Investigation of the gap between learners’ expectations and their actual online experiences

Joanne Margaret Jenson

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Faculty of Social Sciences
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Investigation of the gap between learners’ expectations and their actual online experiences

Joanne Margaret Jenson, M.Ed.

This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Education of the University of Wollongong
ABSTRACT
This research explores the learning experiences of adults who are in full-time employment and their approach to postgraduate part-time study in the Australian education sector. Advances in technology provide flexible study opportunities for adults balancing online study demands with full-time employment. However, there is minimal literature specifically examining how adult learners who are in full-time employment prepare for their first postgraduate online learning experience; the learners themselves have not been questioned. The research reported in this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge addressing first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ expectations and experiences of higher education. A sample of 63 first-time postgraduate online part-time learners participated in this research. The participants were studying an asynchronous online unit of study from one of six Business and Management disciplines in the School of Business at the participating Australian university. A sequential mixed-methods research approach was implemented to investigate first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ preparedness and goal orientation in relation to the successful completion of their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study. Survey findings indicated that self-predictions of completing a study plan prior to commencement were not supported by the post-study survey data. Interview data confirmed that those who had completed their unit of part-time study valued the flexibility of online learning and regarded online study as providing a competitive advantage when applying for promotion. However, the areas of concern this cohort highlighted included juggling family and work responsibilities while working full-time, as well as concerns about elements of online learning course design which impacted on their learning, such as technical issues, privacy, clarity in relation to discussion-board questions and
timeliness of assignment feedback. Participants who withdrew from the online course reported that self-directed online part-time study did not suit their learning needs, citing preferences for immediate responses to their questions and for the social opportunities offered by on-campus study. These findings imply that self-directed learning is particularly challenging for many first-time part-time postgraduate online learners, when immediate academic support may be absent. The findings of this research recommend improving first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ self-directedness strategies. This research contributes to finding a solution to improve first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ experiences through the provision of recommendations emanating from each research question. The provision of recommendations also presents an opportunity for academic providers to review their current approach to online learning delivery.
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This study was motivated by the experiences of capable and intelligent learners who had tried and failed in their quest to obtain an academic qualification online.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Online learning has provided widespread access to education irrespective of the learner’s geographical location. In response to university advertising (James, French & Kelly, 2017; Henry, Pooley & Omari, 2014), increasing numbers of learners enrol in online courses; however, not all first-time postgraduate online part-time learner experiences meet expectations. Given the growth of online learning in Australia (IBISWorld, 2017; Norton, 2016), it is vital that learners’ preparedness and goal orientation be investigated to identify if these areas affect online completion rates. This thesis examines the expectations and experiences of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners with reference to exploring the learners’ preparedness and goal orientation pre-study and post-study, and the relationship between their preparedness and their goal orientation. The factors that contributed to learners’ decisions to withdraw from their online studies when their expectations were not fulfilled are also examined.

Online enrolments in higher-education courses in Australia have increased during the last decade, with over 82,000 postgraduate online enrolments in Australia reported in 2016 (Australian Education Network, 2017). Yet, research has demonstrated that proportionally more online learners withdraw from their studies than their on-campus counterparts (Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard & Smith, 2015; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). For example, Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015), who investigated higher-education students during the period 1994 to 2014, reported that there is a risk that “online learners will become more disengaged from their university communities” (p. 7). Focusing on the attitudes and experiences of first-year students in Australian
universities, Baik et al. (2015) identified the increasing role that online technologies play in altering the nature of the first year of the educational experience for higher-education learners.

There is an abundance of literature available on student preparation for online learning (Liu & Kaye, 2017; McGee, Valdes & Bullis, 2016; Moore, 2016; Siemens, Gašević & Dawson, 2015). In 2005 the Department of Education, Science and Training in Australia commissioned a report into the attitudes and experiences of first-year students in Australian universities (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005) and, more recently, Parkes, Stein and Reading (2015) conducted research into Australian student preparedness for university online learning environments. Aside from Tung (2012), who conducted research into online learners in the Malaysian higher-education sector, Brown et al. (2015), who researched the experiences of Australian and New Zealand students in their first semester of online learning, and Parkes, Stein and Reading (2015), who researched the preparedness of students at an Australian university, very few studies have asked the learners themselves about their first postgraduate online learning experiences.

Instead, studies have focused on the number of students learning online (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Norton, 2016) and the types of effectiveness of online instruction (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Hall & Buzwell, 2013; Khan, Everington, Kelm, Reid & Watkins, 2016; McQuiggan, 2012; Salmon, 2013). The approach that one group of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners undertook for their study will be revisited in more detail in Chapters 4 and 6. These findings will contribute to research about postgraduate part-time learners’
preparedness and whether their first online learning experience meets their expectations.

Understanding how adults in full-time employment approach studying part-time in an online environment while balancing other responsibilities is necessary, as online learning involves high levels of self-directedness. The Online Learning Consortium updated e-learning definitions (September 2014) describe an online course as one where “all course activity is done online; there are no required face-to-face sessions within the course and no requirements for on-campus activity” (retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/updated-e-learning-definitions/). Online study, which means no physical attendance at lectures on-campus, affords learners the flexibility to complete coursework at a time and location that accommodates their commitments. For example, full-time employment and family responsibilities have resulted in online learning emerging as an alternative to on-campus education (Buzdar, Ali & Tariq, 2016). However, there has been little investigation with first-time postgraduate learners themselves about how they approach their part-time online study program while balancing other responsibilities.

Those who embark on their first postgraduate online program after a period of absence from academia will be digressing from their usual routine (Ngumi & Mwaniki, 2008; Weiss & Roksa, 2016), and may not fully comprehend that learning online in isolation will require greater levels of self-directedness. Tung (2012) identified how studying in an online environment required higher levels of self-motivation and commitment than in traditional face-to-face education as well as higher levels of self-directed learning (Gaytan, 2015; Kirmizi, 2015; Lin, Szu & Lai,
2016; You & Kang, 2014). Therefore, postgraduate learners’ levels of preparedness and their self-directedness in the early stages of their first online learning program are of particular interest for universities reviewing their support strategies for this cohort.

Universities must understand the issues confronting first-time postgraduate part-time online learners to develop effective methods of providing a supportive and motivating first-time postgraduate online learning experience. Although learners’ motivation is a key aspect of online study, most studies focus solely on motivation in classroom settings (Ames, 1992; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Pintrich & de Groot, 1990), and more recent studies (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Patall, 2015; Tarbetsky, Martin & Collie, 2017; Wentzel, Muenks, McNeish & Russell, 2017) have largely continued in the same vein. For example, Velez, Potvin and Hazari (2014) identified that learners’ “motivational orientation can influence their views on their academic potential and the actions they take to achieve it” (p. 1). In an online context, Chang, Liu, Lin, Chen and Cheng (2014) studied the effects of Internet self-efficacy on motivation and learning performance, and concluded that “educators would benefit from understanding the internal psychological status of online learners to better facilitate learning” (p. 1).

Goal orientation and academic achievement have also been the focus of previous studies. For example, student motivation and academic achievement studies conducted by Dweck (1999) and Meece, Anderman and Anderman (2006), identified two goal orientations: mastery and performance. Meece, Anderman and Anderman (2006) defined mastery orientation as “focus on developing one’s abilities, mastering
a new skill, trying to accomplish something challenging, and trying to understand learning materials” (p. 490). Meece, Anderman and Anderman (2006) defined performance orientation as “a focus on demonstrating high ability relative to others, striving to be better than others, and using social comparison standards to make judgments of ability and performance” (p. 490). However, there remains a noticeable gap in the literature concerning how first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ preparedness and goal-orientation characteristics may affect their online part-time study experience.

Student retention and success could be improved by investigating learners’ perceptions of their first online course (Ballantyne, Madden & Todd, 2009; Baxter, 2012; Brown et al. 2015; Buzdar, Ali, Tariq, 2016). Whether a first-time postgraduate online part-time learner’s goal orientation altered during his or her part-time study program and how such a shift in goal orientation might affect the completion of his or her study is a necessary step in this investigation. Dweck (1999) and Urdan (1997) concluded that mastery and performance orientations showed different patterns of affective, behavioural and cognitive outcomes. In relation to this research, recognising first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ goal orientation and how the online learning environment affects it will be beneficial for both the education provider and the first-time postgraduate online part-time learner. For the providers, such an understanding can provide deeper knowledge of at-risk students, which will enable emoderators, those responsible for supervising the online communication of learners, to more carefully monitor the online activity of the first-time postgraduate online part-time learner. For the learners, possessing a greater understanding of their goal orientation will also assist
in recognising the necessity for high levels of self-directedness when learning in an online environment.

This Australian study uses a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate the experiences of adult learners undertaking their first online program of postgraduate studies during 2011. The research considered the expectations of adult learners; specifically, their goal orientation and preparedness for their first online study experience and the factors that may have influenced their decisions to continue or discontinue their part-time online studies. The quantitative data captured preparedness and goal orientation as expressed in learners’ pre-study predictive responses and reflective responses post-study. The qualitative data provided the opportunity to question postgraduate online learners in full-time employment about their first online learning experience. Additionally, three case studies provided detailed insights into postgraduate learners’ experiences of academic online part-time study.

This chapter provides the context to the study by profiling the current online learning environment in Australia, where this study took place. This is followed by a summary overview of the research in this field, including the limitations of the extant literature. A description of the study design and methodology follows, with the chapter concluding with details on how this thesis is structured. The next section provides definitions of the terms “goal orientation” and “preparedness”, as well as other key terms used throughout this thesis; the underpinning concepts of this study are the goal orientation and preparedness of first-time postgraduate part-time online learners.
1.2 Definition of key terms

The key terms used in this study are defined below. The terms are important because in this study they were used in a specific context. Further definitions of the key terms used in this study can be found in the glossary (Appendix K).

*Online learning*

The term “online” refers to all learning activities and resources delivered through Internet-based technologies. For the purposes of this research, Smith’s (2005) definition of online learning has been applied: “learning resources are available electronically, and supported by a groupware system where learners can interact together and interact with their instructor” (p. 6).

*Preparedness*

Preparedness is defined in the Collins Dictionary (2017) as “the state of being prepared or ready”. For the purposes of this research, preparedness has been defined by the author of this study as self-management through planning and organising, with the aim of completing coursework within specified academic timelines. This definition is based on the researcher’s years of observing learners’ organisational skills, study timetabling and the various other skills required to complete coursework.

*Goal orientation*

Goal orientation is defined as the “individual’s purposes or aims with respect to developing competence at an activity” (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010, p.6). Goal orientation in this study will be explored through the concepts of mastery goal
orientation and performance goal orientation. Mastery goal orientation is defined as “an individual’s purpose of developing competence” (Ames, 1992, cited in Kaplan & Maehr, 2007, p. 142). Performance goal orientation is defined as “a desire to do well and to be positively evaluated by others” (Farr, Hofmann & Ringenbach, cited in Bell & Kozlowski, 2002, p. 6).

Self-directedness

In this research, the term “self-directedness”, specifically in an online environment refers to a learner’s response in “electronic learning environments where there are often no peer learners or instructors regularly available” to support or encourage the learner as they navigate the online learning environment (Kim & Frick, 2011, p.1).

Emoderator

The emoderator is defined as a person employed by the learning institution, whose role is to “promote human interaction and communication through the modelling, conveying and building of knowledge and skills” (Salmon, 2004, p. 4).

Online discussion

Online discussion in this research is described as a text-based learning activity, in which online learners interact with each other and discuss a particular topic without being limited by time and place (Hew, Cheung & Ng, 2010).

Postgraduate study

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) classifies postgraduate study as Level 8 on a scale of one to 10. The criteria are listed as “Graduates at this level will
have advanced knowledge and skills for professional or highly skilled work and/or further learning” (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013).

1.3 Background to the research

Participation in online education has seen global growth (Allen & Seaman, 2016, 2011; Bowers & Kumar, 2017; Open Universities Australia, 2015; Sharrock, 2017), with the number of learners studying online in the higher-education sector increasing globally at an exponential rate. In the United States, the proportion of students enrolled in one or more online courses increased from fewer than one in 10 in 2002 to nearly one-third of students by 2010, “with the number of online students growing from 1.6 million to over 6.1 million during the same period – an 18.3% compound annual growth rate” (Allen & Seaman, 2012, p. 3). More recently, Allen and Seaman (2016) reported that in 2014 there were in excess of 2.8 million online higher-education learners. This figure represents one-in-seven of all higher-education students in the United States, which Allen and Seaman (2016) claim is impressive due to the reduction in overall enrolments in higher education during the period 2012-2014.

In Australia, a similar phenomenon has occurred. James, French and Kelly (2017) claimed that higher education is one of Australia’s largest exports, and that it is “a globally significant industry” (p. 1). Magner (2014), Norton (2016) and Open Universities Australia (2015) all reported that Australian universities are experiencing a rapid growth in the online student population, with Magner (2014) claiming that the participation in online learning increased between 2009 and 2013 as more people recognised the benefits of online education. Many of these people were
balancing full-time employment, part-time study and home life (Norton, 2014). In response to this increase in student numbers, higher-education providers have been progressively transferring their curricula online (Lai, 2011; Magner, 2014) to meet the growing demand from people in full-time employment.

To meet the growing demand in Australia for part-time online education, Open Universities Australia (OUA), was established in 1993 in Melbourne, Australia. OUA operates as a public university consortium, with eight Australian-based universities controlling ownership of the organisation: Curtin University of Technology, Griffith University, La Trobe University, Macquarie University, Murdoch University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and the University of South Australia. OUA currently offers 121 postgraduate online courses across seven disciplines: Arts and Humanities; Business; Education; Health; Information Technology; Law and Justice; and Science and Engineering. Since its establishment, OUA has increased its course offerings, catering to adult learners, who realise they can complete a university degree online and part-time (Magner, 2014). This increase in online learners is not confined to OUA: in Australia at the postgraduate level, Charles Sturt University (in New South Wales, Australia) has the highest number of online learners (Australian Education Network, 2017), with over 80% of their postgraduate students studying online. The growth of OUA and the increase in online enrolments at Charles Sturt University and many other Australian universities (Australian Education Network, 2017) indicate that the online higher-education market is experiencing rapid growth.
Similarly, in Melbourne, the number of online learners at Swinburne University of Technology increased through Swinburne Online and Swinburne University’s partnership with Open Universities Australia. Swinburne Online was established in 2012, through a joint-venture partnership (Swinburne University Annual Report, 2015, p. 9) with Seek Limited (Dodd, August, 2015). In 2012, Bill Scales, at that time Chancellor of Swinburne University, stated that Swinburne Online had been introduced to create “educational opportunities for many students for whom campus study is not possible” (Swinburne University Annual Report, 2012, p. 4). In its first year of operation (2012), Swinburne Online attracted 2,254 enrolments (Swinburne University Annual Report, 2012) and in its third year (2015) it enrolled 6,786 online learners (Swinburne University Annual Report, 2015) an increase in online enrolments of over 300%. Swinburne Online does not report separately on undergraduate and postgraduate online enrolments; these figures combine both.

Despite this growth in numbers, understanding of the postgraduate online learning cohort remains limited. Waugh and Su-Searle (2014) claim that attrition rates for online learning courses are generally higher than for traditional face-to-face courses, and Parkes, Stein and Reading (2015) state that this raises the question of students’ preparedness for university online learning environments. Norton (2013) observed that while substantial research has been conducted into online education, very few empirical studies are rigorous in design, resulting in limited data and difficulties when analysing the effectiveness of online learning compared with traditional formats.
With online enrolments predicted to increase due to growing demand (Allen & Seaman, 2013, 2015; Open Universities Australia, 2013, 2014a & 2015), attrition levels may also increase exponentially, with less motivated learners less likely to engage in online learning (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Kim & Frick, 2011). Attrition rates are typically much higher in purely online courses than on-campus formats (Bawa, 2016; Park & Choi, 2009; Simpson, 2013b), a probable consequence of lower levels of guidance and personal interaction. Motivation and technology and their intersection are two primary factors that enable first-time postgraduate online part-time learners to maintain engagement levels when learning in an unfamiliar environment. Maintaining engagement levels highlights the importance of the self-directedness and goal-orientation approach first-time postgraduate learners adopt when undertaking part-time online study, and how their self-directedness and goal orientation may affect their first online learning experience. Therefore, as online education enrolments increase, understanding first-time part-time learners’ self-directedness and goal-orientated approach to their online learning experience may help identify retention strategies for learners who are studying in an unfamiliar learning environment.

Advances in technology have provided an online education alternative to learners facing geographic and time restrictions to obtain an academic qualification. Online learning has developed into a reliable alternative to an on-campus education experience (Buzdar, Ali & Tariq, 2016), providing the opportunity to learn through accessing course materials 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For postgraduate online part-time learners, who often have contesting priorities because they are “juggling different roles as a student, worker, spouse and/or parent” (Khiat, 2017, p.
accessing learning materials 24 hours a day, seven days a week provides an opportunity to access an on-campus qualification in a digital environment. Magner (2014) reported that in Australia, those aged 25 to 44 years represent the largest market for university programs, identifying this cohort as consisting of a large number of part-time learners, employed full-time and pursuing a career change or progression through upskilling, where “the flexibility of online learning can be managed around work and family commitments” (p. 15). Based on Magner’s (2014) research, the study outlined in this thesis was similarly focused on first-time postgraduate part-time online learners aged 25 years and over; the rationale for focusing on this cohort will be further explored in Chapter 3. Part-time adult learners now expect education that is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Open Universities Australia, 2014c); in this context, institutional support is an important component in the retention of online learners (Gaytan, 2015). An Australian online service provider, “YourTutor”, which has relationships with dozens of Australian higher-education institutions, reported that demand for its services peaked after 7.30pm and on Sundays (Norton, 2016). The growth in online learners aged 25 to 44 years undertaking part-time online study while in full-time employment signals the need for higher-education institutions to focus their attention on implementing online learning strategies that support learners 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

1.4 Significance of the study

The research outlined in this thesis is significant because increasing numbers of first-time online learners are enrolling at university for part-time postgraduate study, and many of these students are balancing full-time employment and family
responsibilities. Yet to date, the majority of research on first-year student transition into higher education has centred on campus-based transition to university (Gale & Parker, 2014; Kift, 2015). The significance of this study lies in its investigation of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ preparedness and the relationship between learners’ goal orientation and their level of preparedness before the commencement of their online studies. As previously mentioned, the term “preparedness” is being used to refer to a learner being prepared or ready to learn online. This research contributes to a gap in the literature by providing detailed insight into the issues first-time postgraduate part-time online learners experience in a self-directed online learning environment. In their study of online students, Henry, Pooleyn and Omari (2014) identified that that “many students find online courses more demanding and challenging than they had expected” (p. 1). Brown et al. (2015) identified a perception amongst first-time online learners “that their study will not only be flexibly scheduled around commitments, but also ‘condensable’ in to the hours they have available” (p. 12). This study intends to explore perceptions of first-time postgraduate online learners who study part-time, specifically examining whether there is a perceived mismatch between their expectations and their levels of preparedness for a successful postgraduate online experience.

The second area this study will investigate is goal orientation, and how it relates to the learning experience of those who have returned to academia to complete their first online postgraduate qualification. In this study goal orientation is defined as a learner’s aim to develop competence. Goal orientation has been the subject of educational studies for more than two decades (Dweck, 1986; Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Elliot, McGregor & Gable, 1999; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 1989).
However, little attention has been paid to either the first-time postgraduate online learner’s goal orientation when studying in an unfamiliar environment or whether the lack of prior online learning experiences affects a learner’s goal orientation while completing their first part-time online academic study program. This study examined the extent of the learner’s goal orientation in relation to his or her actual experience of online study, and the relationship between goal orientation and preparedness levels.

This thesis also provides insights and understanding into the issues affecting first-time postgraduate part-time learners’ experiences of online postgraduate study, particularly issues relating to learners’ expectations of their first online course (Brown et al. 2015; Ilgaz & Gülbahtar, 2015; Stewart, Bachman & Johnson, 2010). There is a gap in the literature concerning the relationship between learners’ expectations of their first online postgraduate part-time studies and their actual online experience; the research in this thesis provides the opportunity to address this gap. Therefore, the investigation of learner preparedness and goal orientation on entry to higher-education online programs will provide insight into the issues that directly affect the first-time postgraduate online learner’s experience, and offer an understanding of the factors contributing to learners’ decisions to continue or discontinue their studies. This topic will be revisited in more detail in Chapter 6.

Through the use of survey data, interviews and case studies, this thesis will investigate how first-time postgraduate online part-time learners approach their study after a period of absence from academia, identifying and illuminating the range of issues these learners experienced. It is anticipated that these findings will provide
insight into how to support first-time postgraduate online part-time learners. Additionally, this thesis aims to provide recommendations that can assist academic institutions in their planning and delivery of online courses. Five research questions, outlined in the next section, underpin this study.

1.5 Research questions

1. To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to his or her level of preparedness before commencement of online studies?
   a. What was the learner’s level of preparedness before commencement of online study?
   b. What was the learner’s goal orientation before commencement of online study?
   c. What was the relationship between goal orientation and level of preparedness?

2. To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to the actual experience of online study?
   a. What was the learner’s experience of online study?
   b. What was the learner’s goal orientation after online study?
   c. What was the relationship between goal orientation and actual experience?

3. Is there a difference between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experiences?

4. What factors contribute to learners’ decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their online studies?

5. What strategies do part-time adult learners use to integrate their online studies with existing commitments?
1.6 Overview of methodology

This study used a sequential mixed-methods research approach to collect data from first-time postgraduate part-time online participants in the Business and Management disciplines at the School of Business at the participating Australian university. Data were collected from three different sources: a pre-study survey issued prior to commencement of study, a post-study survey issued on completion of study and 15 interviews (completers n=10 and non-completers n=5).

This study captured the expectations and experiences of 63 first-time postgraduate part-time online learners through quantitative procedures, and investigated further the subjective experiences of 15 individual learners (completers n=10 and non-completers n=5) through interviews and three case studies. Two quantitative surveys were used for the study: a pre-study and post-study survey. The pre-study survey asked participants to predict their level of preparedness and self-directedness prior to commencing their first unit of online part-time study, while the post-study survey aimed to gather reflective information from learners about their actual online experience. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure was undertaken on the pre-study and post-study survey results. During the analysis it became apparent that some of the online learners had completed the pre-study and post-study survey using different computers, producing a mismatch, which resulted in a reduction of the sample size for the ANOVA analysis (details are provided in Chapter 3, Section 3.12.2).

On completion of the participants’ first postgraduate online unit of part-time study, qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 learners (completers n=10 and non-
completers n=5), who represented a cross-section of learners studying different postgraduate programs. This qualitative interview was reflective, aiming to gain a better understanding of the issues associated with postgraduate online learner engagement and the consequences for the learners’ ability to self-motivate and complete their first unit of online part-time study. Three case studies (Chapter 5) are included for the purpose of obtaining deeper insights into the experiences of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners and their perspectives of online part-time study.

1.7 Thesis overview

This thesis consists of five additional chapters and is structured as follows:

Chapter 2, Literature Review, examines the prior literature and presents a theoretical framework, which is then used to structure the review of the literature and to focus on issues underlying learners’ expectations and experiences together with learner preparedness and self-directedness.

Chapter 3, Methodology, outlines the research plan, which was designed to provide a holistic view of learner expectations and experiences, and details the phases of this study. It explains the development of the surveys and interviews as well as the relationship of each to the research questions. Details are provided about the research methodology, the use of mixed-methods of data collection, the development of the surveys, the data-collection process, and the selection of postgraduate survey participants.
Chapter 4, Results, presents the analysis of the research results and corresponds to the research questions from the various phases of this study. The results include outcomes from the pre-study and post-study surveys and the post-study interviews, which were conducted with 10 completers and five non-completers. The chapter also discusses the factors that contribute to first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ decision to continue or withdraw from their study program.

Chapter 5, Case Studies, presents a synopsis of three selected case studies. Based on interviews, these case studies provide detailed insight into whether first-time postgraduate online learners’ expectations matched the reality of their first part-time online learning experience.

Chapter 6, Discussion and Recommendations, summarises the study’s conclusions and offers suggestions for improving approaches to online education. It then discusses the implications of this study and, drawing on the study’s important findings, suggests directions for future research. Supporting documentation is included in the appendices.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Learning online is often thought of as a new phenomenon, and in many respects it is. Before online education, colleges and universities attempted to reach audiences from a distance via the postal service, radio and television, but these efforts generated only limited success (Bok, 2013). Distance education courses developed from correspondence courses out of a need to address a demand for access to educational opportunities which conventional campus-based educational practices could not meet. The further transformation of distance education courses commenced when multimedia and electronic mail superseded the postal service (Naidu, 2016) and so the term distance education was born.

As distance education grew in popularity with students taking advantage of education choices, labels such as flexible learning, blended learning, elearning and online learning emerged. The term “online learning” originates from “the days of the telegraph, when messages could be tapped directly onto the line” (Salmon, 2003, p. 3). In this thesis, online learning is defined as accessing learning materials electronically via a learning management system where learners can conduct asynchronous communications.

The advancement of online learning is the result of the development of instructional technologies over time. Papert (1984) predicted that the computer was going to be “a catalyst of very deep and radical change in the educational system” (p. 422). More recently, Margaryan, Littlejohn and Vojt (2011) noted that “the generation born after
1980 grew up with access to computers and the Internet and is therefore inherently technology-savvy” (p. 429). By the mid-1990s, computers had begun to exert a deep and ongoing impact on education.

Despite these prescient pronouncements, no one predicted the influence the Internet would have, not only on education, but also on every other aspect of modern life. The Internet arrived in Australia in June 1989 via a link from Hawaii to Robert Elz in the Computer Science Department at the University of Melbourne (Clarke, 2004). Torben Nielsen sent the first message, the subject line of which he titled ‘Link Up’ (Rahilly, 2014). The Internet has since emerged as a massive information and communication source, which is growing and evolving both as an information depository and as a means of electronic delivery. Using the Internet to distribute information has increased to the point that not only is it a routine feature of daily life, but it is also used in higher education (Harmumoto, Hakano, Fukumura, Shimojo & Nishio, 2005; Kirkwood, 2008; Magner, 2014). Online learning has consequently developed simultaneously and has become an increasingly attractive alternative to on-campus instruction (Brotherton & Abowd, 2004; Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012), with Smith (2013) claiming that “higher education has experienced perhaps the greatest amount of growth in implementation of online course delivery” (p. 490). The next section of this chapter presents the research related to the changing landscape of education and investigates online course delivery.

2.2 A changing landscape: The Internet and its impact on education

The Internet and Web 2.0 technologies have now taken online learning to the point of enabling online collaboration tools, web-based video and instant messaging. In
2008, Dykman and Davis predicted that each successive generation of the Internet would be bigger, faster, smarter and cheaper, and possess the potential to revolutionise higher education further. By 2010, nearly 50% of those who accessed the Internet at home did so in a room designated as a study, with 92% agreeing that the Internet is a fast and efficient means to gain information (Ewing & Thomas, 2010). More recently, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS; 2015) confirmed that 86% of the Australian population accessed the Internet at home using a laptop or desktop computer during 2014-2015. The ABS 2015 census data confirm that the Internet has become a fixture in most households in Australia today, and in many it is being used to both entertain and educate. Many of those using the Internet for education are using it to gain postgraduate qualifications for the purpose of promotion or improving their career chances in a competitive job market (IBISWorld, 2017).

The development of human capital to meet future workforce planning is further evidenced by the increasing number of adult learners returning to obtain a university qualification online (Edwards & van der Brugge, 2012; Magner, 2014). The 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) identified that it will be essential for Australia to produce highly skilled people who can adapt to an ever-changing workplace. Norton (2013) similarly found that “employees are upgrading their qualifications” (p. 27), and argued that this trend will continue, generating increased demand from adult learners for the convenient delivery of online education services.
Online education allows learners to enrol with an institution that offers flexible study options. With the competing pressures of full-time employment, home life and study commitments (Poskitt, Rees & Suddaby, 2011), many postgraduate learners are choosing online education, which offers the flexibility through anywhere, anytime access (Henry, Pooley & Omari, 2014) to accommodate busy work and home schedules. These findings are substantiated with OUA’s (2015) assertion that “potential (online) students have never had so many options available to them” (p. 6). The delivery of online courses is certainly not a passing trend; thus “higher educators should engage in refining or completely redefining their schema for best practice for online instruction” (Smith, 2013, p. 495). Learners returning to academia to complete an online program, no longer restricted by geographical location, are free to search for providers that deliver high-quality online courses that flexibly enable the integration of online study with work, family and other commitments.

The growing trend in learning online has meant that more empirical research is available that explores how online learning is being measured. However, as Norton (2013) observed, few studies are rigorously designed, and with the emergence of new technologies, evidence-based research is constantly in a state of catch-up. The lack of evidence-based research impacts on the non-completion rate data for those who enrol but do not complete their postgraduate online learning program. Simpson (2013b) confirms that very few institutions publish their non-completion data, stating that: “there seems little doubt that the data are much higher than in conventional education” (p. 106). This makes it difficult to identify and analyse postgraduate online learner withdrawal. This finding by Simpson (2013b) is consistent with Norton (2013), who further confirmed that Australia’s national education statistics do
not have “online” as a category, and therefore, calculating the data for withdrawal of online postgraduate learners is very difficult.

Because little attention has been paid to the collection of online withdrawal data or to the reasons why learners withdraw from online study, this thesis seeks to address this issue by examining the experiences of part-time online learners, with particular reference to the approach the research participants implemented for their first postgraduate study experience. One of the contributions to broader online/distance learning literature that this study makes relates to the focus on the learners themselves, who have been asked about their first part-time online postgraduate learning experience. Also, the uniqueness of this study is also demonstrated through the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Adopting this research design provided the opportunity to obtain deeper insights into first-time online part-time postgraduate learners and deeply explore expectations around their first online education experience and how these compared to their actual experiences. To understand first-time postgraduate part-time online learner expectations, their experiences will be examined in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 6.

The next section of this chapter presents the research related to learner withdrawal and the theoretical attrition frameworks, followed by details of various factors that affect the learner cohort under investigation. The chapter then focuses on the key concepts that informed this study: the goal orientation, self-directedness and preparedness of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners. This review of the literature highlights the gaps in the research in this field, which this study will address. Specifically, this study will provide deeper understanding and insight into
the issues that affect first-time postgraduate part-time online learners’ experiences in a wholly self-directed online learning environment. With the ongoing increase in online part-time learner enrolments, understanding the issues affecting this cohort successfully completing their online study becomes critical.

The next section of this chapter describes how first-time postgraduate part-time learners approach their forthcoming first online learning experience, and how the challenges of conflicting priorities are dealt with when completing higher-education qualifications in conjunction with their other commitments.

2.3 Postgraduate learners preparing for part-time online academic study

First-time postgraduate online part-time learners should not underestimate the complexity of the self-directed online learning experience and the process of transitioning to this mode. In this research the term “self-directedness” is used to refer to how a first-time online learner, without other learners or emoderators available for immediate support, learns in an online learning environment. This group of adult learners may find themselves completely unprepared for postgraduate levels of study (Jan, 2015; Krause et al. 2005; Lin, Szu & Lai, 2016), regardless of the many support programs that may be available to them. Studies have investigated adult-learner characteristics, with Kasworm (2003) defining the adult student as a person who represents the:

- status of age (twenty-five years of age and older); the status of maturity and developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence; and the status of responsible and often competing sets of adult roles reflecting work, family, community, and college student commitments (p. 3).
Magner (2014) supported Kasworm’s (2003) definition and identified how the greatest market for university study programs are those learners aged 25 to 44 years who are employed full-time and are seeking flexible online study that can be managed around family and work. Based on the research of Kasworm (2003) and Magner (2014), this study adopted this criterion, focusing on participants who were over 25 years, in full-time employment and studying postgraduate qualifications part-time, often returning to learning after a period of absence.

Given the growth in the number of adults enrolling in postgraduate online education programs to study part-time, it is imperative to identify the type of support required and the issues learners encounter when commencing postgraduate part-time study after a prolonged period of absence from academia. Chang et al. (2014) stated that “educators would benefit from understanding the internal psychological status of online learners to better facilitate learning” (p. 366). Baillie (2015) identified that first-time postgraduate online learners’ experiences in the United States have been recognised as a key element to improving learner support and the overall quality of online programs. Australian universities could then use such insights to inform their approach to supporting first-time postgraduate online part-time learners. In recognising support issues, the nature of the online learner population - perhaps older and returning to education after a significant gap - needs to be considered.

Knowles (1975), in his study of how adults approach learning, proposed the concept of andragogy, an adult learning theory that offers a number of assumptions about how adults learn. In 1980, Knowles formulated the concept of andragogy, which he defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 42). Pappas (2013)
summarises Knowles’ four characteristics of adult learners (andragogy) that differ from those of child learners (pedagogy) as:

1. Self-concept
   As individuals mature, their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.

2. Adult learner experience
   As individuals mature, they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

3. Readiness to learn
   As individuals mature, their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly toward the developmental tasks of their roles.

4. Orientation to learning
   As individuals mature, their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness.

In 1984, Knowles added a fifth assumption:

5. Motivation to learn
   As individuals mature, the motivation to learn becomes internal (Knowles, 1984, p.12).

During research in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Knowles (1970) suggested that andragogical models of learning assume that when an individual psychologically becomes an adult, he or she has already achieved an ability to be self-motivated and capable of making independent decisions. When adults find themselves in a situation
in which they are not able, or allowed to, self-direct, they experience pressure between that situation and their self-concept. The probable reaction of the individual to this kind of situation is a manifestation of resistance and resentment (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998).

This kind of resistance may be particularly obvious in adult learners using technology to learn in a self-directed environment. While older adults may be using computer applications for business purposes, their use of these devices for learning in a self-directed online academic setting may be a new experience (Bawa, 2016). In their study of higher-education online learners, Yoo and Huang (2013) indicated that a “willingness to learn new technologies” (p. 159) may influence an adult’s ability to learn online; these findings are consistent with Venkatesh, Morris, Davis and Davis’s (2003) Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which identifies four core factors of behaviour in an online environment that play an important role in determining user acceptance and usage: 1) performance expectancy; 2) effort expectancy; 3) social influence; and 4) facilitating conditions” (p. 447). Venkatesh et al. (2003) defined performance expectancy as “the degree to which an individual believes that using the system will help him or her attain gains in job performance” (p. 447). Effort expectancy was defined as “the degree of ease associated with the use of the system” (p. 450), and social influence was explained as “the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new system” (p. 451). The fourth core factor, facilitating conditions, was defined as “the degree to which an individual believes that an organizational and technical infrastructure exists to support the system” (p. 453).
However, in addition to the four UTAUT factors, Yoo and Huang (2013) also identified two further variables: learners’ “overall feeling about using the technology system for learning, and anxiety level of learners” (p. 159). Although self-efficacy and anxiety appear to be significant direct determinants of intention, the UTAUT model does not include them as direct determinants (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Research investigating adult-leaner characteristics has also been undertaken by Kasworm, Sandmann and Sissel (2009), complementing the UTAUT model and Knowles’s (1980) theory of adult learning.

Postgraduate learners generally also face challenges of conflicting priorities when completing higher-education qualifications because they must manage numerous commitments. Poskitt, Rees and Suddaby (2011) identified that adult online learners are in full-time employment and motivated by career-specific goals; however, half are likely to have the responsibility for the care of dependent children, which is another factor for consideration by academic institutions when considering the approach to prepare first-time postgraduate part-time online learners for the transition into self-directed online learning. It is also imperative that learners themselves prepare and set goals to maintain their own learning motivation (Schunk, 1994; Zimmerman, 1989) to ensure success in their forthcoming part-time academic experience. This is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

2.3.1 Preparing for academia: whose responsibility?
Postgraduate learners who are returning to university often begin this journey with an initial inquiry to the academic institution to determine whether online part-time study is available and suitable for them. Tresman (2002) identified that meeting a
prospective learner’s actual needs through the provision of clear information “helps to enable prospective students to make informed choices” (p. 4). Results from the 2017 Australian Government report into improving retention, completion and success in higher education expand on Treman’s (2002) findings, identifying a lack of consistent and comparable information was being provided to prospective students to improve their chances of “choosing and completing the right course” (p. 40). Those adult learners employed full-time who decide to return to part-time study to obtain a postgraduate qualification expect the best possible opportunity to achieve their academic aspirations and to realise their goals and potential. Borghi, Mainardes and Silva (2016) and Tresman (2002) suggested that to achieve this objective, there needs to be explicit information that addresses both learner expectations and the reality of first-year online learning experiences.

While the literature explores the challenges for online instructors of teaching in this environment (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Gaytan, 2015; Smith, 2013), research conducted into the experiences of learners studying online for the first time is quite minimal and quite recent (Brown et al., 2015; Parkes, Stein & Reading; 2015, Tung 2012). All learners entering university for the first time undergo a transition phase that varies from student to student (Borrego, 2010; Burton & Dowling, 2005), and providing them with support that is flexible, clear and continuously available is the benchmark for best practice in online learning (Simpson, 2013a). It is argued that the focus of learner support should be on what the learner needs in order to successfully complete their online study (Dumais, Rizzuto, Cleary & Dowden, 2013). Equally, however, online learners need to accept responsibility for the management of their academic progress, which includes increasing their
understanding of how to plan, schedule and maintain motivation in the early stages of their online program (Ko & Rossen 2010; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; You, 2016). The next section outlines some of the research reported in the literature regarding the preparation and support provided for first-time postgraduate part-time online learners.

2.3.2 Who is doing what to support first-time online learners?

It is generally expected that higher-education institutions will provide appropriate academic, attitudinal, and social preparation for their new online learners, as they do for on-campus and blended-delivery learners. Anderton (2006), Lorenzi, MacKeogh and Fox (2003), Lynch (2001), Salmon (2004), and Wilson (2008) all concluded that there is a requirement for institutions to develop programs to assist learners to fully prepare for their first online learning experience, together with providing the tools to facilitate the learner self-directedness and preparedness that will enable learners to take responsibility for their own learning. This imperative applies equally to those returning to part-time study after a prolonged absence. Some institutions offer preparatory study programs which are often directed at older learners who do not have any prior formal qualification, or whose academic qualifications do not satisfy the entry requirements for admission to university. The research into preparedness has found that providing an introductory module in “successful online learning” can be a valuable tool for new learners (Lorenzi et al., 2003; Lynch, 2001; Salmon, 2004; Wilson, 2008). In general, these programs cover time management, scheduling and setting goals and prioritising tasks.
The process learners should undertake to prepare for their first online learning experience has been the focus of many studies on distance education during the past decade (Anderson, 2006; El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007; Moore & Kearsley, 2011). In their study into student preparation for learning online, Lorenzi et al. (2003) discussed how the National Distance Education Centre at Dublin City University in Ireland had initiated a Student Passport for e-Learning (SpeL). The SpeL program was designed as a learner-centred pedagogically driven module that gradually introduces students to the uses of electronic media. One of the findings of this pilot was that those students who participated in SpeL were more successful in their first assignment than students who undertook the conventional text-based, distance-education version of the module supported by face-to-face tutorials. This success may result from online learners having increased confidence after completing the online introductory module.

Lorenzi et al.’s (2003) finding is consistent with the work of Beyrer (2010), who studied an online orientation program offered at a college in California in the US, at which an Online Student Success (OSS) subject, specifically designed to prepare learners for the online environment, was introduced. The data showed that learners who undertook the OSS subject prior to commencing their online studies demonstrated increased comfort with learning online, which resulted in increased success rates (Beyrer, 2010). That said, learners who were successful online without undertaking the OSS were also identified, leading to the conclusion that an OSS subject should target learners with a predisposition for this type of intervention prior to commencing their online program. However, while Beyrer (2010) suggested the
creation of an assessment tool to encourage “at risk” first-time online learners to undertake OSS, he did not provide a detailed assessment tool for this cohort.

The findings of Lorenzi et al. (2003) and Beyrer (2010) are consistent with the approach adopted by OUA and Swinburne University. In 2015, Swinburne University introduced “self-directed and enriched learning-support programs for students such as ‘My Lead’, an online self-assessment on measures of study skills, barriers to study and well-being” (p. 33). OUA provides a 14-week self-paced “Start for Success” program (Open Universities Australia, 2014b) designed for first-time online learners with the aim of developing their understanding of online learning. The program, in addition to outlining strategies learners can use to obtain the most from their online learning experience, details what is required to become an effective online learner and provides examples of participation in online forums, information on how to upload documents, and online quizzes.

Open Universities Australia (2014c) also offers an online-tutoring support service, Smarthinking, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This service provides online learners with advice from professional, qualified tutors whenever they have a question. Open Universities Australia self-reported that over 85% of learners who used Smarthinking completed their studies successfully; the organisation also claimed that those who used this service were twice as likely to achieve Distinction or High Distinction results than those who elected not to use the service. Other research on these types of support programs seems to suggest that they have a positive impact on learner success in the online learning environment (Lynch, 2001). However, it should be noted that a number of these studies, including
that containing the OUA claims, were conducted by the institutions themselves, and thus might have questionable validity.

Despite the apparent success of these programs, further research into the needs of first-time online part-time learners is required for support strategies to be appropriately aligned. Brown et al. (2015) conducted a study of Australian and New Zealand learners, Buzdar, Ali and Tariq (2016) investigated Pakistani open-university learners, Parkes, Stein and Reading (2015) researched the preparedness of Australian online learners and Tung (2012) conducted research into Malaysian higher-education online learners. However, minimal qualitative research has been conducted with the learners themselves to explore the types of support part-time learners expect during their first postgraduate online learning experience. Anticipating the level of support required for this cohort in the early stages of their academic career has been recognised in the literature on higher education as a key step in providing support to online learners (Baillie, 2015; Henry, Pooley & Omari, 2014; Krause, 2005). The next section provides an overview of theories of attrition, while the subsequent section will examine how attrition rates in higher education are potentially linked to levels and types of support provided to learners.

2.4 Student attrition in the higher-education environment

Multiple theoretical frameworks have been developed and theories abound to explain why students choose to withdraw from their university study. A range of models to identify key factors contributing to student attrition have been developed by Astin (1977, 1985), Bean (1980, 1983), Bean and Metzner (1985), Braxton (2000) and Tinto (1975, 1993). Bean and Metzner’s (1985) student attrition model and Tinto’s
(1993) student integration model are regarded as the key models that have informed thinking about influences on student attrition. Tinto (1993) claimed that, for students enrolled in an on-campus program, attrition is the outcome of the interaction between the student and their educational environment. Tinto’s (1993) attrition research regarding on-campus students highlights the importance of the development of “persistence characteristics” for first-time postgraduate online learners who elect to study part-time off-campus through online delivery.

The identification of persistence characteristics has emerged as a result of attrition models and frameworks developed by a number of researchers (Astin, 1977, 1985; Bean, 1980, 1983; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Rovai (2003) and Bean and Metzner (1985) identified that persistence in older or non-traditional students displays characteristics different from those of traditional students, those “residing on-campus, 18 to 24 years old, and attending college full-time” (p. 488). Tinto (1993) argued that social and academic integration results in deeper student engagement with an education provider and increased levels of persistence.

Attrition and persistence frameworks have been examined by other researchers for several decades. For example, Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengstler (1992) reviewed Bean and Metzner’s (1985) and Tinto’s (1975, 1993) attrition frameworks, and their findings suggested that Tinto’s model is more inclusive and robust while Bean and Metzner’s model takes into account greater variance in persistence. Tinto himself acknowledged that “it was necessary to modify his model when used with
non-traditional students” (Tinto cited in Park & Choy, 2009, p. 208) such as those studying in an online mode.

Although models identifying key factors of student attrition have been developed by recognised researchers such as Astin (1977, 1985), Bean (1980, 1983), Bean and Metzner (1985), Braxton (2000) and Tinto (1975), these models were developed for on-campus learners. Rovai (2003) proposed a persistence model targeted at online learners that includes prior-to-admission variables and after-admission variables, in an endeavour to clarify the factors affecting online learners’ decision to withdraw from their studies. This model was based on Rovai’s (2003) review of other models including Tinto’s student integration model (1993) and Bean and Metzner’s student attrition model (1985). Rovai’s (2003) model examined student characteristics and student skills prior to admission along with external factors (e.g., finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement) and internal factors (e.g., academic integration, social integration, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, study habits, advising absenteeism) after admission. Rovai (2003) found that there is no combination of these internal and external factors that guarantees learner persistence in online courses, a finding which was significant for this research. Rovai (2003) further identified that an “unfamiliar learning environment demands significant coping skills for non-traditional learners” (p. 14) and investigated the coping skills necessary to address such unfamiliarity, including approaches to preparing first-time postgraduate part-time learners for the online learning environment. Despite Rovai’s (2003) research, and more recent research conducted by Simpson (2013b), online learner attrition remains significant. The next section describes some of the factors that affect the persistence patterns and engagement of this online student population.
2.5 Student attrition in the online learning environment

The Australian Government (2017) released a report into improving retention, completion and success in higher education which identified that external students are “around 2½ times more likely to withdraw from higher education than internal students” (p. 32). External students in this Australian Government (2017) report are defined as “not physically attending but as studying online, by correspondence or other means.” (p. 32).

Aside, from the 2017 Australian Government report, there are a limited number of studies that have provided data on the numbers of online learners who withdraw from their subject prior to completion. For example, Boston and Ice (2011) identified in their United States-based study how student retention is lower in online settings, while Patterson and McFadden (2009) claimed that attrition rates are six to seven times higher in online modes than on-campus or blended models in the United States. However, Gaytan (2015) identified how “no single set of factors exist that is able to predict student attrition in online courses” (p. 58). Lewin (2010) conducted an investigation into the University of Phoenix, one of the largest online learning providers in the United States, and identified that its online graduation rate was 5% of students graduating within six years; figures like these have resulted in some critics referring to such institutions as “failure factories” (Simpson, 2013b, p. 106).

While research into early online learning experiences is limited, there has been some exploration of factors that are linked to attrition, including isolation from peers and learner motivation. A more coherent understanding of the reasons behind online learner attrition would enable universities to implement retention strategies specifically targeted to first-time online learners who are embarking on learning in an
unfamiliar learning environment. The next section outlines some of the challenges reported in the literature faced by first-time postgraduate online learners.

### 2.5.1 Isolation from peers

The first-time postgraduate online learner is faced with the challenge of achieving quality learning in isolation. Simpson (2013b) identified isolation from peers as a contributing attrition factor for first-time adult online learners, claiming this to be “a principal factor in the higher probability of dropping out” (Simpson, 2013b, p. 111). Bawa (2016) and Simpson (2005, p. 42) had earlier suggested that to reduce attrition rates and thereby increase retention, institutions must actively initiate contact with students individually, rather than just provide services, regardless of how good the services may be, as accessing services involves students taking the initiative.

### 2.5.2 Student motivation

High attrition rates do not necessarily indicate academic non-success (Diaz, 2002); rather, many factors influence the decision to withdraw from online study. Beer, Clark and Jones (2010) identified that student motivation and student retention are always linked to engagement. Kim and Frick (2011) observed that “previous studies (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Serwatka, 2005) have found that lack of time and lack of motivation are the main factors associated with learner attrition in online courses” (p. 2). These findings are consistent with Anderson (2006), who argued that most students withdraw from their online studies because of a diminished motivation to learn and, therefore, that the best predictor of student retention is motivation. The next section provides an overview of supporting first-time online learners through learning-analytics software to aid moderators in identifying “at-risk” learners. This
type of identification may assist in identifying at-risk learners and so positively affect retention rates, or at least provide targeted support to those in need of assistance.

2.5.3 Support for first-time online learners and practical implications

One approach to retaining first-time online learners is through the implementation of learning-analytics software (Park & Choi, 2009), which assists in identifying learners who may be experiencing difficulties early in their online program. Early identification then enables emoderators to direct assistance to those learners struggling in an online learning environment. Arroway, Morgan, O’Keefe and Yanosky (2016) recognised that one of the key factors that “motivate investment in learning analytics [is] student retention” (p. 5). However, Spies (2011) has acknowledged that universities cannot control all retention risks, but early identification and assistance to struggling learners can reduce attrition. Also, importantly early identification of risk does not assume that students needs will necessarily be addressed, as this is dependent on the availability of relevant institutional support structures.

The provision of additional support to emoderators, in the forms of training and technical support, may also assist in reducing student attrition. This thesis adopts Salmon’s (2004) definition of emoderators as those who support learners’ communication and interaction through the learners’ acquisition of skills and knowledge. Poorly trained teachers with heavy workloads and limited time lack the capacity to investigate how new technology can be embedded into their course to improve their learning design (Johnson, Adams-Becker, Cummins, Estrada, Freeman & Ludgate, 2013). As both Bawa (2016) and Salmon and Wright (2014) note,
training for emoderators on the effective use of technology is a substantial investment for both the university and the individual in terms of resources, time and cost. The technology is new, but the pedagogical goals are old (Norton, 2013): when online pedagogy is executed well, learners are actively engaged and challenged (Norton, 2013; Salmon & Wright, 2014). Emoderators require additional support in the form of reduced teaching loads or provision of teaching assistants (Major, 2010), enabling them to focus on high-risk first-time adult online learners who require additional support. Gaytan (2015) also added that those who have emoderated appreciate that teaching online requires “significantly more faculty time, resources and effort than in face-to-face classrooms” (p. 63). Gaytan’s (2015) statement highlights the requirement for emoderator support and additional training to provide the necessary skills for emoderators to successfully identify at-risk first-time online learners.

2.5.4 Peer-to-peer learning through moderated discussion board interaction

Moderated online discussion board interactions are designed to reproduce on-campus instruction by stimulating responses to questions and promoting continuous feedback (Darabi, Liang, Suryavanshi & Yurekli, 2013). The introduction of discussion-board technology has altered how learners interact with their emoderator and peers (Kaminski, Switzer & Gloeckner, 2009). This presents a challenge for emoderators: the creation of an environment in which learners can fully immerse themselves, and where lecturer-to-learner and peer-to-peer learning can occur. Studies conducted on the role of the emoderator in facilitating effective discussion-board forums have highlighted that emoderator interactivity is crucial to creating an engaged online classroom (Cranney, Wallace, Alexander & Alfano, 2011; Croxton, 2014;
Mandernach, Forrest, Babutzke & Manker, 2009; Rovai, 2007). Yet Shearer, Gregg & Joo (2015) concluded, based on their study of the concept of deep learning, that asynchronous online discussions do not always produce the expected levels of deep thinking and learning. Academic staff should be offered the opportunity to participate in training to assist in transforming their teaching practices to support more future-orientated, digital, student-centred learning (Salmon & Wright, 2014) so they can provide engaging online discussion board interactions that deliver richer peer-to-peer online education experiences. This thesis contributes to the wider online/distance learning literature through its focus on learners’ perspectives derived from both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This has culminated in recommended improvements to online course design and highlighted the importance of ongoing emoderator professional development which are outlined in more detail in Chapter 6.

2.5.5 Section summary

Adult learners continue to enrol to study online at increasing rates. A number of these learners will be new to the mode of delivery and to academic study itself, and yet distance educators give much less attention to student attrition than they should (Simpson, 2013b). The research indicates that adult learners have experiences different from those of younger learners (Hung, Chou, Chen & Own, 2010; Rovai, 2003; Wilson, 2010), and demonstrates that the experiences of studying in an online environment may be complicated by the challenges of learning in isolation, which may be a contributing factor to early withdrawal. To more fully understand other factors that may lead to high rates of non-completion, the next section investigates online learner readiness studies by Lynch (2001), Rossett and Schafer (2003), Smith,

2.6 Other online-learner readiness studies

In the last decade a number of learner-readiness studies have been conducted (Dray, Lowenthal, Miszkiewicz, Ruiz-Primo & Marczynski, 2011; Hung et al. 2010; Kirmizi, 2015; Wladis, Conway & Hachey, 2016). The current research in the area of online learning conveys the growing popularity of online learning; however, there is a requirement for additional research into online-learner preparedness to develop education policies that identify and support first-time online learner readiness.

Lynch (2001), Rossett and Schafer (2003), Smith et al. (2003) and Watkins (2005), have all implemented an instrument that has tested learner readiness prior to the commencement of online learning. The Online Learner Self-Assessment questionnaire, developed by Watkins (2005), was designed to provide learners (without any online experience) with a quick overview of their online-learning readiness. This type of self-evaluation can assist in identifying areas of weakness of which the learner should be aware, equipping the first-time online learner with information prior to commencing an online learning program. The perceived flaw with this instrument is that it relies on the individual to self-predict their responses to an online learning environment in which they have had no experience.

Another self-evaluation instrument is the Readiness for Online Learning questionnaire created by Lynch (2001). Lynch’s (2001) survey was tested by Smith et al. (2003) by administering it to 107 undergraduate university students from the
United States and Australia. Smith et al. (2003) concluded that the questionnaire provided a “useful tool for research and practice in the area of readiness for online learning” (p. 65), stating: “The instrument fared well in the reliability analysis, and yielded a two-factor structure that was readily interpretable in a framework of existing theory and research.” (p. 57). The factors identified were “Comfort with e-learning” and “Self-management of learning.” Smith et al. (2003) suggested that “the instrument is useful for both research and practice, but would be enhanced through further work” (p. 57).

Bernard et al. (2004) further adapted the Lynch (2001) questionnaire, developing a 38-item questionnaire designed to assess online-learning success. This questionnaire was administered to 167 Canadian online students. Bernard et al. (2004) also included aspects of online moderator-to-student and student-to-student interactions. The results of their study suggested that learners’ opinions in relation to their own initiative, self-management and self-direction were the fundamental issues for predicting success in an online learning environment. However, the studies conducted by Bernard et al. (2004), Lynch (2001), Rossett and Schafer (2003), Smith et al. (2003) and Watkins (2005) are based on quantitative data that highlight the importance of this study where learners’ opinions of their first postgraduate part-time online learning experience were explicitly sought.

The next section defines learner preparedness and explores the process of preparation and the skills required for first-time postgraduate learners to succeed in online academic study. The subsequent review of self-directedness will examine learner
motivation and goal-setting and how these affect the completion of online part-time study.

2.7 Preparedness

Preparedness is defined by Day, Lovato, Tull and Ross-Gordon (2011) “largely in attitudinal and motivational rather than academic terms” (p. 80). Research has indicated that first-time postgraduate online learners require assistance with preparedness in areas such as familiarisation with the online-learning technology, and, to ensure that course requirements are completed, planning and implementing a study schedule (Krause et al., 2005; Samarakwickrema, 2005; You, 2016). Parkes, Stein and Reading (2015) observed, notwithstanding the increased popularity of university online learning, that “little research appears to have been done on the preparedness or readiness of students” (p. 1). Preparing learners to successfully complete academic study online is important, particularly as academic providers promote the benefits that flexible online studying provides. The promotion of online study is attractive to those who are in full-time employment and are considering to returning to academia to complete a postgraduate qualification. These learners may be attracted to the flexibility of online learning but may not have fully considered how to adequately prepare to learn online while managing full-time employment and other responsibilities.

There are limited data available that directly relates to first-time postgraduate online learners’ expectations and perceptions of their experience. In addition to the research of Brown et al. (2015), Parkes, Stein and Reading (2015) and Tung (2012), Buzdar, Ali and Tariq (2016) undertook a study at a prominent Pakistani Open University and
concluded that the learners in their study lacked preparedness and readiness to adopt online learning. Therefore, understanding the motivations of first-time online learners and how they prepare for their online study is vital to ensure that the learning expectations of this cohort are met.

Henry, Pooley and Omari (2014) support the findings of Krause (2005) identifying the importance of understanding the motivations of learners selecting online study, as “without this universities cannot be sure programs are effectively meeting students’ expectations or that students are sufficiently informed and prepared to learn in the online environment” (p. 2). Universities are challenged by the increasing diversity of students, many of whom admit to be unprepared for university study (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Krause et al., 2005). Re-entry into academia for learners returning to part-time online study requires a level of adjustment (Ngumi & Mwaniki, 2008). First-time postgraduate online learners largely draw upon “traditional study skills” and learning habits developed in instructor-led classrooms (Anderton, 2006; Hughes, 2004; Wilson, 2008). Existing research focuses on a range of factors that might affect adult learners; for example, the provision of support (Zhang & Zheng, 2013), levels of persistence (Hershkovitz & Nachmias; 2011), effective online instruction (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012) and student engagement and learning (Chen, Lambert & Guidry, 2010). Undertaking further research to fully understand how this cohort prepares for their re-entry into academia after a period of absence will enable institutions to provide improved support for first-time postgraduate part-time online learners.
2.8 Self-directedness

The study outlined in this thesis also investigated learner self-directedness in online learning postgraduate study programs. Self-directed learning in an online setting is defined in this study as an individual's response in asynchronous online learning environments where there is often no immediate support available to the learner.

A high degree of initiative and self-directedness is a prerequisite for adults undertaking their first postgraduate online study part-time, as an estimated 70% of adult learning is self-directed learning (Cross 1981). This finding by Cross (1981) is consistent with Pintrich and De Groot (1990), who also identified a positive correlation between motivational beliefs and self-regulated learning strategies. Tyler-Smith (2006) argued that adult learners can often successfully generate self-directedness and internal motivation for their learning; these are frequently based on notions of self-development, career advancement and achievement. In contrast Ko and Rossen (2010) and Roper (2007) claim that, in addition to the ability to use technology, successful online learners must often possess other skills such as self-directedness and communication and time-management skills. Self-directedness is important in this study, as the participants in this research had not previously studied online. Given the flexibility of online learning, and a cohort of learners learning to learn online, high levels of self-directedness can be understood to be a requirement to successfully complete academic study in a flexible online learning environment.

Developing an online learning environment that provides this group of learners with the opportunity to develop their preparedness and self-directedness skills is crucial to their success. The importance of acquiring self-directed learning skills is underlined
by Khiat (2017), who identified how such self-direction enables effective learning while postgraduate learners juggle work, family and other commitments. In particular, to ensure that course requirements are completed, self-directedness requires goal-setting as a learning strategy for first-time postgraduate online learners; the setting of goals will inform the development of the study schedule that accommodates full-time employment with part-time study. The goals should be realistic enough to enable first-time postgraduate online part-time learners to monitor the process and to adapt their approach if the original goals are not achieved. Schunk (1990) theorises that learners who set goals too low are unable to realise their true potential. Conversely, learners who set goals too high and cannot see progress will be tempted to give up when they encounter problems. As Schunk (1990) stated, “realistic goal-setting often requires training” (p. 81), which is particularly important for those returning to academia and who are learning online in isolation.

2.9 Goal orientation

This study also investigates mastery goal orientation and performance goal orientation. Mastery goal orientation is defined in this study as a learner’s intention to develop their competence. Performance goal orientation has been defined as a learner’s objective to do well and be positively assessed by their peers.

Learners completing their first postgraduate online study part-time need to exhibit levels of self-regulation and motivation to attain their learning goals (Rakes & Dunn, 2010; You, 2016; You & Kang, 2014), particularly while juggling other responsibilities such as full-time employment. Providing the learner with an understanding of their goal orientation prior to their beginning an online study
program would be advantageous, as goal orientation has been shown to have a “consistent direct relationship with self-efficacy, feedback seeking, learning and performance” (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002, p. 3). Furthermore, it is important that learners have a level of understanding of performance goal orientation and how this affects their desire to be positively evaluated by others (Farr, Hoffman & Ringenbach, 1993).

Mastery goal orientation represents one’s intention to learn, and to improve one’s ability and skills. Performance goal orientation differs from mastery goal orientation in that, in the latter, learners are not concerned with what others think about their competence, as they will persist when encountered with difficulties. Therefore, mastery goal orientation focuses on the development of competence through effort (Dweck, 1986). Acquiring a level of understanding about their own goal orientation before beginning online study may assist learners when encountering new situations in an unfamiliar learning environment. First-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ goal orientation is important in this study because the study seeks to determine whether the learner’s goal orientation affects studying in an online learning environment.

2.10 Chapter summary

Although the increase in the number of online learners has seen a growing corresponding increase in volume of related research (Greenland & Moore, 2014), higher-education online course completion rates are difficult to obtain. Periodically, however, completion rates are reported on in media interviews. For example, Devlin
(2017) identified how this type of data is misinterpreted and “assumptions underpinning how completion rates are calculated are woefully out of date” (p. 1).

This literature review highlights how there has been an upward trend in the number of online learners, and has revealed that, in relation to adults commencing or returning to undertake their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study, some important questions require addressing. From the literature reviewed, it was determined that no existing research was available that analysed or compared pre-study with post-study postgraduate online experiences and expectations. Further, there was little research available that explored first-time postgraduate part-time online learner experiences through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. There is a significant gap that exists in the literature: learners themselves have not been asked to identify the relationship between their expectations and experience. Specifically, this study will provide deeper understanding and insight into the issues that affect first-time postgraduate part-time online learners’ experiences in a wholly self-directed online learning environment through a mixed-methods research approach.

This literature review also confirms that there are few published works identifying the triggers that contribute to a first-time postgraduate online learner’s decision to persist with, or withdraw from, studying online. Therefore, the investigation of the extent of learner self-directedness, preparedness, and goal orientation when entering higher-education online programs will provide insight into the issues that directly affect these online learners’ experiences. As a result, this thesis contributes to understanding about first-time postgraduate part-time online learner withdrawal.
This will include identifying some of the factors that contributed to these first-time postgraduate part-time learners persisting in an online learning environment.

The following chapter details the research methodology and the methods of data collection employed in this study.
3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to investigate first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ expectations prior to the commencement of their first online study program, and to explore whether their expectations were met on conclusion of their online study experience. The relationship between part-time learners’ preparedness and goal orientation was examined. The research also investigated how first-time postgraduate online learners integrated part-time study with other commitments and what factors contributed to withdrawal from their qualification. The five research questions that underpinned this study were:

1. To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to his or her level of preparedness before commencement of online studies?

2. To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to the actual experience of online study?

3. Is there a difference between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experiences?

4. What factors contribute to learners’ decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their online studies?

5. What strategies do part-time adult learners use to integrate their online studies with existing commitments?

This research investigated online-learner preparedness and goal orientation by capturing the expectations of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners through surveys administered both prior to their first unit of postgraduate online part-time study and on completion. The subjective experiences of individual learners
were further investigated through qualitative interviews. While self-evaluation is beneficial in identifying what first-time postgraduate online part-time learners consider they should be aware of before commencing their first postgraduate unit of part-time study online, this research also included a post-study survey to identify the ways their expectations were met.

The research was carried out during Semester 1 (March to May) and Semester 2 (August to October) throughout 2011. Each online semester at this Australian university comprised a 10-week study period. Across both semesters in 2011, 268 online learners were registered in postgraduate business disciplines in this particular institution (Table 3.4). From the 268 first-time postgraduate online part-time learners studying at this Australian university, 105 (39%) responded to the pre-study sampling survey (Appendix C), which would determine whether they were eligible to participate in this study. They were eligible to be involved in the study if they were over 25 years old, working full-time and studying part-time, and had not studied online previously. Research conducted by Magner (2014) identified that Australians aged over 25 years represent the largest market of part-time learners in full-time employment for university programs; thus these criteria were used to focus this research. An additional criterion of respondents being first-time online learners was included, as it was important in terms of investigating the learners’ expectations. If the respondents did not fulfil each of these four criteria (over 25 years old; working full-time; studying part-time; and had not studied online previously), they were not eligible to participate in the pre-study and post-study surveys. The survey was designed to exclude respondents who selected a “no” response to any of the first four questions on the pre-study sampling survey (Appendix C), automatically generating a
message thanking the respondents for their interest in the study and explaining that they did not meet the criteria to participate.

Of the 105 respondents issued with the pre-study sampling survey (Appendix C) to determine their eligibility prior to commencing their first postgraduate online unit of study, 63 were identified as eligible to participate in this research and completed the pre-study survey. As mentioned, there were two data-collection points for the pre-study survey: one survey was sent to 46 postgraduate learners commencing their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study in Semester 1 in March 2011, and a further 17 postgraduate learners received the survey in Semester 2 in August 2011 (Table 3.1). At the end of their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study, the 63 pre-study survey participants (46 postgraduate learners from Semester 1, 2011 and 17 postgraduate learners from Semester 2, 2011) were requested to complete a post-study survey in June 2011 and November 2011 respectively. Thirty-three participants completed the post-study survey: 23 in June 2011 and 10 in November 2011 (Table 3.1). To obtain the qualitative data, 15 interviews were conducted. There were two data-collection points for the interviews: 10 interviews were conducted in July 2011 and five in November 2011. Each of the data-collection stages is outlined in more detail later in this chapter.

3.2 Research design

The research was designed to provide a holistic view of first-time postgraduate online part-time learner expectations and experiences. Given the scope and aims of the research, it was considered that solely relying on either qualitative or quantitative research methodologies would prevent the researcher from reasonably addressing the
research questions outlined in this study. Therefore, a mixed method approach was used in this research to overcome the limitations, and to complement the strengths, of a single design. Mixed methods research is defined by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008) as “research that involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies that investigate the same underlying phenomenon” (p. 265).

The rationale for adopting a mixed-method design was twofold. Firstly, it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the phenomena under investigation. Secondly, the robust methodological nature of a mixed-method design helped alleviate any potential weaknesses or inherent biases that may occur with a single-method approach (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The use of mixed-method designs to explore relatively unknown phenomena has much support of previous researchers in the social science literature (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Newman & Benz, 1998). This literature indicated that relying solely on qualitative or quantitative research methodologies would prevent the researcher from reasonably addressing the research questions outlined in this study. This approach is supported by Newman and Benz (1998), who conceptualised qualitative and quantitative analysis as a continuum and not a dichotomy. Newman and Benz (1998) stated: “all behavioural research is made up of a combination of qualitative and quantitative constructs” (p. 9). In addition, Creswell and Clark (2007) argued that “the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone” (p. 5).
Therefore, the adoption of a mixed-methods approach was considered an appropriate methodology to collect data to provide a comprehensive investigation of Australian part-time online learners undertaking their first postgraduate unit of part-time study. Indeed, it was felt this design would offer more methodological rigour by overcoming the limitations, and complementing the strengths, of any stand-alone single design. In addition, the mixed method was deployed to address the research questions at different levels drawing on quantitative and qualitative data through a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell, 2003). More specifically, a sequential explanatory design enabled the collection and analysis of quantitative data (pre- and post-study surveys) followed by collection and analysis of qualitative data (in-depth interviews). This combination enabled the researcher to utilise qualitative findings to build upon and further explore key themes and findings that emanated from the pre- and post-study quantitative data.

3.2.1 Quantitative data collection

A collection of quantitative data was undertaken in the first and second phases of data collection (Figure 3.1). The rationale for instigating a pre- and post-study online survey was the ease and speed made possible by utilising SurveyMonkey software for obtaining data from a geographically dispersed cohort of first-time online part-time postgraduate learners. Wright (2005) identified disadvantages of online survey research such as uncertainty over the validity of the data and sampling issues, and concerns surrounding the design, implementation, and evaluation of an online survey. These disadvantages were moderated by the researcher utilising surveys (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Lynch, 2001) which had been extensively tested by other
researchers (Bernard et al., 2004; Finney, Piper & Baron, 2004; Smith et al., 2003; Tung, 2012).

To obtain quantitative data, the Readiness for Online Learning Questionnaire (Lynch, 2001) and the Achievement Goal Questionnaire (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) were used. However, this study adapted some questions from the Readiness for Online Learning Questionnaire and the Achievement Goal Questionnaire to contribute to the body of knowledge in this field in the areas of first-time postgraduate online learner preparedness and goal orientation. The Lynch Readiness for Online Learning (2001) questionnaire has been used extensively by education practitioners, including Smith et al. (2003) in Australia, Bernard et al. (2004) in Canada and, more recently, Tung (2012) in Malaysia. Each of these researchers slightly modified the survey questions to reflect the continual evolution of online pedagogy. Similarly, the Achievement Goal Questionnaire (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) was adapted by Finney, Pieper and Barron (2004), who found that the four-factor structure of goal orientation was replicated when used in a general academic context. This study also adapted these surveys; this adaptation will be described in detail later in this chapter.

Survey-research methodology was used to examine the relationships between the variables in this study. The participants’ original responses from their completed pre-study survey were matched against the responses in their post-study survey (n=33). The pre-study and post-study surveys were matched by the unique internet protocol (IP) number, which is generated by the Survey Monkey software program. However, 14 of the pre-study and post-study surveys could not be compared and
used in the ANOVA procedure, resulting in 19 pre-study and post-study surveys being compared in the ANOVA procedure. During the data analysis, it became evident that a mismatch had occurred due to 14 learners completing their pre-study and post-study surveys on different computers and logging into the survey with different email addresses, with the result that two different identifiers were generated. The generation of two different computer identifiers was consequently identified as a limitation of this study’s survey design, as it was impossible to match the pre-study and post-study surveys to one learner. The one-way ANOVA F test is a procedure widely used for testing the equality of means of independent normal distributions with homogeneous variances (Jan & Shieh, 2013) and it was concluded that the resulting sample size of 19 learners would be sufficient for this type of testing. The matched pre-study and post-study surveys (n=19) formed the basis for analysing quantitative data to identify whether a gap existed between postgraduate online learners’ expectations and their actual online experiences, for the purpose of further analysis.

A correlational design was employed, with variables being measured at one point in time to examine the relationship between preparedness and goal orientation. To examine the differences between part-time postgraduate online learners’ expectations of study and their actual online experiences, a repeated-measure ANOVA was used to analyse the pre-study and post-study survey data. One hundred and five postgraduate first-time online part-time learners responded to the pre-study sampling survey. However, the survey design affected the participation criteria, which in turn affected the learners’ eligibility to complete the pre-study and post-study surveys (Table 3.1).
Table 3.1
*Learners’ Eligibility to Participate in Pre-Study and Post-Study Surveys*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Eligible</th>
<th>Ineligible</th>
<th>Eligible</th>
<th>Ineligible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-study</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sampling</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survey</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester 1</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester 2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>105</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 shows how the 105 pre-study sampling survey participants were divided across the two semesters over which data were collected, with 71 of the 105 taking part in the survey in Semester 1, 2011 and 34 participating in Semester 2, 2011.

It was determined that the sample size of 105 would be sufficient to detect an effect size of .15 with power = .95 at the 0.05 level, which it did, but the sample size declined over time from 105 responses to 63 eligible participants for the pre-study survey; this then further declined to 33 eligible participants for the post-study survey (Table 3.1). The pre-study and post-study surveys sought voluntary, non-incentivised participation from first-time post-graduate part-time online learners. Electronic questionnaires are increasingly used to collect survey data (Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2009). In contrast (Nulty, 2008) reported on the comparability of online and on-paper survey response-rate data and identified how online surveys are much less likely to achieve high response rates “despite the implementation of various practices to improve online course survey responses rates” (p. 302). To address the reduction in sample size, a mixed-methods approach was adopted to report on the research questions outlined in this study. The use of a mixed-methods
approach in this study enabled an analysis of pre-study and post-study survey statistical analysis and interviews “in a way that no single method could possibly have done” (Greene, 2007, p. 105). Therefore, adopting a mixed-methods approach provided the opportunity for deeper exploration of facets of online learning that first-time postgraduate part-time learners experienced.

The pre-survey data were gathered prior to the commencement of Semester 1 in March 2011 and Semester 2 in August 2011, using Survey Monkey software. The collected data were then downloaded into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. A combination of pre-study and post-study surveys and interviews with first-time postgraduate online part-time learners ensured that sufficient data were collected. Table 3.2 gives a summary of the different stages of the data collection and how they relate to the themes of goal orientation and preparedness. As shown in Table 3.2, the final stage of data collection focused on conducting 15 interviews (n=10 completers and n=5 non-completers). The next section discusses the qualitative data collection process and outlines how the 15 interviews were structured to obtain a deeper understanding of first-time postgraduate online part-time learning experiences.
Table 3.2
*Key Themes Explored in Each Stage of the Data-Collection Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The data-collection process</th>
<th>Goal orientation and preparedness themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-study survey issued (predictive) Semester 1 March 2011 Semester 2 August 2011</td>
<td>- Preparedness pre-study  - Goal orientation pre-study  - Preparedness and goal orientation relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-study survey issued (reflective) Semester 1 June 2011 Semester 2 November 2011</td>
<td>- Preparedness post-study  - Goal orientation post-study  - Preparedness and goal orientation relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data variables</td>
<td>- Pre-study and post-study comparison of preparedness to goal orientation  - Examination of differences between expectations and actual online experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews – completers (n=10)</td>
<td>Factors contributing to completers’ decisions to continue with their studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews – non-completers (n=5)</td>
<td>Factors contributing to learners’ decisions to withdraw from their studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.2 Qualitative data collection

The collection of qualitative data was undertaken in the third phase of data collection (Figure 3.1) to obtain deeper insights into the experiences of first-time online postgraduate learners and their perspectives of part-time study. Haverkamp and Young (2007) describe this as *practice-oriented purpose* qualitative research which “aims to inform practice by providing rich, elaborated descriptions of specific processes or concerns within a specified context” (p. 274). The rationale for including in-depth interviews was the usefulness as a technique identified by Haverkamp and Young (2007) for gathering knowledge to obtain rich descriptions from this cohort of part-time postgraduate learners’ of their first online learning experience.

The subjective experiences of 15 first-time postgraduate online part-time learners were investigated through interviews; 10 interviews were conducted in July 2011 and five interviews were conducted in November 2011. The inclusion of qualitative
methods allowed one cohort of first-time postgraduate part-time online learners to self-reflect on their experiences and perspectives of engaging in online study (Padgett, 2016). These qualitative data address a gap in the current research, as very few studies have asked the learners themselves about how they prepared for their first postgraduate part-time online learning experience and whether their first online learning experience met these expectations.

The interview questions (Appendix G) covered the following areas: getting started; self-management through planning and goal-setting; knowledge-sharing with peers and their emoderator; instructional design of coursework; and assessment feedback. Questions covering these topics were asked during face-to-face interviews with the city respondents, and by telephone with the country respondents. These questions also obtained deeper insight into first-time postgraduate online part-time learner preparedness and goal orientation. The interviews were transcribed and analysed for themes that emerged relating to the participants’ experiences in studying their first postgraduate online unit of study part-time.

The interview candidates were selected from those who indicated their willingness to be available for interview on the post-study survey (survey question 59); these were then segmented into those who had completed their online study and those who had withdrawn from their postgraduate online studies prior to completion. A variety of disciplines were identified. The final three case studies were selected based on completion and non-completion of part-time postgraduate online study, together with the secondary criteria of postgraduate discipline, gender and final grade. Post-study survey participants were further categorised by non-rural (city) and rural (country)
locations to capture a cross-section of learners from different geographical locations; this will be revisited in more detail in Chapter 4. The identified interview candidates were then categorised into their final grade, to gain deeper insights into their levels of preparedness and goal orientation for their first postgraduate online learning experience.

One female and one male who completed their online study were sourced from the ANOVA sample of 19 learners to participate in a case. The third case study was identified from one of the learners who provided a “no” response to question 35 in the post-study sampling survey, which asked learners to respond to the statement, “I completed the online subject.”

3.3 Setting

For this study, data were collected from postgraduate part-time learners undertaking their first unit of study online. The participating Australian university comprises one campus located in the central business district, three campuses in the metropolitan area and one campus in Asia. The university was established in the early 1900s and offers 38 postgraduate certificate courses across 17 disciplines. This institution’s emphasis is on teaching and research in science, technology, business, design and innovation. The institution’s aim is to deliver teaching and research that makes a difference in the lives of individuals and contributes to national economic and social objectives through partnerships with industry and other universities in Australia and internationally. The part-time participating postgraduate learners in this study were enrolled in their first online subject within the School of Business. In 2011, when this study took place, the School of Business offered 18 fully online postgraduate
subjects in the Business and Management disciplines, such as Accounting, Human Resource Management, Marketing and Public Relations.

3.4 The data-collection process

There were three stages to the data collection for this study (Figure 3.1), which was repeated over two semesters (Semester 1, 2011 and Semester 2, 2011).

![Diagram showing data collection phases](image)

*Figure 3.1. Data collection process.*

3.4.1 Phase 1 data-collection process

Due to the participants’ dispersed geographic locations, all data were collected via the University’s learning management system. The researcher arranged for the pre-study survey to be uploaded onto the system. When the 268 learners studying their first online unit of their part-time postgraduate course logged in and accessed their online coursework materials for the first time, they were invited to participate in the research. The information sheet (Appendix B) was provided to enable the learners to make an informed decision about their willingness to participate in this research. The pre-study sampling survey (Appendix C) comprised the first four questions of
the pre-study survey, which were designed to determine students’ eligibility for participation; if eligible, they were asked to complete the remainder of the pre-study survey. Questions 5 to 10 of the pre-study sampling survey were designed to provide eligible participant demographic data. The pre-study survey (Appendix D) questions 11 to 21 comprised the Lynch (2001) Preparedness survey questions. Questions 22 to 33 comprised the Elliot and McGregor (2001) Goal Orientation questions and question 34 asked the respondents to nominate their willingness to participate in a post-study survey.

The information sheet described the purpose of the research along with details of confidentiality and contact details for further enquiries, and the details for the Ethics Officer at the University of Wollongong should there be complaints about unethical conduct.

3.4.2 Phase 2 data-collection process

When each participant had completed their unit of study, an invitation to participate in the post-study survey was sent to the email address obtained from their pre-study survey. The first question in the post-study survey (Appendix E) was designed as a post-study sampling question to determine whether the respondent had completed their unit of study. To be eligible to participate in the post-study survey, a “yes” response to the first question (question 35) on the post-study survey was required. If the participant responded “no”, they were redirected to answer the non-completion survey (questions 60 to 65), which formed part of the post-study survey (Appendix E). The final question in both surveys asked the participant for their contact details if they were willing to participate in an interview.
3.4.3 Phase 3 data-collection process

The interview participants were identified from those who had provided their contact details on the post-study survey and who had indicated they were willing to participate in an interview. The interview candidates were selected based on completion or non-completion of their first online postgraduate unit of study, rural and city location, postgraduate discipline of study, and gender (Table 4.7).

3.4.4 Section summary

There were three stages to the data collection: 1) pre-study survey, 2) post-study survey and 3) interviews with candidates selected based on completion or non-completion of their first online postgraduate unit of part-time study. The rationale of the pre-study survey was to determine eligibility to participate in the research, and eligible participants were provided access to complete the pre-study survey. The pre-study survey aimed to focus the participant on self-predicting their preparedness and self-directedness prior to commencing their first unit of online study. The post-study survey aimed to focus the participant on reflecting about their actual first-time postgraduate online part-time learning experience. The post-study interviews sought to provide detailed insights into the experiences of this cohort through personal reflection on whether their first postgraduate part-time online learning experience had met their expectations.

3.5 Instrument development and testing

Quality research relies upon a commitment to testing and increasing the validity and reliability of the research results (Baker, 1994; Ford, 1986; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). This study design was strengthened by the review of the pre-study
and post-study surveys by 12 Wollongong University online learners who volunteered to complete the survey and provide detailed feedback in February 2011, prior to the survey being issued to learners at the participating Australian university. The purpose of conducting a small-scale face-validity study was to identify whether the changes made to the survey questions were adequate.

3.6 Pre-study survey modifications

The outcome of the small-scale validity and reliability study resulted in minor alterations to wording to increase clarity and readability. The wording of the original Lynch (2001) survey (adapted by Smith et al. 2003) was modified to suit the context of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners. Details of all these changes have been outlined in Appendix H. For example, the original wording of question 1, “I am able to easily access the Internet as needed for my studies”, was amended to “I am able to easily access the learning management system (Blackboard) when needed for my studies”. This amendment was made based on feedback, which recommended that the words “learning management system” replace the word “Internet.” Concerns were raised over the use of the word “Internet” which might confuse survey respondents, as online leaners specifically used the University’s learning management system to access their course materials not the Internet.

Appendix I details all the changes to the wording of the Elliot and McGregor (2001) survey (adapted by Finney et al. 2004), and the rationale for these changes. Many of the changes were based on feedback derived from the external independent participants who reviewed both surveys. For example, three of the 12 participants who had undertaken the small-scale testing process of the post-study survey
indicated that the word “class” might confuse participants. It was decided that replacing the word “class” with “online subject” would help participants select consistent choices on the pre-study survey.

3.7 Post-study survey modifications

An email was sent to all of the external independent participants who had participated in the small-scale testing process of the pre-study survey, with a request to complete the post-study survey and provide further feedback. The recipients of the post-study survey were advised that the survey was based on the pre-study survey and contained reworded questions to gather reflective information from the learners who completed the pre-study survey. No alterations were suggested for the wording of the post-study survey questions. Those who completed the survey agreed that the post-study survey adequately collected information about actual online experience in relation to learner preparedness and self-directedness. Appendix J contains the final versions of both the pre-study and post-study survey questions.

Apart from those questions specified previously, no other sections of the pre-study and post-study survey were amended. Table 3.3 summarises the relationship of each data-collection technique to the research questions.
Table 3.3  
*Relationship of Data Instruments to Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Data source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| RQ1 = To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to his or her level of preparedness before commencement of online studies? | Survey questions 10 to 33  
Interview questions 1, 7, 8, 10, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 36 |
| RQ2 = To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to the actual experience of online study? | Survey questions 36 to 58  
Interview questions 1, 4, 5, 6, 8 to 14, 17 to 20, 22 to 36 |
| RQ3 = Is there a significant difference between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experiences? | Survey questions 22, 23, 24,  
vs 47, 48, 49, 25, 26, 27, vs 50, 51, 52, 28, 29, 30 vs 53,  
54, 55; 31, 32, 33 vs 56, 57, 58 |
| RQ4 = What factors contribute to learners decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their studies? | Survey questions 35, 60, 61,  
62, 63  
Interview questions 11 & 14 |
| RQ5 = What strategies do part-time adult learners use to integrate their online studies with existing commitments? | Interview questions 2, 3, 7, 12,  
13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 30, 36 |

3.8 Pre-study survey participants

One hundred and five learners participated in the 2011 pre-study survey (Table 3.1). As outlined above, to be eligible to participate in this study, survey participants needed to be aged over 25 years. The adoption of this criterion was based on Magner’s (2014) research, which found that Australians aged over 25 years represent the largest market of part-time learners in full-time employment participating in university programs.

3.8.1 Pre-study sampling survey

The first section of the pre-study survey (survey questions 1 to 4) was designed as a sampling survey to determine eligibility to participate in the pre-study survey (Appendix C). Of the 105 participants who undertook the pre-study sampling survey, 63 were eligible to participate in the pre-study survey: 32 males and 31
females (Table 3.1). Forty-two participants were ineligible to participate as they either were not working full-time, were not studying part-time, were aged under 25 years or had previously studied online, or a combination of some or all of these factors. The data from the 42 ineligible participants were removed from the final data set.

Online learners from six of the 18 units of study offered by the School of Business took part in this study. Table 3.4 summarises the postgraduate certificate Business and Management disciplines that participated in the pre-study survey and the total enrolment numbers. The data were obtained from pre-study survey participants’ selection in response to pre-study survey question 7: “I am enrolled in the [each of the postgraduate online subjects were listed].”

Table 3.4
2011 Postgraduate Certificate of Business Enrolments by Discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Total enrolments</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Number of pre-study sampling survey participants</th>
<th>Percentage of pre-study sampling survey participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Management</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Management</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Management</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply Chain Management</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.8.2 Pre-study survey

The pre-study survey consisted of five sections: the first section was designed as a sampling survey to determine eligibility (as detailed in Section 3.8.1). The second section extracted demographic data; the third section contained preparedness questions; the fourth section contained goal-orientation questions; and the fifth section allowed the respondent to provide their contact details. Each of these sections is explained in detail below.

The first section (survey questions 1 to 4), as noted earlier, was designed as a pre-study sampling survey to determine eligibility to participate in the pre-study survey (Appendix C). The second section (survey questions 5 to 10) extracted demographic information in order to profile the participant (Table 3.4).

The third section of the pre-study survey was an adaptation of the Readiness for Online Learning questionnaire (Lynch 2001) and comprised 11 items (survey questions 11 to 21). The questions in the third section of the pre-study survey related to learner preparedness, and were measured on a four-point scale ranging from *never* (1) to *all of the time* (4). The pre-study survey participants were asked to rate their perceived level of preparedness by selecting the response that best matched their beliefs about each statement.

The fourth section of the survey was based on the Achievement Goal Questionnaire (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) and comprised 12 statements related to goal orientation measured on a seven-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). The 12 questions were grouped into four domains: performance approach (items 22, 23 and 24), performance avoidance (items 25, 26 and 27), mastery avoidance...
(items 28, 29 and 30) and mastery approach (items 31, 32 and 33). This section of
the pre-study survey gathered information about the learners’ expectations prior to
the commencement of their first online unit of part-time study, focusing on their
perceptions of their goal orientation. The participants were asked to rate their
perceived level of goal orientation by selecting the response that best matched their
beliefs about each statement.

The fifth section of the pre-study survey (survey question 34) provided the option for
the participant to include their contact details, indicating their willingness to
participate in a post-study survey. Appendix D contains a complete version of the
pre-study survey.

3.9 Post-study survey participants

At the conclusion of their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study, the post-
study survey was emailed to the 63 participants who had completed the pre-study
survey (Appendix C). Thirty-three participants 14 males and 19 females completed
the post-study survey which was based on the pre-study survey, but aimed to gather
reflective information from learners about their actual first postgraduate online
experience in relation to their preparedness and goal orientation.

3.9.1 Post-study survey

The post-study survey comprised five sections (Appendix E). The first was an
introduction to the post-study survey, which contained an outline of the research
project. The second was designed as a post-study sampling survey to determine
eligibility of the 63 pre-study survey participants to partake in the post-study survey.
The eligibility of the 63 pre-study survey participants was based on whether the learner had completed their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study (post-study survey question 35). If the participant answered “no”, they were invited to participate in the non-completion survey instead (survey questions 60 to 65).

The third section of the post-study survey (survey questions 36 to 46) contained reworded questions of the Readiness for Online Learning questionnaire (Lynch 2001). This section comprised 11 statements relating to learner reflection on their preparedness, measured on a four-point scale from *never* (1) to *all of the time* (4). The post-study survey participants were asked to rate their level of preparedness by selecting the response that best matched their beliefs.

The fourth section of the post-study survey (survey questions 47 to 58) contained reworded questions of the Achievement Goal Questionnaire (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) and comprised 12 statements related to learners’ reflection on their goal orientation, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). The goal-orientation post-study survey comprised items 47 to 58. These 12 items were grouped into the four goal orientation categories: performance approach (items 47, 48 and 49), performance avoidance (items 50, 51 and 52), mastery avoidance (items 53, 54 and 55) and mastery approach (items 56, 57 and 58).

The post-study survey gathered information on the learners’ reflection on their experience following the completion of their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study of their course, but focused on their reflection on their preparedness and
goal orientation. The post-study survey participants were asked to rate their level of goal orientation by selecting the response that best matched their beliefs.

The fifth section of the post-study survey (survey question 59) contained the option for participants to include their contact details if they were willing to participate in a post-study interview. Appendix E contains a complete version of the post-study survey.

3.10 Post-study interviews

Fifteen of the participants who provided their contact details on the post-study survey were contacted to request their participation in a post-completion interview of their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study of their course. The interviews aimed to explore the issues they encountered during their studies. Creswell (1998) and Morse (1994) identify that a phenomenological design should contain between six and 10 interviews to provide adequate data for thematic analysis, which means that the 15 interviews undertaken in this research project provided adequate data for conducting the thematic analysis for this research.

Thematic analysis was conducted adopting Braun and Clarke’s (2003) six-step process: 1. familiarisation; 2. producing initial codes; 3. searching for themes; 4. clustering and reviewing themes; 5. defining and naming themes; and 6. reporting the content of identified themes. A theme is defined as capturing something significant in the data that relate to the research question, and signifies a patterned meaning or response within the set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2003). To address the research questions, a thematic analysis was undertaken to obtain deeper insights into this
cohort of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners. The interviews were semi-structured, but the interviews were based on a list of initial questions (Appendix G) and were conducted to ensure the experiences of the interviewees were described as accurately as possible to retain their original meaning. The analysis of the data identified common themes which culminated in seven recommendations which addressed the research questions outlined in this study. This research methodology contained limitations, which are discussed in the next section.

3.11 Limitations of the study

During this research study, two limitations of this study were identified:

1. Participant-sample limitations
2. Data-collection limitations
3. Interview technique

3.11.1 Participant-sample limitations

The sample of participants was obtained from one Australian university. Participation in this research was voluntary, and as a result was not representative of the entire learner population at the participating university. In addition, the pre-study survey was only issued to those studying their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study in the Business and Management discipline within the School of Business at the participating Australian university. The sample was further limited to those 1) aged 25 years or older, 2) in full-time employment, 3) studying part-time, and 4) who had not studied online previously. Due to these criteria, there was a low response rate from the pre-study survey in Semester 1, 2011 (n=46). Therefore, to increase the sample size, the pre-study survey was reissued to a similar cohort studying in
Semester 2, 2011, which resulted in achieving a greater number of responses (n=17); in total 63 respondents completed the pre-study survey.

The participants in this study were sought from one School of Business so it may be likely that first-time online learners from other disciplines would have different expectations when enrolling in online postgraduate part-time study. Therefore, the opportunity to include learners from the other seven schools at the participating Australian university would have increased the participant sample size, which would have affected the research findings.

A primary strength of this study is that it represents an initial attempt to reveal the expectations and experiences of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ at one Australian university and the factors that influence those who complete or do not complete their online study. Indeed, by focusing specifically on the first-time postgraduate online part-time learner, the findings also serve to address the scarcity of research that has targeted this cohort. In addition, by identifying the key factors that impact on completion or non-completion of postgraduate online part-time study, a further strength of the study involved both qualitative and quantitative research design. This study has also advanced existing literature by highlighting the expectations of first time postgraduate online learners, the importance of online learning design and ongoing moderator professional development.

Although this study has enhanced our understanding of the expectations of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ and their experiences of higher education, some limitations need to be addressed. First, given the specific focus on one academic institution, the transferability of the findings to other academic institutions
in Australia and globally is unknown. Therefore, readers should be judicious in an attempt to apply the findings to other settings. We must also acknowledge that a follow-up study to this study across multiple locations is suggested.

More female respondents (n=11) than male (n=4) participated in the post-study interview, which introduces gender bias in the interview-data findings. It is not surprising that more females than males responded to the survey. The Australian Government Department of Education and Training identified the number of female students in higher education rose by 33.5 per cent between 2002 and 2012, compared with a 22 per cent rise for males (Maslen, 2013). In addition, a contributing factor to the increase in female participation can be attributed to women who have identified that online learning provides them with greater flexibility to balance their family and work commitments (Haynie, 2015). Therefore, the higher number of females (n=193) than males (n=75) in the study as a whole can partially be accredited to an increased number of female enrolments in the postgraduate certificate of business disciplines in 2011 at the participating Australian university. The higher number of female respondents than male participating in the post-study interviews may contribute to amplifying the voices of females, rather than males, in this research, which may introduce an artificial gender imbalance. While more females than males responded to this study, it may be interesting for future studies to focus on gender.

3.11.2 Data-collection limitations

This study was not about making generalisations to all first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’. This research was conducted at one Australian university and
must be acknowledged that this was the intention of this study. It was beyond the scope of the study aims to go to wider audience.

One hundred and five participants responded to the survey from a total of 268 participants studying an asynchronous online unit of study from one of six Business and Management disciplines in the School of Business at the participating Australian university; a survey response rate of 39 per cent. While not a data-collection limitation, it could be argued that 105 survey participants is a small sample size. However, combined with the post-study survey results and the 15 interviews, the sample size was considered sufficient to capture the expectations of first-time postgraduate part-time online learners at this academic institution. The survey data was used to inform the interviews which helped to obtain a complete picture of experiences and provided a comprehensive and authentic narrative of experiences. Fifteen interviews were considered sufficient as themes in interviews reached saturation of exploring positive and negative online learning experiences.

To counter bias occurring during the qualitative data collection, the following three steps were taken: 1. a structured interview procedure was adopted through a standardised set of questions (Appendix G) to guide the interview; 2. the interviewees were not known to the researcher and were treated with respect; and 3. the interview results were accurately recorded to avoid reporting bias. As an additional measure, the pre- and post-survey interview data was also used to inform the qualitative data collected.
During data analysis it became apparent that the collection methods of this study had limitations. During the analysis of the pre-study and post-study surveys, the researcher became aware that some of the participants had completed the pre- and post-study surveys on different computers. This resulted in an inability to compare 14 of the pre-study and post-study surveys, as this was managed via the unique IP address of the computer. As a result, the ANOVA analysis only included 19 pre- and post-study surveys.

Due to these limitations, the findings from this research cannot be generalised; however, this study does provide insights into one cohort’s expectations of and actual experiences with online learning. In future, a larger-scale study may focus on expanding the research across multiple disciplines at one university, or multiple universities, to compare and contrast first-time postgraduate part-time online learner experiences.

3.11.3 Interview technique

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that the researcher conducting the interviews did not have extensive training in interview-based research. However, the researcher has extensive experience with first-time postgraduate online part-time learners. This understanding helped to build rapport with the learners, which in turn, facilitated the interviews. Secondly, it was necessary to conduct four telephone interviews due to the geographical location of the participants. A limitation placed on telephone interviews is the reduction of social cues and the interviewer having a lack of control over the interview setting. The lack of social cues and interview setting may have impacted on the interviewee responses. However, irrespective of the interview
setting, it was important to conduct each in-depth interview to allow for full exploration of the perspectives of both city and country first-time postgraduate part-time learners.

3.12 Ethical considerations

The Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong approved the ethics submission for this research. The letter of permission can be found in Appendix A. The ethical considerations that were taken into account are outlined below.

The participants voluntarily responded to an invitation to complete an online pre-study survey prior to commencing their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study, and a post-study survey after its completion. These surveys did not significantly add to the burden of the participants’ workload and were deliberately designed to take participants’ time constraints into consideration. Accordingly, it took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete the pre-study and post-study surveys online, which were based on the Lynch (2001) Readiness for Online Learning questionnaire and the Elliot and McGregor (2001) Achievement Goal Questionnaire.

The pre-study and post-study surveys contained a section where learners could elect to provide their contact details, so they could be approached after the completion of their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study. If a participant was prepared to participate in post-study interviews, they were asked to provide their name and contact telephone number in the space provided on the pre-study survey. Completing this section provided the information necessary to enable the researcher to make
contact with the learner to arrange a suitable time for an interview. Participation in
the post-study interview was not linked to the individual’s assessment in their unit of
study. Emoderators and tutors were not informed or advised of who did or did not
participate, and did not have access to the recordings, transcripts or analyses of the
interviews or surveys.

The participants in the pre-study and post-study surveys were not identified and
remained anonymous, unless they nominated to include their contact details as
potential participants in the semi-structured post-study interview. For those who
participated in this process, and to ensure anonymity, all data were de-identified and
coded to ensure that pre-study and post-study survey responses could not be linked to
individual course participants. When participants’ identities were coded, the code
key document was kept secured and separate from any other material during the
research.

At no stage in the final report were participants named, and their individual
responses were kept completely anonymous. All information gained through the
process was kept confidential and secure. The original interview tapes and
transcripts were kept in a locked, fireproof, coded safe at the premises of the
researcher. The participants’ responses were not identifiable in the research case
report or thesis. There were no other ethical issues identified that required
addressing.
3.14 Chapter summary

This chapter described the research-method approach that was implemented to capture, through quantitative and qualitative procedures, the expectations and experiences of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners. The pre-study questions (Appendix D) determined participants’ comfort with online learning, goal orientation and preparedness; specifically how they planned to monitor their part-time study workload in conjunction with their full-time employment. The post-study survey questions (Appendix E) were reflective and determined whether the learners’ pre-study expectations had been met and if they were eligible for a post-study interview for the purpose of gathering qualitative data.

Chapter 4 presents the quantitative data analysing the descriptive statistical results of the pre-study and post-study goal orientation and preparedness surveys. These results examine the relationship between first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ preparedness to study and their goal orientation before and after study. The quantitative pre-study and post-study data are further analysed for learner preparedness in relation to four goal-orientation categories: performance approach, performance avoidance, mastery avoidance and mastery approach. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data examined the factors that contributed to learners’ decisions to continue or withdraw from their studies; and outlined positive and negative impacts. The chapter also highlights the strategies adopted to integrate online studies with existing commitments. The research then further investigates the subjective experiences of three individual learners, through a qualitative analysis of the interview data, which is outlined in Chapter 5.
4 RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the pre-study survey (n=63) and post-study survey (n=33) data, as well as a subset that includes matched data (n=19) analysis, and the results of the post-study interviews (n=15).

The overall aim of this study was to investigate the expectations of a cohort of postgraduate learners’ first part-time online learning experiences and to compare these expectations with the reality of their online experience, with the aim being to obtain insights into whether a gap existed between their expectations and actual online experience. To respond to this aim, the following five key research questions were addressed in this study:

1. To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to his or her level of preparedness before commencement of online studies?
2. To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to the actual experience of online study?
3. Is there a difference between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experiences?
4. What factors contribute to learners’ decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their online studies?
5. What strategies do part-time adult learners use to integrate their online studies with existing commitments?
The results are reported as they pertain to each of the five research questions together with three sub-questions, which underpin research questions 1 and 2. To interrogate these data, the main research questions together with the respective sub-questions were examined.

The first section of this chapter, “Goal orientation and preparedness before commencing studies”, reports on the levels of preparedness and goal orientation of the pre-study survey participants (n=63) prior to starting their first online unit of study (data-collection phase 1). Data-collection phase 1 addressed research question 1 and three sub-questions: 1.a, 1.b and 1.c.

The second section, “Goal orientation and preparedness after completion of studies”, reports on post-study survey participants’ (n=33) levels of preparedness and goal orientation after completing their first online unit of study (data-collection phase 2). Data-collection phase 2 addressed research question 2 and three sub-questions: 2.a, 2.b and 2.c.

The third section, “Differences between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experiences”, reports on the differences between the variables of expectations and actual experience. These variables are examined using a one-way repeated-measures ANOVA to identify differences among the four areas of goal orientation across the pre-study and post-study survey responses (n=19), and addresses research question 3 (data-collection phases 1 and 2).
Sections 4 and 5 of the chapter present the qualitative data derived from interviews conducted with 15 participants (data-collection phase 3). This data-collection phase addressed research questions 4 and 5.

4.2 Goal orientation and preparedness before commencing studies

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 4.1. Data-collection phase 1*

This section will explore the first research question, which examined the relationship between first-time adult online learners’ goal orientation and their perceived preparedness before the commencement of their postgraduate online part-time studies. The following three sub-questions further explored these relationships:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.a)</td>
<td>What was the learner's level of preparedness before commencement of online study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.b)</td>
<td>What was the learner’s goal orientation before commencement of online study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.c)</td>
<td>What was the relationship between goal orientation and level of preparedness?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of these questions will be dealt with separately in the sections that follow.
4.2.1 Research sub-question 1.a

Research sub-question 1.a sought to gain insights into how first-time online learners (n=63) said they prepared for their study experience. To address this question, postgraduate learners studying their first online unit of part-time study were invited to respond to an online pre-study survey prior to the commencement of their studies (Figure 4.1). This research question was addressed through their responses to items 11 to 21 of the pre-study preparedness survey.

This section of the pre-study survey was designed to gather information about the learners’ expectations prior to the commencement of their first online unit of part-time study, focusing on their perceptions of their preparedness. The pre-study survey contained 11 preparedness questions using a four-point scale and 12 goal orientation questions using a seven-point scale, from which participants could select their response. Appendix D contains a copy of the pre-study survey. Table 4.1 reports the means, standard deviations and distribution of responses (frequencies) to the preparedness pre-study survey questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Response-category counts (Frequencies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I believe I will be able to easily access the online learning management system as needed for my studies</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>Never 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I am comfortable communicating electronically</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1 5 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I am willing to actively communicate with my classmates and instructors electronically</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>2 6 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I am willing to map out a study plan to effectively manage my study and work commitments</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0 5 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I believe that my background and experience will give me confidence to complete my studies</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0 5 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I am comfortable working with information in an online format</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>1 8 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>When it comes to learning and studying, I am a self-sufficient person who can work autonomously</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1 9 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>In my studies, I am self-disciplined and will find it easy to set aside reading and homework time</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0 13 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I expect to manage my study time effectively and easily complete assignments on time</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0 11 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>As a student I think I will enjoy participating in online discussions</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0 12 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>In my studies, I plan to set goals and have a high degree of initiative</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0 8 31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean of $M$ for preparedness 3.19

$n=63$
Overall, participants reported being generally prepared for their first part-time online learning study experience ($M_{total}=3.19$). This reflected that online learners in this study felt “somewhat assured” when self-predicting time management and balancing full-time work with part-time study (item 18: “In my studies, I am self-disciplined and will find it easy to set aside reading and homework time”, $M=2.98$). However, participants reported feeling most confident about scheduling activities they would be involved in when they commenced study (item 14: “I am willing to map out a study plan to effectively manage my study and work commitments”, $M=3.40$). This result indicated that this group of learners was prepared to engage in self-management strategies to complete coursework within specified timeframes.

Responses to items 11, 12, 13, 16 and 20 demonstrate participants’ predicted levels of comfort when communicating electronically, and their confidence in their ability to access the online learning management system. In response to item 20 ($M=3.03$), “As a student I think I will enjoy participating in online discussions”, the mode response was 3, “Most of the time”. Although this cohort largely reported that they were returning to study for career advancement and/or professional development reasons, the results of the pre-study preparedness survey provided insights into the participants’ integration of full-time employment commitments with forthcoming part-time study.

### 4.2.2 Research sub-question 1.b

Research sub-question 1.b focused on learners’ (n=63) goal orientation prior to the commencement of their online study. This research question was addressed through the responses to items 22 to 33 of the pre-study goal-orientation survey.
Table 4.2 reports the means, standard deviations and distribution of responses (frequencies) to pre-study goal-orientation questions. The distribution of responses are categorised into the four areas of goal orientation: performance approach (questions 22, 23 and 24), performance avoidance (questions 25, 26 and 27), mastery avoidance (questions 28, 29 and 30) and mastery approach (questions 31, 32 and 33).
Table 4.2
Descriptive Statistics of Participants’ Responses (Pre-Study Survey) to the Items Representative of the Variables “Performance Approach”, “Performance Avoidance”, “Mastery Avoidance” and “Mastery Approach”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal-orientation category</th>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Response-category counts (Frequencies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all true of me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance approach</td>
<td>My goal in this class is to get a better grade than most of the other students</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>It is important for me to do well compared to others in this online class</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is important for me to do better than other students</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_p$</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>I just want to avoid doing poorly in this online class</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>My fear of performing poorly in this online class is often what motivates me</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My goal in this online class is to avoid performing poorly</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_m$</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>Sometimes I am afraid that I may not understand the content of this online class as thoroughly as I’d like</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I worry that I may not learn all that I possibly could in this online class</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am often concerned that I may not learn all that there is to learn in this online class</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_m$</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>I desire to completely master the material presented in this online class</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I want to learn as much as possible from this online class</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is important for me to understand the content of this course as thoroughly as possible</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_m$</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean of $M$ for goal orientation 4.53

$n$=63

Chapter 4: Results
The results indicated participants’ self-predicted intermediate levels of goal orientation towards their first online learning experience ($M_{total}=4.53$). The participants demonstrated strong mastery-approach goals by focusing on their self-improvement for item 33, “It is important for me to understand the content of this course as thoroughly as possible” ($M=6.06$). Participants were least concerned about benchmarking themselves against their online counterparts for item 22, “My goal in this class is to get a better grade than most of the other students”, and item 24, “It is important for me to do better than other students” ($M=3.71$). This result seems to suggest that prior to commencing study this group of learners were largely orientated towards the goal of improving themselves through knowledge acquisition, as opposed to benchmarking themselves against their peers.

Table 4.2 presents the pre-study distribution of the response-category counts. The frequencies in Table 4.2 show that the highest frequency in the mastery-approach goal-orientation category was for item 32, “I want to learn as much as possible from this online class”, with a score of 32 in category 7 of the seven-point goal-orientation scale. Participants’ self-reported levels in the goal-orientation category of performance avoidance was the second-highest-scoring category, the highest score in performance avoidance being for item 25, “I just want to avoid doing poorly in this online class”, with a score of 17 in category 7 of the seven-point goal-orientation scale. The third-highest-scoring goal-orientation category was for mastery avoidance. The highest score in mastery avoidance was for item 28, “Sometimes I am afraid that I may not understand the content of this online class as thoroughly as I’d like”, with a score of 16 in category 5 of the seven-point goal orientation scale. Participants’ self-reported levels of “performance approach” received the lowest
score in the goal-orientation category. The highest score in performance approach was for item 23, “It is important for me to do well compared to others in this online class”, with a score of 15 in category 4 of the seven-point goal-orientation scale (Table 4.2). The average of the means for the four goal-orientation categories was calculated (Table 4.2) indicates that performance approach returns the lowest average of the means ($M_{Pa}$ 3.78), whereas mastery approach returns the highest average of the means ($M_{Ma}$ 5.71). The finding that mastery approach had the highest score in the pre-study goal-orientation survey is important in identifying whether the perception of the cohort of first-time online part-time postgraduate learners at goal-orientation pre-study survey (time 1) and goal-orientation post-study survey (time 2) differed for the cohort of participants who responded to both surveys.

4.2.3 Research sub-question 1.c

Research sub-question 1.c focused on the relationship between perceived learner preparedness and their pre-study goal orientation. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between the variable preparedness and the subscales of goal orientation: performance approach, performance avoidance, mastery avoidance, and mastery approach. The correlation between preparedness and mastery approach was significant and positive ($r=.93$, $p<.001$), showing that high levels of preparedness were associated with high levels of mastery approach (Table 4.3). This finding suggested that this cohort of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners were focused on self-management to complete their coursework, while maintaining a positive approach to building on their existing knowledge and mastering the course material in their first postgraduate online unit of study. This is consistent with the reported results for survey item 8, “Please select your reason(s)
for learning”, in which 44 of the 63 participants stated that they had commenced part-time study to develop their career.

There was also a strong positive correlation between preparedness and performance avoidance ($r=.84, p<.001$), demonstrating that high levels of preparedness were also associated with high levels of performance avoidance (Table 4.3). This result indicated that, for these participants, being highly prepared to avoid failure was the next most important priority.

Furthermore, preparedness and mastery avoidance revealed a strong positive correlation ($r=.78, p<.001$), as did preparedness and performance approach ($r=.78, p<.001$) Table 4.3. There was also a strong positive correlation for these categories. These correlations indicated that this cohort of online learners aimed to achieve maximum productivity for their performance through planning and organising, to complete coursework within specified timelines.

**Table 4.3**
Correlation Results between Participants’ Preparedness Responses (Pre-Study Survey) to the Items Representative of the Variables “Performance Approach”, “Performance Avoidance”, “Mastery Avoidance” and “Mastery Approach”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Preparedness correlation result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance approach</td>
<td>($r=.78, p&lt;.001$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>($r=.84, p&lt;.001$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>($r=.78, p&lt;.001$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>($r=.93, p&lt;.001$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$n=63$
The following section focuses on learner experiences after the completion of their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study. The relationship between preparedness and goal orientation was explored on completion of their study.

4.3 Goal orientation and preparedness after completion of studies

![Diagram showing data collection phases](image)

**Figure 4.2** Data-collection phase 2

The aim of the second research question, “*To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to the actual experience of online study?*”, was to examine the relationship between first-time postgraduate online learners’ goal orientation and their preparedness after the completion of their first part-time online unit of study.

The following three sub-questions explored these relationships:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.a</th>
<th>What was the learner’s experience of online study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.b</td>
<td>What was the learner’s goal orientation after online study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.c</td>
<td>What was the relationship between goal orientation and actual experience?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of these questions will be dealt with separately in the sections that follow.

4.3.1 Research sub-question 2.a

The first of the sub-questions (2.a) was designed to focus on how learners’ preparedness related to their actual online study experience. To address this
question, postgraduate learners studying their first online unit of part-time study were invited to respond to an online post-study survey after completing their studies (Figure 4.2). This research question was addressed through the responses to items 36 to 46 of the post-study preparedness survey.

This section of the post-study survey was designed to gather information about the learners’ experiences after their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study. The post-study survey contained 11 preparedness questions using a four-point scale and 12 goal-orientation questions using a seven-point scale, from which participants could select their response (Appendix E). Table 4.4 reports the means, standard deviations and distribution of responses (frequencies) to the preparedness post-study questions.
Table 4.4
Descriptive Statistics of Participants’ Responses (Post-Study Survey) to the Items Representative of the Variable “Preparedness”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>Response-category counts (Frequencies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>I experienced problems using the online learning management system</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>I was comfortable communicating electronically</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>I communicated regularly with my classmates and instructors electronically</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>I adhered to my study plan and effectively managed both study and work commitments</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>My background and experience provided me with confidence to complete my online studies</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>I was comfortable working with information online</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>I required minimal guidance and found I worked autonomously and was self-sufficient</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>I was self-disciplined and made time to read and complete homework</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>I managed my time effectively and completed all assignments by their due date</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>I was an active participant in online class discussions</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>I adhered to my set goals and exercised a high degree of initiative</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean of $M$ for preparedness | 2.87 |

$n=33$

The results reported in this section of the chapter are a descriptive analysis of the post-study preparedness survey results of learners ($n=33$) reflecting on what their first online postgraduate part-time study experience had involved. The corresponding pre-study and post-study survey results of learners ($n=19$) are compared and discussed in Section 4.4. The section presents the one-way repeated-
measures ANOVA data, which were used to compare the four areas of goal orientation in the pre-study and post-study survey responses. The pre-study and post-study survey results of the 19 learners were used in the ANOVA from the group of 33 online learners who completed both surveys. During the analysis it became apparent that some of the online learners had completed the pre-study survey using their university student email address. As a result, it was not possible to match the different computer pre-study and post-study identifiers, which resulted in the data of just 19 learners being matched for ANOVA data analysis. The ANOVA data are detailed in Section 4.4 (Table 4.8) of this chapter. The following data outline the preparedness post-study survey results (n=33).

After completing their first unit of part-time study, post-study survey participants (n=33) reported they felt they had been prepared for their return to study ($M_{total}=2.87$). However, this feeling of preparedness was lower than they had expected ($M_{total}=3.19$) on the pre-study survey (Table 4.1). Although there was a difference between the level of preparedness found in the pre-study and post-study surveys, for the purposes of interpreting these data, the mean differences were small.

The participants in this study (n=33) advised they rarely experienced difficulties using learning technologies (item 36: “I experienced problems using the online learning management system”, $M=1.76$). Additionally, these learners felt comfortable communicating online (item 37: “I was comfortable communicating electronically”, $M=3.12$) and working with information online (item 41: “I was comfortable working with information online”, $M=3.21$) (Table 4.4).
Time management was not an issue for 27 of the 33 participants: seven chose most of the time and 20 chose all of the time for item 44, “I managed my time effectively and completed all assignments by their due date”, (M=3.33). Thirteen of the 33 participants chose most of the time and 10 chose all of the time for item 43, “I was self-disciplined and made time to read and complete homework” (M=2.94). In addition, their background and experience gave them confidence regarding item 40, “My background and experience provided me with confidence to complete my online studies” (M=3.06), with 18 participants choosing most of the time and nine choosing all of the time.

The post-study survey preparedness results provided insights into the participants’ high levels of comfort in using their existing computer skills when operating within the University’s online-learning platform. Participants showed a high level of comfort using the University’s learning managing system with 15 of the 33 participants choosing most of the time and 13 choosing all of the time in response to item 37: “I was comfortable communicating electronically” (M=3.12).

Survey item 14 (Table 4.1), “I am willing to map out a study plan to effectively manage my study and work commitments”, scored the highest mean (3.40) before commencing study, with 28 of the 63 participants choosing most of the time and 30 choosing all of the time for this item; this suggests that the first-time postgraduate online part-time learners in this cohort were willing to prepare a study plan prior to commencing their studies. Survey item 44 (Table 4.4), “I managed my time effectively and completed all assignments by their due date”, scored the highest mean (3.33) post-study, with seven of the 33 participants choosing most of the time
and 20 choosing all of the time. This suggested that intentions for pre-study planning and time management were consistent with post-study reports of effective time management, which highlights that learners were optimistic about preparing and mapping out study and work commitments. A deeper level of understanding of how learners managed their part-time study and work commitments was obtained through an analysis of the qualitative data, outlined in Sections 4.4 and 4.5.

4.3.2 Research sub-question 2.b

Research sub-question 2.b asked learners to reflect on their goal-orientation levels after completing their online studies. This research question was addressed through the responses to items 47 to 58 of the post-study goal-orientation survey. Table 4.5 reports the means, standard deviations and distribution of responses (frequencies) to goal-orientation post-study survey questions.
Table 4.5
Descriptive Statistics of Participants’ Responses (Post-Study Survey) to the Items Representative of the Variables “Performance Approach”, “Performance Avoidance”, “Mastery Avoidance” and “Mastery Approach”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal-orientation category</th>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Response-category counts (Frequences)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all true of me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance approach</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>I received a higher grade than I anticipated</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>I was pleased with my result</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>I was motivated to perform well</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>I performed well in my online subject</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>I understood the content presented</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>I did well in this online subject</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>I learnt all there was to learn in this online subject</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>I mastered the material presented online</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>I learnt a lot from this online subject</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>I understood the subject content very well</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean of M for goal orientation</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=33
The results showed that participants’ (n=33) goal orientation remained consistent throughout their study program (pre-study survey $M=4.53$ compared with post-study survey $M=4.52$). The post-study survey goal-orientation question that returned the lowest mean was item 49 (Table 4.5), “I did better than the other students” ($M=3.94$), in the performance-approach category, a result that is consistent with the lowest pre-study survey score which was for item 22 (Table 4.2), “My goal in this class is to get a better grade than most of the other students” ($M=3.71$), in the performance-approach category.

Participants were motivated to perform well throughout their study program, as shown by their responses to item 51 (Table 4.5), “I was motivated to perform well” ($M=5.06$) in the performance-avoidance category. This result is consistent with the highest pre-study survey results for item 33 (Table 4.2), “It is important for me to understand the content of this course as thoroughly as possible” ($M=6.06$) in the mastery-approach category. Survey participants reported high levels of mastery approach, and this area is further explored in relation to the responses to the interview question, “Did you underestimate the level of difficulty in understanding the subject content?”, outlined in Section 4.5.1 of this chapter.

The average of the means for the four goal-orientation categories was calculated (Table 4.5) to identify if a shift had occurred in any of the four goal-orientation categories between the pre-study and post-study goal orientation surveys (Figures 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6). Table 4.5 provides evidence that, when reflecting post-study, these participants indicated a performance avoidance towards their first unit of online
part-time study. In this study, performance avoidance is defined as “the avoidance of incompetence relative to others” (Elliot, McGregor & Gable, 1999, p. 549).

To compare the differences between results for learner post-study preparedness and goal orientation, mean scores and response-category counts were calculated to identify the lowest- and highest-scoring responses (Tables 4.4 and 4.5). However, it is important to note that these comparisons are descriptive rather than inferential. The differences between learner cohort post-study preparedness and goal-orientation results will be used to compare the differences between learner cohort pre-study survey preparedness and goal orientation results (Figures 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6) to ascertain if first-time postgraduate part-time online learners made any adjustments in their preparedness and goal orientation occurred.

The results for the pre-study survey questions 22, 23 and 24 ($M_{p_c}=3.78$) suggest that, prior to commencing their part-time study program, this cohort of pre-study survey participants ($n=63$) were in the lower mid-range of the performance approach category. However, on completion of their first postgraduate online part-time study program, their results ($n=33$) indicated that their performance approach ($M_{p_c}=4.18$) had slightly increased from the pre-study result. This result is consistent with a cohort of learners who were studying part-time for career advancement and/or professional development reasons as indicated on the pre-study sampling survey (Appendix C). The high-scoring pre-study and post-study survey question results demonstrated that, in the pre-study period, this cohort prioritised understanding the subject content, and during their study program maintained high levels of motivation to perform.
4.3.3 Research sub-question 2.c

Research sub-question 2.c addressed the relationship between learner preparedness and goal orientation post-study at the completion of the learner’s first postgraduate online unit of study. The question was: “What was the relationship between goal orientation and actual experience?” To assess the differences between preparedness and goal orientation, mean and standard deviation scores were calculated. As demonstrated in Table 4.5, the responses for goal orientation were divided into four categories: performance approach, performance avoidance, mastery approach and mastery avoidance. A Pearson correlation was used to determine the relationship, if any, between the variables in the pre-study and post-study surveys; this is discussed later in this chapter.

Table 4.5 illustrates that the highest frequency in the performance-approach goal-orientation category was for item 49: “I did better than the other students”, with 14 respondents selecting category 4 of the seven-point scale. Participants’ self-reported levels of mastery approach were the second-highest-scoring category. The highest score in mastery approach was for item 58, “I understood the subject content very well”, with 13 respondents choosing category 6 of the seven-point scale. The third-highest was for performance avoidance: the highest score in performance avoidance was for item 51, “I was motivated to perform well”, with 12 respondents choosing category 6 of the seven-point scale. Participants’ self-reported levels of mastery avoidance were the lowest-scoring category. The highest score in mastery avoidance was for item 54, “I did well in this online subject” with 11 participants choosing category 6 of the seven-point scale (Table 4.5). The average of the means for the four goal-orientation categories was calculated (Table 4.5).
Analyses of the goal-orientation categories were conducted to identify the variations in these categories between pre- and post-study. Figure 4.3 presents the comparison of performance-approach scores pre-study (n=63) and post-study (n=33).

![Performance Approach Pre-study vs Post-study](chart)

**Figure 4.3.** Comparison of pre-study and post-study survey performance-approach mean scores.

Results show a shift from $M_{pa}=3.78$ pre-study (n=63) to $M_{pa}=4.18$ post-study, a shift of $M_{pa}=-0.4$; this indicates that the post-study cohort’s (n=33) perceived performance approach did not alter during their studies.

![Performance Avoidance Pre-study vs Post-study](chart)

**Figure 4.4.** Comparison of pre-study and post-study survey performance-avoidance mean scores.
Results show a shift from $M_{pav} = 4.57$ pre-study ($n=63$) to $M_{pav} = 4.86$ post-study, a shift of $M_{pav} = -0.29$; this indicates that this cohort’s ($n=33$) perceived performance avoidance did not alter during their studies.

*Figure 4.5.* Comparison of pre-study and post-study survey mastery-avoidance mean scores.

Results show a shift from $M_{Mav} = 4.07$ pre-study ($n=63$) to $M_{Mav} = 4.46$ post-study, a shift of $M_{Mav} = -0.39$; this indicates that this cohort’s ($n=33$) perceived mastery avoidance did not alter during their studies.

*Figure 4.6.* Comparison of pre-study and post-study survey mastery-approach mean scores.
Results show a shift from $M_{Ma}=5.71$ pre-study (n=63) to $M_{Ma}=4.59$ post-study, a shift of $M_{Ma}=-1.12$; this indicates that this cohort’s (n=33) mastery approach altered slightly during their study program. These results are explored in detail in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6
Comparison of Highest- to Lowest-Scoring Response-Category Counts for Pre-Study and Post-Study Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Pre-study category</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Post-study category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest $M_{Ma}=5.71$</td>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>Highest $M_{Ma}=4.86$</td>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_{Pa}=4.57$</td>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>$M_{Ma}=4.59$</td>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_{Ma}=4.07$</td>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>$M_{Ma}=4.46$</td>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest $M_{Pa}=3.78$</td>
<td>Performance approach</td>
<td>Lowest $M_{Ma}=4.18$</td>
<td>Performance approach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=33

The results in Table 4.6 indicate that in the highest-ranking category, self-predictions of a mastery approach ($M_{Ma}=5.71$) pre-study, converted to a performance avoidance ($M_{Pa}=4.86$) post-study. The lowest-ranked pre-study category of performance approach ($M_{Pa}=3.78$) remained as performance approach, shifting slightly higher ($M_{Ma}=4.18$) post-study. The pre-study mastery approach ($M_{Ma}=5.71$) shifted downwards in the post-study score ($M_{Ma}=4.59$), and although there was a slight shift in the post-study mean of 4.59, the scores remained high. This indicates that the mean differences are small when interpreting these data.

The mastery approach result highlighted that, prior to commencing their studies, first-time postgraduate online part-time learners placed the highest emphasis on their levels of mastery approach, which suggested that these learners were focused on
improving themselves. During their part-time study program, a shift away from a mastery approach was apparent. The results indicated that at the conclusion of their online part-time study, the focus had moved from the lowest-ranking performance approach ($M_{PA}=3.78$) category pre-study, to the highest category of performance avoidance post-study ($M_{PA}=4.86$) (Table 4.6). This finding indicated that, prior to commencing their online studies, the pre-study survey cohort ($n=63$) were interested in self-improvement through skill acquisition. At some point during their study program, the post-study survey cohort ($n=33$) shifted away from this and approached their online study with a focus on demonstrating their proficiency to avoid appearing incompetent.

The relationship between the variables of preparedness and performance avoidance was investigated using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a very strong, positive correlation between the two variables ($r=.86$, $p<.001$), with high levels of preparedness associated with high levels of performance avoidance (Table 4.7); this indicates that the participants who placed the highest importance on not revealing incompetence to peers increased their preparedness.

Preparedness and mastery avoidance revealed a very strong, positive relationship ($r=.86$, $p<.001$), with high levels of preparedness associated with high levels of mastery avoidance (Table 4.7). The result indicated that this group of online learners was focused on being prepared. Preparedness and mastery approach revealed a very strong, positive relationship ($r=.85$, $p<.001$), with high levels of preparedness associated with high levels of mastery approach; this indicates that the pre-study survey participants ($n=63$) were focused on improving themselves, which is
consistent with the pre-study survey response to item 8, “Please select your reason(s) for learning”, in which 44 of the 63 participants stated that they commenced part-time study for professional development and career advancement. The category “career and/or professional development” for item 8 in the pre-study survey, “Please select your reason(s) for learning”, yielded the highest scores (Table 3.4 and Appendix C). The correlation between preparedness and performance approach showed a very strong, positive relationship ($r=.82$, $p<.001$), with high levels of preparedness associated with high levels of performance approach (Table 4.7). These correlation results indicate that this group of online learners placed the least amount of significance on their performance approach.

**Table 4.7**

*Correlation Results between Participants’ Preparedness Responses (Post-Study Survey) to the Items Representative of the Variables “Performance Approach”, “Performance Avoidance”, “Mastery Avoidance” and “Mastery Approach”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Preparedness correlation result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance approach</td>
<td>($r=.82$, $p&lt;.001$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>($r=.86$, $p&lt;.001$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>($r=.86$, $p&lt;.001$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>($r=.85$, $p&lt;.001$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$n=33$

### 4.4 Differences between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experiences

The aim of the third research question, “Is there a difference between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experience?”, was to examine any disparity between first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ perceived expectations of study and their actual online experiences.
Adults undertaking their first postgraduate unit of part-time study in an online environment were unable to base their expectations on previous learning experiences, as they were studying part-time in an environment of which they had no previous experience. It is important to understand how first-time postgraduate online learners prepare themselves to achieve maximum productivity when in full-time employment and studying online part-time. Discussed in this section are this cohort’s levels of preparedness in their approach to pre-study planning and their goal orientation to completing coursework, and how their expectations aligned with the reality of their first postgraduate online learning experience.

The pre-study and post-study survey results of the 19 learners were used in the ANOVA from the group of 33 online learners who completed the pre-study and post-study surveys. As outlined in Section 4.3.1, it became evident during analysis that some online learners completed their pre-study survey using different email addresses to the one they used to complete the post-study survey, making it impossible to match the surveys and reducing the sample size for the ANOVA analysis. To determine any differences pre-study and post-study between expectations and experiences, a one-way repeated-measures ANOVA was used to compare the four areas of goal orientation in the pre-study and post-study survey responses (Table 4.8).
Table 4.8
Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Investigating the Difference Between Pre-Study Expectations and Post-Study Experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Pre-study</th>
<th>Post-study</th>
<th>F (df=1,18)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance approach</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*n=19
Goal-orientation scale ranged from 1 = Not at all true of me to 7 = Very true of me

Preparedness and mastery approach were statistically significant pre-study and post-study ($F(1,18) = 6.08, p < 0.05$ and $F(1,18) = 4.63, p<0.05$, respectively), indicating that there was a significant difference in preparedness scores and mastery approach scores over the two time periods. Both mean scores showed a decrease over time.

The results in Table 4.8 show that preparedness had a pre-study mean of 3.22, compared with a post-study mean score of 2.91. Mastery approach had a pre-study mean of 5.63 compared to a post-study mean of 4.84. Other mean scores for performance approach and mastery avoidance were not significantly different over the two time periods. Performance approach had a pre-study mean of 4.02, compared with a post-study mean score of 4.23, while mastery avoidance had a pre-study mean of 4.56, compared with a post-study mean score of 4.65. The difference between the pre-study and post-study results for preparedness and mastery approach, revealed by the ANOVA, supports the hypothesis that there is a difference across time between first-time postgraduate online learners’ expectations and their part-time online study experience. While these results are derived from a sample of 19 participants, this finding is significant, contributing to an understanding about how
online learners themselves consider and reflect upon their first online learning experiences.

4.5 Reasons contributing to learners’ decisions to continue or withdraw from their studies

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 4.7. Data-collection phase 3*

The fourth research question, "What factors contribute to learners’ decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their online studies?", aimed to gain a deeper level of understanding of the factors contributing to their decision. Rather than relying on data gathered through surveys, it was important to ask the learners participating in this study to reflect on their actual experiences. This approach was designed to yield qualitative data on first-time postgraduate part-time online learners. The learners studying their first postgraduate unit of part-time study online who had participated in the pre-study and post-study surveys were invited to participate in a qualitative interview (Figure 4.7). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants (10 completers and five non-completers) to gain detailed insights into their first postgraduate online learning experience. Table 4.9 provides details of the
selected interview candidates’ age, gender, discipline of postgraduate study and location, and whether they completed or withdrew from their first part-time online study program.

Table 4.9
Interview Candidate Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Postgraduate discipline</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Completer / Non-completer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Human Resource Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Supply Chain Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Marion</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Human Resource Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Executive Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Retail Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Alona</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Executive Management</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Pauline</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Non-completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Corrine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Non-completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Malcolm</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Non-completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Supply Chain Management</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Non-completer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Non-completer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The common themes identified from the interviews were: feelings of isolation; understanding how to complete a study plan; time delay on the part of the moderator in responding to learner questions; lack of feedback on assignments; frustration with discussion board postings; concerns about privacy issues; and the disorganisation of the moderator in regard to the distribution of learning materials.
This chapter and Chapter 5 expand on these themes. In the sections that follow, 15 learners’ experiences of their first postgraduate online part-time study program are detailed through the identification of interviewees by their age, location of study and whether they completed their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study (n=10) or elected to withdraw prior to completion (n=5).

4.5.1 Factors contributing to learners’ decisions to continue with their studies

To answer this question, data derived from the interviews (open questions) were thematically analysed. The interview data were divided according to those participants who continued their studies (n=10) and those who decided to withdraw (n=5). To provide a framework for these data, the survey items that relate to the interview questions will be summarised first, to be followed by the interview data to further contextualise each of the themes.

The majority of the pre-study survey cohort identified that their reasons for studying were vocationally orientated. In response to the pre-study survey item 8, “Please select your reason(s) for learning”, 44 of the 63 participants in the pre-study survey stated that they had commenced part-time study for career development. This result was echoed in the interviews, where the two reasons cited in the post-study interviews for undertaking postgraduate online study were: the need to compete with candidates who have academic qualifications and the need to “upskill” to remain current in professions.

Once the learners had made the decision to commence postgraduate online part-time study, goal orientation was the underpinning motivator in their decision to gain an
academic qualification. Evidence of this appeared in comments made during the interviews. For example, Pauline (aged 37, country student) commented: “If I leave my current employer, I am going to have to compete with people who have degrees, and I decided that it was time I went back to university and obtained a postgraduate qualification to increase my employability.” Tony, aged, 42, who also did not possess a postgraduate qualification, reiterated Pauline’s sentiment: “I have observed people 20 years older than me who do not have a formal qualification, and I decided I did not want to be one of them.”

Kate, aged 44 and living in an urban area, exemplified the importance of a tertiary qualification in the workforce. Having decided to study an executive management subject, Kate said:

I wanted to legitimise my last 20 years in the workforce with no qualifications, and I hope this qualification will put me ahead of my peers when applying for future roles. I also wanted to prove to myself that I could do it.

These interviews confirmed the pre-study survey results for Question 8, “Please select your reason(s) for learning” that these first-time postgraduate online part-time learners had decided to study part-time for career advancement and/or professional development. This is an important finding; this cohort displayed high levels of goal orientation, despite the challenges and issues they encountered during their first postgraduate online part-time learning experience.

Successfully using technology is one possible challenge facing online learners. To assess this issue, an interview question posed was, “Did you experience any difficulties accessing/getting started using the learning management system?” Eight
of the participants who completed their part-time study did not encounter difficulties using the University’s learning management system, whereas two required assistance from the university IT department (n=10). Eight of the 10 completers stated that they did not experience any issues logging onto the system for the first time. Once participants had logged onto the learning management system, they found it self-explanatory. For example, Karen aged 29 and located in a metropolitan area of a major Australian city, commented: “I followed the instructions provided, but after I had spent a few minutes reading the instructions, it was very easy and straightforward.”

Amongst the learners who completed their studies, two interviewees identified specific issues relating to accessing the online learning management system. During their interviews, they expressed concerns related to administrative and/or IT errors and interface-design issues. The other eight interviewees who completed their subject confirmed that their existing computer skills proved sufficient to successfully navigate the online learning management system.

When those who had completed their studies were asked, “If you had the opportunity to do your subject again online or attend class, which option would you choose?”, interviewees were equally divided: five stated their preference for online part-time study and five said their preference was to study part-time on-campus. The completers who indicated that they would prefer to attend class all cited the lack of interaction and socialisation online and/or the time delay in receiving answers to questions; for example, Alona, female, residing in the country stated:

I like to be able to see and interact with people and read body language and also talk to like-minded people - how do you get a
virtual gin and tonic online? I like being able to raise questions with
lecturers and get answers on the spot. There is no delay in responding
in a face-to-face situation.

The 10 completers commonly expressed concern over the high workload associated
with part-time study. Despite the pre-study survey results returning high mean
scores for mapping out study plans, the interview data did not support these findings.
Five completed a study plan, while the other five did not. For example; one
interviewee, Marion, female, residing in a capital city, commented:

I did not understand what online study was going to involve, but after
commencing found the workload was astronomical. As a first-time
online learner I had no idea how to do a study plan – no one had shown
me how.

Another interviewee, Sue, demonstrated efficient time management by completing
her coursework while on public transport. However, when it came to mapping out a
study plan, Sue stated, “It is too hard for me to be really structured with children and
everything else that happens in my life, so I did not commit to producing a study plan
before I started.”

A factor that contributed to a positive online learning experience was receiving
feedback on assignments. Interview participants were asked: “Did you receive
feedback on the course work you submitted?” Seven of the 10 participants expressed
the view that receiving feedback assisted in building confidence in academic
referencing, and also in adapting to writing in an academic style, which is generally
unfamiliar to adult learners employed outside academia. This was reiterated by
Debra, who stated, “The more feedback I received, I implemented that feedback into
future assignments and aimed higher. I was motivated to get better results.”
In contrast, Pauline, aged 37, who had been studying a project management subject, had a different view of this experience: “The feedback I received was poor and very limited. I was unable to build on the feedback and incorporate it into any real learning for future subjects.” Pauline’s comments highlight the importance of learners receiving feedback that enables them to scaffold their learning to avoid repetition of mistakes in future assignment submissions. The nine completers who received varying degrees of feedback on their coursework claimed that it assisted with understanding academic referencing and writing style.

Another area raised during two of the interviews was the matter of learning how to be a self-directed learner in an online environment. Pauline had not studied since leaving high school 20 years before, but had decided to return to education to study project management. She stated, “The problem was not the subject matter, the problem is learning how to study again and learning how to study online. But I knew if I persisted it would get easier eventually.” Another interviewee, Kate, encountered a different challenge: “It was a lot harder than I thought; I underestimated learning in isolation in an online environment and I found it challenging to keep myself focused on completing coursework.”

Despite the self-directedness concerns raised by two of the interviewees, there was evidence that, in general, the interviewees were comfortable learning in an online environment. This is supported by the pre-survey results, which also indicated that the majority of survey participants (n=63) were comfortable working in an online environment. Moreover, on completion of their unit of part-time study, those who
participated in both the pre-study and post-study surveys (n=33) further affirmed this level of comfort learning in an online environment.

Nine of the 10 completers expressed the importance of deeply understanding the learning materials, stating that they found it important to comprehend the subject content as thoroughly as possible. For example, when asked if they had received the final grade they had set out to achieve, seven learners responded that their aim was to understand the subject content. These seven learners demonstrated high levels of goal orientation through their commitment to understanding the subject content, which was demonstrated by engaging in and completing their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study. All seven learners further commented that, provided that they had applied themselves, the grades achieved were secondary. For example, Karen commented:

I have never sat down and said I wanted to get High Distinctions all the way through. However, we have to get a Credit average if we want to continue to study towards a Master Degree. I am confident I will achieve this by applying myself.

Nick also commented, “Grades mean nothing; I was focused on completing the qualification.”

When asked about their preparedness and self-discipline, five completers perceived themselves as highly prepared and self-disciplined in their approach to online part-time study. However, the remaining five completers felt this was not a realistic description upon completion of their studies. Nick, who works for an oil company and spends 55% of his time working on an offshore oilrig, had a different view of his experience. When asked about his approach to part-time study, he replied, “Prior to
commencing I believed I was a self-disciplined learner. However, on reflection after completing my online study, I am not as self-disciplined as I thought I was.”

Irrespective of self-directedness approaches to study, online learning does not suit everyone, with the three participants who valued socialisation and immediacy of response appearing to struggle in a postgraduate online learning environment. This was typified by Alona, who stated, “In class, questions can be asked in so many different ways and conversations flow. I repeatedly asked for clarification as I struggled with reading between the lines online.” Alternatively, the five completers who enjoyed studying part-time online appreciated the flexibility and access to their moderator outside the core class hours that are associated with on-campus part-time study.

4.5.2 Factors contributing to learners’ decisions to continue or withdraw from their part-time studies

Issues contributing to wishes to discontinue online part-time study during the semester were explored during interviews with the 10 participants who completed their studies. To ascertain whether their levels of engagement continued during their part-time study program, a question asked during the interview was, “Did you feel like giving up at any stage?” Responses to this question were varied. Two interviewees stated they had wanted to give up in week one, another two interviewees in week three and two more interviewees in week six. Kate, female, living in an urban area, who was studying a subject for an executive-management qualification stated, “I felt like giving up but only momentarily – not seriously.” Pauline, female, living in the country, also provided insight into what contributed to
her feeling like giving up: “I found I was reading all this theory and the assignments had no relationship to what I was reading, which was extremely frustrating and made no sense.” Pauline went on to highlight the differences between her experiences with on-campus and online learning. Her frustrations were compounded by knowing that “in a classroom situation I would have been able to discuss this with my peers and (hopefully) find out that I was not the only person experiencing these feelings”. The reason these six completers gave during interviews for continuing with their part-time study was a fundamental desire to complete a postgraduate qualification for their career progression.

Four interviewees responded “no” to the interview question “Did you feel like giving up at any stage”, and were very definite in their response when asked about this again during their interview. Sue, female, living in a capital city, was studying an executive-management subject and had been made redundant 12 months prior; she claimed, “No, it [giving up] was never an option. I need a postgraduate qualification to be considered for a promotion in my workplace.” In contrast Debra, living in a capital city, who was studying business management and who had been in the workforce since she was 17 years old, provided more detail:

It is not easy to commit to study on weekends and after hours and I asked myself, “Why am I doing this?” The biggest stress was the amount of work I had to do in my own time after being at work all day, but I persevered.

These responses highlighted that in the early stages of their part-time study program, some of these first-time postgraduate online learners felt overwhelmed when balancing full-time employment with part-time study. In later stages, however, 10 of
the 15 learners interviewed worked through these initial feelings and completed their study program.

These semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed to explore the factors that contributed to both completers and non-completers considering discontinuing their part-time online study programs. The section that follows includes the themes that emerged from the interviews with the five non-completers.

4.6 Non-completers’ decisions to withdraw from their studies

The aim of the fourth research question, “What factors contribute to learners’ decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their online studies?”, was to explore the issues that first-time postgraduate online learner’s encountered that affected their decision to withdraw from their first unit of part-time study.

Although the non-completers gave different reasons for terminating their part-time study, commonalities can be identified. For example, two of the five non-completers reported difficulties associated with combining full-time work and part-time study, with one admitting that postgraduate online learning was not the preferred method of learning, while two withdrew for health issues (one for their own health issues and the other to care for their ill partner).

Nick, male, residing in a capital city, who was studying project management was forced to withdraw from his unit of part-time study due to health reasons. Despite this, Nick remained positive about learning online. When asked, “If you had the opportunity to do your unit of study again online or attend class, which option would
you choose?”, Nick stated, “I like the flexibility of online learning. When you are in class you do not have the opportunity to call or email your teacher. Online learning gives you an extra level of communication.”

Another learner with health issues, Malcolm, stated:

I had family and health issues, which were external factors that caused difficulties resulting in my withdrawal. However, when I return to study next semester I will be having four to six weeks off work due to additional surgery. I am planning on using that time to get a lot of study done to regain some of the momentum I lost during this semester.

Malcolm’s comment demonstrates that health issues can be accommodated in a more flexible way in an online environment than perhaps might be possible in a more traditional educational setting.

Amanda, female, married with children and residing in an inner suburb, who was studying business management, withdrew in week seven of her 10-week study program because she was working on a company acquisition, which increased her work load, making it impossible to complete the unit of part-time study. During her interview, she added, “The company acquisition was my main focus and everything else got put to one side – family included. There was no way I could incorporate part-time postgraduate study while working 18-hour days and travelling interstate extensively; work takes priority.” Amanda also cited isolation and a lack of interaction with peers during her online learning experience as contributing to her reason for recommencing her study on-campus in the next semester (detailed in Section 4.7.2).
Corrine, female, residing in a capital city, who worked in a demanding public-relations role, commenced studying public relations to formalise her skills; she also found her online learning experience isolating: “The reason I withdrew after three weeks was I realised that I wanted to learn with other people and this [online] was not the best way to do it. You learn from other people.”

The fifth person, Julia, female, single with no children, residing in an urban area, enrolled in two postgraduate online subjects to study part-time. Julia found the amount of study to successfully complete two subjects while in full-time employment too difficult and withdrew from one subject. Julia was selected as one of the three case studies; her online study experiences are detailed in Chapter 5, Section 5.3

Of the five non-completers, Corrine and Amanda identified that the online environment was not their preferred way by which to learn, an unforeseeable realisation by those who had not studied online previously. Three participants experienced issues outside their control that affected the successful completion of postgraduate online part-time study. Both health issues (Nick and Malcolm) and unforeseen circumstances in employment (Amanda) contributed to these decisions to withdraw from their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study, the latter including additional short-term work responsibilities, which affected the time available to complete part-time postgraduate study. The next section explores the other factors that led participants to question whether postgraduate online part-time study was the right choice for them.
4.7 Negative factors contributing to decisions on whether to continue to learn online

This discussion of the negative factors experienced by interview participants during their first experience of postgraduate online part-time learning addresses the fourth research question, “What factors contribute to learners’ decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their online studies”. The 15 interview participants (completers (n=10) and non-completers (n=5)) were asked to reflect on the aspects of their first-time postgraduate unit of part-time online study that caused them frustration or that they disliked. These factors are explored in more detail in the following sections.

4.7.1 Frustration

Eleven of the 15 interview participants reported feelings of frustration with the online nature of their first postgraduate unit of part-time study. The five non-completers’ reasons for withdrawing from their postgraduate online part-time study program have been summarised in section 4.6. Six of the 10 interviewees who did complete their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study confirmed that they experienced frustration when completing their part-time study program, with their responses including frustration with group assignments, discussion-board activities, isolation, loneliness, privacy concerns and the disorganisation of the unit of part-time study.

i. Group assignment constraints

Four of the 10 completer interviewees expressed high levels of frustration concerning working on group assignments. Nick struggled to comprehend the allocation of marks and claimed, “I did not understand the concept of having a 4,000-word paper
with four people contributing 1,000 words each. How can four individuals do justice to an assignment - who brings it together?"

Kate experienced similar frustration but had a different perspective on the distribution of work:

If people in the group left, you had to pick up and allocate their work amongst the remaining members. Some people had to achieve a certain grade to get the subject paid for by their employer, and this placed added stress on those who were in groups with non-performers. Overall, group work in an online environment is not worth the stress.

Karen adopted a strategic approach in relation to group assignment work. During her interview she commented:

The reason I enrolled in this subject was [that] a former classmate told me there was not a group assignment in this online subject. This influenced my decision to undertake this subject online. I do not like group work but I do not like studying online either, so the fact there was no group work overrode my dislike for online study and I completed the subject online.

Amanda, who withdrew in week seven, had a different experience:

It was two people who completed the group assignment. I believe the two non-performers did this deliberately because they know there are high achievers who will take over and do their work for them. All they want is a pass and they do not care how they achieve it. If someone else is going to do it for them, they must think it is great! If we had waited for the other two, we would still be waiting and you need to make a judgement over what is worth arguing over and ultimately it is about submitting assignments on time.

The interview cohort’s approach to online group assignments was related to increased stress levels due to non-performers, and an increase in workload due to learners withdrawing before completing the postgraduate unit of part-time online study, with the remaining group members being obliged to complete that person’s
outstanding work. In addition, some were confused about how marks were distributed amongst group members. An extreme approach to avoiding group assignments involved reading the assessment criteria for online units of part-time study, and enrolling in a subject that did not require the completion of an online group assignment. For example, during Amanda’s interview, she stated, “The lesson learned from this experience will be to read future subject outlines and avoid doing subjects with group work.”

ii. Discussion-board drawbacks

The discussion-board was another aspect of online part-time study that created a level of frustration. Three of the completers did not participate in the discussion-board activities at all. Marion said:

The weekly discussion-board postings were worth 10%. I decided after being at work all day communicating online, I was willing to forgo the 10%, as it was not worth the investment of time I needed to commit to contribute each week. A more productive use of my time was redirected to focus on getting better grades for my other assessment tasks.

The remaining seven completers all stated that their frustration arose from participation in the discussion-board forums being a component of the assessment. Katherine added, “When I had to use the discussion board, I did not respond to other people’s postings. I only did what I needed to do to pass this component of the subject.”

Two interviewees who completed their part-time study mentioned that people were rewriting discussion-board entries and then posting them as their own work. For example, Tony said:
I participated in all discussions but got frustrated midway through the subject. I would comment on the question and then read the posts that came after mine. Some of the posts were rehashing what I had said and this became a waste of my time reading them.

The non-completers (n=5) all stated that their discussion-board contributions were limited due to their non-completion of their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study. Those learners who completed their part-time study (n=10) were frustrated by the time required to read other postings and contribute to the discussion board, and the comparatively low marks allocated to this assessment component. Consequently, eight of the 10 who completed their part-time study only contributed the amount that was required of them to receive marks for their discussion-board contribution, with the remaining two stating they participated but not without experiencing some levels of frustration. On completion of their online unit of part-time study, eight of the interview participants (n=10) felt that the overall learning experience had not been as rich as they had anticipated due to the absence of peer-to-peer learning interactions on the discussion board.

Eight of the 10 participants who completed their studies enjoyed the flexibility of online part-time study and did not regret the absence of face-to-face lectures. The remaining two participants stated that they missed the interaction that the face-to-face environment provided, as well as the reassurance and clarification that having a lecturer in the classroom provided.

4.7.2 Online isolation

Five of the 10 interviewees who completed their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study experienced feelings of isolation. Debra found that distractions
interfered with her ability to read successfully in isolation, also noting, “When
reading on your own you are not getting the enthusiasm of the teacher.” Alona
reiterated this:

If I was studying at midnight [and I had an issue] I could not get an
answer immediately, and I felt very isolated and alone. I would rather
spend time in a classroom and ask the lecturer real questions and get a
real-time response.

Karen missed “the reassurance and clarification from having a real lecturer in the
classroom”.

Four of the five participants who did not complete their online part-time study
program stated that they would not study online again, citing issues of isolation and
lack of interaction with peers. Amanda reported:

The lack of human interaction and the isolation made online study
very difficult. Corporations are spending massive amounts of money
designing new offices by creating spaces where people can sit
together. These offices are being built so that people are able to
interact and meet. They are open plan so people can hear one another
and share ideas. Online learning sounds contemporary but it is the
opposite of what is happening in the workplace.

In total, 13 participants (nine completers and four non-completers) missed the
interaction and reassurance associated with on-campus study, acknowledging that
being unable to interact with, and learn from, a lecturer and other learners created an
isolating learning experience.

Another issue raised during interviews was the lack of podcasts. Each of the 15
interviewees was asked, “Did your instructor incorporate any podcasts with the
online learning materials?” Fourteen of the 15 interviewees responded “no” with
only one interviewee responding “yes”. Of the 14 who responded “no”, a further
question was asked: “Would podcasts have assisted you with your studies?” Each of the 14 interviewees responded with “yes”.

Fourteen of the 15 interviewees stated that podcasts would have assisted with their studies. Pauline commented, “If you have been in front of a computer all day, podcasts are far less detrimental to your body [because] you can listen to instructions.” Pauline also stated that “the inclusion of multimedia would have reduced the reliance of reading text on a computer screen”. Katherine reinforced Pauline’s comments, adding, “Having a podcast or YouTube talking through expectations, particularly the first assessment task, would have increased my confidence levels.”

Corrine, who withdrew from her unit of part-time study, clarified Debra’s comments, adding, “A YouTube video of what to do in your first two weeks would have been great,” whereas Mark, who also withdrew from his unit of part-time study, stated:

Where I work we have corporate online learning modules and we have people from the Human Resource department, or avatars, that talk you through the materials. The visual aspect of seeing someone and hearing them always helps, as this adds to the senses and completes the communication cycle.

Debra, the only interviewee who was provided with podcasts in the subject she studied, said, “Podcasts were provided and contained information with voice-over which explained the subject, assessment tasks and generally clarified what was expected of you as a first-time postgraduate online learner.” Debra went on to comment that the podcasts were of enormous benefit, as “they clarified exactly what was required from you to complete coursework during the semester”.

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The 15 interviewees were all employed in occupations that required them to sit in front of a computer all day, and all of them confirmed that they would have appreciated having the option to listen to podcasts that supplemented the text-based materials, which were necessarily read from a computer screen. The impact of the lack of social interaction in postgraduate online part-time study is explored in the next section.

4.7.3 Loneliness in an online learning environment

Loneliness was cited as a negative aspect of the online part-time study, a consequence of learners’ inability to interact and bounce ideas off others as they would in a classroom situation. Although Karen and Alona completed their studies, both expressed concerns about the lack of interaction. For example, Karen stated, “Studying online, I only did what I needed to do to complete the assessment tasks, whereas on-campus I learn from the questions asked by others and the subsequent discussions.” Alona also observed, “I put in more effort in a face-to-face situation, as you are challenged to think more, whereas studying online you have to read more.” This cohort of first-time online learners expressed concern about their experiences of learning in isolation when making comparisons to the interactive on-campus classroom environment. The isolating experience of online learning was raised by each of the completers (n=10) at some point during their interview.

4.7.4 Protecting privacy

Privacy in online public forums has been the focus of recent media attention, and this was reflected in interviewee comments concerning posting personal information about themselves in online learning environments. Three of the 10 participants who
completed their studies did not enjoy sharing knowledge, and raised privacy concerns about sharing information online with “faceless” people unknown to them. Two of the five participants who withdrew from their studies also shared their concerns during their interviews about protecting privacy in an online learning environment.

One such example is Mark, male, living in a capital city, who worked for a multinational company and was studying a supply chain management subject. Mark stated:

My company policy precludes me from using my company name in online forums and social-media applications. If I do not adhere to this policy, I am subject to immediate dismissal. This made participation in online forums impossible for me.

Corrine had a similar viewpoint:

I work in a controversial industry and I did not want people to know where I worked. However, if it was face-to-face I would be more comfortable as I can read body language and soften my language while I gauge if people have an issue about my workplace. I could not do this in an online environment.

However, as three of the interviewees who completed their studies confirmed, personal and workplace privacy issues also affected their ability to actively participate.

**4.7.5 Disorganisation of the unit of study**

Eight of the 10 participants who completed their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study claimed that the difficulties they experienced with online study resulted from the course materials on the learning management system being disorganised. The “disorganisation” they cited ranged from the provision of outdated
material on the University’s learning management system to learners being given incorrect advice on the start date and the textbook required. Pauline and Alona, who completed their study, experienced different aspects of “disorganisation” of course materials. Pauline explained:

This was my first subject and I found it very disorganised. We did not get into the subject until a few weeks after the official commencement and then we lost a few people due to them withdrawing. This made it very difficult to get an understanding of what was required. Even if you had the skills to devise a study plan, you would not have been able to, due to the disorganisation of the emoderator and subject materials.

Alona encountered outdated material online:

There were still old postings online and for a moment I thought I had missed out on material and was behind. I then realised that it was material from last semester which had not been removed before putting up the next semester’s subject.

One of the five participants who did not complete their part-time study program claimed that a lack of support and communication from the emoderator contributed to the disorganisation of the unit of study. However, the remaining four non-completers expressed no concerns about this issue during their interviews.

4.8 Strategies first-time postgraduate part-time learners adopt to integrate their online studies with existing commitments

The fifth research question, “What strategies do part-time adult learners use to integrate their online studies with existing commitments?”, was also addressed using the data obtained from the 15 post-study qualitative interviews (10 completers and 5 non-completers).
First-time postgraduate online part-time learners used various strategies to integrate their studies with existing commitments. The 15 interviewees were divided about the amount of coursework they were expected to complete in a fully online environment. When asked, “How prepared were you for the amount of study/coursework you were expected to complete in a fully online environment?”, eight of the 15 interviewees stated they were well prepared and had mentally adjusted to forgoing weekends to complete coursework.

In contrast, the remainder had no understanding of the time commitment involved and were totally unprepared. Katherine, for example, stated:

I was fairly prepared for devoting an amount of my free time to do the study, but I found that when you added up all the reading and activities it was significantly more hours required than stated in the subject outline.

Similarly, Sue experienced issues and declared, “I did not expect the amount of work, or appreciate the length of time it took to prepare an assignment, together with the research. I got better as I went along but this was a reality check.”

Interestingly, all those who said they were prepared for the study had no conflicting priorities outside the workplace. For example, Julia explained:

It was what I expected. The subject guide stated 12.5 hours plus extra time for assignments, which was what I did. I am new in the country and didn’t have a social life so I was happy to commit to this amount of time.

Debra also commented:

I expected long hours, and that is why I put time aside on the weekend. My partner plays golf so when he was out of the house and on the golf course, I used that time to study at home in peace and quiet without any distractions.
The unit of study outlines published by the participating Australian university and provided to learners stated that part-time postgraduate online study required an allocation of 12.5 study hours per week. However, four learners who had completed their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study concluded that the hours stated in that document were, on reflection, not an accurate indication of the time actually required. Eight of the 10 interviewees who completed their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study dedicated more hours than the minimum recommended in the outlines. This seems to be reflected in the positive correlation findings between preparedness and mastery approach \((r=.93, p<.001)\) recorded on the pre-study goal-orientation survey (Table 4.3), which indicated that this cohort was focused on knowledge acquisition. Eight interviewees indicated that they had spent additional hours studying to potentially gain deeper insight into the course content and new concepts they were being exposed to.

Given the difference in expectations relating to the number of hours committed to study, it is not surprising that participants were divided when reflecting on whether a study plan would have helped them to complete their part-time study. When the 15 interviewees were asked, "Did you set yourself a study plan before commencing your online studies?", nine (five of the 10 completers and four of the five non-completers) stated that they did not map out a formal study plan prior to commencement.

The five interviewees who had completed their part-time study program but had not mapped out a formal study plan prior to commencement had varying responses to the interview questions on this topic. The responses ranged from not understanding what a study plan involved to difficulties associated with work and family making it
impossible to formally plan when their study would be completed. Sue commented, “It is too hard for me to be really structured, with children and everything else that happens in my life”, and Julia commented, “I did not know what was involved, but if I know I can do something, I will put myself under pressure and leave things to the last minute to get things finished.”

Mark was the only one of the five non-completers who mapped out a formal study plan. Amanda, who withdrew prior to completing her part-time study and did not complete a study plan, stated, “having a study plan would not have made a difference, as I am too busy at work and I study on the run.”

The five interviewees who completed a study plan mapped due dates of assignments and discussion-board activities into their calendars to ensure that their coursework was submitted on time. This is exemplified by Kate, who stated:

The planning occurred when I got the weekly subject outline. I mapped out and set my goals to match the subject outline and worked out when the assignments were due. Discussion boards were due by midnight Friday which made it difficult, as I had initially allocated myself to do coursework on weekends.

Although the pre-survey results indicated that the majority of survey participants had completed a study plan prior to commencement, it appeared that when asked about it during interviews, some of them revealed that they had failed to adhere to their study plan.

The interviewees were also asked the question, “Was there a specific day/time when you completed your coursework?” The majority (n=9) of interviewees accessed the online learning management system on weekends and at the end of the working day
when time permitted. In some instances accessing the online course materials did not correspond to their original study plan. Sue explained:

I would complete my study somewhere from 8.30pm to midnight, and I would also do some reading on the train. I would study on the weekend, but I have two small children, so whenever I got a window of opportunity, I would take it.

The comments of those who studied mainly at weekends were summarised by Debra, who stated, “I mainly dedicated eight hours of study on Saturday in addition to study on Sunday if an assignment was due, or I needed to put in extra hours.”

4.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the results of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ preparedness and goal-orientation self-predicted pre-study survey and reflective post-study survey. The relationship between goal orientation and level of preparedness was also examined. The factors contributing to first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ decisions to continue or withdraw from their studies highlighted a broad range of issues relating to online study experiences. Specifically, feelings of isolation, privacy concerns, and issues over which learners had no control (such as the discussion board) contributed to frustration levels.

Affecting these frustration levels were concerns over the low relative value of the marks received for group assignments. Group assignment work also prompted frustration in relation to group member(s) withdrawing prior to the completion of their group assignment and the non-performers in groups.
The discussion board was a further area of concern; specifically, large amounts of time were required to read other learners’ postings, but this effort achieved little in terms of the marks contributing to assessment. Some members of this cohort completed the bare minimum required for a pass grade. Others took this activity more seriously, but expressed frustration when observing some who edited other participants’ discussion-board postings and posted them as their original contribution. Another aspect highlighted was the disorganisation of course materials, which ranged from the previous semester’s material remaining on the learning management system, through to learners being given incorrect administrative advice, such as the required textbook(s) and commencement date.

This cohort of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners found the lack of interaction with peers and an emoderator to be a disadvantage of this form of study, perceiving these limitations to have had a direct impact on their achievement of a deep and enriching learning experience. In addition, as they had not experienced studying part-time online, they found that the time commitment was far greater than originally anticipated, a situation further compounded by the inability of some first-time postgraduate online part-time learners to adequately prepare for their study program.

The following chapter details three case studies – a female non-completer, a male completer and a female completer – with the aim of gaining a deeper insight into the experiences of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners and their perspectives of online study.
5 CASE STUDIES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents three participant case studies to highlight the individual experiences of first-time postgraduate online learners completing their first unit of study part-time in an online environment. The three individuals in this chapter represented completers and non-completers: two of them had completed their unit of study, while the other had withdrawn prior to completion. Representatives from both categories would provide a clearer understanding of some of the issues that affect those who complete and those who withdraw prior to completion.

Using the mixed-methods approach employed in the study, both qualitative and quantitative data were interpreted and presented in Chapter 4. The three case studies in this chapter explore in greater detail the first online postgraduate learning experience of three students and examine whether their expectations prior to commencing their online part-time study actually matched their online experiences on completion.

The primary selection criteria for the three case studies were based on segmenting survey data into those who had completed and those who had withdrawn from their first online postgraduate part-time study program. The secondary selection criteria taken into consideration were postgraduate course discipline, final grade, gender and the learners’ consent to be interviewed. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that it is important to obtain a representative sample. Table 5.1 provides details of the selected case-study subjects. These criteria aimed to obtain perspectives from
participants studying different postgraduate disciplines, and of both genders, as well as learners who obtained a range of final grades.

Each case study is based on an analysis of the interview as well as information derived from the learner’s pre-study and post-study surveys, which had been matched for the ANOVA analysis; each is presented with appropriate demographic data, study discipline and final grade. The case study then presents background information on the reason for the learner undertaking part-time postgraduate online study and the results of their goal orientation pre-study and post-study surveys. The case study examines the obstacles encountered during the first semester of online part-time study and concludes with a reflection on their first online learning experience.

The individual case studies were thematically analysed to discover patterns and developing themes. As Boyatzis (1998) states, thematic analysis is a process of "encoding qualitative information" (p. vii). A cross-case comparison was carried out to classify the commonalities and differences in the issues deriving from the three case studies, enabling a logical chain of evidence to be constructed (Yin, 1994). Table 5.2 provides the commonalities across the three case studies presented in this chapter.
Table 5.1  
*Case Study Subject Details*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Postgraduate discipline</th>
<th>Final grade</th>
<th>Goal orientation pre-study</th>
<th>Goal orientation post-study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – Tony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Retail Studies</td>
<td>High distinction</td>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>Equal ranking with performance approach and performance avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – Julia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>Equal ranking with mastery approach and performance avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Amanda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Business Excellence</td>
<td>Withdrew</td>
<td>Equal ranking with performance approach and mastery approach</td>
<td>No data available as withdrew and did not complete the post-study survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5.2 Case: Tony

Tony was male, aged 36, residing in an urban area and married with three young children. He undertook two units of study from the Business Management (Retail Studies) Postgraduate Certificate program, one online and the other on-campus. Tony completed both units of study and received a high distinction for his online unit of part-time study.

#### 5.2.1 Background

*Reason for undertaking part-time study*

Like the majority of participants, Tony’s pre-study survey indicated that he began the course for the purpose of career advancement. Tony had completed year 12 (at that time known as a Higher School Certificate) 18 years before, and had no formal tertiary qualifications.
Tony remarked that his motivation to complete postgraduate study was largely because he had observed people older than himself in his workplace who were undertaking their first qualification. Tony stated in his post-study interview, “I did not want to be one of these people. I want to progress in my career and continue to go back and do a qualification every few years to remain current in the workforce and my profession.”

ii. Goal-orientation pre-study and post-study results

Tony’s pre-study results identified that he self-reported a mastery approach, indicating that he placed emphasis on self-improvement in preference to benchmarking his performance against others. Tony’s post-study survey results revealed a shift away from a mastery approach, moving to an equal ranking with performance approach and performance avoidance. This suggested that, while Tony’s goal prior to commencing his online part-time study was to increase his knowledge, his academic performance became of more interest to him during his studies.

Tony’s post-study survey results differed from those of his peers in two areas. First, Tony placed a medium level of significance on benchmarking his results against his peers, unlike the rest of his cohort, who placed a low level of significance on benchmarking against their peers. Second, Tony demonstrated a move away from a mastery approach during his study, whereas the majority of this cohort continued to display high levels of a mastery approach.
5.2.2 Obstacles Tony faced

During the interview, Tony mentioned a number of obstacles he had encountered during his first semester of online part-time study, which included: i) juggling two units of study while in full-time employment and raising a young family; ii) insufficient information at the time of enrolment; and iii) the need to seek clarification about the requirements associated with assessment and the discussion board. These issues are further explained below.

i. Juggling family and work responsibilities while studying part-time

Tony commented, “At the time of enrolment, I believed I had the time to complete two units of study while working full-time and raising a young family,” an assessment that led to Tony’s decision to undertake two units of part-time study when returning to study after an 18-year absence. Tony noted a number of obstacles that affected his study time, one of which related to his underestimation of the amount of time required to complete his postgraduate online studies. As Tony explained when responding to the interview question, “Were there any distractions that caused you not to spend the allocated amount of time on line each week? If so, what were they?”. Tony explained, “…family and work. In hindsight I would not do two units of study again, as I work full-time plus I have a wife and three young children.”

In this situation of conflicting priorities, Tony’s greatest incentive to continue and complete the two units of study in which he was enrolled was financial. Tony’s employer was paying for his study, and provided that Tony passed, his study expenses would be reimbursed. He claimed, “There was no option to fail. When the
pressure was on to get things done, I just got it done”. Tony admitted that with a wife and three young children, he could not afford to pay for his study and therefore it was essential that he pass each unit of study despite conflicting priorities.

**ii. Insufficient understanding of the time commitment**

Tony’s lack of available study time was further compounded by his pre-study goal orientation of mastery approach, which, by the time the study had been completed, had moved to an equal ranking of performance approach and performance avoidance. Tony undertook part-time study to increase his opportunity for career advancement, which is consistent with his pre-study result of a mastery approach. At some point during his study, Tony’s goal orientation shifted to an equal ranking of performance approach and performance avoidance. Upon commencement Tony was focused on learning as much as he could, with little regard for benchmarking himself against his online peers, but again, at some point during his postgraduate online study Tony’s goal orientation shifted from his original intention, to want to do better while not appearing “stupid” (in his words) to his online peers. This affected Tony’s study, as he increased the amount of time he spent studying to ensure a high grade for this unit. Tony undertook two units of study, which meant that wanting to excel presented a challenge, given the time available to him for study.

During the interview Tony stated, “My reason for starting postgraduate study was to increase my knowledge, and juggling two subjects simultaneously did not enable me to learn as much as I could have if I had reduced my coursework load to one subject.” During his interview Tony was asked the question, “Did you underestimate the level of difficulty in understanding the subject content?” Tony responded, “Yes,
it was a lot harder than I had anticipated.” He went on to explain: “If I had understood the time commitment required to complete two subjects [one online and one on-campus] while working full-time, I would have only committed to study one postgraduate subject.”

iii. Discussion-board participation

In response to the interview question: “Did you interact with other students in your subject?” in relation to his participation in the discussion board, Tony explained that he had only “actively participated” in the first few weeks of the subject, and that if he missed participating for a week due to work commitments, he would go onto the discussion board later to post his response “if time permitted”. Tony expressed disappointment when he discovered that some of his classmates had not posted anything on the discussion board. He observed, “There was little connectedness amongst the group, which limited my opportunity to learn from others.”

These comments, made during Tony’s interview, were consistent with his response to pre-study survey item 13, “I am willing to actively communicate with my classmates and instructors electronically”, of 4 (all of the time). This contrasts with the corresponding post-study survey item 38, “I communicated regularly with my classmates and instructors electronically”, where his response was 2 (sometimes). Tony described his frustration and disappointment with the online discussions:

I did interact with other learners in all discussions, but got frustrated midway through the subject. I would comment on the question and then read the posts that came after mine. Some of the posts were rehashing what I had stated and I found reading the posts after mine were a waste of time. I responded early to the discussion-board questions and then I wouldn’t bother looking at subsequent discussion-board postings.
Upon further questioning about his participation in the discussion board, Tony identified only three regular contributors. He concluded that this low contribution level limited his opportunity to share knowledge with other learners.

Asked for further detail about how this affected his discussion-board interaction, Tony replied, “This tempered my activity on the discussion board.” He observed that he was with a group of learners who were unwilling to post responses on the discussion board. When questioned during the interview about this observation, he explained, “It was not as though the tutor didn’t want to provide an online experience that encouraged high levels of interactivity, as she would put comments out there, but people just wouldn’t respond.”

In keeping with his desire to do better than his peers, during the post-study interview Tony explained that he did not want to reveal a lack of knowledge when communicating online with them. Tony linked this view to the initial experience of using the discussion board, which he described during his interview:

Some of the knowledge I shared in my first discussion board contribution was a personal opinion. The next time I logged into the discussion board, I discovered someone had responded saying my response was wrong. This tempered my activity of sharing my personal opinion and knowledge on the discussion board. These comments made me more determined to apply myself fully and aim to get the best possible grade I was able to achieve.

Tony was initially willing to engage and participate in discussion-board activities, but re-evaluated his discussion-board contributions based on some comments made by his peers. However, the discussion board was not the only aspect of online study that Tony raised during his interview.
iv. Lack of clarification of assessment procedures

A further issue of concern to Tony, but an issue inherent in online study, was the need to obtain near-instantaneous clarification of issues arising during studies. Despite indicating in both his pre-study and post-study surveys that he would require minimal support and would be able to work autonomously, during interviews he explained that “the difficulty with online study was when you sought clarification, there was usually a 24-hour delay in response time”. Tony explained that he found he needed to ask questions to clarify assignment requirements and the wording of some discussion-board questions, suggesting that “having podcasts or YouTube clips talking students through the expectations of the first assessment task would have increased my confidence levels and perhaps eliminated the need to ask the tutor questions”. Tony’s comments highlighted the importance of providing both text and audio resources.

5.2.3 Overall first online learning experience

Tony stated during his interview that “overall, my online experience was enjoyable and I would definitely consider studying online again in the future”. He further elaborated upon his experience as he began to learn online, the self-directedness strategies he applied and his rating of his online experience overall.

i. Getting started with learning online

Tony found that accessing the University’s learning management system for the first time was straightforward. Before commencing study, Tony responded to the pre-study survey item 11, “I believe I will be able to easily access the online learning management system as needed for my studies”, as 3 (most of the time). After
concluding his study, Tony rated the post-study survey item 36: “I experienced problems using the online learning management system”, as 1 (never). His survey ratings were reinforced during the interview: when asked, “Did you experience any difficulties accessing the learning management system?”, he commented, “There was a document available on how to get online, which I started, but [I] found once I was in there, it was not necessary, as I just found my way around, as and when I needed to do things”.

ii. Self-directedness strategies

Tony mapped out a study plan which is consistent with Knowles’s (1975) adult-learning framework, as detailed in Chapter 2. In his interview, Tony remarked that he was entirely motivated by the desire to achieve his qualification and, with the development of his learning plan, his actions were consistent with his response of 4 (all of the time) to the pre-study survey item 14, “I am willing to map out a study plan to effectively manage my study and work commitments”.

Post-study, however, Tony observed that he had not adhered to his original study plan, as he rated post-study survey item 39: “I adhered to my study plan and effectively managed both study and work commitments”, as 2 (sometimes). In the post-study interview, Tony clarified his reasons for not adhering to his study plan:

I tried to commit to do my online study on Wednesdays and Saturdays as I was doing another subject face-to-face. My online study revolved around the face-to-face workload as online was easier in the sense that I could go online when it suited me. The on-campus subject took priority, as people were relying on you to complete your component of group work.
Despite his family and work commitments, Tony said that he did not seek extensions for his coursework and allocated three to four hours online and another seven to eight hours offline each week. He further commented: “At times completing coursework for two subjects with conflicting assignment deadlines caused high levels of stress. However, I focused on counting down the weeks to the end of semester and somehow managed to get through the two subjects”. The time commitment required to complete two units of study was consistent with the information Tony had received on commencement in the unit of study outline; that is, 12.5 hours per unit of study per week for each unit.

Although Tony did not adhere to his study plan, he continued to focus on completing and submitting assessments by the due date. Tony stated during interview that when family responsibilities conflicted with coursework requirements:

my priority is my family responsibilities. Once these were over, I would start completing my coursework, which often meant studying late at night and in some instances until the early hours of the morning. This meant little sleep, which did not help when I knew I had to spend 12 hours in the office the next day.

Tony also stated during his interview, “Family and work distractions meant I did not have the luxury of time to explore as many new concepts as I would have liked to”. This was exemplified when he stated in his post-study interview: “My aim was to do the best I can in the limited time available, and know that I could not have done any better”. In his circumstances, Tony’s overall goal was to apply himself to the best of his ability within a constrained timeframe and set his goal to achieve “a distinction in this subject, and I worked hard to achieve my goal”.

Chapter 5: Case studies
iii. Overall rating of online experience

Irrespective of Tony's negative comments on the delayed responses to his questions, his discussion-board experiences, and a lack of other media to complement the written onscreen resources integrated technologies (for example YouTube), Tony stated that he had “gained confidence from his final grade and that he found interesting the few insights on the discussion board of others in the group from different fields”. He particularly enjoyed being able to access his course materials at his convenience, which he felt allowed him to use his time efficiently.

5.2.4 Tony – summary

Career advancement was the reason Tony commenced studying a postgraduate qualification, with his goal prior to commencement being to increase his knowledge. However, Tony identified the difficulties he experienced during his studies, as he was juggling work, a young family and study. He realised that completing two units of study had not afforded him sufficient time to explore as many new concepts in his course, which led to frustration, since his goal prior to commencement had not been realised. Tony persevered with two subjects because completion offered the financial incentive of having his fees reimbursed. Tony made a commitment to study one subject the next semester to realign the balance between family, work and study.

Tony also experienced frustration at the time delay he experienced when seeking clarification of assessment and discussion-board requirements. Tony acknowledged the noticeable absence of embedded technology in the online coursework, and suggested that the use of podcasts to explain discussion-board activities and
assessments may have reduced his reliance on the moderator for clarification of his questions.

5.3 Case: Julia

Julia was female, aged 27, residing in an urban area and recently emigrated from the United States. She was single, had no children and chose to study two units from the Postgraduate Certificate Business Management program. Julia found that the workload for two online subjects was overwhelming, and withdrew from the other subject in the third week of the semester. Julia continued to study one subject and passed her completed unit of online study.

5.3.1 Background

i. Reason for undertaking part-time study

In common with the majority of participants, Julia’s pre-study survey indicated that she undertook the course for both career advancement and professional development, an objective highlighted during the interview when she stated, “I want to achieve as much as I can in my career and to be considered for promotion; I recognise a postgraduate qualification is now a requirement”. Although she withdrew from one unit of study, Julia did pass the unit in which she remained enrolled.

ii. Goal orientation pre-study and post-study results

Julia’s pre-study survey results, like Tony’s, identified that she self-reported a mastery approach to study, and that she placed emphasis on self-improvement as opposed to benchmarking her performance against others; this result was consistent with her reason for undertaking postgraduate online part-time study. Julia’s post-study survey results differed from Tony’s, though, in that they revealed an equal
ranking for mastery approach and performance avoidance. This suggests that, although Julia’s goal prior to commencing her online part-time study was to increase her knowledge, during her studies her academic performance became more of an issue.

5.3.2 Obstacles Julia faced

In her interview Julia described a number of obstacles encountered during the first semester of her postgraduate online part-time study: i) juggling study with work responsibilities; ii) discussion-board participation; and iii) educator effectiveness in relation to receiving feedback on assignments and the structure of group work. These issues are further explained below.

i.  Juggling study with work responsibilities

As a new immigrant to Australia, Julia lacked an established social life, which prompted her to enrol in two units of study. She explained, “Being new to the country, I believed I had the time available to complete two subjects concurrently”. Julia read the university unit of study outline she was given upon commencement, which stated that the required time commitment to study a unit of part-time study was 12.5 hours per week. Julia responded that after reading the unit of study outline, she “allocated 25 hours per week in the evenings (five hours per night), plus extra time for assignments on the weekend”. Three weeks into her part-time study program, Julia realised that “undertaking two subjects while working full-time was far too big a commitment”. Julia stated:

I was unable to keep up the momentum of completing five hours each night after being at work all day. After completing two
weeks of online study, I found I was doing just enough to get by and not gaining as much knowledge as I could if I just focused on the one subject.

Consequently, Julia withdrew from one of the units of study and concentrated on completing the unit of study with the most reading. This strategic approach was arguably consistent with Julia’s pre-study survey results for goal orientation of a mastery approach and a post-study result of an equal ranking for mastery approach and performance avoidance.

\textit{ii. Discussion-board participation}

Julia was asked to comment on whether reducing her study load from two units of study to one unit had affected her communication online with her peers and emoderator. Before commencing her postgraduate online part-time study, Julia responded to the pre-study survey item 13: “I am willing to actively communicate with classmates and instructors”, with 3 (\textit{most of the time}). After concluding her study, Julia rated the post-study corresponding survey item 38: “I communicated regularly with my classmates and instructors electronically”, as 2 (\textit{sometimes}).

This discrepancy between pre-study and post-study survey responses was raised during the interview. Julia described how much she initially enjoyed communicating with the people in her group. However, as the discussion-board postings increased, she began to experience feelings of inferiority due to a limited understanding of the material about which others were writing. Julia said that her fellow learners exhibited “behaviour that made me feel very much out of my depth and intimidated, and contributed to my feelings of wanting to give up”. This experience could have contributed to her pre-study self-reported mastery approach changing to a post-study
self-reported equal ranking with mastery approach and performance avoidance. Julia’s feelings of intimidation, which limited her interaction on the discussion board and affected her enjoyment of communicating with others in the online environment, support her post-study shift to include a performance-avoidance rating.

**iii. Educator effectiveness: assignment feedback and group work**

Julia confirmed during her interview that the emoderator had attempted to organise weekly group chats to encourage a deeper level of engagement for the group:

The first time we tried to go online and all chat together there was an IT issue and it did not work. All we achieved was wasting time and everyone being very confused. If we [had] worked out how to do the online classroom chats, that would have been great to have that connectedness. The way this subject was, it did not happen and I guess it depends on who is teaching the subject and their level of technological literacy.

Julia also went on to explain that in week five of her unit of study, the emoderator “disappeared and gave no explanation or advised that she was going to be offline for a period of time”. Julia displayed initiative by telephoning the emoderator at the end of week six to make enquiries about why she had not been online. Julia left a message and, to her disappointment, received no reply. When asked during the interview if the emoderator had come back online, Julia stated:

In week eight the tutor suddenly went back online and posted a lot of material. This was not fair as we had little to do for weeks and then all of a sudden had everything piled onto us with only two weeks of the semester remaining.

Julia confirmed that this contributed to her demotivating experience:

For weeks I had done absolutely no study at all and then suddenly there was too much to get done in a very short period of time. I felt that if the tutor could not be bothered, why should I bother?...Once I got over the initial feelings of frustration, I did have to bother because I was paying
for the subject and wanted to pass to get one step closer to completing my postgraduate qualification.

When asked during the interview to provide details on the feedback she received for her assignments, Julia remarked, “I did not receive feedback on my assessments”. She further clarified: “Feedback would have helped me understand where I was going right or wrong before starting my next assignment and possibly avoid making the same mistakes”. Julia also added that receiving feedback on assignments would have contributed to a positive experience and increased her motivation.

When asked if she had encountered any other issues during the subject, Julia reported experiencing difficulty with the group assignment:

I was placed in a group of four but one person was never there to contribute to the group assignment. Another person was located in Perth and the time difference added another layer of complexity to get commitment from everyone to meet online at a common time. Also, it was the last subject for one person in the group and they just wanted to get it done and did not care about the quality of work. Overall, it was a nightmare and I do not understand what it achieved.

Julia’s ultimate goal and reason for undertaking part-time study had been to advance her career. During the post-study interview Julia was asked: “Will this grade assist you in achieving your overall goal you set yourself?” Julia’s response was: “I don’t care – I’m just glad it is over”. Before commencing her online part-time study, Julia had responded to the pre-study survey item 25, “I just want to avoid doing poorly in this online class”, with 5 (on a scale of 7). After concluding her part-time study, Julia rated the post-study corresponding survey item 52: “I performed well in my online subject”, as 5 (on a scale of 7). When asked during interview why she had given the same rating to the corresponding pre-study and post-study survey questions, Julia explained: “I did not receive my final grade until weeks after the
subject had finished, so I had no idea whether I had performed well or not”. She went on to state: “I got 62%, which I am happy with now, but I think I would have been disappointed with at the start of the subject. I am just pleased this subject is over”.

5.3.3 Overall first online learning experience

Julia commented during her interview, “Overall my online experience was not an enjoyable way to learn and in future I will be turning up to class on-campus”. Julia elaborated further during her interview about her experience in becoming accustomed to learning online, her self-directedness strategies and the overall rating of her first online experience.

i. Getting started with learning online

Julia stated that when she accessed the University’s learning management system for the first time, she had “initial difficulties in understanding and accessing the online learning management system”. Before commencing her online study, Julia had responded to the pre-study survey item 11, “I believe I will be able to easily access the online learning management system as needed for my studies”, with 4 (all of the time). After concluding her part-time study, Julia rated the corresponding post-study survey item 36, “I experienced problems using the online learning management system”, as 2 (sometimes). During the post-study interview, Julia explained that her difficulties were related to the fact that “the book used in the subject kept stating “log onto the learning lab”, where we were supposed to be able to access additional resources for the subject on the learning management system. I could not figure out where the online learning lab was and got very frustrated”. Julia’s survey ratings
were further explained when she was asked: “Was there a getting started module available?” She indicated that the lack of any information on how to use the learning management system was one of the key reasons she struggled:

I had no idea how to use the online library. I could have asked but it was not easy getting hold of anyone to assist, so I gave up. I did not pursue it because it was too hard. So I made do with the resources I had. I really needed more understanding of how it all worked. However, on reflection I should have persevered, but the university did not make it easy to obtain advice when I was a part-time student off-campus.

Julia’s lack of self-directed learning in this instance could arguably have been a result of her returning to part-time study in an unfamiliar, online context and a lack of explanation of the online course by the university.

ii. Self-directedness strategies

Julia did not formalise a study plan before commencement of her study, despite allocating the highest category in response to the pre-study survey item 14: “I am willing to map out a study plan to effectively manage my study and work commitments”. During the interview, she was asked, “What were the reasons you did not set yourself a study plan prior to commencing your online studies?” She explained that a study plan would not have assisted her to complete this unit of study, and stated that: “being new to Australia and with an undemanding social life, I did not feel the need to set myself a study plan before commencing my online studies, as I thought I had enough time”. Julia further commented that she enjoyed “dealing with pressure” and would complete unfinished coursework on the weekend in the instances when she was unable to complete it during business hours (her work situation allowed her to complete some of her coursework during work time). Julia clarified that she would deliberately “put myself under pressure and leave things to the last minute to get things finished”. When asked during interview, “On reflection,
do you think a study plan would have assisted in completing your study program?”, Julia acknowledged that “it would have been beneficial to map out a study plan”, and went on to state that she “intended to map out a study plan for her next subject”.

Julia responded to the pre-study survey item 19: “I expect to manage my study time effectively and easily complete assignments on time”, with 3 (most of the time). After concluding her part-time study, Julia rated the corresponding post-study survey item 44: “I managed my time effectively and completed all assignments by their due date”, as 4 (all of the time).

In the post-study interview, Julia provided additional clarification on why her survey result had increased post-study, explaining that reducing two units of part-time study to one, together with the flexibility of her employment circumstances, had exerted a positive impact on her study schedule. She observed:

I was extremely lucky to be working in a role that enabled me to complete coursework during business hours. That flexibility provided a balance of doing some of the coursework in the workplace and some on the weekend if there was a need to complete coursework that had not been completed during business hours. This also meant that I did not have to study for as many hours in the evening at home when I was tired.

While Julia acknowledged that her studies had been assisted by her employer, who had allowed her to study during business hours, she realised that this was an unusual arrangement, noting, “I will not be in my current role forever and I am sure that not all employers will be as understanding”. Julia commented that she had developed a realisation of “the importance of mapping out a formal study plan for future subjects”. She also observed that “as I settle into life in Australia, I am sure my social life will become more active and weekends will include social activities. This
emphasises the importance of planning my study time for future subjects”. Julia further acknowledged, “I discovered a study plan is useful for allocating time to respond to discussion board activities,” and “I must also allocate time for reading what other learners have posted and to write my responses, in order to receive marks for this component of online study”. Julia confirmed that she had no understanding prior to commencing her first postgraduate online unit of part-time study that there was a requirement to participate in the discussion board, which would be assessed: “I thought online learning meant that I would read a text book and complete a few assessment tasks. I had no idea there was a discussion board, and before my online study did not know what one was”.

iii. Overall rating of online experience

Julia identified herself as an auditory learner, which she believed contributed to her frustrating and limited online learning experience. When asked during the interview, “Which option would you choose if you had the opportunity to do this subject again online or attend class?”, Julia’s response was “face-to-face”. She went on to comment:

I find face-to-face study easier because you have to commit to go to class. When you study online you can put study off until tomorrow and sometimes tomorrow never comes. I also found reading in isolation difficult, as you do not get the enthusiasm of the teacher. If you have a question in a face-to-face environment you can get it answered straight away. Online you have to wait for a response and in this subject, that was weeks.

As noted earlier, Julia analysed the outlines of each unit of study and elected to complete the unit that required the most reading. While she was pleased to have completed one unit of part-time study online, with the benefit of hindsight she felt she should have made the opposite decision: “If I had known at the time of
withdrawing, the struggle I was going to have reading in isolation, I would have continued with the other subject”. Julia acknowledged that she would have completed this unit of study on-campus assisted by the “enthusiasm of a teacher” rather than having to “read in isolation”.

Julia’s preference for studying part-time on-campus was confirmed when she encountered “the moderator going offline for a period of some weeks during the semester”. Julia further confirmed, “At least when you go to attend study on-campus, a lecturer is there”. Despite Julia completing the unit of study, the moderator’s unexplained absence contributed to Julia’s lack of participation, which resulted in a loss of momentum, which in tum affected her motivation levels.

5.3.4 Julia – summary

Julia commenced her postgraduate part-time study for both career advancement and professional development, with her primary motivation being career progression opportunities. Early in her online study program, Julia acknowledged that completing two subjects while working full-time was too difficult, and withdrew from one subject, concentrating on the subject that required the largest amount of reading. However, she subsequently experienced difficulties interpreting information in isolation and recognised that she should have withdrawn from this subject and continued with the other.

Other difficulties Julia described were her frustration when participating in the discussion-board activities and the lack of feedback received on assignments. Julia
reflected that feedback would have helped her to avoid making the same mistakes in subsequent assessment tasks and increased her confidence.

5.4 Case: Amanda

Amanda was female, aged 41, and resided in an inner urban area. Married and with two young children, Amanda undertook one unit of study from the Graduate Certificate in Business Management (Business Excellence) program, which she did not complete.

5.4.1 Background

i. Reason for undertaking part-time study

Amanda’s reason for enrolling in a postgraduate online qualification was for career advancement. Amanda stated: “My employer was looking to acquire another business and the long-term strategy was to merge the two organisations”….“I pre-empted the need to obtain a postgraduate qualification, not only to secure my position in the restructure, but also I realised that recent academic study would enhance my promotional prospects”.

ii. Goal-orientation pre-study results

Amanda’s pre-study survey results identified that she self-reported an equal ranking of the mastery and performance approaches. This suggested that Amanda’s emphasis was on self-improvement, and that she aimed to do better than her peers. As Amanda withdrew from the unit of part-time study prior to completion, there are no post-study survey results available to validate her self-reported pre-study results. When asked why she did not complete her study, Amanda responded, “Work got in
the way, and I also discovered that the online environment did not suit me. I found
the lack of human interaction and the isolation very difficult”.

5.4.2 Obstacles Amanda faced

During the interview, Amanda highlighted a number of areas where she struggled
during her first encounter with online part-time study: i) incorrect choice of study
delivery; ii) insufficient information at the time of enrolment; and iii) lack of
educator effectiveness in relation to receiving feedback on assignments and the
structure of group work. These issues are further explained below.

i. Incorrect choice of study delivery

During the interview Amanda further articulated her reasons for not enjoying
learning online, the main reasons being “the lack of interaction with others and the
delay in receiving answers to her questions”. Amanda said that the next time she
attempts the unit of study, “I will attend class because I like to be able to see and
interact with people, read body language, and also talk to like-minded people”.
Amanda’s comments are based on her preference to “raise questions with lecturers
and get answers on the spot”. To accommodate future studies on-campus, Amanda
remarked that she would “commit to leave the office to attend classes to enable her to
network with like-minded people and then complete my working day by checking
business emails when I arrive home from campus”.

ii. Educator effectiveness

Another experience contributing to Amanda’s frustration was the lack of response
from the moderator to her request for an extension. During the interview, Amanda
commented, “I requested an extension to submit my first task, which was delayed
due to an administrative error which prevented me from accessing course materials
for nearly two weeks after the subject commencement date”. Amanda went on to
explain:

I emailed my request to the lecturer, and then followed up by phone
when I did not receive a response. When I eventually got an answer it
was not helpful, it was patronising. I felt like I was on my own with
no support or assistance.

When asked during interview if she had received feedback on her first piece of
assessment, Amanda stated, “No, I did not receive any feedback on that piece of
assessment, I am still waiting”.

Despite not completing the part-time study program, when Amanda was asked, “Did
you interact with other online learners during the seven weeks you studied?”, she
replied, “I did interact with other learners online but I did not increase my level of
discussion-board participation due to time constraints”. Amanda further commented:

Under the circumstances, I just did enough to meet the unit of study
criteria. I do not know that I would have participated any more had the
circumstances been different, because the quality of what people were
posting/discussing was very low-level.

To highlight her concerns about how academics allocated people into groups,
Amanda commented on the second assessment, a group task: “There was no
preparation for putting the groups together. The groups were not based on
identifying people’s strengths, weaknesses, backgrounds, or education, which should
be the starting point”.

Amanda elaborated upon her group experience by comparing group work at
university and that in the corporate world. In her experience, only two people from
the group of four completed the group assignment, a situation that ultimately contributed to her decision to withdraw from the unit of study. Amanda explained during her interview, “You submit the work and say everyone participated because it is not worth arguing over it… If we waited for everyone in the group to contribute we would still be waiting to finish this assignment”. Her experience with non-performers in a group assessment contributed to her opinion that this is a deliberate strategy because non-performers know high-achievers will complete the task: “All they want is a pass and do not care how they achieve it. If someone else is going to do the work for them, they must think it is great”.

5.4.3 Overall first online learning experience

When asked during her interview to describe and summarise her online learning experience, Amanda stated that it was “annoying, frustrating, and together with a lack of responsiveness from the emoderator, I will not ever study online again”. She went on to explain how she had arrived at this decision and elaborated upon her experience of becoming accustomed to learning online, her self-directedness strategies, privacy in a postgraduate online program and her reason for non-completion.

i. Getting started with learning online

It was important to gain insight into Amanda’s experiences during the seven weeks she participated in the online part-time study program. Amanda’s response to the pre-study survey item 11, “I believe I will be able to easily access the online e-learning management system as needed for my studies”, was 4 (all of the time). However, when during interview she was asked the corresponding survey question
put to the participants who had completed the online course, “Did you experience any difficulties using the learning management system?”, Amanda explained that her experience was contrary to her expectations:

I did have difficulties accessing the learning management system. I was enrolled but there was a mix-up with getting my student number to the IT Department. Student Administration were [sic] telling me I was enrolled and able to log on and the IT Department were telling me I was not enrolled. Finally I got someone to take ownership of the issue and got logged in two weeks after everyone else had started. From my experience, the hardest bit of studying is getting enrolled.

Amanda explained that a “getting started” module would have been extremely helpful, observing that “a lot of prior knowledge is assumed”. She concluded that, despite her outstanding computer skills, “it would have been useful to have something to go through, skip the parts you knew and focus on the areas that you didn’t know”.

ii. Self-directedness strategies

In the absence of a “getting started” module, Amanda was asked about the usefulness of a study plan. She explained:

I didn’t do a study plan because I was far too busy at work to commit the time to do this and anyway, I study on the run. I plan my business life but outside work, nothing is planned. Although I didn’t complete this subject, it wouldn’t have made a difference.

When asked to further elaborate on her response, Amanda stated in her interview:

On reflection I was not at all prepared for the amount of work online study entailed. However, I think if you go down the path of preparing and understanding the volume of work, it becomes so overwhelming you wouldn’t do it. If I had mapped it all out I would have thought, “I don’t have the time to do this,” and wouldn’t have made it through seven weeks of the program.

Chapter 5: Case studies
Amanda did not formalise a study plan before commencing her online part-time study, and her comments suggest that she will not consider mapping out a weekly study plan for future subjects. These comments highlight that formalising a weekly study plan is not a task Amanda is willing to undertake, as her preference is to complete all study tasks as they are required.

**iii. Engaging with peers in a postgraduate online program**

Amanda raised the issue of privacy in relation to the discussion-board requirements for her unit of part-time study. Amanda stated in her post-study interview that she did not post an introduction to herself on the discussion board, explaining that her actions were “due to privacy reasons and being employed by a large multinational organisation. The company policy does not allow us to use the company name in online forums, blogs, wikis or similar social media sites”. Amanda further elaborated, “I find you need to be in front of people because you need to work out what level of engagement you have with that person and who they are”. Amanda reinforced this by observing:

> It's like going to the gym - you wouldn't be posting where you work and what your hobbies are and the other questions we were asked to answer on the noticeboard so that everyone who had a gym membership has that information. Just because you are doing something collectively doesn't mean you are engaged with everyone; it is not normal behaviour.

Amanda also observed that online learning does not provide the opportunity to “see” other learners in the group, thereby removing the ability to read body language and facial expressions when responding to questions raised. She elaborated further on her experience: “There are some real weirdoes with very strange motives for doing online study. After experiencing one semester of learning in an artificial
environment, and for the reasons outlined above, I will complete future subjects on-campus.

iv  Reason for non-completion of online study

During her interview Amanda was asked: “Why did you withdraw with only a few weeks to completion?” Acknowledging that postgraduate online learning was not her preferred way to learn, Amanda clarified during her interview, “I would have persevered and completed the subject had my workload remained as it normally was and enrolled to attend on-campus for the remaining subjects”. A major company acquisition became Amanda’s main focus. She explained, “Everything else got put to one side during this time as I was working 18-hour days, and that included my family”. Such an unforeseen work situation would make it impracticable for any learner, even those with the highest levels of motivation and commitment, to continue with their postgraduate online part-time study.

5.4.4 Amanda – summary

Amanda did not complete her online part-time study. She enrolled in postgraduate online part-time study for career-progression reasons, as her employer was undertaking a major acquisition and Amanda identified that promotional opportunities would become available if she could demonstrate her professional capabilities through postgraduate coursework. However, due to this acquisition, Amanda experienced an increase in her workload, which made completion of her online study impossible and led to her withdrawing from part-time study.
During the time Amanda studied online, she concluded that her choice of online study was ill-advised and that she would return to complete her postgraduate part-time study on-campus. Amanda’s company policy prohibited the sharing of corporate information online, which affected her discussion-board participation. The other area where Amanda raised concerns was related to the group assessment tasks, in particular how academics assigned learners into groups. Amanda also raised the issue of receiving responses to her questions and timely feedback; she is still waiting for feedback on her assessment tasks.

5.5 Cross-case comparison

A cross-case comparison was undertaken to identify the commonalities and differences across the issues arising from the three case studies outlined above. The identification of similarities and differences through a cross-case analysis allows a logical chain of evidence to be constructed (Yin, 1994). Table 5.2 shows the items compared across the three case studies and the identified commonalities for responses to items 1, 11, 12, 13 and 16, with items 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14 and 15 returning mixed responses. Section 5.6 provides a detailed review of each item in Table 5.2.
Table 5.2
Cross-case Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Case 1 Tony</th>
<th>Case 2 Julia</th>
<th>Case 3 Amanda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Undertook program for:</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Career advancement</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>- Professional development</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Undertook two subjects during the semester</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>- I would commit to this study workload again</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Time allocated to study each week</td>
<td>12 hours</td>
<td>12.5 hours</td>
<td>10 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>- Was this consistent with your expectations?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Pre-online study familiarisation module available</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>- Undertook the familiarisation module prior to starting</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mapped out a study plan</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>- Adhered to the study plan</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Podcasts / Skype used to supplement coursework</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>A group assignment was part of my subject coursework</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>- My group assignment experience was positive</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Feedback received on coursework</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Did the discussion board increase your participation?</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Emoderator response time was slow</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>- I would study online again in the future</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
✓ = yes
X = no
U = undecided
N/A = not applicable.

All three cases undertook further studies for the purposes of career advancement, but only Julia held the view that postgraduate part-time study would support her professional development. Tony and Julia both completed their units of part-time study, with the underpinning motivation being to progress their careers. Despite a company acquisition interrupting Amanda’s online part-time study, her online learning experience confirmed that learning online was not her preferred mode of
delivery. Amanda indicated that she plans to continue studying part-time on-campus next semester as she had the view that a postgraduate qualification is a requirement for career advancement.

Tony and Julia undertook two units of part-time study, although Julia withdrew from one unit of part-time study early in the semester. However, all three cases identified that they would not in the future make the same commitment to the postgraduate online part-time study workload they undertook. Each concluded that the time commitment was greater than anticipated. Tony was aware of the number of hours of study but had not anticipated the impact of studying two postgraduate subjects while juggling family and work responsibilities. The unexpected increase in Amanda’s workload contributed to her non-completion of her unit of study.

Prior to commencing online part-time study, Tony confirmed that before the start of online study a familiarisation module had been made available to him, but that he had elected not to undertake this, as it was not compulsory. Julia and Amanda claimed that neither an “academic skills” lecture nor a “getting started” module was available to them when they first logged onto the learning management system. All three stated in their post-study interviews that there were no podcasts, YouTube videos, Skype or any other technologies included to support the completion of their coursework, and that their online coursework consisted solely of Word documents or PowerPoint slides. Julia identified herself as an auditory learner and said that she had difficulty reading materials online, in isolation.
When it came to organising themselves for their first online unit of part-time study, Tony was the only person to develop a formal study plan. Neither Julia nor Amanda created a study plan and, despite Tony’s efforts, he did not adhere to his original strategy. Julia recognised the importance of planning and confirmed that she would develop a study plan for any future units of study.

All three cases had a group assignment as part of their assessment, and none of them described this group task as a positive experience. Tony received feedback on his coursework; however, Amanda and Julia did not, and cited a lack of detailed feedback on assignments as disheartening and demotivating.

The discussion-board component of their online part-time study was explored. During their post-study interviews Julia and Amanda stated that the discussion-board activities did not increase their participation, with Tony being undecided. In addition, compounding their negative experience of their group assessment and discussion-board participation, all three cases agreed that their moderator response time was slow when they sought answers to their questions. Based on their experiences, Tony was the only person who indicated that he would be willing to undertake postgraduate online part-time study in the future. Both Amanda and Julia cited their preference for on-campus classes in future.

5.6 Chapter summary

The three case studies outlined in this chapter highlighted the experiences of learners commencing postgraduate part-time study online to further their careers. The individual case studies and the cross-case comparison demonstrated the
commonalities to be work and family distractions, issues around getting started and feelings of isolation. In addition to these, frustration with educator effectiveness in relation to delays in responding to questions, management of discussion-board activities and issues associated with group assignments were other factors contributing to two of these learners’ decisions to avoid future online learning. Each of the learners struggled with the inability to obtain timely responses to their questions, which raises the issue of moderators’ responsiveness. The issues raised in this chapter will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6. The extent to which the analysis and interview data contribute to the existing literature is discussed in the chapter that follows, along with recommendations for the more effective support of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners.
6 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This study investigated the expectations and experiences of first-time postgraduate online learners in relation to their part-time online learning experiences using a mixed-methods research approach. As detailed in Chapter 3 (Sections 3.8 and 3.9), the pre-study surveys (n=63) explored the study expectations of this group of learners who self-reported their expectations of being prepared and goal-orientated for their first part-time online learning experience. These expectations were then compared with learners’ post-study surveys (n=33) of their actual postgraduate online study experiences. Through the administration of a predictive pre-study survey and a reflective post-study survey, the objective of this research was to gain deep insights into whether a gap existed between first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ expectations and actual online experience. While responses to the post-study survey were not as high as expected and there were issues around matching surveys (Chapter 3, Section 3.2.1), the total number of respondents did provide a sound basis for recommendations about approaches to improving postgraduate online pedagogical design.

The depth and richness of these data has been further supplemented by 15 survey respondents who agreed to participate in an interview. These interviews allowed the researcher to gain insights into whether this cohort’s first postgraduate online learning experiences had met their expectations and how aspects of this online part-time study had contributed to their overall online learning experience. The interviews also provided the basis for three case studies (described in Chapter 5), designed to provide detailed insights into the first online learning experiences of
part-time postgraduate study. Both interviews and surveys examined the broad areas of online learners’ preparedness and goal orientation.

This chapter focuses on the main research questions, as the research sub-questions have been addressed in detail in Chapter Four. Here, the key questions in this study will be broadly discussed and the findings compared to relevant literature and research in the field. Each of the five sections in this chapter addresses one of the research questions through discussion and comparison to current literature and concludes with a summary of the discussion points. Each of these sections closes with recommendations for postgraduate online course providers; these recommendations are then discussed in greater depth at the end of the chapter and provide practical strategies which contribute to the broader online learning literature.

The first section of this chapter reports on the pre-study survey participants’ (n=63) levels of goal orientation and preparedness prior to the commencement of their first online subject (data-collection phase one). Data-collection phase one addressed the first research question: “To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to his or her level of preparedness before commencement of studies?” The discussion will focus on the pre-study survey results, where first-time postgraduate online part-time learners self-reported on their goal-orientation preference and their levels of preparedness for their first postgraduate online part-time study experience.

The second section refers to the post-study survey participants’ (n=33) self-reflecting on their levels of goal orientation and preparedness after the completion of their first online unit of part-time study (data-collection phase two). Data-collection phase two
addressed the second research question: “To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to the actual experience of online study?” This section will discuss whether the respondents’ post-study survey responses aligned or varied from the pre-study survey results of goal-orientation preference and preparedness levels.

The third section will investigate first-time postgraduate online part-time learner expectations and experiences (data-collection phase two). Data-collection phase two focused on the pre-study and post-study survey data that responded to the third research question: “Is there a significant difference between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experiences?” The discussion focuses on the results from the repeated-measure ANOVA used to analyse the pre- and post-study survey data.

The fourth section examines the issues encountered by first-time postgraduate online part-time learners (n=15) that affect their continuation of or withdrawal from their studies (data-collection phase three). Section 4 responds to the fourth research question: “What factors contribute to learners’ decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their online studies?” The discussion focuses on how those who completed their online studies placed high emphasis on the flexibility that online learning provided, although this study also confirmed that online learning does not suit everyone.

The fifth section builds on the second question: “To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to the actual experience of online study?” It focuses explicitly on the interviews (n=15) to deeply examine and generate rich data through the
investigation of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ strategies to accommodate their studies within their other commitments of full-time employment and/or family (data-collection phase three). This section responds to the fifth research question: “What strategies do part-time adult learners use to integrate their online studies with existing commitments?” The final section of the chapter summarises the discussion and offers recommendations based on the research.

6.2 First research question: To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to his or her level of preparedness before commencement of studies?

This section draws on the pre-study surveys completed by 63 first-time postgraduate learners before they commenced their first postgraduate unit of part-time study online, and answers the first research question. In this study, the survey respondents self-reported being prepared for their first online learning study experience, as previously outlined in Chapter 4 (Section 4.2.1). The following segments of this chapter draw upon the literature in the wider field to discuss how those commencing self-directed study in an unfamiliar online learning environment may underestimate the importance of goal orientation and preparedness. Section 6.2.4 concludes with summarising the findings and making recommendations.

6.2.1 Learners’ goal orientation and part-time online study

The existing research and literature on goal orientation focuses on how learners’ persistence influences the achievement of personal objectives and goals. Whilst most learners understand the motivation required to achieve their goal (Brett & VandeWalle, 1997), first-time postgraduate online learners may not fully understand which goal-orientation category (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) motivates their approach
to study and how goal orientation interacts with preparing for postgraduate study in an unfamiliar online learning environment.

In this research, 26 of the 63 learners (41%) adopted a mastery approach for their first online unit of part-time study (Section 4.2.2); this was the highest scoring of the four goal-orientation categories. Although 41% is less than half the learners in the study, this finding is noteworthy, as the remaining learners (59%) were distributed across the other three goal-orientation categories (performance approach, performance avoidance and mastery avoidance). The mastery-approach goal-orientation category characterises those who prioritise mastering and understanding the course content.

These results align with Tung’s (2012) findings in relation to learners who return to study for career advancement and/or professional development. Tung’s (2012) research suggested that highly goal-orientated learners “persist and seek education as a means for accomplishment or for their own personal objectives and goals. Whereas the learner who has low goal-orientated attitudes will predictably have lower levels of persistence, and will be more likely to withdraw” (p. 320). The difference between this study and Tung’s (2012) research lies in the provision of deeply descriptive experiences of first-time postgraduate part-time learners studying online for their own personal objectives. These qualitative data allowed a deeper analysis of this field and will be revisited throughout this chapter.

The qualitative data obtained from the five non-completing learners (Section 4.6) provided insights into the five learners’ reasons for early withdrawal, which differed
from the reasons outlined in a previous goal-orientation study conducted by Dweck (1999). Dweck (1999) presented her research and model of achievement motivation in children and young adults and discussed whether learners react to academic failure with helplessness or a mastery-orientated response, which can be attributed to individual’s assumptions about intelligence. The comprehensive interviews conducted with five part-time online postgraduate learners who withdrew from their study program prior to completion indicated that none of these learners perceived themselves as academic failures (Section 6.5.1.4) as suggested by Dweck.

Given the possible connection between a learner’s goal orientation and patterns of completion, the study outlined in this thesis indicates a very real need for institutions to proactively encourage students to explore and measure their goal orientation. Such encouragement would appear to have benefits for all parties in this learning partnership. For the learners, an understanding of their goal-orientated approach towards part-time online study would establish expectations prior to commencement. The benefit to the academic institution would be through the identification of learners who may have a goal-orientated avoidance to study prior to beginning their first online study program. Highlighting such attitudes towards part-time online study prior to commencement benefits academic institutions, as it enables a targeted effort for those who may have the propensity to become easily disengaged and are therefore at risk of early withdrawal.

If learners are aware of their particular goal orientation and its significance for their first self-directed online learning experience, they may consider engaging in strategies to better prepare themselves for their studies. This is significant for first-
time postgraduate online part-time learners, some of whom may have low goal-orientated attitudes. If online learners are encouraged to understand how their goal orientated approach to part-time study affects their self-efficacy and persistence, they can implement learning strategies designed to keep themselves motivated and on-track in a proactive and timely manner. Further, if individuals understand their goal-orientated approach to part-time study prior to commencement, this offers the possibility to assist in the identification of those who may be at risk of non-completion (Spies, 2011). With this in mind, the next section discusses the preparedness of learners in this study and the implications of inadequate preparation for online study.

6.2.2 Learners’ preparedness and part-time online study

Over a decade ago, Vergidis and Panagiotakopoulos (2002) found that learners at the Hellenic Open University in Greece underestimated the effort and time requirement to complete their online learning program, and that this was the second most cited reason for non-completion. More recent research into learner preparedness for online learning with college students in Taiwan further confirmed that participants lacked self-directedness, with the study highlighting the importance of online learners’ developing time-management skills (Hung et al. 2010). Preparedness appears to be key to student success. The research outlined in this study points to the lack of literature on the preparedness process that full-time employed adult learners undertake for their first postgraduate online learning experience between their acceptance into the academic program and the start of study. One quantitative study that contributed to preparedness research was conducted by Parkes, Stein and Reading (2015), who investigated student preparedness for university online learning
environments. However, this research selected participants on the basis of them having “previous learning” (p. 3) or previous online-learning experience. The research outlined in this thesis differs from the Parkes, Stein and Reading (2015) study, as one of the eligibility criteria to participate in this research was that learners have no previous academic online learning experience. This thesis examined first-time postgraduate part-time online learner preparedness through interview data that revealed that half the participants did not understand how to prepare for their online study. This study highlighted the importance of educating first-time online learners in how to prepare themselves for their forthcoming online study experience. However, rather than placing the onus on learners themselves, academic providers could assist by mandating that all learners complete an online orientation module to ensure adequate preparedness prior to commencement, which may contribute to reducing online learners’ attrition.

Learners who return to study after a period of absence from academia rely heavily on advice received from their academic provider on the time commitment required to successfully complete part-time postgraduate online study. Brown et al. (2015) identified a perception amongst Australian and New Zealand students in their first semester of online learning that online learning would be scheduled around existing commitments and would be achievable within their availability to study. The research conducted for this thesis confirms these findings; however, this research extends them through the inclusion of interviews conducted to obtain a thorough understanding of first-time online learners’ preparedness and whether their first online learning experience met their expectations. For example, the participants in this study told how their perception of the amount of time required to complete a
module of part-time online study affected their preparedness and contributed to a mismatch between their expectations and their actual experiences. This mismatch resulted in the learners in this study dedicating substantially more hours to successfully completing their online coursework than the number of hours stated in the subject guide provided by the academic institution.

The findings of this study indicated that more research is required into identifying the specific preparedness methods adopted by first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ between enrolment and commencement. The research conducted for this study identified a mismatch in expectations against actual part-time online learning experiences for first-time postgraduate learners. To align expectations, an online orientation module to develop preparedness skills for first-time online learners becomes critical in setting expectations, particularly for a cohort who are returning to academia after a period of absence and who will also be learning how to learn online.

Despite the many studies that focus on the online undergraduate experience (Chapter 2, Section 2.7), few focus on learners’ preparedness or readiness to undertake their studies (Bernard et al. 2004; Lynch, 2001; Smith, 2003). The adult learner has many different demands when studying (Dumais et al. 2013; Newberry & DeLuca, 2014; Wiesenborg, 2013); this emphasises the requirement for preparedness prior to commencement. This need for learners to be adequately prepared while juggling family and work responsibilities after a period of absence from study was also highlighted in the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al. 2008). Similarly, Tung (2012), in his study of factors that contributed to learner attrition and non-completion in Malaysian distance education, concluded that factors such as
family and employment “continue to pose a tremendous challenge, as these factors are beyond the University’s control” (p. 319).

The study outlined in this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge concerning the approach first-time postgraduate online learners undertake to integrate part-time study with full-time employment commitments. This is achieved through the investigation of the relationship between online-learner preparedness and goal orientation. For example, one of the key findings from this study indicates that learners were goal-orientated in their approach to their first postgraduate unit of part-time online study as part of their forthcoming online learning experience. These levels of goal orientation suggest that first-time postgraduate learners may benefit from an online learner orientation module capitalising on their high levels of motivation and goal orientation prior to starting their part-time online study program. The next segment of this section deeply explores goal orientation and its relationship to preparedness, as well as the significance of this for both academic providers and first-time postgraduate online part-time learners.

6.2.3 Goal orientation and its relationship to preparedness

Current research has produced many goal-orientation studies (Dweck, 1986; Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Elliot, McGregor & Gable, 1999; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 1989) in addition to multiple theories and theoretical models to facilitate the explanation of factors affecting students' motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992). However, there is a noticeable absence of literature exploring goal orientation and its relationship to how postgraduate learners prepare for their first online learning experience.
The participants in this study self-reported their expectations of being prepared and goal-orientated for their first online study experience (as outlined in Chapter 4). Most universities provide student guides for preparing to study online that are available on the university website, together with a range of student-support services that are available post-enrolment but are not mandatory for first-time postgraduate online part-time learners to access before they start. However, Anderson (2006), Lynch (2001) and Simpson (2006) have all emphasised the need for proactive forms of support in the early stages of programs for those learners studying online for the first time and in full-time employment. Tung (2012) stated that clear information regarding study requirements establishes realistic expectations for first-time postgraduate online part-time learners who are juggling multiple priorities while studying for career progression.

One of the key recommendations emerging from the research in this thesis is the need to equip first-time postgraduate online part-time learners, with an opportunity to “self-assess” their preparedness and goal-orientated preference (Sections 2.6.1 and 4.7.2). It is suggested that such a self-assessment could be facilitated via the completion of an Introductory Foundation Study module prior to the commencement of their first online part-time study program. This module could include a targeted package of self-help modules based on preparedness and goal-orientation quizzes. These self-help modules could be targeted towards the first-time online part-time learner to raise awareness of potential issues learners may encounter and of which they need to be mindful to successfully complete their first online-learning module. The results from the Introductory Foundation Study module could then be provided to the learner, along with predictive tailored self-help modules (including advice and
recommendations) directing the learner’s attention to specific forms of preparation rather than a raw, generalised, one-size-fits-all approach. Such a proactive intervention would provide a more realistic understanding of the expectations involved in online learning, which would assist in better aligning first-time learner’s expectations with their forthcoming online learning experience. For the academic provider, the data analytics from this Introductory Foundation Study module could also be used to inform strategic decisions on improvements to online pedagogical design and innovation.

If institutions elected to undertake such a tailored approach, a better institutional awareness of who their online learners are would be generated, which would ultimately assist in the development of remedial support for first-time online learners that would be both individualised and targeted to those who may be more at risk of withdrawing. Providing the moderator with the results from this module (with permission from the students) would also serve to identify learners who may require additional support in the early stages of their first online program. For the learners themselves, such information would provide an opportunity to align their expectations of what their forthcoming online study experience would involve.

This study contributes to the extensive online/distance learning literature through the quantitative and qualitative research approach which identified the need to consider goal orientation and preparedness in a more holistic way to better facilitate first-time postgraduate online part-time learner outcomes. The requirement to equip first-time postgraduate online learners with effective part-time study preparation is critical, as the literature has identified a projected increase in the number of Australian learners
enrolling in online study (Australian Education Network, 2017; IBISWorld, 2017; Norton, 2016). There is a noticeable gap in the literature about approaches to understanding first-time postgraduate online learners’ preparedness and whether goal-orientation characteristics may affect part-time online study experience. The nature and scope of this support, together with a summary of this section, will be examined further in the next section and in Sections 6.7.1 and 6.7.2.

6.2.4 Summary and recommendations: First research question

This research data revealed how the participants in this study endorsed a mastery approach (n=26) towards their study based on self-reported levels of preparedness ($M_{total}=3.19$), which indicated that this cohort predicted they would adopt strategies to enable them to complete their coursework.

To help online learners complete this important first unit of study, scholars suggest that institutions should implement a system that is proactive and addresses students’ learning motivation, referred to by Moore and Kearsley (2011) as “proactive student support” (p. 167). Universities have the capacity to provide such proactive support in a number of ways. It is imperative, for example, for universities to implement a process of continuous review, with the aim of improving the procedures for the delivery of accurate and timely academic advice in a rapidly changing online environment. Tung (2012) proposed that “learners are more likely to persist in settings that provide clear and consistent information about institutional requirements” (p. 314), together with the appropriate guidance and support required to enable first-time postgraduate online learners’ transition to part-time tertiary study.
Being new to postgraduate online learning means these learners are probably confronting new and unfamiliar learning experiences. Providing the first-time online learner with their goal-orientation and preparedness results gives first-time postgraduate online learners information about their approach to study before they begin. In such a system, the higher-education provider would assume some responsibility for a smooth transition for students returning to part-time online study and proactive motivational support. Family issues (Buzdar, Ali & Tariq, 2016) and conflicting work priorities (Khiat, 2017) are beyond the university’s control; however, steps to adequately prepare first-time postgraduate online part-time learners are not. These findings all support recommendation 1: Prior to commencement, an Introductory Foundation Study module should be embedded as part of institutional strategic planning and education delivery (Table 6.1). The next component of this chapter discusses the goal-orientation levels of first-time online learners after completing their online studies.

6.3 Second research question: To what extent is a learner’s goal orientation related to the actual experience of online study?

The second section of this chapter draws on the post-study surveys completed by 33 learners after they had concluded their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study, and answers the second research question. The research findings indicated that participants’ goal orientation had altered over the course of their studies. This change is highlighted by the shift from a mastery approach prior to commencement to performance avoidance on completion of study. The next two segments of this chapter discuss this change in goal orientation and whether the discussion board was a factor in the learner’s experience when studying part-time in a fully online delivery
mode. Section 6.3.3 concludes with summarising the findings and making a recommendation.

6.3.1 Goal orientation pre-study and post-study

The focus is on how a first-time postgraduate online part-time learner’s goal orientation may affect their motivation and persistence during their study program. The learners in this study were enthusiastic and motivated to complete a unit of postgraduate study part-time to achieve their goal of career advancement. The pre-study result for the highest-ranking goal-orientation category of mastery approach ($M_{ma}=5.71$) shifted during the online study period to performance avoidance as the highest ranking post-study ($M_{pv}=4.86$). The research data indicated that, at some point during their online study, this group of learners became focused on demonstrating their proficiency to avoid negative judgements about their competence from their online peers, aligning with performance avoidance as discussed in Section 6.2.2 and performance goal orientation is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

The literature on goal-orientation research focuses on how goals affect student motivation (Ames & Archer, 1988; McCollum & Kajs, 2007), the role of goal orientation in self-regulated learning (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Boekaerts, Pintrich & Zeidner, 2005; Phillips & Gully, 1997; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998) and the development of goal-orientation instruments (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; VandeWalle, 1997). However, there remains an absence of research that investigates whether an online part-time postgraduate learner’s goal orientation changes during an online study program. While the learners in this study seemed to understand the motivation required to complete postgraduate study to achieve their goal of career
advancement, they may not have understood which of the four goal-orientation categories underpinned their approach to part-time online study. If learners had an understanding of their goal orientation, this could heighten their awareness of their own approach to learning, which would in turn make them aware of their strengths and limitations. This would result in an informed approach to their own management of part-time learning while in full-time employment.

There is also an absence of literature investigating whether discussion-board participation influences a learner’s goal orientation. This lack of knowledge extends to whether the underpinning academic framework of the discussion-board learning outcomes affect a part-time learner’s persistence and motivation during their first fully online academic qualification. The research outlined in this thesis has contributed to knowledge of this field by investigating postgraduate online learner goal orientation characteristics both pre-study and post-study, highlighting how this goal orientation can shift. The fluid nature of learners’ goal orientation indicates the need for further research that focuses on the relationships between goal orientation and first-time postgraduate learners’ experience of part-time online study, and how the discussion board may contribute to the experience of this specific online cohort.

The platform for communication in a fully online academic qualification between learner-to-learner and learner-to-emoderator is the discussion board. It could be argued that for some of the survey respondents, the move from a desire for self-improvement to a desire to avoid negative comments from their peers highlights the importance of implementing a discussion-board policy incorporating etiquette guidelines. The discussion board is a fundamental form of communication in online
learning, and the inclusion of etiquette guidelines would ensure that online discussions are conducted through respectful and polite online contributions. Online learners must be encouraged to provide alternative examples, viewpoints or concepts that increase peer-to-peer learning opportunities in a safe online environment supported by etiquette guidelines enforced by the emoderator.

In addition to the development of course materials that provide a safe online learning environment, discussion-board policy should advocate that first-time postgraduate online learner discussions are moderated through the presence of a skilled emoderator. Croxton (2014) confirmed that learner-to-emoderator interaction was noted as a “primary variable in online student satisfaction and persistence” (p. 314). The next component of this section discusses the function of the discussion board in enhancing a mastery approach to learning and how it contributes to enriching a learning experience undertaken in isolation online.

6.3.2 The role of the discussion board

The pre-study and post-study survey results suggest that learners maintained high levels of motivation to perform. However, this cohort began to benchmark their performance against their online peers, which is evidenced by the survey data revealing a shift from the pre-survey result of mastery approach to a post-study survey result of performance avoidance.

The participants in this research study confirm the findings of Salmon (2013), who claimed that an online learning environment should be designed to provide opportunities for learners to experience peer-to-peer learning in addition to the
emoderator promoting and mediating online learning. Salmon’s (2013) findings align with Conrad and Donaldson (2011), who identified how the creation of a safe, student-centred learning environment adds an additional layer of complexity to online-learning design and teaching. One way to achieve a safe online-learning environment is by establishing rules at the commencement of the study program to encourage equal participation, particularly in regard to online discussion-board activities. The other opportunity to increase discussion-board participation is through the ongoing education of emoderators to increase their knowledge of online course design. The findings in this study highlight the importance of discussion-board design and thereby implementing a discussion-board environment that encourages a diversity of opinions and fosters equal participation, without first-time postgraduate online learners fearing ridicule or rebuttal from their online peers, as previously outlined in Chapter 5 (Section 5.2.2).

To achieve an egalitarian online environment, emoderators should explain the purpose and benefits of the discussion board at the commencement of study, in a way that, “encourages maximum use by all students” (Robinson, 2011, p. 20). Suggested strategies for managing an online discussion board will be discussed in more detail in Section 6.7 (recommendations). The recommended approach for the establishment and management of a discussion board for first-time postgraduate online part-time learners, together with a summary of this section of the chapter, will be outlined in the following section and further discussed in Sections 6.5.3.1 and 6.7.3.
6.3.3 Summary and recommendations: Second research question

The research data highlighted how the cohort who participated in this study commenced their first part-time online learning experience aspiring to learn as much as possible. However, the survey data indicated that this expectation was not met, as shown by a 38% reduction from what the learners had self-predicted in the pre-study survey that they wanted to learn (item 32) to what they indicated in the post-study survey that they had perceived they had learnt (item 57). Similarly, the interview participants (n=10) told how the discussion board affected peer-to-peer learning, which resulted in experiencing lower levels of learning than expected, as reported in Chapter 4 (Section 4.7.1; Sub-section ii). The survey data also demonstrated a shift in the pre-study survey mastery-approach result to a post-study survey performance-avoidance result. This indicated that this cohort of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners commenced study with expectations of knowledge acquisition; however, at some point during their study program their motivation became a fear of their online cohort negatively judging their academic performance. These findings are further explored in Chapter 5, where the discussion-board experiences of the three case studies are reported on in greater detail.

An aspect of pre-commencement planning that learners need to take into consideration is allowing time to participate in discussion-board activities. However, emoderators have the responsibility to ensure that learners participate and contribute equally to the group discussion so that peer-to-peer learning opportunities are maximised (Salmon, 2012; Sangrà & Wheeler, 2013) and learners are fully engaged in the discussion (Zingaro & Oztok, 2012). This discussion should also occur in an environment that encourages a diversity of opinions. At present learners “can and do
choose not to answer questions from instructors” (Della Noce, Scheffel & Lowry 2014, p. 80) but encouraging learners to participate in discussion-board activities may lead to learners obtaining a deeper understanding of the content – aligning with a mastery approach. Additionally, if the discussion board is an active space, individuals who have not contributed may reconsider their choice in this regard. Yet it is important to remember that discussion-board interactions are not purely the responsibility of the learner. The role and skills of the emoderator are critically important (Salmon, 2011, p. 5) when guiding interaction and communication, and even more so when moderating first-time postgraduate online learners who are learning to learn online. These findings endorse recommendation 2: Discussion-board policy guidelines should set out expectations and guidelines around learner-to-learner and learner-to-emoderator interaction on the discussion board. Guidelines should be provided at the commencement of all online study programs (Table 6.1). The next section of this chapter discusses the differences between the learners’ expectations of their online study experience and their actual experience.

6.4. Third research question: Is there a difference between part-time adult learners’ expectations of online study and their actual online experiences?

A one-way repeated-measures ANOVA was used to compare the four areas of goal orientation and preparedness in the pre-study and post-study survey responses of 19 learners at the end of their first postgraduate online unit of study (Table 4.6). The reduced number of learners who participated in the one-way repeated-measures ANOVA was due to a limitation of the survey design (detailed in Chapter 4). The results of the one-way repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a difference between the
pre-study and post-study results for preparedness and mastery approach. These results supported the hypothesis that there was a difference across time between first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ expectations and their online study experience. The next section discusses the key findings from the ANOVA between the pre-study and post-study surveys.

6.4.1 Discussion: Third research question

The expectations of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ prior to commencing their online subject and their post-study experiences are discussed in this section. This study revealed how the survey respondents’ (n=19) preparedness and mastery approach were statistically significant over the two time periods (time 1=pre-study survey and time 2=post-study). The decrease from the pre-study to the post-study responses may suggest that the online learners in the ANOVA study commenced with high levels of self-directedness and confidence, but at some point during their study program, their self-directedness and confidence levels decreased; this may be attributed to the frustration experienced during their online learning program. The interview data, outlined in Sections 6.5 and 6.6, provide further insights into this cohort’s expectations and their first experience of part-time study online.

The adult-learning theory of Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) advocates that adults learn via experience, and that when an adult knows little or nothing about a topic (in this instance, learning to learn online) they will be more dependent on the educator for instructions. In a similar vein, Cho and Shen (2013) undertook research and found that for many online students, self-directed learning is challenging “where
[learners] may lack immediate support and feel lost or socially isolated” (p. 291). The findings of Cho and Shen (2013) align with the outcomes of this study, and suggest that to increase the first-time adult online learner’s confidence, a range of resources and support (Zhang & Zheng, 2013) in the early phase of their online study program is required. These authors also concluded that, to enable online learners to learn successfully, organisational support is required across three levels: from the instructor, the academic program/department and the institution (Zhang & Zheng, 2013). The research conducted for this thesis has shown how participants were not completely self-directed learners, requiring moderator support in the early stages of their online learning program to build their confidence to succeed in an unfamiliar environment. As the pre-survey results in Chapter 4 highlighted, the learners in this study predicted that they would be self-directed and could work autonomously. However, understanding self-directed learning in an online academic setting is a new experience to those who have not previously studied online. Indeed, it is important to recognise that neither the first-time postgraduate online part-time learners nor the academic provider should underrate the transition process to online learning. The next part of the chapter (Section 6.5) will provide additional insight into the interaction between the learners in this study and their moderator.

6.4.2 Summary and recommendations: Third research question

This study has indicated how a supportive online environment for first-time postgraduate online part-time learners should not be underestimated. Dumais et al. (2013) found that “adult online learners, as a subset of the non-traditional student population, may be even more lacking in support” (p. 100). Institutions could focus on the design and content of the first assessment task as a means to build the
learner’s confidence and ensure their engagement in the early stages of a first-time postgraduate learner’s online part-time study program. This is particularly important because as this cohort will not only be learning how to study online, but at the same time learning after a period of absence from academia. These findings also support recommendation 3: Emoderators should provide detailed timely feedback on the first assessment task as a means of building confidence for first-time postgraduate online learners to improve their understanding of academic expectations in future assessment submissions (Table 6.1). The aim of providing timely feedback on the first assessment has the possibility of helping students feel more confident and engaged in their learning, and thereby possibly reducing the number of learners who choose to withdraw from their online learning program. This issue is outlined and explained later in this chapter (Section 6.7.5).

6.5 Fourth research question: What factors contribute to learners’ decisions to continue, or withdraw from, their online studies?

This question specifically examined the issues encountered by first-time postgraduate online part-time learners that affected on the continuation, or discontinuation of their studies, and aimed to gain a deeper level of understanding of these contributing factors. This understanding was derived from 15 post-study qualitative interviews (n=10 completers and n=5 non-completers). The following sections detail the factors contributing to learners’ decisions to continue or withdraw from their online studies that emerged from the 15 interviews.
6.5.1 Factors that influenced withdrawal

This research confirmed that online learning does not suit everyone. During the interview the five learners who did not complete their online study were asked: “If you had the opportunity to do this subject again online, or attend class, which option would you choose?” Four of the five learners stated that, after their online study experience, any further study would be undertaken on-campus. These four learners explained that they valued socialisation and the immediacy of responses that are better facilitated by the on-campus environment, factors reflected in other studies of online learners (Simpson, 2013a; Smith, 2013). The issues that contributed to the five learners in this study terminating their first postgraduate online unit of study included difficulties managing study with work commitments (n=2), health issues (n=2) and re-evaluation of part-time study load (n=1), which are detailed below.

6.5.1.1 Difficulties managing study with work commitments

The interview data highlighted that some first-time postgraduate online learners experienced challenges integrating part-time study with their full-time employment commitments. Two of the respondents referred to employment as a primary reason for discontinuing their studies: Julia withdrew from one of her two subjects to reduce her study workload, which enabled her to continue studying one subject part-time while working full-time, and Amanda withdrew due to unforeseeable work circumstances. This situation reflects the findings of Dumais et al. (2013) who demonstrated that extenuating employment circumstances are often cited as a reason for non-completion. Other researchers such as Simpson (2013b) and Wiesenber (2013) identified the various difficulties faced by adult online learners when balancing full-time work schedules, family caretaking roles and assignments.
Moreover, Conrad and Donaldson (2011) confirmed that the learning process can be interrupted by business travel and international business meetings. Institutions have a responsibility to retain first-time postgraduate online learners, such as Amanda, who have often invested significant time and money in their postgraduate online studies. Although in Amanda’s case the extenuating circumstances were beyond anyone’s control, withdrawal from study was the only option the university offered.

6.5.1.2 Circumstances of health issues affecting study

Of the two interviewees who withdrew from their postgraduate online part-time study program prior to completion for health reasons, one experienced a personal health issue and the other a family member’s health issue. One of the reasons McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Teese (2000) identified for voluntary withdrawal was health issues. Over a decade later, the findings from this cohort of students reflect those of both McInnis et al. (2000) and Conrad and Donaldson (2011), who identified that online learners face challenges such as health issues which can interrupt the learning process.

6.5.1.3 Re-evaluation of part-time study load

Adults rely on the advice provided by frontline university staff when making initial enquiries about returning to part-time academic study after an absence. For example, Julia was advised by university staff at the time of enrolment to commence with two subjects despite staff being aware that this first-time postgraduate learner was working full-time and had never studied online previously. This advice greatly underestimated the time commitment necessary to complete two units of study resulting in Julia subsequently finding that the online-study workload was too large.
to be accommodated with full-time work. Crawley and Fetzner (2013) identified that “students new to online learning need to know what to expect from the online learning experience” (p. 7). Irrespective of “where an institution stands on the level of services provided to online students, there is no longer a question about the importance of these efforts” (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013, p. 7). Academic providers must ensure that frontline university staff are adequately skilled to provide appropriate advice in response to student enquiries, particularly in terms of time commitments and existing responsibilities. This process could be assisted by staff being provided with example probing questions that reveal the complexities of learners' lives. These findings support recommendation 4: Information should be provided by university staff who are qualified to discuss the positive and negative aspects of online study prior to enrolment, enabling first-time postgraduate online part-time learners to make informed decisions about their choice of study mode upon re-entry into academia after a period of absence.

6.5.1.4 Discussion: Factors that influenced withdrawal prior to completion

This research identified that the learners who did not complete their study were affected by unforeseen work circumstances and health issues, and encountered difficulties managing full-time employment with a part-time study load. Withdrawing from online study was not a decision they made without extensive consideration. One of Dweck’s (1999) theories is that failure implies a natural deficiency of intellect. As a result, learners stop trying or pushing themselves because they consider that success is attained through intelligence rather than effort. Anderton (2006), on the other hand, proposed that student withdrawal was largely due to one factor: loss of motivation to learn. The five learners in this study who
withdrew prior to completion challenge the theories of both Dweck (1999) and Anderton (2006), as they were motivated to learn and wanted to avoid failure. The desire by all five interviewees to avoid failure is evidenced by the collective claim in interviews that each would recommence their part-time study the following semester (four on-campus and one online) to complete their postgraduate qualification. The findings indicated that these five learners did not lose the motivation to learn, nor did they have difficulty meeting deadlines and completing assignments. Instead, a range of extenuating circumstances prevented them from completing their original goal.

Simpson (2013b) reported that 38% of online learners dropped out prior to submitting the first assignment at Open University in the United Kingdom, and claimed “it would be surprising if these general trends are not repeated in many other institutions” (p. 109). Yet there remains a dearth of research on this area, a gap also noted by Buzwell, Farrugia and Williams (2016), who stated that “little is known about Australian online learners”. This study shows that the five learners who withdrew from their online study all completed and submitted their first assignment, which seems to challenge Simpson’s (2013b) assertion that there is a substantial withdrawal of online learners prior to submitting their first assignment. These five online learners also contradict the research of Wilson and Allen (2011), who reported that online learners have greater difficulty meeting deadlines and completing assignments than traditional face-to-face learners: each of the five learners who withdrew prior to completion had met all their unit-of-study deadlines at the time of withdrawing.
However, it is important to note that for those learners who elect to withdraw from their postgraduate online studies, their non-completion in an online environment does not necessarily signify the absence of intellect or ability on their part: it could reflect the incorrect choice of learning environment, particularly when an individual enrolls in an environment in which they have no previous experience. As indicated in this study, it is not only the learner’s responsibility to select the correct study choice; first-time postgraduate online part-time learners rely heavily on academic institutions to provide guidance and have different expectations of their responsibilities as consumers of education services (Table 6.1, recommendation 5). West (2011) confirmed the importance of academic advice for online student success, where students are “usually older, working full-time and interacting with the institution only through their advisor” (p. 141).

Higher-education institutions accept that teaching and frontline staff have a responsibility to provide students with assistance to engage academically, socially and personally with their institution (Bradley et al. 2008; Coley & Coley 2010; Tinto 2009). Research conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (2009) identified “the importance for institutions of implementing carefully designed monitoring and preventative procedures that can track student progress, identifying ‘at risk’ students, and putting in place conditions which may support and inspire student success” (p. 44). In 2010, Coley and Coley defined these attributes as “successful campus-wide retention programs” where the institutions “have determined a clear methodology to define and identify ‘at risk’ students, to reach out to students with appropriate resources and support, and to track and monitor student engagement” (p. 6). While Coley and Coley (2010) acknowledged the importance of
identifying at-risk students, Tung (2012) conducted research into Malaysian online learners to obtain a clear understanding of the reasons learners withdrew from their studies by analysing exit-survey data. Tung’s (2012) research highlighted a need for proactive interventions to address student retention. Notwithstanding Tung’s (2012) research, this thesis shows the implementation of such interventionist approaches, and actual examples in higher education continue to be rare. This suggests that first-time online learners themselves are not being widely consulted to obtain rich qualitative data to be analysed to determine appropriate proactive intervention strategies. However, this study only begins the process of identifying intervention strategies for at-risk first-time online learners. As stated, there is a need for additional research in this field. The next component of this chapter discusses the factors contributing to learners’ decisions to continue with their online studies, that emerged from the 10 interviews conducted with the students who had completed their studies.

6.5.2 Consolidation of key findings from those who completed their online study

This section focuses on the experiences of the 10 learners who completed their first postgraduate unit of study, and on the factors that contributed to the completion of, and satisfaction with, their online part-time study program.

6.5.2.1 Positive characteristics of online study

The interviews and survey results from the 10 persisting learners demonstrate how a mastery approach to completing part-time online study benefits the first-time postgraduate online learner when they are motivated by the desire to succeed in a competitive employment market. These 10 learners all regarded their achievement
as providing a competitive advantage when applying for a promotion either with their current employer or outside their organisation. The issues that contributed to these learners’ completing their first postgraduate online unit of part-time study was the flexibility of studying in an online environment, including extended access to emoderators and assessment-task feedback, which are detailed below.

6.5.2.2 Studying in a flexible online environment

During interviews, each of the 10 learners discussed how much they valued the flexibility of online learning, as well as access to their emoderator outside core class hours. However, having access to emoderators for periods outside core class hours may also promote the perception that emoderators will be available to respond to enquiries from online learners at any time on any day, thereby increasing demands on emoderators (Salmon & Wright, 2014). The findings from this study suggest that learners expect immediate responses to their questions, which indicates that accessibility during weekends is necessary. To manage such learner expectations, emoderators should communicate their availability to respond to questions at the commencement of the learner’s study program to manage expectations appropriately. These findings support recommendation 7: Emoderators should provide their preferred communication mode, together with days/times available to respond to enquiries (Table 6.1).

6.5.2.3 Quality feedback on assessment tasks

Despite experiencing decreased motivation levels in the early stages of their postgraduate online part-time study program, once this cohort had submitted their first assignment and received detailed feedback, seven of the 10 interviewed
participants indicated that their motivation to continue increased. Instructor feedback assists learners in identifying their goals, assists in modifying the direction of their effort, and aids in developing self-efficacy as they experience progression towards goal completion (Bandura, 1997; Locke & Latham, 2002). In this study, eight of the 10 learners reported that receiving detailed feedback on assignments was a vital factor in positive online learning experiences. This result confirms prior research findings, which indicates that for those who received feedback on assessment tasks, the more feedback they received, the higher their levels of motivation to improve future submissions and eliminate poor academic practices (Hanover Research Council, 2009; Tung, 2012).

6.5.2.4 Discussion: Learners who continued and completed their online study

In this study, the qualitative data showed that this cohort of 10 first-time postgraduate online learners enjoyed the flexibility that studying online part-time provided. Nevertheless, at some point during the first six weeks of their study program, all interviewees reported decreased motivation levels and a desire to withdraw from their online studies. Brown et al. (2015) identified that early interventions are imperative, as the first six weeks are considered to be a high-risk transition period for first-time learners. The 10 interviewees who continued their studies confirmed that when responses from the moderator were not immediate, this contributed to feelings of decreased motivation. The common patterns identified by the participants were the timeliness of feedback on assessment tasks from the moderator, as feedback assists in the contextualisation of learning and provides the basis from which to scaffold and improve future assessment task submissions, particularly for those commencing online academic study after a period of absence.
The next section of this chapter discusses the negative factors raised by those who continued with their online studies. These frustrations emerged from the 10 interviews and were described as affecting the overall experience of online study.

6.5.3 Negative characteristics of online learning raised by those who completed their study program

These findings in this section contributes to the broader online field as it highlights a deeper understanding of what postgraduate learners expect in their first online learning experience and thereby suggests ways that online course design can be strengthened. The 10 interview participants who completed their online part-time study were also asked to describe the frustrating factors of their online study program that could have contributed to withdrawal from their online studies. The learners in this study identified a range of pressures that led to some level of frustration; for example, group assignments and the absence of technology that would improve their online learning experience. In addition, participants identified elements of postgraduate online learning that they did not enjoy or that they resented, which included the structure of discussion boards and issues related to privacy; each of these is explored below.

6.5.3.1 Online learner participation in asynchronous discussions

In this research, interviewees expressed frustration with online discussions. Cho and Shen (2013) acknowledged that very little research has been conducted on the ability of online learners to regulate their social interaction with others. Young and Bruce (2011) examined student perceptions of online courses and found three factors related to their overall evaluations: community building between students and
instructors; community building among students; and student engagement with learning. The experience of the cohort in this study is consistent with the findings of Capdeferro and Romero (2012), who claimed that “frustration is a common feeling among students involved in online collaborative learning experiences” (p. 1). Participants in this study identified that one of the main causes of frustration was the lack of consistency and participation by other learners in the online space. Indeed, Conrad and Donaldson (2011) argued that “the power of engagement in online courses is yet to be fully realised” (p. vii), perhaps indicating a need for further in-depth research on online interactions, a need also identified by Cho and Shen (2013). Unfortunately for these 10 interviewees, their experiences revealed a superficial level of discussion-board participation in return for marks. Alona observed that the “artificial discussion-board interaction highlighted why I missed the classroom environment so much”. The 10 interviewees stated that they only did what was necessary to pass the discussion-board component of their unit of study. Kate commented that she participated just enough to meet the course criteria, and claimed, “When the emoderator commented that no one had been online, I noticed a couple of us would post comments to appease the emoderator”. Tony claimed that a more efficient use of everyone’s time would have been to form an online community. Tony’s suggestion supports Young and Bruce’s (2011) study of student perceptions of online courses as well as the findings of Bangert (2008). Young and Bruce (2011) claim that by using meaningful peer interaction, rather than the conventional method of question and answer, learners gain a deeper understanding of the content.
6.5.3.2 *Online collaboration and equal participation in group work*

Group assignment work was singled out for criticism during interviews, particularly in relation to the allocation of groups and a lack of equal participation. According to the University of Technology Sydney, the rationale of group assignment work is centred on assisting learners’ work together on a common outcome to reflect the workplace, where individuals are often judged collectively. Yet many of these learners are already employed, so the question does arise as to whether group work is suitable in a course for professional adult online learners. In many ways the rationale of group assignment work as defined by the University of Technology Sydney describes what many of the full-time employed professional adults who participated in this study already did in their daily work. Given that many postgraduate part-time online learners are in workplace teams in paid employment, the pedagogical rationale for the inclusion of group work in an asynchronous online postgraduate qualification should be questioned.

Interview feedback highlighted that postgraduate learners in full-time employment experienced difficulties when completing group coursework due to time constraints and moderator inflexibility with submission deadlines, a finding consistent with that of Dumais et al. (2013). Importantly, the time available outside business hours for group members to meet online was restricted. Despite Knowles, Holton and Swanson’s (1998) theory that adults need to learn via experience, the learners who participated in the required group work reported negative effects on their enjoyment of study (Hall & Buzwell, 2013). Five of the 10 learners interviewed in the research outlined in this thesis deviated from the order of interview questions to raise concerns during their interview about their group assignment work. For example,
one criticism related to a lack of understanding about learners’ geographic location when allocating groups. One of the interviewees, Julia, described the difficulty she experienced when the moderator grouped geographically dispersed learners. This geographic distance affected communication due to time differences; these effects were exacerbated by the limited time available to group members who were working full-time. These findings suggested there is a requirement to ensure that moderators are experienced in designing online group coursework, which includes an understanding of the temporal and spatial contexts of their learners. This study contributes to the broader online/distance field by highlighting how learners desired well-structured online course design which can be achieved through the ongoing continuous teacher professional development.

6.5.3.3 Social networking and privacy-preserving features
Recent media attention (Taylor, 2015; Gillespie, 2015; Goldberg 2016) has focused on privacy issues in relation to information posted in public forums. Although discussion boards are not strictly public forums, eight of the 10 completing learners commented in their interviews about sharing personal knowledge raised concerns about how much information should be shared with their “faceless” online contemporaries. Many public- and private-sector organisations have implemented policies that govern their employees’ interactions on social-media websites, as well as the use of the company name. Yet, as Conrad and Donaldson (2011) point out, “learners have the additional uncertainty of having to quickly build trust and interdependence with others that they may never meet face to face” (p. 10). All members of this cohort noted that the absence of visual communication and the complexity associated with sharing personal information was further complicated by
the nature of the audience, essentially a group of people whose only commonality was the course they were studying online. These findings support recommendation 5: **Online learners should be offered the choice of using pseudonyms to protect corporate identities, overcoming privacy issue of disclosing company information** (Table 6.1).

### 6.5.3.4 Instructional technology for online learning

The 10 learners who completed their online study program identified a degree of frustration with the range and scope of the technology encountered in their online studies. The learners all highlighted the lack of YouTube videos or podcasts accompanying the learning materials. One respondent emphasised that the visual aspect of seeing someone and hearing them is beneficial, in that the senses are stimulated and the communication cycle completed.

The literature and research in this area highlighted that the flexibility provided by online study is compromised because the learning occurs in isolation (Smith, 2013). One way to improve the online learning experience is the inclusion of a video component (Gaytan, 2015) that is divided into discrete topics, providing visual content in manageable chunks. This approach in an online course has been found to be most beneficial, as it is delivered in a way similar to how students are “accustomed to learning in face-to-face classes” (Smith, 2013, p. 493). Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo and Woodard (2011) and Smith (2013) proposed in their research that one way to achieve connectedness is through the incorporation of technologies. Smith (2013) stated that “videos or podcasts where the moderator is seen and/or heard interpreting content” (p. 495) can help students to connect with
and understand content in a way that print (or slides) alone may not be able to achieve. The 10 interviewees who completed their online study program collectively agreed that technology-enhanced learning materials would have enriched their online learning experience. These findings support recommendation 6: The academic provider should incorporate emerging technologies, such as multimedia video/audio resources, for learners to access that support and contextualise course content (Table 6.1). The next component of this chapter discusses the strategies first-time postgraduate online learners implemented to incorporate their part-time online studies with full-time employment and other personal commitments.

6.6 Fifth research question: What strategies do part-time adult learners use to integrate their online studies with existing commitments?

This section was addressed using the data obtained from the 15 post-study qualitative interviews (n=10 completers and n=5 non-completers) to explore strategies first-time postgraduate online part-time learners adopt to integrate their online studies with existing commitments. This study revealed how the research participants allocated time required for their study, accommodating it after work and on weekends, given that most were unable to study during business hours. Other findings revealed how some learners would juggle their study around their children’s sleeping patterns, on weekends or weeknights and/or around their partner’s weekend social activities. Accordingly, participants’ weekends were largely dedicated to completing coursework, highlighting the expectations of first-time postgraduate online part-time learners that moderators would be available on weekends to respond to their questions.
6.6.1 Discussion: Fifth research question

The participants in this study, in particular those with young families and those who were responsible for managing a household, experienced a shortage of time. In 1997, Ozga and Surhnandan observed that family commitments were major causes of non-completion amongst mature learners studying via a face-to-face mode. Fifteen years later, in 2012, Tung identified that the foremost reason for online learners withdrawing was for personal reasons, while Thompson and Porto (2014) found that the difficulties adult online learners face in balancing full-time work schedules, family caretaking roles and assignments make them particularly vulnerable to stressors.

Compounding the balancing of full-time work with other commitments, all 15 interview participants acknowledged that their unit of study outlines did not differentiate between online and face-to-face delivery in specifying the number of contact hours to complete the course successfully. This study identified that eight of the 15 interviewees dedicated more time to study than recommended in the outline. This result is not surprising: Tung (2012) also acknowledged that online learning requires higher levels of “self-motivation, commitment, and persistence from learners than traditional face-to-face higher education” (p. 320). Research conducted by Brown et al. (2015) explored the experiences of 20 first-time distance learners through quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data were collected using weekly video diaries and thematically analysed, providing unique insights into the complexities of studying. The research results of Brown et al. (2015) highlighted that a significant “high-risk” period of disengagement exists for first-time learners. Brown et al. (2015) identified five factors that could result in disengagement: 1) motivating factors; 2) inhibiting factors; 3) importance of support; 4) study
approaches; and 5) retrospective thoughts. To combat this high-risk period, Brown et al. (2015) identified a need for more research into course design, and targeted interventions that would increase the level of support available for online learners. Similarly, 10 of the interview participants in this thesis outlined periods of disengagement; for example, Pauline highlighted her frustration with the online course design. This research highlighted the importance of providing an Introductory Foundation Module with targeted online self-help modules (such as an induction and familiarisation module) that would provide first-time online learners with an orientation to their online course to reduce their reliance on instruction from emoderators.

Fourteen of the 15 participants interviewed studied at the end of the working day or on weekends, when emoderators were not available to respond to learners’ questions. Only Julia was employed in a workplace that provided the opportunity to complete coursework during business hours. A number of the respondents found that “teachers would simply not respond to emails or questions” (Dumais et al. 2013, p. 107) on weekends or in the evenings. For instance, one interviewee found online study difficult because “if I needed anything clarified, I could not ask someone straight away”. Another interviewee voiced similar sentiments, stating during his interview, “The difficulty was when you are unsure, there is a delay due to email while you wait for the response”. One more interviewee explained that she tried to commit herself to studying for a few hours each night, but found that she mainly completed her study on Saturdays. She commented that she would also use time on Sundays to finalise assignments. The findings from this study endorse the findings from other studies of online discussions, which suggest that learners seek timely
responses to their questions and that these questions often occur outside of traditional business hours (Dumais et al. 2013).

During interviews, all 15 respondents claimed they had good time-management skills, and stated at the completion of their part-time study that these skills had assisted them in completing their coursework. However, despite the 15 interviewees’ perception of possessing good time-management skills, dismay over the high workload of part-time study were expressed, with this cohort of 15 interviewees describing apprehension about their efforts to incorporate these demands into their existing schedules. These fears could be somewhat alleviated by institutions emphasising the need for a study plan to be mapped out prior to commencement and providing clear guidance about this.

The 15 interviewees in this study did not indicate that they had reflected on the importance of mapping out a study plan; this might have been because they had no preconceived expectations about what online part-time study entailed. However, when the 15 participants were asked to reflect on their time-management strategies, one of the participants, Julia, explained that after having experienced one unit of part-time study online, she now understood what a study plan entailed; she said that the completion of a study plan would be one strategy that she would adopt in future units of study. Such proactive strategies are consistent with the theoretical frameworks of self-directedness (Knowles, 1975) and goal orientation (Dweck, 1989).
6.6.2 Summary: Fifth research question

Communicating and setting expectations of the commitment required to commence postgraduate online part-time study for those juggling work and family cannot be underestimated. Communication is paramount, and emoderators need to clarify their availability and preferred method of communication to their cohort of postgraduate first-time online part-time learners. Although part-time online learners have few commitments in terms of attending lectures and seminars, in contrast to on-campus learners, scheduling communication with their emoderator around the learners’ existing commitments is important for first-time online learners. This cohort of learners may rely more on their emoderator in the early stages of their online program and seek guidance to enable them to successfully complete their coursework. However, for these first-time postgraduate online part-time learners, the demands of managing study were challenged by the need to study at weekends and at the end of the working day, which was further complicated by emoderators not being online on weekends to provide the level of support required (Alverson & Shultz, 2015). These findings support recommendation 7: Emoderators should provide their preferred communication mode, together with days/times available to respond to enquiries (Table 6.1).

The previous elements of this chapter addressed the findings of this study and answered the five research questions around which the study was framed. The next section, in addition to offering recommendations arising from each of the research questions, provides an overview of how the study has identified roles and areas of responsibility for both the academic institution and the first-time postgraduate online learner; these are designed to ensure success for the learners themselves.
6.7 Recommendations

This thesis offers seven recommendations (Table 6.1) to postgraduate online course providers enrolling full-time employed adult learners into part-time postgraduate study. These recommendations are a summary of the findings of each of the five research questions underpinning this thesis.

Table 6.1
Recommendations emanating from each research question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Prior to commencement, an Introductory Foundation Study module should be embedded as part of institutional strategic planning and education delivery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Discussion-board policy guidelines should set out expectations and guidelines around learner-to-learner and learner-to-emoderator interaction on the discussion board. Guidelines should be provided at the commencement of all online study programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Emoderators should provide detailed timely feedback on the first assessment task as a means of building confidence for first-time postgraduate online learners’ to improve their understanding of academic expectations in future assessment submissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Information should be provided by university staff who are qualified to discuss the positive and negative aspects of online study prior to enrolment, enabling first-time postgraduate online part-time learners to make informed decisions about their choice of study mode upon re-entry into academia after a period of absence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Online learners should be offered the choice of using pseudonyms to protect corporate identities, overcoming privacy issue of disclosing company information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The academic provider should incorporate emerging technologies, such as multimedia video/audio resources, for learners to access that support and contextualise course content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Emoderators should provide their preferred communication mode, together with days/times available to respond to enquiries.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

6.7.1 Recommendation one: Introductory Foundation Study module

The first recommendation this research makes relates to the need to embed an Introductory Foundation Study module for the learners’ completion prior to commencing their first online unit of part-time study (Recommendation 1). An Introductory Foundation Study module should be constructed in response to data
analytics and exit-survey data. An Introductory Foundation Study module should include a suite of targeted support modules based on preparedness and goal-orientation quizzes, and be accompanied by tailored advice and motivation strategies based on the individual’s results rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to online learning. The inclusion of a module of this nature in online courses would provide an interface between first-time postgraduate online part-time learners and emoderators, providing data analytics that would enable emoderators to differentiate between those who have previously studied online and those who are new to studying in an online environment and may thus require higher levels of personalised guidance.

Ideally, course materials should not be accessible to first-time postgraduate online learners until the Introductory Foundation Study module has been completed. This would provide timely feedback to the learner about their approach to learning in an online environment, thereby enabling an assessment of whether online learning is the best option for them. For those who continue in an online environment, and who return low preparedness scores and an avoidance-goal-orientated preference to study, these results should be sent to their emoderators. The questionnaire results would alert emoderators to the fact that they have first-time postgraduate online learners who have a returned an at-risk result in their approach to studying in their online course, identifying potential learners at-risk of early withdrawal. This strategy would benefit emoderators by highlighting those online learners requiring regular contact during the early stages of their part-time study program, and assist in sustaining first-time postgraduate online learners’ motivation levels and build their confidence by establishing self-directed learning behaviours.
6.7.3 **Recommendation two: Discussion-board guidelines**

The second contribution that this research makes is its recommendation for a review of the learning-design practices underpinning discussion-board participation (Recommendation 2). Concerns were raised by the learners in this study about privacy and superficial discussion-board contributions in return for marks. One of the major challenges for online learning is the need for e moderators to facilitate a safe learning environment, which encourages equal participation for learner-to-learner and e moderator-to-learner communication. To assist in creating this environment, e moderators should implement, at the commencement of the online study program, policy/guidelines relating to the use of the discussion board. In this way expectations and rules relating to learner-to-learner and e moderator-to-learner interaction will be established from the outset.

6.7.4 **Recommendation three: Provision of detailed feedback on first assessment**

This research also highlights how first-time postgraduate online part-time learners valued detailed feedback on assessment tasks, particularly their first assessment. Krause (2012) observed that first-time online learners increased their levels of understanding about the requirements of postgraduate academic study through feedback. The participants in the study all identified that they had underestimated the amount of time required to prepare an assignment and the amount of research required. This feedback suggests that first-time postgraduate online part-time learners would value high-quality, timely feedback on their first assessment task (Recommendation 3). The provision of timely feedback for the first assessment would provide part-time learners with a better understanding of the excepted level of academic rigour. The research supports the needs for timely feedback (Krause,
2012; Tung, 2012), recognising that such feedback can assist in building confidence among a cohort who have not studied online previously.

6.7.5 **Recommendation four: Setting expectations through targeted communication and motivational support**

The results of this research also suggest that universities should regularly assess the types of information communicated to first-time postgraduate online part-time learners (Recommendation 4). As highlighted in this study, first-time postgraduate online learners had a range of expectations about their part-time online learning experience, which often differed from the reality. In this study, the levels of educational support and motivation for a cohort who had not previously accessed university services were largely perceived as inadequate, particularly in relation to the lack of advice and educational support services provided outside core university hours. Today’s online academic consumer requires immediate responses to questions to maintain motivation. Because much online learning occurs on weekends, it is necessary for universities to establish guidelines for moderator availability and communicate their policy prior to enrolment. The challenge for universities is the deployment of an academic workforce that provides 24-hour access seven days a week to university staff for online learners to obtain immediate responses to their questions. How universities approach the changing nature of a modern workforce is a complexity to be faced by all institutions that provide online programs.

The interview data revealed that first-time postgraduate online part-time learners may be ill-prepared to commence or return to study, having the perception that they
can study online at their own pace anytime and anywhere, and that their study will be easily accommodated in their busy schedules. This misconception is not surprising, considering how institutions market these educational products; for example, websites may state “Study an **online course** when and where it suits you” (Seek Learning, 2016) or “You can complete a degree by studying where, when, and how it suits you” (Open Universities Australia, 2016). Such advertising perpetuates the myth that online study is easy, with learners able to study at their own pace in their own time. Such claims seem to overlook the academic online learning study timelines that learners may need to adhere to.

6.7.6 **Recommendation five: Privacy and protecting the learner’s online identity**

The fifth contribution of this research is addressing online learners’ privacy concerns; the university should display a privacy policy relating to its learning materials in the learning management system (Recommendation 5). The university privacy policy would appear when learners post their first discussion-board response and could prompt the learner to read the privacy policy and tick a disclaimer box that states: “I have read this policy and agree to the terms and conditions”. Including a privacy policy would reassure first-time postgraduate online learners that they are participating in a safe environment. Being confident that the university has ensured a safe environment might increase learners’ confidence to participate in discussion-board activities, which are invaluable to their learning experience. Discussion boards can provide first-time postgraduate online learners with the opportunity to scaffold existing knowledge and enable deeper levels of meaningful online peer-to-peer conversation. The data obtained in this research indicated that incorporating
strategies to protect online learner privacy would lead to increased participation of first-time online learners in the discussion board, which may uphold motivation levels as online learners progress through their first study program. Ensuring privacy and the protection of online learners’ identities might also better support peer-to-peer learning. Online activities designed to protect individual learners’ privacy could also assist in developing deeper levels of collaboration and a sense of community in an online learning environment.

6.7.7 Recommendation six: Incorporation of multimedia into online learning resources

The sixth contribution of this research is in relation to the incorporation of video and audio resources (Recommendation 6). This research highlighted the need for the visual and auditory messages to complement written documents. The inclusion of YouTube videos and/or other visual and auditory messages would eliminate or reduce levels of uncertainty and reliance on emoderators.

The provision of video and audio resources for first-time postgraduate online learners requires that emoderators use the technologies to support their course content. Those universities that enable the transformation of their learning materials through ICT enhancement and development will be the innovators, and future online learners will be the beneficiaries (Salmon & Wright, 2014). It remains the responsibility of academic institutions to ensure that adequate ICT resources and training are available to emoderators. Upskilling educators to embrace emerging technologies would improve the quality of online learning. To support this, technical expertise and ongoing support must be provided to emoderators.
6.7.8 Recommendation seven: Communicating emoderator availability to online learners

The need for emoderators to communicate their preferred communication method and hours of availability to their online learners was also indicated in this study. Due to the number of communication options, it is difficult for learners to guess their emoderators’ preferred method and time of communication.

Online learners can communicate through a number of communication channels: the University’s learning management system; their business and personal email addresses; mobile phones and landlines; and online communication tools such as Skype or Zoom. As a result, it is important at the commencement of the study period that emoderators communicate their availability to respond to learner queries and their preferred mode of communication. This enables learners to strategise and schedule communication with their emoderator around existing commitments. Therefore, the importance of managing learner expectations in terms of when emoderators will be available to respond to queries is crucial to setting expectations and learner satisfaction.

6.8 Conclusion

The results of this research have satisfied the objectives of this study. The purpose of this study was to identify factors affecting first-time postgraduate online part-time learners’ decisions to persist with, or withdraw from, online courses; and, through interviews with participants, to highlight appropriate retention strategies for online learners. Despite the limitations of a sample from one academic institution in
Australia, this research provides insights into some possible strategies to improve the online student learning experience.

The research conducted for this study supported the hypothesis that there was a difference between first-time postgraduate online learners’ expectations and their part-time online study experience. To obtain deeper insights into this cohort’s expectations, the interviews conducted culminated in the identification of common themes, such as feelings of isolation, privacy concerns and issues over which learners had no control (the discussion board, response time to questions and assignment feedback). This study has contributed to theory through a deeper understanding of how first-time postgraduate online part-time learners approach their part-time study after a period of absence from academia. Consideration of implementing the identified recommendations would benefit academic institutions’ online delivery, potentially reducing online attrition, which current research identifies as a significant issue.

However, additional research is required on how to prepare and support first-time postgraduate online part-time learners, as the number of learners choosing to learn online is projected to increase. Future research could focus on the various motivations for undertaking postgraduate online study and what approaches to learning design can be incorporated into online learning that deepen first-time online postgraduate part-time learners’ understanding of content that aligns with a mastery approach. Further research into first-time online part-time learners’ understanding their goal-orientation approach prior to commencement may assist in aligning expectations with actual online study experiences.
This thesis has highlighted areas for future review and it is recommended that this research be conducted with a larger sample size. An investigation of full-time employed adult learners studying their first postgraduate qualification part-time online from a wider cross-section of universities and academic disciplines is likely to yield results that offer a greater understanding of the issues facing full-time employed postgraduate learners returning to academia after a period of absence, and to provide critical observations and recommendations to support continuous improvement in online pedagogical practices.
7 REFERENCES


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Section 7: References


Section 7: References


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Section 7: References


Tresman, S. (2002). Towards a strategy for improved student retention in programmes of open, distance education: A case study from the Open University UK. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, (3)1, 1-11.


APPENDIX A HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL
RENEWAL APPROVAL LETTER

Ethics Reference: HE11/028

20 January 2016

Mrs Joanne Jensen
PO Box 13213
Law Courts VIC 3010

Dear Mrs Jensen

I am pleased to advise that renewal of the following Human Research Ethics application has been approved. This certificate relates to the research protocol submitted in your original application and all approved amendments to date.

Ethics Number: HE11/028
Project Title: Investigation of the gap between learners’ expectations and their actual online experiences.
Name of Researchers: Mrs Joanne Jensen, Professor Lori Lockyer, A/Professor Peter Caputi
Renewed From: 16 February 2016
Expiry Date: 15 February 2017

Please note that approvals are granted for a twelve month period. Further extension will be considered on receipt of a progress report prior to expiry date.

This certificate relates to the research protocol submitted in your original application and all approved amendments to date. Please remember that in addition to completing an annual report the Human Research Ethics Committee also requires that researchers immediately report:
- proposed changes to the protocol including changes to investigators involved
- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

A condition of approval by the HREC is the submission of a progress report annually and a final report on completion of your project. The progress report template is available at http://www.uow.edu.au/research/rio/ethics/UOW109338S.html. This report must be completed, signed by the appropriate Head of School and returned to the Research Services Office prior to the expiry date.

The University of Wollongong/ Illawarra and Shoalhaven Local Health Network District (UHWLHD) Social Science HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

If you have any queries regarding the HREC review process, please contact the Ethics Unit on phone 4221 3886 or email rio-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Yours sincerely

Associate Professor Melanie Randle
Chair, Social Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee
APPENDIX B PRE-STUDY STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET
Participation Information Sheet for University Students

Dear Student

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH
This is an invitation for you to participate in a study conducted by the University of Wollongong. The research is called *Investigation of the gap between learners’ expectations and their actual online experiences*. The purpose of the research is to investigate adult learner perceptions of their preparedness and self-directedness prior to the commencement of their first unit of an online university course and their subjective experiences during their study program.

INVESTIGATORS
Professor Lori Lockyer (Team Leader)  
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02 4221 5511  
lockyer@uow.edu.au  

Associate Professor Peter Caputi  
Faculty of Psychology  
02 4221 3717  
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Jo Jenson (Researcher)  
Faculty of Education  
0409 123 328  
jo.jenson@westnet.com.au

WHAT WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO
If you choose to participate you will be asked to complete a survey which takes approximately 3-5 minutes to complete. To commence the survey – click here

ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS
This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you are not happy with the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the Ethics Officer at the University on (02) 42214457. Thank you for your interest in this study.

Kind regards
Jo Jenson

**More detailed information about this study**

I’m looking for people who are studying online part-time and willing to complete an online survey at the beginning and end of their first session of study. I’m also interested in holding some follow-up interviews with students.

This first survey takes about 3-5 minutes to complete and asks about your attitude towards online learning looking at your comfort levels, self-directedness, goal orientation, and a few general questions about yourself. The second survey is at the end of your online subject, takes 5 minutes to complete, and asks you to reflect on your online learning experience. The follow-up interview is optional and is conducted on the completion of your online subject. This interview takes approximately 20 minutes and provides an opportunity for you to have your say about your online learning experience.

The reviewed research reveals that there is substantial information available on attrition, retention and non-completion of online courses but little information that directly relates to the learner’s online experience. It is hoped that the findings of this research may improve the information available to educational institutions and online learners by identifying areas that are commonly misunderstood or misinterpreted. Your participation will benefit future online learners.

In accordance with University of Wollongong policy, all data collected from this project will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for five years. Only my supervisors and I will have access to this data and no findings that could identify any individual will be published. Your responses are identified by code numbers only.

Your identity will remain confidential throughout the study and participation or non-participation will not affect any assessment in your subject. You may withdraw from completing the survey at any time or request that your information be withdrawn.

If you have any questions about this study, feel free to contact me on 0409 123 328 or jo.jenson@westnet.com.au Or you can contact my supervisor Professor Lori Lockyer on 02 4221 5511 or llockyer@uow.edu.au If you have a complaint concerning the manner in which this research is being conducted, please contact: The Ethics Officer Human Research Ethics Committee University of Wollongong 02 4221 4457

Your interest and participation in this research is greatly appreciated.

Kind regards
Jo Jenson
APPENDIX C PRE-STUDY SAMPLING SURVEY
# PRE-STUDY SURVEY

## Sampling Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question number</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Are you working full-time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Are you studying part-time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Are you an adult learner (25+ years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I have never studied a University course online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Yes I have studied online before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I live in an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Urban (City)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Non urban (Country)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I am enrolled in the ***** University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Accounting &amp; Financial Decision Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business (Business Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Employee Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business (Human Resource Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Human Resource Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Commerce (Human Resource Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Human Resource Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business (Business Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Logistics Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business (Supply Chain Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Managing in a Complex World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business Management (Executive Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Performance &amp; Reward Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business (Human Resource Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Project Closure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business Management (Project Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Project Management Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business Management (Project Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Project Planning &amp; Initiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate Certificate of Business Management (Project Management)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8 Please select your reason(s) for learning

- Working in industry relevant to this study
- To gain employment in chosen field
- Required by industry (eg regulatory requirement)
- Career and/or professional development
- Career progression
- Personal interest
- Other (please specify)

9 What is your level of education?

- Have not studied since leaving secondary school
- Started but didn’t finish a TAFE course
- Completed a TAFE course
- Started but didn’t complete a University degree
- Completed a University degree
- Other (please specify)

10 How long has it been since you undertook formal study?

- Less than 1 year
- 2 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- More than 10 years
APPENDIX D PRE-STUDY SURVEY
### Pre-study Lynch Preparedness Survey Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question number</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
<th>All of the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I believe I will be able to easily access the online learning management system as needed for my studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I am comfortable communicating electronically</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I am willing to actively communicate with my classmates and instructors electronically</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I am willing to map out a study plan to effectively manage my study and work commitments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I believe that my background and experience will give me confidence to complete my studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I am comfortable working with information in an online format</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>When it comes to learning and studying, I am a self-sufficient person who can work autonomously</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>In my studies, I am self-disciplined and will find it easy to set aside reading and homework time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I expect to manage my study time effectively and easily complete assignments on time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>As a student I think I will enjoy participating in online class discussions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>In my studies, I plan to set goals and have a high degree of initiative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Pre-study Elliot & McGregor Goal Orientation Survey Questions

**Achievement goals - The questions below focus on your performance and how you set your goals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at all true of me</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Very true of me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 My goal in this online subject is to get a better grade than most of</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 It is important for me to do well compared to others in this online</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 It is important for me to do better than other students</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 I just want to avoid doing poorly in this online subject</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 My fear of performing poorly in this online subject is often what</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 My goal in this online subject is to avoid performing poorly</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Sometimes I am afraid that I may not understand the content of this</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 I worry that I may not learn all that I possibly could in this online</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 I am often concerned that I may not learn all that there is to learn</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 I desire to completely master the material presented online</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 I want to learn as much as possible from this online subject</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 It is important for me to understand the content of this course</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-study Survey Details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 I am willing to participate in a similar survey at the end of my</td>
<td>○ Yes. Please send the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online learning subject</td>
<td>survey to email address:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E POST-STUDY SURVEY
POST-STUDY SURVEY
Student attitudes towards learning online

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the post-study questionnaire. Your time and commitment to my research is greatly appreciated.

At the end of this survey there is the opportunity to participate in an optional 20 minute interview. Regardless of your experience, or what grade you achieved, I'm interested in gaining an insight into your experiences.

The reviewed research reveals that there is substantial statistical information available on online learning but there is minimal information where the learner has been asked for their opinions on their online learning experiences. It is hoped that the findings of this research may improve the information available to educational institutions and online learners by identifying areas that are commonly misunderstood or misinterpreted. Your participation will benefit future online learners.

As previously advised, your identity will remain anonymous throughout the study. You may withdraw from completing the survey at any time or request that your information be withdrawn.

In accordance with University of Wollongong policy, all data collected from this project will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for five years. Only my supervisors and I will have access to this data and no findings that could identify any individual will be published. Your responses are identified by code numbers only.

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If you have any questions about this study, feel free to contact me on 0409 123 328 or jo.jenson@westnet.com.au Or you can contact my supervisor Professor Dr Lori Lockyer on 02 4221 5511 or llockyer@uow.edu.au If you have a complaint concerning the manner in which this research is being conducted, please contact:
The Ethics Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
University of Wollongong
02 4221 4457

Your interest and participation in this research is greatly appreciated.

Kind regards
Jo Jenson

University of Wollongong
### Post-study Sampling Survey

35 I completed the online subject
   - Yes
   - No

### Post-study Lynch Preparedness Survey Questions

**Learning Online - The questions below focus on how you may expect to learn online**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
<th>All of the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36 I experienced problems using the online learning management system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37 I was comfortable communicating electronically</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 I communicated regularly with my classmates and instructors electronically</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 I adhered to my study plan and effectively managed both study and work commitments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49 My background and experience provided me with confidence to complete my studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 I was comfortable working with information online</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 I required minimal guidance and found I worked autonomously and was self sufficient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43 I was self-disciplined and made time to read and complete homework</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44 I managed my time effectively and completed all assignments by their due date</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 I was an active participant in online class discussions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 I adhered to my set goals and exercised a high degree of initiative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Post-study Elliot & McGregor Goal Orientation Survey Questions

**Achievement goals - The questions below focus on your performance and how you set your goals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at all true of me</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Very true of me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>47 I received a higher grade than I anticipated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 I felt I did well compared to others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49 I did better than the other students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 I was pleased with my result</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 I was motivated to perform well</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52 I performed well in my online subject</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53 I understood the content presented</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>I did well in this online subject</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>I learnt all there was to learn in this online subject</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>I mastered the material presented online</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>I learnt a lot from this online subject</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>I understood the subject content very well</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Contact Details**

<p>| | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>I am willing to participate in a 20 minute interview about my online learning experience</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, My contact details are</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phone:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Email:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Non-Completion Questionnaire**

To be completed by respondents who answered ‘no’ to question 35

<p>| | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Which week of the online course did you withdraw</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weeks 1 - 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weeks 6 - 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weeks 9 - 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Did you submit your first assignment</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>If you answered No to the previous question, what were the reasons for you not submitting your first assignment?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Please select which reasons below apply to you not completing your online subject</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>incorrect choice of qualification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>didn’t like the teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>didn’t enjoy the subject structure</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>unable to cope with the demands of juggling work and online study</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>financial reasons</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lack of assistance from the teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>inadequate support from the university help desk/IT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interpersonal problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lack of peer support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lack of support from work colleagues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<p>| | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>I am willing to participate in a 20 minute interview about my online learning experience.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If you answered yes to the question above, my contact details are:
Name:
Phone:
Email:

Thank you for your participation in this research project

Your time spent completing this survey is greatly appreciated. Thank you so much for your contribution to my research project.

In accordance with the University of Wollongong policy, all data collected from this project will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for five years. Only my supervisors and I will have access to this data and no findings that could identify any individual will be published. Your responses are identified by code numbers only.

Your identity will remain anonymous throughout the study. You may withdraw from completing the survey at any time or request that your information be withdrawn.

If you would like to contact the research supervisor about any aspect of this study, please contact Associate Professor Dr Lori Lockyer on 02 4221 5511.

If you have a complaint concerning the manner in which this research is being conducted, please contact:
The Ethics Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
University of Wollongong
02 4221 4457
APPENDIX F INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM
Consent Form for University Students

Investigation of the gap between learners’ expectations and their actual online experiences: A research project

Researcher: Joanne Jenson

I have been given information about the research project “Investigation of the gap between learners’ expectations and their actual online experiences”. This is part of a Doctor of Education degree supervised by Professor Lori Lockyer from the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong.

I understand that if I consent to participate in this project I will be asked to participate in a 20 minute interview after the academic session has concluded. I understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that there are no potential risks or burdens associated with this study.

I have agreed to have my interview recorded and transcribed for the purposes of the study, which will be stripped of personal identifiers and coded by the researcher prior to any analysis. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my future studies.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Professor Lori Lockyer on 02 4221 5511. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on 02 4221 4457.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used primarily for a PhD thesis, and may also be used in summary form for journal publication, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed

Date

.................................

Name (please print)
APPENDIX G STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question number</th>
<th>Research question addressed during interview</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Integrate</th>
<th>Continuity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Did you experience any difficulties accessing/getting started using the learning management system?</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>RQ5</td>
<td>Where did you access the online learning management system (home or work or both?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>RQ5</td>
<td>Was there a specific day/time when you completed your coursework?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>RQ1 RQ2</td>
<td>Did your existing computer skills enable you to navigate your way around the learning management system? 4a - If answer is no, then ask - was there a pre-study module offered to assist in familiarising yourself with the LMS?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Did you interact with other students in your subject? 5a - If answer is no, then why not? 5b – if the answer is yes, how frequently did you communication electronically?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Did you find this medium increased your level of participation than you would normally contribute in a classroom situation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 7 | RQ1  
RQ5 | What were some of the difficulties you encountered when completing your studies? How have these impacted on your confidence levels? | ✔ | ✔ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | RQ1  
RQ2 | How prepared were you for the amount of study/coursework you were expected to complete in a fully online environment? | ✔ | ✔ |
| 9 | RQ2 | Did you need to contact your moderator for clarification of any aspect of the course? 9a - If yes, what did you seek clarification on? | ✔ |
| 10 | RQ1  
RQ2 | Before you commenced this online study, would you have described yourself as a self-disciplined learner? After this online study, would you still describe yourself the same way? 10a - Why? | ✔ | ✔ |
| 11 | RQ2  
RQ4 | Did you feel like giving up at any stage during the online program? 11a - If so, what was it that contributed to these feelings? | ✔ | ✔ |
| 12 | RQ2  
RQ5 | How much time did you spend each week online? | ✔ | ✔ |
| 13 | RQ1  
RQ2  
RQ5 | Was this consistent with your estimations prior to starting? | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |
| 14 | RQ2  
RQ4 | Were there any distractions that caused you not to spend the allocated amount of time on line each week?  
14a - If so, what were they? | ✓ | ✓ |
| 15 | RQ1  
RQ5 | Did you set yourself a study plan before commencing your online studies?  
15a - If yes, did this help keep you on track to achieve your study goals?  
15b - If no, what caused you to abandon your study plan?  
15c - If no (to original question), what were the reasons you didn’t set yourself a study plan prior to commencing your online studies? | ✓ | ✓ |
| 16 | RQ1  
RQ5 | On reflection, do you think a study plan would have assisted in completing your study program? | ✓ | ✓ |
| 17 | RQ2 | When you came across new concepts in the learning materials, were you able to work autonomously to find the answers required?  
17a - If no, how often did you need to make contact with your moderator for guidance? | ✓ |
| 18 | RQ1  
RQ2  
RQ5 | How did you describe your time management skills prior to commencing your online study?  
18a - Now that you have completed this study, would you describe the way you manage your time in the same way?  
18b - If yes, do you think being highly organised, assisted in your online study?  
18c - If so, how? | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
<p>| 19 | RQ1 | Did you adhere to your set goals to complete your study | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RQ2</th>
<th>RQ5</th>
<th>program tasks on time? 19a - If no, what prevented you from adhering to your set goals? e.g. was it the timelines that weren't sufficient / was it work that got in the way / tasks too hard?</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>RQ5</td>
<td>Did you need to request an extension to complete your coursework? 20a - If yes, did the extension assist in completing the coursework?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td></td>
<td>What was the reason did you undertook this study?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Did you receive the final grade you set out to achieve?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td></td>
<td>What was the final grade you achieved for this subject e.g. Fail, Pass, Credit, Distinction, High Distinction?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Will this grade assist you in achieving your overall goal you set yourself?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Did you like being able to share knowledge with other students?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Did you learn from other student’s contributions online? 26a - If yes, did this make you feel more “connected” and part of the class community? 26b - If no, why not?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Did your instructor provide any communication to support you with your first assignment submission – e.g. talked you through</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|   |   | the process to provide you with confidence – e.g. skype, blog, wiki.  
27a - If so, did this help build your confidence when it came to submitting your first assignment?  
27b - If not, would this support have helped your confidence? |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 28 | RQ2 | Did you understand the learning materials and assessments?  
28a - If not, did you call the emoderator for clarification?  
28b - If yes, were your questions clarified in a timely and clear manner? |   |   | ✓ |
| 29 | RQ2 | Did you receive feedback on the course work you submitted?  
29a - If yes, how did this feedback assist you in performing well?  
29b - If no, would receiving feedback have had an impact on your performance? |   |   | ✓ |
| 30 | RQ2 | Did you put in the same amount of effort in this online course as you normally would in a face-to-face course?  
30a - If no, what was it that prevented you from performing well? |   | ✓ | ✓ |
<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Was there a pre-subject ‘getting started’ module available? 31a - If yes, did you complete the pre-subject module? 31b - If yes, on reflection, do you think there needs to be additional material included that would prepare future learners in understanding the content? (for example information on referencing, academic writing skills, other?) 31c – If no, would a ‘getting started’ module helped you?</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Do you believe the length of this online subject was adequate for you to learn the concepts introduced? 32a - If no, what do you believe would be an adequate timeframe?</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Did you miss having to turn up to a class on a specified day at a specific time? 33a - Did this impact on your ability to learn all you could in this subject?</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Did you experience any difficulties with any aspect of the online study materials or assignments? 34a - If yes, what were the difficulties you experienced?</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 35 | RQ2 | Do you think that this online experience encouraged high levels of interactivity?  
35a - If so, do you think this contributing to you learning more? |   |
| 36 | RQ1  
RQ2  
RQ5 | Did you underestimate the level of difficulty in understanding the subject content?  
36a - If yes, did you feel like giving up and withdrawing from the course?  
36b - If yes, can you recall which week you experienced these thoughts? | V  
V  
V |
APPENDIX H MAPPING OF LYNCH QUESTIONNAIRE WITH RECOMMENDED CHANGES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Original Lynch Question</th>
<th>Revised Survey Question based on Smith (2001) and researcher’s recommendations</th>
<th>Smith’s Recommendations</th>
<th>Researcher Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I am able to easily access the Internet as needed for my studies.</td>
<td>I am able to easily access the learning management system (Blackboard) when needed for my studies.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
<td>Delete the word ‘internet’ and replace with ‘learning management system’ as this is the terminology used to describe the learning platform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I am comfortable communicating electronically.</td>
<td>I am comfortable communicating electronically.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I am willing to actively communicate with my classmates and instructors electronically.</td>
<td>I am willing to actively communicate with my classmates and instructors electronically.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am willing to dedicate 8 to 10 hours per week for my studies.</td>
<td>I am willing to map out a study plan to effectively manage my study and work commitments.</td>
<td>Smith argued that asking students to rate their willingness “to dedicate 8 to 10 hours per week for my studies” may be too contextualized for some institutions. Smith identified that the question may be improved by rewording the question to ask about motivation to set aside an amount of time each week to study, without indicating a specified timeframe. By doing so, the end result may be that the question is contextualised to focus on study management than commitment.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel that online learning is of at least equal quality to traditional classroom learning.</td>
<td>Question not included</td>
<td>No change required</td>
<td>Question not included. To gain a deeper insight into first-time online learners’ perspectives, this question will be included in the interview to obtain qualitative data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel that my background and experience will be beneficial to my studies.</td>
<td>I believe that my background and experience will give me confidence to complete my studies.</td>
<td>Smith (2001a) identified that the use of prior knowledge to assist with new learning is one of the learner characteristics for effective engagement with flexible learning. Smith queries whether this question is associated with e-learning comfort or with self-management. On this basis it is recommended that this question be reworded taking these comments into consideration.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I am comfortable with written communication.</td>
<td>I am comfortable working with information in an online format.</td>
<td>Smith recommends rewording this question so it focuses on the comfort with online learning from the perspective of a learners’ ability to work with textually based information which also forms part of self-directed learning in a resource-based Environment.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>When it comes to learning and studying, I am a self-directed person.</td>
<td>When it comes to learning and studying, I am a self-sufficient person who can work autonomously.</td>
<td>The researcher has used this questionnaire for other research purposes. That experience showed that previous participants misinterpreted the word ‘self-directed’ and placed their own interpretation on the word. This became apparent when discussing the questionnaire results with the participants.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I believe looking back on what I’ve learned in a course will help me to remember it better.</td>
<td>Question not included</td>
<td>Smith recommends this question be deleted and replaced with an alternative.</td>
<td>Question not included. Questions were asked during qualitative interview to provide deeper insights into this aspect of online learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>In my studies, I am self-disciplined and find it easy to set aside reading and homework time.</td>
<td>In my studies, I am self-disciplined and find it easy to set aside reading and homework time.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I am able to manage my study time effectively and easily complete assignments on time.</td>
<td>I am able to manage my study time effectively and easily complete assignments on time.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>As a student, I enjoy working independently.</td>
<td>As a student I enjoy participating in online class discussions.</td>
<td>Smith identified that the use of the word “independently” may lead to the misinterpretation of question 12. It is evident in previous use of this survey by the researcher that some of the survey participants interpreted “independently” as meaning “working alone without any interaction or support.” On the other hand, some interpreted “independently” as meaning working in a self-directed way including with others by means of communicating electronically. Smith suggests replacing the word ‘independently’ with ‘in a self-directed way’.</td>
</tr>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>In my studies, I set goals and have a high degree of initiative.</td>
<td>In my studies, I set goals and have a high degree of initiative.</td>
<td>No change required</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX I MAPPING OF ELLIOT & MCGREGOR QUESTIONNAIRE WITH RECOMMENDED CHANGES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Original Elliot &amp; McGregor Question</th>
<th>Revised Survey Question based on Researcher’s Recommendations</th>
<th>Researcher Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My goal in this class is to get a better grade than most of the other students.</td>
<td>My goal in this online subject is to get a better grade than most of the other students.</td>
<td>Delete the word ‘class’ and replace with ‘online subject’. It was determined through discussion and user testing that for the intended survey respondents the deletion of the word ‘class’ will deliver consistent responses when surveying online learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It is important for me to do well compared to others in this class.</td>
<td>It is important for me to do well compared to others in this online subject</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>It is important for me to do better than other students.</td>
<td>It is important for me to do better than other students</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I just want to avoid doing poorly in this class.</td>
<td>I just want to avoid doing poorly in this online subject</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My fear of performing poorly in this class is often what motivates me.</td>
<td>My fear of performing poorly in this online subject is often what motivates me</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>My goal in this class is to avoid performing poorly.</td>
<td>My goal in this online subject is to avoid performing poorly</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes I am afraid that I may not understand the content of this class as thoroughly as I’d like.</td>
<td>Sometimes I am afraid that I may not understand the content of this online subject as thoroughly as I’d like</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I worry that I may not learn all that I possibly could in this class.</td>
<td>I worry that I may not learn all that I possibly could in this online subject</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I am often concerned that I may not learn all that there is to learn in this class.</td>
<td>I am often concerned that I may not learn all that there is to learn in this online subject</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I desire to completely master the material presented in this class.</td>
<td>I desire to completely master the material presented online</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I want to learn as much as possible from this class.</td>
<td>I want to learn as much as possible from this online subject</td>
<td>Altered – see comments above for item 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>It is important for me to understand the content of this course as thoroughly as possible.</td>
<td>It is important for me to understand the content of this course as thoroughly as possible</td>
<td>No change required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX J PRE-STUDY AND POST-STUDY SURVEY COMPARISON
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LYNCH Question Number</th>
<th>Pre-study questionnaire (predictive)</th>
<th>Post-study questionnaire (reflective)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I am able to easily access the online learning management system needed for my studies.</td>
<td>I experienced problems using the online learning management system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I am comfortable communicating electronically.</td>
<td>I was comfortable communicating electronically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I am willing to actively communicate with my classmates and instructors electronically.</td>
<td>I communicated regularly with my classmates and instructors electronically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I am willing to map out a study plan to effectively manage my study and work commitments.</td>
<td>I adhered to my study plan and effectively managed both study and work commitments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I believe that my background and experience will give me confidence to complete my studies.</td>
<td>My background and experience provided me with confidence to complete my studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I am comfortable working with information in an online format.</td>
<td>I was comfortable working with information online.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>When it comes to learning and studying, I am a self-sufficient person who can work autonomously.</td>
<td>I required minimal guidance and found I worked autonomously and was self-sufficient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>In my studies, I am self-disciplined and find it easy to set aside reading and homework time.</td>
<td>I was self-disciplined and made time to read and complete homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I am able to manage my study time effectively and easily complete assignments on time.</td>
<td>I managed my time effectively and completed all assignments by their due date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>As a student I enjoy participating in class discussions.</td>
<td>I was an active participant in class discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>In my studies, I set goals and have a high degree of initiative.</td>
<td>I adhered to my set goals and exercised a high degree of initiative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FINNEY Question Number</td>
<td>Pre-study questionnaire (predictive)</td>
<td>Post-study questionnaire (reflective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My goal in this class is to get a better grade than most of the other students.</td>
<td>I received a higher grade than I anticipated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It is important for me to do well compared to others in this class.</td>
<td>I felt I did well compared to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>It is important for me to do better than other students.</td>
<td>I did better than the other students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I just want to avoid doing poorly in this class.</td>
<td>I was pleased with my result.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My fear of performing poorly in this class is often what motivates me.</td>
<td>I was motivated to perform well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>My goal in this class is to avoid performing poorly.</td>
<td>I performed well in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sometimes I am afraid that I may not understand the content of this class as thoroughly as I’d like.</td>
<td>I understood the content presented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I worry that I may not learn all that I possibly could in this class.</td>
<td>I did well in this class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I am often concerned that I may not learn all that there is to learn in this class.</td>
<td>I learnt all there was to learn in this class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I desire to completely master the material presented in this class.</td>
<td>I mastered the material presented in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I want to learn as much as possible from this class.</td>
<td>I learnt a lot from this class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>It is important for me to understand the content of this course as thoroughly as possible.</td>
<td>I understood the subject content very well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX K GLOSSARY
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emoderator</th>
<th>The person who is responsible for responding to and building on the contributions of online discussions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal orientation</td>
<td>The individual’s purposes or aims with respect to developing competence at an activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning goal orientation</td>
<td>Learning goals, in which individuals seek to increase their competence, to understand or master something new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery approach</td>
<td>Achieving proficiency for the sake of acquiring a skill or learning a concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery avoidance</td>
<td>Achieving proficiency but do so focusing on avoiding making mistakes or failing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery goal orientation</td>
<td>Mastery goal orientation is defined as “Individuals who engage in academic performance behaviours because of the desire to develop competence and attain task mastery.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online course</td>
<td>All course activity is done online; there are no required face-to-face sessions within the course and no requirements for on-campus activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online learning</td>
<td>Learning resources are available electronically, and supported by a groupware system where learners can interact together and interact with their instructor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time study</td>
<td>Integrating postgraduate study with full-time employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance approach</td>
<td>Demonstrating proficiency based on being better than others and publicly displaying their proficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance avoidance</td>
<td>Demonstrating proficiency, not necessarily to be better than others but to avoid looking incompetent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance orientation</td>
<td>When an individual is motivated to demonstrate their performance or abilities to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance goals</td>
<td>Where individuals seek to gain favourable judgments of their competence or avoid negative judgments of their competence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance goal orientation</td>
<td>A desire to do well and to be positively evaluated by others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>Achieving maximum productivity by means of self-management through planning and organising in order to complete coursework within specified timelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-subject survey</td>
<td>A questionnaire administered prior to the commencement of the scheduled academic session of the participants first session of enrolment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-subject survey</td>
<td>A questionnaire administered at the conclusion of the scheduled academic session of the participants first session of enrolment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-directedness</td>
<td>The learner’s response in electronic learning environments where there are often no peer learners or instructors regularly available to support or encourage the learner as they navigate the online learning environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>