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MASTERS IN ADULT LEARNING AND GLOBAL CHANGE

Lifelong learners as digital citizens: Challenges and new learnings for adult learners in Higher Education

UNIVERSITY *of the*
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this research paper is my own work. I have not submitted this work before for any examination or degree at the University of the Western Cape or any other university. I submit this research paper in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change, Institute for Post–School Studies, University of the Western Cape.

Constance Mouwers–Singh

C Mouwers–Singh

Date: October 2022

QUOTE

By Stephen Mitchell:

"Education is no longer thought of as a preparation for adult life, but as a continuing process of growth and development from birth until death."

ABSTRACT

This study explored the learning journeys of graduate students in an online master's programme with the view to understand the challenges, successes, identities and distinct attributes they may bring to the programme. Historically the literature largely points to adult students being commonly portrayed only in terms of the challenges they may be experiencing in higher education settings. Arguably it may be an under–researched area as to whether adult learners may already be active online learners and digital citizens when they seek access to certain higher education programmes. The study, therefore, explored the kind of contribution adult learners bring to certain educational settings, the learnings adult learners may be seeking, and what they may be acquiring especially in terms of lifelong learning, online learning, and as digital citizens. The capability approach was the preferred theoretical framework to use for this study, and a key element of well–being provided a lens through which the experiences of the participants could most appropriately be explored. The qualitative nature of this study has guided me to use a narrative inquiry and was conceptually guided by the Capabilities Approach. Eight participants shared layered accounts pertaining to their experiences of lifelong learning and online learning as well as how they construct identities and see themselves as digital citizens during open–ended semi–structured interviews. Findings reveal that while taking part in a particular online learning program which employs digital technologies, adult learners needed a certain amount of support, enhancing a need for collaborative learning, intergenerational learning, and mentorship. The key lifelong learning outcomes identified and attained by participants through the online master's program include both a social and pedagogical emphasis. Participants are aware of the value of lifelong learning to keep up with society's rapid changes and it is therefore important for education providers and workplaces to understand challenges, new identities, and learnings in the context of lifelong learning and digital citizenry. This way they can develop innovative solutions and strategies that will reach adult learners less familiar with technology and develop competencies that will allow them to grow and develop freedoms and opportunities to actively participate in education and society.

Keywords: Online learning, teaching and learning, higher education, adult learning and education (ALE), lifelong learning, digital citizen, student identity and the capabilities approach

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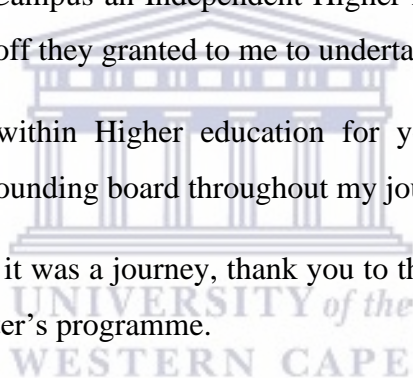
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ALE: Adult Learning and Education

CA: Capabilities Approach

COVID–19:   Coronavirus Pandemic

DLL: Division of Lifelong Learning

GNP: Gross National Product

ICT: Information Communication Technology

ICTs: Information and Communication Technologies

IT: Information Technology

MS Teams: Microsoft Teams

POPIA: Protection of Personal Information Act

UN: United Nations

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific And Cultural Organization

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<center>**CHAPTER ONE**</center>

<center>**INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**</center>

1.1   Introduction

This study investigated the lived experiences of a group of adult learners within a higher education setting engaging in a particular master's programme. Insights gained from this study are potentially helpful to similarly constituted educational programmes in understanding some of the experiences of adult learners who engage in such programmes. The literature points to certain kinds of new learnings and new identities currently confronted by students in a rapidly changing higher education landscape. In particular, this study explores how lifelong learning and online learning are experienced by the participant pool, and how they may have been both shaped and influenced by these constructs during their respective learning journeys on the programme. I am also part of this programme intended as the case for my study. Being both an adult learner and educator in an online higher education landscape, I have a passion for education and specifically Adult Learning and Education (ALE). I bring a personal interest to the research undertaking having also experienced new teaching and learning challenges, learnings, and new identities as part of my learning journey on this programme. Noting the affordances and constraints in this regard, I included my voice in the study and the participants' voices will be central to the study. Online education environments are increasingly being used by adult learners who have many challenges which may include adult learner identity management struggles and living complex lives. There is, however, little research exploring how adult learners orientate themselves towards the future and this is a significant omission due to riskier futures that require a more flexible, dynamic, and future–focused self (Clegg, 2010). However, to create a hopeful agenda for adult learning as well as for growth in the 21st century and beyond, a capabilities approach to the setting of adult education is recommended so certain contributions can be made to the re–imagining of adult education.

1.2   Background and Context

A myth persists that higher education exists mainly to serve young people, who have the time to concentrate solely on their studies as young people make up a large proportion of the population in South Africa (Walters, 2012). The political and economic pressures in a middle–income country such as South Africa make the successful implementation of lifelong learning both difficult and essential and there is an acute need for ongoing access to opportunities for

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learning throughout one's life (Walters, 2012). The human population of the world is not only larger, but also older than it has ever been before and the proportion of older adults is increasing and have so much to contribute to the development of society which is why it is important to learn on equal terms with the young, and in age–appropriate ways where skills and abilities need to be recognised, valued and utilised (Yang, Schneller & Roche, 2015). Research suggests that appropriate support for adult learning in higher education may require ongoing investigation (Buchler, Castle, Osman, & Walters, 2007). It is especially noted by Buchler et al (2007) that further research is being invited regarding adult learning's "push and pull factors" and experiences pertaining to what is regarded as the "deeper questions" (p.1). While many theories and policies have already been created to address the rapidly increasing educational challenges confronting adult learners in higher education, it is noted that more needs to be known about adult learners and their learning in the wake of growing knowledge and skills demands (Owusu-Agyeman, Fourie-Malherbe, & Frick, 2018). Thanks to technological development, many diverse learning means, and modalities have become available today facilitating and opening learning pathways for everyone. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), lifelong learning however must evolve in response to these societal needs that are rapidly changing, and therefore it has a major role to play so people can update their digital skills and fully participate in education and society.

Looking at the researcher's personal journey and narrative as a lifelong learner and the age to pursue an online higher education master's degree, the researcher also partially shares her own journey and lived experiences along with cohort members on the same programme which could ultimately connect experiences and draw participants closer to each other. However, the intention is not to bracket the researcher's experience in relation to this study. Appendix A provides details of my own learnings. Since more needs to be known about adult learners and their learning in the wake of growing knowledge and skills demands the lived experiences of other adult learners will be central to the study and contribute to the larger scholarly conversation and study in the context of lifelong learning and adult digital citizens. The literature consulted mirrors some of the experiences I personally experienced as an adult learner and educator and therefore I attempt to interpret, represent, amplify, and honour the voices of participants in their own words and meaning.

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1.3   Rationale

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning experiences of a group of higher education students, who might be described as non–traditional, and who have in common their participation in an intercontinental adult learning programme at master's level. Existing theoretical insights were used to understand some of the new challenges adult learners may be faced with, new identities they may be forming, and new learnings that adult learners may be experiencing alongside skills adult learners already possess as they participate in hybridised and digitised higher education settings. The researchers' narrative in Appendix A explores the constructs of a lifelong learner and digital citizen. This study could assist educational institutions and workplaces understand adult learners in hybrid and digitised higher education landscapes so that suitable teaching and learning spaces could be designed that are based on student–centred learning principles. Understanding the challenges, new learnings and identities experienced by adult learners within hybrid and digitised higher education landscapes can also help institutions put in place various support initiatives within these landscapes that will encourage adult learners and contribute to sustainable adult education and lifelong learning. I am passionate about understanding the adult learner whom Knowles (1973), referred to in his book title as "The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species" and discovering whether this is still a stereotype we deal with today.

1.4   Research Aim

This aim of this study was to understand more about new learnings and challenges experienced by adult learners in hybrid and digitised higher education landscapes, how new learnings were attained, and how they perceived their student identity. The study potentially also provides insights into new learnings which a group of adult learners may have acquired on an online master's programme. The overall aim of this study was to explore lived experiences and how these new learnings may have come about for adults who are participating in hybrid and digitised higher educational settings.

The objectives of the study:

- To understand and explore what participants regard as learning successes and challenges within an online higher education programme;

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- To add to the body of knowledge institutionally pertaining to kinds of new learning successes and challenges and what it might mean for adult learners within an online higher education programme; and

- To add to the body of knowledge about how adult learners may construct identities and see themselves as lifelong learners and digital citizens.

1.5   Research Question(s)

Research questions are important as they guide the methodology, methods, sample, sample size, data collection instrument and data analysis techniques. Developing good research questions is a very important part of the research process and although it is hard to identify sound research questions, it is however possible to produce questions that can be researched with enough available time and resources (Lipowski, 2008).

The main question guided my research enquiry is the following:

- What are the learning successes adult learners are acquiring and the challenges they experience within an online higher education programme?

Sub–questions:

- How do participants in a particular online higher education programme construct identities and see themselves as adult learners, online learners, lifelong learners and digital citizens?

- What are the main lifelong learning and online learning outcomes adult learners have acquired on this programme?

1.6   Chapter Summary

This chapter described the background and context of the study and was followed by the rationale, an outline of the research aims and concluded with the research question and sub–questions. The literature review and theoretical framework will be presented in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1   Literature Review

The literature review and theoretical framework covered in this chapter foreground certain scholarly debates and important developments that have a bearing on this research undertaking. Since the focus of the research is on non–traditional students in a particular higher education setting, studies pertaining to adult learners as well as older adult learners have been selected for review. According to (Brolpito, 2018; Chen, 2017), digital technology has major implications for the labour market, and it has significant effects on the nature of work and the future of jobs. Important to note here is that although labour and employability are high on the policy agenda in terms of importance it is not lifelong learning's single and overarching goal (Boyadjieva & Ilieva–Trichkova, 2018). Researchers and scholarly literature (Buchler et al., 2007; Chen, 2017), claim that adult learners in higher education have gone unnoticed and this significant section of the student population is largely undocumented and has been ignored.

According to (Brolpito, 2018; Hubackova & Semradova, 2014), education systems, therefore, need to provide the necessary access to lifelong learning so people can learn and acquire the necessary skills needed in an increasingly fast–changing digital world. Gratton and Scott (2016) claim that the 20th century saw the creation of a three–stage life namely education, employment and then retirement. However, the need for lifelong learning has been enhanced by the shift referred to as a multi–stage life and therefore educational horizons must extend beyond traditional ages as well where a greater focus and emphasis also needs to be placed on adult education. The following questions and areas will be addressed in this chapter in a comprehensive review informed by the scholarship:

- Who is the adult learner in higher education today?
- What are the motivations for higher education as well as the new learnings adult learners may be seeking within higher education?
- How do adult learners identify with lifelong learning?
- How do adult learners identify with being digital citizens?

2.2 Who is the adult learner in higher education today?

According to the Division for Lifelong Learning (DLL) (2010) at the University of the Western Cape, a working definition of an adult or mature learner is the following: 'an adult learner is someone who carries multiple responsibilities; is over 25 years old; frequently working while studying; has had significant time out from study and has had work or community engagement experience and often lacks formal access requirements'. One of the greatest challenges of being an adult learner is the multiple roles. This convergence of roles and responsibilities can create stress, be overwhelming and create challenges and wellness issues (Thompson & Porto, 2014). These multiple life roles include the roles of a worker, spouse, partner, parent, caregiver, and even community members and these multiple roles may either be assets because of the social support it provides or create challenges due to the allocation of time (Ross-Gordon, 2011). It is a truism that lifelong learning is for all stages and ages of life, though popularly the term often refers to the adult or the 'non–traditional' learners that bring complex life experiences to the environment of learning and that has multiple roles and responsibilities (Walters, 2012). Older adult learners find significance in learning digital technologies through collective interactions allowing them to share information, give their opinion and keep up to date. Some of these interactions are collaborative and co–operative, via inter–generational learning and mentorship (Ahmad et al., 2022).

The adult learner population according to Nor (2011), is emerging into a complex and dynamic group of learners making their presence felt especially in developing countries where changes in age structures are also changing nations. Unlike the traditional trajectory of younger learners in Higher Education, the path of the adult or 'mature' learner into Higher Education is very different, more unpredictable, much less linear and often involves multiple breaks and transitions and consequently may have highly complex and fragmented pasts which could, at certain times threaten to disrupt not only their past but also future trajectories (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). According to data from the *World Population Prospects: the 2015 Revision* (United Nations, 2015), the global number of adults between the ages of 25–59 years is growing faster than the growing number of children, and the population 60 years or over is also growing faster than the growing number of children. In 2015, there were 29 per cent more people aged 25–59 years old than 15 years ago in 2000 and projections imply that by 2050 it will be a 62 per cent growth compared to the year 2000.

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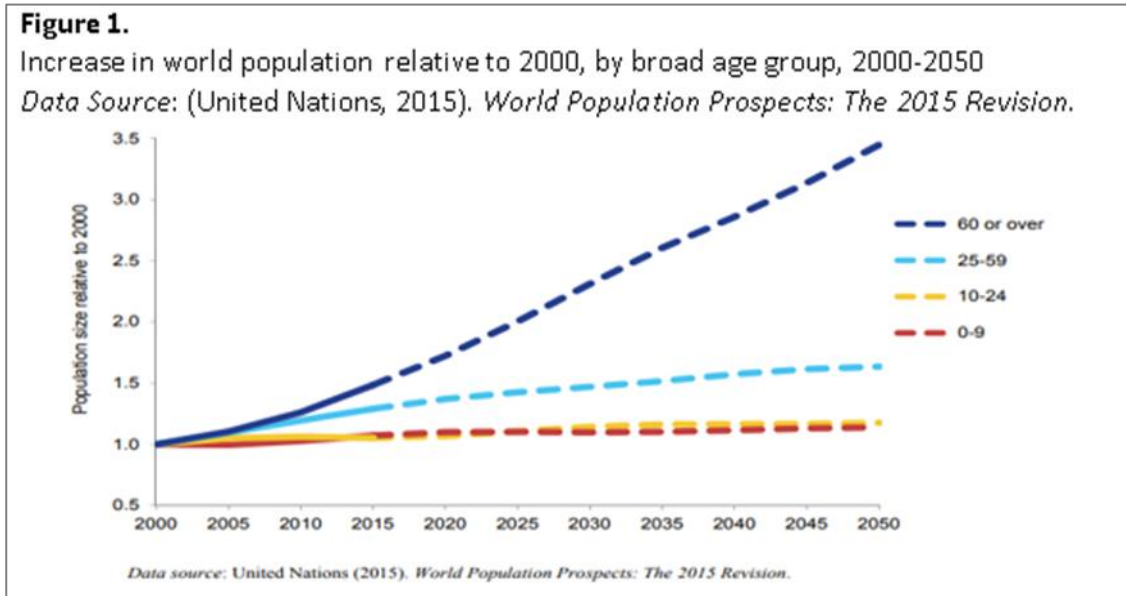
Figure 2.1: Increase in World Population
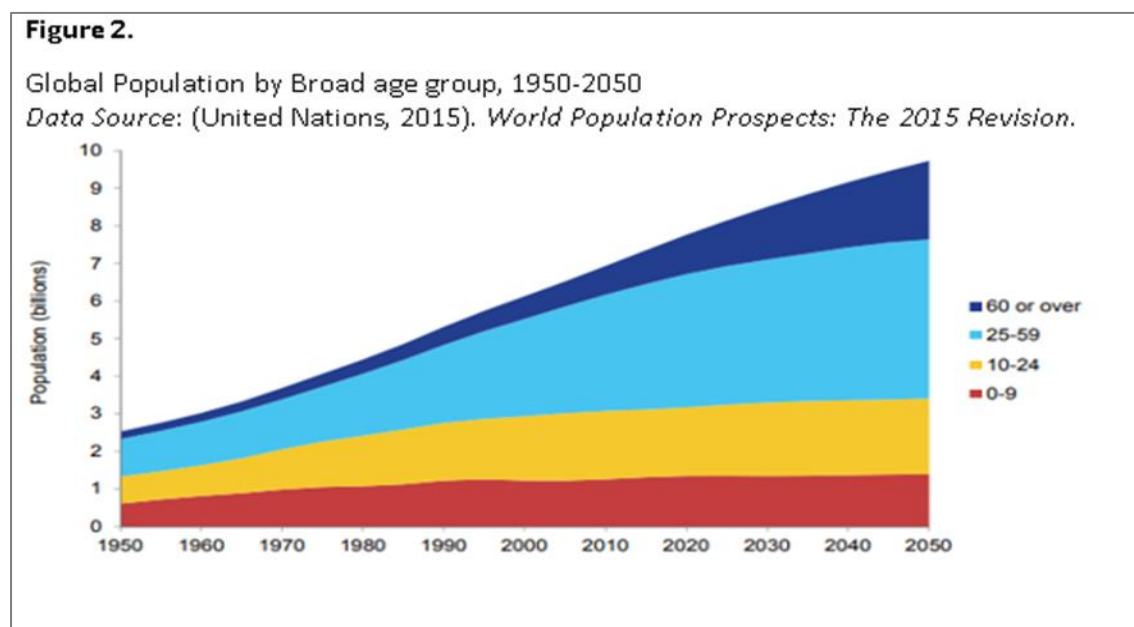
Figure 2.2: Global Population

Guided by the data highlighted in the United Nations (UN) reports 2015 and reference to Figure 2.1 and Figure 2.2 above showing the growth of adults 25 and over me as the researcher has therefore decided for this study to sample adult learners in Higher education aged 25 years and older with no maximum cut–off age. I connect to this study as a current adult and lifelong learner over the age of 25 and therefore the study is also guided by the researchers' experiences within an online learning programme. In addition to deciding on this age range for the participant sample, the research implications suggest that the findings in this study could be important for policy, practice, theory as well as subsequent research on this topic.

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2.3 What are the motivations for higher education as well as the new learnings adult learners may be seeking within higher education?

Learning is centred on the individual and driven by a multifaceted combination of motivations, and it tends to include both work–related and personal reasons it is therefore important to understand the reasons that motivate adults towards learning (de Oliviera, 2009). Motivation for learning does not remain the same, it can be diverse, and it changes throughout an individual's life and could be linked to various factors such as an individual's level of education, an attitude to learning, a strong passion for a subject, to improve self–confidence and for opportunities based at work (Anderson, 2008). According to Graham (2015), the decision to engage in higher education can be a significant step and some adults decide to return to education because of life's circumstances, a life stage they are in or a certain experience resulting in them wanting to expand their worldview. Higher education provides personal and life–changing learnings and experiences and does not only meet the employment and practical needs of adult learners, but it also helps adult learners derive meaning from their educational experiences (Chen, 2017). It further functions as a stimulating learning environment that could help the adult learner meet various needs such as late–life development needs and could contribute and direct them towards an ageing experience that is positive and meaningful (Lin, 2011).

Participation in higher education by adults appears to be a response to motivational needs, they are seeking personal growth and satisfaction, and development or a continuation of a growth process that already started (Lin, 2011). According to Dede & Wirth (2018), the movement through approximately 60 years of employment brings about occupation redundancy, evolving jobs, multiple careers and new roles and these new learnings often bring about a requirement to expand skillsets. Higher education is integral, especially in a changing world where new skills are constantly required. It has an important role to fulfil to help acquire knowledge and to develop competencies for adults to actively participate in society and to create conditions for the holistic development of every person, regardless of age.

2.4 How do adult learners identify with lifelong learning?

It is widely accepted that it is necessary to be a lifelong learner to thrive in a fast–changing and technologically complex global society as it enables people to adapt and meet challenges at a societal, industry and individual level (Kungu & Machtmes, 2009). Because we are living in a

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world where the necessary skills are needed to understand, interpret and process diverse information there is a natural desire to learn and adapt to change (Laal & Salamati, 2012). Learning is a process that is continuous throughout life and therefore plays an important role in enabling individuals to deal with and adapt to new challenges and changes they experience in their lives and environments. Lifelong learning embraces various forms of teaching and learning experiences. It helps individuals interact purposefully with their environment through the development of critical thinking abilities, knowledge, and skill, helping individuals to engage in purposeful interactions with their environment and further enabling them to become active social agents, individuals, and members of society (Ahmed, 2014). In South Africa under apartheid, higher education was inaccessible to the majority of people and therefore through lifelong learning, there is now an opportunity to redress this situation and promote equity (Walters, 2012).

Lifelong Learning for active citizenship according to Walters (2012), challenges current realities so alternatives can be built with an emphasis on human values rather than on human capital, so nobody is left behind. Lifelong learning is further a social paradigm of education which is being implemented throughout one's life, representing a continuous supporting process embracing continuous possibilities and therefore it is acknowledged as a necessary process (Hubackova & Semradova, 2014). The increasing role that higher education serves within lifelong learning processes is becoming a global trend in the context of the knowledge society and is therefore identified as being very important to create opportunities for lifelong learning across the lifespan of individuals (de Oliviera, 2009). It enables self–confidence, creativity, skills and experience and one of the major tasks of lifelong learning, having a clear social and pedagogical orientation, is to create conditions for the development of every person, regardless of age, but with the obligatory account of the individual abilities, motives and interest, and values creating conditions for the whole self and development of people (Bekisheva, Kovalenko, & Gasparyan, 2017). Engaging with education is therefore a significant step for adults and therefore adults need to receive encouragement and support so they can fully participate in education and reach their goals within the context of lifelong learning (Graham, 2015). The review of the literature helps us see that universities have a vital role to play when it comes to promoting lifelong learning as well as exploring avenues they can use to transform and promote lifelong learning as well as the paradigms of lifelong learning.

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2.5   How do adult learners identify with being digital citizens?

Even though our surroundings may be impacted by technology's systemic effects, technology itself also possesses qualities that can improve human potential (Haenssgen & Ariana, 2018). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have brought about rapid changes in society by profoundly changing the way people work, communicate, and access information and therefore ICTs are perceived to be essential to the transformation efforts necessary for the 21st century society (Jimoyiannis, 2015). The Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID–19) has further created a wide, abrupt, and intense digital transformation forcing us to take extraordinary digital leaps and make significant adjustments in education, our family lives as well as in society (Livari, Sharma, & Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020). The world is changing at a fast pace and if people don't continuously grow and develop, they will be left behind. In the 21st century, lifelong learning is important so skills can continually be updated (Laal & Salamati, 2012). However, online digital courses present many challenges for the first–time online learner such as a lack of preparation and online readiness, and adaptability to new tools as well as platforms used in the online learning environment (Wright, 2015). As such, caution must be taken in terms of using and adding too many new technological tools and technologies at one time, so learners don't become overwhelmed (Steinke & Bryan, 2014).

Holistic approaches will be instrumental to consider these various challenges and to ensure that all learners have the opportunities to cultivate the necessary and relevant skills, so they are not left behind (Chakroun & Keevy, 2018). Online and distance education, for adult learners, though do strengthen the personal, social, and professional development of individuals, and assist with the development of competencies which can be applied not only to the digital world but also to each person's daily activities (Neves & Henriques, 2020). Adults are active agents who make sense of the digitalising world, and they can identify the advantages and drawbacks of digitalisation (Pirhonen, Lolich, Tuominen, & Jolanki, 2020). Older adults do not use technology fully and therefore digital technology brings about various challenges deemed closely related to self–esteem and the range of challenges encountered can deter them from participation (Reneland-Forsman, 2018). According to Kara Erdoğdu, Kokoç, & Cagiltay (2019), the challenges faced by adult learners in online distance education tend to be strongly related to each other and therefore one challenge might become the source of another. Due to the rapid development of digital technologies, people are often in unequal positions when it comes to skills but generally, there is an expectation of the future benefits that can be derived

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from digital technologies (Pihlainen, Korjonen–Kuusipuro, & Kärnä, 2021). Many adults who work have already been seeing and experiencing changes in the working methods and practices, as well as the technologies they are using in the workplace and some occupations, which are changing faster than others (Brolpito, 2018). Even though digital technologies are creating new opportunities for skills development and promising to spur innovation, to generate efficiencies and improve the quality of services to a wide range of sustainable development areas including education it can create challenges and become disruptive if there is an inability to swiftly adjust running the risk of falling behind (Chakroun & Keevy, 2018).

According to Pirhonen et al. (2020), the constant need for upskilling due to these continuous changes taking place could result in apprehension in some cases also a reduction of usage leading to challenges in ultimately mastering technology. Those who have positive user experiences can see the opportunities of digitalisation. Digital and social exclusion are intrinsically intertwined therefore it puts adults at risk of social exclusion. Their engagement with digital interfaces is important to promote social inclusion and construct meaningful educational practices (Reneland-Forsman, 2018). The lack of interaction between students which is found at physical universities can also lead to feelings of isolation and affect the richness of the learning experience due to it omitting significant elements of learning (Croft, Dalton & Grant, 2010). Engagement in digital interfaces is very important to get knowledge about accessing technology, digital practices and learning from networks as it brings about social inclusion and participation (Reneland-Forsman, 2018). It is for these reasons and due to the ongoing process of globalisation and the rate of technological advancement, higher education institutions face a strategic imperative to broaden and open lifelong learning opportunities to bring a diverse education that is also available to a diverse student population (Yang, Schneller & Roche, 2015). In the following section, two further areas were also broadly addressed namely digital literacy and digital identity.

2.5.1   Digital Literacy

Digital literacy comprises a varied range of complex skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes when it comes to using ICT to accomplish goals pertaining to personal development, employment, entertainment, inclusion, education, and various other activities and elements of ICT literacy are needed to function within contemporary digital environments (Jimoyiannis, 2015). It is swiftly becoming a necessity to fully participate in society, and these are the new learnings, skills and knowledge needed to improve learning as well as employment

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opportunities. It appears that the general population is lacking the digital skills and literacy to keep up and adults, therefore, have an enhanced need to develop their digital competence (Jimoyiannis, 2015). While digital literacy is built upon elements of ICT literacy it does also include a variation of knowledge, attitudes and complex skills needed for people to function well in digital environments so they can create, adapt and share information and knowledge in multiple formats (Jimoyiannis, 2015). The relationship between adult learners and their adaptability to technological skills and any strategies used to equip and enhance their digital literacy is not straightforward as adult learners have very specific characteristics and attributes regarding education and learning with and about Information Communication Technologies (Jimoyiannis, 2015).

Engagement in active discussions and digital discussion forums could improve active learning and digital literacy skills (Onyema, Deborah, Alsayed, Noorulhasan, & Naveed, 2019). Digital literacy is further considered to be by most experts around the world one of the key competencies for lifelong learning development and active citizen participation in nowadays' societies. According to Jimoyiannis (2015), the main argument is that people who can understand and effectively use digital means are more likely to be empowered, take advantage of educational opportunities, and achieve success in many dimensions and activities of their social, economic, and personal lives. Digital literacy is, therefore, presenting a socio–cultural dimension that must be analysed as an evolutionary process, not reducing itself to the effective capacity of the use of digital resources only. The contribution of digital literacies should be seen from a holistic and lifelong human development perspective. Digital literacy is a cultural, political, and ethical phenomenon that goes far beyond instrumental use and function. It is not only about literacy skills but also about social skills and competencies, habits and values that help individuals to cope better with the accelerated dynamism and changes in everyday life (Neves & Henriques, 2020).

2.5.2   Digital Identity

Adult learners evaluate and prioritise their learning through multiple identities because, unlike traditional students, they do not see themselves as students first and foremost. Instead, they have a variety of competing identities and life roles, such as those of employees looking for learning opportunities to advance their careers and career identities (Chen, 2017). For many adult learners trying to transition into higher education, it is an intense experience that challenges their sense of themselves as they have to construct themselves and engage in identity

management on a day–to–day basis. They have to interchange identities between different parts of their lives and therefore incorporating any new identities is often described as challenging (Brunton & Buckley, 2020). Hall (1996) argues that identity is formed in the 'interaction' between self and society, and we project ourselves onto societal values before internalising them. Hall further contends that we do not have set identities (assuming different identities at different times). In terms of digital environments, it is important for adults to locate and position themselves digitally in these environments so they don't feel isolated and out of place which would assist to open up possibilities of participation and greater involvement in the digital environment (Muñoz–Rodríguez, Hernández–Serrano, & Tabernero, 2020). Digital environments, therefore, need to be designed to encourage participation and should consider identity as a relational process when it comes to learning with and from others (Muñoz–Rodríguez, Hernández–Serrano, & Tabernero, 2020).

To provide sustainable learning opportunities for adults and to increase their lifelong learning possibilities, there is a need to consider digital identity, identity building and development because identity does manifest itself in different forms and therefore should not be omitted during practices and experiences in digital environments. Identifying the digital identity of adults is an important step for their effective digital inclusion and to be grounded in holistic and sustainable human development in hyper–connected societies. It is necessary to take into account digital identity creation and development if technologies are to offer sustainable learning chances and increase lifelong learning possibilities (Muñoz-Rodríguez, Hernández-Serrano, & Tabernero, 2020). Online digital environments that deliver adult education must therefore consider social variables as well as motivational variables which will ultimately assist adults with digital identity, digital inclusion as well as sustainable development (Muñoz-Rodríguez, Hernández-Serrano, & Tabernero, 2020).

2.6   Theoretical Framing: A Capabilities Approach

This section provides insights into the capabilities approach which was pioneered by economist–philosopher Amartya Sen, and significantly developed by philosopher Martha Nussbaum. It will focus on the enhancement of people's real freedoms to achieve well–being and what they are able to do and to be. According to Sen (1999), although the growth of the Gross National Product (GNP) and individual incomes can be important to expanding human freedoms, freedoms also depend on other determinants and influences other than economic determinants such as technological progress which can also substantially contribute to

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expanding human freedoms and can help to re–think key issues of lifelong learning. The capability approach is a rich multidimensional approach, that cares about people's real freedoms to do things and the levels of well–being they will achieve and reach when they choose from the options open to them (Robeyns, 2017). It has become influential over the last two decades as it conceptualises human well–being in terms of the ability to achieve the functionings they have reason to value (Hoffmann & Metz, 2017). I selected the Capabilities Approach (CA) as the proposed framework for my research study and the capabilities approach will be the lens used to view my research through. I believe that the capabilities approach takes my research forward as it recognises the diversity of people's ability to convert resources and goods into real opportunities and achievements and live the life, they are effectively able to lead. The qualitative study draws from educational literature about the Capabilities Approach in this section.

2.7   A short overview of the capability approach

The capability approach has been used for many purposes and over the last twenty–five years, it has been applied, developed, and dramatically expanded in a range of fields including global public health, environmental protection and ecological sustainability, development ethics, technological design, welfare state policies, education and more (Robeyns, 2017). While the capabilities approach can be specifically linked to certain theorists, the scholarship points to widening perspectives of what the capabilities approach might signify beyond economics and social justice. It is a framework for assessing well–being without imposing one's notions about what a good life should contain. It offers a viewpoint that allows for the rethinking of lifelong learning that is beyond a human capital theory suggesting that learning should be assessed and evaluated in terms of the capability to achieve and redefine the concepts of human well–being and social development (Chiappero-Martinetti & Ventakapuram, 2014). It analyses and describes individual well–being or quality of life in terms of possible opportunities to achieve a diversity of results – "beings and doings" – that make up a successful and good life. The capability approach is a broad framework for the evaluation of individual well–being and the assessment of social arrangements and the design of policies based on individual diversity focusing primarily on what people are effectively able to do and be (Chiappero–Martinetti et al., 2014).

Robeyns (2017), describes the capability approach as having a modular structure that can be specified in diverse ways prioritising people's beings and doings as well as their opportunities

to realise those beings and doings which is different to other accounts of advantage which for example focuses on the material means to well–being (Robeyns, 2017). It is therefore in most cases used as a normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well–being and that of institutions, adding to its much less frequent use for non–normative purposes (Robeyns, 2017). Rajapakse (2016) suggests that the integration of the Capability Approach provides a broader multi–criteria framework which can help as a measurement for evaluating and shaping universities surpassing the neoclassical view. According to Pogge (as cited in Somerville, 2017), the capability approach has come under scrutiny by others as well as Sen and Nussbaum themselves, of each other.

2.8 How does the capability approach relate to my study in adult education?

The capability approach relates to my study to understand the adult learner on their journey of lifelong learning. The role of education is multiple and complex, and the way education is viewed is challenged by the paradigm shift towards viewing development in less economic terms but rather with the human being placed at the centre fully enhancing freedom and development aiming to help people of all ages better understand the world so they can address the complexity and interconnectedness of problems (Hoffman, 2006). From the capabilities approach point of view, Saito (2003) as cited by Cortinovis, (2018) claim that failures to take the actual individual needs of different persons into consideration as well as failing to pay customised attention to their individual needs are unescapably certain to diminish them, as well as to perpetuate further inequalities that create life–long disadvantages. Adult education and participation cannot be assumed as being separate from the lives of participants and should always be reflected upon and measured in deep association with their real–life experiences which will ultimately help to design learning environments that are customised and engaging (Cortinovis, 2018). So, for all these endeavours, the capability approach asks the following questions: what is it that people can do and be (their capabilities) and what are they actually achieving in terms of beings and doings (their functionings)? It further asks whether institutions, practices and policies focus on people's capabilities to do what they value and be the kind of person they want to be (Robeyns, 2017).

2.9 Capability Approaches and online learning higher education landscapes

In terms of the capabilities approach for online learning higher education landscapes, universities need to work with students to identify how their approaches can help students

http://etd.uwc.ac.za/

deploy the freedom for them to choose to be and do (Tait, 2013). Using the capabilities approach as a framework online institutions need to ask themselves how they will go about assisting and supporting students to exercise their freedom 'to be and to do' and programmes and curriculums of study need to be developed centring themselves on outcomes for the student, negotiating the interests of the students and acknowledging the student's freedom to choose (Tait, 2013).

2.9.1 Core concepts of the Capabilities approach

According to Robeyns (2017), the purpose of the approach is on eradicating barriers so that individuals have the freedom to live the life they have reason to value. The core concepts of this approach are functionings, capabilities, freedom, choice, well–being, and agency and Figure 2.3 provides a visual representation of the Capabilities Approach and the ways in which the various components relate to each other to influence well–being. Alkire & Deneulin (2009) as cited in Grande (2014), explains these core concepts by stating that the functionings of a human being describe what the person does, has and is. Capabilities are the functionings which is successfully achievable for this human being and the term agency is closely related to that of capability which is seen as the freedom to enjoy several functionings which is the individual's ability to follow through and realise those functionings accounting for the distinct differences in choices made by the individual. A key component of the Capabilities approach is the Agency as it is important for individuals to be able to choose from their capabilities that they have reason to value (Randal et al., 2020). It is not only the functionings that are important for the well–being of individuals but also whether they can be free to choose the 'beings' and 'doings' they value – as well as whether they can be successful. As per Figure 2.3, agency can be affected by context which includes personal, environmental, and various social factors and this limitation on the individual's agency is captured in the Capabilities Approach as the conversion factor (Randal et al., 2020).
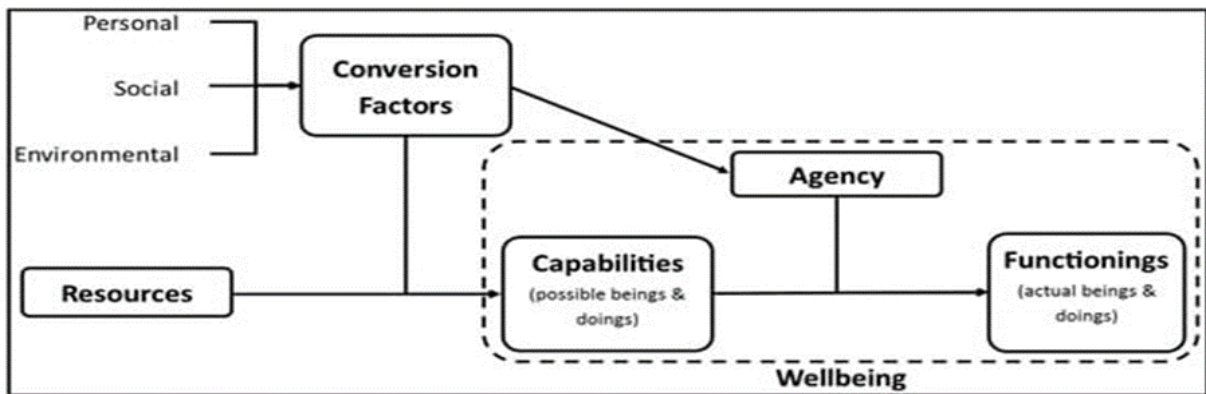
Figure 2.3: The Capabilities Approach to Well–being shows the ways in which the various concepts relate to each other to influence well–being (Randal et al., 2020).

Education needs to address not only the human capital needs of society, but it needs to address the developmental needs and aspirations of individuals as well. It is therefore important to understand that the well–being of individuals does not only depend on resources or income but depends on various other factors. The capabilities approach highlights the intrinsic value of education where education can be used not only to promote economic growth but also to address inequalities that will allow for the rethinking of lifelong learning. Adult Education should be measured in deep association with the real–life experiences of adults so that the individual needs of adult learners are taken into consideration. According to Robeyns (2017), understanding people as beings whose nature consists of a *plurality* of dimensions is important and further claims that the capability draws attention to non–income–based dimensions as a yardstick for evaluating prosperity and progress. Further linking this to the bigger overall study it is important for stakeholders in digitised higher education landscapes to respond to the needs of the adult learner and to know and understand the adult learner. The needs of adult learners are substantially different from their younger counterparts and explicit consideration is needed to respond to adult learner needs so appropriate programmes, curriculums and strategies of support centred around student outcomes can be developed and created helping and preparing them for the 21st century society. Failure to do so can perpetuate further inequalities that will create life–long disadvantages in an increasingly digital world.

2.10 Chapter Summary

This literature review and theoretical framework chapter looked at various scholarly articles, books, and other sources relevant to this study and provided a description, summary as well as a critical evaluation of the sources. The next covers the research design and methodology for the current study.

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<center>**CHAPTER THREE**</center>

<center>**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**</center>

3.1 Introduction

The main aim of this study was to explore the experiences of a group of adult (non–traditional–aged) students within the context of a particular higher education setting, which has become increasingly hybridized (online and in–person teaching) in terms of its teaching and learning arrangements. Accordingly, I used an interpretative paradigm as an appropriate way of exploring the meanings that individuals attach to their lived experiences within a particular higher education setting. Under the identified chapter headings, I demonstrate how the use of a qualitative research approach, and most notably a narrative inquiry, has shaped my study methodologically.

3.2 Research Assumption

At this point, it may be pertinent to elaborate upon my research assumption, which I have identified as interpretivist. In contrast to its normative counterpart, the interpretivist paradigm foregrounds concern for the individual and the subjective world of human experience (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p.19). As an interpretive researcher, therefore, I begin with individuals and set out to understand the world around me (Cohen et al., 2018, p.20).

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 A qualitative framework

According to Cohen et al. (2018), it is important to have a research design in the research process as it identifies the evidence needed to address the research objectives, questions, and purposes. The logic informing qualitative research designs is often inductive, flexible, dynamic, emergent, non–linear, and non–sequential and consists of describing situations, meanings and experiences of people and groups and answering clearly stated, important research questions (Frankel & Devers, 2000). These experiences are often collected by doing interviews; however, observations and documents may also be used to collect data (Butina, 2015). Annexure B is the core open–ended research questions used to collect qualitative data in semi–structured interviews which assisted to help to describe situations, meanings, and experiences.

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3.3.2 A Case Study Approach

The qualitative research methodology I used is a case study within a narrative approach inquiry which has several benefits such as gathering in–depth meaning as participants reveal themselves within their stories. It provided the opportunity to engage at a deeper level with adult learner experiences. Case studies and narrative inquiry as merged methodological frameworks make a vital contribution when seeking to understand processes that could explain current realities (Sonday, Ramugondo, & Kathard, 2020).

3.3.3 Narrative Inquiry

According to McAlpine (2016), a narrative lens can be integrated into the research process throughout the design or alternatively only at different points and through the recounting of narratives, individuals form who they have been, who they are presently and who they hope to become. An important documentary source of narrative data is autobiographies and memoirs written by ordinary people (Murray, 2018). In line with McAlphine (2016) and Murray (2018), I integrated a narrative lens throughout the research process and used self–reflection to explore anecdotal and own personal experiences in a reflexive and narrative–style connecting to the research and helping to clarify and create further meaning and understanding (Refer Appendix A).

3.4 Research Site

It is important for researchers to plan their research in detail and to check the feasibility of gaining access to a specific research site or the people they seek to access. It is not uncommon for researchers to approach organisations beforehand to check if there is a likelihood, possibility, or chance of carrying out the research at that specific site beforehand (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The research site for this narrative research study was carried out at a public university in the Western Cape. The university is an historically black university founded to serve the apartheid political vision and in 2010 had around 17,000 students, majority black, poor, working class and nearly 60% women students (Walters, 2012) This university was established by the South African Government as a direct effect of the Extension of University Education Act 195 and today is a research–rich environment.

3.5 Research Sampling, Size, and targeted respondents

Despite the selection of a research topic as well as an appropriate research design, there is no other task in research that is more important and fundamental than for the researcher to obtain an adequate sample to ensure that the data is enough and that the research is credible for analysis and reporting (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Samples used for qualitative studies are usually much smaller than what is used in quantitative studies. Qualitative research is labour–intensive, and because of this analysing a large sample can often be impractical and time–consuming (Mason, 2010). The sample size is to some extent determined by the research style and for example, in qualitative research, the sample size will more likely be smaller. Other factors that could also determine and constrain sample size are time, money, the number of researchers as well as resources (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The sample size that I used in this study was, therefore, a small sample size due to its qualitative and narrative style and therefore my sample consisted of only eight participants.

Participation response rates are traditionally the total number of participants who were interviewed divided by the total number who were eligible and although this is informative it is not sufficient evidence to judge the quality and validity of a study. In addition to reporting response rates, authors should disclose details about why participants did not participate, their attempts made to improve participation in the study and the method they used to determine the response rates so editors and reviewers can assess the validity of the findings of the study more accurately (Morton, Bandara, Robinson, & Carr, 2012). In terms of average response rates studies that administer personal interviews have a response rate of 36.6% which is calculated as the ratio of people who agreed to the interview versus the ratio of people contacted (Yang, Wang, & Su, 2006). Although the target of eight participant interviews was reached, the total participation response rate is 57.14% as 14 eligible participants were invited to participate in the study. This remains more than 20% higher than the average response rates reported for personal interviews.

Table 3.1: Participant Response Rate

INTERVIEWS HELD	PARTICIPANTS INVITED	DECLINES	NO RESPONSES	CONSENT FORMS COMPLETED BUT UNRESPONSIVE THEREAFTER	% RESPONSE RATE
8	14	1	3	2	57.14%

I intended to interview at least eight participants in this study and therefore fourteen eligible respondents were targeted. These participants all participated in a particular online master's programme. Other reflections were that the process of getting participants to assist in the study was not easy as anticipated. The interviews took off to a slow start as adult learners experienced multiple challenges affecting participation. Some of these challenges were work obligations and travel as well as family commitments. There were two scheduled interview cancellations and interviews had to be rescheduled due to illness.

One interview was stopped halfway through and proceeded an hour later again due to work commitments. Another interviewee arrived 45 minutes late due to a struggle with their technological equipment. Only one eligible participant declined after two communication attempts. The reason was a de–motivation to participate in anything pertaining to studies and the master's programme, as the eligible participant had put their studies on hold and therefore was not willing to participate in the study either. Three participants did not respond after multiple communication attempts. Two respondents agreed to participate after numerous attempts to contact them via email, WhatsApp etc. but after sending back the signed consent forms they became unresponsive thereafter. I, however, reached a point in my study where there is enough information to replicate the study and where the data that was collected is enough to draw necessary conclusions from. The participants who did participate in the study were not incentivised to participate and participated voluntarily. This sample however does not represent the wider population but represents only a representation of online master's students.

3.6   Research Methods

Investigating a problem in the entire population is not always possible which is why alternatively researchers can study a sample which is a subset of the population. By taking a sample to represent we could also reduce costs, time, and manpower to conduct a research study which will still bring about valid inferences from the sample (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, & Nigam, 2013). The selectivity built into non–probability samples originate from who targets and pursues a particular group and is fully aware that this group does not represent the wider population and does not seek to generalise the findings (Cohen et.al., 2018). Convenience sampling is a non–probability sampling technique and was used as the researcher chose the nearest individuals to act as respondents in the study and chose the sample due to the accessibility of the individuals. According to Marshall (1996), there is an element of convenience sampling in many qualitative studies. There are three broad approaches to

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selecting a sample in a qualitative study namely, convenience sampling, theoretical sampling and judgement sampling with convenience sampling being the least rigorous technique involving the researcher selecting the most accessible subjects. According to Cohen et al. (2018) convenience sampling does not represent any group apart from itself and it does not try to generalise to the wider population. Convenience sampling is the most commonly used sampling method, and the sample is chosen based on convenience for the researcher the respondents are often selected because they are at the right place and at the right time (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, & Nigam, 2013). Non–probability sampling was used for this study, and sample units were chosen subjectively. Convenience sampling is not free of limitations as bias cannot be controlled or measured and data cannot be generalised beyond the sample. However, I believe my sampling methods were a good fit for this research study. Table 3.2 below outlines the convenience sample participant characteristics.

Table 3.2: Convenience sample participants' characteristics

SAMPLING CHARACTERISTIC	TOTAL= 8 PARTICIPANTS
Gender	M=3 non–binary=0 F=5 Other=0
Age	Oldest participant =65 Youngest participant=36 Average Total Participant Age=49
Highest Qualification	8 participants have post–graduate qualifications
Professional Industry	7 participants are in the education industry and 1 participant is in Human Resource Management
Years of working experience	Lowest Number of years working experience =17 Highest number of years working experience =40 Average total amount of years working experience=26
Home Language	English=3 Other=3 Afrikaans=2 All participants are however proficient in English
Completion status of the module courses within the programme (excluding proposal & final thesis)	Completed = 7 Incomplete= 0 Appreciably close to completing= 1

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3.7 Data Gathering Instruments

3.7.1 Semi–Structured Open–ended Interviews

Semi–Structured open–ended interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. According to Patton (2002), as cited in Butina (2015), the three basic approaches to collecting qualitative data through open–ended interviews include informal conversational interviews, standardized open–ended interviews, as well as the general interview guide approach. Core open–ended interview questions were designed as part of a general interview guide approach and developed for these semi–structured interviews. This approach helped to provide some structure for the interviewer ensuring that the same general areas of information were collected from each interviewee. The questions were however developed to produce narratives also allowing the interviewer freedom and adaptability to ask to follow– up questions. This aspect made semi–structured open–ended interviews the most suitable option for this study to gather data. The interviewer took notes during the interview process however the interviews were also audio recorded using Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) which is a cloud–based collaboration software using an electronic device and was also transcribed.

3.7.2 Core Interview Questionnaire

For this study, core interview questions were designed under pre–determined themes and developed to use as a research instrument during semi–structured open–ended interviews for data collection purposes (Refer to Appendix B). Participants were asked open–ended questions, using more of a verbal form approach to collect narratives and in some cases detailed responses. The questions were designed to provide freedom to respondents to express opinions on the research topic (Dalati & Gómez, 2018). The open–ended interview questions in the questionnaire were designed to capture broader perspectives as well as some retrospection of the previous years of this programme. The content of the questions for the interview relates to the theory and the questions were developed in relation to the concepts and constructs of the study and were designed by the researcher by transforming the constructs of the study into items to be used in the semi–structured open–ended interviews. According to Cohen et al. (2018) open–ended questions contain the 'gems' regarding information received that may not have been caught otherwise.

3.7.3 Narratives

The open–ended research questions were developed broadly so participants could provide detailed stories and narratives. Participants were at the heart of the research study providing their own stories about their experiences. Narratives help researchers to better understand the experiences and behaviours of people and come closer to representing the context and integrity of people's lives (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The interview accounts, stories and experiences of people can be applied to many different areas of life addressing the 'how' and 'why' questions rather than cause and effect questions (Ziebland, 2013). Interviews collecting narratives are not just a practice of exchanging data through communication and collection but rather an active process where researchers and participants co–construct meanings and memories contributing to the constructive potential of the inquiry process (Gemignani, 2014).

3.7.4 Audio Recordings

Interviews are a commonly used method for researchers doing qualitative research and data collected through interviews can be documented and recorded through the use of field notes, transcripts, as well as recordings. A combination narrative is argued to be better than substituting one over the other and therefore it should be considered (Tessier, 2012). Since the interview questions are all open–ended and set with the goal to capture stories and narratives the audio recordings also supported the field notes, especially in cases where the participant spoke fast, to avoid distraction and so that no data was lost in the data collection process. Even though I took notes during the interview process a combination narrative was used for validation and reliability. The interviews were also audio recorded using Microsoft Teams which is a cloud–based collaboration software using an electronic device, transcribed, and coded thereafter. Audio recordings and transcriptions were decided on as a further tool so the researcher could also go back if needed and also to validate data and improve data management.

3.8 Data Analysis

3.8.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

Data analysis is a fundamental phase in qualitative research and the analysis of qualitative data is only one of the steps in the research process intensive data analysis can begin after data has been collected and prepared or in other cases, both steps can be done in parallel (Flick, 2013). Qualitative data analysis is innovative, and captivating yet is not easy due to it being disordered,

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hard and time–consuming. It is a process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the data that was collected (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). In a narrative form of inquiry such as this study, qualitative data analysis was used to analyse the data. Interviews were audio–recorded and transcribed and coded as with most qualitative research as it is very important to identify the person's story throughout the data so that the richness of stories and accounts is not lost during the analysis process (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). According to Cohen et al. (2018) coding is when a category label is ascribed to a piece of data and is the process of breaking down segments of the data into smaller units so you can examine, compare, categorise, and conceptualise the data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). In terms of coding and analysis, these are not two distinct phases but rather interrelated processes that co–evolve to get patterns to emerge (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). For this study, the process of data analysis was portrayed in a sequence of steps and is set out in Table 3.3 below. The data analysis process was guided by the seven steps of qualitative data analysis by Cohen et al. (2018) but the steps were adapted according to this study due to pre–determined themes and therefore consisted of six steps.

Table 3.3: Qualitative Data Analysis Steps

STEP 1	Ascribing codes to the data which was collected under pre–determined themes
STEP 2	Establish relationships and linkages
STEP 3	Made speculative inferences and posit some explanations
STEP 4	Summarised and wrote a summary of the main features, key issues and key concepts, constructs. and ideas encountered
STEP 5	Looked out for negative and discrepant cases. to weigh the significance of disconfirming cases as well.
STEP 6	Generated findings & drew conclusions

Reflecting on the qualitative data analysis steps I can note that because the core interview questions were developed using pre–determined themes, the data was collected, transcribed and captured and codes were ascribed to the data under those pre–determined themes. I made use of various colours to highlight and establish relationships and links in the data. I also made notes mentioning speculative inferences and highlighted and reported on conflicting cases in my data analysis section. I further identified unanticipated findings and recommended them for further future studies. I thereafter summarised and wrote up key concepts and ideas and generated conclusions and findings.

3.9   Reliability and validity issues

Before one can progress in planning your research, it is important for the project to be grounded in validity and reliability. Ensuring reliability and validity in qualitative data analysis could be challenging as the researcher needs to be fair to the phenomena under investigation and the participants therefore reflexivity is important here (Cohen et al., 2018). Qualitative researchers can adapt to ensure the credibility of their findings by incorporating methodological strategies to ensure that the findings are trustworthy (Noble & Smith, 2015) Some of these strategies include accounting for personal biases, acknowledging biases in sampling, ongoing critical reflection of methods, meticulous record keeping, demonstrating clarity in terms of thought processes during interpretations and data analysis, engaging with other researchers to reduce bias and respondent validation (Noble & Smith, 2015). I know and understand that reliability and validity is important for a research study hence, I endeavoured to ensure that my research and data are plausible, trustworthy, credible, and defendable. I have addressed validity and reliability throughout my research from the planning, methodology, instrumentation, data analysis and whilst drawing conclusions and findings. Many of the possible obstacles when it comes to gathering data can be avoided by running a pilot with the data collection tools you intend to use before you start the actual data collection process. This helps to quickly identify any unforeseen problems, and it will allow changing any questions (Stake, 1995). For this study, I tested the core interview questionnaire doing it myself, by sending it to the university writing coach as well as an academic peer to be piloted before carrying out the interviews which opened up the opportunity to cross–check questions, giving participants more agency, address duplications, create context and positionality and help make changes bringing about more clarity and validity of all the questions that were used during the interview process. Furthermore, interview notes, audio–recordings and transcriptions also provided further reliability, validity, accuracy, and improvement in data management.

3.10 Research Ethical considerations and confidentiality

The research was subjected to the university's ethical clearance process (Appendix G). I did not coerce respondents into participating in the study and the decision to become involved or to withdraw from the research was entirely voluntary. For this study, I acted impartial and was not biased in any way throughout my research study and especially when reporting on my personal experiences. According to Cohen et al. (2018) sensitive matters may be revealed about the participant's family, themselves or the tutors and lecturers on the programme and the

researcher should know how to deal with the information received and how to act when it comes to sensitive matters. According to Kaiser (2009), confidentiality is addressed during data cleaning and researchers can remove certain identifiers to clean the data and to create a "clean" data set which does not contain information that identifies respondents. For this research study confidentiality and anonymity in the research were of utmost importance and the identities of my participants were protected. I used pseudonyms and removed the real names of participants throughout as a strategy to further protect the identify of participants and to add an extra level of confidentiality and anonymity. My research, therefore, was classified as low–risk (Appendix G). Other ethical issues considered very pertinent for my study included asking permission from the participant to participate as well as treating the participants with the utmost respect and protecting participants from harm.

Even though I am one of the participants in this master's programme, the interviews with interviewees did not seek to impose my views within the interviewing process and the interviewees' responses were recorded using their own words. When it comes to respecting a person, it is assumed that individuals are autonomous beings and therefore respect is due to them because of that fact, and they can make their own judgements pertaining to what can be done to their persons (Ketefian, 2015). When it comes to data processing and the safekeeping and storing of the data collected via interviews for confidentiality, I stored the data on OneDrive which is a trusted platform that securely stores files information with confidence and the data files are only accessible with a secure password adding to the safekeeping and handling of data. According to Kaiser (2009), data may be stored in separate protected files especially since some identifiers are easily recognised and provide examples such as respondent names to be replaced with pseudonyms and addresses of respondents to be deleted from files once no longer in use. For this study, I in terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) also presented a privacy notice on the Information letter regarding the storing and collection of personal information (Appendix C).

3.11 Consent form from Institution

To abide by the ethical requirements of the institution an application was also made to the institution to obtain consent from the institution to conduct the research study using learners from the institution. The application outlined the intention to act ethically as a researcher and to act in the best interest of the institution a researcher (Appendix E). The application was

approved by the registrar and permission was received to conduct the research study at the institution (Appendix F).

3.12 Informed Consent from participants

To further abide by the ethical requirements of the institution a consent form (Appendix D) was emailed to participants before the interviews took place detailing that they were free to withdraw from the study as well as a letter designed informing them of the reasons and details of the research study (Appendix C).

3.13 Limitations

Limitations of any study potentially concern weaknesses usually not in the control of the researcher. It is closely linked to the research design chosen and it may affect the study's design, results and conclusions and thereby should be acknowledged clearly within the research paper that is submitted (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). I did not foresee any major limitations in conducting this research but have identified possible limitations and anticipated drawbacks. Because the study generally involved a small sample of participants, the findings would also be limited to this specific sample studied and this was identified as a limitation as the findings cannot be generalised to other contexts. Although a small sample of participants was used the data collected was still rich and the participation rate was close to 60%. Narrative inquiry also comes with its own limitations, the researcher has to collect information extensively about the participant to completely understand the individual and this may be a slow and meticulous and careful process (Butina, 2015). I am also a participant in the same master's programme, and this could also be seen as a limitation as the researcher is also reflecting on personal experiences of self and other. Furthermore, I further would like to acknowledge is also the fact that this is not a full thesis but a mini–thesis paper and therefore is more limited in scope resulting in five chapters written up to thoroughly present and give a complete account of the study and its findings. I have however recognised all these potential limitations and have protected the privacy and anonymity of the participants, their sensitive issues and experiences, as well as being mindful before reporting results to approximate a coherent and sound study.

3.14 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the research design and methodological approach taken. It provided a description of the research site, research assumption, research design, research site, sample size

and participants, research methods and data–gathering instruments. It also further covered data analysis, research ethical considerations and confidentiality and concluded with limitations. The data presentation and analysis section will be presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1   Data Presentation

In this section, data is presented according to themes emanating from views expressed by participants.

The interview data is presented under the following headings below:

- Biographical information of participants
- A brief account of each participant
- Who is the Adult Learner in higher education today?
- Lifelong Learner
- New learnings
- How do adult learners identify with being digital citizens?
- Challenges as an adult learner
- Future learnings
- Biographical information of participants

The participants in this study were all mature students who were studying for a particular master's programme. This master's degree is a three–year intercontinental programme offering online courses pertaining to adult learning and global change. All participants in this study were able to form important viewpoints and perspectives related to the study at hand.

The ages of the participants ranged from 36 years to 65 years with seven out of the eight participants being over 41 years old. Refer to Figure 4.1.
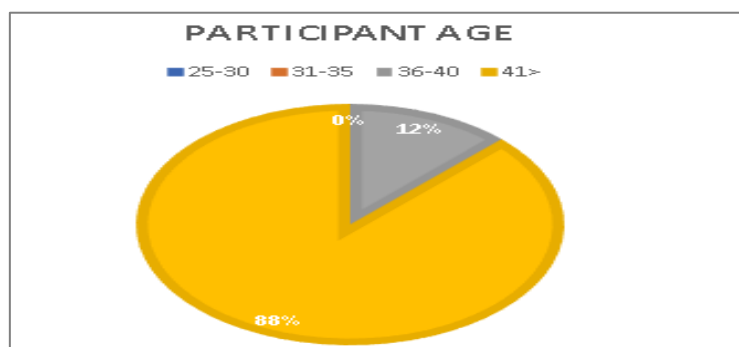
Figure 4.1: Participants Age

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In terms of gender, there were three males and five females who participated and contributed to this study. Refer to Figure 4.2.
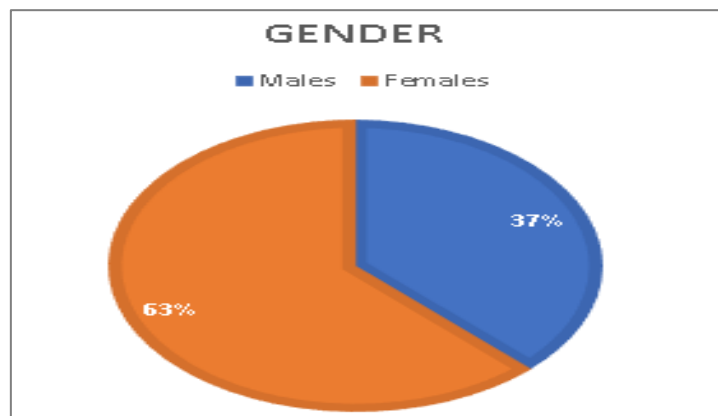
Figure 4.2: Gender

In terms of qualifications, all the participants reported that they had post–graduate qualifications. Refer to Figure 4.3.
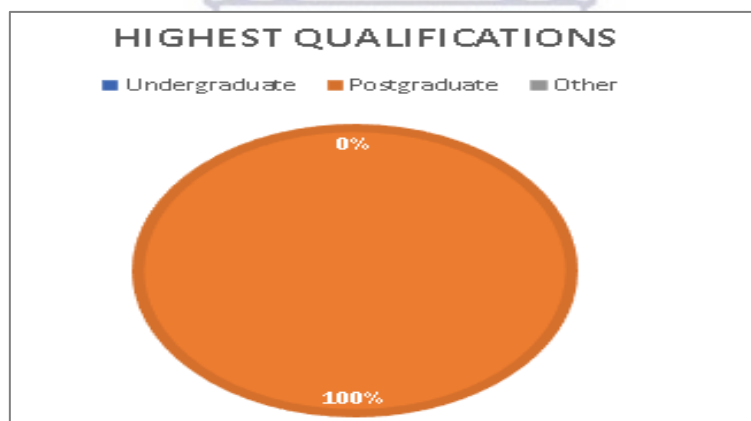
Figure 4.3: Highest Qualifications

The home languages spoken by participants are respectively English, Afrikaans, Lozi and Xhosa. English is also the medium for the courses on offer pertaining to this study. All participants confirmed their competency in English and therefore all interviews were conducted in English. Refer to Figure 4.4.

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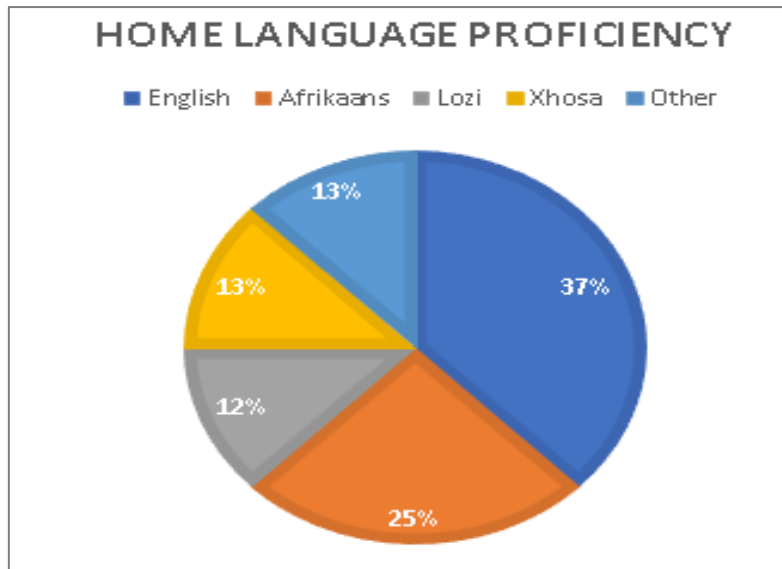
Figure 4.4: Home Language Proficiency

Data revealed that seven out of the eight participants work in the area of Education and Training whereas only one participant works in Human Resource Management and Training. Refer to Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5: Professional Industry

The average working experience years is 26 years with four of the participants working in the category of 11 to 20 years, 3 participants working over 31 years and only 1 participant working between 21 and 30 years. Refer to Figure 4.6.

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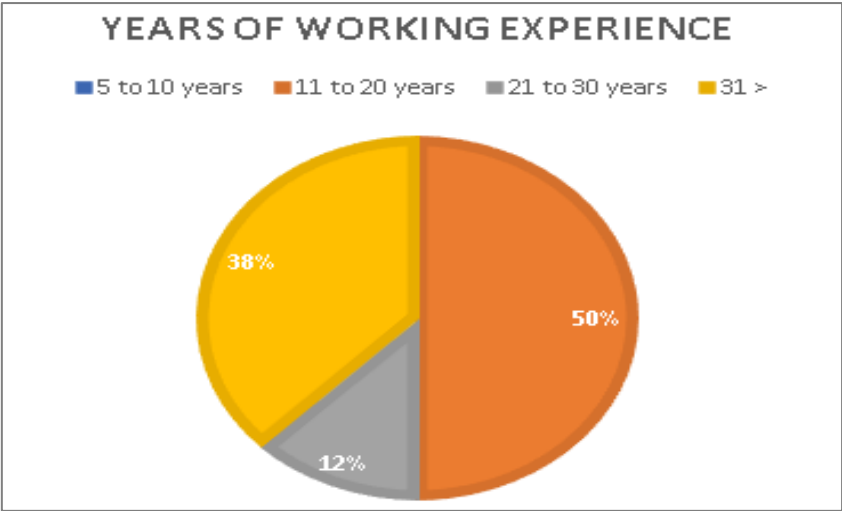
Figure 4.6: Years of Working Experience

With regards to the completion status of the modules in the master's programme, seven of the participants have completed all their modules with only 1 participant being appreciably close to completion. Refer to Figure 4.7.
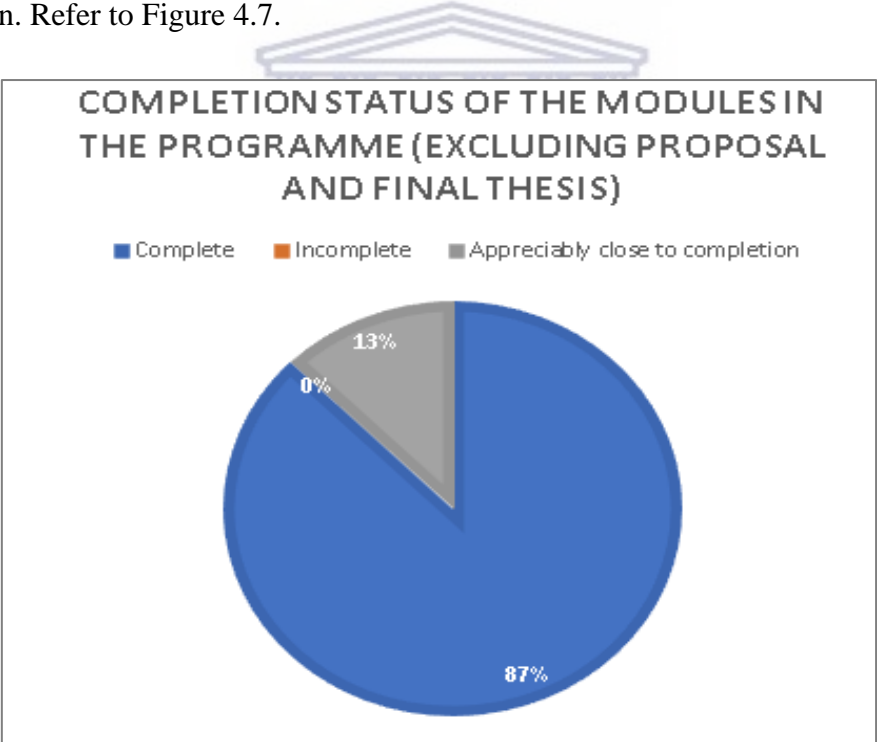
Figure 4.7: Completion Status of Modules

4.1.1 A brief synopsis of each participant

Each participant in this study was given a pseudonym to protect participant identity and confidentiality in the study.

Brenda: Brenda is over 41 years old and is a female whose home language is both English and Afrikaans. Her profession is located within education and training, her highest qualification is post–graduate, years of working experience is 24 years and has completed all the modules on the programme.

Chad: Chad is between 36–40 years old and is a male whose home language is English. His profession is located within education, his highest qualification is post–graduate and has 17 years of working experience. Completed all modules on the programme.

Doreen: Doreen is over 41 years old and is a female whose home language is English but is proficient in Afrikaans. Her profession is located within human resources management; highest qualifications are post–graduate qualifications. She has 40 years of working experience and has a completion status on all of the modules on the programme.

Nicole: Nicole is over 41 years old and is a female whose home language is Lozi. Her profession is located within education and her highest qualifications are a master's degree, years of working experience 11–20 years and completing all modules on the programme.

Norma: Norma is an over 41 years old female whose home language is Xhosa. Her profession is located within education, her highest qualification is a post–graduate degree, her years of working experience is between 11–20 years and have completed all modules on the programme.

Reginald: Reginald is a male and is older than 41 years old. His home language is English. His profession is located within education, his highest qualifications are on a post–graduate level, years of working experience are between 11 and 20 years with a completion status on all modules on the programme with only the proposal and final thesis left to do.

Thora: Thora is an over 41 years old female whose home language is Afrikaans but is proficient in English as well. Her Profession is located within education, and her highest qualification is an Honours Degree (Postgraduate). Thora has 34 years of working experience and the completion status of the modules on the programme is complete.

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Washington: Washington is a male and is older than 41 years–old whose home language is Afrikaans but is also proficient in English. His Profession is located within education, highest qualifications are post–graduate, years of working experience 37 years and the completion status of modules on the programme is appreciably close to completion.

4.1.2   Who is the adult learner in higher education today?

Interviewees were asked to share their adult learning stories and narratives as a way of exploring how they saw themselves as adult learners in relation to their own adult learning and also to assess the participant's agency within the adult learning process.

Six key points of engagement emerged during this interaction:

- Multiple Roles and Commitments
- Fragmented and Less Linear Paths
- The Impact of COVID–19
- First–Time Online Learners
- Adaptability
- Certain Levels of Learning Support

Interviewees showed that they had *multiple roles and commitments* alongside their formal learning pathways as per examples demonstrated below:

Reginald – "Getting into this master's programme and doing the individual courses in this programme, was very demanding especially being an adult learner and working fulltime, having a family and so forth"

Washington – "I believe that when one has a deep goal inside you, although there will be times where there may be family responsibilities or various challenges such as finances, sickness, death you must never give up"

Chad – "I never had the luxury of studying fulltime due to other commitments and living a full life etc."

Nicole – "My adult learning story is different. There are responsibilities to be taken into account along with the learning. Now I go into a course knowing I have multiple responsibilities alongside my studies"

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With reference to *multiple roles and commitments*, participants largely confirm a preparedness at the outset for undertaking to pursue postgraduate study alongside other undertakings towards which they also have varying measures of responsibility. The attainment of this degree in particular seems uniformly important for all participants, and towards this end, an ethos of resilience is evident in all responses.

A few interviewees noted key obstacles that had prevented earlier learning pathways and show *fragmented and less linear paths* which include dropping out of school and financial imperatives as demonstrated in examples below:

> **Thora** – "I didn't pass matric in 1987 and I was very despondent. I was the only grandchild that didn't pass my matric and felt like a flop"

> **Doreen** – "I failed my standard 9 and I didn't want to go back to school"

> **Norma** – "After matric at the age of 18 years I never went to study but had a gap year. I didn't decide on a gap year, but situations forced me to have a gap year. After the gap year, I started doing education and after 3 years I failed one subject which was traumatic"

> **Chad** – "I was an absolutely frustrated and somewhat angry teenager and never did good at school. In fact, I did not like school at all"

> **Brenda** – "Somebody took me in without a degree to work, it didn't go well, and I was let go"

With reference to the point of engagement encapsulated as *fragmented and less linear paths*, it is noteworthy but perhaps not unsurprising within a South African higher education landscape for participants to have predominantly experienced appreciable schooling challenges. Yet, it would seem, from the data provided, a decent education is still considered important to access gainful employment.

Interviewees were then asked to further share their online learning stories to understand their exposure to online learning and identify challenges and successes that could assist learners to attain their educational and lifelong learning goals. A few interviewees noted *the impact of COVID–19* on them in terms of having to learn technology and do things online as demonstrated in the examples below:

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Doreen– "After so many years of experience and studying face to face COVID happened and forced me to do things online. I was not really exposed to digital environments prior to COVID and starting this programme"

Washington –" So, you need to come to terms with the fact that the future is online and especially after COVID 19 we are talking digital"

Nicole – "we learned a lot about doing things online, especially during COVID"

Brenda – "COVID also had a big impact on me embracing technology and being digital citizens. COVID also had a large role to play and fast–tracked me to being a digital citizen"

With reference to the way in which participants experienced the impact of COVID–19 on their studies, participants communicated unanimously that they had been catapulted into certain kinds of digital activity that would not have been the norm prior to the pandemic. It would seem from the information provided by participants that there may be a variation at this stage in terms of how they are relating to digital environments and how they understand the concept of being a digital citizen.

Asking the interviewees to share their online learning stories also further ties in to understand and assess what the participants' real freedoms are to do things, how they came to use online learning and the triumphs that helped them achieve their educational and learning objectives. Some interviewees highlighted that they were *first–time online learners* and speak about their reasons for choosing an online learning programme as demonstrated below:

Reginald – "I had to choose to study online as it was not possible to attend face–to–face at a physical campus, so I had to do an online course"

Washington– "I didn't really choose to study online; I prefer face to face, on campus with contact lecturers and instructors but with this master's I chose, it was online and a distance learning master's degree"

Brenda – "I like the face–to–face interaction, to speak with people about my studies and so forth, I thought to myself to give this programme a try even though it was online"

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> **Thora** – "I live in a rural area; we don't have universities around, and because I was driven to have my degree, I started studying via distance learning and when I started this programme this was my first online learning experience"

> **Doreen**– "After so many years of experience and studying face to face COVID happened and forced me to do things online and this is also when I decided to embark on this online master's programme"

> **Norma –** "I got this online programme by default. I thought I was going to do a face–to–face programme but then all the programmes were full when I applied. This online programme still had openings, so I decided to go for it. But I was sceptical, and I am not that kind of person"

> **Chad** – "If it was my choice I would not of wanted this programme to be online"

Under this theme, for *first–time online learners*, it is significant that in–person tuition is perceived to be the educational gold–standard, and online learning is perceived to be the fall–back position if in–person tuition is not possible. Participant observations in this regard are significant as they have a bearing on what kind of status is being accorded to being a digital citizen at the start of the programme.

Some interviewees highlighted a certain level of *adaptability* claiming that they had to make the necessary changes to accommodate and make improvements pertaining to online learning as demonstrated below:

> **Reginald** – "I had to make changes in my life to accommodate online learning and making the expected online posts on the LMS. It was quite a ride and still is"

> **Washington**– "It isn't and wasn't easy when it comes to being online, but I carry on and learn by myself, ask for help and learn by others and practice"

> **Brenda** – "even though I haven't done it before. I really wanted to try it although mentally I was telling myself that I couldn't do it"

Thora – "It was something new for me, but I wanted to have a master's degree also to show learners in rural areas that you shouldn't allow anything to stop you from achieving your set goals"

Doreen – "In the beginning it was nerve–wrecking. It was tough but we had to manage and get through it"

Norma "I was worried when I registered for this programme. Wasn't sure if I would be able to do it. But I went for it"

With reference to the way in which participants understand and experience *adaptability* in relation to their studies, participants communicated variously what adaptability could mean to the programme, the online course architecture, the course delivery, preparedness as a student or venturing into the unknown, as examples.

A few interviewees noted that they needed certain *levels of learning support* and examples are demonstrated below:

Thora – "having a mentor perhaps as a support platform, that would be recommended. For me, it would have been a lightbulb at the end of the tunnel so yes it would be recommended"

Brenda – "On this course, I didn't really have a go–to person who could explain to me something in a more down–to–earth manner that I could understand something in which I believe is critical in a programme like this"

Doreen – "My learning story includes a study buddy and a study group that helped me cross bridges and to learn certain terminologies and even statistics"

Washington– "My family, daughter and others are helping me in my online struggle and to doing things smoothly. It isn't and wasn't easy when it comes to being online"

Based on the insights obtained from participants regarding *certain levels of learning support*, participants provided the following examples: having a mentor, having a go–to person, having a study buddy, and having the support of family and friends. From demonstrated data, it would

seem that the participants found ways to find the support they needed to succeed. Having summarised key issues affecting agency as well as challenges and obstacles facing interviewees on their online learning pathways, the next section focuses on their understanding of lifelong learning.

4.1.3   Lifelong Learners

Understandings of lifelong learning from research participants were important to explore as well as to see how participants understood the lifelong learning concept, together with their motivation attitudes to further learning. Participants understood the concept of lifelong learning in various ways, and there seemed to be a shared understanding of its enduring purpose.

> **Reginald** – "Lifelong learning is reaching a sense of self–fulfilment"

> **Washington** – "Knowledge never ends as new developments will happen all the time in your field. If you want to keep abreast, you need to continue learning to stay abreast"

> **Brenda** – "Lifelong learning is continuous learning, it doesn't matter how old you are what you learn, how you learn, it's just a journey that you take"

> **Thora** – "Lifelong Learning for me is never stopping to learn, from birth until you die".

> **Doreen**– "I remain a student. I learn every day"

> **Nicole –** "It's about being motivated to learn so you can sustain yourself and constantly find new ways of doing things"

> **Norma –** "Learning is ever continuous– you need to be open–minded to accept new learnings and collaborate it with what you already know"

> **Chad –** "As long as I consider myself being alive learning is critical for me"

Participants were then invited to reflect on their own capabilities as active learners and were asked whether they felt they became more developed lifelong learners because of their journey on the online master's programme. Some participants felt they had and supported their views by referring to technological aspects at which they were now more adept and only two out of

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the eight participants felt they had not and mentions that the programme had served only to credentials prior to lifelong learning as demonstrated below:

> **Doreen–** "Yes, if I look back 3 years ago, how I battled at first to even log into the Learning management system and upload documents. But afterwards, I could log on and upload documents with my eyes closed. Even now with MS Teams. I learned to use it and I do use it"

> **Nicole – "**Yes, I did. Certain technological tools such as for example SharePoint and everyone working on one document regardless of our location. I didn't use these applications before. I also developed in my reading and making comments on the platform"

> **Brenda** – "No, I don't think I became more developed as a result of the programme as I already knew a lot when I started on the programme, but the programme cemented when I already learned in the past and what I already knew. I had all the knowledge but didn't necessarily have a degree to prove it"

> **Chad –** "No I can't honestly say that. I think I was a lifelong learner before this programme. I don't believe this programme has increased or improved my development as a lifelong learner. In fact, if it did do something– it rather just helped me come to the conclusion that my next step would rather be in face to face. And look for something that I will enjoy, a classroom environment and being stimulated. Synchronous learning as I subscribe to the social constructivist way of learning and sharing my knowledge about what I know and learning from others"

To assess participants' lifelong learning attributes and worldviews that assist in achieving educational success interviewees were asked whether they felt that they embraced a culture of lifelong learning. Participants embrace it for various reasons such as gainful employment and a better quality of life while others embrace it for personal growth and resilience as demonstrated in the data below:

> **Brenda –** "Yes, I think I do, the reason for this is because I am in an area where we focus on training giving companies and learners advise to improve

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so they can become employable. So, I cannot speak of anything else but the culture of lifelong learning. These days you need to have the skills and the necessary paperwork and embrace the culture of learning. It doesn't matter what age you are. Learning is continuous, you have to improve and continue learning to stay relevant"

Doreen– "Yes, I do try to embrace a culture of Lifelong learning. I encourage the youngsters and the younger ones at work to further their studies and take up learning opportunities as they are becoming stagnant, yet they are so young. There are bursary opportunities to study but they don't take up these opportunities. It's like they say: You can lead a horse to the water, but you can't make it drink. But yes, I do embrace it and I do try to encourage it too"

Washington – "One of the lifelong learning outcomes I have acquired is that I learned to work with different personalities and cultures. An example would be that I started to have a better understanding of people. There are those that are genuine and want to help you then you will find others who are only fundamentally interested in pursuing their own goals. Especially when working in large groups you learn to understand different people. So, I think this is a skill I developed on this course, to be able to better understand different people, cultures, and different personalities"

Thora – "I learned perseverance. I feel that the university dropped me, and I had to swim to survive in this programme. I learned that knowledge is power, and I kept telling myself that I had to persevere and acquire knowledge"

Participant interviews in this section may also suggest that the concept of lifelong learning may be perceived as a personal and professional tool to safeguard a particular kind of future, although this kind of future was not specifically articulated. The next section focuses on understanding new learnings.

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4.1.4 New Learnings

Interviewees were asked what their motivations were to pursue higher education as well as what they were seeking from higher education when they joined the programme. This question was seeking to understand prior knowledge of motivation and mindset to assess changes in participants. From the data we found motivations to be work–related and personal. See some quotations below to demonstrate work–related and personal motivations:

> **Brenda** – "sometimes knowledge and experience is not what is needed when you go for an interview and you automatically put yourself out of the running for a job"

> **Reginald** – "But I knew I wanted the actual degree to advance professionally and open myself up to various markets"

> **Thora** – "I had a very low self–esteem, so apart from getting a qualification as a motivation, I also wanted to show my parents and siblings that I am not stupid, and I wanted to also prove this to myself"

> **Washington**– "I also feel once I complete my qualification, I will really feel that I've acquired what I came for–a full qualification because this is what I am seeking, the qualification would also be what I was seeking and to be recognised and respected in society"

Interviewees were further asked what new learnings they acquired on the programme to determine what they may be acquiring especially in terms of lifelong learning, online learning, and as digital citizens. This question was also asked to assess the learnings and to see what people are effectively able to do and be. It was found that participants acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes on this programme and some examples of this are demonstrated below:

> **Washington** – "A level of intellect was what I acquired that I could use to contribute intelligently. But growing up in education I do learn that although my qualification is not done, I acquire a deep desire of wanting to complete something – e.g., perseverance"

> **Nicole** – *"I also learned a lot about the theories of learning through the readings that we received on the programme"*

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Thora – "What stands out above the rest is definitely my academic writing skills that I acquired. I didn't do this well before. I was wondering why I didn't achieve high marks doing my Honours but now I know. So, these are the skills and learnings that I acquired"

Norma – "The learnings were academic writing skills, referencing skills as well as peer learning skills"

Brenda – "The fact that the course was intercontinental also assisted me, there were time zone differences, yes, but you built relationships and friendships. I also learned to understand other behaviours better. I realised we may be worlds apart, but it doesn't matter if you from Georgia or Norway, but we can share the same challenges and successes"

To further assess participants' prior knowledge interviewees were asked what they brought to the learning agenda to explore the kind of contribution adult learners bring to certain educational settings and here a *struggle to discuss accomplishments and achievements* by participants was identified as demonstrated below:

Reginald – "I am not sure really what I brought"

Thora – "Goodness, I just can't think what to say. I can't recall. What do I say?"

Doreen– "I can normally speak about what others bring but I am not good at this for myself. I am always last on the list"

Norma – I don't know, and I don't want to come across as a brag. We get demoralised when we brag so we don't want to sound too high on our horses. People may think that we think we better than them when we speak about ourselves. So, we somehow tone it down. One is frowned upon when speaking about yourself, so it is difficult"

Chad – "I can't confidently say whether I brought something or whether others could learn anything from me"

Interviewees were then asked to further reflect for a while and then to attempt to answer the question again so an assessment could be made of prior knowledge and sense of agency.

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Reginald – "Being able to provide context to a topic and being able to give a different perspective to a topic is what I brought. Not necessarily a new perspective but a different perspective and context. Also, a level of creativity when it came to structuring essays, planning, and bringing a direction to group essays"

Washington– "I think what I brought was my perspective on an issue. Others could read and were good in theory, but I think I brought rich contributions in terms of the comments I made in discussions during the study"

Brenda – "Part of what I brought – was my understanding of the different ways that people learn. One is creative, one is theoretical, others contextual and others learn through doing and you need to keep them busy. I had the knowledge about that but then aligned it to the learnings on the programme"

Thora – "I do believe a brought my computer skills. I am a computer teacher, and this is what I brought, and I could assist others with certain things they struggled with example: table of contents etc."

Prior knowledge and learnings were assessed but interviewees were then asked whether new learnings and learning outcomes affected their identity seeking to see the impact of the interviewee's current learning on their identity formation. Here identified from the data some of the interviews affirmed that new learnings and learning outcomes did affect their identity, while others didn't agree, and two out of the eight participants were not sure. See quotes demonstrating these findings below:

Reginald – "Yes, in a very big way. A big part of my learning journey was grounded in my location at first and my identity stemmed from my current location. But now I can also identify as a global teacher and student"

Thora – "Yes it did. I am so much more confidant now. In the beginning, I was scared and not confidant at all and didn't know what was expected from me. Now I developed my identity in the sense that I can agree or disagree on topics that were spoken in the discussion forum with confidence"

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Brenda – "No I don't think it has affected my identity as such. The fact that I had knowledge already, the learning like I said just cemented what I really knew so it didn't really affect my identity"

Norma – "Maybe only to a certain point it did. I am a physical person. I have been used to doing things physically for many ears. So, all of a sudden, I had to communicate with people who don't understand me, who don't know me. I was wondering whether they would take me seriously online in my deliberations especially since some are from the global south and some are from the global north forgetting that I was accepted into the master's programme because I had the requirements and the capacity to be accepted for a master's programme"

Chad – "I suppose so, I don't know. I don't know if its specifically linked to learnings and learning outcomes"

Participant interviews in this section may suggest that participants acquired new learning successes including new knowledge, skills and attitudes. The next section will focus on how adult learners identify with being digital citizens.

4.1.5   How do adult learners identify with being digital citizens?

Because the literature has noted the importance of digital literacy it was important to understand whether participants identified themselves as digital citizens and therefore interviewees were asked how important the construction of digital identity and sense of belonging is in terms of participation in this online master's programme. Some quotes from interviewees referencing the importance of the sense of belonging in this online master's programme are demonstrated in examples below:

Washington – "For me, it is very important, especially in terms of sense of belonging. That you feel that you belong by your fellow peers and feel important in your group. It was important to me that I belonged to a group, and I could make contributions in the group even how little the contributions may have been. You are not a person on an island you must belong. It is very important"

Thora – "Extremely important. Like I said I wasn't confidant in the beginning. I didn't feel that I belonged. In the beginning, we had to choose a learning partner and my learning partner helped me feel like I belonged, and my learning partner also guided me along my journey. In the beginning, I was being begged to speak on the discussion forum, but I just couldn't start talking but I grew in this regard"

Some quotes from interviewees referencing the importance of digital identity in this online master's programme are also demonstrated in the examples below:

Reginald – "My constructing of a digital identity and sense of belonging didn't feel that important in the beginning. But when I had to work in groups or with my learning partner there was a sense of community and belonging and it was important, as you felt you had a comradery. If not for this you could feel lost, you could ask yourself is someone even looking at my online comments made on the discussion forums?"

Doreen – "It is critical as cyberspace don't make things easy. You have to become aware of the social and cyber sphere. Even at work, we moving to a paperless environment where everything we do is becoming paperless. You have to have a digital identity and you have to embrace a world of digitisation or you will lag behind and will become lost and feel lost"

To get a deeper understanding of digital citizens' interviewees were asked whether the construct of being a digital citizen was easily embraced and familiar. A clear yes came through from participants from this question and only one participant felt that the construct of being a digital citizen was not easily embraced and familiar as demonstrated below:

Brenda – "Yes, for me it is easily embraced because at this stage I do everything online. Work–related paper–based tasks are now done online; I even do my banking online. So, I think its easily embraced and I have become a digital citizen"

Thora – "Yes, to be honest, I never wanted to be one. But I became one and it is embraced by me now and is familiar to me now. It was actually good because I could also expand my knowledge on a global scale"

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Doreen– "Yes, and I also try to be a digital citizen in everyday life. I try to protect my personal information at all times, and it is also important to leave a positive digital footprint. I discuss aspects about digitisation with my kids and create awareness to them and to others"

Nicole – "Yes, it is familiar to me. One day I wanted to participate in a conference, and I wanted digital literacy. I was checking articles on digital literacy and through its through digitalisation that we learned a lot about doing things online, especially during COVID"

Norma – "Yes, I do embrace the construct of digital citizen because our country and most countries globally are encouraging digital citizenry. We cannot act differently. We need to understand what is happening around the world. This applies to various contexts as well. Even at the bank, you are connected to some sort of digital products to manage the queues. Even your smart phone can be used for banking. One will feel lost if they not up to date with technology"

Chad – "Yes, it is familiar and embraced by me. It simply means we are living in a time where you need to have a presence online even on social media as everything is becoming online and therefore it is quite important from that perspective"

Washington – "No, it is not easy, and it is not that familiar, but I have to come to terms with it. I know I have to study and learn and become more familiar with the construct"

To get a further understanding of digital citizenship within the programme interviewees were asked whether the online master's programme required them to reflect on the culture of being a digital citizen. The rational of the question was also to assess whether institutions actually focus on people's capabilities to do what they value and be the kind of person they want to be. From the participants' responses to this question, half of the participants felt that the online master's programme did require them to reflect on a culture of being a digital citizen whilst the other half felt it did not. See examples below demonstrating the above:

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Washington – "Yes it definitely did, I had to reflect, and I understand the culture of being a digital citizen is important and the online master's programme did help me reflect on this culture and I realised in order for me to become successful I would have to spend more time with technology and become a digital citizen"

Doreen– "Yes definitely, through the activities we got, working together in online groups and on different digital applications. The culture allowed me to experience ideas and reflect"

Norma – "Yes it did require me to reflect on a culture of being a digital citizen as we discussed topics and articles around being digital citizens– even long discussions on global citizenry. These articles were capacitating me to a degree".

Brenda – "I can't say that it has to be honest"

Thora – "I don't think the online master's programme required me to reflect on a culture of being a digital citizen. In this programme, you just had to swim. For me, it was like I was told to log in and start. But log in how? No one taught me, so it was a sink or swim experience digitally and otherwise"

Chad – "No, I can't really say that the programme required me to reflect on being a digital citizen. Perhaps it did require me to, but it doesn't allow the time to do so. Like I said things were happening so fast on this programme, there wasn't really time for reflection of any kind. One couldn't really reflect on much– you just to keep going and finish your module that you were busy with"

Interviewees were asked whether they felt that they have grown as digital citizens as part of this online master's programme. The rationale of this question was to pick up present understandings of digital citizenship as the previous questions explored their previous understandings which may have changed as a result of exposure to the online master's programme. As per the examples from the data demonstrated below the participants believed they have grown as digital citizens as part of this online master's programme:

Reginald – "Yes, I improved and now have the ability to work in groups online and find my voice and place and make useful contributions online. It was challenging because in some cases you didn't necessarily agree with someone, it wasn't always a smooth process to work on online group

Thora – "Yes, I can now easily log in, do various tasks, do research, and look up things that I didn't understand. For example, I use MS Teams now, google meet etc. even word and SharePoint. I never used these digital applications before, but I do know now"

Doreen– "Yes, I now have grown and have the world in my hands. There are times I even feel incomplete if I don't have my phone or digital tools. I can't imagine if I should lose it. I will be lost"

Nicole – "Yes, I have very much grown. At first, there was no motivation to use the internet or be online all the time, but I became motivated to continue learning for life"

Norma – "Yes, I have grown as a digital citizen as part of this master's programme because if I didn't do this programme I wouldn't have grown in terms of confidence. I would of still being anxious, but this programme did empower me in a way"

Then for a deeper exploration of digital literacy and ways in which the mastery of digital applications helps or impedes adult learners' paths to achieving social and educational freedoms interviewees were asked whether they felt that their digital literacy has grown as part of this online master's programme and in what way. As per the examples demonstrated below the participants believed that their digital literacy has also grown as part of this online master's programme:

Washington – "Yes, there were new apps I learned that I haven't come across before. My digital literacy has grown and when I didn't or don't understand I ask my daughter what it means so I can understand and in order to develop a digital understanding"

Thora – "Yes, my digital literacy has also grown a lot. Like the examples I used before, I am using different digital applications to speak on and work

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on. Especially writing together with my group on an application like SharePoint and MS Teams"

Doreen– "Yes, definitely. I can read better digitally, analyse articles, and make comments and give my perspectives on readings more confidently now"

Norma – "Yes it has grown. My mind is more elevated in terms of communication, reading etc. This programme kind of forced me to do things digitally"

In the next question challenges and obstacles were raised to get an understanding of reasons that could impede the attainment of participants' educational goals. Interviewees were asked to what extent they thought their learning journey in education is hindered and hampered when new digital skills were required to be learned alongside the content of the learning programme. It was found that those participants less familiar with technology were hindered and hampered to a great extent as demonstrated below:

Reginald – "It could be a great extent as it creates stress. As you have to try to juggle dealing and troubleshooting technical aspects and this sometimes could slow or stop learning. And that is exactly what happened in one of my groups"

Washington– "I think it is hindered to a significant extent. For me, it was a struggle. Other students perhaps could go on, but it may have kept me behind in my learning journey. There was a task we had to do, and I got stuck, because of the digital things and it affected me in this programme. To this extent yes, my learning was hindered as my computer skills was not up to scratch. But those who were sufficient had a major plus for them, but for me, it was a major hindrance"

Thora – "To a large extent. You can become so distracted. In fact, it can demotivate you as a person. For me especially I am very structured. I first had to learn the digital platform and acquire the skill and then move on to the content. I had to learn it separately. I was easily stressed when this happened – I feel like don't put me in a hotbox like that. Rather let me learn the digital

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app and acquire the new skills and then move on to the content but not together otherwise it can easily distract a person"

Doreen– "Theory and practice never met each other as it should. Sometimes I couldn't fit it all together. When we learn theory on the one hand and then something practically on the other hand it was not easy. Learning it alongside each other can become a hindrance. For me, I first have to acquire the skills then move on to learning the content. You become fearful but just tell yourself that you have to do it and that you can do it. Adaptability is key"

Norma – "When a new platform was introduced, I panicked every time but then I got familiar with it. When we get an invitation using a new application, I would question why a totally new application now because I am still learning the other application now, I must learn a new application again. So, I would say to a large extent your learning can be hampered"

It was found that those more familiar with technology were not hindered and hampered to such a great extent when they were required to learn new digital skills alongside the content of the learning programme as demonstrated below:

Brenda – "Definitely, especially for someone that hasn't done online learning before. I think there needs to be some sort of introduction course for anybody that starts with an online programme. Like I said I had a totally different idea of how this course would be executed, it wasn't what I expected. It was totally about working on a platform. If there was someone that prepared me there would have been a different understanding. Then yes it can put you on a back foot and hinder the learning process. It also depends on what your digital literacy is when you start, this would have an impact the level of the extent. For me, it might have been a bit easier but someone who never really worked on computers all the time it could have been more difficult"

Nicole – "It is good if its new technology that is being introduced. Yes– sometimes you do find problems when advanced applications are expected to be learned alongside the content or using upgraded system. So, it can affect you negatively and positively as it also benefited me"

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Chad – "It depends; it really depends on how literate you are when you come into this programme. If you have basic skills your learning journey could be hindered and hampered but from my experience not so much. This is another reason Orientation is so important to develop older adult learners and orientate them to a platform beforehand"

Interviewees were then asked to listen to a statement and then to reflect and motivate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement. The rationale for this reflective question was to put the person at the centre and to assess and get an understanding not only from within the programme but also outside as productive members of society as a whole.

Statement 1:" Improving adult digital literacy levels is fundamental in the sense that a) it motivates people to develop literacy and language skills, numeracy, scientific and cultural literacy, b) contributes to strengthening human capital and c) bridges the digital divide and confronts exclusion and marginalisation"

One participant agreed that adult literacy levels are fundamental in the sense that it motivates people to develop literacy, language skills, numeracy and scientific and cultural literacy as demonstrated below:

Doreen– "I agree, especially pertaining to the motivation of people. People will be motivated and focused to develop the necessary skills"

Five of the participants agreed that literacy levels are fundamental in the sense that it bridges the digital divide and confronts exclusion and marginalisation as demonstrated below:

Reginald – "I Agree; digital literacy has the ability to do all of these things. But to me, it also depends on the people involved and their personal goals. But this is true because if you don't have certain resources to your disposal and you get it –then you can bridge the divide and you if don't –then you can't bridge the digital divide"

Washington– "I would agree with this statement; digital literacy is fundamental in our modern time. It's primary. And because its fundamental we should motivate people to develop digital literacy skills so they can keep abreast. And especially people like me to develop literacy with technology.

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And obviously, it can bridge the digital divide. But this will require resources and ongoing training and learning from primary school to higher education"

Thora – "I agree, especially pertaining to bridging the digital divide. If I didn't have a learning partner, I would have easily dropped out. But my Learning partner helped me to learn and helped me improve my literacy skills and levels. Only after that I feel I could actually make contributions and could even motivate others thereafter to develop digitally"

Nicole – "I do agree especially pertaining to bridging the digital divide as there are people that are being excluded because when they can't do things and stand a chance of being left behind. So, if you not improving you will definitely be left behind"

Norma – "With digital literacy itself we need to understand that everyone is not on the same level. These are things we need to consider. Especially look at me I had huge data issues pertaining to data costs. So, we could get digital literacy skills, but we need a different approach because I will still need money/data to use technology. It's not so open to all, very expensive. It's for people who are rich, and people will remain marginalised and excluded if these issues like affordability of data is not addressed"

Two participants agreed that literacy levels are fundamental in the sense that it contributes to strengthening human capital as demonstrated below:

Brenda – "No definitely. I think of a programme that was also implemented at one of training providers, the programme can be executed even on a phone, so it definitely does all of those things mentioned and it's important to improve digital skills. In terms of contributing to strengthening human capital, people who are not digital savvy is going to be left behind, everything we have to do now Is starting to be electronic. But people also need to come to the party, or they will be marginalised and left behind if they don't also embrace digital literacy"

Chad – "I agree, all of the points in the statement is relevant. In my experience, I can more relate to the part about strengthening human capital and if improvements are made there could be improvement"

To probe deeper and get a deeper understanding of digital literacy as a possible means of social exclusion interviewees were asked if a lack of digital identity and sense of belonging puts adult learners at risk of social exclusion when participating in online learning programmes. From the data demonstrated below six of the eight participants agreed that a lack of digital identity and sense of belonging puts adult learnings at risk of social exclusion when participating in online learning programmes:

Reginald – "Yes, having a digital identity and sense of belonging helps develop skills and if not developed, you will have a lessor chance of succeeding and developing and being part of a learning community"

Brenda – "Yes, I think if you are not going to be active, digitally active that already in itself is going to put you at risk because you are firstly not going to be able to keep up with learning taking place and at the end of the day may even exclude yourself from learning. Even socially, if we meet via MS Teams, you will need to teach yourself how to use the application so you can also be included"

Thora – "Yes, definitively you could feel excluded, especially if you are older and if you take age into consideration, you could easily become demotivated and lose interest and feel excluded"

Doreen – "Yes it does. If you lack the technical skills and are not on the same page and same pace as other fellow learners who have technical skills and who are digital savvy, you could be at risk of social exclusion and at risk of being left behind"

Nicole – "Yes, it puts them at risk. If I think of my workplace some adult cannot even register online. They perform poorly online. They afraid of being online. They are not literate enough and so they will be excluded. If you not equipped with the day–to–day literacy and you not upgrading yourself then some may end up cancelling"

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Norma – "Yes, it would put you at risk and you may even become demoralised as you won't have the confidence to proceed if you don't have a digital identity or have a sense of belonging. My self–esteem would be very low if I never had the opportunity and sense of belonging"

From the two remaining participants, it is not sure if the participants completely agree as one participant mentions that it depends on the gap between the digitally literate and the not–so–digital literate and the other participant says that he is not sure about social exclusion and that a lack of digital identity fundamentally can't socially exclude you completely.

Chad – "It comes down to the gap between the digital literate and the not–so–digital literate once again. It lends itself to generations. My grandparents for example currently use WhatsApp very well for example but if they should have to work on a computer it may be a different case. So, it's also about the design of the educational programme as well. What type of technologies are integrated into the programme is important? Some programmes haven't considered elements such as the design etc. that takes everyone into consideration and if not, some will be excluded"

Washington "I'm not so sure about social exclusion. But the lack of a digital identity fundamentally can't socially exclude you completely. It may exclude you socially from the ranks of those people that are already digitally educated"

To probe further and get a deeper understanding of digital identity development on the programme interviewees were then asked whether they believed they developed an adequate digital identity whilst participating in this online master's programme. As demonstrated below it is found that six out of the eight participants believed they developed an adequate digital identity whilst participating in this online master's programme:

Reginald – "Yes in the basic sense and in the context of the course. Due to Academic reading and writing and due to the online discussions and working online in groups I have developed in the basic sense and in the context of the course"

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Brenda – "Yes, I think I did. I previously decided not to participate in any social media platforms but I told myself in order for me to grow professionally I did start a digital footprint and joined LinkedIn so I can still connect and collaborate with others in the industry and those that participated in this programme"

Thora – "yes, I did develop an adequate digital identity, but I would still like to develop more. What I have learned I don't actually have the necessary platform and space to live out what I have learned"

Doreen– "Yes, as mentioned before –I do believe the skills I developed were definitely adequate as I learned a lot"

Nicole – "Yes I believe I developed quite enough especially for my day–to–day usage of the internet and being online"

Norma – "Yes, I have developed an adequate digital identity because I could afterwards contribute and even share my personal experiences online and became more confident on the discussion forums"

Further as demonstrated below it is found that one out of the eight participants wasn't sure if it was adequate, and the other participant did not.

Chad – "I wouldn't know how to consider it. I wouldn't know how to consider whether it was an adequate digital identity that was developed in my experience. Because before I knew it the course was over. I didn't consider whether it was adequate. It would also be difficult to compare my learning journey with others from other universities as these journeys were not necessary the same"

Washington – "No I haven't, it is something I need to continually pursue, study, practice and really put my mind to it and be more at ease and embrace technology. I opened a new account today and had to sign electronically and I didn't have a clue what to do and I had to ask my daughter. Now imagine she wasn't around I wouldn't be able to do my investments and banking. So, I know I have to develop myself"

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To understand the varying degrees of identity struggle, the changing sense of who they are, and the ongoing day–to–day identity management of participants' interviewees was asked to explain whether it is easy or difficult for them to incorporate new adult learner identities into an existing identity portfolio.

Six participants found it difficult to incorporate new adult learner identities into their existing identity portfolio as demonstrated below:

> **Reginald** – "It was very difficult because at the beginning of the course. Around the 2nd module, I was almost destroyed with one of the assignments. I had to repeat the assignment four times. The feedback I received was that although I showed an understanding of the content the perspective my assignment was written from a teacher's perspective and not a student's perspective. I could not make the identity/paradigm shift. I just couldn't make the crossover over"

> **Washington** – "I think it would be easier studying face to face, but it is more difficult to incorporate new adult learner identities into an existing identity portfolio when I am online"

> **Brenda** – "To be honest, I am not sure. I am going to have to find a very good online programme for me to consider another online programme. Because definitely it has its benefits, but this programme has made it difficult for me to even reconsider another online learning programme. So, I would go back to face– to face instead of online again. Because it was difficult"

> **Thora** – "yes it was difficult since I was a distance learner. And also, especially since people around me didn't understand what I was doing and what I was talking about, I had to continuously explain. Especially at work where I am an educator"

> **Doreen–** "It was difficult and certainly not easy. It was difficult to incorporate the online identity with the face–to–face identity. I couldn't do the online stuff initially. I can correlate this to someone like me who always was doing interviews and interviewing people then suddenly had to go for

interviews myself and was the interviewee – there is definitely a struggle between the identities"

Norma – "For me, it was difficult to incorporate new learning identities into an existing learning portfolio. I think it's because I am not as confident as I would like"

Two participants found it easy to incorporate new adult learner identities into their existing identity portfolio as demonstrated below:

Chad – "This was fairly easy for me because I am a subscriber to Lifelong Learning. Because I am a lifelong learner, I know the benefits of getting certain skills and I have a growth mindset. Yes, there will be times that things will be a bit challenging, but incorporation the old with the new and the new with the existing wasn't difficult"

Nicole – "I don't think it was difficult for me. I could easily incorporate my identities and I found a way to incorporate my identities"

Due to the need to understand ways in which institutions and their practices actually focus on people's capabilities and the institution's support of digital identity formation, interviewees were asked whether it was their understanding that they needed a well–developed digital identity as a requirement for this online master's programme.

Six out of the eight participants said no it was not their understanding that they needed a well–developed digital identity as a requirement for this online master's programme as demonstrated below:

Chad – "No, it wasn't my understanding. There was so much reading, and I was struggling to keep up. The programme kept one busy all the time. If I knew what I know now I would never have done this programme. Yes, I will finish it, but I felt I could have rather pursued another qualification"

Reginald – "No, this wasn't my understanding. I knew the course was online but once we got into it – everything was happening very quickly"

Washington – "No definitely not. It was not my understanding. But I realised it as I went along"

Brenda– "No not for me. I thought the programme would include lectures. When I spoke to the programme head, I was told there would be different professors lecturing different modules, but I never expected what I got. There were no lectures. In fact, I was flabbergasted when I started this programme"

Thora – "No I didn't know; I didn't know I needed to know this and that. I also didn't know I would need and require permanent data. I had to learn through time on the course and especially pertaining to the data, I really used a lot of data, and I am glad I am almost done"

Norma – "I didn't understand the magnitude of how well developed I actually had to be. That is in terms of how much I knew"

Two out of the eight participants said yes it was t their understanding that they needed a well–developed digital identity as a requirement for this online master's programme as demonstrated below:

Doreen– "Yes– I did actually have that understanding because in the beginning I was asked whether I could use a computer and whether I had access to a computer and accessibility to the internet. However, I was not fully prepared and never comprehended the impact of going online but we were forced to adjust"

Nicole – "Yes– in the advert I saw of the programme it did require a level of computer literacy but when I started I had very little online experience and as I went on it became easier"

To deepen the probe into institutional practices and support of digital identity formation interviewees were asked whether they felt there was an allowance for them to develop their digital identity in this online master's programme. Four out of the eight participants felt there was an allowance for them to develop their digital identity in this online master's programme as demonstrated below:

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Thora– "Yes there was an allowance to develop because I was growing all the time and continued to learn how to do certain things"

Doreen– "Yes there was an allowance but at times it was tough. But we were given the space to grow and develop digitally and build a digital footprint"

Nicole – "Yes there was a space for me to develop. The programme allows collaboration with others, and you can see how others do things and then also develop. Working in groups and teams also enhanced learning and helped with the construction of sentences as well as developing a digital identity"

Norma – "Yes there was an allowance because I had to use different applications interchangeably"

Two out of the eight participants felt there was no allowance for them to develop their digital identity in this online master's programme as demonstrated below:

Brenda – "I don't think there was an allowance as such. You just had to do it. You had to learn while you were doing your studies. So, there wasn't really an allowance, but more of a must if you wanted to succeed"

Chad – "There wasn't really an allowance because of the demands of the programme, you just did what you had to do to finish the courses within the programme"

Whilst two out of the eight participants were unsure as to whether there was an allowance for them to develop their digital identity in this online master's programme as demonstrated below:

Reginald – "In the beginning I did not feel that was the case. Everything was happening very quickly but afterwards, once we started to plateau, we built an immunity to the LMS and found how you fit into the learning community and with your peers, you then found your feet and your identity took shape. But it takes time. I don't think this Course allows you time to really enjoy it"

Washington – "I think there were attempts, we had a training in the library in the beginning and there were also a few more other attempts thereafter prior to COVID, so there was an attempt"

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Participant interviews in this section may suggest that fully embrace the construct of digital citizen and participants mention that they have grown as digital citizens. Any differences in the data coming from participants are a result of some participants being less familiar with technology and others more familiar with the technology. The next section will focus on the Challenges experienced as an adult learner.

4.1.6   Challenges as an adult learner

In seeking to understand adult learners, their multiple roles and how adult learners adapt to multiple realities interviewees were asked what new learning challenges they experienced in this online master's programme. Diverse challenges were presented and each participant mentioned more than one challenge which included internal, external and programme–related challenges as demonstrated below:

> **Reginald** – "Yes, there was different challenges at different times on the programme. I had to structure and manage my time, and this was challenging. It was and still is a demanding course, especially working fulltime and having a family as well. You needed a massive mental and paradigm shift. Everything was continuous, it just didn't stop and working with groups of 12 people, or more was very challenging for me"

> **Washington** – "Yes, my learning partner was from Canada, it was difficult to communicate with my learning partner because of the different time zones and the distance between learning partners. Then there was also sicknesses and individual challenges that were experienced"

> **Brenda –** "Home, work and studying all together was challenging for me. You have to put yourself in a corner and in some cases scramble to make contributions. Very difficult to maintain and in some instances had to put off my studies for days and as a result, I sometimes felt that I never made valuable contributions on the discussion forums. The volume of work for an online programme was very demanding. The module content was just too much. There was a lot of reading to be done. You had multiple overlapping tasks as well. Not one, but in some cases three–part tasks. Yes, it's a master's programme, but you are studying and working and have a family, and the spread of the course needs to be investigated as its challenging. On this

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course, I didn't really have a go–to person who could explain to me something in a more down–to–earth manner that I could understand something in which I believe is critical in a programme like this"

Thora – "Yes, I experienced a lot challenges. I struggled with certain things on my computer. If only I wish, I had an Information Technology (IT) person with me. Example Hardware and software challenges. Data usage was also a huge financial challenge for me, and it affected me. I felt the institution let me down, I felt like I was in the hotbox. Yes, in the beginning, previous cohorts spoke about their journey, but I think if they could drive with new cohort members throughout it would help. Like in a form of a mentor to reduce challenges"

Doreen– "Yes, I had a lack of technical skills at times, and this was challenging. As a result, I sometimes felt isolated, especially by others that were maybe more advanced than me. My own personal mindset was to some degree my own challenge in the beginning. Being in a third–world country I thought we were on back foot and had negative footing, but I realised only afterwards that we are all part of a skills pool and we all the same and experience challenges. When I saw others engaging on the platform so quickly after receiving the tasks, knowing I still had to read something twice or thrice in order to grasp things was challenging. I always told myself you can do it and I eventually did. As they say: "Die agter os ko mook in die kraal "Other challenges were personal, I went through a personal traumatic experience during this time of being on the programme, and this also affected my learnings, and it was challenging for me thereafter"

Nicole– "It was challenging as the essays that had to be written was too long. In this programme, we had to research and read too many articles. It becomes challenging when you are working but then still have to find the time to read long articles and write long essays. At times you will find yourself working through the night and find yourself still writing. Because you serve multiple roles you need to find a balance between them. The volume of work is too demanding. Because you also work with multiple lecturers and facilitators on the different modules from different universities. So, you really had to

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adapt your writing each time according to the different lecturers' feedback and their subjectivity and this was challenging"

Norma – "Had to manage my time and was committed into many projects include work and community/church projects. So had different responsibilities both personally and professionally. But I must tell you I struggled. I struggled with data at home. I couldn't connect at home but at the office we had wi–fi. I struggled to upload assignments onto the Learning Management system. Even the online contributions that we were expected to make, I struggled to do this and often I would struggle to upload documents. During the time of COVID, I struggled as I had to buy data and I could not access the office nor campus and it was a big punch for me as I was responsible for others too in the family especially since some family members lost their jobs. I had computer struggles. In fact, I would recommend this programme with caution. It is good to a certain degree, but you need to consider that you need to be computer literate, you need to understand the important of peer learning and you need to learn to manage your time optimally, you need some sort of research skills, and it was challenging to work in groups especially since others don't believe in peer learning. As with me in some groups, there were no problems but in other group, it was problematic, especially there is criticism from peers. This programme is also very long in relation to other master's programmes. The coursework was completed according to strict dedicated time but now busy with a proposal for 2 years. This is way too long"

Chad – "Although I will finish this master's programme – my learning journey on this programme was and still is very challenging for me. It seems students from the other countries perhaps were doing the programme fulltime whilst in our country we were mostly doing it part–time. There were times I felt out of place seeing how others from other countries and universities were analysing readings and their contributions on the discussion forum. The reason for this could have been due to my own insecurities especially coming from a country that is less developed and it took me very long to read. Since this programme also required a lot of reading this was even more challenging

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for me. At some stage on this programme, it just became about assignments and reading and make contributions on the discussion forums. Unlike face–to–face, it was difficult to stay motivated and due to time challenges, it was also difficult to collaborate and negotiate with learning peers. I was willing to travel this whole journey, but it just didn't live up to the expectations that I had. The teaching and learning aspect of the online programme was in my opinion lost along the way"

To better understand adult learners and their challenges specifically at the start of an online learning programme it is important so institutions can get a better understanding and address diverse adult learner challenges. Interviewees were asked to consider two (2) statements, then reflect on them and decide whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements.

Statement 1:" *A lack of preparation and online readiness provides on–boarding challenges"*

All of the respondents agreed with the above statement that a lack of preparation and online readiness provides on–boarding challenges as demonstrated below:

Reginald – "Yes, a lack of preparation and online readiness can provide on boarding challenges. But for me, it doesn't have to be a negative thing. In the beginning yes it was rushed and demanding but it also allowed for learning to take place fast and for the learner to take initiative to reach out to peers. So, it can also turn out to be positive"

Washington – "Yes, I do agree with that statement if you are not ready for online, and you did not prepare you will be faced with on–boarding challenges"

Brenda – "Yes, it definitely does. Any programme for that matter you need some sort of preparation and especially an online programme such as this. If there is an expectation for people to use different apps, then programmes preparation is very critical for you to be ready"

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Thora – "Yes, a lack of preparation and online readiness provides on boarding challenges. I feel I have elaborated on this in some of the other questions as well"

Doreen– "Yes, I do agree with this statement as technical challenges was huge for me in the beginning– and I had to learn through and overcome these challenges"

Nicole – "Yes you need preparation for this course, I do agree. Luckily, we had an orientation at the start of the programme. Without any orientation, there will be challenges"

Norma – "Yes you would have on–boarding challenges as we traditionally come from a place where teaching is face–to–face. So, orientation is important as this is where you get your heartbeat. That support is important. If you don't have an orientation you would need to be intrinsically motivated to succeed on your own"

Chad – "Yes this is true. I spoke about this before. Orientation is very important especially for older adult learners and for people less familiar with technology and if there is a lack of preparation this could be problematic and will cause challenges even exclusion. But once again this depends on the digital literacy levels of the individual learners"

Statement 2: "Interactive online discussion forums and support platforms are recommended to help adult learners to transition in online higher education landscapes, to develop digital identities and digital literacies"

Six of the participants agreed with the above statement and agree that interactive online discussion forums and support platforms are important and recommend it to help them transition into online higher education landscapes and also to develop digital identities and digital literacies.

Reginald – "The discussion forums and support platforms on this programme was a safe space, and it was a good platform to help learners transition as the topics were guided by lecturers and facilitators"

Washington – "Definitely, the support platforms are very important especially if you want to take the maximum number of adult learners into account. Especially older adult learners much support is needed to develop. And help is very crucial for me and unfortunately that is lacking"

Thora – "I agree, however with the interactive online discussion forums it also becomes very demanding when you have to say something and especially when you are not always ready to say something– so basically feeling forced to interact. But the support platform is good. Like having a mentor perhaps as a support platform, that would be recommended. For me, it would have been a lightbulb at the end of the tunnel so yes it would be recommended"

Doreen– "Yes, it is recommended. If the support platform was available to me, it would of really helped me a lot. I felt my younger counterparts from the education industry had an advantage over me. So, the support structures I am referring to are different support structures for technical support and even educational support. I felt I had to work harder than my younger counterparts especially due to my age"

Nicole – "yes they recommended because this is good for transitioning and to learn from others"

Norma – "Yes, support platforms and discussion forms is recommended. Even if you do it on WhatsApp. I find you then develop your relationship more. These platforms one should grab it with both hands where you can speak and interact with peers even those across the border or you will feel alone and you may even feel like dropping out, but your peers on these support platforms will carry you and pick you up and tell you keep going we are nearly there"

Two of the participants have not outright agreed with this statement highlighting that it could also on the flip side make some adult learners feel inadequate and also that if the platforms used are not the most up–to–date platforms it could affect the learning experience.

Brenda – "I think it does, but it can also not. There were people that did not even comment on the platforms. Maybe they felt that their contributions were not valuable. Some felt they would rather not contribute and only participated in assignments. So, I do think the forums and discussions is of value and important, but it can also make some feel inadequate as they fear to look stupid, so they rather don't say anything on discussion forums. Even though you don't see the person face to face you still feel like you will come across stupid. Maybe you want to write something, but when you read it out loud to yourself and you feel it's stupid, so you rather decide not to post a comment. Some people did not reach out to support platforms. So, it's important to prepare people even in this regard"

Chad – "It is recommended but the online discussion forums and support platforms used are not necessary the most up–to–date and this makes a huge difference to the learning experience and improves the learning experience. Perhaps the programme facilitators should find better ways and more updated ways for interaction and for support"

Reflective statements in this section were seeking to understand ways in which online platforms and digital infrastructure assists adult learners to achieve educational goals. All participants agreed that a lack of preparation and online readiness provides on–boarding challenges and various other internal, external and programme, related challenges were highlighted in this section. In the next section perceptions of future learning needs with be explored.

4.1.7 Future Learnings

Because future learning is about the development of future competencies required to achieve social and education freedom interviewees were asked a self–reflection question on what kind of new learnings, they believed would most appropriately still prepare them for the future and a diverse list of new learnings were highlighted by participants as demonstrated below:

Reginald – "Learning pertaining to writing research proposals, improvement on my academic skills, my academic referencing, and in–text citations so I can become a more experienced researcher in the future"

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Washington – "For me, it would be more current subject matter in this course as well as economics and politics. All of these I believe would together most appropriately still prepare me for the future. It is important to understand and know global trends. You need to know what is going on in the world. You also need to understand different religions and cultures as this plays a very big role globally. There is a real fight for world domination, so you need to be aware about various trends on a global scale and that is my perspective"

Brenda – "Look I do think, one of things that is going to take off even more than now is definitely digital online learning. One of things I use now are survey forms on SharePoint, but I had to teach myself. But you need to also start teaching yourself and embracing digital technology to make your work life easier as well"

Thora – "Reading and writing academically is always an area for improvement for me. Even academic communication. How I speak and say something in an academic way"

Doreen– "It would be important for me to keep learning and updating myself with regards to the latest technology. It is key for me. If I don't keep abreast digitally, I will have to start over"

Nicole– "To stay up to date on new programmes and applications being developed to stay up to date. A PhD qualification is also something I look forward to– always aiming for higher. This will also diversify me more"

Norma – "I am not on social media, and I notice when working on some projects I am asked to check feedback on social media. For example, LinkedIn. I need to learn to collaborate and bend in terms of some of my principles in terms of social media. For example, I never wanted to be on WhatsApp, but I have to think how can use social media platforms as these to collaborate and learn and see what is beneficial for me to learn from these platforms. Like LinkedIn when I joined, I said" wow I am here forever"

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Chad – "I think for me the learning for me would be more holistic now. Learnings about being the best version of myself and not only in terms of digital skills or project management skills. But about wellness and mental wellness. And I would absolutely recommend this on this master's programme. If I had some sort of wellness support or knowledge of how to look after my wellness as well it would be such a massive help and especially on this programme. At some point you feel isolated or alone on this programme and wellness knowledge will make a huge contribution personally and academically"

To probe further self–reflection on their identities for further lifelong learning interviewees were asked whether their past experiences and learnings in this online master's programme provided them with any resources on which they could draw for their present and their future. Every participant could identify resources on which they can draw in their present and future and the resources highlighted were diverse and are demonstrated below:

Reginald – "Yes, certain collaborations and relationships were formed especially with peers at my home university but not necessary with the other participating universities"

Washington – "Yes what I draw – like with you giving me this opportunity to participate in this study, what I draw from it is a resolve to finish my course. Right at the beginning, I stopped, then started then stopped again. And what I learned from that firstly, is to get up and pick up where you left off and carry on and try to finish off whatever you started in life, and this is possible. Also, the papers I read and the material I gathered. I still have it and can draw from it going forward. But the biggest is that we must not give up"

Brenda – "For me, it is a yes. I can start identifying and classifying people into learning categories. So, I think for me I can always draw on this learning so that I can also especially in a leadership position be a mentor to others and be a better mentor as such. Especially when it comes to learning in the workplace"

Thora – "Yes it taught me a lot. It provided me with resources, but I can't draw upon these resources in my current job and in my present capacity

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working with children. I can't use it currently in my capacity. I may have to consider changing my job in order to draw upon these resources to do something greater, especially coming from a rural area"

Doreen– "Yes, for me it would be academic resources. I can still call on certain people if needed. Like a friend or a learning partner"

Nicole– "Yes, what I have learned really helped me. It helps even when having critical discussions at work as well as when you write and respond to discussions and different topics. What we learn today can definitely help in the future"

Norma – "Yes, I made social resources. I made friends from different countries. I can draw on the relationships that were built and I can call on these relationships. I believe that even if I am working on a project, we would be able to collaborate. This programme also introduced me to conferences and presenting a paper at a conference. I know the standard and requirements needed to present a paper at a conference"

Chad – "Certainly, a connection with the people on the programme is important and I had this in the beginning with my learning partner, but my learning partner left. So, from a networking perspective, I can't really say I can still rely on any networks or that I can draw on anyone presently or in the future. Other than the affiliation to these collaborating international universities and by association to this programme and these universities I can't really identify anything else or resources that I can draw upon"

To build on previous questions for assessing future learning choices interviewees were asked whether adult education and learning, lifelong Learning, and digital learning featured in any of their future study choices and plans.

One participant highlighted that adult education and learning would feature in their future study choices and plans as demonstrated below:

Reginald – "Although it didn't before. It does now. Even while on this master's programme it still didn't feature. But now my song has changed. Yes, I would like to pursue a PhD in adult education. I first thought that I

should pursue something totally different and new. But I came to the realisation that I do want to study further in the line of adult education"

One participant highlighted that adult education and learning, and lifelong learning would feature in their future study choices and plans as demonstrated below:

Norma – "Adult Learning– yes because I am currently teaching in a private college currently which are adult students. I will take what I learned on this programme and take it to where it is applicable. This would then also mean that Lifelong learning would also be embraced in my future but in terms of Digital and the costs that goes along with it. For now, it is questionable. I still have to grow in this field but maybe one day I can help bring about changes for others in this regard"

Two participants highlighted that lifelong learning and digital learning would feature in their future study choices and plans as demonstrated below:

Brenda – "Lifelong learning– I am definitely a lifelong learner so yes lifelong learning definitely will always feature. Digital citizenry is also something that will form part of my lifelong learning. We will need to enhance our skills so yes digital citizenry and lifelong learning will go hand in hand"

Thora – "Lifelong learning yes. I am a teacher by heart. I live for my learners. I therefore will continue learning so I can teach our future leaders and uplift my learners so they can also become lifelong learners. Digital Citizenry yes because the learners are ripe and interested and hungry to know more. For this reason, I want to learn more so I can teach them to know more and to do things online and to further expand and be ready for the 4th industrial revolution"

Four out of the eight participants highlighted that adult education and learning, lifelong learning and digital learning would feature in their future study choices and plans. This is half of the participants as demonstrated below:

Washington– "Adult Education – yes, Lifelong learning – yes & digital citizenry yes. All of them feature in my future study choices. My wife and I

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are starting our own primary school in a rural area. We are in education our whole lives and will be in education our whole lives. We are born for education. We want to learn everything about education from primary education to higher education. And therefore, we are also in lifelong learning. The 4th industrial revolution also forces people to be digital and therefore we need to keep abreast"

Doreen– "Adult Education–definitely yes. As I said before I will align my learnings on this course with my TEFL knowledge to teach others. Lifelong Learning– yes because I will always remain a student and I would always want to know and learn more. Digital citizenry– yes as they all aligned. I will be able to teach and work wherever I am in a digital world and be part of a digital world"

Nicole– "This master's is taking so long; I could have finished a PHD already. So, I will use my other master's as a building block to go further and it is not in education. But it does feature in my future because I deal with adults on a daily basis where I work. I also want to be a lifelong learner so I can motivate adults to be lifelong learners. Like now I am blindly stuck and financially drained. It's been almost 5 years struggling to finish this masters. But I am considering other study choices. Digital citizenry does feature indeed"

Chad – "Adult Education yes, especially since I am also in this space at the moment. Lifelong learning yes as well, as at my institution I work at an institution of learning, and we are also encouraged to continue learning. Digital Citizenry certainly also yes. You can't do any of the others this aspect or you will be handicapping yourself"

In this section, interviewees provided detailed responses on ways in which they understood their own agency, perspectives of lifelong learning as well as future learning. The following section provides an analysis of these findings based on the research questions, theoretical approach and literature review.

4.2 Data Analysis

In this section, data will be analysed in six main categories and involves an interpretation of the data gathered using analytical and logical reasoning.

- Who is the adult learner in higher education today?
- Lifelong Learners
- New learnings
- How do adult learners identify with being digital citizens?
- Challenges as an adult learner
- Future learnings

4.2.1 Who is the adult learner in higher education today?

In this category, data was analysed in terms of the following sub–themes:

- Multiple Roles and Commitments
- Fragmented and Less Linear Paths
- The Impact of COVID–19
- Drawbacks and advantages of online learning
- First Time online learners
- Adaptability
- Certain Levels of Learning Support
- Collaborative Learning
- Intergenerational Learning
- Mentorship

Multiple Roles and commitments

Participants were asked to share their adult learning stories and narratives to assess the participants' agency within the adult learning process. Identified in the data was that adults held *multiple roles and commitments*. Adult learners have multiple roles and commitments to fill over and above their studies and these roles have to be fulfilled alongside their academic responsibilities which could cause challenges. These are family commitments, work, and other life commitments. Division for Lifelong Learning (2010) states that a working definition of an adult or mature learner is as follows: "An adult learner is someone who carries multiple

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responsibilities; is over 25 years old; frequently works while studying; has had significant time away from the study and has had work or community engagement experience" which is also consistent with the literature and not departing from the literature.

Fragmented and less linear paths

The question also further wanted to assess the participants' real freedom to do things and identified from the data that adult learners had *fragmented and less linear paths*. The path taken by the adult or "mature" learner into higher education is very different, more unpredictable, less linear, and frequently involves multiple breaks and transitions. As a result, they may have highly complex and fragmented pasts that, at times, could threaten to disrupt both their past and future trajectories (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). This relates to the data below showing the less straight forward paths of adult learners and resonates with the work of (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). No adult learning story is the same. Each participant has a different and unique story. Only one out of the 8 adult learner participants went on to study immediately after finishing school whilst the rest never pursued further studies directly after school though the participant still has another incomplete degree that they commenced with in the past. The participants provided personal accounts of their pasts and their adult learning journeys.

Online learning story: The Impact of COVID–19

Interviewees were then asked to further share their online learning stories to understand their exposure to online learning and to identify challenges and successes that could assist learners to attain their educational and lifelong learning goals. The analysis of the data revealed that the COVID–19 epidemic drove adult participants to use technology more frequently and exposed them to it more frequently and that adult learners gained a lot of knowledge during this time. The COVID–19 pandemic sparked a broad, sudden, and powerful digital transformation that compelled many to make exceptional digital leaps and profound changes in family life, education, and society as a whole (Livari, Sharma, & Ventä–Olkkonen, 2020).

Drawbacks and advantages of online learning

The data further revealed that the participants see both the benefits and drawbacks of online learning, which is consistent with their personal accounts of their online learning experiences as adult learners. This is in line with the claim made by (Pirhonen et al., 2020) that adult learners are active agents who understand the world as it is being transformed by technology

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while being able to see its advantages and disadvantages. Technical, time management, social isolation, data usage, and financial issues are a few of the drawbacks identified. Some advantages include giving students the freedom they need to succeed in all of their endeavours by allowing them to attend classes whenever they want and finish the homework on their own schedules (Wright, 2015). This is consistent with the assertion made by Kara et al. (2019) that an online learning environment gives adult learners the flexibility they need to manage their time for their own learning processes. Other advantages drawn from participant data included flexibility, the ability to learn at one's own pace from the comfort of one's home and financial savings from not having to pay for travel.

First Time online learners

Asking the interviewees to share their online learning stories also further ties in to understand and assessing what the participants' real freedoms do things. It was further found that 7 out of the 8 participants has a preference to take up face–to–face learning opportunities. Face–to–face learning opportunities are what adult learners were exposed to and used to which is the reason why online learning presented many challenges. The adult learners who chose this online master's programme are *first–time online learners.* It is found that this online master's programme was chosen and enrolled for by participants due to various reasons such as their geographical locations, COVID, by default and due to other face–to–face programmes being full. This is consistent with the study of Wright (2015), who asserts that online courses present a variety of difficulties for the first–time online learner due to a lack of readiness for the online environment, difficulty adjusting to new tools, and a variety of additional platforms.

Adaptability

It was important to know how adult learners came to use online learning and the triumphs that helped them achieve their educational and learning objectives. The findings revealed that adult learners are adaptable despite the different challenges they encounter during their online learning experiences. Participants adjusted to online learning, made active changes, practised, made active accommodations in their lives, and kept up with an attitude of learning and lifelong learning even though they preferred face–to–face interactions and faced various difficulties and on–boarding challenges. It is widely accepted that one must be a lifelong learner to thrive in a quickly changing, technologically advanced global society. This ability aids individuals in

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adapting to and overcoming challenges on a social, professional, and individual level (Kungu & Machtmes, 2009).

Certain levels of learning support

From the data, it also strongly comes that the adult learner in this programme desired a *certain level of learning support* whilst participating in online learning programmes using digital technologies. In order to share information, voice their opinions, and stay current, older adults find value in mastering digital technology through group interactions. Collaboration, cooperation, intergenerational learning, and mentoring are a few of these interactions (Ahmad et al., 2022).

Collaborative learning

The learning support identified is *collaborative peer learning.* This is where adult learners are motivated and learn together with peers in a collaborative way. Lifelong learning is a societal paradigm of education that is applied throughout one's life. It is seen as an essential activity since it represents a continual supporting process that embraces continuous possibilities (Hubackova & Semradova, 2014).

Intergenerational learning

Another learning support identified is *intergenerational learning.* This is where adults learn with the assistance of family members. Adult learners have a variety of roles in their lives, such as that of a worker, a husband, a partner, a parent, and a carer, and these numerous positions may be advantages due to the social support they bring (Ross–Gordon, 2011).

Mentorship

Another learning support identified is *mentorship*. This is where adult learners need a mentor to assist, motivate, support, and provide guidance. It is crucial that adults have the appropriate encouragement and support to fully participate in education and achieve their goals within the context of lifelong learning since engaging with education is a huge step for adults (Graham, 2015).

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4.2.2   Lifelong Learners

Lifelong learning is crucial to maintaining a competitive advantage in the twenty-first century so that abilities and skills can be continuously enhanced for a competitive advantage (Laal & Salamati, 2012). Participants were asked what their understanding was of lifelong learning. Understandings of lifelong learning from research participants were important to explore as well as to see how participants understood the lifelong learning concept, together with their motivational attitudes to further learning. From the data received from the participants was evident that each participant understands the importance of lifelong learning to stay abreast and was motivated not to be left behind in a fast–changing society. Table 4.1 details participants' understanding of lifelong learning.

Table 4.1: What do you understand by lifelong learning?

Lifelong learning is formal or non–formal education
Lifelong learning is about having a growth mindset
Lifelong Learning is about constantly evolving
Lifelong learning is a continuous improvement
Lifelong Learning provides a sense of self–enrichment
Lifelong learning is about keeping abreast with new knowledge and skills
Lifelong learning builds confidence
Lifelong learning is a never–ending journey of reading and finding out more
Lifelong learning an urge to constantly know more
Lifelong learning is constantly learning new things
Lifelong learning is learning every day
Lifelong learning is also for personal development
Lifelong learning also motivates one to learn
Lifelong learning is about constantly evolving and finding new ways of doing things
Lifelong learning is critical as sectors and industries continue to change

To probe participants' lifelong learning attributes and worldviews that assist in achieving educational success interviewees were asked whether they felt that they embraced a culture of lifelong learning. There was no doubt among any of the participants, indicating that they most definitely did embrace a culture of lifelong learning. Reasons for embracing a culture of lifelong learning could be regarded as largely aspirational, and with the view to gainful

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employment. To further deepen their understanding of lifelong learning achievements interviewees were asked what the main lifelong learning outcomes they believe they acquired in this online master's programme. Six out of the eight participants said that the program had helped them become more skilled at updating their knowledge and evolving as lifelong learners. The remaining two participants, however, felt that this program had only solidified what they already knew before enrolling in it and had not advanced or improved their development as lifelong learners.

Social and pedagogical lifelong learning outcomes

Table 4.2 below identifies the main lifelong learning outcomes highlighted by participants. These include both a *social and pedagogical orientation.* These lifelong learning outcomes can help individuals in ways that can improve their well–being, societal, learning and growth in various ways. Lifelong learning is projected to develop in response to constantly shifting societal needs, and it has a significant role to play in enabling people to keep their skills up to date and actively participate in both education and society as a whole (UNESCO, 2020).

Table 4.2: Main lifelong learning outcomes

Self–motivation
Self–assessment
Cultural skills
Self–reflection
Learned to understand different personalities
To be able to collaborate online with others
Construct sentences
Learned to be disciplined with time
Resilience
Perseverance
The ability to find my voice
Confidence
Skills to participate in broad discussions
Learned to use a learning and self–reflection logbook
Obtained online learning skills

Digital confidence
Digital dependence and independence

"Adults integrate and orient their learning in the present and future contexts, drawing from their past life experiences. Embracing these principles, design learning focuses on understanding adult learners and developing curriculum and services to address their genuine needs rather than those assumed by educators on their behalf," (Brewer, 2020, p. 62). It is worth noting the implications of educational institutions working towards the kind of lifelong learning required for the future, and Brewer (2020) represents a strand of scholarship cutting a new path in this regard.

4.2.3   New Learnings

Interviewees were asked what their motivations were to pursue higher education as well as what they were seeking from higher education when they joined the programme. This question was seeking to understand prior knowledge of motivation and mindset to assess changes in the participants. It was found that adult learners are driven in a variety of different ways, and many factors encourage them to pursue higher education. Understanding the factors that encourage adults to learn is crucial (de Oliviera, 2009).

Work–related and personal motivations

From the data, it was identified that the motivations to participate in higher education are mainly *work–related and personal motivations*. Personal–related motivations mentioned were seeking to advance teaching skills, seeking to advance knowledge, seeking recognition from family and friends, and seeking respect from society. Work–related reasons are seeking professional advancement, competing in the respective industry and markets as well as obtaining a formal qualification. Six out of the eight participants were motivated to do the master's programme for the actual qualification. This information supports de Oliviera's (2009) assertion that learning is centred on the individual and is motivated by a complex mix of factors, including both personal and professional considerations. Interviewees were further asked what new learnings they acquired in the online master's programme to determine what they may be acquiring especially in terms of lifelong learning, online learning, and as digital citizens. The question was further asked to assess the learnings and to see what people are effectively able to do and be. The new learnings participants acquired shows that though students are faced with challenges they do learn and solve immediate problems, complete tasks, make decisions

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and acquire a variety of skills. The list of new learnings acquired is a fair indication that there were opportunities for growth and development.

Knowledge, skills and attitudes

Table 4.3 documents the new learnings adult learners acquired in this online master's programme. It included a variety of *knowledge, skills and attitudes* and does not only include technological skills because of its online nature but also learning skills, cognitive skills, social skills, and other skills. This is in line with Jimoyiannis (2015), who asserts that while ICT literacy was the foundation of digital literacy, it also incorporates a number of other skills required for people to function properly and be able to produce, adapt, and share knowledge.

Table 4.3: New Learnings acquired on the programme

Collaboration skills
Learned how to work in groups
Learned project management skills
Technical skills
Writing Skills
Skills to voice my opinion in broad discussions
The skills to understand people
Cultural skills
Problem–solving skills
Academic Writing skills
Technological skills
Referencing skills
Peer learning skills
Creative and critical thinking skills
Learned to critique my own work
Learned to critique the work of others
Scholarly competency skills

To assess prior knowledge and learnings participants were further asked whether new learning outcomes affected their identities to see the impact of the interviewees' current learning on their identity formation. Five of the participants' answers were affirmative in this regard, two

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participants agreed to a certain degree and only one participant highlighted that learning outcomes did not affect their identity. From the data received it can still be found that the shift into higher education on an online learning programme is not necessarily an easy event. Transitioning into higher education is an intense experience that challenges someone's sense of themselves as they must construct themselves and engage in identity management on a day–to–day basis. Since they must switch between multiple identities throughout their lives, integrating new identities is frequently regarded as difficult (Brunton & Buckley, 2020). In order to flourish in a world that is rapidly changing and technologically complicated on a global scale, it is commonly acknowledged that one must be a lifelong learner. This enables people to adapt and meet difficulties on a societal, industry, and personal level (Kungu & Machtmes, 2009). To further assess participants' prior knowledge interviewees were asked what they brought to the learning agenda to explore the kind of contribution adult learners bring to certain educational settings. It is found that participants struggled to speak about what they brought to the programme along with their accomplishments and achievements.

Struggle to discuss accomplishments and achievements

Reflecting on the interviews with the participants, this question was answered with hesitation, long pauses before answering and just a general *struggle for participants to speak about their own accomplishments and achievements*. Due to the limitation of this being a mini–thesis, I highlight this to be a recommended topic to further research and to further explore the reasons that adult learners may struggle to talk about their own achievements and accomplishments and what they bring to the learning agenda. Further probing was necessary so an assessment could be made of prior knowledge and sense of agency, and participants then attempted to highlight what they brought to the programme. Table 4.4 details what the participants brought to the programme and what others could learn from them:

Table 4.4: Learnings participants brought to the programme

How to provide context to a discussion and topic
How to provide a different perspective
A level of creativity
Planning skills
How to bring direction to a group essay

How to structure essays
People skills
Computer skills
Understanding people's behaviours
Research skills and research methods skills
Zeal and enthusiasm
Presentation skills

Having discussed and summarised new learnings experienced by adult learners on their learning pathways, the next section will now focus on how adult learners identify with being digital citizens.

4.2.4 How do adult learners identify with being digital citizens?

Digital Identity and Digital Citizen

Adult learners are not only involved in identity formation but also in the practicality of managing the transitions between numerous context–specific identities and fitting everything in (Brunton & Buckley, 2020). Participants were asked if they embraced the construct of "digital citizen," and only one participant responded that they didn't. When this was looked into further, it was discovered that Washington, the only participant, was also the oldest adult learner enrolled in the master's program. As a result, the reaction of the youngest adult learner to this topic was also examined, and the respondent's response was entirely different. The discrepancy in responses between the two participants may be due to a combination of personal traits, digital know–how, and talents, as well as their ages at the time of the program. Other information from one participant is also noticed, and this participant feels that because of her age, she had to work harder than her younger peers on this program and that they had an advantage over her on the programme. This was an unexpected result and given the limitations of the study and the fact that this is only a mini–thesis, it would be prudent to conduct additional research to better understand the differences in identity struggle, identity formation, and success rates between adult learners and older adult learners. Other findings from the data include that participants are beginning to use social media more frequently, are confidently securing their personal information online, and are raising awareness among others. Work–related tasks are also becoming more digital, as is banking. Participants are also discovering that they are leaving digital footprints and developing digital identities.

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To get a further understanding of digital citizenship within the programme interviewees were asked whether the online master's programme required them to reflect on a culture of being a digital citizen to assess whether institutions focus on people's capabilities to do what they value and to be the kind of person they want to be. More than half of the participants said that they were required to reflect on the culture of being a digital citizen as part of the master's program. Three of the participants didn't feel that the program required them to reflect on a culture of being a digital citizen, but based on the data, it appears that all participants agreed and felt that they had grown as digital citizens on the online master's program. They indicated the following ways: participating in online groups, finding their voice online, learning new applications, and doing various online tasks with confidence.

To avoid feeling isolated and out of place in the digital world, it is crucial for adults to locate and position themselves in terms of their digital identities (Muoz–Rodrguez, Hernández–Serrano, & Tabernero, 2020). This will help them open up opportunities for participation and deeper engagement in the digital world. Due to the literature's emphasis on the value of digital literacy, it was crucial to ascertain whether participants considered themselves to be digital citizens. As a result, participants were questioned about how crucial they thought the development of digital identity and a sense of belonging was to their participation in the online master's program. Participants believed that developing a sense of belonging and a digital identity was crucial for taking part in this online master's program and that a lack of either could put them in danger of social exclusion when taking part in other online higher education programs. The data acquired on this subject supports Reneland–Forsman's (2018) assertion that social isolation and digital technology are intimately related. Therefore, it is essential to consider adults' use of digital interfaces to encourage social inclusion and develop efficient educational practices that evaluate adult learners' actual freedom to do things.

Participants were asked to describe whether it was easy or difficult to integrate new adult learning identities into their existing identity portfolios to understand the different levels of identity struggle, the shifting sense of who they are, and their ongoing day–to–day identity management. Incorporating new adult learning identities into an existing identity portfolio was extremely difficult for six out of the eight participants, which is consistent with the work of (Brunton & Buckley, 2020), who assert that adults must switch between identities in different contexts. As a result, integrating any new identities is sometimes referred to as being challenging since it interferes with a person's perception of the stability or coherence of their

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present sense of identity. During times of transition, adults experience some degree of identity struggle, particularly as they negotiate and interact with their emerging identity and their pre–existing sense of self (Brunton & Buckley, 2020). Because of a need to understand ways in which institutions and their practices actually focus on people's capabilities and the institutions' support of digital identity formation participants were asked whether they had the understanding that they would be required to have a well–developed digital identity when joining this online master's programme and six out of the eight claims that they didn't have the understanding that they would be required to have a well–developed digital identity when joining this online programme. Two participants mentioned that it was mentioned in the advertisement for the programme that one needed to be able to use a computer and be accessible on the internet. However, they did not fully comprehend the impact of going online and neither did they understand the magnitude of the requirement. According to (Brunton & Buckley, 2020), making the shift to higher education is a difficult experience that tests individuals' self, especially given that they must create themselves and participate in identity management. To deepen the probe into institutional practices and support of digital identity formation interviewees were asked whether they felt there was an allowance for them to develop their digital identity in this online master's programme. Half of the participants felt that there was an allowance on this online master's programme to develop their digital identity due to factors such as working and collaborating in groups on MS Teams, others felt they were given the space to grow and build a digital footprint whilst two participants felt that there wasn't an allowance due to the demands of the programme and just having to do what was necessary so you could finish a course and two participants were not sure. This was an important observation, especially for institutions, educators, curriculum developers and instructional designers of online and digital environments. Those who provide education in online and digital environments, and particularly those who provide adult education to older learners, should take into account social and motivational variables because doing so will help adults with digital identity, digital inclusion, and sustainable development (Muoz–Rodrguez, Hernández–Serrano, & Tabernero, 2020).

Digital Literacy

Jimoyiannis (2015) claims that the general population lacks the digital literacy and skills necessary to keep up and that adults have an advanced need to improve their digital competence. When asked whether their level of digital literacy has increased as a result of the

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online master's program, all of the participants said that it has, in ways like writing on different platforms, reading online, analysing information, and providing perspectives, critical thinking, improved writing, increased research skills, and having higher levels of awareness of online culture.

Some obstacles and challenges were then raised to help understand the factors that might prevent adult learners from achieving their educational goals. Participants were also asked if it hampered their learning journeys when they had to learn new digital skills in addition to the program's subject matter. Five of the participants highlighted that their learning journey is hindered and hampered when new digital skills are required to be learned alongside the content of the learning programme and highlighted the struggle of having to deal with learning content and trouble shoot technical aspects which they felt slows them down, distracts them and causes panic which affects ultimately affects their progress on the programme. It was found that these five participants were affected to a great extend as they were less familiar with the technology. The data aligns with the work of (Steinke & Bryan, 2014). The other three participants were not hindered as they were more familiar with the technology.

After hearing a statement, interviewees were asked to think and indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with it. The purpose of this reflective question was to focus on the individual and gain an understanding of them as productive members of society both inside and outside of the program.

Statement: *"Improving adult digital literacy levels is fundamental in the sense that a) it motivates people to develop literacy and language skills, numeracy, scientific and cultural literacy, b) contributes to strengthening human capital and c) bridges the digital divide and confronts exclusion and marginalisation"*

From this question, some intriguing ideas emerged that institutions should consider as participants demonstrate how they face a variety of obstacles and difficulties and how difficult it can be since they don't always have control over their freedom to live and realise their full potential. This fits well with the study's theoretical framework, which gives people's beings and doings a priority along with their opportunity to realise those beings and doings. Some adult learners believe that this online master's degree left them blindly trapped and monetarily depleted. Financial obstacles as well as ongoing data expenses were emphasized as constraints. A participant goes on to add that a different strategy will be required because education is now

expensive and only available to the wealthy, meaning that people will continue to be marginalised and excluded. Beyond technology access, there are capacity gaps, and individuals who are marginalised frequently fall behind in engaging in our digital society. Technology alone won't be sufficient to close these gaps; instead, comprehensive solutions that account for a variety of challenges are essential to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to gain useful skills and relevant knowledge (Chakroun & Keevy, 2018). Robeyns (2017) asserts that the capabilities approach strives to remove these kinds of challenges to allow people to live the lives they have good reason to value. In this regard, the capabilities approach should be taken into account, and issues of what individuals are capable of doing, being, and achieving should be brought up. It's crucial to consider what institutions can do to remove these challenges and to help people reach their full potential. Additional questions could be whether organizations, methods, and policies actually prioritise people's abilities to achieve the things they value (Robeyns, 2017).

4.2.5 Challenges as an Adult Learner

Internal, External and Programme related challenges

Participants were questioned about any new learning problems they encountered in this program and were invited to elaborate to better understand adult learners, their many responsibilities, and the ways in which adult learners adjust to varied realities. Identified from the data it was found that participants experienced *internal challenges, external challenges and programme–related challenges.* Multiple duties, including those related to family, career, and time, are some of the external challenges. This is consistent with the argument made by (Ross–Gordon, 2011), who argues that while having a job and a family might be a benefit because of the social support it can offer, it can also present challenges for adult learners in terms of how they allocate their time. These challenges are interconnected and revolve around the adult learners' online learning journey. According to Kara et al. (2019), the issues faced by adult learners in online distance education tend to be highly related to one another, therefore one challenge may give rise to another. According to the data collected, adult learners in this program, especially older adult learners, do not fully utilize technology and pick up new skills and tools as they go. This is consistent with the findings of Reneland–Forsman (2018), who argues that because older persons do not use technology to its full potential, it poses a number of problems that are strongly tied to their self–esteem and may discourage them from participating. This group of adult learners interviewed are also new to the online learning

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environment. This is consistent with Wright's (2015) research, which asserts that taking an online course for the first time might be difficult due to a learner's lack of online readiness, capacity to adjust to new tools, and online platforms. An interesting finding in the data was that participants found that they were on a back foot compared to their learning counterparts from other countries on this intercontinental online master's programme. Due to the limitations of the thesis being a mini–thesis a recommendation for comparative studies into South African adult learner performance on an intercontinental cohort programme is made. Table 4.5 records some of the internal, external and programme–related challenges experienced by adult learner participants in this online master's programme.

Table 4.5: Challenges Experienced by Participants whilst on the Programme

Internal challenges	External challenges	Programme challenges
Feeling of Isolation	Time	Structure of the programme
My own personal mindset	Work demands	Demanding programme
Trauma	Family responsibilities	Working in large groups
Grief	Sickness/Illness	Learning Partners from other countries and different time zones
Stress	Never had a go–to person to explain something in a down–to–earth manner	High volumes of work
Feelings of low self–esteem	Technical skills	High volumes of module content
	Hardware and Software	High volumes of reading
	High Data Costs & Usage	High volumes of researching
	Financial Challenges	Work with multiple course facilitators who provide different subjective feedback, so you have to adapt your writing to the various styles of the facilitators

	Struggling to navigate around the Learning Management System	Challenging to make timeous compulsory contributions on the discussion forum
		Programme very long– Proposal 2 years
		Teaching and Learning aspects are lost along the way

Referring to the theoretical framework employed in this study, the capabilities approach also emphasises the intrinsic worth of education, showing how it can be used to combat inequality and foster economic growth, allowing for a rethinking of lifelong learning. Adult education should therefore be evaluated closely in relation to adults' real–world experiences to consider their unique needs. There is a need to discover a strategy to solve numerous adult learning issues when adults participate in online learning programs based on the list of challenges above. According to Robeyns (2017), the capabilities approach aims to remove barriers so that people are free to live the lives they have good reason to value. Further research revealed that some adult learner participants do not fully utilise technology, technical tools, and applications; others do not have social media profiles and only use technology, when necessary, which can also result in a lack of social interaction. According to Reneland–Forsman (2018), because older persons are not utilising technology to its fullest, therefore they are encountering difficulties, which in turn impacts their self–esteem and deters them from engaging in society.

The need for orientation programmes

Interviewees were asked to analyse two assertions, then think about them, and then decide whether they agreed or disagreed with them to better understand adult learners and their obstacles, particularly also at the beginning of an online learning program.

Statement 1: "A lack of preparation and online readiness provides on–boarding challenge"

This statement was endorsed by each participant. Orientation was a motif that emerged from these data. Before beginning this online master's degree, participants stressed the necessity and significance of orientation and orientation programs, especially for online learning programs that call for the use of various technological tools and applications. Student orientation programs are essential for acquainting students with their educational environment because they encourage participation in learning and may inspire the development of fresh, cutting–

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edge approaches to ensure students' success (Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015). To seek to get a deeper understanding the interviewees were asked if interactive online discussion forums and support platforms are advised as well as whether it is crucial to support adult learners as they transition into online higher education landscapes, develop digital identities, and acquire digital literacy to learn how online platforms and digital infrastructure assists adult learners to achieve their educational goals.

Statement 2:" Student Interactive online discussion forums and support platforms are recommended and is important to help adult learners to transition in online higher education landscapes, develop digital identities and digital literacies"

Six participants agreed that interactive discussion forums and support platforms are important to help adult learners to transition into online higher education landscapes, to develop their identities and their digital literacies. Some participants highlighted that the discussion forums on the programme were a safe space where learners are guided by lecturers and facilitators which could encourage learning. Adults are at risk of social exclusion due to the link between digital and social exclusion; thus, it is crucial for adult learners to interact with digital interfaces to promote social inclusion and create effective educational practices (Reneland–Forsman, 2018). Other participants made special reference to the support that older adult learners require to enhance their skills, as well as peer support and motivation. Adult learners should participate in active online discussion forums to develop their active learning and digital literacy skills (Onyema, Deborah, Alsayed, Noorulhasan, & Naveed, 2019). The other two participants brought about noteworthy results to this contemplation question. Although they concur that interactive discussion forums are crucial to the online master's degree, they can however also make adult learners feel inadequate. Some adult learner participants had a fear of looking stupid when making posts on the discussion forum which resulted in them withdrawing from speaking and making comments on the discussion forum. Another participant highlighted that having to make posts on a discussion forum also becomes very demanding when there is an expectation for participants to say something, and they are not ready to do so. Interaction then feels forced resulting in discussion comments that are not necessarily meaningful. However, it is crucial for adults to situate and locate themselves in the digital world, so they don't feel alone and out of place. Doing so will also help to open up opportunities for participation and greater involvement in the digital environment (Muoz–Rodrguez, Hernández–Serrano, & Tabernero, 2020). Additionally, discussions on a digital discussion forum, according to Durairaj & Umar

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(2015), can enhance a person's learning experience and take it to a new level by enabling them to create new knowledge. Due to the limitations of this being a mini–thesis I recommend further future studies into the benefits of designing meaningful online collaborative discussion forums and support platforms for older adult learners. The next section draws on interviewees' perceptions of their future learning needs.

4.2.6   Future Learnings

Past resources to draw upon in the present and future

Participants were questioned about whether their prior experiences and education from this online master's program gave them any resources they could use in the present and the future because future learning is about developing the future competencies necessary to achieve social and educational freedom. Table 4.6 lists the resources that students might use for both the present and the future.

Table 4.6: Resources from which students can draw in the future

Relationships were formed at my home university
Relationships were formed with learners in other countries
Academic Reading Material
The knowledge, learnings and learning content
Networks Built
The affiliation with international universities
The association with an intercontinental master's programme

Motivational dynamics toward future learning

In this section, an understanding is sought about adult motivational dynamics towards their future. Adult learner participants were asked what kind of new learning they believed would most appropriately still prepare them for their future. There is not a lot of research exploring how adult learners orient themselves towards the future and this is a significant omission since riskier employment futures require a more flexible, dynamic, and future–focused self (Clegg, 2010). Some of the learnings coming through from the data are learning to write research proposals, improving academic reading and writing skills and becoming a more experienced researcher. Other learnings are to keep up to date with new technology and stay up to date

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regarding new digital programmes and applications. One participant's desire to understand how to become his greatest self, including in terms of mental and general wellness, is an intriguing finding. Based on the data from the above participant further analysis was done on the rest of the data throughout all questions finding certain phrases in the data pertaining to well–being. Some of the reflections from participants were that they felt isolated, had no time to reflect, had low self–esteem, were stressed, things were tough, deal with personal trauma whilst on the programme and dealt with sickness whilst on the programme, it was nerve–wracking, some wanted to drop out, some felt lost, others say they feel like throwing in the towel and that the programme didn't allow them to reflect and to enjoy the journey. This highlights a significant concern for wellness within adult online education and adult online learner wellness and these issues and needs of wellness should be addressed so adult learners can reach their full potential as productive members of society.

Multiple roles and duties and their convergence have been noted as one of the biggest obstacles for adult learners since they can lead to stress, overwhelm, and wellness problems (Thompson & Porto, 2014). Returning to the study's theoretical framework and considering the capabilities approach, Saito (2003), as cited by Cortinovis (2018) contend that failing to consider people's actual individual needs and failing to give those needs individualized attention will inescapably devalue those people and perpetuate inequalities and life–long disadvantages. Adult education and participation must therefore always be thought about and evaluated in close relationship with participants' lives to create learning settings that are tailored to their needs (Cortinovis, 2018). See Figure 4.8 for a visual image created to represent some of the participants' words and expressions about their online learning journey struggles, experiences, and overall well–being.
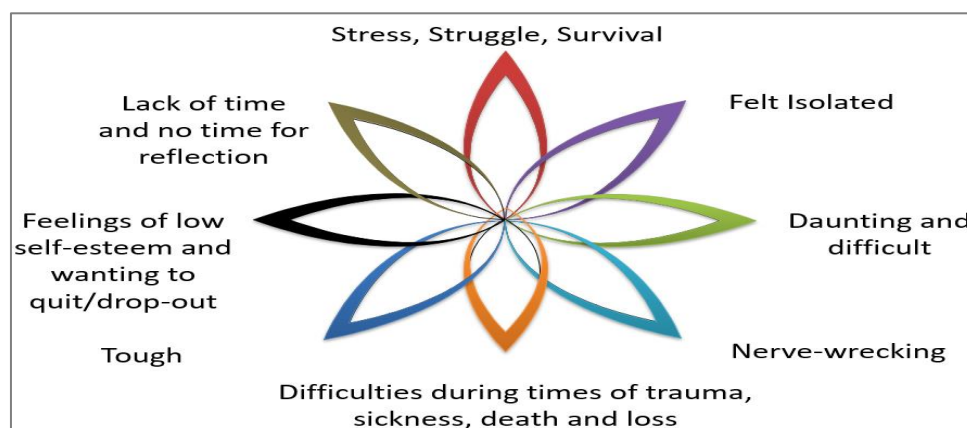
Figure 4.8: Learner journey visual words and expression image

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Feelings of isolation can also be caused by the lack of contact between students in an online learning environment, which can reduce the depth of the learning experience as it leaves out important components of learning (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010). This includes feelings of isolation and adult learners feeling that they never belonged, some were seeking recognition from society and others felt alone and wanted to drop out. The final question was to build on future learning choices. Interviewees were asked whether adult education and learning, lifelong learning, and digital learning were featured in any of their future study choice and plans. The future plans for adult education, lifelong learning, and digital learning are held by half of the participants. Lifelong learning/adult education and Lifelong Learning/digital learning made up the balance. However, it is evident from the data received from the participants that all these learnings are connected and overlap. Refer to Figure 4.9 summarising the findings of this question.
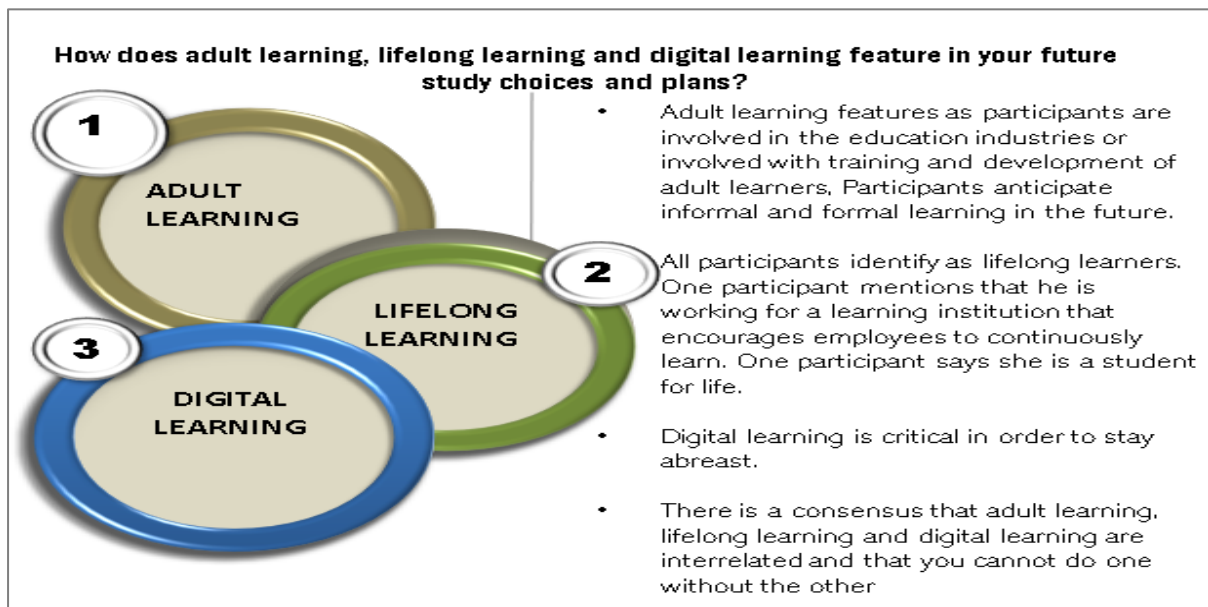
Figure 4.9: Adult learning, lifelong learning and digital learning in future study

4.3   Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the data that was collected during the data collection process and further provides a discussion on the analysis of the data. The process involved an interpretation of the data gathered using analytical and logical reasoning to present the findings and recommendations. Interviewees gave in–depth replies on how they perceived their own agency, opinions on lifelong learning, and perspectives on future learning. With reference to lifelong learning and digital citizenry, a picture emerges in which participants generally ascribe a

http://etd.uwc.ac.za/

lifelong–learning identity to themselves, and for most this would be akin to an adult learning identity. While most participants expressed the desire to be digitally literate and capable, there may not be a shared understanding of digital citizenry. An analysis of these results was illustrated which was based on the study questions, theoretical framework, and literature review.

This chapter will therefore be followed by Chapter 5 which will provide a summary, the findings, recommendations as well as concluding remarks.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

The study aimed to get a better understanding about new learning successes and challenges experienced by adult learners in online higher education landscapes. It explored how these new learnings were attained, and how adult learners perceived and constructed their adult learning identities as adult learners, online learners, lifelong learners, and digital citizens. The overall aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences and how these new learnings may have come about for adults who are participating in online higher education settings. This chapter summarises and provides a synopsis of the most significant findings of the research presented in previous chapters and based on interviews with participants it further provides the limitations of the study as well as recommendations relating to the study and for future research. This chapter then provides conclusion remarks providing a critical account of the study.

Subsequent chapters considered the research question as outlined below:

CHAPTER ONE provided the background to the research problem including stating the problem, specifying the research objectives, and outlining the research approach. In this chapter, the research approach and methods were also described, the objectives were identified, and the rationale was identified and explained.

CHAPTER TWO provided a review of the research literature pertaining to all the concepts of the study. This review established a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the adult learner, their motivations, and new learnings and finally how they identify with adult education and learning, lifelong learning and digital learning which guided the research approach and instruments used.

CHAPTER THREE engaged with the assumptions informing the research methodology and design for this research paper. The section highlights the research design, research site, sampling, research methods, data gathering instruments, reliability and validity issues, the research consideration and confidentiality and the limitations. The scope of the research paper was critically reflected upon in this chapter.

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CHAPTER FOUR provided a discussion pertaining to data presentation and presented the results of the data collected during the data collection process as well as the analysis and interpretation of findings.

CHAPTER FIVE provides a research summary of the study, highlights the findings/conclusions drawn, limitations of the study and recommendations for further and future studies.

5.2   Summary of the Study

Participants in this study were older adult learners with seven out of the eight participants being over 41 years old. It is observed that many of the participants experienced multiple challenges on their online learning journey but have also acquired many learning successes and new learnings, achieved positive lifelong learning outcomes and consequently learned to construct and managed new learning identities. A qualitative research approach was conducted, and the study was conceptually guided by the Capabilities Approach providing a lens through which the experiences of the participant pool most appropriately could be explored. Core interview questions were used as a research instrument to conduct semi–structured open–ended interview questions with eight participants as part of a narrative inquiry. Interviews were audio–recorded and thereafter transcribed verbatim and then captured into the data presentation section. All audio recordings, registers and transcriptions are securely saved on OneDrive with a secured password. The core interview questions were set using pre–determined themes and therefore it was captured and coded under those pre–determined themes. It was then further organised into sub–themes and patterns. The data was then analysed, and variations and similarities were identified to draw conclusions, discuss limitations, and provide recommendations.

5.3   Limitations of the Study

The study invited the participation of a relatively few participants from a much larger pool and within a relatively brief, and specific, timeframe. These factors influenced the kinds of conclusions that have been drawn in this research paper. Noting the limitations, the conclusions of this research paper nevertheless offer important considerations for practical strategies at various levels such as universities, colleges, organisations for training and development, local communities, adult learning communities and lifelong learning communities. Another limitation I further would like to acknowledge is also the fact that this is not a full thesis and therefore is more limited in scope resulting in the researcher trying to present and give a

complete and thorough account of the study. This has also brought about future recommendations for studies. Furthermore, with the benefit of hindsight, and specifically seeking an understanding of who adult learners are for the purposes of my study, I acknowledge that my review of the literature has drawn on adult learning insights which may have held true for particular rather than universal contexts. My use of these scholarly references does not invalidate the particular and instead sheds light on the unevenness of the adult education terrain across local and global contexts. Both as a researcher of this study as well as a mature student, I align myself to the view that adult learners are not a homogenous group and may vary in many ways inclusive of social class, sex-gender, and ethnicity. Also, with the benefit of hindsight, and specifically seeking an understanding of lifelong learning in relation to my research question, the literature points to appreciable complexity in this area for an extended period. My current understandings of lifelong learning point to two divergent paths; mainly the neoliberal discourse promoting an ethos of individual responsibility for learning, and also from a social justice ethos in which lifelong learning holds out a promise to improve the lives of many, and individuals are rightfully supported in this regard by designated social structures.

5.4   Findings of the Study

The exploratory aspect of this study has various implications for those involved in online education, curriculum developers, teachers, instructional designers, policy makers, and private institutions. The eight adult learner participants' narratives provided rich information that was used to generate findings, answer research questions and sub–topics, and come to conclusions. An outline of the data findings is provided below.

5.5   Who is the Adult Learner in higher education today?

It is found that the adult learners in this study have multiple roles, tasks, and commitments outside of their studies that must be performed over and above their academic obligations and there academic and learning journeys are not straight forward. This finding is supported by literature claiming that lifelong learning is for all ages and phases of life, although the term is most frequently used to describe adult or "non–traditional" learners who bring complex life experiences to the classroom and who have various roles and responsibilities (Walters, 2012). Adult learners in this study are more familiar and more at ease with face-to-face learning possibilities and would rather choose to participate in face-to-face learning encounters. The adult learners participating in this study however do see the benefits as well of online learning,

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digitalisation and digital learning environments. This finding resonates with the claim by Pirhonen et al., (2020) that adult learners are active participants who make sense of the digitalising environment and can see the advantages and pitfalls of digitalisation. Adult learners are aware of both the difficulties and benefits of online learning (Pirhonen et al., 2020). It is found that the decision of adult learners in this study to enrol in higher education is motivated by both personal and professional factors. This finding is supported by literature claiming that although employment and employability are important motivations, lifelong learning does not have a single, overarching objective that should be overlooked (Boyadjieva & Ilieva–Trichkova, 2018). An unanticipated finding about the adult learner in the online master's programme participating in this study is that speaking about their own accomplishments and successes was generally difficult for most of these adult learner participants. Another finding is that adult learners on this programme and participating in this study emphasised the value and importance of orientation and orientation programs, especially for learning curricula that demand the use of multiple technological instruments. This finding aligns with the literature claiming that student orientation programs are essential for acquainting adult learners with their educational environment as it encourages participation in learning and may result in the discovery of fresh, cutting–edge approaches to assuring students' success (Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015).

5.5.1   Lifelong Learner

The adult learners in this study further understands the importance of lifelong learning to stay ahead of society's swift changes and to prevent falling behind. Findings reveal that there are key lifelong learning outcomes identified by participants and adult learners in this study that they attained through the online master's program which includes both a social and pedagogical emphasis. These findings are supported by the literature claiming that lifelong learning is projected to develop in response to constantly shifting societal needs, and it has a significant role to play in enabling people to keep their skills up to date and actively participate in both education and society as a whole (UNESCO, 2020). This further resonates with the literature claiming that one of the main tasks of lifelong learning, with a clear social and pedagogical orientation, is to create conditions for the development of every person, regardless of age, but with the obligatory account of the individual abilities, motives and interests, and values. Some of the lifelong learning outcomes that were found and established from adult learners participating in this study was confidence, digital confidence and skills to participate in broad

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discussions. Literature supports these findings claiming that lifelong learning enables self–confidence, creativity, skills, and experience (Bekisheva, Kovalenko, & Gasparyan, 2017).

5.5.2   New Learnings

It is found that the motivations of adult learners to participate in higher education are mainly work–related and personal. This finding resonates with de Oliviera (2009) who claims that learning is centred on the individual and is typically motivated by a variety of factors, including both work–related and personal factors and therefore it is crucial to understand what drives adults to learn. It is found that the new knowledge, skills, and attitudes that adult learners have acquired through this online master's degree is diverse. It is further found that although the adult learner participants on the programme preferred face–to–face instruction and encountered difficulties with on–boarding and other aspects of their online learning journey, they still maintained a positive attitude towards new learnings. The adult learners in this study adjusted their identities, adjusted to online learning, adjusted to changes in practice, and made active accommodations in their lives to participate. This finding resonates with the literature that claims that active conversation and participation in online forums enhances active learning and digital literacy abilities (Onyema, Deborah, Alsayed, Noorulhasan, & Naveed, 2019). It is found that the adult learning journey is also hindered and hampered when new digital skills are required to be learned alongside the new learning content of the online master's programme as this causes a distraction and panic which ultimately affects progress on the programme. This finding is consistent with the literature, which asserts that it is important to avoid overwhelming and overburdening learners by implementing and introducing too many new technologies at once throughout the learning process (Steinke & Bryan, 2014).

5.6   How do adult learners identify with being digital citizens?

Adult learners on this programme and participating in this study claim that they had to make significant digital jumps as a result of the COVID–19 pandemic. This finding is supported by the literature that the COVID–19 pandemic has triggered a broad, abrupt, and intensive digital transition that has forced people to make exceptional digital leaps and substantial changes in society, education, and family life (Livari, Sharma, & Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020). Another finding is that a specific level of learning assistance, such as collaborative learning, intergenerational learning, and mentorship, was required for adult learners participating in this study in terms of the use of digital technology. This finding is supported by the literature that claims that older

adult learners find significance in learning digital technologies through collective interactions allowing them to share information, give their opinion and keep up to date (Ahmad et al., 2022). It was further found that the majority of adult learners on this study do not fully utilise technology and was therefore confronted with difficulties that affected their self–esteem and even prevented them from engaging and actively participating in some instances. This finding is in alignment with Reneland-Forsman (2018) that claims that adult learners use technology in a limited way only and that older adult learners tend to have a variety of issues with digital technology that are thought to be intimately tied to their sense of self which may prevent older adults from participating in certain activities in society.

It is crucial to consider adults' use of digital interfaces to promote social inclusion and to create effective educational practices that assess adult learners' real freedom to do things and participating in digital interfaces is also crucial to learn about digital practices, and to network with others so social inclusion and engagement can be promoted (Reneland–Forsman, 2018). It is a finding that adult learners in this study found it difficult to incorporate new adult learning identities into their existing identity portfolios especially since they have to change between different identities in their lives. The findings of this study are in line with the literature of Reneland-Forsman (2018) in terms of the importance of the construction of a digital identity and sense of belonging when participating in digital interfaces. This finding is further supported and in alignment with Brunton & Buckley (2020) who argues that adults go through periods of identity conflict, especially as they interact and negotiate with their pre–existing sense of self and their newly formed identity. Hall (1996) also supports this finding arguing that adult learners do not have fixed identities (assuming different identities at different times) and in the case of this research, adult learners are challenged to a greater extent in their learning journey because of their specific circumstances.

5.7 Challenges as an adult learner

Adult learners in this study are all first-time online learners and it is a finding that the online learning program and platform was challenging for them as first–time online learners due to their lack of online readiness. Adult learners in this study who enrolled without doing their research about it ran into several challenges and experienced on boarding problems once they started. It is further found that adult learners in this study faced internal, external, and program–related challenges whilst participating in the online master's programme. Some of these challenges are feelings of isolation, stress, work demands, programme demands and family

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responsibilities. These findings align with Wright (2015) who claims that a lack of preparation, adjustment to new tools, and use of different platforms in the online education environment, create a number of obstacles for first–time online learners. The finding about first time online-learners who find online learning programs and platforms challenging also resonates with Brunton & Buckley (2020), arguing that participants evolving sense of who they are in new educational contexts could present them with difficult and challenging experiences. The internal challenges such as feelings of isolation that is highlighted by adult learners in this study is supported by the literature arguing that a lack of interaction between students in an online learning environment could lead to feelings of isolation and could affect the richness of the learning experience (Croft, Dalton & Grant, 2010). This finding also resonates with Kara et al. (2019) who claims that adult learners could also be at risk of social exclusion since digital and social marginalisation are inextricably linked.

5.8   Future Learnings

Little research has been done on how adult learners position themselves for the future (Clegg, 2010). This study also tries to determine the future learnings of adult learners participating in this study and a finding of this study is that more than half of the adult learners have future learning plans for adult education and learning, lifelong learning, and digital learning in the future which they believe are strongly interrelated mentioning that you can't necessarily do one without the other. The phrases and sentiments from adult learner participants in this study also indicate a finding that a strong need exists for wellness programs in the future within online learning programs and adult learners participating in this study also know and understand the future benefits of digital learning. This finding resonates with the literature who claims that there is often an expectation of the future benefits that might be drawn from digital technologies, but further highlights that due to the rapid growth of digital technologies, people are frequently in unequal positions with regards to their skill sets (Pihlainen, Korjonen–Kuusipuro, & Kärnä, 2021).

5.9   Recommendations for Further Research

For this research undertaking and based on my alignment to various strands of the scholarship (challenges, new learnings and learning successes), I make the following recommendations based on what I have gained in this regard.

- More research is advised on the advantages of creating useful online collaborative discussion forums and support platforms for older adult learners because there is an increase in the number of adult learners enrolling in online higher education.

- Another suggestion for future research would be to investigate the causes of adult learners' difficulties in discussing their own accomplishments and what they contribute to the learning agenda. This is because adult learners had trouble talking about what they brought to the learning environment.

- Comparative research on South African adult learners' performance against their international classmates in an international master's program is another recommendation for future studies because some adult learners feel that they are at a disadvantage compared to their international peers.

- It would be advised to investigate online virtual wellness techniques and online wellness programmes, especially since the many roles that adult learners play present one of the biggest obstacles causing overall wellness issues.

5.10 Chapter Summary

The theoretical approach and literature were drawn on to inform the research instruments as well as the interpretation of findings for this study. It is important for people to learn, adapt, and even embrace new technologies to constantly acquire the skills they need to stay relevant in the emerging new digital era. Institutions must therefore expand their programs and develop new and essential models for lifelong learning in the emerging digital economy, opening the door to a lifetime of adaptability and inventiveness. This is important to meet the needs of the modern global knowledge economy. Online higher education environments have gained a lot of popularity and as a result, institutions of higher education must invest in diverse programs that cater to a variety of learners, including adult learners, to help them become digital citizens. There is a significant role to be played in educating students to become digital citizens, fostering participation and engagement, and educating them to handle difficulties and changes correctly and confidently so they can transition from face–to–face learners to digital learners. It is therefore essential to have a thorough awareness of both the challenges and successes of adult learners and the suitability of their digital settings so that stakeholders can develop applicable solutions that will support adult learners to fully participate in society and achieve their goals within the context of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning must further be viewed as an emancipatory process, where the aim would be for adults to be able to develop into

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independent, self–directed learners and members of society who have the freedom and chance to develop unique abilities and become more socially sentient. In online learning environments, the digital design of adult learning programmes should be creative, supportive, and developed to improve digital literacy and proficiency. Additional resources that could be explored and used include orientation and on–boarding workshops, meaningful and interesting online discussion forums for adult learners, virtual wellness strategies, technical assistance, and mentorship always taking the well–being of adult learners into consideration and as an end. Using the capabilities approach as a framework, online institutions must consider how they will help and support students as they exercise their freedom "to be and to do," and programs and curricula of study must be developed with an emphasis on the student's outcomes, negotiation of the student's interests, and recognition of the student's freedom to choose what to be and do (Tait, 2013).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Researcher's Narrative

SECTION 1: WHO AM I AS THE ADULT LEARNER

Reflecting on my own experience as an adult learner I would say my motivations for learning as an adult learner was always diverse throughout my life. My interests were linked to various factors for example, personal life experiences and for workplace development. When I started my first degree (Health and social Sciences majoring in psychology) a few years after finishing my senior education phase it was because of an intrinsic interest in the subject, I wanted to be able to help individuals and the community after being through a tragic personal experience myself.

Higher education helped me meet my developmental needs in my place of work and participating in various education programmes also made me feel that I could contribute meaningfully to my field, discussions in the workplace and the learning environment, apply my learnings, stay up to date, grow and progress. When I worked in banking, I did a higher certificate in banking. When I worked in corporate forensics, I studied Anti–corruption and commercial crime. When I worked in management, I studied management and when I made a shift from corporate to education, I decided to pursue my higher education studies in Education. I felt intellectually stimulated when I participated in various higher education programmes and although my journey was not without challenges, I knew that I was acquiring new knowledge and skills, networking and engaging with other people from diverse industries which also added meaning and satisfaction into my life. I also developed very good relationships and in some instances friendships on my journey. Deciding to continue my path of learning also wasn't always easy. I knew I wanted to and had to continue to grow and develop but it was also challenging in terms of time as I had various other responsibilities beside my studies.

The decision for me to continue studying after my Bachelor of Commerce Honours Degree in Management was difficult. I was in a Senior Management position, but I was not happy in my job. I had to decide whether I would continue my studies and do a master's in management or a Master's in business administration (MBA) or something more in line with my passion in training and development. I really enjoyed the training aspect of my role which was not

surprising as I always had a passion for teaching and learning as well as a way of motivating the staff to participate in various forms of learning. I had to ask myself some questions about where I saw myself in the future, what I could learn further, how I could expand my worldview and I looked at various Coaching options and eventually I changed my academic direction and applied to do a master's degree in education. After being accepted into the programme, I started to apply at educational institutions as well and a few months later I was successfully employed as an educator at a business college. I identify with being a lifelong learner and I always knew that I wanted to make a contribution in terms of education and teaching and learning in South Africa. I also love learning new things and in the same breath I want to love what I do. I am often encouraged by the quote by *Mark Twain – 'Find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life'.*

SECTION 2. WHO WAS AND WHO I AM AS A DIGITAL CITIZEN, MY DIGITAL IDENTITY AND LITERACY?

Throughout my career and especially within the context of my new position as an educator at an online higher education institution and as an adult learner doing an online master's programme, I came to learn that digital literacy was not only important, but it was a necessity.

I was never interested in any social media platforms, internet devices or any new mobile or technological devices. I was computer literate, had a computer, knew how it operated and how to use it but never explored technology and the use of it in an educational setting. I was comfortable to use some digital tools and applications, but I did not use them often. I struggled with various applications and tools as well as problem solving on hardware and software. It was challenging for me to identify as a digital citizen, I was not very confidant, and I never had all the necessary digital competencies.

It took a lot of trial and error as well as a lot of self– motivation to learn and to become more confidant and independent when it came to digital tools and digital environments. Even now I still cannot fully associate and identify with being a digital citizen. I acknowledge that I require to do what I have to keep up to date with changes in the digital world and that I need the support from my employer and educational institution in this regard.

I felt isolated in the beginning of my journey learning via a hybrid and digitised higher education landscape, but overtime became more confidant to collaborate and engage.

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The interactive discussion forums helped me build my identity and find my sense of belonging. Learning is after all about building relationships and trust, and this is and was a very important aspect for me especially within hybrid and digitised higher education landscapes.

SECTION 3. MY NEW LEARNINGS

When I started an online master's programme, I initially had challenges pertaining to tasks using diverse digital applications and tools and it took time before I could acknowledge that digital tools could be used to enhance the learning and teaching experience. Whilst participating in the online master's programme we were encouraged to collaborate in virtual teams for group discussions and tasks where we could engage with each other and learn from one another. Some technological applications and tools we used and that I learned to use were Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google meet, OneDrive, OneNote, and SharePoint. I became more confident to use and access information and even could suggest ways to communicate information. I believe my learning in this regard was a learning of technological and digital literacy.

Another learning for me was the ability to become a critical consumer of information. I learned not to just accept information at face value, I enjoyed questioning and finding answers and researching something critically before responding to discussions or tasks. This I believe could be a digital competence of critical thinking and even problem solving that was learned. Also, as an educator I learned that social media could also be used for learning and collaborating. And in this same way social media can also be used for research purposes or to collaborate with fellow students and facilitators of programmes.

Another learning for me was digital communication. I noticed that on social media people speak using definitions to keep their text short, but I learned that when you on a discussion forum and you trying to communicate you can still do so in full, use paragraphs and full words and bring across your message so that it can be clear to the reader and where the reader will feel comfortable to engage further.

Just as the traditional face to face learning the exact same communication can be replicated and even enhanced in a digitised environment. This competency could also be tied in with a new learning of digital media literacy. I was also not very good in academic referencing when I started my online master's programme, and all assignments were in the form of research essays, and I had to learn how to support my arguments or discussions on online discussion platforms

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and in assignments by using referencing and citations. I learned to read easier digitally instead of printing and dealing with actual printed out articles which was difficult for me initially as I wanted everything printed out. So besides improving my digital reading I believe I also became a bit more analytical and descriptive in my academic writing as well. This competency could be tied in with a new learning of digital communication. Another learning for me in a digitised higher education environment was to start safeguarding my data and privacy, always ensuring to read privacy policies and manage my privacy settings. I also know that with technology there also comes risk and dangers such as viruses and bugs, and I can now access information safely as well as locate sources and information appropriately and safely (digital safety).

SECTION 4: IN SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

All these new learnings that took place throughout my journey developed after experiencing challenges first. I had to show initiative and needed to have the necessary motivation to do my part to develop and learn within a digitised learning environment. I now see digital learning as a continuous process as I know that I still have a lot to learn so I can develop and have 21st century skills. When it comes to digital creativity especially, I know that I also still have so much to learn as an educator and Academic Quality manager. I acknowledge that organisations are using blogs, animation, videos, audios, and gaming to enhance the digital learning experience. I do see the potential in this type of digital creativity and as a learner it would be up to me to embrace this type of digital creativity in the digital learning environment and on the other hand it is also up to the institution to drive digital change. With all this said I do thereby feel that educational institutions, businesses, and various other stakeholders have a huge role to play in preparing learners, teachers, and staff members to become digital citizens that have a digital identity, encourage participation and engagement, to deal with challenges and changes and to respond appropriately and confidently and to help learners and remote workers transition from traditional face to face learners to digital learners as well. I don't think there is enough digital design and support and creativity in learning online learning environments and digital learning products needs to be designed that will enhance digital literacy and competency. Other tools that could be used are also orientation and on boarding sessions, meaningful and engaging Learning Management systems and technical support and mentors.

Appendix B: Core Interview Questions

DEMOGRAPHIC AND BASELINE INFORMATION

1. GENDER

MALE	
FEMALE	
NON–BINARY	
OTHER	

2. AGE

25–30	
31–35	
36–40	
40 >	

3. HIGHEST QUALIFICATIONS

UNDERGRADUATE	POST– GRADUATE	OTHER

4. PROFESSIONAL INDUSTRY

5. YEARS OF WORKING EXPERIENCE

5–10	

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11–20	
21–30	
30>	

6. HOME LANGUAGE PROFICIENCIES (please specify below)

7. <u>COMPLETION STATUS OF THE COURSES WITHIN THE PROGRAMME (EXCLUDING PROPOSAL & FINAL THESIS)</u>

COMPLETE	INCOMPLETE	APPRECIABLY CLOSE TO COMPLETING

PART A

WHO IS THE ADULT LEARNER IN HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY?

8. What is the main thing you might like to share in terms of the following?

- Your adult learning story
- Your online learning story

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LIFELONG LEARNING

9. What do you understand by lifelong learning?

10. Do you feel you became more developed as a lifelong learner as a result of the online master's programme and why do you say that?

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11. Do you feel that you embrace a culture of lifelong learning and in what way?

12. What are the main <u>lifelong learning outcomes</u> you believe you acquired on this online master's programme?

PART C

<u>NEW LEARNINGS</u>

13. What were your motivations to pursue higher education and which new learnings did you originally **seek** from higher education when you joined the programme?

14. When learnings did you feel you've **acquired** in the programme

15. Did you **bring** any new learnings into this programme?

16. Have new learnings and learning outcomes affected your identity. If so, how?

PART D – HOW DO ADULT LEARNERS IDENTIFY WITH BEING A DIGITAL CITIZEN

17. How important was the construction of a digital identity and sense of belonging in terms of your participation in this online master's programme and explain?

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18. Is the construct of digital citizen easily embraced by you or familiar to you? Please explain.

19. Did the online master's programme require you to reflect on a culture of being a digital citizen and in what way?

20. Do you feel you have grown as a digital citizen as part of this online master's programme and in what way?

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21. Do you feel your digital literacy has grown as part of this online master's programme and in what way?

22. To what extent do you think your learning journey in education is hindered and hampered when new digital skills are required to be learned alongside the content of your learning programme you doing?

23. Listen to the following statement, then reflect and motivate whether you agree or disagreement with the statement.

Statement 1.

" Improving adult digital literacy levels is fundamental in the sense that a) it motivates people to develop literacy and language skills, numeracy, scientific and cultural literacy, b) contributes to strengthening human capital and c) bridges the digital divide and confronts exclusion and marginalisation"

24. How does a lack of digital identity and sense of belonging put adult learners at risk of social exclusion when participating digitised higher education landscapes?

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25. Do you believe you have developed an adequate digital identity whilst participating in this online master's programme, Explain.

26. Explain whether it is easy or difficult for you to incorporate new adult learner identities into an existing identity portfolio.

27. Was it your understanding that you needed a well–developed digital identity as a requirement for this online master's programme? Explain

28. Do you feel there was an allowance for you to develop your digital identity on this online master's programme? Elaborate as much as possible.

PART E– CHALLENGES AS AN ADULT LEARNER

29. Have you experienced new learning challenges on this online master's programme and if so, discuss what they are?

30. Consider to the following two (2) statements, then reflect on whether you agree or disagree with the statements

Statement 1.

A lack of preparation and online readiness provides on boarding challenges.

Statement 2.

Student Interactive online discussion forums and support platforms are recommended and is important to help adult learners to transition in online higher education landscapes, develop digital identities and digital literacies.

PART F –FUTURE LEARNING

31. In your opinion, what kind of new learnings do you believe would most appropriately still prepare you for the <u>future</u>

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32. Do your <u>past</u> experiences and learnings on this online master's programme provide you with resources (social, personal etc.) on which you can draw upon for your <u>present</u> and for your <u>future</u>?

33. Does adult education and learning, lifelong Learning, and digital learning feature in any of your <u>future</u> study choices and plans, Explain

Thank You for your participation!

Appendix C: Information Sheet

Topic: Lifelong learners as digital citizens: challenges and new learnings for adult learners in higher education

Dear respondent

I Constance Mouwers–Singh, am pursuing my master's degree in in the Department of Education at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. I would like you to take part in my research project. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and please feel free to ask questions if anything you read is not clear to you or if you'd like more information.

What is the study about?

This study seeks to explore the learning journeys of graduate students in an online master's programme with the view to exploring both the challenges as well as the new learnings they experience in higher education.

Why are you being invited to participate this study?

You are being invited as the study targets respondents currently participating in hybrid and digitised higher education aged 25 years old and above participating in a specific master's programme.

What will I be expected to do in this study?

You will be expected to participate in an interview and share your stories, experiences and narratives.

What are the potential risks involved in this study?

The research was subjected to the Universities ethical clearance process. This is a low–risk study with no anticipated risks, and it is therefore classified as a low–risk study.

What are the potential benefits involved in this study?

The study is beneficial as it could provide educational institutions and workplaces with certain insights about the kind of learning that may have currency for adult learners presently, and how these adult learners may be perceiving themselves beyond their student roles as lifelong learners and digital citizens.

What COVID 19 Protocols are in place?

Given the global concern regarding the spread of COVID–19 any research actions will be carefully considered to mitigate any risk of transmission. For this reason, the study minimises physical contact between researcher and participant and therefore planned interviews with human subjects will be carried out online and not physically. The researcher will make use of electronic means to facilitate the consent process as well as the data collection process.

Will my details be kept confidential?

Yes, your details will be kept confidential. The researcher endeavours to adhere to the research ethics procedures as outlined in the universities ethics policy and undertake to observe strict confidentiality.

INFORMATION SHEET/PRIVACY NOTICE

In terms of the requirements of the Protection of Personal Information Act (Act 4 of 2013), personal information will be collected and processed as per below: website: www.uwc.ac.za

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What type of personal information that will be collected? Some baseline and demographic questions will be collected such as your age, gender etc. however due to the nature of this study your stories, experiences, and narratives will also be collected.

Who at UWC is responsible for collecting and storing your personal information? The researcher and any members of the research team the researcher gives permission to however, they will only have access to anonymised responses.

Who will have access to my personal information outside of UWC? The researcher and any members of the research team and to who the researcher gives permission to however, they will also only have access to anonymised responses.

How long will my personal information be stored? I will store the data on OneDrive which is a trusted platform and only accessible with a secure password adding to the extra safekeeping and handling of data. Any physical information will be stored in a locked safe. In general, regulation requires that all raw data be kept for a minimum of 5–years after study completion.

How long will my personal information be processed? When it comes to data processing the process consists of a series of steps and the process will usually end once data is translated into usable information.

Who do I contact for further information?

Should you have any require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me Constance Mouwers–Singh on my cell phone (0718954329) or via email (3522258@myuwc.ac.za). Alternatively, may also contact my supervisor Dr Colette February in the Department of Education (IPSS), University of the Western Cape (UWC), cfebruary@uwc.ac.za, (cell/tel 021 959 2800) and the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC), Research Development, of UWC by telephone at 021 959 4111 or by email: research–ethics@uwc.ac.za.

This information sheet is for you to <u>keep</u> so that you can be aware of the purpose of the study. With your <u>signature on the attached consent form</u>, you indicate that you understand the purpose of the exercise.

Project Title: Lifelong learners as digital citizens: challenges and new learnings for adult learners in higher education

Researcher: Constance Mouwers–Singh (student number: 3522258)

Please <u>initial</u> the boxes to show your agreement and understanding of what is expected for this study.

☐

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I wish to withdraw, I may contact the lead researcher at any time to do so).

☐

3. I understand my responses and personal data will be kept strictly confidential.

☐

4. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my responses without revealing any part of my identity.

☐

5. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and that I will not be identified or identifiable in the reports or publications that result for the research.

☐

6. I agree for the anonymized data collected to be used in future research. (*Circle the appropriate answer*). **Yes /   No**
7. I hereby agree to be audio recorded.   (*Circle   the   appropriate   answer*). **Yes /   No**

In terms of the requirements of the Protection of Personal Information Act (Act 4 of 2013), personal information will be collected and processed:

☐ I hereby give consent for my personal information to be collected, stored, processed and shared as described in the information sheet.

☐ I do not give consent for my personal information to be collected, stored, processed and shared as described in the information sheet.

Name   _____

Signature: _____

Date   _____

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Name of Participant   Date   Signature

(*or legal representative*)

_____   _____   _____

Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature

(*If different from lead researcher*)

_____   _____   _____

_____   _____   _____

Supervisor   Date   Signature

Copies: All participants will receive a copy of the signed and dated version of the consent form and information sheet for themselves. A copy of this will be filed and kept in a secure location for research purposes only.

Researcher:	**Supervisor:**	**HOD:**
Connie Mouwers-Singh	Dr Colette February	Professor Joy Paper
Tel: 071 8954 329	Tel: 021 959 2800	Tel: 021 959 9595

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Appendix E: Permission to Conduct Research Study

The Registrar   **July 2022**

Re: Request for Research permission to conduct research study

I am currently a student doing research towards a master's degree in Adult Learning and Global Change (MALGC). My research topic is: Lifelong Learners as digital citizens: challenges and new learning for adult learners in Higher Education.

The main question that would be guiding my research enquiry is the following:

√   What are the learning successes adult learners are acquiring and the challenges they experiencing within an online higher education programme?

Other sub–questions:

Q1   How do participants on a particular online higher education programme construct identities and see themselves as adult learners, online learners, lifelong learners and digital citizens?

Q2   What is the main lifelong learning and online learning outcomes adult learners have acquired on this programme?

The objectives are:

- To understand and explore what participants regard as learning successes and challenges within an online higher education programme.
- To add to the body of knowledge institutionally pertaining to kinds of new learning successes and challenges and what it might mean for adult learners within an online higher education programme.
- To add to the body of knowledge about how adult learners may construct identities and see themselves as lifelong learners and digital citizens

I am requesting permission to conduct an investigation with adult learners who are currently enrolled in the master's programme in Adult Learning and Global change (MALGC) and my intention is for my qualitative study to contribute to new insights institutionally**.** I will collect data by conducting semi–structured open–ended interviews with approximately 8 to 12 participants and will be using core interview questions in the interview to collect experiences and narratives. A letter of consent and Information letter will be given to all participants which they will be required to sign before commencement of the interviews.

I endeavour to adhere to the research ethics procedures as outlined in the universities ethics policy and undertake to observe strict confidentiality. I trust my application and request meets your favourable consideration and approval.

Kind Regards

C Mouwers–Singh

C Mouwers–Singh: Student Number: 3522258

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Appendix F: Permission Received to Conduct Research Study from Institution

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE
PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

DEAR   **Constance Mouwers-Singh**

This serves as acknowledgement that you have obtained and presented the necessary ethical clearance and your institutional permission required to proceed with the project referenced below:

RESEARCH TOPIC

Lifelong learners as digital citizens: challenges and new learnings for adult learners in Higher Education

Name of researcher	:	Constance Mouwers-Singh
Permission valid till	:	29 July 2023
Institution	:	University of the Western Cape
Ethics reference	:	HS22/5/17
Permission reference	:	UWCRP081066

You are required to engage this office (researchperm@uwc.ac.za) in advance if there is a need to continue with research outside of the stipulated period. The manner in which you conduct your research must be guided by the conditions set out in the annexed agreement: Condit
research conducted at the University of the Western Cape.

Please be at liberty to contact this office should you require any assistance to conduct your research or require access to either staff or student contact information.

Regards
Dr Ahmed Shaikjee
Deputy Registrar Academic Administration

Approval status: APPROVED   1 August 2022

To verify or confirm the authenticity of this document please contact the University at researchperm@uwc.ac.za.

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE
Robert Sobukwe Road, Bellville, 7535, Republic of South Africa

29 July 2022

Mrs C Mouwers-Singh
IPSS
Faculty of Education

HSSREC Reference Number:	HS22/5/17
Project Title:	Lifelong learners as digital citizens: challenges and new learnings for adult learners in higher education.
Approval Period:	**29 July 2022 – 29 July 2023**

I hereby certify that the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape approved the methodology, and amendments to the ethics of the above mentioned research project.

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for approval.

Please remember to submit a progress report by 30 November each year for the duration of the project.

For permission to conduct research using student and/or staff data or to distribute research surveys/questionnaires please apply via:
https://sites.google.com/uwc.ac.za/permissionresearch/home

The permission letter must then be submitted to HSSREC for record keeping purposes.

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse events and/or termination of the study.

Ms Patricia Josias
Research Ethics Committee Officer
University of the Western Cape

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**Appendix H: Certificate from Editor**

Goodwood Estate
Cape Town
7460

14 October 2022

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I hereby confirm that I have proofread and edited the following Thesis using the Windows 'Tracking' system to reflect my comments and suggested corrections for the author to action:

Lifelong learners as digital citizens: Challenges and new learnings for adult learners in Higher Education

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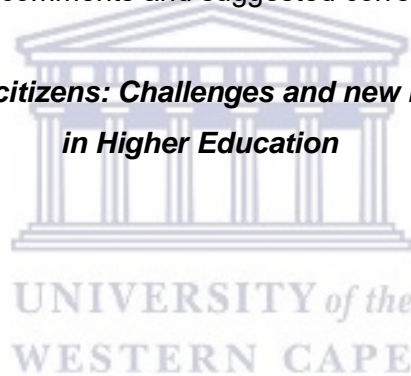
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