



**Exploring the Transition: A Case Study
of RPL Students in a Postgraduate
Programme**

Masters in Organisational Psychology



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Abstract

There has been a movement across South Africa's education sector to widen access and participation in higher education (HE). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programmes offer an opportunity to do so by providing access to HE to those who do not necessarily have the prerequisite requirements. There is still much to learn regarding RPL programmes and the unique needs and challenges of RPL students, as most of these programmes are still in the pilot stage. This study is specifically concerned with the transition of RPL students into postgraduate HE, as little research has been conducted on this topic. To gain a deeper understanding of RPL student transition, the researcher followed a case-study approach in which the experiences of RPL students enrolled in an online postgraduate diploma programme in management in marketing (PgDipMM) at a South African university were investigated. The programme piloted a novel RPL assessment and selection process which aimed to address criticisms of previous models. Qualitative data was obtained through eight open-ended, in-depth interviews with RPL students enrolled in the programme. Using a thematic analysis approach, nine key themes were identified as possible mechanism that facilitated RPL students' successful transition into the postgraduate diploma and six themes that did not. Findings indicated that, to a large extent, the novel RPL assessment and selection process appeared to have facilitated RPL students' successful transition into a postgraduate diploma through technical preparation and building students' confidence in their abilities. Possible enablers and barriers to RPL students' successful transition were also identified and discussed. In short, the enablers included learner maturity, transference of prior knowledge and skills, social support, sense of belonging, access to effective resources and financial security. Conversely, the barriers included academic difficulties, under preparedness for the intensity of HE and time restrictions. The study had theoretical and practical implications in that it contributed to our understanding of RPL student transition to HE and provided suggestions for ways in which their successful transition can be facilitated.

Key words: Recognition of prior learning (RPL), RPL student transition, RPL assessment and selection, postgraduate studies, higher education,

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations (in order of appearance)

HEI	Higher education institution
HE	Higher education
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
PgDipMM	Postgraduate Diploma in Management in Marketing
RPL ASP	the RPL Assessment and Selection process under examination
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

The success/retention and throughput of postgraduate students is a critical concern for higher education institutions (HEIs). Not only are postgraduates seen as a key component of well-developed societies, but they also have a financial and reputational effect on HEIs (Davis & Venter, 2011). With governmental funding becoming increasingly dependent on student throughput rates, student success remains a key concern of HEIs. As a result, a great deal of literature has investigated student success and associated factors. Most of the literature examines student success of traditional students. However, with recent global shifts in the labour market, coupled with widening student participation, HEIs have experienced a large increase of non-traditional student enrolments (Safford & Stinton, 2016). Multiple definitions exist for non-traditional students, but for the purpose of this study non-traditional students are defined as mature age (above the age of 25) students who have not enrolled in higher education (HE) within one to two years of completing secondary schooling (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Characteristics of non-traditional students differ from traditional students and include one or more of the following: they come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are engaged in part or full-time employment, have family dependents, and lack university prerequisites (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). The increase in non-traditional students has forced HEIs to relook at factors affecting student success, as these may not be similar to factors affecting traditional students. Consequently, qualitative research from Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), and Safford and Stinton (2016) have strived to better understand the experiences and needs of non-traditional students in order to help institutions better support these students and ensure their successful transition into HE.

The current research project sought to investigate one particular cohort of non-traditional students that play an integral role in widening participation in HEIs. These students have gained access to HE through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programmes. RPL is an assessment strategy that facilitates access to HE for adult learners who lack the requisite entrance requirements (Castle, 2003). This assessment strategy emerged from overseas educational development in response to educational inequalities and social immobility (Castle, 2003). It has since gained large-scale traction in Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Kizito, 2006).

RPL is of particular interest in South Africa as it offers an opportunity to redress past injustices imposed by the educational system of Apartheid, which has resulted in a racially

skewed percentage of individuals with tertiary education qualifications (Castle, 2003; Osman, 2004). Furthermore, it offers a promising solution to address global labour market challenges through widening access and participation in HE. Hence, some institutions have begun to implement RPL programmes as a mechanism for attracting previously disadvantaged individuals into HE to attain degrees or diplomas previously inaccessible to them. However, the majority of these programmes are still in the pilot stage. Institutions and researchers still have a lot to learn about the unique needs and challenges that this new cohort of students bring (Kizito, 2006). Moreover, a paucity of research exists concerning RPL students' transition into HE, specifically postgraduate studies. Recommendations for future research in previous papers refer to areas such as student needs, challenges and characteristics which are unique to RPL students (Castle, 2003; Kizito, 2006). At present, the majority of RPL literature is grounded in education research that focuses on discussions relating to theoretical concerns, different model approaches and designs, as well as institutional implementation challenges (e.g. Beekman, 2001; Castle & Attwood, 2001; Cooper, 2011; Motaung, 2009; Osman, 2003; Osman, 2004).

This study will aim to contribute to RPL literature by offering an organisational psychology perspective on RPL student transition within a postgraduate diploma, to provide insight into the psychosocial processes and behaviour of RPL students. To address the theoretical questions surrounding RPL student' transition into HE, this study has explored the experiences of RPL students in an online Postgraduate Diploma in Management in Marketing (PgDipMM) programme at a South African university (See Appendix A for the PgDipMM programme description). This programme piloted a new RPL assessment and selection process (the RPL ASP) that sought to improve previously criticised RPL assessment and selection models. It is envisaged that insights learned from this case will better prepare HEIs to support and facilitate RPL students' transition into HE, as well as, improve RPL processes and programmes. Thus, the current focus has led to the development of the following two research questions:

Research Questions

- 1) To what extent did the RPL ASP facilitate students' transition into a postgraduate programme?
- 2) What were the RPL students' perceptions of the enablers and barriers to the successful transition to a postgraduate programme?

The proceeding chapter presents a critical review of the literature relevant to the study's outlined focus.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The aim of this qualitative study is to gain a deeper understanding of RPL students' transition into postgraduate HE. To achieve this, the purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, to explore RPL students' perceptions of the extent to which a newly developed RPL assessment and selection process facilitated their transition into a postgraduate programme and; secondly, to identify the enablers and barriers that these students experienced during their transition to a postgraduate programme. To conduct the current study, it was necessary to complete a review of the current literature in the areas pertaining to RPL and non-traditional student transition to HE. The literature review was ongoing (between February 2017 and January 2018) throughout the research phases (i.e. data collection, data analysis and synthesis phases). The review explores literature relating to RPL and non-traditional student transition into HE in both South African and international publications. The literature review provides an understanding of the context, history, policies and challenges of RPL in South Africa as well as an overall view of what is known about RPL student transition to HE.

To conduct this literature review, the researcher used a variety of information sources, including dissertations, peer reviewed journal articles, periodicals and governmental reports. The sources were accessed through the researcher's university library portal which utilises various database platforms including, but not limited to, ERIC, EBSCO Host, Emerald, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Sabinet, Sage, Springer Link and Wiley. A systematic search was conducted to identify the information sources. The 'advanced search function' on the respective database platforms was used to include only the aforementioned resource types as these were deemed legitimate and of good quality. The following search terms were used in various combinations: 'Recognition of Prior Learning', 'RPL', 'non-traditional student', 'non-traditional student transition', 'student transition', 'transition', 'higher education', and 'postgraduate student transition'. The results generated from the search were scanned and articles that were deemed irrelevant were excluded from the literature review. The articles were downloaded and stored electronically and can be found in the reference list. Initially the search included articles from the last ten years, but due to limited availability the search was broadened to include articles older than ten years.

UNDERSTANDING RPL IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The following section provides context and understanding of RPL within South Africa and develops an argument as to why the researcher is concerned with RPL students' transition into HE.

The genesis and development of RPL in South Africa

Since its inception, RPL has been developed and implemented through various practice models in adult education learning institutions such as universities, vocational and community colleges and work-based training centres (Kistan, 2002). South Africa adopted the term RPL from Australia, whereas the US refers to it as prior learning assessment (PLR). In the UK it is known as accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and in Canada it is referred to as prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) (Kistan, 2002). Despite the acronym differences, it is understood that adults are able to gain tertiary level learning through a variety of experiences outside the academic realm (Castle & Attwood, 2001). Based on this assumption, RPL assessment and selection tools were developed to assess this learning and to provide a pathway of formally recognising or accrediting individuals' prior learning (Castle & Attwood, 2001). Thus, RPL has been formally defined as "the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner, howsoever obtained, to the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements" (Beekman, 2001,18; Definition accepted by SAQA, Regulation 452, No 18787, March 1998).

The genesis of RPL in South Africa is rooted in the efforts of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) who, during the early 1990s under a socio-political transformation and globalisation of markets, fought for the rights of workers to have increased access to higher education opportunities in the face of increasing retrenchments and capital-intensive investment (Cooper and Ralphs, 2016; Kizitio, 2006). South African labour unions felt that the skills and experiential knowledge of thousands of workers needed to be appraised and granted educational qualifications that commensurate with their skills and knowledge levels (Cooper and Ralphs, 2016). Their aim was to redress past injustices of the oppressed working-class who had previously been systematically denied the opportunity to obtain formal qualifications, through recognising and accrediting knowledge they had previously accumulated through their experiences at work (Kizitio, 2006). Likewise, the further development of RPL in South Africa is heavily motivated by both economic and political

factors. There is a need to increase labour market participation to develop and strengthen the economy, as well as a moral and political need to widen the participation in HE of adults who were previously excluded and disadvantaged by the Apartheid regime. (Osman, 2004). Following its socio-political genesis, RPL became statutory in South Africa and is outlined in the following Acts: White Paper on Education and Training (1995); National Qualifications Framework (NQF); the South African Qualifications Authority Act (Act 58 of 1995), the Higher Education act of 1997; the Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998) and the Skills Development Act (Act 97 of 1998) (Alexander, Van Wyk, Bereng, & November, 2010; Beekman, 2001; Kistan, 2002). The Acts and national policy documents denote governmental and HEIs commitment to equity and redress, and broadening participation through widening formal educational opportunities by beginning to recognise different forms and sources of knowledge (Beekman, 2001; Kistan, 2002; Kizito, 2006).

Advocates of RPL argue that it holds a high degree of transformational opportunity in South Africa. It is seen as an effort “to structure and redress historically disadvantaged groups from exclusion; to develop individuals’ capacity through skills; to facilitate access to jobs and progression in career paths; and to promote employment equity” (Alexander et al, 2010, 47). Tjabane (2002), suggests that one of the key mechanisms of achieving social justice is inclusive education as it leads to greater participation of previously disadvantaged groups. During the Apartheid regime, racist and oppressive laws governed higher educational institutions that prevented many black South Africans the opportunity to pursue undergraduate degrees. This saw individuals having to seek learning elsewhere. Thus, alternative sources to knowledge were found, including informal self-study, mentorship, volunteering, work and/or life experience (Alexander, et al, 2010; Breier, 2006; Castle, 2003.; Cooper, 2011; Kizito, 2006; Shalem, & Steinberg, 2016). Hence, RPL is of particular interest to South African Education policy makers and HEIs as it offers a way to amend past injustices through opening the gates to HE by acknowledging individuals’ learning acquired by non-formal means. However, the positive impact that RPL can have on widening participation and the South African economy can only be actualised if the policy leads to successful transition and throughput rates of RPL students. Therefore, the researcher turns to a review of RPL literature in South Africa to identify potential gaps requiring further study in the realm of RPL literature.

RPL policy implementation challenges and identified knowledge gaps within South African literature

Due to its infancy, RPL programmes and assessment models are not without their challenges. This became evident during the literature review, as the majority of the literature took an education disciplinary approach and focused on assessment policy and model design; adult learning theory and pedagogy debates; RPL technical implementation designs and challenges and; education quality control (examples include Alexander et al, 2010; Beekman, 2001; Castle & Attwood, 2001; Cooper & Harris, 2013; Motaung, 2009; Osman & Castle, 2002). While these examples contribute in assisting educators to further develop RPL policies, models and practice in South African HE, some researchers have called for a shift in focus towards understanding RPL students, and their experiences in HE (Castle, 2003; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Osman, 2004). Kizito (2006), in his research on RPL students at the University of South Africa, outlined three main challenges to the implementation of RPL programmes: academic challenges, institutional constraints and challenges related to learners' needs. In his paper, Kizito (2006) argues that these challenges may have a negative impact on RPL students' success and throughput. Furthermore, Kizito (2006) highlights that there is a lack of published South African-based literature that focuses on RPL students and their transition into HE. Likewise, Osman (2004) highlights the thin availability of research conducted on student experiences, who have participated in RPL programmes in HE. With most of the literature being grounded within educational research, and with RPL being a relatively new concept in the institution where the research is being conducted, there is a call for more research on RPL students' experiences, challenges and transition in HE (Castle, 2003; Geysers, 2001). (Castle, 2003; Geysers, 2001). Hence, the researcher positions the current study to look specifically at RPL students' transition into a postgraduate programme, to contribute to our understanding of RPL students' experiences in HE.

RPL AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS' TRANSITION INTO HE

The following section looks specifically at both RPL students and non-traditional students' transition into HE; and the possible mechanisms that may enable or hinder RPL student transition into HE.

Demographic characteristics of RPL students in HE programmes.

Research confirms that demographic characteristics of RPL students are similar to those of mature aged, non-traditional students (Southall, Watson, & Avery, 2016). Non-traditional

students have been defined in a multitude of ways throughout educational literature. The typical demographic characteristics included in definitions ranges from mature students above the age of 25, students from an ethnic minority, students from a low socio-economic background, international students, first-generation university goers in their family, alternative entry students, part-time students, female students to students with full-time employment and/or families. In some cases, definitions of non-traditional students have included direct entry students with one or more of the aforesaid characteristics. Thus, it is evident that no single definition exists throughout literature for non-traditional students, and that it is an umbrella term used to describe students other than traditional, adolescent, direct entry students. To keep the relevancy of the literature review closely aligned to the transition of RPL students the current study defines non-traditional students as mature aged students above the age of 25, that are not direct entry (students who enter HE directly after completing secondary education) or international students. Considering the overlapping similarities between the characteristics of RPL students and the current study's definition of non-traditional students, the literature review has been broadened to include research focusing on non-traditional students' transition into HE. The researcher felt the need to do this as she anticipated that similarities would be found in prior research.

The transition of RPL and non-traditional students into HE.

In the current study, transition has been conceptualised and is defined as a liminal period of separation and incorporation, where students are positioned mid-way between two states (Fisher, Cavanagh, & Bowles, 2011; Southall et al., 2016). Successful transition requires disassociation from previous memberships and the establishment of new ones and often involves changes in identity (Southall et al., 2016). Southall et al. (2016) provides the example, that for traditional students it means a shift in identity from one of son or daughter to an independent adult learner. Whereas, for non-traditional students it is a transition from worker, partner and or parent to an independent adult learner.

Much of the literature concerning student transition has focused on traditional students. Researchers have highlighted that relatively little is known about the transition of non-traditional students (Chartrand, 1992; Southall et al., 2016). This shortage has been attributed to the way transition and adjustment have been traditionally conceptualised (Southall et al., 2016). The predominant and classic models and theories developed to explain student transition, adjustment and attrition have focused on factors that are salient to traditional

students during their late adolescence, such as Pascerella (1980) and Tinto (1975). For example, Tinto (1975) places emphasis on social involvement in the college environment, something that is generally not significant for non-traditional students (as cited in Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011).

RPL and non-traditional students: Experiencing the transition into HE.

For non-traditional students, entering into HE can be quite a daunting challenge (Bowl, 2001; Dyke, 2014; Stone, 2008). Some barriers faced by non-traditional students include lower socio-economic backgrounds, unfamiliarity as first-time university goers, employment demands and family responsibilities (Southall et al., 2016). Studies have found that non-traditional students may experience high levels of stress during their transitional period into HE (Askham, 2008; Dyke, 2014; Southall et al., 2016). Non-traditional students report experiencing feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, loneliness and low self-esteem (Askham, 2008; Dyke, 2014; Southall et al., 2016). Anxiety and stress have been negatively associated with retention and throughput (Askham, 2008). The above association emphasises the need for HEIs to better understand non-traditional student transition and their needs, in order to facilitate a smoother transitional period into HE. HEI's should consider the less visible needs of those from non-traditional backgrounds, specifically RPL students, as they may find the transitional process even more challenging than traditional students (Southall et al., 2016).

On the other hand, not all non-traditional students characterise their experience of transition by feelings of anxiety, stress and being overwhelmed. Research has indicated that non-traditional students have experienced growth in their identity and agency during their transitional period into HE (Caslte, 2003; Fragoso et al., 2013). This leads to the understanding that successful transition of non-traditional students not only enables students to effectively navigate through HE, but also extends to their lives outside HE such as their families and workplace (Fragoso et al, 2013). Similarly, experiences of successful transition of non-traditional students has been linked to a wide range of positive outcomes. These outcomes include the development of four types of capital (personal, social, professional and economic; personal and economic being the more salient of the four) (Fragoso et al, 2013). Moreover, personal outcomes (such as self-confidence, self-actualisation and identity growth) and social outcomes (such as new friendships, attitude changes and extended opportunities for one's family) are further benefits of successful non-traditional student transition into HE (Fragoso et al., 2013). Furthermore, a qualitative study conducted by Castle (2003), found that RPL had a

positive impact on the students and made a significant contribution to redress and fostered a lifelong learning attitude. This was achieved through the development of self-reflective and narrative skills, development towards academic and professional goals, and the opening of paths for further learning and development Castle (2003). These positive outcomes highlight the importance and value of RPL programmes and the need to promote lifelong learning in society (Swain & Hammond, 2011; Fragoso et al., 2013).

RPL Students: Enablers and Barriers to Successful Transition into HE

Three studies were identified that have generally begun the discussion on the experiences and needs of RPL students in South Africa. The first study, Castle (2003), qualitatively examined the prior learning and career paths of three mature students who were admitted to a postgraduate course in adult education at the University of Witwatersrand, after completing an RPL portfolio development course. The second study, Cooper (2011), included a qualitative investigation of the academic experiences of three postgraduate RPL students in an MPhil in Disability Studies at a South African university. Cooper's (2011) study focused on academic experiences of RPL students; and the capability of prior experiential knowledge as a resource facilitating RPL students' successful acquisition of postgraduate literacies. The third study, Dykes (2014), included an exploration of four RPL first year social work students and their experiences, focusing on their specific support needs in HE.

The above studies provided a starting point to an increased understanding of RPL students' experiences of HE. However, more research is needed in this area as these studies are based on relatively small samples. Additionally, further questions remain unanswered, particularly around RPL students' transition into HE in South Africa. Castle (2003) and Cooper (2011), have suggested that there is an important need to explore the experiences of South African RPL students in order to inform and develop effective HEIs student success strategies for this particular cohort of students. This type of information may prove to be crucial in influencing the methods in which departmental or institutional RPL policies are adopted, assessment and support strategies are implemented, as well as to facilitate RPL student transition and throughput in South Africa.

As only a few literature publications were found in the South African context, the literature review was expanded to include international studies similarly concerned with RPL students and the transition of non-traditional students. Presented below is an integrated review of the factors that may enable or hinder RPL students' successful transition found in the

reviewed literature. The integrated discussion begins with covering the above mentioned South African RPL research papers, then moves to findings based on international RPL articles and non-traditional student samples.

Academic difficulties.

All three studies reported academic difficulties as a barrier facing RPL students during their transition into HE. Castle (2003) reported that RPL students experienced difficulties with academic writing during their transitional period into HE. Participants attributed their difficulties in writing to weaknesses in their language proficiency and their lack of vocabulary. Cooper (2011) provides a deeper insight into the potential reasons why RPL students, in particular, experience difficulties with academic literacy. The two most prominent reasons include a) RPL students' lack of prior academic training and b) RPL students' unfamiliarity of the academic modus operandi. The latter refers to RPL students' weaknesses in knowledge and application of academic protocols. Cooper (2011) found that RPL students tend to bring emotion into their writing and fall back on their own experience and passion instead of using data to direct their argument. Thus, they find it difficult to adapt to the conventions and demands of academic writing (Cooper, 2011). In addition to academic literacy difficulties, Dykes (2014) reported that RPL students felt that they needed more guidance with other academic tasks such as study guidance and purposeful academic reading techniques.

Similarly, academic difficulties were found to be a barrier in non-traditional student transition literature (Bowl, 2001; Christie, Barron, & D'Annunzio-Green, 2013; Fragoso et al, 2013). Christie et al., (2013) reported on the difficulties that 20 non-traditional students faced in their studies, which included not knowing what standards were expected of them, difficulties with written assignments and understanding the meaning of assessment criteria. Likewise, Bowl (2001) found that non-traditional students had difficulties with reading, structuring assignments and understanding what tutors expected of them. It is important to note that Bowl's (2001) findings were based on the barriers experienced in HE of three mature aged students who were from minority ethnic groups and low socio-economic backgrounds and; thus the research findings do not claim to generalise to non-traditional student groups, but rather give voice to minority groups in HE. Additionally, Fragoso et al. (2013) partially attributes the academic difficulties experienced by non-traditional students to their lack of self confidence. Participants in Fragoso et al. (2013) expressed that being disengaged from formal education for a long period of time contributed to their lack of self confidence, which made transitioning

into HE particularly challenging. Fragoso et al. (2013) investigated the transitional experiences of 344 first year students (including a focus group of 12 mature aged students) at a university in Portugal. A large majority of this sample had completed secondary school (46%), 15% did not complete grade 12, 24% withdrew before reaching grade 12, 14% completed grade 9, and 1% did not reach grade 9. This may provide insight on the background of the mature aged student sample and their readiness for HE.

Unfamiliarity and preparedness for HE.

Studies have reported RPL students' unfamiliarity and newness to the university environment as a possible barrier to RPL students' successful transition into HE (Castle, 2003; Dykes, 2014). Participants in Castle's (2003) study perceived the new environment of HE as a challenge, which they took a significant amount of time to adjust to, which may have affected their academic performance. Moreover, participants reported that they felt underprepared for HE and that their previous educational experiences were not enough to equip them for HE. Additionally, Dykes (2014), found that RPL students experienced difficulties navigating the university system which hindered their successful transition to HE. Participants reported that they were still experiencing difficulties eight months into being at university and that they felt confused and lost trying to navigate the university campus, systems and procedures (e.g. registration procedures and the online communication and education platforms).

In support, Southall et al. (2016) argues that there may be a possible link between a non-traditional student's under-preparedness and their unfamiliarity with the HE environment and their lack of cultural capital. HEIs have their own cultures, modus operandi, rules of engagement and language which can act as a barrier to non-traditional students' transition, as they may lack familiarity and cultural capital to help them navigate through HE environments (Southall et al., 2016). Cultural capital is a concept that is "related to students' demographic and attitudinal background. It relates to social class, family background and commitment to education and can be connected to the students' support sources." (Bourdieu, 1992 as cited in Southall et al., 2016, p.7). Southall et al. (2016) suggests that non-traditional students may not have the acquired cultural capital from past learning experiences to adapt quickly to the HE academic environment in terms of workload, study habits, performance, and academic standards. Furthermore, Southall et al. (2016) suggests that students who may experience difficulties transitioning into HE, experience a discrepancy between what they expected HE to be like and the reality they encounter. The experienced discrepancy extends to aspects such as

course content, intensity of the workload, and the amount of self-study required. Southall et al. (2016) suggests that HEIs should establish clear expectations at the start of programmes which should include information regarding timetables and the amount of self-study that will be required.

Experiential knowledge.

Castle (2003) and Cooper (2011) reported that RPL students' experiential knowledge facilitated their transition into HE. Castle (2003) found that both hard and soft skills that RPL students developed through their life and working experiences helped them transition to HE. Specific skills mentioned included field knowledge, interpersonal and communication skills, leadership qualities, management skills, and critical thinking. Furthermore, Castle (2003) reported that RPL students had greater practical and operational knowledge than theoretical knowledge. Likewise, Cooper (2011) reported that although RPL students' life experience gave their work more depth, they lacked academic writing skills in comparison to mainstream students.

Experienced learners.

Castle (2003) describes RPL students as 'experienced learners', a characteristic which was found to facilitate their transition into HE and used this term to refer to RPL students' self-awareness and knowledge of their learning habits, strategies, styles and preferences. Castle (2003) reported that RPL students were experienced learners who were able to devise learning strategies to facilitate their success in HE, which enabled them to respond to the different demands of educational institutions and levels of education.

Similarly, Frago et al. (2013) highlighted certain mature learner characteristics that facilitated transitional learning of non-traditional students. Mature students perceived themselves as having better organisational skills and having the advantage of life experience which contributed to conceptualisation and application of academic material. These characteristics were highlighted as peripheral factors that further facilitated non-traditional students' transition into HE (Frago et al., 2013).

Independent learner.

Christie et al. (2013) and Southall et al. (2016), suggest that successful transition is dependent on the student becoming an independent learner. Christie et al. (2013) reported that students who transition most successfully to new learning environments are those who

understand what independent learning entails, and who have good time management skills. Their results highlighted that a key characteristic of non-traditional students who successfully transitioned into HE was the ability to be flexible and adapt quickly to the new learning environment. Furthermore, they had high expectations of themselves and made little reference to the challenges and pressures they may have experienced as non-traditional students. Similarly, Fragoso et al. (2013) and Krause and Coates (2008) found that effective time management skills, study habits and strategies for success are foundational to successful transition. Their research also highlights that non-traditional students who transition smoothly recognise the need to adapt to their new learning environments and the need to become independent learners.

Social support.

Social support has been underlined as an influential mechanism to RPL students' successful transition into HE (Castle, 2003; Dykes, 2014). The participants (RPL) in Castle (2003) referred to how social support was a vital component to their successful transition into HE. Similarly, the participants (RPL) in Dyke (2014) reported that social support and having 'someone to talk to' was very helpful during their time of transition into HE. In both studies participants made references to various types of social support namely emotional, instrumental or informational. Srivastava and Barmola (2012) distinguish between the various types as such: emotional support is often the support received from loved ones, family and friends. It consists of expressions of empathy, concern, encouragement, trust and love. Whereas instrumental support is tangible aid or direct assistance. Informational support consists of receiving advice, guidance, suggestions and helpful information. Lastly, appraisal support is similar to informational support however the advice or information received is useful for self-evaluation and self-development.

Cantwell and Scevak (2004) investigated the academic experiences of 33 male RPL students (from an industrial background) in a two-year education degree in Australia. Cantwell and Scevak (2004) reported how a lack of explicit support mechanisms coupled with other structural factors (such as short time frame for adjustment, high workload and varied knowledge demands across different subjects) lessened the probability of RPL students' successful transition to HE.

Social support has also been positively associated with strengthening RPL student resilience (Southall et al., 2016; Stone, 2008). Studies have put emphasis on the positive

contribution that resilience has on RPL student adjustment which facilitates successful transition (Southall et al., 2016; Stone 2008). Stone (2008), qualitatively investigated the experiences of 20 female and male non-traditional entry students at an Australian university. The results showed that RPL students received help and support from several sources including lecturers, campus support services (such as counselling, learning support, careers advisers, student mentors), and their families. One of the most influential sources of support that RPL students mentioned was the support, friendship and assistance they received from their fellow students. Other notable factors facilitating RPL students' resilience was their sheer determination to achieve their goal, their love of, and desire to, continue learning and a new-found growth in independence (Stone, 2008). Moreover, Fragoso et al. (2013) argued that non-traditional student relationships formed a key source of support and friendship which participants emphasised as critical to their successful transition into HE. Mature non-traditional students in Fragoso et al. (2013) were paired with traditional students to create mixed working groups. Participants had positive experiences of these working groups and reported that it facilitated beneficial relationships for both types of students, fostering support, friendships and student participation. Similar findings were reported in Penketh and Goddard (2008) where peer relationships appeared crucial to mature students' transition into HE, to the point where participants perceived it to have prevented their withdrawal from HE.

Mentorship support.

A few studies have investigated the contribution of mentoring on RPL students' transition to HE. Studies have reported that RPL students positively perceived mentorship to have contributed to preparing and supporting them through their transition to HE. (Arscott, Crowther, Young, & Ungarian, 2007; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Morton, 2003). Over 100 RPL students, in Arcsott's et al. (2007) study of Athabasca University's Gateways Project, perceived mentoring to be beneficial to their learning and transition into university. Likewise, a relatively recent study conducted by Conrad and Wardrop (2010) investigated the relationship that mentoring had on learning in RPL practices. This qualitative study gathered data from six mentors and 22 RPL students from four Canadian universities. Their findings indicated that mentors were most influential in assisting RPL students in finding their academic voice during the RPL assessment process. Mentors also provided technical assistance which students found very beneficial. Examples of technical assistance include providing submission information, portfolio assistance, academic writing and organising assistance, programme planning information and counselling). RPL students emphasised that their mentor was a source of

encouragement, faith and support which was significant in getting them through the assessment and selection process. Additionally, mentors were found to assist students with vital cognitive skill development required in HE, such as synthesising, evaluating, deducing, balanced thinking, causal reasoning and creative thinking (Conrad & Wardop, 2010).

Support in administration processes.

Dykes (2014) reported that RPL students perceived the university's administrative processes as a barrier to their transition into HE. She described that RPL students evaluated these processes negatively and that they could not transcend the negative impact that this had on their ability to adapt to the university and enjoy the new experience. Participants (RPL) in Dyke (2004), communicated the need for more efficient and transparent application processes, competent and informed staff to assist with information and to advise on administrative procedures; efficient bursary application and pay out, better departmental organisation, timetable arrangements and better feedback on assignments.

Access to resources.

Dykes (2014) reported that having access to adequate and necessary resources was important to RPL students' successful transition into HE. Participants (RPL) in the sample felt frustrated at the limited number and quality of computer labs they had access to (Dykes, 2014). Thus, having access to adequate resources may facilitate RPL students' transition into HE.

**The following mechanisms discussed are based on international RPL and non-traditional student samples.*

Financial difficulties.

Financial difficulties have been highlighted as a possible mechanism that may hinder RPL and non-traditional students' successful transition into HE (Stone, 2008; Bowl, 2001). Stone (2008) reported that RPL students' experienced financial struggles and financial implications associated with giving up full-time employment. The juggling act of finding enough time and money was emphasised as one their most difficult and constant challenges. All the participants in Stone (2008) commented that time and money were their most significant sacrifices made. Similarly, Bowl (2001) reported that non-traditional students indicated that financial difficulties as one of the most pressing difficulties in their transition into HE. Participants in Bowl (2001) were from low income and financially disadvantaged backgrounds who often struggled to afford the prescribed books, computer equipment, travel expenses to

and from university, and child care costs. Participants reported that they often had to go in search of cheaper, community-based child care and afterschool services. Moreover, the cost of studying was cutting into participants' money set aside for the family budget and other bills. These financial difficulties were a source of a great deal of stress for participants and contributed to them feeling as if they were not coping as well as they should. Bowl (2001) provides evidence that finance is a major barrier, particularly in financially disadvantaged students, to non-traditional students' transition and success in the HE.

Time and time management.

Christie et al. (2013), found that difficulties that students may have in transitioning into HE may be exacerbated in non-traditional students as they have less time in which to adapt to their new environments. Moreover, results from student narratives in Penketh and Goddard (2008) indicated that mature female students had more difficulties in managing their time and academic work. Poor time management appeared to stem from pressures relating to competing demands from work and family resulting in overload rather than a lack of organisational skill (Penketh & Goddard, 2008). Similar to findings in Fragoso et al. (2013), participants reported a prevailing feeling of guilt and failure of not meeting all competing demands placed on them (Penketh & Goddard, 2008). However, in Fragoso et al. (2013), feelings of guilt felt, particularly in female students concerning neglect towards their children, lead them to consider withdrawing from HE.

Time was elaborated on as one of the biggest losses and sacrifices that RPL students experienced in Stone (2008). Stone reported lack of time, difficulties with organising and prioritising, dealing with challenges in relationships with partners and children; and balancing the needs of study with the needs of family, home and children as barriers that may hinder RPL students' transition into HE. Issues of lack of time and poor time management skills emerged alongside difficulties in juggling competing role demands and responsibilities (Bowl, 2001; Christie et al., 2013; Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fragoso et al., 2013; Penketh & Goddard, 2008; McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Cree, & Tett, 2010). Thus, indicating that time difficulties experienced by RPL students can be linked to their conflicting role demands.

Conflicting role demands.

What appears to be a prominent difficulty in non-traditional students' transition into HE, is balancing study with work and/or family responsibilities (Bowl, 2001; Fragoso et al., 2013, McCune et al., 2010; Reay, 2002). As many others do, non-traditional students juggle

multiple roles in their daily lives, thus it is not surprising that the delicate act of seeing to the demands of these roles may prove to be a barrier to their successful transition and success in HE, as it reduces the amount of time available to dedicate to their studies.

A significant number of students in the Fragoso et al. (2013) study reported that they worked daily until roughly 5pm. Results indicated that 32% of participants reported spending more than 4 hours, 14% spent between one to two hours and 16% spent less than one hour a week on their academics. This result indicated the limited time that non-traditional students have available to dedicate to their studies and the incompatibility between demands of academia and employment. Participants often left academic work for the weekends and, as a consequence, family time was largely limited causing non-traditional students with families a large amount of guilt. Fragoso et al. (2013) highlighted that these difficulties were more intense where students had children and lived far away from the university. Consequences of role conflict included disrupted family balance, childcare issues, changing patterns of socialisation and continuous feelings of fatigue and guilt (Fragoso et al., 2013). Supporting findings from Reay (2002) concluded that work and family were a significant barrier experienced by non-traditional students that made transitioning into HE difficult.

Submission Feedback.

A few studies have highlighted the importance that non-traditional students place on the quality of feedback received on their work (Fragoso et al., 2013; Tett, Hounsell, Christie, H, Cree, & McCune, 2012; Young, 2000). Findings from Fragoso et al. (2013) indicated that mature students were not satisfied with feedback received on their work submissions. Mature students found feedback to be unclear, deceptive and did not contribute to their learning processes. Similarly, Young (2000) in an investigation of nine mature students' satisfaction with feedback received, found that all students were not satisfied with feedback they received. Additionally, Tett et al. (2012) investigated various assessment regimes and the role they played in mature students' experiences of HE, using a sample 18 mature students in a UK university. They found that feedback was a valuable tool used in mature student learning. Results indicated that feedback that participants perceived as clear and adequate contributed to their autonomy, progression, critical self-assessment and further development in learning.

Chapter two has provided an overview of the existing scholarship that serves as a foundation for the current study, which aims to produce further research on RPL students'

transition into postgraduate HE. The subsequent chapter outlines the procedure that the current study followed to address the proposed research questions.

CHAPTER THREE - METHOD

Introduction

The objective of the current study is to explore the transition of RPL students into postgraduate HE. To respond to the research question, the study investigated the experiences of the RPL students enrolled into the Postgraduate Diploma in Management and Marketing (PgDipMM) at a South African university. In depth, semi-structured interviews were used to gather insight into the RPL students' experiences and reflections. This chapter outlines the research design and approach followed, including sampling and data collection and analysis techniques.

Research Design

To effectively address the research question, this study adopted an exploratory single case study design. This type of design is used to explore areas in which the phenomenon under study has no clear, single set of outcomes (Marshan-Piekkari, Welch & Ghauri, 2004; Yin, 2006). The case study design further sets out to provide a rich description of the general situation and specified topic, as well as to expand understanding of the case itself (Lee, Mitchell & Sablynski, 1999).

This design is appropriate for the current study, firstly because the area under investigation (RPL student transition into a postgraduate programme) has not had many publications in South Africa, particularly in the postgraduate space. Secondly, it used a unique case, Postgraduate Diploma in Management in Marketing (PgDipMM), to address the theoretical question of non-traditional student transition into postgraduate HE. The PgDipMM programme provided a suitable platform to explore and advance our understanding of RPL student transition as it hosted a large number of RPL students. Thirdly, this research asked an exploratory type question of "how". The case study design is well suited to address these types of research questions (Marshan-Piekkari et al., 2004; Yin, 2006).

Research Method

A qualitative approach was adopted for the purpose of this study. Qualitative research is used for the discovery and exploration of new areas (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As the aim of this paper is to investigate the transition of RPL students in a distance learning postgraduate diploma and since little is known about this area, a qualitative approach is deemed well suited.

Furthermore, the use of the qualitative approach allowed the researcher to extract rich data and enabled a deeper exploration of the outlined case.

Context plays a particularly important role in the study. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to place emphasis and importance on the specific context of the case study as well as give a voice to RPL students. Moreover, the situation under study occurs in a natural setting and is derived from the participants' perspective. Qualitative research is well suited for the purpose of description, interpretation, and explanation (Lee et al, 1999). Thus, it allowed the researcher to illuminate the experiences and interpretations of RPL students' transition into the PgDipMM programme.

Single Case Study and Unit of Analysis

The design of this study is an embedded single case study design as it suited the exploratory nature of the research study (Yin, 2006). The case under exploration is a two-year, part-time distance postgraduate diploma programme. The programme had 60 RPL students enrolled out of approximately 74 firm offers made to eligible RPL candidates. The programme piloted a new RPL assessment and selection process which was developed based on critiques of previous RPL assessment and selection models (A. Meadows, personal communication, March, 2017). The case study is particularly concerned with RPL students in the programme; accordingly, the unit of analysis in this study is the individual. The case study is embedded as it made use of multiple units of analysis. Furthermore, the case is particularly unique as it had a large number of RPL students enrolled in the PgDipMM programme. It also piloted a new RPL assessment and selection process which was designed to accommodate the large number of RPL applications that the institution received.

Sample and Sampling Method

The sampling approach used was a combination of a purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling refers to a sampling method where participants are consciously selected by the researcher based on desired characteristics that meet the research criteria (Russel & Gregory, 2003). Whereas, convenience sampling considers the researcher's ability to access the sample (Russel & Gregory, 2003). Purposive sampling is appropriate for this study as the researcher is interested in the experiences of a specific cohort of students (RPL students) in a particular programme (PgDipMM). The case study under investigation was utilised based on its uniqueness of piloting a new RPL selection process and based on the large

number of RPL student enrolment. Thus, the case investigated in the current study provided a suitable and sufficient sampling frame.

The sample comprised of RPL students in the 2015 PgDipMM programme, who registered for the first integration of the programme. The sample consisted of eight students, five of whom are female and three males. The sample had an age range between 29 and 53, the average age of the sample was 36. The racial composition of the student sample consisted of three Blacks, two Whites, one Coloured, one Indian and one who identified as Other. The home languages of the participants included three English speakers, two Afrikaans speakers, two Zulu speakers and one other (Malagasy) speaker. The sample included six South Africans and two International students. Of the eight participants six were first generation university goers and two were not. Three participants were married with children, one participant was a single mother, and four participants were single with no dependants. All eight participants had not completed the course in the expected time of two years. See table B1, Appendix B for sample demographics.

Data Collection

The following section outlines how data was collected in the current study. It includes detailed information and an explanation on the instrumentation employed and process followed as well as a justification of why these methods were used with respect to the underlying philosophy of qualitative research.

Data collection instrument.

This study used data collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the selected participants from the 2015 PgDipMM programme. Interviews are a well-recognised and principle source of information and data used in case study research (Yin, 2006). An in-depth, semi-structured interview method was used to gather appropriate data from the participants in order to effectively address the research question. In-depth interviews were used as the study's underlying theory was insufficiently developed, as little research has been conducted in the area (Lee et al., 1999). Thus, the interview technique suited the study's theoretical question and analytical situation.

The questions were open-ended as the study is exploratory in nature. Furthermore, open-ended questions allowed participants to have a voice in the interview and enabled the researcher to extract rich and meaningful data. The semi-structured interview schedule can be

found in Appendix C. The initial questions elicited background information from the participant. This was to establish rapport and to gain a historical context of individual's educational trajectory to date. The interview then proceeded to the body of questions. These questions mainly centred on the participants' experience of the RPL ASP and the PgDipMM programme. The overarching theme of the questions focused on the student's transition into postgraduate HE.

The interviews ranged between 47 minutes to 95 minutes. They were conducted face-to-face and via Skype when face-to-face interviews were not possible. The process of in-depth interviews involved active listening to the subjects' responses and an attempt at empathetic understanding and reflection on the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It further involved gentle probing to elicit deeper descriptions and reflections from the participant. The researcher also had to be mindful of preconceptions and possible biases to the situation (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Data collection procedures.

Case study description development and analysis of RPL students' academic performance.

In the chapter titled Context, a description of the unique case under exploration was provided. In order to generate this description an informal interview was conducted with the programme course convener who designed the new RPL assessment and selection process (the RPL ASP). The purpose of the interview was to gain a deeper understanding of the case study which encompasses the RPL ASP and the PgDipMM programme. Moreover, the researcher collected specific details of the RPL ASP through documentation provided by the institution and obtained details about the PgDipMM (Distance) through the university's student handbook. In addition, this chapter presents an analysis of the 2015 PgDipMM online students' performance data. This analysis is presented as supplementary to the interview data in order to provide context and a holistic picture of RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme.

Firstly, performance data was used to compare RPL online students' and non-RPL online students' academic performance. This enabled further analysis of RPL online students' successful transition in comparison to other online students in the programme. This data was supplied by the institution in Excel format. The data was securely stored on the researcher's personal computer. Simple statistical analysis techniques were used to analyse the data,

including central tendency measures and box and whisker plots. It must be noted that the data set contained some missing data concerning demographic information and individual students' performance grades. The researcher removed students with missing data to avoid skewing the data analysis. The data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel 2013.

Procedure of the RPL student interviews.

Sixty RPL students were initially contacted via email by an administrator. The email contained a written request by the PgDipMM programme convener, which requested participation from the RPL students. This was done to increase participation in the research as the RPL students were familiar with the programme course convener and there was existing rapport. The letter requested the students' consent to participate in the study.

The participants that indicated their interest to be interviewed, received a second email from the researcher with a detailed brief which included a briefing on the interview procedure, ethical procedures and a consent form (see Appendix D). The email was also used to schedule an interview time and place that was convenient for the participant. Of the 49 RPL students that received the initial email, nine responses were received, and interviews were conducted with four respondents based on their response time and location. Cape Town respondents were interviewed first as initially a face-to-face medium was preferred as the researcher found it easier to establish rapport, clarify participants' questions or concept misunderstanding, and to extract rich and detailed data. After exhausting the initial respondents, the researcher sought more respondents.

The researcher also realised that a more demographically diverse group of participants was needed as majority of the participants were white and male. Hence, following the first round of data collection, a select group of RPL students were contacted via a second-round email. This group was selected based on race and gender. This process yielded four more respondents, who were then interviewed. In total nine interviews were conducted, however under the researcher's and supervising researcher's discretion one interview was excluded from the study as it was determined that the respondent did not meet the research criteria. The respondent was a staff member at the university in the current case study and had completed a previous qualification at this university, thus she did not meet the sample requirements.

In addition, the brief included some pre-interview questions for the participant to consider. The interview required information from the participant that was introspective and

reflexive. By allowing the participant time to reflect and think about the topics, it was envisaged that richer, more considered answers would be provided in the interview.

Individual interviews were conducted to ensure that participants were not influenced by other participant's opinions, to avoid group thinking and to ensure a degree of confidentiality. The duration of the interviews were approximately 60 minutes to allow the interviewer to establish rapport with the participants and to ensure that participants could actively engage with the interview process. The same researcher conducted the interviews to ensure consistency in the process. The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the verbal consent of the participants.

In total, two interviews were conducted face-to-face and six interviews were conducted via Skype. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a time and place that was convenient to the participant. Both face-to-face interviews were conducted during working hours at the participants' place of work, in a quiet and undisturbed private room. Skype interviews were conducted during and after working hours and in various locations. The researcher determined that saturation occurred after the ninth interview, meaning no new data was gained from additional participant interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Transcribe Wreally was used to transcribe the interview voice recordings. Transcribe Wreally is a partially-free online programme that assisted with and eased the transcribing process. The programme can be accessed through www.transcribe.wreally.com. Once the transcription of the interview was completed, the script was downloaded into a Word document and kept securely on the researcher's computer. All traces of the script were removed from Transcribe Wreally. Seven interviews were transcribed by the researcher to allow familiarisation with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One transcription was outsourced to an independent party due to time constraints - identification material was removed to ensure the participants' anonymity and a detailed brief was provided to ensure satisfactory transcription quality.

The pilot interviews.

Two pilot interviews were conducted to test the interview questions. The pilot interviews were used to determine if the questions were comprehensible and would elicit meaningful and relevant responses. The first two respondents to reply to the initial email invitation to participate were selected to participate in the pilot interviews. The aim of the pilot interview was to test the interview schedule, revise and edit where needed, to increase

participant understanding to elicit in depth, honest reflections and insights from the participant. The pilot study further allowed the researcher to practise her interviewing skills and to become familiar and comfortable with the interview process. One interview was conducted face-to-face and the other via Skype. This allowed the interviewer to test both mediums of conducting the interview and iron out any logistical and technical issues. The participants understood the questions being asked and needed very little clarity on the concepts being asked. Thus, no changes were made to the interview schedule. However, it is important to note that the interview schedule utilised a semi-structured design. This enabled the researcher to deviate from the schedule where necessary and to provide clarity when needed. The semi-structured interview design also allowed the researcher to probe in areas of potential significance to the research. This qualitative research approach, which requires continuous analysis and reflexivity to adapt to new discoveries and data, was applied throughout the interview process (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Data Analysis

The current study utilised the thematic analysis technique to analyse the interview data. A thematic analysis method was used as an independent qualitative explorative approach for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was deemed appropriate to adequately and sufficiently analyse the interview data collected. The aim of thematic analysis is to analytically examine narrative material from interview data and life experiences by dividing the interview text into smaller units of content, and submitting them to explorative and descriptive analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

Thematic analysis involved the search for and identification of common patterns and themes that extended across all eight interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This technique of analysis allowed flexibility within the process and ensured a rich, detailed and multifaceted, account of the data.

Coding and analysis began at the onset of the interviews. This analysis technique involved multiple stages of open coding and recoding and organising the data into core categories and sub-categories (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Both inductive and deductive approaches were used during data analysis. Inductive analysis was used as there was insufficient previous research dealing with the phenomenon under investigation; hence the interview data directly informed the codes and categories identified (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Deductive analysis was used in cases where the data coincided with previous research findings, which have been highlighted in the literature review chapter (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

This study followed the suggested thematic data analysis process by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, the researcher transcribed and read the transcripts several times to become well familiarised with the data and to obtain a holistic sense of the data. The researcher then proceeded, through multiple stages of open coding, to record and organise the data in core themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme is an expression of the latent content and captures the essence of the data pertaining to the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is indicative of response patterns within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The two research questions are explored within two categories each. Each category hosts the relevant themes and sub-themes, termed as such. Thematic analysis is of the position that both the latent and manifest content within a data set must be viewed as indivisible entities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Headings that attempted to encapsulate the essence of the themes were created and assigned to each theme by the researcher.

The following process was conducted through a data management programme, Atlasti. In the first stage, interesting patterns, relevant to each code, were systematically coded and collated throughout the data set (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In the second stage, codes and data were collated into potential themes and sub-themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In the third stage, the themes were reviewed to establish if they were adequately suited to the coded extracts and effectively capture the interviewees' responses (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This was conducted in partnership with the research supervisor to ensure quality and accuracy of the analysis. A thematic map was then generated, to give a clear picture summary of the data, and to present a useable and manageable collated representation of the data analysis. Ongoing refinement of the themes and sub-themes continued throughout the process until the researcher and research supervisor were satisfied that the themes and sub-themes accurately and sufficiently depicted the data. A record was kept of the number of interviewees that made reference to each theme and/or sub-theme, as well as the groundedness of each theme and sub-theme. Groundedness relates to the number of times a specific theme and sub-theme was mentioned across the data set. In addition, a selection of vivid, compelling extract examples from the interview data were selected throughout the analysis process. These selections were then reviewed to ensure quality, appropriateness and relatedness to addressing the identified themes and research questions. It is important to note that the analysis process was not linear but followed a recursive trajectory with frequent reviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The analysis process

occurred concurrently during data collection as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This added depth and quality to the data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance from the Faculty of Commerce Ethics in Research Committee was obtained before carrying out the current study. To obtain ethical clearance the researcher developed a research proposal detailing the possible valuable contributions of the study and propositioning that the researcher had adequate competence and blueprint to complete it (McNabb, 2015). The proposal outlined all the key areas involved in a research process, namely the research title, the purpose of the study and possible theoretical contributions, the research question, a condensed literature review, as well as a detailed methodology of how the researcher planned to conduct the research and the procedures that would be followed (McNabb, 2015). Once the researcher received ethical clearance from the relevant body, permission to contact the university's students was applied for via the Department of Student Affairs. Once permission was granted, the researcher was able to proceed with the research and contact the RPL students in the PgDipMM programme.

APA ethical research guidelines for conducting research with human participants was adhered to in all aspects of the research. Accepted ethical procedures were adopted throughout the study. Firstly, permission was obtained to contact and ask RPL students from the PgDipMM programme to participate in the study. Secondly, consent to participate and be voice recorded from willing participants was obtained. Participants were assured that the study posed no direct threat or harm to them and that no data would be used without their consent. Thirdly, consenting participants were briefed on the interview procedure and types of questions to be asked (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Fourthly, it was emphasized that participation was voluntary and that participants were free to opt out of the study at any time. Fifthly, the participants' data was securely stored on the researcher's personal computer. Only the primary researcher and research supervisors had access to the data. Personal identifiers were removed from the data to protect the participant's identity.

Quality Assurance of the Data

Research trustworthiness.

Paramount to qualitative research is maintaining rigour or what it is mostly referred to as the "trustworthiness" of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Included under

trustworthiness are the following concepts of *credibility*, *dependability*, *confirmability* and *transferability* (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). These four aspects of trustworthiness should be considered as being interrelated (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). *Credibility* involves establishing confidence in the accuracy of the research findings through using well established data collection methods (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *Dependability* considers the consistency used throughout the research process including analysis techniques. (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, Guba & Lincoln, 1985). *Confirmability* speaks to the degree of neutrality kept during the research study. This is the extent to which the study's findings were attributed to the participants and not the researcher's bias, preconceptions, motivation or interests (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). *Transferability (also known as flexible generalisability)* refers to the extent to which the research findings can be transferred to other settings or groups (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The researcher followed Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Braun and Clarke's (2013) recommended list of techniques to achieve trustworthiness within the current research. Their work is highly regarded and is widely cited within the quality literature of qualitative research. The following techniques were employed as the researcher identified them as suitable and applicable to achieve research trustworthiness in the current study.

Firstly, credibility was achieved through the use of audio recordings and accurate transcriptions of the voice recordings. Moreover, the researcher formed an intimate relationship with the qualitative data and its analysis. The researcher read and reread the data multiple times as well as conducting multiple reflexive analysis of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this process the researcher attempted to reflect an accurate representation of the participants' responses to the interview questions as well as an authentic and valid illustration of their views and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Secondly, transferability of the study was achieved through providing a reasonably thick description of the participant group and case study boundaries (see chapter 4 - Context) (Clarke & Braun, 2013). However, the researcher acknowledges that the current study's transferability is limited by the context in which it occurred. As mentioned, the investigation of a new RPL assessment and selection process (the RPL ASP) makes this study context unique. Moreover, the inequalities experienced in South Africa's past education systems heightens the problems associated with non-traditional students' transition into HE. This uniqueness may limit the ability of the findings to be generalised. However, understanding RPL students and how to support them is high on the educational agenda in order to effectively

broaden participation in HEIs. Thus, South Africa is an appropriate and interesting context to study non-traditional students' transition into HE.

The researcher acknowledges the boundaries the context of this research and the nature of the results. However, it is maintained that the themes identified within the research can be generalised to other similar contexts. This is because the research results were determined by the groundedness levels of RPL students' perceptions and experiences of the RPL ASP and their transition into HE. The results are further supported by academic theories of learner behaviour and social psychology. Thus, transferability of the research is considered to be relatively high.

The researcher believes that the study's conclusions add value to the discipline of organisational psychology, educational institutions and future RPL students with a degree of utility and applicability within these areas. This research aimed to achieve greater understanding of RPL student transition into HE to guide institutions and education policy makers. Deeper insights into the enablers and barriers of RPL students' successful transition may assist institutions in identifying effective support strategies as well as provide students with information to help better prepare them for HE. In addition, the RPL ASP may assist in bettering assessment and selection processes as well as preparation of RPL candidates whilst limiting the negative experiences that candidates may have under less favourable assessment processes. Following examination, the researcher intends to make the research accessible to users, stakeholders and participants. This is in line with good quality research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln & Guba (1985) argue that research should enhance the degree of understanding, sophistication and ability of the necessary parties to act following the research.

Thirdly, dependability was achieved through a dependability audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This involved the detailed examination of the process of inquiry (i.e. the data collection process, how the data was kept and the accuracy of the data). Furthermore, detailed and complete records of all phases of the research process were made and kept (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Fourthly, confirmability was achieved through verbatim transcription of the interview data. The researcher made no attempt at altering any phrases or comments. The researcher thus maintained a high degree of neutrality.

Researcher bias.

A reflexive journal was kept where the researcher wrote about herself and her interactions with the research and the research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This was done to ensure that the researcher was aware of her personal bias and to ensure that she remained objective and neutral throughout the interview and data analysis processes (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Addressing possible researcher bias and other reflections on the research process.

As a novice qualitative researcher, the researcher felt it important to provide a description of her reflections and thought process during the data collection process. The following sections speaks to these reflections and provides an outline of how the researcher prepared herself for the interviews to ensure the quality of the data collection process.

The researcher attended a two-day qualitative research workshop at her university hosted by Dr. Bianca Stumbitz from Middlesex University, London. The workshop was made available through the researcher's department and included one day of lectures on qualitative research and one day of practical training in the field. This allowed the researcher to become familiar with interviewing techniques and an opportunity to practise and hone her interviewing skills.

The pilot interviews conducted were not only an opportunity to test the interview schedule, but also an opportunity for the interviewer to familiarise herself with the material and become comfortable in a one-on-one interview. Following each interview, the researcher reflected, in her journal, on the interview and analysed what was done well and what could have been improved upon (and extract has been provided in Appendix D as an example). The researcher established that she had a natural ability to make participants feel comfortable and soothe any apprehension. This was largely beneficial as the participants felt open to share their experiences and insights with the researcher. Evidence of this is provided in multiple interviews with the participants disclaiming that "I haven't told anyone else this" or "I am only telling you this". The researcher also observed during the pilot interviews that the participants thought that she was directly linked to the university, specifically the host department of the PgDipMM. Once the researcher realised that this could be the case, she iterated that she was an independent researcher and that what was shared during the interview could not be identified to them. Following the pilot interviews, the researcher emphasised this in all the other interviews to

ensure understanding of the purpose of the research. This was done to reduce social desirability bias and to elicit more open and honest responses from the participants.

The researcher engaged in journal writing throughout the process to reflect on herself as an active agent in the research, to ensure mindfulness of her preconceptions in order not to bias the data or interview process (again, see Appendix D). Additionally, the researcher reflected on her interviewing skills to maintain a standard of consistency and objectivity, so as not to detract from or bias the quality of the data. This method of self-reflection was critical to the data collection process, as the primary aim of the study was to explore and understand the experiences of the RPL students as they transitioned into the PgDipMM programme.

The pitfalls that the researcher became aware of during the pilot interview was asking two questions at once. This created ambiguity in the question and potentially confused the respondent. The researcher took care to avoid this in the subsequent interviews. Additionally, as the researcher identified with difficulties and challenges of working whilst studying, the researcher had to be mindful to remain neutral and objective throughout the interview.

Every effort was made to ensure that a suitable and rigorous research method was designed and followed, in order to effectively address the research questions outlined in the current study. The following chapter provides details of the context of the current research case study.

CHAPTER FOUR – CONTEXT

Introduction

The following chapter introduces the contextual setting within which the current study is conducted. The first section provides a detailed description of the case study. This includes a description of the RPL ASP, the PgDipMM programme and student demographics. The second section presents a contextual and descriptive statistical analysis of RPL students' transition into HE through various comparisons of academic performance data. Other issues relating to context within the study were discussed previously, in the method chapter.

The Case Study

The current study is concerned with the RPL students enrolled in the 2015 PgDipMM at a South African university. This Diploma is a two-year, part-time distance learning programme. This programme is one of the first accredited qualifications to be offered fully online by this university.

The programme had 60 RPL students enrolled. This is of particular interest to the context of the current study as this is a relatively large number of RPL students to be enrolled in a programme. The university initially received approximately 1200 applications applying for admission into the programme under RPL. The large influx in the number of applicants applying under RPL forced the university to revisit its RPL assessment and selection process. To accommodate the large number of RPL applicants, and because of dissatisfaction with and critique of previous RPL assessment and selection models being unsuitable and ineffective, the university designed a unique RPL assessment and selection process, denoted as the RPL ASP. The university identified a need for an assessment and selection process that would effectively accommodate the large number of applicants; facilitate the successful admission and preparation of RPL students into the online programme environment; ensure a fair and objective assessment and selection process set at the NQF level 7 standard; be easily adaptable to other qualifications and be a positive experience for applicants (A. Meadows, personal communication, March, 2017).

The RPL ASP

The following description of the RPL ASP is based on personal communications with A. Meadows (March, 2017) includes documentation extracts received from the university.

The university department offering the programme identified a significant increase in the volume of applicants applying to the programme through RPL. This initiated an investigation into RPL assessment and selection processes in order to develop an RPL application process that would be conducive to the university's standard of application procedure, and that would ensure a fair and accurate evaluation allowing admission to eligible applicants. The department felt that the existing RPL assessment and selection processes were unbecoming, ineffective and unable to support the large number of RPL applications. The department subsequently developed its own new and unique RPL assessment and selection process (the RPL ASP) that met the aforementioned RPL assessment and selection needs of the university. The process was then piloted through the PgDipMM programme (A. Meadows, personal communication, March, 2017).

Applicants applied for the PgDipMM programme as per the standard university's admission process with the addition of indicating that they are applying on the grounds of RPL. Suitable applicants were informed of the details of the RPL process. This included fee information, a questionnaire and procedure guidelines (see Appendix E, RPL ASP and essay questions). The questionnaires and other necessary documents were required to be submitted to the Faculty Office by a specified date. These documents, including a questionnaire, example of the students work and a testimonial, were evaluated by the selection Committee/Programme Convenor. The applicants then proceeded to complete a two-week assessment course offered via the GetSmarter platform (Across Africa). Get Smarter is an online education company that collaborates with leading universities to offer premium online courses. The Get Smarter platform uses a virtual learning environment (VLE) to provide educational services and deliver academic content to students.

The first week of the assessment programme required applicants to complete an adapted version of an existing 1st year commerce course, BUS1036, Evidence-Based Management, at NQF level 5. Applicants were given notes, readings and extensive information on referencing and plagiarism. Applicants were required to complete a short assessment at the end of the course, weighted at 30%. The second week, students were required to complete an adapted fourth year course BUS4050W, Strategic Thinking. The BUS4050W course has been designed for fourth year Commerce students and operates on the assumption that the NQF level 7 outcomes have been met by the student. Applicants were required to complete a short, written assignment based on the course content, weighted at 70%. Applicants needed to achieve a minimum of 40% average for these two assignments. If the applicant met these requirements,

they then had to submit a final essay in the third week. The essay assessed the applicant's ability to incorporate the course content into an analysis of their own personal and professional life. The entire coursework and assignments were designed by the university's staff members and the evaluation of final summative activity was evaluated by the programme convener. Subsequently acceptance or refusal offers were made based on the applicants' performance in the collective assessment programme.

Acceptance or refusal offers were made based on the following minimum requirements and evaluation criteria.

- Successful performance on the assessment course, satisfactory completion of the questionnaire, and submission of all supporting documents (i.e. example of student's work and a testimonial).
- Applicants whose submissions and supporting documentation did not provide evidence of equivalent knowledge were not admitted on to the qualification, regardless of whether they had completed the assessment course or not.

This assessment process was designed to provide an accurate representation of the applicant's readiness to enter a postgraduate diploma. The assessment process tested the necessary competencies, skills and abilities to ensure that the applicant would have a fair and obtainable chance of achieving the qualification. Furthermore, the assessment aimed to do so whilst ensuring an assessment process that was respectful, fair and objective and provide the applicant with an adequate opportunity to demonstrate their eligibility for the programme. An added advantage was that any student entering via RPL had the opportunity to work on the online platform they would be working from during the programme, which was believed would be of great benefit to them and increase their confidence levels (A. Meadows, personal communication, March, 2017).

RPL Student Demographics in the PgDipMM

There were 191 students enrolled in the 2015 PgDipMM programme of which 60 were RPL students and 131 were non-RPL students. Of the 60 RPL students, 38 were female and 22 were male. The race composition of the RPL students comprised of 22 Black, eight Coloured, one Indian, 13 White students and 16 students had missing data or preferred not to indicate their race. 21 graduated in 2016, 14 in 2017 and 26 students had missing data. 53 were South African, three had permanent residence in South Africa and four were from member states in

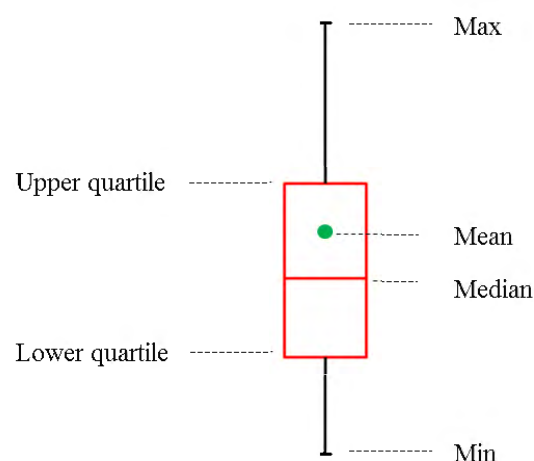
the South African Development Community (SADC). There was one withdrawal in 2016, three withdrawals in 2015 and two exclusions in 2015.

Exploring RPL Student Transition through Academic Performance Data

Every effort was made to collect hard data on actual performance to illustrate the RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. Even though this is not a quantitative result-based study, the researcher wanted to showcase the positive results online RPL students achieved in the PgDipMM programme in comparison to non-RPL online students. By looking at the final results we can see that online RPL students' performance was satisfactory, even though they might have taken a bit longer to perform than some.

An overall analysis of academic performance indicated that RPL students fared as well as non-RPL counterparts in the online PgDipMM programme. Only a marginal difference can be seen between the two groups in the final grade performance as well as in coursework and exam performance in each course. In most courses RPL students performed slightly lower than non-RPL students, however they still maintained a passing grade. Presented on the next page is an illustrative example of where RPL students fared the best (Table 1 and Figure 2), and one example of where they fared worst in comparison to their non-RPL counterparts (Table 2 and Figure 3). Analysis of the remaining courses can be found in the Appendix G. The mean, standard deviation, minimum (min) and maximum (max) scores are presented in table format. A visual display of the above five number summary as well as the mean are shown in a box and whisker plot. The range spread and shape of the academic scores including the lower and upper quartile can be read off the box and whisker plots. An example is provided below to show what each component of the box and whisker plot represents (Figure 1).

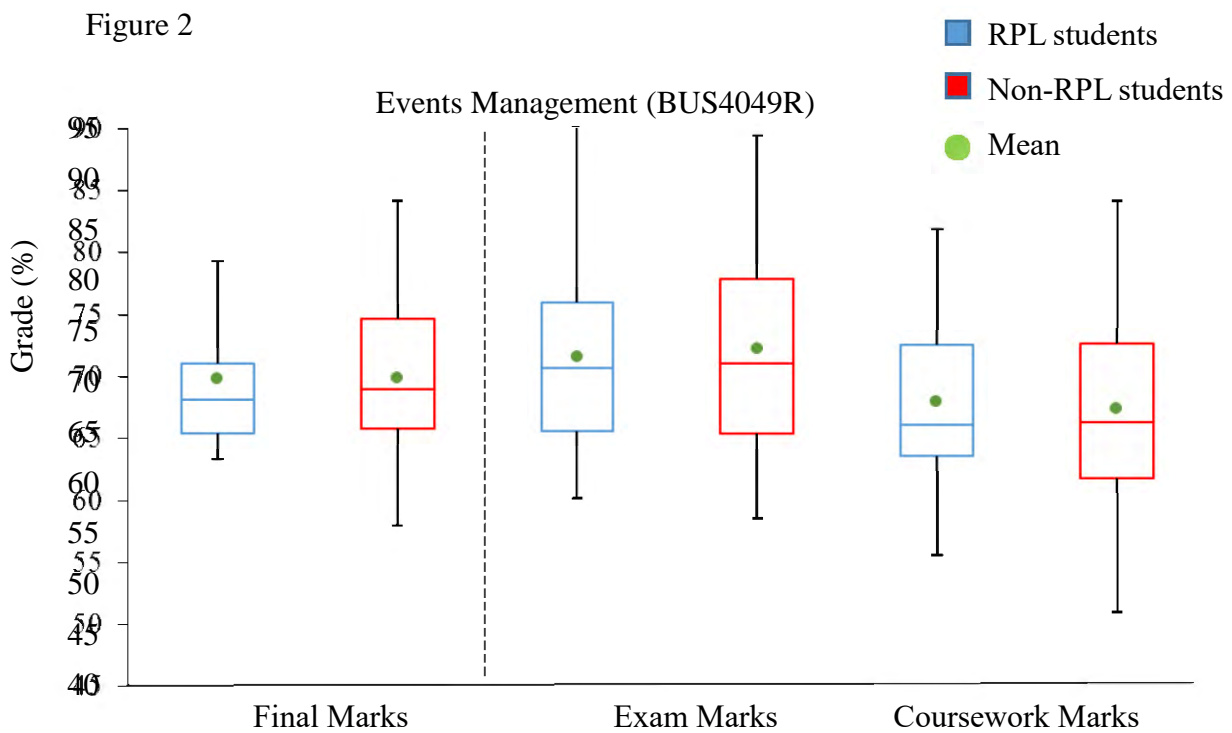
Figure 1 - Box and whisker plot example



Events Management (BUS4049R)

Student Group	<u>Final Marks</u>		<u>Exam Marks</u>		<u>Coursework Marks</u>	
	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL
Number of students	20	38	20	38	20	38
Mean	70	70	72	72	68	67
Standard deviation	6	7	8	9	8	8
Min	63	58	60	59	56	51
Max	86	84	90	89	82	84

Table 1



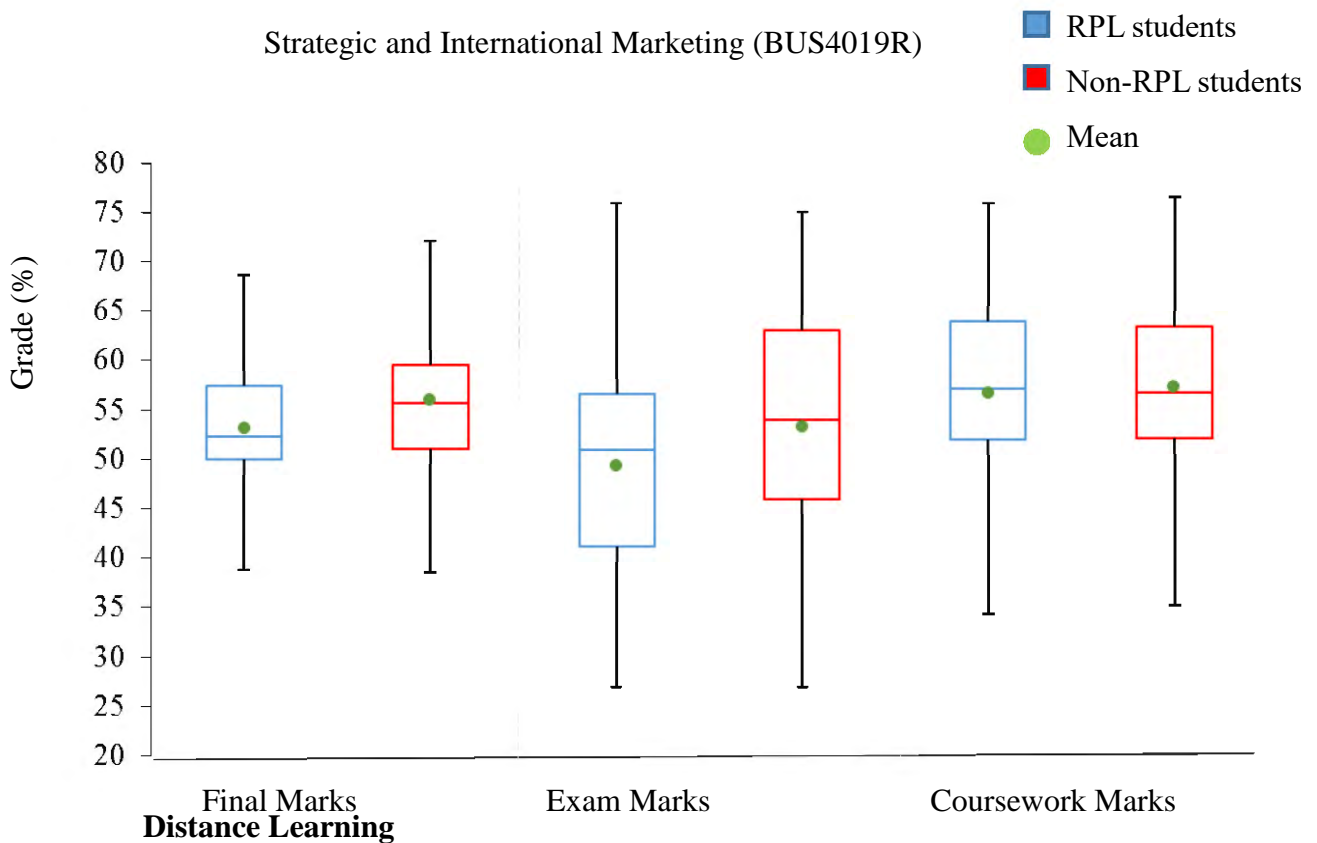
RPL students performed equally as well as non-RPL students in the Event Management (BUS4049R) course exam ($M=72$; $M=72$) and in the overall course ($M=70$; $M=70$). Furthermore, they performed slightly higher than non-RPL online students in the coursework component ($M=68$; $M=67$).

Strategic and International Marketing (BUS4019R)

Student Group	<u>Final Marks</u>		<u>Exam Marks</u>		<u>Coursework Marks</u>	
	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL
Number of students	38	73	38	73	38	76
Mean	53	56	49	53	57	57
Standard deviation	8	8	10	11	10	11
Min	36	32	27	27	27	26
Max	76	73	76	75	76	77

Table 2

Figure 3



RPL students performed lower than non-RPL students in the Event Management (BUS4049R) course exam ($M=49$; $M=53$) and in the overall course ($M=53$; $M=56$) (Even though the average for the exam component was just under a pass, RPL students still

maintained a pass overall for the course). However, they performed equally as well as non-RPL students in the course work component ($M=57$; $M=57$).

The data presented above evidences RPL students' successful transition into the programme with satisfactory academic performance with only marginal differences between their non-RPL online counterparts. The following section provides a review of literature concerned with distance learning and non-traditional students. As the current case study involves the transition of RPL students in a distance learning postgraduate programme, the researcher felt it necessary to investigate research focusing on the experiences of non-traditional students in distance learning programmes to further contextualise the research case study.

Online Distance Learning and Non-Traditional Students

Online distance learning continues to rise since the early 1990s and is now seen as a legitimate means through which education can be disseminated. The advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT), have made new opportunities for disseminating information, resources, and educational programmes, as well as providing networking opportunities with student peers, tutors, and the institution possible (Fozdar, 2015). These advances reinventing the way education is disseminated may be the solution to widening access to education, specifically HE. Online learning, distance learning, e-learning and digital study are general terms for the use of telecommunication to provide or enhance learning. The term distance learning is used throughout the current study and is defined as a “set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students in different locations and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors/lecturers and other students” (UNISA, 2008, p. 10).

Distance learning methods have widely broadened access to HE, particularly for non-traditional student groups. As previously discussed unique characteristics of non-traditional students such as full-time employment and family responsibilities make it difficult for this cohort of students to access on campus HE. Although distance learning overcomes many barriers and challenges of providing access to marginalised groups, distance learning is not without its own difficulties. The following section reviews research exploring the barriers and challenges concerning distance learning and non-traditional students in university qualifications.

Non-traditional students experience of online distance learning.

As previously mentioned, a large portion of students in university distance programmes are non-traditional students with many being mature students, returning to study students and those gained access through alternative routes (Stafford & Stinton, 2016; Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011; UNISA, 2008). This category of students are often juggling multiple roles as they tend to have families and/or are engaged in employment. Several studies have shown that students in distance programmes find it difficult to cope with the competing demands of employment, family responsibilities and academic studies (Dawson & Parker, 2011; Romero, 2011; Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011; UNISA, 2008). Furthermore, these studies explain that the addition of distance learning presents a further challenge to this cohort of students as it presents another element that they are required to manage and incorporate into their non-academic environments. Kirkwood and Price (2005) argue that institutions should be cognisant and realistic about the time available that non-traditional distance learners have for their studies. They further emphasize the importance of understanding the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of non-traditional students and their level of preparation for distance learning university programmes. In their analysis of 15 quantitative and qualitative studies with data summing up to over 80 000 participants, they found that non-traditional students vary in factors such as prior educational experiences, socio-economic background and age (Kirkwood & Price, 2005).

Barriers to successful transition into online distance learning for non-traditional students.

Distance learning delivers educational services through online course designs, module activities and assessment tasks. Students need to be familiar with operating technology and have the necessary digital skills to navigate, operate and engage with virtual learning platforms. Often distance learning concepts assume that students are competent technology users and have the means to effectively engage with the online learning platforms (Safford & Stinton, 2016). However, research has shown that this is not always the case. A number of studies have underlined that although non-traditional students may engage with a variety of digital and online technologies in their personal and or work lives, many of them are underprepared to use technologies for academic purposes (Safford & Stinton, 2016; Smith, Skrbis, & Western, 2013; Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). This lack of preparedness was particularly evident in more acute

non-traditional students who are mature students, first-time university goers and/or have taken non-transitional routes to HE.

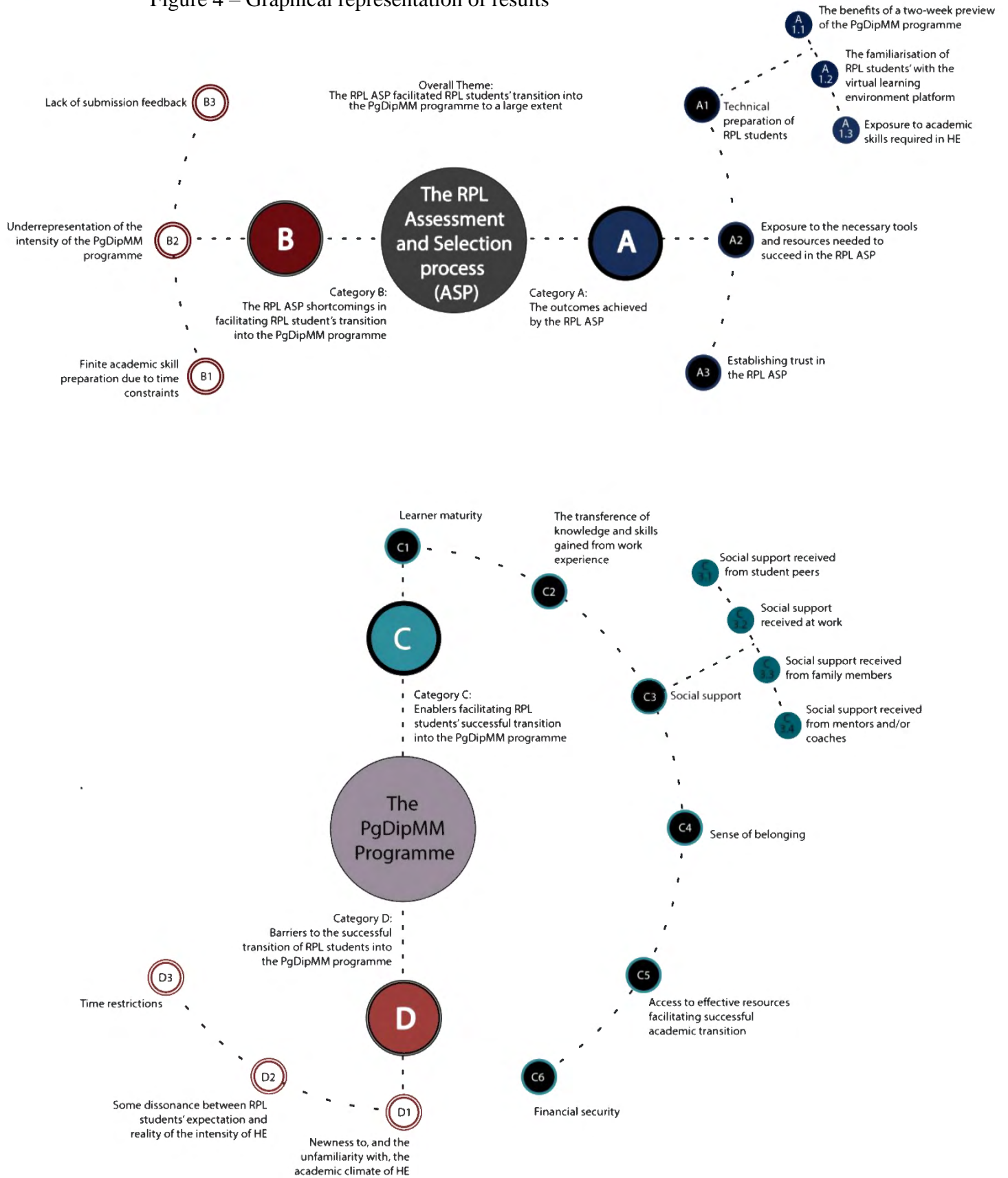
Safford and Stinton (2016), through a qualitative study of 163 participants, investigated the barriers to blended digital distance learning for non-traditional and low-socio-economic status students new to university education. Results indicated that barriers experienced by non-traditional students include; where and when to go online, finding support for distance learning, navigating virtual learning platforms and filtering of academic material, variable and absent technologies in the workplace, making connections between workplace technologies and ICT for study purposes, and storing and organising digital information (Safford & Stinton, 2016). One of the most prominent findings of the research was that the participants lacked the entry-level guidance about distance learning study techniques, skills and strategies (Safford & Stinton, 2016). This saw difficulties emerge in online note taking, digital highlighting, saving, storing and editing of study content (Safford & Stinton, 2016). This created stressful situations which were heightened by the need to master the convergence of new learning content and new technologies in a relatively short time period (Safford & Stinton, 2016). Moreover, being unprepared led to students spending an unanticipated amount of time navigating unfamiliar territory, and with the majority of the students being mature aged students this caused additional stress in juggling study/work/family demands (Safford & Stinton, 2016). The above findings from Safford and Stinton (2016) were consistent with similar results from previous studies such as Kirkwood and Price (2005) and Schulze (2016).

In summary, the current chapter provided a thick and detailed description of the unique case study under investigation. Having embedded and contextualised the current study, the following chapter reports the findings that resulted from the collected interview data.

- Theme A
- Theme B
- Theme C
- Theme D

CHAPTER FIVE – FINDINGS

Figure 4 – Graphical representation of results

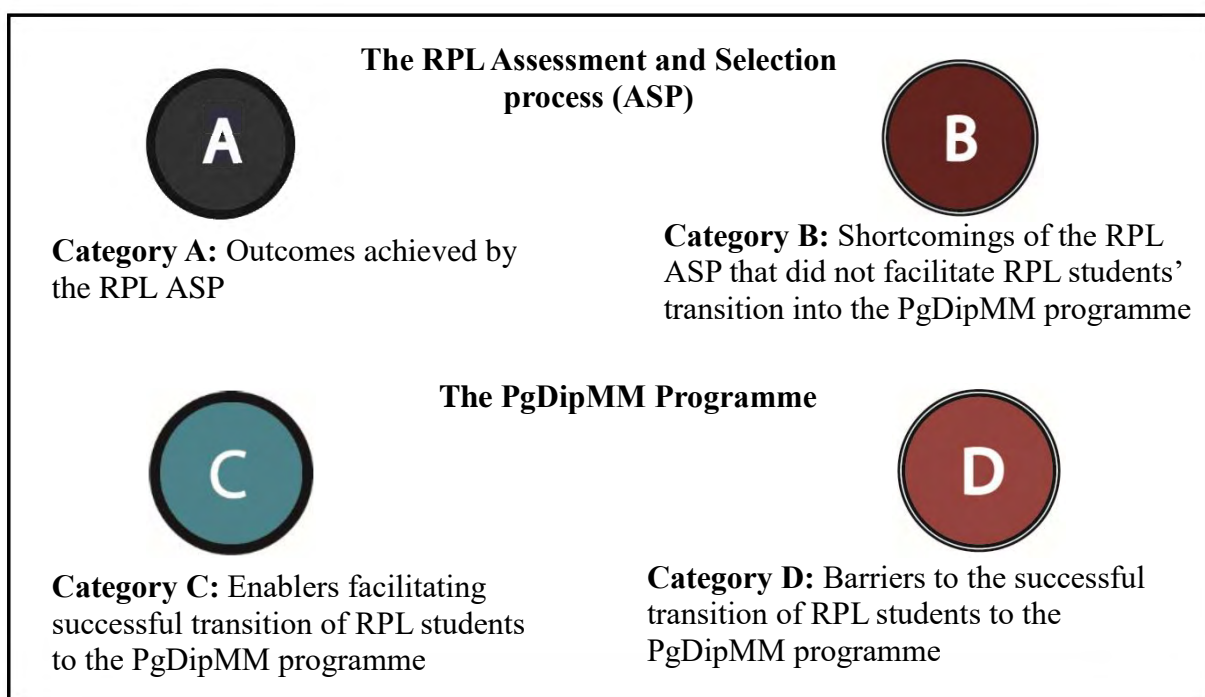


Introduction

Before getting into a narrative description of the findings, in the page above are two diagrammatical representations of the major themes. As outlined in the methods chapter, eight participants were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of the transitional journey into HE experienced by mature RPL students in a postgraduate diploma. During the interviews an enormous amount of data was generated. Much of it had to do with the general experience of the programme, but the focus of the current study is on the mechanisms that facilitated or did not facilitate participants' transition into HE and this is what is reported in this chapter. Participants are referred to as interviewees throughout this chapter and can be differentiated through an assigned alphabetic letter.

The chapter reports the themes and sub-themes that emerged through the data analysis. Supporting quotations from the interview data are provided to substantiate the identification of the themes and sub-themes as well as themes and sub-themes groundedness. Firstly, findings pertaining to the extent to which the RPL ASP facilitated RPL students' transition into the PgDipMM programme are reported. Secondly, the findings pertaining to the enablers and barriers that facilitated or inhibited the successful transition of RPL students are reported. At least 50% (four interviewees) needed to refer to a particular theme for the theme to be included in the results. Icons have been assigned to each category (see Figure 4) to be used as a quick reference aid (Evergreen, 2014).

Figure 5. Categories with their respective reference icons



THE RPL ASP

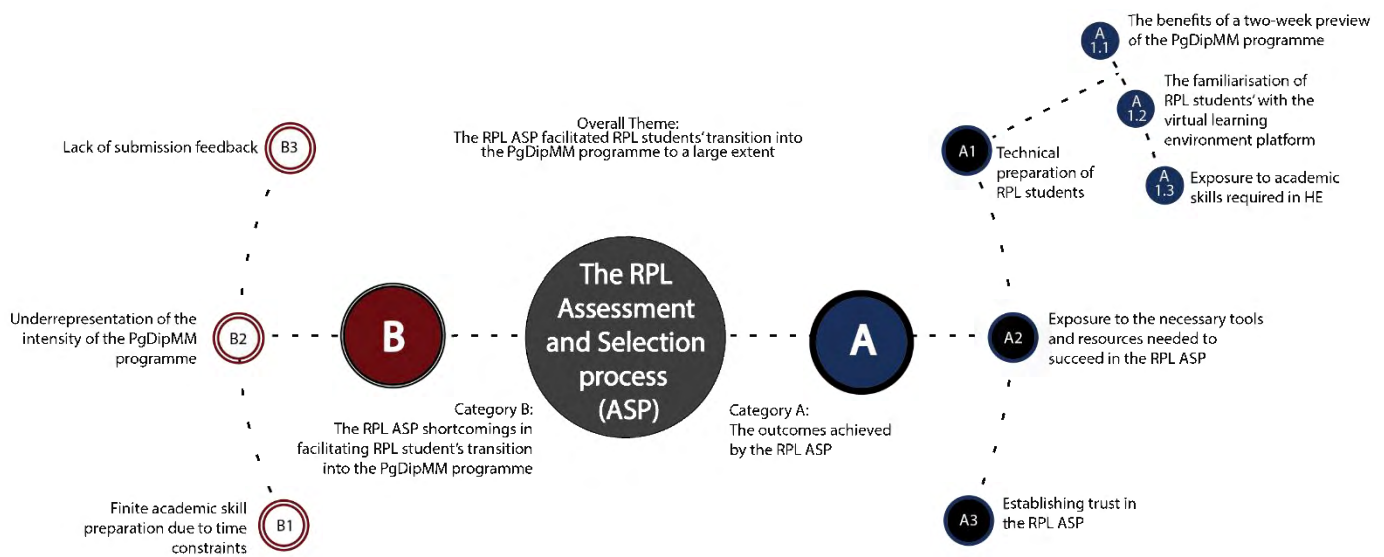


Figure 6 – The RPL ASP

Overall Theme: The RPL ASP facilitated RPL students' transition into the PgDipMM programme to a large extent [groundedness = 46].

Across all eight interviews there was confirmation of an overall positive perception (and experience) of the RPL ASP in that it facilitated their transition into the PgDipMM programme to a large extent. All interviewees had a common understanding of what the RPL ASP entailed and they had all participated in the assessment process. Substantiating quotations illustrating the positive perception of the RPL ASP are provided below:

“The RPL process was that two-week assessment course before I got in, um loved it.”
(Interviewee A)

“It was nice because I had to adapt, learn and with it, the same as the Postgraduate Diploma, every course is something new that I had never touched on before and I think it was nice. I really enjoyed the RPL [RPL ASP].”
(Interviewee B)

The interviewees' highlighted aspects of the RPL ASP that they felt facilitated their transition into the PgDipMM programme and aspects or shortcomings of the process that did not necessarily facilitate their transition. These aspects are reported under Category A and B respectively.

Category A: The Outcomes Achieved by the RPL ASP

Category A refers to the outcomes achieved by the RPL ASP that appears to have facilitated RPL students' successful transition into HE. These outcomes were highlighted through the interviewees' positive perceptions of the RPL ASP.

Theme A1: Technical preparation of RPL students [*groundedness = 23*].

Seven interviewees reported that the RPL ASP helped to technically prepare them, to a certain extent, for the PgDipMM programme and this facilitated their successful transition into the programme. The quotations below illustrate how the RPL ASP provided technical preparation which facilitated interviewees' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme.

“Right, so you have two modules on evidence-based management, but it was technical, psychological terms whatever that kind of thing. Stuff that you haven't been exposed to yet. And I think that was nice. Because the course had to test how you would handle new information, technical information that you have never seen in your life.”

(Interviewee B)

“To me, I would say yes it prepared me. I don't know, I can't speak on behalf of others, but I believe so. I think so. It [the RPL ASP] is helpful.”

(Interviewee F)

Three sub-themes emerged from the interview data indicating certain areas that the RPL ASP technically prepared the RPL candidates. Namely, the benefits of a two-week programme preview, the familiarisation with the VLE and, exposure to academic skills required in HE. These areas will be reported in further detail below alongside supporting quotations. The shortcomings of theme A1 (i.e. the areas that interviewees felt that the RPL process did not technically prepare them for the PgDipMM) will be reported under Category B.

Sub-theme A.1.1: The benefits of a two-week preview of the PgDipMM programme [*groundedness = 15*].

Six interviewees explained that the RPL ASP provided them with a preview of what the PgDipMM programme would be like, to some extent. They elaborated that having this insight or taster of the PgDipMM programme, helped prepare them and eased their transition into HE as they knew what to expect and became familiar with the programme's structure and types of assessment and courses they would be exposed to in the PgDipMM. The quotations

presented below provide evidence of how ‘programme preview’ assisted students’ successful transition and illustrates how the RPL ASP provided a preview of the course.

“So, if I just start with the RPL process these are the three things that I feel that had sort of prepared me for the transition. It was a quick wakeup call around there’s a deadline this is the actual volume, and this is the system we are going to use to get you through the next 2 years. So that prepared me quite well.”

(Interviewee C)

“Yes, it was very useful. It gave you like a pre-insight of what the course [PgDipMM] was going to be like. So ya like a course before a course. It was really helpful in that way.”

(Interviewee D)

Sub-theme A1.2: The familiarisation of RPL Students’ with the virtual learning environment platform (VLE) [groundedness = 19].

Six interviewees explained that the RPL ASP was particularly helpful in familiarising them with the VLE platform. For many of interviewees it was their first time being exposed to the particular VLE platform used to deliver the PgDipMM programme and for some it was their first time studying online. Having a chance to familiarise themselves with the navigation and operation of VLE platform was largely beneficial to the interviewees as they felt it facilitated a seamless and fast transition into the PgDipMM programme. Interviewees’ further commented that being familiar with the VLE prior to entering the PgDipMM programme reduced feelings of stress and being overwhelmed as they were already confronted with a mass of new information upon entering the new environment of HE. Illustrative quotations supporting this sub-theme are presented below.

“Well it was familiar. So by the time we got the VLE and the kind of work that’s required, logging in, responding, you know that process, I had already gone through it. I remember being on campus and having the VLE explained. And I remember thinking, ah I know this. So, it made it familiar and easier.”

(Interviewee D)

“So, all in all it definitely did give me that experience, because by the time that I got in to start the actual process, I was quite familiar with the navigation system of how Get Smart [VLE] did work compared to someone else who was doing it for the first time. I sort of knew roughly where things had to be uploaded so I felt like I eased into it because of the two weeks versus someone else that’s actually getting familiar with the system, but at the same time they have learning content to cope with as well so in that instance it was an advantage for me, I feel.”

(Interviewee H)

Sub-theme A.1.3: Exposure to academic skills required in HE [groundedness = 16].

Six interviewees explained that the RPL ASP exposed them to the academic skills required to be successful in the PgDipMM programme. They explained being exposed to certain skills in the RPL ASP helped them to feel more prepared when entering the PgDipMM programme. These skills include academic writing, referencing, learning new unfamiliar material and academic reading. This helped to ease their transition into the programme and HE to some extent. The quotations below provide evidence of exposure to certain academic skill and how it assisted students' transition into HE.

“I am not a big writer. I can do it, um but it does not come easily. I need to fight myself a little bit in the process and obviously academic writing is a very certain style that I was not familiar with. So, it [RPL ASP] kind of explained things. So that was one thing that I had to learn.”

(Interviewee A)

“Most of the challenges I noted was the issue of academic writing. They were the correct referencing style, issue how you structured your answer, you essay question also. You have to be in the system to understand. You can write properly but it is not academic. So those are the things that you learn through the process. How you formulate your answer, if it is an essay. It's how you approach it in writing academically. So, it puts you through the process to understand what to expect. I find it helpful.”

(Interviewee F)

Theme A2: Exposure to the necessary tools and resources needed to succeed in the RPL ASP [groundedness = 8].

Six interviewees explained that their experience was positive because they had been exposed to the necessary tools and resources that they required to succeed in the RPL ASP. This included reference guides and tutorials, readings, tutorial videos and access to tutors and forum groups. The interviewees indicated that being exposed to the necessary tools and resources assisted them with their success in the RPL ASP and subsequently readied them for the PgDipMM programme. Evidencing quotations are provided below.

“Um in this case so the resources were pretty much provided so there was no real resources I needed. We got some pre-reading and to answer some questions and we also did a tutorial around referencing which was and we got a whole referencing guide and we got a piece of reading and then we had to reference that.”

(Interviewee C)

“Um a lot had to do with the notes and the videos that were given to us by Get Smarter. We had online tutors. We had access to email those tutors whenever we wanted to. And their work group chats and forum where we could pose questions and ask a lot of

questions if you didn't understand. So there were a lot of those, the group chats, the videos, notes, the forums, referencing guides, reading materials, the emails and the live tutors themselves. That was also very helpful."

(Interviewee E)

Theme A3: Establishing trust in the RPL ASP [groundedness = 16].

Seven interviewees reported that they trusted the RPL ASP. They explained that, at the time of the assessment, they felt confident that should they pass the assessment they would be able to succeed in the PgDipMM programme. However, interviewees described the RPL ASP as a challenging process that was not easy to pass. Moreover, they perceived that the RPL ASP acted as a personal indicator that they met the level required to become a postgraduate student. Therefore, the RPL ASP assisted RPL students' successful transition through the development of confidence in their academic abilities and the establishment of new memberships and an identity as an independent postgraduate adult learner. Quotations supporting this finding are highlighted below.

"It was my belief, yes. That was my conviction. If I make it through the RPL, I was quite confident that I will make in in the course. That was my assumption."

(Interviewee F)

"Um, it wasn't easy to be accepted, so if I made that [passed the RPL ASP] I told myself, I am sure that I will make the grades of this [the PgDipMM programme]."

(Interviewee H)

Category B: The RPL ASP's Shortcomings in Facilitating RPL Student's Transition into the PgDipMM Programme



Themes discussed under Category B refer to the shortcomings of the RPL ASP expressed by the interviewees during the interview. These shortcomings are aspects of the RPL ASP that the interviewees felt did not necessarily facilitate their transition into the PgDipMM programme. Themes under this category (B) include, lack of submission feedback, finite academic skill preparation due to time constraints and failure to prepare RPL students for the intensity of the PgDipMM programme.

Theme B1: Finite academic skill preparation due to time constraints [groundedness = 6].

Although the RPL ASP exposed RPL students to the necessary academic skills required in HE, five interviewees felt that the two-week duration of the RPL ASP was too short for them

to completely prepare and hone the necessary academic skills required in HE. They felt rushed in trying to develop these academic skills in the two weeks provided. They would have liked more time to practise and familiarise themselves with academic skills they were exposed to during the RPL ASP. As many of the interviewees were unfamiliar with some of the academic skills required in HE, particularly academic writing, they perceived that having more time to develop their academic skills would have positively contributed to their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme.

“I think two weeks to me seems a bit of a small time. For me it’s probably a bit small.”
(Interviewee D)

“It was challenging, of course it was challenging. Because basically it was someone who hasn’t been exposed to higher education for such a long time. And I have never been exposed to higher education in South Africa and how the system works. Everything was quite new to me. So I had to adapt myself and to do that in the space of two weeks, was a bit of a rush.”

(Interviewee H)

Theme B2: Underrepresentation of the intensity of the PgDipMM programme

[groundedness = 8].

Data obtained from all eight interviewees indicated that they felt technically prepared, but not for the intensity of the PgDipMM programme. The interviewees felt that their experience of the RPL ASP did not translate into reality on the ground in terms of the programme intensity. They described the PgDipMM programme as being faster paced, more intensive and demanding in comparison to the RPL ASP. The interviewees explained that the information received during the RPL ASP about the time and effort the PgDipMM programme would require was understated. Thus, the interviewees felt somewhat unprepared for the demanding nature of the PgDipMM programme and its high workload. The quotations below illustrate the interviewees’ perceptions of how they would have liked clearer communication about the intensity of the PgDipMM programme.

“So it was quite intense, and I think what they anticipated and what they thought and communicated to us as to what to expect was not realistic. So they said, no 20 hours a week that’s what you need, and it was like 40 hours a week.”

(Interviewee A)

“I think in terms of preparation as to what to expect from a working professional wasn’t sufficiently covered. The volume of work that was to be covered was intense. And I don’t think the two weeks gave you a sense of that, besides if you have maybe done it before. But that was a big adjustment for me starting this programme”

(Interviewee G)

“Because the course was hectic, it was on another level. It’s not been what like was advertised. Like you just need some hours of your week or something like that. For someone that works full-time, um you have to give up a lot, a lot, a lot, and a lot”

(Interviewee H)

Theme B3: Lack of submission feedback [groundedness = 4].

Four interviewees reported the need to receive feedback on their submissions during the RPL ASP. The interviewees perceived submission feedback as a valuable learning resource that could further facilitate their transition into HE. They explained that they required feedback particularly on essay submissions as they found academic writing challenging and unfamiliar. The provision of feedback on their submission would allow them to assess where they stood academically and afford them the opportunity to address any areas that needed addressing prior to entering the PgDipMM programme. Feedback on submission would have been well received and interviewees perceived that greater feedback would have eased their transition into the PgDipMM programme, by allowing them to better prepare themselves through addressing their academic weaknesses. The quotations below illustrate the interviewees’ desire for feedback on their submission during the RPL ASP.

“Feedback would have been great just, ya just to be able to have understood if there were any red flags. I would have liked from their perspective reading it that I should have been aware of something or actually just you know um awesome application we think you ready or whatever.”

(Interviewee C)

“Um and they didn’t give you anything [feedback]. They just said okay you made it. I think the online stuff there is quizzes and you can kind of test your own scores, but the writing assessments they never gave you feed back to say when you go into this you need to consider A, B and C.”

(Interview G)

THE PgDipMM PROGRAMME

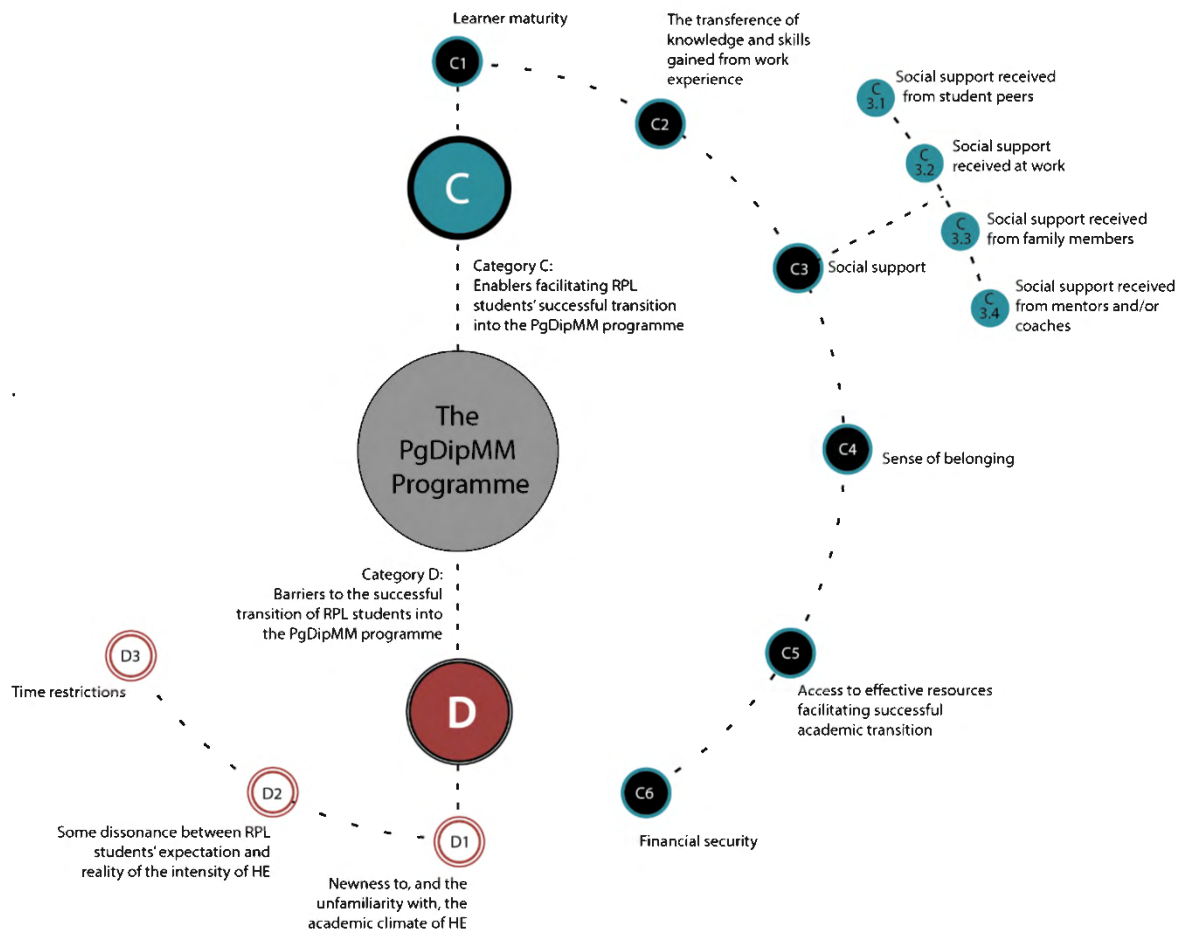


Figure 7 – The PgDipMM Programme

Category C: Enablers facilitating RPL students' successful transition into HE

Category C refers to the enablers that were perceived to have facilitated RPL students' transition into HE and the PgDipMM programme. Six themes emerged from the data set and are reported under this category (C), namely 1) *learner maturity*, 2) *The transference of knowledge and skills gained from work experience*, 3) *social support*, 4) *sense of belonging*, 5) *access to effective resources* and 6) *financial security*. These six themes are presented below in no particular order.

Theme C1: Learner maturity [groundedness = 22].

Six interviewees referred to certain personal attributes that facilitated their transition into HE. These attributes can be understood as learner maturity and consist of, awareness of individualistic learning styles, study habits, coping mechanisms and an overall mature approach to their studies. Below is an illustrative quote of learner maturity.

“Always there’s that pressure of I have to, because if I don’t do something tonight it means I have to do double tomorrow. So there is a schedule and you need to work out what your schedule is.”

(Interviewee A)

“So I had a whole system that I worked out and a lot of other people might have a different system, but I found that, that works for me and that’s what I am using. So I think from what you need to succeed I think that you should, number one, be able to know how you work, how you learn. Um, understand yourself and then ah work out a schedule to it.”

(Interviewee C)

Theme C2: The transference of knowledge and skills gained from work experience [groundedness = 15].

Five interviewees commented on how they were able to transfer knowledge and skills gain from their work experience to their studies and how this greatly assisted them with transitioning into the PgDipMM programme. The interviewees also highlighted how this differentiated them from traditional students and assisted them with their learning which made for an easier and smoother transition into the PgDipMM programme. The quotations below provide an example of how the transference of work knowledge and skills assisted interviewees’ successful transition.

“I think age makes a difference. I think with RPL, if you have worked you’ve got a different set of understanding and skills from the work place and I think you are able to apply more and rationalise or argue for something or just the application part. So you bring in that practical back into your studies.”

(Interviewee A)

“The work ethics, or time scheduling and meeting deadlines was a very helpful experience. At work you are expected to finish work and submit your report. And me I was personally familiar with report writing, time management. And those helped me. Probably as a consultant, we write a lot of reports, we have to meet deadlines, and we know how you have to perform with ethics. It is a higher-level ethics. Which I found at university level, they are honesty, those kinds of things. Which I found those with undergrad, you know the youngsters, just living at college, it is not there.”

(Interviewee F)

Some interviewees highlighted that their work knowledge in specific fields aligned to some of the courses in the PgDipMM programme. They explained that their expertise in their field greatly contributed to their successful transition as they were familiar with certain jargon and possessed industry knowledge that was directly relevant to their studies.

“I think it was the subjects and marketing and management was in line with my passion and my work. But when I went through the topics that were going to be covered during the course, I knew 100% that I could apply it in my real life. So that helped me a lot. If I look at all the subjects I did well in, they were in line with my work. So every case study was like an application of what I was doing at work. So the subject that I am redoing is the only one I failed and it is the one that I didn’t have prior experience at all.”

(Interviewee G)

Theme C3: Social support [groundedness = 64].

Social support was mentioned by interviewees as a large factor that contributed to their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. The interviewees made mention of various sources of social support they received, namely from students, work, family, coach/mentor, friends. These sources have been categorised and are reported below in hierarchical order from the most discussed source of social support to the least. Below are illustrative quotations highlighting the influential role that social support played in the interviewees’ transition into postgraduate HE.

“Um, social support was really big.”

(Interviewee A)

“100%. Social support played a major role.”

(Interviewee G)

Sub-theme C3.1: Social support received from student peers [groundedness = 19].

The most notable source of social support, which was reported by all eight interviewees was social support received from other students in the PgDipMM programme. The interviewees found great support from other students who understood what they were going through and who experienced the same challenges as them (for example working and studying at the same time). The PgDipMM students created a closed Facebook group which became their support group and channel of communication with each other. Provided below are illustrative quotes of how students were a source of social support that facilitated RPL students’ successful transition into postgraduate HE.

“The 2015 group had a Facebook group that really helped. So the guys would like share things that they found, clips, um information. If someone had a problem with something they would put it on the group. So I actually thought that was quite helpful. It was really, I think, for the bulk course that was really helpful. And I would recommend that for anyone. Just to be in touch. So if you know you are not hugely

social about this whole study thing, try to see what other people, who are experience the same things as you, are going through.”

(Interviewee D)

“Yes, we also had a Facebook group with a cohort of students that were doing the course online. It was like a mini support group.”

(Interviewee G)

“We have the forum as well. And you could read others reports feedback and lean from them.”

(Interviewee H)

Sub-theme C3.2: Social support received at work [groundedness = 18].

Six interviewees reported that they received social support from their work place and that this was a contributing factor which eased their transition into the PgDipMM programme. Many of the interviewees were granted study leave and had flexible time at work which could be used to accommodate their studies and manage competing demands. Moreover, interviewees reported receiving support from their colleagues who offered to alleviate some pressure through offering their assistance on their university assignments or their work place tasks. In addition, some interviewees received financial support from their workplace. Financial support is classified under instrumental support (type of social support). This alleviated stress from those with financial difficulties and afforded them the opportunity to direct their efforts to ensuring their successful transition into HE.

“Very much. So they were very supportive. Flexitime, I can go off a little bit earlier or I can take some time here and there.”

(Interviewee A)

“At work also they knew that I am studying, they understood. Because this was an opportunity given to me by work, I had access to like a mentor from work. I mentioned before that I had access to professional division with in the SABC. So I had to go to the financial division for help. I needed extra lessons, you know extra tutoring lessons, because you know it was difficult. So that’s how I managed to cope with that.”

(Interviewee E)

Sub-theme C3.3: Social support received from family members [groundedness = 11].

Six interviewees indicated that their family was a big source of social support which facilitated their transition into the PgDipMM programme. In all cases, the interviewees’ families were supportive through taking on many of the household chores and caregiving roles. This allowed the interviewees’ time to concentrate on their studies and work deliverables. The

interviewees also commented on how their families kept them motivated to complete the course. They would offer words of encouragement, and the interviewees felt a sense of responsibility to finish the course as to not disappoint their family members or to achieve a better life for their household.

“I think family is probably my biggest success for this. I had the understanding and support from my wife’s side.”

(Interviewee A)

“I got support from them. It wasn’t academically. But it was support in a sense that she would take care of the son, do homework with him when I can’t, when I had to fly down to Cape Town for whatever reason, she [interviewee’s mother] would take care, the dad was always there. So in that sense. And now that SABC is not funding, they will help with the funding as well. You know to push. So that’s how they would help as well.”

(Interviewee E)

Sub-theme C3.4: Social support received from mentors and/or coaches

[groundedness = 7].

Five interviewees indicated that they had received social support from a coach or mentor either privately or provided by the institution or their work place. They highlighted that support received from their mentor or coach was highly influential in their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. The mentors and coaches were an influential source of social support as they offered advice and helped the interviewees’ see the bigger picture when needed. The PgDipMM programme was an intensive and gruelling programme which often left the interviewees feeling overwhelmed, distressed and defeated. During these times the interviewees saw their mentors or coaches as pivotal in getting them back on track, motivated and energised. The interviewees found the mentors and coaches particularly helpful in encouraging and motivating them and helping them to believe that they had the capacity and ability to complete the programme. The PgDipMM course coach also assisted the interviewees with strategic exercises such as goal setting and planning which kept the interviewees focused on completing the programme. Thus, mentors and coaches provided RPL students with all four types of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal) which contributed to ensuring the successful transition of RPL students into HE (Dykes, 2014).

“But the coach! Having a coach! I spoke to Adrian, ah I’m so defeated, and I don’t think I can put up with this [the PgDipMM] anymore. I think I am just going to leave it now. He looked at what courses I had done and he said to me, you are done with VRC [course] and the only thing left is a group project and then you are done with it

[the PgDipMM]. So he looked through it, he selected a few courses for me. And he said once you are done with this and then next year you can pick it up again. So he was able to look at my personal progress and how far I need to go. Almost like a careers consult. But he is very specific to the course. So, um I think, we probably took for granted that that has been a very big differentiator.”

(Interviewee D)

“I found having a course coach during the 2 years has been a dramatic help.”

(Interviewee G)

Theme C4: A sense of belonging [groundedness = 14].

Seven interviewees described that they developed a sense of belonging which facilitated their successful social transition into HE. They explained that they felt part of the university and believed themselves to be legitimate students within a postgraduate HE context. One interviewee (E) explained that her sense of belonging was facilitated by the fact that she was surrounded by many other mature looking students like her. Moreover, the interviewees perceived the feeling of being a part of the institution contributed to their learner confidence and self-efficacy, which in turn eased their transition into the unfamiliar learning environment of HE. Provided below are evidencing quotations.

“I got to the contact week and they treated me like I am just one of them, you understand what I am saying. So it was awesome. It was amazing, and when we wrote our first exam, the programme convener flew down to examinations centre and I’ll never forget it. She handed everyone a chocolate and she said here is something for energy because you are going to need it. It was awesome. Look I mean even though we are studying here in Joburg, when I go to the university I feel like I am home. It’s amazing. I really enjoy it. Really, really.”

(Interviewee B)

“We felt part of the university, 100% we had access to everything. We are university students.”

(Interviewee H)

Theme C5: Access to effective resources facilitating successful academic transition [groundedness = 17].

All eight interviewees reported that, through the university, the academic resources they needed to be successful in the programme were accessible to them. The interviewees indicated that this assisted their learning which contributed to their academic transition into HE. The particular resources that were highlighted to be most useful were study/content materials such as notes, readings, books, video clips,

tutorials, past question papers, detailed written feedback on submissions and the institution's private library. Illustrative quotations of this theme are presented below.

"If I look at the course, they give us all the notes. All the resources we need, um. I don't say I lack anything."

(Interviewee B)

"The university has got like a lot of research, previous question papers, you know Peoplesoft [the university's communication portal], you have a lot of access, and they have emails that they constantly sent you. They provide links to real world examples. Like we did a case study, like Johnson and Johnson etc. So the university has a vast like whole library of information that assists you. So there was a lot that the university actually offered"

(Interviewee E)

Theme C6: Financial security [groundedness = 14].

Five interviewees reported that being financially independent played a role in their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. They commented that because the programme was online it required specific tools such as a good working laptop, internet and mobile internet connectivity and other technological devices such as earphones, a microphone and printing facilities. Interviewees stressed that having the means to afford these types of resources are imperative to being successful in the programme. These resources enabled the interviewees to work remotely, submit deadlines on time and access material. The quotations provided below illustrate some of the resources required and how it assisted with interviewees' successful transition into the programme

"I also had the resources available at home so biggest thing for us as part of coping with an online programme is internet connectivity and having earphones. Other than that you could do a lot of your readings online, you didn't have to print everything. I'm a textbook type person, so I like to print and highlight and make notes and I did that here [at work]. So that for me was quite enabling."

(Interviewee C)

"You must have a laptop. You must have 3G or Wi-Fi, a secure connection and you must have space. It costs money. I would say I have access to those tools. I can afford it because I am employed. But for some people it is a challenge. It is expensive. And you need the space. You must have the space."

(Interviewee F)

"Yes, I think if you didn't have the finances there's no way you could make it happen."

(Interviewee H)

D

Category D: Barriers to the Successful Transition of RPL Students

Category D refers to the barriers that were perceived to have hindered RPL students' transition into HE and the PgDipMM programme. Three themes emerged from the data set and are reported, namely, 1) *newness to, and the unfamiliarity with, the academic climate of HE*, 2) *Some dissonance between RPL students' expectation and reality of the intensity of HE*, 3) *time constraints*.

Theme D1: Newness to, and the unfamiliarity with, the academic climate of HE
[groundedness = 28].

Six interviewees perceived their unfamiliarity and newness to the academic climate of HE as a barrier they had to overcome during their transition into HE. They reported that the academic climate of HE was an unfamiliar environment for them which took time to understand and transition into. The interviews commented that it was a challenge to master the unfamiliar academic terminology and skills used in HE, in a short space of time. Provided below are two illustrative quotes of interviewees unfamiliarity with the academic climate of HE. Interviewee A provides an example of unfamiliarity with academic terminology, interviewee B - research skills, and interviewee C - academic writing.

"I think that for me was a big thing. What is analyse, what is assess, when they use those words, what does that mean really? How does that look in writing format? That for me was like what?"

(Interviewee A)

"I must say the research, sometimes can be very, very hard and something that you are not familiar with at all. A topic that is not your strength."

(Interviewee B)

"Ah, at the beginning um ooh gosh, you have to write differently, it's not like it's something you would write to your boss or business partners or whatever. You have to write in a different style and um I think they taught us. In a way there was some sort of guidance to write, but at the same time it is still very new to you. I think everyone struggles at the beginning when it comes to the style of academic, how you present things and so on."

(Interviewee H)

Additionally, the interviewees stressed that they had difficulties with subject material that they were largely unfamiliar with. Particular reference was made to the managerial finance and accounting modules and the interviewees' unfamiliarity with these subjects. Provided below are evidencing quotations of interviewees difficulties with unfamiliar subject content.

“That accounting. That horrible, horrible finance management, especially when you have never done accounting before. You know that was really tough, that was one of the challenges. It was an area, okay, most of the modules within the course, I could relate to. But the other one, HR [human resources] and accounting, I was confused, because I have never experienced anything to do with HR or accounting. The terminology was unfamiliar, and I failed that one.”

(Interviewee E)

Theme D2: Some dissonance between RPL students’ expectation and reality of the intensity of HE [groundedness = 35].

All eight interviewees experienced some dissonance between their expectation and reality of the intensity of HE. The interviewees explained that their expectation of the intensity and level of workload and sacrifice the PgDipMM would require was largely underestimated. This was highlighted as a hindrance to their transition as they felt underprepared for the intensity of the programme as well as overwhelmed and discouraged. Interviewees indicated that their expectations had been shaped by communications from the university as to what expect in terms of workload and the amount of time that should be dedicated to the programme. However, in reality, interviewees perceived the intensity of the PgDipMM programme and time commitment to be much larger than communicated. The quotes below provide evidence of the workload intensity and dissonance between the communicated time expectation and the actual time commitment needed.

“We were told that it takes three to four hours a week, but no, one to two hours per day, but we most of us found that unrealistic.”

(Interviewee F)

Additionally, interviewees felt that the workload and time commitment expected by the university to be an unrealistic expectation of them, as full-time employees. Interviewees felt that the course should be reviewed in terms of this and consider, that as mature students, they do not have the same amount of time available to commit to their studies as traditional students may have. Below are evidencing quotations of this.

“It’s just managing the content and the work load and still having it at the right level has for me been the biggest challenge.” “Like I honestly feel like the course needs to be reviewed. Having said that though, if it’s meant for someone to make more time, then I think that should be stated upfront.”

(Interviewee D)

“Oh, it is intensive. It is very intensive course, particularly for full-time workers. That it is, really. For someone who juggles around with workload, family responsibilities, social engagements, it is very, very intensive.”

(Interviewee F)

Theme D3: Time restrictions [groundedness = 25].

All eight interviewees perceived time restrictions as a barrier to successful transition into HE. Interviewees explained that time was a barrier to transition as they were constantly juggling demands between their various roles. The interviewees had to maintain their identities and role responsibilities as a worker, parent and/or spouse. Consequently, they felt that they had a lot less time to dedicate to their studies than other students as many had competing role demands. Thus, time restrictions caused by competing role demands hindered RPL students' transition into HE as they had to retain their previous memberships as well as the formation of new memberships and identity as a postgraduate student. An evidencing quote of time restrictions as a reason of competing role demands is presented below.

“Um time it is always an issue. Um you know you are working, you have a family, you studying.”

(Interviewee B)

One interviewee (H) explained how his various memberships and role identities hindered his transition into HE. He felt there was no time to adequately meet all the demands of his various roles which lead to feelings of stress and exhaustion.

“I wanted to resign was I didn't have time! Um I was struggling. One semester we had like five courses. You just don't have time. And the pressure was on. Like you have to have a submission every week. Every week, every week. Sunday and Monday evening, I was exhausted, exhausted, exhausted.”

(Interviewee H)

Conclusion

The reported findings indicated that the RPL ASP seemed to facilitate RPL students' transition into the PgDipMM programme to a large extent. Interviewees further identified and provided their perception of the possible enablers and barriers that they experienced during their transition into the PgDipMM programme. Interviewees reported more enablers than they did barriers to their transition, which could signify the effectiveness of the RPL ASP in facilitating transition into the PgDipMM programme. A summary of the themes and sub-themes reported can be found on page 40. The subsequent chapter provides a discussion and interpretation of the current findings presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER SIX – DISCUSSION

The current study set out to explore the transition of RPL students into postgraduate HE. It investigated RPL students in a postgraduate diploma at a South African university. The aim of the study was twofold: The first was to examine to what extent a novel RPL assessment and selection process (RPL ASP) facilitated RPL students' transition into the PgDipMM programme. The RPL ASP was designed with the criticisms of previous RPL assessment models in mind. The second was to determine the enablers and barriers that contributed to, or hindered, RPL students' successful transition into HE. The following main findings emerged: The RPL ASP seemed to have facilitated students' transition into HE to a large extent. Six possible enablers and three barriers to RPL students' successful transition into HE was identified. The enablers were identified as learner maturity; transfer of work knowledge and skills; social support; sense of belonging; access to effective resources; and financial security. The barriers were identified as newness to, and unfamiliarity with, the academic climate of HE; dissonance between expectation and reality of the intensity of HE; and time constraints.

Discussion of the RPL ASP

It can be deduced that the RPL ASP is a useful tool that may help facilitate RPL students' transition into HE. The large extent to which the RPL ASP appeared to have facilitated RPL student's transition into HE was evident through interviewees' discussion of various achievements and shortfalls of the RPL ASP. Despite some shortcomings, which are opportunities for refinement, the RPL ASP appears to have prepared RPL students for the PgDipMM programme and facilitated their successful transition into HE. Overall the interviewees perceived the RPL ASP to have facilitated their transition into the PgDipMM programme to a large extent.

The themes illustrate aspects of the RPL ASP that interviewees found most beneficial in facilitating their transition into HE, and they include: technical preparation of RPL students; exposure to the necessary tools and resources needed to succeed in the PgDipMM; and establishing trust in the RPL ASP. However, these aspects housed certain shortcomings that did not necessarily facilitate RPL students' transition into HE. These shortcomings include: finite academic skill preparation due to time constraints; underrepresentation of the intensity of the PgDipMM programme (in theme A1) and the lack of submission feedback (in theme A2). The emergent themes are discussed and interpreted in accordance to the research question. Each theme and sub-theme have not been individually discussed. Rather, an integrated

discussion is provided. The researcher considered this to be more logical and comprehensive due to the nature of the findings.

The current research findings indicated that the RPL ASP addressed potential challenges and difficulties (highlighted in previous research) that RPL students might experience during their transition into HE. In addressing these areas, the RPL ASP appears to have acted as a pre-emptive tool to help better prepare and support RPL students with their transition into HE. In turn, the way it did so is discussed below.

Technical preparation of RPL students.

One of the most seemingly beneficial aspects of the RPL ASP was the technical preparation it provided to the RPL students. Technical preparation included: provision of a preview of the PgDipMM programme, familiarising RPL students with the VLE and introduction to certain skills required in HE. These will be discussed accordingly.

Firstly, the RPL ASP acted as a two-week preview of the PgDipMM programme. This appeared to have helped prepare and build confidence in the RPL students which facilitated their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. However, it was found that the preview underrepresented the intensity of the PgDipMM programme. Therefore, the RPL students felt underprepared for the intensive and demanding nature of the PgDipMM programme, although the primary purpose of the RPL ASP is not to necessarily prepare RPL students for the PgDipMM programme, but rather to assess the readiness of the RPL student for the PgDipMM (A. Meadows, personal communication, March, 2017). Nevertheless, a suggestion for possible refinement would be to communicate the intensity of the PgDipMM during the two-week assessment and selection process. Similar recommendations were made by Dykes (2014) and Southall et al. (2016) as participants in their study also indicated their lack of preparedness or unfamiliarity with the workload intensity of HE. If the RPL students had been aware of the intensity of the PgDipMM programme they could have made the necessary arrangements to help alleviate some of their other pressures. For example, they could have informed their employer of their decision to study and discussed certain ways to assist them with their studies, and those with family responsibilities could have arranged child caring assistance. Moreover, RPL students could have, during the assessment process, assessed whether they themselves had the capacity to commit to completing a postgraduate diploma whilst being engaged in full-time employment. Lyons (2006) and Southall et al. (2016) suggest that a lack of preparedness for HE and commitments outside of the HEI as a possible reason

for low retention rates of non-traditional students. Although feeling underprepared for the intensity of postgraduate studies may be a view held by other students as well, it might be more acute in an RPL students' case as they have no prior reference of HE standards and workload intensity (Dykes, 2014; Southall et al., 2016). This finding is unpacked further and discussed in relation to previous literature under the heading 'some dissonance between RPL students' expectation and reality of the intensity of postgraduate HE', as the discussion of the two themes closely align.

Secondly, the RPL ASP allowed RPL students a chance to familiarise themselves with the VLE used in the PgDipMM programme which largely contributed to their successful transition into the programme. This aspect of the RPL ASP addressed research on distance learning that indicated that non-traditional students (particularly mature aged, first-generation university goers and/or non-traditional entry students) experienced difficulties in navigating and operating online learning platforms (Stafford & Stinton, 2016). Moreover, the RPL ASP did not assume that the RPL applicants were competent in using technology for academic purposes as previously highlighted in distance learning literature (Safford & Stinton, 2016; Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Thus, the RPL ASP was able to address this area of concern in non-traditional student transition and online learning literature, and in doing so it facilitated RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme.

Exposure to tools and resources.

The interviewees highlighted how exposure and access to a vast amount of resources and learning tools greatly facilitated their transition into the PgDipMM programme. Previous research from Dykes (2014), Aksham (2008) and Southall et al. (2016) have highlighted that non-traditional students experience difficulties transitioning into HE as it is a largely unfamiliar environment to them. With the exposure and access to a vast well of resources and tools, interviewees felt equipped to tackle academic deliverables. Furthermore, a large amount of anxiety and unfamiliarity towards the academic climate appears to have been reduced as RPL students were exposed to resources and tools they needed to be successful in their studies. However, the interviewees would have liked more exposure and access to feedback on their submissions. Comparably, studies have found a general dissatisfaction amongst mature students in the quality of feedback they received on their submissions (Fragoso et al., 2013; Tett et al., 2012; Young, 2000). The aforementioned studies stress the importance and value

that non-traditional students placed on submission feedback, to facilitate their learning. Tett et al. (2012) reasoned that clear and detailed quality feedback facilitates student transition by aiding student development in their autonomy, critical self-assessment and learning. The RPL ASP appears not to have adequately addressed this concern in the literature, as interviewees indicated that they did not receive feedback on their submission during the RPL ASP. A reason for this could be that due to the short time frame of the RPL ASP, the institution could not logistically provide students with the expected submission feedback. With logistical concerns in mind, the institution could provide RPL students with a form of feedback through disseminating best and weak practice examples.

RPL students' trust in the RPL ASP.

Over and above being an assessment and selection tool to assist the university in its admissions processes, the RPL ASP seems to have acted as a personal indicator to applicants of their readiness for the PgDipMM programme. The current finding is consistent with RPL student readiness issues discussed in Castle (2003), Dykes (2014), Lyons (2006) and Southall et al. (2016). For example, Dykes (2014) reported that RPL students themselves felt under equipped and ill prepared during their transition into HE. The current RPL applicants were trusting of the RPL ASP in that, should they be successful in the admissions process, they would have the means to be successful in the PgDipMM programme. This increased RPL students' confidence levels and assisted them in the transitional process of establishing their identity as a postgraduate student and independent adult learner. (Southall et al., 2006) argues that non-traditional students lack cultural capital, in comparison to more traditional students, may contribute to their under preparedness for HE. Perhaps in building RPL students' confidence and readiness for HE, the difficulties experienced in having less cultural capital (discussed in Southall et al., 2016) may have been mitigated. Thus, the RPL ASP appears to have offered assurance and raised RPL students' confidence levels which most likely contributed to their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. This theme can further be linked to the facilitation of RPL students' sense of belonging as the RPL ASP legitimised their status as a postgraduate student (Pym, Goodman, & Patsika, 2014). (The way in which a sense of belonging can facilitate transition into HE will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter under the heading 'sense of belonging')

Researchers Observations

Southall et al., (2016) characterised non-traditional students' period of transition into HE as highly stressful coupled with feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty and low self-esteem. The current study's findings point to the RPL ASP as a useful tool that appeared to demystify postgraduate HE, which contributed to reducing RPL students' initial feelings of apprehension, uncertainty and fear. Therefore, the RPL ASP managed to mitigate negative emotional experiences associated with non-traditional student transition into HE. The manner in which it did so was to build RPL students' confidence through the assessment and selection process and assisting them (through technical preparation) in becoming independent learners. Southall et al., (2016) explains that confident students are more likely to independently persevere through difficulties and are more open to mastering new skills. Similarly, Christie et al., (2013) ascribes successful transition to be dependent on the students ability to become an independent learner. In providing technical preparation and developing confidence, the RPL ASP seems to have facilitated the transition of RPL students into becoming independent learners and reduced some of the stress associated with transition in HE. As a result, the RPL ASP appears to have been beneficial in facilitating RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme and HE.

In the past, introduction programmes have been critiqued for only targeting the practical and academic side of transition, and somewhat neglecting or insufficiently addressing resilience and how to cope with stress (Southall et al., 2016). Southall et al. (2016) turns our attention to earlier seminal research (e.g. Zimmermann, Bandura and Martinez-Pons, 1992) that suggests the importance of concepts such as optimism, persistence, resilience and developing control (over aspects of the one's learning environment) in students' successful transition and success in HE. Such concepts are now understood and referred to as psychological capital in organisational psychology scholarship. HEIs could explore interventions designed to increase students coping mechanisms (or psychological capital) to further facilitate their successful transition into HE.

In conclusion, the RPL ASP appears to have provided RPL students with an introduction to HE, which provided many benefits to them and seems to have facilitated their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme to a large extent. The use of the online learning platform and integrated assessment appears to facilitate a relatively smooth and

successful transition for RPL students into HE. However, having analysed the findings there are some suggestions for further refinement of the RPL ASP to facilitate even greater transition.

Discussion of the Transition into the PgDipMM Programme

While the first question explored the extent to which the RPL ASP facilitated RPL students' transition into the PgDipMM programme; the second question explored the mechanisms that enabled and hindered students' successful transition during the PgDipMM programme. This allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of RPL student transition into HE. The following section presents a discussion of these enabling and hindering mechanisms to RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme.

The data suggests there are many more enablers than barriers that facilitated RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. This may be a result of the RPL ASP's ostensive success in facilitating RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. Additionally, as one of the outcomes of the ASP was to ensure a positive assessment experience for RPL students, interviewees' positive perception of their transition into the PgDipMM programme seems to indicate the achievement of this outcome. Furthermore, in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the researcher presented findings on students' experience of transition into HE. The research reports relatively generic or global understandings of transition. The analysis of the findings of the current study revealed a more nuanced understanding of transition. The interviewees reported psychological, social and academic transition as distinct aspects of their experiences.

Enablers Facilitating RPL students' Successful Transition into HE

Learner maturity.

Learner maturity spoke to interviewees' knowledge about themselves as an independent learner. The interviewees were self-aware of their learning styles, study habits, coping mechanisms and study strategies which enabled them to act as independent learners. Interviewees highlighted that their successful transition into HE was largely attributed to their success in becoming independent learners. This supports the views of Christie et al., (2013), Fragoso et al., (2013), and Krause and Coates (2008) who view that successful transition into HE is largely dependent on the student becoming an independent learner. RPL students' age and life and work experience are possible explanations of RPL students' learner maturity and knowledge of independent learning. As mature adult learners, RPL students in the current

study, have had a host of education (albeit it not in HE), and work and life experiences. They had a particularly keen sense of self-awareness and knowledge about their own learning styles and methods, which was an enabling factor in their successful transition into HE and facilitated their learning.

The transference of knowledge and skills gained from work experience.

The RPL students in the current study perceived that the knowledge and skills developed through their work experience contributed to their successful transition into HE. Interviewees perceived that they acquired a better work ethic and greater time management skills compared to traditional students. Likewise, interviewees stressed how their work experience contributed to their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme, particularly in courses that aligned to their field. The transfer of work expertise found in the current study is consistent with findings from Cooper (2011) who found that RPL students' life experience added greater depth to their work in comparison to traditional students. Likewise, Fragoso et al., (2013) identified skills developed through work and life experience as a peripheral factor that further facilitated mature students' transition into HE. However, it is observed that non-traditional students in Bowl (2001) perceived HEIs as unwelcoming of the insights they brought from their life experiences. This created an environment where non-transitional students felt the need to censor themselves in order to adapt or belong. It is this perception that the university (under discussion) specifically wanted to avoid in the PgDipMM programme and the reason why the new RPL ASP was developed, as it was felt that previous assessment methods were negative and demeaning for the participants (A. Meadows, personal communication, March 2017).

Social support.

Interviewees identified social support as a critical factor to their successful transition into HE. This supports the view from various authors (Castle, 2003; Cantwell & Scevak, 2004; Dyke, 2014; Fragoso et al., 2013; Stone, 2008) who highlight the importance of social support in non-traditional student transition into HE. The interviewees alluded to the possibility that social support facilitated their successful transition through strengthening their resilience and motivation to see through their studies. This was also found to be so in Southall et al. (2016) and Stone (2008). Moreover, the interviewees made reference to various types of support that they found facilitated their successful transition into the postgraduate HE. The different types of social support referenced match the types of social support explained in Srivastava and

Barmola (2012), namely emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal social support. In addition, corresponding with Stone (2008) and Fragoso et al. (2013), who found that non-traditional students received support from multiple sources; the current study found that the interviewees received social support from various sources namely student peers, their work place, family members and mentors and/or coaches. These are discussed in turn below.

The current study found that the most instrumental source of social support stemmed from interviewees fellow student peers. RPL students connected with their fellow student peers who also identified themselves as non-traditional students (i.e. students who were engaged in full-time employment, parents and other RPL students). Support from this source was considered extremely helpful as they were able to understand and empathise with each other as they were going through many similar challenges. A support group created by the PgDipMM students via Facebook provided students with emotional, instrumental and informational types of social support which greatly contributed to their successful transition into HE and the PgDipMM programme. The Facebook group was a closed site with no staff involvement and thus it became a safe space for students to interact. The current findings support the view of Fragoso et al., (2013), Penketh and Goddard (2008), and Stone (2008) who highlight that student peer relationships formed a key source of social support crucial to mature students' transition to HE.

Interviewees' workplaces were found to be a source that provided emotional and instrumental social support which appeared to have facilitated their transition into HE, however no particular mention of the workplace as a source of social support was found in the literature review. A suggestion for possible research is to investigate why this is and moreover, to explore what efforts are being made to promote and support lifelong learning and RPL programmes in South African workplaces.

Interviewees also indicated that their families were a valuable source of social support, both emotionally and instrumentally through offering encouragement and reducing some of the household responsibilities. Similar findings were present in Castle (2003), Fragoso et al., 2016 and Stone (2008).

Social Support received from mentors and/or coaches was rated as highly influential in interviewees successful transition into HE in that they provided the interviewees with all four types of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal). Similar findings were present in Arscott et al., (2007), Conrad and Wardop (2010) and Morton (2003), who

believe that mentoring plays a vital role in the provision of support, advice and guidance which facilitates successful transition of non-traditional students. Furthermore, Dyke (2014) identified the strong need for counselling services perceived by RPL students. Congruency of this finding solidifies the significance that mentors and/or coaches play in facilitating RPL student transition into HE.

The current finding (social support) is noteworthy as it holds practical implications for various stakeholders. Firstly, RPL students should be made aware of the importance and benefits of social support from the onset so that they can actively engage in creating a supportive environment for themselves. For example, RPL students could have a discussion with their families, employers and friends, communicating their decision to study, and share their needs and possible ways that they could be supported through their educational journey. Secondly, employers could be informed of the ways in which they can assist and support RPL students. (e.g. offering mentoring or coaching services, flexitime etc.) This could further promote lifelong learning in the workspace and further contribute to a smooth transitional process into HE. Lastly, HEIs can not only provide additional support services to students such as coaches and counselling services, but they can also disseminate information to workspaces to foster a supportive environment encouraging lifelong learning.

Sense of belonging.

A common thread throughout the various narratives was that the interviewees felt a sense of belonging at university and viewed themselves as legitimate postgraduate students. Social connectedness or ‘sense of belonging’ refers to “one’s opinion of self in relation to other people” (Lee & Robbins, 1995:239). In HE, this concept related to the feeling of fitting into the institution as a community (Pym, et al., 2014). This finding was particularly surprising as previous non-traditional student literature does not emphasise sense of belonging as a mechanism influencing non-traditional (mature and alternative entry) students’ transition into HE. However, a few studies have stressed the importance that a sense of belonging has on successful transition in traditional students (Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench, & King, 2015; Pym, et al., 2014).

Access to effective resources.

Access to effective resources was identified as a likely enabler that supported students’ transition into HE and academic success. Supporting this finding is Dykes (2014), who emphasised the importance of technical support in alleviating stress to ensure a smooth

transitional process for RPL students into HE. Access to effective resources, in the current study, was found to provide RPL students with technical preparation they required to complete the RPL ASP. Moreover, these resources introduce RPL students to academic skills used in HE. The most beneficial resources were identified as study/content materials such as notes, readings, books, video clips, tutorials, past question papers, detailed written feedback on submissions and the institution's private library, which was similar to findings in Dykes (2014). These findings indicate the reliance that RPL students place on resources to help guide and support them through their academic studies. Thus, it is essential that RPL students are provided with effective resources that can facilitate them in completing their course requirements to give them a fair chance to achieve academic success.

Financial security.

Financial security was found to be a likely enabling mechanism that contributed to interviewees' successful transition. Their financial security afforded them the ability to purchase the equipment necessary to be successful in the PgDipMM programme. Financial struggles and concerns were highlighted in Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite and Godfrey (2004), Bowl (2001) and Stone (2008) as a major challenge experienced by mature and alternative entry students. It is noted that the aforementioned studies contained samples that included participants not engaged in employment, had low socio-economic backgrounds and who had to take out study loans in order to study. However, in the present study, participants were full-time employees who had financial security to afford tuition and the necessary resources, and in some cases were supported financially through study grants. It is recommended that HEI institutions inform prospective RPL applicants about the resources they will need and the financial implications this will have. By doing so, RPL applicants are able to make the necessary financial decisions and preparations to facilitate their transition and success in HE. Moreover, this finding motivates the need for funding to be made available to RPL students who require financial assistance.

Barriers to the Successful Transition of RPL Students

Newness to, and the unfamiliarity with, the academic climate of HE.

RPL students' unfamiliarity with the academic climate in HE was identified as a barrier to successful transition into HE; manifested in their experience of certain academic difficulties at the beginning of their transitional period into HE. Although transition was facilitated in the

early stages and demystified the experience of HE, academic difficulties were experienced when the learning commenced in the PgDipMM programme. Academic skills that RPL students in the current study seemed to have the most difficulty with included understanding academic terminology, academic writing, academic research and learning unfamiliar material outside their area of experience or expertise. Similar findings were reported in Bowl (2001), Christie et al. (2013), and Fragoso et al. (2013). Findings from the aforementioned authors indicated that non-traditional students experienced similar difficulties during their transition into HE, as mentioned in the current study. However, the magnitude of the academic difficulties experienced by the samples in Bowl (2001), Christie et al. (2013), and Fragoso et al. (2013) seemed much larger and longer lasting than difficulties experienced by the RPL students in the current study. One needs to study the findings of some of these previous students closely and be cautious of generalisations as sampling specificities may account for the results found. For example, samples in the studies mentioned above (Bowl, 2001; Fragoso et al., 2013) included non-traditional students from minority ethnic groups from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students who had not completed secondary education. RPL students in the current study had completed secondary education and all had some background in continued learning prior to leaving secondary school. Moreover, the benefits of introducing students to the academic climate and skills used in HE during the RPL ASP could have mitigated the academic difficulties experienced by the RPL students. Therefore, HEIs can possibly facilitate RPL students' successful transition into HE through the prior introduction of academic skills.

Some dissonance between RPL Students expectation and reality of the intensity of HE.

Some dissonance between RPL students' expectations and reality of the PgDipMM programme intensity was identified as a possible barrier to RPL students' successful transition into HE. This finding is congruent with Southall et al., (2016) who highlights that non-traditional students who have trouble adapting to HE often experience disparity between what they expected HE to be like, and the reality thereof. The differences in expectation encompassed by Southall et al., (2016) pertains to aspects such as the course content, the workload intensity, teaching time and the quality of their social life. Aspects of teaching time and social life were not raised in the current study as students were not on-campus students.

HEIs have the ability to minimise the gap between RPL students' expectations and reality of the intensity of HE. Clearer and accurate estimations of programme intensity and

time commitment required should be communicated to RPL students prior to entering HE. RPL students in the current study indicated that the information they received regarding the intensity of the course and time it would need was largely underestimated and thus hindered their transition. Therefore, it is important that this information reflects an accurate estimation of what students can expect. This will allow potential RPL students to better prepare for the transition into HE (Dykes, 2014; Southall et al., 2016). Communication of expectations is particularly necessary as many RPL students do not have a prior reference of HE to formulate an idea of what to expect (Southall et al., 2016). Moreover, many RPL students are the first in their family to enter HE, and thus cannot rely on their family members as a source of information (Southall et al., 2016). Thus, it is crucial that RPL students are informed of the demands and intensity of HE programmes and are encouraged to make the necessary preparations to develop proactive study habits (Southall et al., 2016). Furthermore, RPL students felt that the PgDipMM programme's expectations of them in terms of workload and time commitment was unrealistic. RPL students felt that the programme did not accommodate that they were not full-time students in the traditional sense. It is suggested that HEIs should consider this when designing education programmes.

Time restrictions.

Time restrictions experienced by RPL students was indicated as a possible barrier hindering RPL students' transition into HE. Difficulties that students may have in transitioning into HE may be exacerbated in RPL students as they have less time to transition into HE than other more traditional students. The hindrance of time restrictions was attributed to their constant juggling of competing demands, which often is the reality of adult life. RPL students embodied various roles as a student, employee and a family member. The constant juggling of various roles caused exhaustion and hindered the formation of RPL students' identity as a postgraduate student, as they were already faced with many demands from their other memberships (e.g. employee, spouse, parent etc.). Thus, time restrictions caused by competing role demands possibly hindered RPL students transition into HE as they had to retain their previous memberships as well as the formation of new a membership and identity as a postgraduate student. Similar findings were present in Abbott-Chapman et al., (2004), Christie et al., (2013), Frago et al., (2013), Penketh and Goddard (2008) and Stone (2008). These studies highlighted that time restrictions experienced by non-traditional students may hinder transition into HE. Likewise, the aforementioned researchers attributed difficulties in transition

(due to time constraints) as a possible outcome of competing demands, experienced through non-traditional students' multiple role commitments.

Researcher's observations

Overall, this study yielded an encouraging result in terms of the large extent to which the RPL ASP appeared to have facilitated RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme. This may have contributed to the presence of more enablers than barriers that interviewees reported during their time of transitioning into postgraduate HE. Moreover, further exploration of interviewees' successful transition in to the PgDipMM revealed a deeper insight into understanding RPL students' transition into HE, over and above the facilitative mechanisms identified in the RPL ASP. The following chapter discusses the key limitations and contributions of the current study and provides recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER SEVEN – LIMITATIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Assumptions of the Research

This qualitative research paper, and qualitative research in general, is underpinned by ontological and epistemological assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In addition, the researcher also assumed that the participants who were willing to participate in the study, would provide open and honest accounts of their experiences during the PgDipMM programme. Further, as participants completed a postgraduate diploma in English, it was assumed that participants would have a reasonable command of the English language and therefore were able to understand the interview questions and provide insight of their experiences during the programme. Lastly, the researcher assumed that the participants were able to recall their experiences of the PgDipMM programme in order to provide reflective and detailed responses. These assumptions were met during the respective research phases.

Limitations

Findings in the current study cannot be generalised to wider populations. Issues of generalisability, as well as trustworthiness and researcher bias are discussed in detail in the method chapter. Further limitations are discussed below.

Firstly, self-selection of the interviewees could result in selection bias. However, the sample itself was diverse and interviewees told varied stories, thus it is unlikely that selection bias occurred.

Secondly, the study used interviews, which is limited in its accuracy and can be influenced by biases such as participants' self-perception, self-enhancement and self-presentation (Cozby, 2009). Other issues concerning interviews as a data collection method that could have affected the data include selective memory, attribution (attributing positive events and outcomes to one's own agency and negative events or outcomes to external factors) and exaggeration (Brutus, Aguinis, & Wassmer, 2013). Similarly, face to face interviews can be affected by interviewer bias, self-consciousness, rapport, transference and modelling (Cozby, 2009). The researcher made every effort to prevent this from happening through participating in interview training and through self-reflection. Moreover, when discussing the RPL ASP some of the participants had trouble recalling some of the details as a long time had passed since they completed the process. An attempt to prevent this from happening was made

by providing each participant with pre-interview questions to allow them time to remember and reflect on their experiences. The potential biases did not seem to have a large impact on the interviewee data. The interviewees seemed to give open, honest responses and the researcher established a good rapport with the interviewees.

Thirdly, the researcher conducted majority of the interviews via Skype (video conference technology). Skype interviews may have limited the depth of answers provided, and some communication difficulties were experienced (for example poor connection and line breaks). However, the researcher noticed that data collected from Skype interviews, although shorter, was satisfactory. Communication issues were rectified through the repeat of questions and responses. In addition, the researcher did not have control over the interviewees' environment in which the Skype interviews were conducted. In some instances, the Skype interviews were conducted in a quiet and undisturbed room and in others, interruptions were present (e.g. interruption from the interviewees children or spouse). In one case, a Skype interviewee was conducted whilst the interviewee was at work. He hesitated to share his thoughts to some questions when his answers contained his perceptions of his work. However, this limitation was unavoidable due to the distance nature of the PgDipMM programme which meant that many students lived outside of Cape Town.

Research Contributions

Contributions of this research are multiple and of interest to various actors and stakeholders. Firstly, the exploration of RPL students' experiences of the PgDipMM programme provided a better understanding of RPL students' transition into HE. It further provided valuable insight and voice into their unique needs, challenges experienced and the enabling or inhibiting mechanisms influencing transition. This research contributed to expanding RPL literature, which is predominantly grounded in educational research, by providing an organisational psychology perspective of RPL student psychological, social and behavioural processes.

Secondly, this information is useful to HEIs, policy and programme designers. Lessons learned from this research will, firstly, assist the university staff in refining the RPL ASP and PgDipMM programme, as well as inform other RPL programmes and policies, both internally and externally. Moreover, it will assist the university and other HEIs with better alignment of resources to effectively support RPL students and provide students with a more positive experience of HE.

Thirdly, a better understanding of the experiences of RPL students may be beneficial to respective employers. Awareness and understanding of the challenges and needs of employees engaged in RPL programmes would help organisations to better support their employees and further promote life-long learning.

Lastly, prospective RPL students who may be considering entering HE may be interested in the findings of this study. The transitional experiences of the participants in the current study may prove to be valuable in providing prospective RPL students with an idea of what to expect when entering HE. Thus, this study's findings may provide useful information to help better prepare them for HE and against potential challenges that they may encounter.

Recommendations for Future Research

Firstly, it became apparent from the literature review conducted, that there is limited research available pertaining to RPL students, and their transition into HE. In research for future cohort studies and academic success, future research could analyse the time to completion rates of RPL students and the throughput statistics.

Secondly, it would be interesting and valuable to expand this study to include interview data from RPL students who withdrew from the PgDipMM programme. Insights gained from this sample would deepen our understanding of RPL student transition into HE and provide possible insight to increase retention rates of RPL students.

Finally, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of the RPL ASP in its ability to assess RPL students' readiness for the PgDipMM programme of RPL students. This would help to validate the RPL ASP's effectiveness even further.

The newness of RPL policies and programmes in South Africa presents a great deal of possibilities for further research studies in this (RPL) area. Three suggestions that the researcher felt would be most interesting and further contribute to RPL scholarship were mentioned above. In closing the following chapter provides a conclusion to the current study.

CHAPTER EIGHT – CONCLUSION

In conclusion a qualitative study was conducted to explore recognition of prior learning (RPL) students' transition into a postgraduate context in South Africa. The study's aim was twofold. Firstly, it aimed to investigate the extent to which a novel RPL assessment and selection process (RPL ASP) facilitated RPL students' transition into a postgraduate diploma programme, the PgDipMM, at a South African university. Secondly, it aimed to explore the enablers and barriers that RPL students perceived to have facilitated or hindered their successful transition into postgraduate HE. To address the research questions, the researcher explored a unique case study at a South African university which hosted a large number of RPL students in 2015, which also implemented the RPL ASP that sought to improve previously criticised RPL assessment and selection models.

Findings suggest that the RPL ASP facilitated RPL students' successful transition into the PgDipMM programme to a large extent. The findings indicated three areas where the RPL ASP appeared to successfully facilitate RPL student's transition and three areas where it did not. In summary, the RPL ASP seemed to have built RPL students' confidence and provided technical preparation and exposure to aspects of the HE environment which facilitated their successful transition into the PgDipMM programme, however some experienced difficulties emerged once they entered the PgDipMM programme. Suggested areas for further refinement include, effective communication of the PgDipMM programme intensity, further development of academic skills and the provision of feedback through best and worst practice examples. In addition, the findings indicated many more enablers than barriers that facilitated RPL students' successful transition into PgDipMM programme. This positive outcome could be indicative of the apparent success of the RPL ASP to have facilitated a positive assessment experience for RPL students and their successful transition into the programme. The findings of this study were reinforced by prior research, specifically that important enablers were learner maturity, the transference of work knowledge and skills, social support, a sense of belonging, access to effective resources and financial security. Barriers included unfamiliarity with the academic climate of HE, some dissonance between RPL students' expectation and reality of the intensity of HE and time restrictions.

Despite some limitations, this study made a theoretical contribution to RPL student scholarship by offering an organisational psychology perspective on the possible mechanisms which may influence the experience and/or outcome of the RPL students' transition, during

their postgraduate diplomas. Moreover, practical contributions were made as insights learned from this case will better equip HEIs to support and facilitate RPL students' transition into HE, as well as, improve RPL assessment and selection processes and programmes.

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Appendix A – PgDipMM (Distance) Course Outline

The Postgraduate Diploma in Management in Marketing

The following description of the PgDipMM programme was extracted from the university's Commerce Faculty Postgraduate Handbook, 2015.

The Post Graduate Diploma in Management and Marketing (Distance) is offered as a two-year part-time qualification that is completed via online distance learning. There are two contact weeks at the beginning of each academic year where students attend an orientation on campus. The Diploma programme aims to provide specialised academic and professional knowledge to students in the field of marketing management. Students will be exposed to, among other things, in-depth courses in the areas of consumer behaviour, digital marketing, advertising and communications, retail management, service marketing, strategic management and international marketing (UCT, PG Handbook, 2015, 27). The programme structure and prescribed curriculum is divided into two semesters per year. The first year requires students to complete seven courses, three in the first semester and four in the second. The second year requires students to complete nine courses, five in the first semester and four in the second. The complete programme structure can be found in Appendix A. The postgraduate diploma is open to all university graduates with degrees from any faculty besides those with a Bachelor of Business Science. Students have full access to the institution's resources such as the library, computer labs and careers development programmes (UCT, PG Handbook, 2015, 27).

Postgraduate Diploma in Management in Marketing [CG032BUS07] (Distance) First time registration for the qualification.

Convener: A Meadows

Entrance requirements:

An undergraduate degree or equivalent in any area. Candidates who have not completed the courses FTX1005R (Introduction to Managerial Finance) and BUS2011Q (Introduction to Marketing), or equivalents, prior to registration, will be required to complete these courses concurrently with the 1st year curriculum. All applicants are also required to submit their CV detailing previous work experience and/or any extra-curricular involvement. This can be pasted on to the online admissions form if the applicant is applying online to University X. Applicants with undergraduate degrees from universities other than University X are also required to submit their full academic transcripts to date. A student wishing to apply for the diploma with qualifications other than an undergraduate degree will need to satisfy the Senate that his/her qualification and/or experience are an adequate preparation for the work prescribed in the course. Students who are applying on the basis of work experience (Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL]) will also need to complete a separate RPL process;

suitable candidates applying on the basis of RPL will be informed of the additional application requirements on receipt of their application.

Programme outline:

This diploma programme aims to provide specialised academic and professional knowledge to candidates in the field of marketing management. Inter alia, candidates will be exposed to in-depth courses in the areas of consumer behaviour, digital marketing, advertising and communications, retail management, services marketing, strategic management and international marketing. Contemporary issues are explored within these courses and candidates are encouraged to develop practical solutions in both a local and international context. The courses are applied in nature and geared towards equipping candidates with the knowledge and skills to succeed in an increasingly competitive workplace.

Duration:

The diploma is offered over two years part-time as a distance learning qualification, with a contact week at University X at the beginning of each academic year.

Prescribed curriculum/programme structure [CG032BUS07]

Prescribed curriculum/programme structure:

Note: FTX1005R and BUS2011Q must be completed by students who have not previously completed these courses or their equivalents. These courses are non-credit bearing for the purposes of the diploma.

First year – First semester

Number	Course	NQF Credits	HEQSF Level
BUS2011Q#	Introduction to Marketing (see above)	0	6
BUS4091Q	Organisation and Management	18	8
BUS4103Q	Effective People Practices	18	8

First year – Second Semester

Number	Course	NQF Credits	HEQSF Level
FTX1005R#	Introduction to Managerial Finance	0	5

Number	Course	NQF Credits	HEQSF Level
BUS4092T*	Business Research and Communication	18	8
BUS4074R	E-Marketing	18	8
BUS4017R	Consumer Behaviour	18	8

Second Year – First Semester

Number	Course	NQF Credits	HEQSF Level
BUS4092T*	Business Research and Communication	18	8
BUS4018Q	Retail Management and Services Marketing	18	8
BUS4016Q	Integrated Marketing Communication	18	8
FTX1005R#	Introduction to Managerial Finance	0	5

Second Year – Second Semester

Number	Course	NQF Credits	HEQSF Level
BUS4092T*	Business Research and Communication	18	8
BUS4019R	Strategic and International Marketing	18	8

Plus TWO electives

Elective courses offered (subject to demand):

Number	Course	NQF Credits	HEQSF Level
BUS3038R	Introduction to Project Management	18	7
INF4000R	Managerial Information Systems	18	8
BUS4094R	Events Management	18	8

* BUS4092T runs over three semesters beginning in the 2nd semester of the first year

FTX1005R runs over two semesters beginning in the 2nd semester of the first year

All students are to complete all courses on the diploma.

With permission from the Postgraduate Convener, students registered for other residential qualifications in the Faculty of Commerce at University X may register for certain individual courses offered in distance format.

Assessment rules:

At least 50% of the final mark for each course must be made up of individual work that has been proctored. Each student in each course requires a sub-minimum of 50% in the individual proctored work to pass that course. This means that where a student does not achieve 50% for the individual proctored work, the final mark will consist only of that proctored individual assessment (i.e. The mark for any other non-proctored coursework will not count towards the final mark in that course).

Readmission rules:

A student may not fail more than four semester courses.

A student may not fail a course required for the diploma more than once.

A student who fails a diploma course once may attempt that course only once more. No student may attempt a course more than twice.

Supplementary examinations are offered in each course to students who achieve between 40 and 49% for their final course mark.

Resubmission of failed assignments is at the discretion of the individual programme convener.

Distinction rules:

A distinction may be awarded to a student who receives a weighted average of 75% or more across all courses.

Appendix B – Sample Demographics

Table B1

Frequency distribution of demographic variables ($n = 8$)

Item	Category	Frequency
Gender	Female	5
	Male	3
Age	20-29	1
	30-39	5
	40-49	1
	50-59	1
Race	Black	3
	White	2
	Coloured	1
	Indian	1
	Other	1
Home Language	English	3
	Afrikaans	2
	Zulu	2
	Other	1
1 st Generation University Goer	Yes	6
	No	2
Marital Status	Married	3
	In a Relationship	1
	Single	4
Dependents	Yes	4
	No	4
Nationality	South African	6
	International	2
Completed PGDIPMM on time	Yes	0
	No	8

Appendix C - Pilot Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Opening

- Inform interviewee of his/her rights
- Obtain consent to record and proceed with the interview

...I would like to ask you questions about your experience of the RPL assessment process, as well as your time in the PgDipMM programme... These questions focus on your transition and adjustment to university.

Demographic and background information

Gather interview data on a) age, b) gender, c) race, d) home language, e) marital status, f) dependents, g) first-generation university goers, h) nationality and e) if they completed the programme in the expected two years

Could you please tell me a little about yourself... (Past and current background)
(Including family, work and education background)

Could you tell me a little bit about your family background?

What is your educational background?

What made you want to study further? Why this particular course?

RPL Assessment and Selection Processes

How did you experience the process?

Did you face any barriers during the process? What type of barriers were they?

What resources assisted you in the process? Both internal and external (e.g. personal attributes, university resources, social support).

To what extent do you think the assessment process prepared you for the course? Did you feel adequately prepared?

Did you trust the assessment process? I.e. did you believe that if you succeeded in the assessment process you would be able to succeed in the course?

How would you further improve the assessment process?

Any other comments on the assessment process?

PGDipMM programme

What was your experience of the course? (i.e. elicit a general emotional response).

What challenges did you face throughout the course? (Include academic and social transition and adjustment).

Were there any particular barriers that you encountered that inhibited your success in the programme?

How did you navigate these barriers?

What enabled your success in the course? (Include academic and social transition and adjustment)

Did you use any of the university resources available to you? Please elaborate on which you found most useful or not useful.

How do you feel about being at university? Do you feel a part of the institution/ the people? Or do you feel out of place?

How do you feel you have transitioned or adjusted to university?

What has transition or adjustment felt or looked like for you? How could the university have assisted with your transition into HE?

Do you think your successful transition and adjustment, or lack thereof contributed to your success or failure in the programme?

Closing

Do you have any further comments or insights that you would like to share?

The researcher will thank the participant for his/her time.

Appendix D – Procedural Participant Email

Dear Participant,

My name is Aimee Brenner and I am an Organisational Psychology Masters student at the University of Cape Town. My research focuses on non-traditional student adjustment to higher education. I am particularly interested in the transition of Recognition Prior Learning (RPL) students in the PgDipMM course at [REDACTED]. I would like to ask for your participation in an individual interview to learn about your experiences in the PgDipMM course and your adjustment to higher education.

Please understand that you do not have to participate, i.e. your participation is voluntary. The choice to participate is yours alone. If you choose not to participate, there will be no negative consequence. If you choose to participate, but wish to withdraw at any time, you will be free to do so without negative consequence. However, I would be grateful if you would assist me by allowing me to interview you.

The interviews are approximately one hour and will be conducted until the 20th of September. The interviews are flexible and can be arranged to suit your schedule and preferred meeting venue. University X has kindly offered its facilities if you prefer to meet in this space. The interviews will also be voice recorded with your consent. The recording is only for transcription purposes and your identity will remain anonymous.

Due to the nature of the study you will need to provide the researchers with some form of identifiable information however, all responses will be confidential and used for the purposes of this research only. Moreover, your confidentiality will be protected, as no data will be used without your consent. The study further poses no direct threat or harm to you. You will also receive the interview transcript and the research results will be made available to you.

Through your participation, we hope to better understand the phenomena of non-traditional student adjustment and transition in a Postgraduate programme and assist the university and other institutions to guide programme improvement. The results of the survey will be useful in the field of higher education. We hope to share the results with university and possible dissemination in a higher education journal.

If you wish to participate, kindly respond to this email with your signed consent and you will be contacted to arrange the interview.

The Commerce Ethics Committee at the [REDACTED] and the Executive Director Department of Student affairs have approved this study.

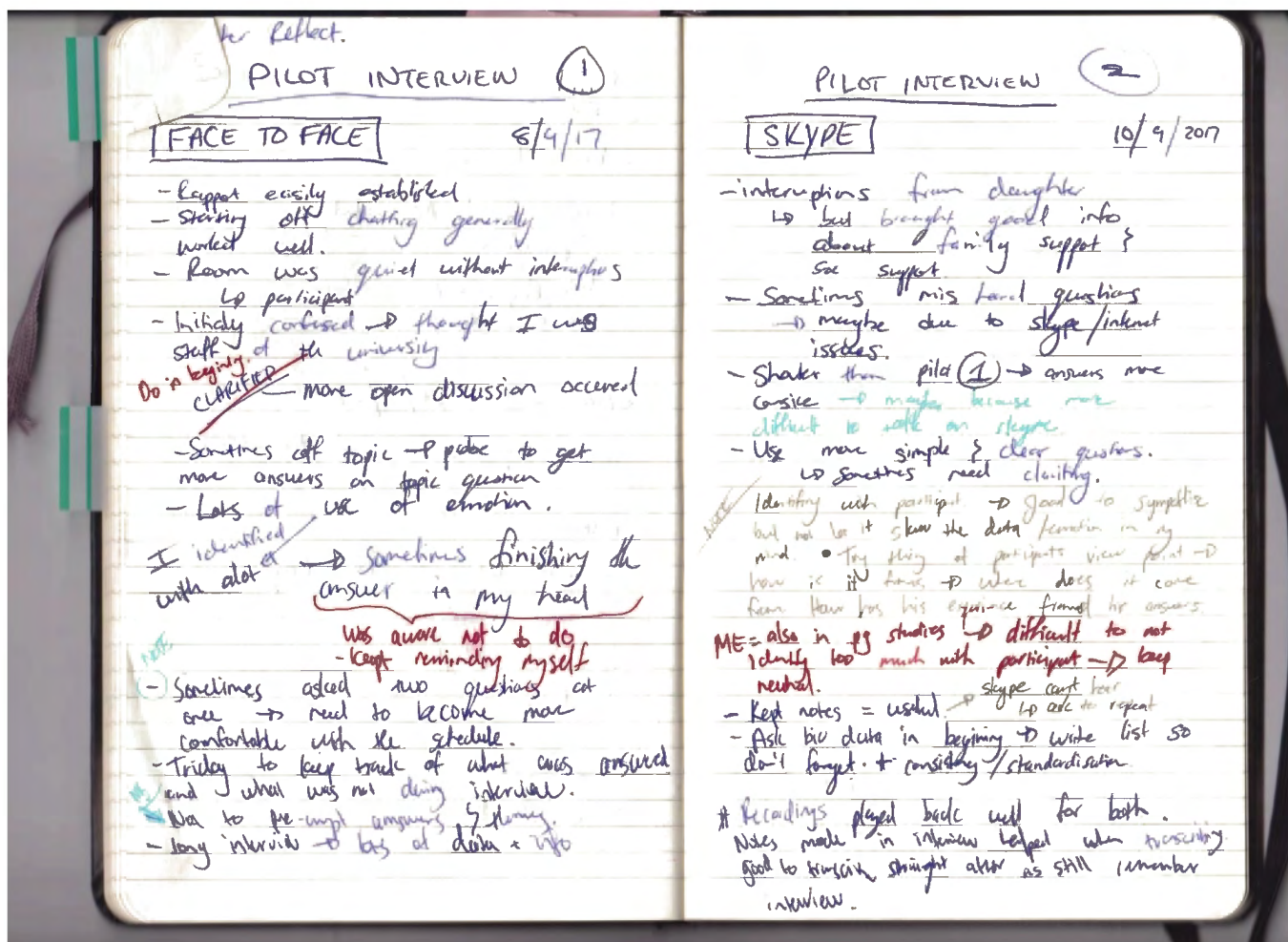
Should you have any questions or concerns about the interview or about being part of this study, contact Alison Meadows, email: Alison.meadows@uct.ac.za; Tel: 021 650 4247 or Aimee Brenner, email: brnaim002@myuct.ac.za, Tel: 072 996 7176

Name of participant Date

Signature of participant

Appendix E – Journal sample Extract

Extract example from the researcher's journal. The extract is of the pilot interviews that the researcher conducted.



Appendix F - RPL ASP and Essay Questions

Application process for RPL candidates for admission to the following Blended Learning qualifications in 2015:

- Advanced Diploma in Business Project Management OR

- Postgraduate Diploma in Management in Marketing

Notes for all candidates:

1. All candidates wishing to apply for admission to either of the above qualifications on the grounds of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) are required to complete this questionnaire, submit the supporting documents as requested on page 7 and be successful in a two-week online course. The questionnaire is designed to enable you to provide us with information regarding your knowledge and experience, and the online course will enable us to assess your readiness and suitability for registration for the diploma, whilst also introducing you to our online learning platform. Please note that whilst filling in this questionnaire, you may wish to write more or less in your answers; this is perfectly acceptable.
2. All candidates are required to complete and be successful in all parts of the RPL process in order to gain admission to the qualification. Please note that you will be informed of the outcome of your application only after you have completed the online course.
3. Please note that it is important that you reflect work done only by yourself, and that you complete both the questionnaire and the course individually. This is taken very seriously by the university. Where you wish to quote other people or use material written by other people, you have to provide a formal reference and acknowledge your source— otherwise this is considered plagiarism.
4. There is a separate fee for the RPL process – which includes the preliminary questionnaire and the online course (including feedback on the outcome of the course assignments). Even if you do not complete the course, or succeed in the assignments, there will be no refund of this RPL assessment fee.
5. Successful performance on the course is a minimum requirement for admission, but depending on the number of competitive applications, it not a guarantee of a place.

Please complete the following questions:

1. Please give reasons why you wish to attain this particular qualification, referring to both your career and personal goals.
2. Please explain in full why you did not pursue/complete undergraduate degree studies at University.
3. Please indicate what you believe your key strengths and knowledge areas are, and how you would apply this knowledge to your learning and success on the proposed qualification.
4. Please provide information on how you plan to complete this diploma, indicating what resources and support mechanisms you have in place to assist you in the attainment of the qualification.

Required additional documents for submission with this completed questionnaire:

1. Please email or send to us an example of a **recent** piece of work/report/project you have completed at work or in another organisational context, and provide us with the context for this (i.e. you need to explain what the purpose of the piece of work was), as well as your role in its preparation/compilation/design/execution etc.
2. Please provide us with a testimonial from a business colleague with a university education who can comment on your ability to cope with university study at a postgraduate level and provide reasons why they believe you would be successful on the proposed qualification. Please make sure that this colleague would be willing to answer any additional questions the committee might have regarding your application.

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. We trust that you will find the short course interesting and enlightening and hope that you will be eligible to join the diploma next year.

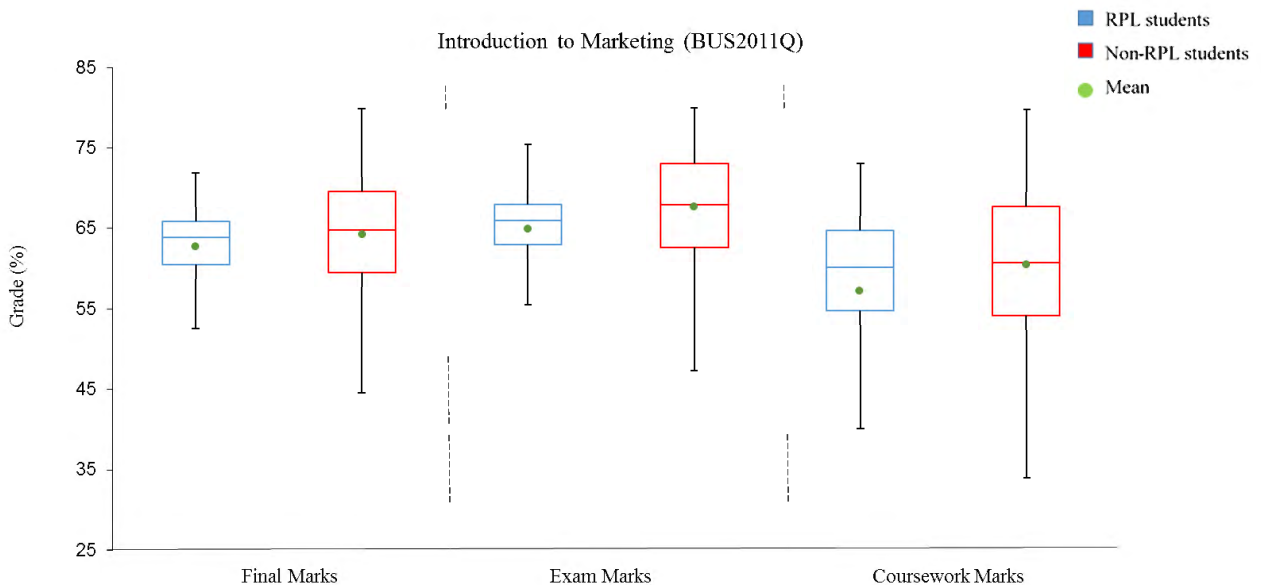
Please note that your application will be treated in the strictest confidence.

Appendix G – PgDipMM (Distance) Academic Performance Analysis

Table G1

Introduction to Marketing (BUS2011Q)						
Student Group	<u>Final Marks</u>		<u>Exam Marks</u>		<u>Coursework Marks</u>	
	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL
Number of students	42	73	42	73	45	76
Mean	63	64	66	67	57	61
Standard deviation	5	8	9	11	14	10
Min	50	32	40	45	7	28
Max	5	8	9	11	14	10

Figure G1

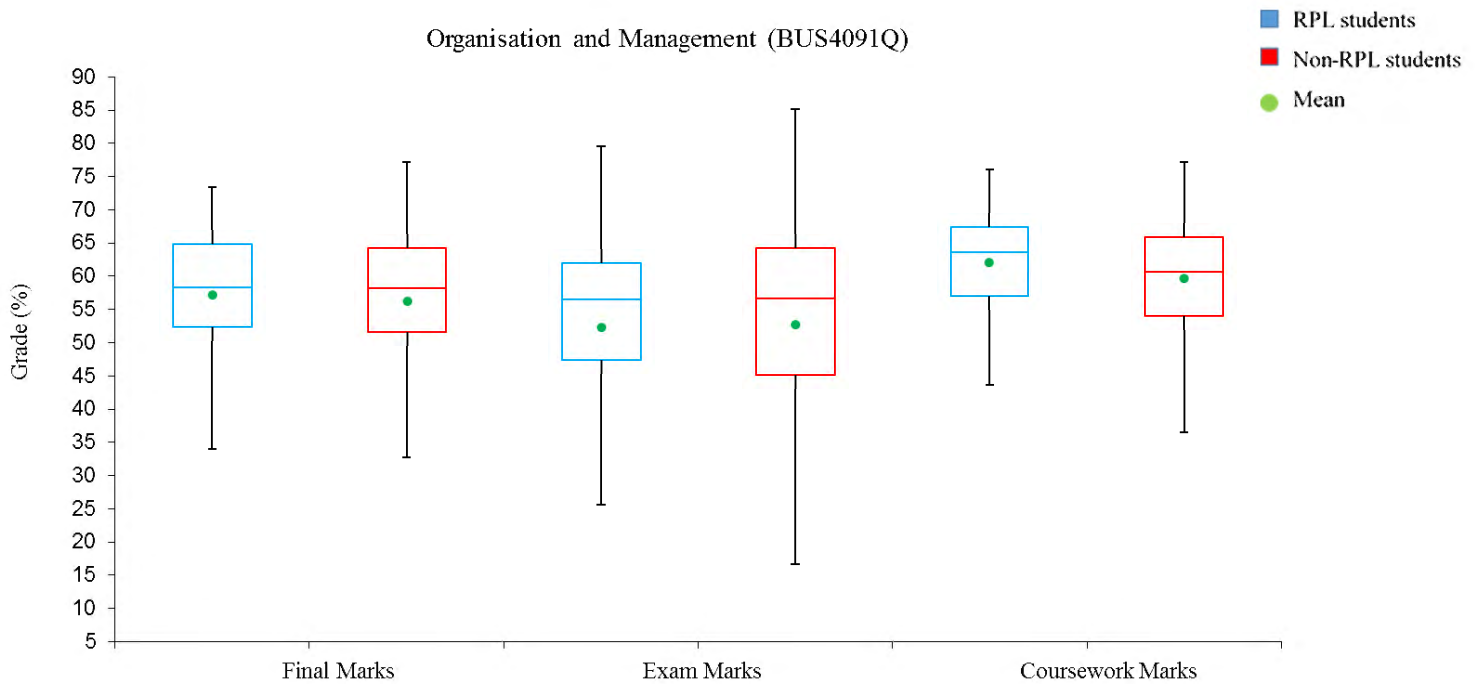


RPL students performed equally as well as non-RPL students in the Introduction to Marketing (BUS2011Q) course exam (M=72; M=72) and in the overall course (M=70; M=70). Furthermore, they performed slightly higher than non-RPL online students in the coursework component (M=68; M=67).

Table G2

Organisation and Management (BUS4091Q)						
Student Group	<u>Final Marks</u>		<u>Exam Marks</u>		<u>Coursework Marks</u>	
	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL
Number of students	48	94	48	94	49	94
Mean	57	56	52	53	62	60
Standard deviation	10	12	16	19	8	9
Min	32	33	22	16	44	33
Max	73	77	80	85	76	77

Figure G2

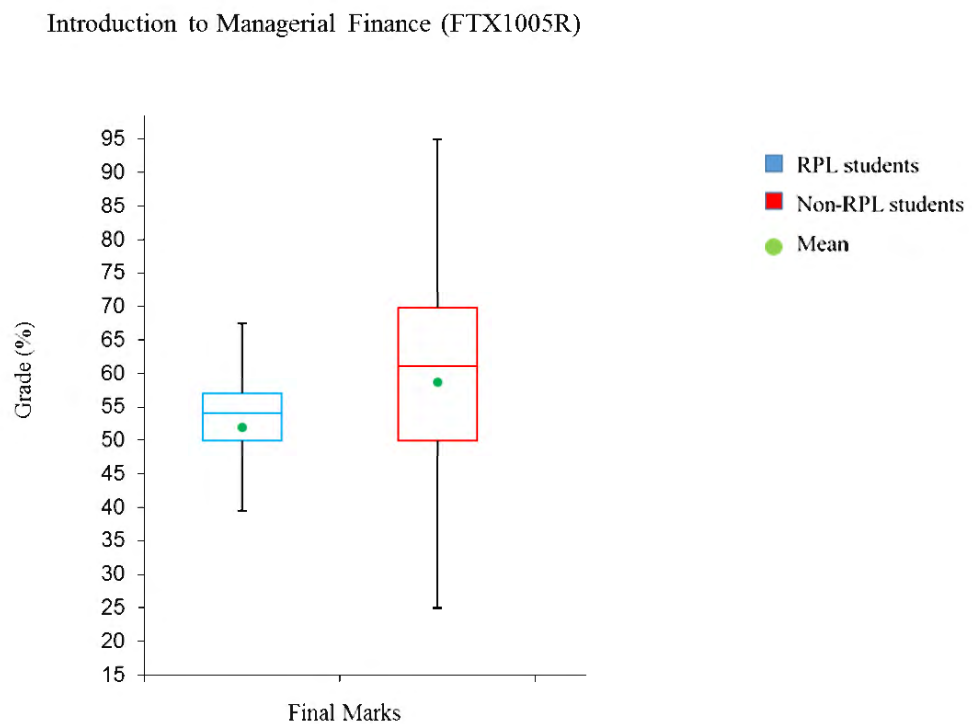


Online RPL students performed slightly higher than non-RPL students overall ($M=57$; $M=56$) and in the coursework component ($M=62$; $M=60$) of the Organisation Management (BUS4091Q) course. The difference is marginal as it ranged between one and two percent. However, they performed slightly lower in the exam ($M=52$; $M=53$) with only one percent difference.

Table G3

Introduction to Managerial Finance (FTX1005R)						
Student Group	Final Marks		Exam Marks		Coursework Marks	
	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL
Number of students	31	62	-	-	-	-
Mean	52	59	-	-	-	-
Standard deviation	14	17	-	-	-	-
Min	37	25	-	-	-	-
Max	68	95	-	-	-	-

Figure G3

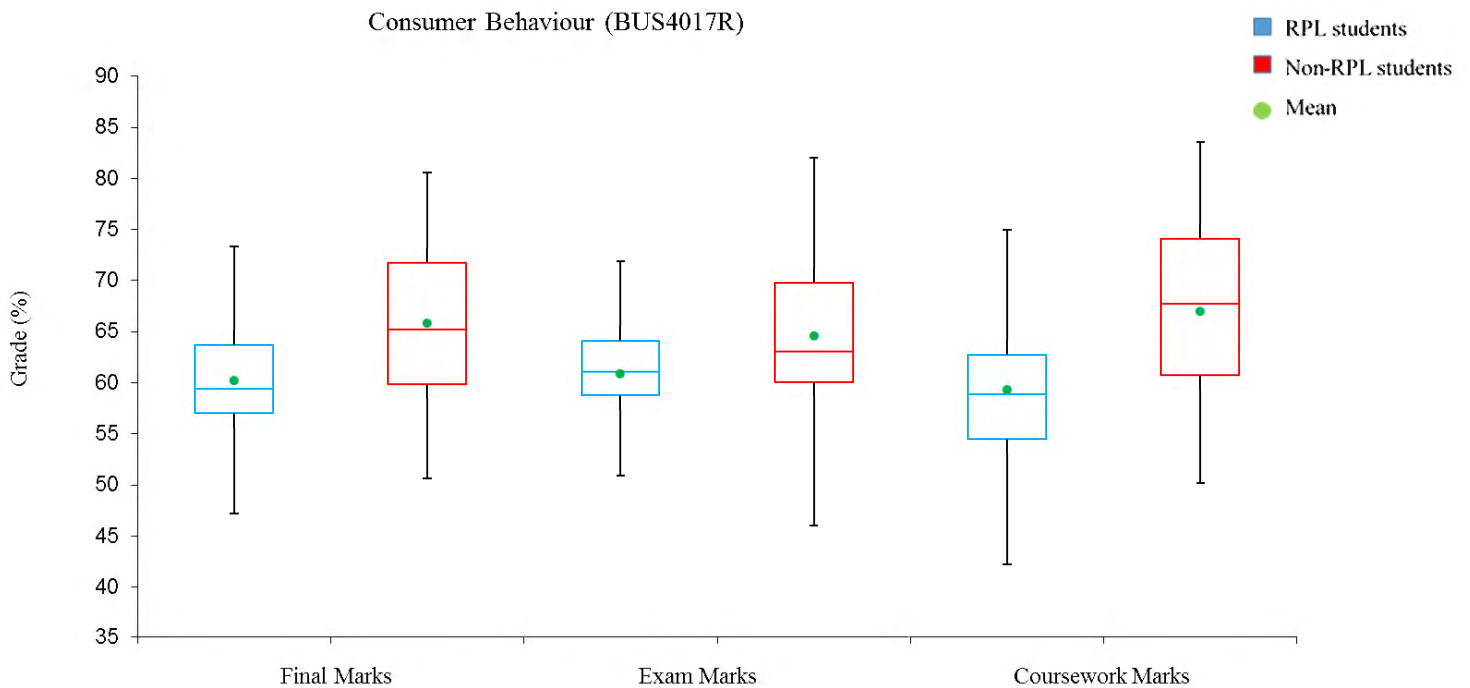


RPL students performed slightly less well than non-RPL students in the Introduction to Managerial Finance course ($M=52$; $M=59$). However, both groups still maintained a pass.

Table G4

Consumer Behaviour (BUS4017R)						
Student Group	<u>Final Marks</u>		<u>Exam Marks</u>		<u>Coursework Marks</u>	
	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL
Number of students	36	66	36	66	36	66
Mean	60	66	61	65	59	67
Standard deviation	6	7	6	8	9	8
Min	46	51	49	46	41	50
Max	73	81	73	82	78	84

Figure G4

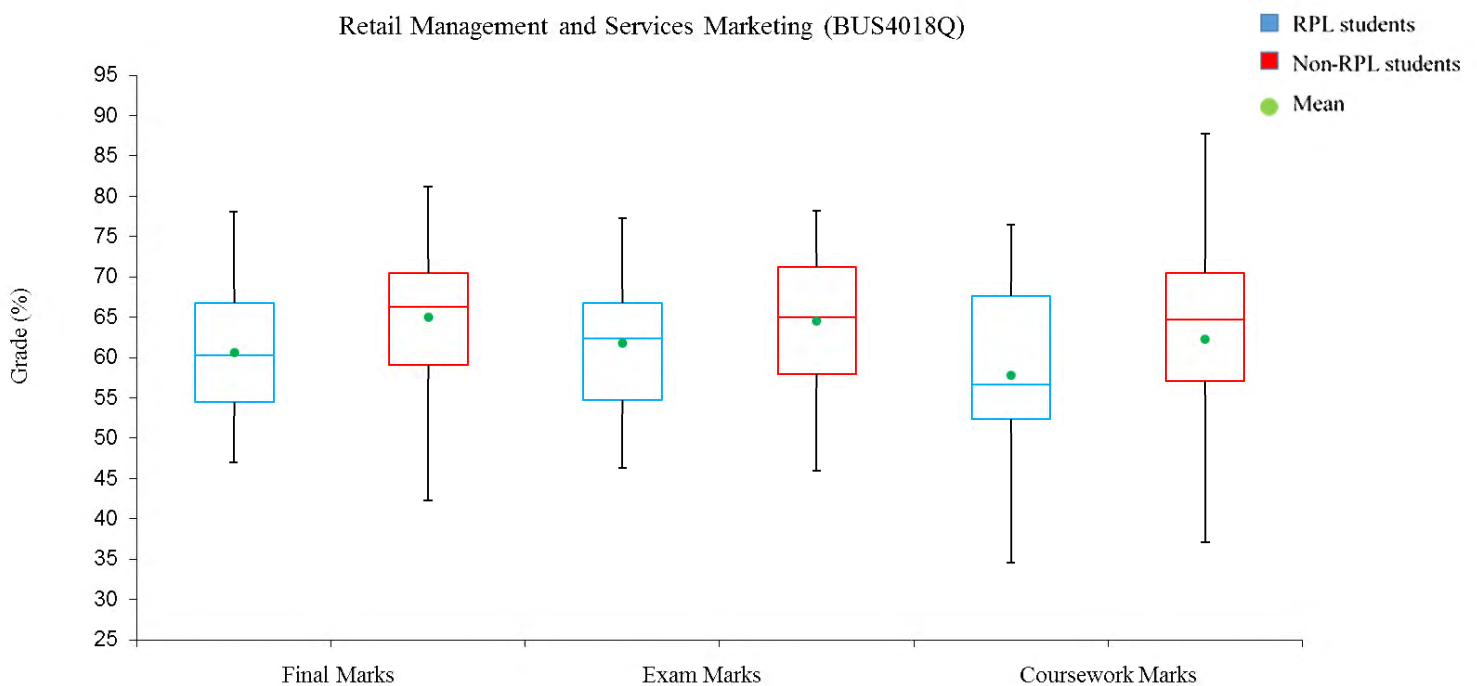


RPL students performed slightly less well as non-RPL students in all three components of the Consumer Behaviour (BUS4017R). Overall final mark ($M=60$; $M=66$); exam component ($M=61$; $M=65$) and in the overall course ($M=59$; $M=67$). However, RPL students maintained a fair pass of the course overall.

Table G5

Retail Management and Services Marketing (BUS4018Q)						
Student Group	Final Marks		Exam Marks		Coursework Marks	
	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL
Number of students	38	63	38	63	39	67
Mean	61	65	62	64	58	62
Standard deviation	8	9	8	8	11	14
Min	47	40	46	46	35	36
Max	78	81	77	78	77	88

Figure G5

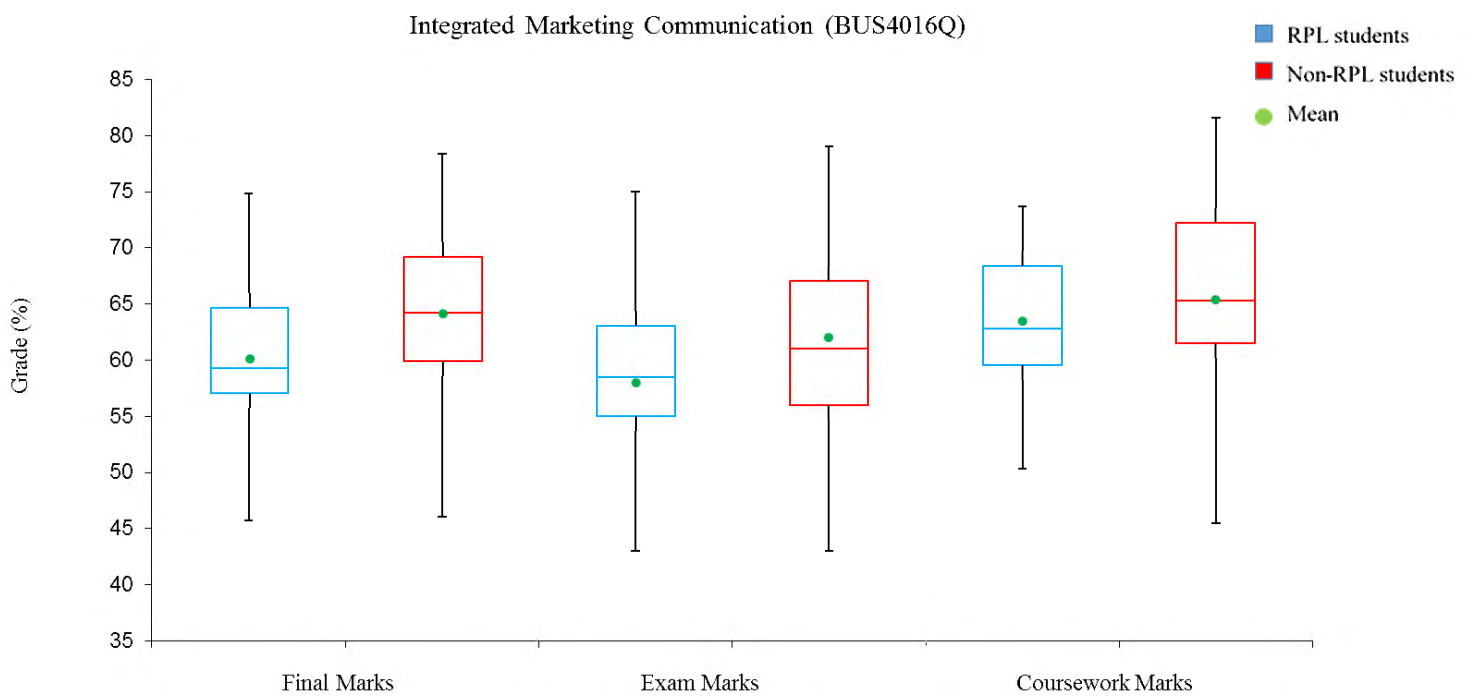


RPL students performed slightly less well as non-RPL students in all three components of the Retail Management and Services Marketing (BUS4018Q) course. Overall final mark ($M=61$; $M=65$); exam component ($M=62$; $M=64$) and in the overall course ($M=58$; $M=62$). However, the difference was marginal as it only ranged between two and four percent. Moreover, the RPL students maintained a satisfactory pass for all three components.

Table G6

Integrated Marketing Communication (BUS4016Q)						
Student Group	Final Marks		Exam Marks		Coursework Marks	
	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL	RPL	Non-RPL
Number of students	42	69	42	69	42	71
Mean	60	64	58	62	63	65
Standard deviation	7	7	7	8	6	10
Min	45	45	43	43	50	46
Max	75	78	76	79	74	82

Figure G6



RPL students performed slightly less well as non-RPL students in all three components of the Integrated Marketing Communication (BUS4016Q) course. Overall final mark ($M=60$; $M=64$); exam component ($M=58$; $M=62$) and in the overall course ($M=63$; $M=65$). However, the difference was marginal as it only ranged between two and four percent. Moreover, the RPL students maintained a satisfactory pass for all three components.