Identifying the Challenges of Autonomous Learning among International Master of Research Students in Western Sydney University

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

(Signature)
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Abbreviations

MRes: Master of Research
WSU: Western Sydney University
HDR: Higher Degree Research
GRS: Graduate Research School
PhD: Doctor of Philosophy
EAP: English for Academic Purposes
Abstract

This is a qualitative narrative study that has explored the challenges of international research students in understanding, adapting, and evolving in an autonomous learning culture, specifically in an Australian context. As a small project incorporating six participants, who are all Master of Research (MRes) students, this study confines itself within the context of Western Sydney University (WSU); the findings and discussion of which have highlighted the rationale for a wider research scope in the future. The potential benefit of this study would be improved preparedness of international research students towards autonomous learning structures in Australian universities. This study will help in understanding the unique pedagogical support that international MRes students may require that is responsive to their prior learning contexts and assist in revising the current research-specific support. Through the narrative storytelling process, this study has captured the lived experiences of these students that may contribute to the current literature on international research students, and issues of their integration into diverse learning contexts, styles, and curriculums that are common in Australian universities.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview
This is a qualitative narrative inquiry that explores the experiences of international research students, and their processes of understanding, adapting, and evolving within an autonomous learning\(^1\) culture. As an exploratory project, the study presents seven participants’ stories, including the researcher, as they fulfil the requirements of being a MRes student at WSU. The findings and discussions, although limited to a small group within a specific program, identify a rationale for a wider research scope in the future. The study supports the value of international students’ improved preparedness when enrolling in research degrees, especially those that require the development of autonomous learning practices. For higher education stakeholders, this study seeks to provide an understanding of the unique pedagogical support MRes students may require in order to be responsive to and build from their prior learning contexts and provide revised strategies to enhance the overall educational experience. Lastly, the study contributes to the current literature on international research students and issues of their integration into diverse learning contexts, styles, and curricula, that is common in Australian universities.

Rationale for the Study
The preliminary notion for the research topic emerged from my learning experience as an international student for more than half a decade and my initial struggle to adjust in different academic contexts\(^2\). After completing my college degree in the United Kingdom and having no research background, I relocated to Australia for my research master’s degree. I was apprehensive of the possible academic struggle ahead, yet

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\(^1\) Autonomous learning: An ability to take charge of one’s own learning (Holec, 1981).

\(^2\) I come from a south Asian country, Nepal, where I did my schooling and higher education in the institutions which promoted a teacher centric learning environment. I went to the United Kingdom to pursue my Master degree in a college that was also based on coursework and exam focused.
delighted to be a university student. As a result of my experience of having lived and studied for a few years in an Anglophone country as an international student, I believed I had the required level of English-language academic competency required for the MRes program. Once the course commenced; however, I noticed that my general English proficiency alone was not sufficient to thrive as a research student. Therefore, in order to succeed it was clear I had to improve my academic literacy, together with developing my research skills. As an international research student, I realised the need to prepare myself for the challenges that were distinct from my prior learning experiences.

Given my previous learning experiences, which were exam-oriented, teacher-centric and had limited research-focus, I found my academic skills were not adequate enough to quickly adapt within the Australian tertiary research environment. Instead, I had relied on learning styles that encouraged me to memorise content in preparation for written exams. Learning for deeper understanding and creating my own ideas were rarely incorporated into the regular academic practices of my previous learning context. As an international MRes student, I grappled with the following areas: identifying and understanding academic articles; giving a clear structure to my writing; possessing advanced research knowledge and skills; formal communications; appropriate referencing; understanding the student-supervisor relationship; and handling recurring emotions that overshadowed my motivation at different times. Moreover, I experienced guilt of not being able to meet basic standards of academic writing, such as appropriate word choice and sentence structure, when I received feedback on assignments during my coursework. It made me question my learning ability and what I had gained in knowledge up to that point. Although I had questions regarding my coursework, I felt unable to share this problem on any platform or with anyone, including my supervisor.

Initially, my research focus was on effective marketing of international higher education during my coursework program, although I had various opportunities to interact with fellow international students in different disciplines and understand their individual struggles as a research student. In response to the impact of these informal conversations, I shifted my focus to explore what challenges international research students were facing, particularly how they were adapting to autonomous learning
styles evident in these particular Higher Degree Research (HDR) settings. As a result of my gradual development during those early stages of this new research focus, and based on the feedback I received from academic panel members after presenting my topic at the university initiated Presentation of Proposal, I transferred from the School of Business to the School of Education.

**Research Questions**

The following research question and two sub-questions were identified to support this investigation:

How do international MRes students overcome the challenges of, and adapt to autonomous learning?

- What are the challenges for international MRes students when adapting to an autonomous learning mode during their MRes program?
- How do international MRes students’ prior learning experiences impact on their capacity to adapt to autonomous learning modes?

Autonomous learning is widely understood to be the ability to take responsibility of one’s own learning (Benson, 2013; Holec, 1981). The significant part of the coursework and thesis in the MRes program at WSU required students to be autonomous and to explore different opportunities where they needed to take charge of their learning. This included the stages of developing a research topic, finding a supervisor, searching for relevant literature, aligning with a philosophy that was congruent with the study, and selecting a consistent methodology to support the investigation. While there were supports available to guide them, many students confided in me during our informal conversations throughout the MRes study that there were some unmet needs for the non-Western learners when shifting away from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches.

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3 The Presentation of Proposal is an important stage of the project as it is at this point where the student must present their intended research to a panel of academic staff members from the program and it is decided by the panel if the project is viable.

4 Non-Western learner: An international student who comes from the developing countries and for whom English is the second language (Handa, 2013).
I found in my initial literature search that the challenges of non-Western students, such as Asian students coming from a teacher-centred learning atmosphere, were discussed in the research. These works highlighted common academic practices in non-Western contexts, such as rote learning, drills, content memorisation, and being exam-focused (Merriam & Kim, 2008; Pham Thi Hong, 2011; Tran, 2013; Wong, 2004) and the potential misalignment with Western style learning environments. Although this may be a “deficit belief” of understanding non-Western international students’ capabilities (Handa, 2013), it was also identified that these students may need significant academic support in the initial phases of learning if they choose to study in institutions in Western contexts. My realisation that this topic was under-researched in the discourse of international higher education, along with knowing my own experience and being concerned about how to support current and future international research students’ academic outcomes, led me to select this area of study. In particular, I noted there was an absence of the personal narratives of students’ learning experiences as part of their everyday lives. Consequently, I became interested in exploring the challenges of autonomous learning among the international MRes students by generating their personal stories and including my own insider participant story alongside theirs.

**Foreground: Why Western Sydney University?**

This research is a site-specific study conducted at WSU, which is home to students with more than 100 cultural and ethnic backgrounds and operates through diverse values and principles, one being multiculturalism (Western Sydney University, 2017a). WSU embraces the idea of supporting learning environments for diverse students as stated in its strategic plan. This study has the potential to inform educators working with students on the specific challenges of international research students with diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. The MRes is a two-year research-based degree and a training pathway for future PhD students. The program incorporates cross-disciplinary coursework in the first year and an independent research project to be completed by each student in the second year (Western Sydney University, 2017b). This study, located within the context of the MRes program, explores the challenges experienced by a small group of international students during their autonomous learning journey, given that each student in MRes must undergo an independent
research project. Even though the degree is positioned as a potential pathway into a doctoral degree, previous educational research questioning how students will adapt and contribute to a distinct, self-directed autonomous learning mode through the completion of an individual research project did not appear to be well articulated for international MRes students, the educators of the coursework, or for potential supervisors. In this respect, this study provides a valuable opportunity to facilitate these discussions in order to build the potential in the MRes program by considering how to improve support and resources for these students, and also investigate how students and staff can draw on students’ past experiences to improve student learning.

**Purpose of the Investigation**

Through the narrative exploration of international research students’ experiences of integration into diverse learning contexts, styles, and curricula, the main purpose of this study was to increase academic stakeholders’ understanding of the specific challenges that international MRes students may face in an autonomous learning environment. The research purpose was fulfilled through the following objectives:

- To explore the specific challenges of international MRes students’ confrontation of autonomous learning styles;
- To provide a series of participant narratives through narrative inquiry in order to analyse the challenges identified by MRes students;
- To discuss the implications of MRes students’ challenges for providing academic practices and supports for international MRes students.

**Overview of the Research Methodology**

As a qualitative researcher, I believe that truth is bound to different contexts and therefore it may be accepted as the outcome of social exchange (Neuman, 2011). Within this subjective epistemological belief, my study employed qualitative research methods to collect the data. To ensure that participants volunteered freely and felt no obligation to participate in the study, participants were recruited through the Graduate Research School (GRS) for the in-depth interviews so that I, as both insider-outsider, and student and researcher, was not seen to be influencing the selection. All the participants were first or second year international students in the MRes program who
were located in a range of different disciplines. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at WSU.

The study has maintained the anonymity of the participants throughout the research process by using pseudonyms. To better understand the lived experiences of the students, once the data was collected, the narratives were created and sent back to participants for further discussion. All participants had the chance to review their narrative and revise it according to how they wished to be represented and also to add any further clarification that they felt enhanced their story. The narratives were then analysed to identify themes from the stories, while drawing across theoretical framing emanating from the most recent literature in this field of study. Participants were all provided with the opportunities to give feedback on the interview questions and transcribed data, and a PDF copy of the final thesis was sent to each of them at the completion of the project.

**Wider Significance of the Study**

The aspiration for this research is that it will have an impact in the field of higher education, in particular on international students’ learning, and at the local level of the university program developers to provide some areas that could be further explored in any revisions of the program design. The potential benefit of this project will be to bring attention to current and prospective international research students’ scholarship and to open conversations about the learning challenges they face. Through the narrative exploration of the underlying challenges of the participants, the study aims to encourage prospective students to consider their choices before aiming to undertake research studies in Australia. While the sample size is small, the deeper analysis of the participants’ experiences of autonomous learning could provide valuable insight to educators about their teaching and supervising of students from Asian backgrounds with largely teacher-centred learning approaches, as well as providing insights for researchers who may be interested in internationalising research curricula and pedagogies (Handa, 2013; Singh, 2017).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction
This chapter introduces the various literature examining current issues in international higher education, specifically highlighting the learning experiences of international HDR students. As the focus of the study is on the identification of the challenges of international students in adapting to distinct learning styles, particularly autonomous learning, the scope of the literature review includes discussions on diverse issues that have emerged during the transition of these students from one learning context to another. To provide the background to the review, a brief overview is presented on the increasing financial contribution of the international higher education market to the Australian knowledge economy and the current trend of international students’ enrolments in Australian universities.

The next section of the chapter explores literature on autonomous learning, including framing the fundamentals of learning ability and willingness to learn, and a discussion on readiness and adaptation of the learner. To further understand the different dimensions of experiences of international research students, recent scholarship on HDR experiences of international students in Western contexts is explored, concomitantly providing insight on the prior learning backgrounds of these cohorts, to understand how it impacts on the adaptation of international students in distinct research environments. The final section of this chapter includes a succinct discussion of the literature reviewed, indicating the gap needing to be addressed.

Background to the Study
International students have been accepted as one of the important student population groups in leading educational destinations worldwide because of the economic and social values they bring to the host societies (Due, Zambrano, Chur-Hansen, Turnbull, & Niess, 2015; Gebhard, 2012; Sawir, 2013; Yu & Wright, 2016). To quantify these values in the Australian context, the contribution of international education in 2014-15 totalled AU$19.7 billion, making it the third largest export economy of Australia
(Deloitte Access Economics, 2015). The most recent data on the total number of international students reveals an overwhelming increase of 15% from 2016 to 2017 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: International student enrolments from top five Asian countries in March 2017 (Source: Department of Education and Training).

In addition, the data shows that the majority of international students come from Asian backgrounds for whom English is an additional language. Further, the data (see Figure 2) show that more than half of the total international students coming to Australia are enrolled in higher education.
As of 2012, 31% of the students enrolled in HDR programs in Australian universities were international students (Yu & Wright, 2016). In an international student policy note by Group of Eight, Australia the contribution of international students on university research has been highlighted as:

International students undertaking higher research degrees play an important role in promoting and developing a university’s research outputs. A study by the World Bank for example, was able to show that a 10 per cent increase in the number of foreign graduate students increased patent applications by 3.3 per cent. (Group of Eight Australia, 2014, p. 6)

This is an additional benefit to the universities, especially when the national research workforce projection suggested that meeting the increasing demand for research skills would be a challenging task for Australia in future (Wallace et al., 2015).

While it is imperative to recognise the contribution of international students towards the host societies, it is equally important to be cognizant of their lived experiences in these contexts, which determines their objective of seeking knowledge in divergent
settings. As one purpose of international students to mobilise globally is to attain education, there has been continuous interest by different scholars regarding international students’ learning. Past studies have examined topics, such as whether they are progressing in their learning or not; what kind of support they need that differs from local students; are they adapting or not; and how do their experiences inform practices in international higher education (Cotterall, 2011b; Due et al., 2015; Durkin, 2008; Hird, 1997; Ingleton & Cadman, 2002; Telbis, Helgeson & Kingsbury, 2014; Yu & Wright, 2016).

This study contributes to the growing body of research in this area, but focuses specifically on international students coming from Asian backgrounds, arguing that they need more attention during their transition from a teacher-centred learning context to a highly autonomous student-centred learning context. Drawing from the context of language learning that emphasises the active engagement of the learner in the process of foreign language acquisition (Littlewood, 1996), this study examines autonomous learning in the context of a postgraduate research degree and aims to “look at an individual’s capacity to act autonomously in performing specific tasks, e.g. a profession or learning activity” (Littlewood, 1996, p. 429). The next section explores the prevalence of autonomous learning within the Western academic norm, and provides an overview of how the study of autonomous learning emerged and the rationale for positioning students at the centre of learning to help them achieve their learning goals more effectively.

**Why Autonomous Learning?**

Autonomous learning emerged as an ‘innovative’ concept in learning, which was first introduced in foreign language learning by Henri Holec in 1981, and was then expanded by several scholars within the second language acquisition context (Benson, 2013; Candy, 1991; Cotterall, 1995a; Dickinson, 1995; Littlewood, 1996; Reinders, 2010). Additionally, within language learning contexts, the essence of autonomous learning has been alternatively reflected in self-directed learning (Candy, 1991), learning to learn (Holec, 1981) and independent learning (Reinders, 2010). Regarding a life-long learning strategy in relation to the learning of languages, “autonomy is consequently the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec,
1981, p. 3). Similarly, Littlewood (1996) explains that autonomous learning is an individual's capacity to learn that is developed through their ability (knowledge, skills) and willingness (motivation, confidence). Scholars in the field of linguistics transformed the construct of ‘autonomy’ through its intervention in the teacher-centric learning environment. Autonomy in a learning context has been manifested in indefinite ways (Benson, 2013). However, this review will reflect on three components of autonomous learning that are pertinent to the research investigation, that is, motivation, capacity, and readiness of the learners.

**Autonomy and Motivation**

Some scholars have made strong claims that autonomy and motivation are interrelated. Ushioda (2011) argued that students should be highly motivated before they are engaged in the autonomous learning activities. She also claimed that motivation helps in the sustenance of the metacognitive behaviours that characterise autonomous self-regulated learning; however, motivating learners should be part of the educators’ responsibility by internalising curriculum goals and values among the learners. In the same vein, Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) posit that motivation is a key to the preparedness of learners toward the new learning styles. Following the investigation on the preparation of international students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the authors argued that “…although motivation was not the key focus of the study, it emerged as the recurring theme and suggests that it is crucial to develop motivation as an antecedent to learners’ autonomy” (Spratt et al., 2002 p. 247). Dickinson (1995) claims that motivation is conditioned to the extent of control that learners exercise during their learning trajectories:

Learning success and enhanced motivation is conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning, being able to control their own learning and perceiving that their learning successes or failures are to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside their control. (p. 174)

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5 Metacognition: In this context, metacognition implies “students’ awareness of their own learning process and their ability to reflect on and evaluate the productiveness of their own thinking” (Department of Education).
He emphasises the direct relationship of autonomy with extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, suggesting that in a learner-centric educational setting, intrinsic motivation could be fostered to enable learners to focus on their learning goals rather than on external rewards. The studies examining the relationship between autonomy and motivation have illuminated the idea that motivation is related to student-centred learning in one way or another and gives an impetus to investigate the same in the context of international research students’ experiences in Australian universities.

**Autonomy and Capacity**

Drawing from the historical perspective, autonomous learning has been explained as a “capacity to do something” or capacity to take charge over one’s own learning (Holec, 1981). Benson (2013) states that “taking charge of one’s own learning is described in terms of the capacity to make decisions at successive stages of the learning process” (p. 48). Similarly, Little (2007) defines the capacity of a learner as someone who is not only there to learn, but also to transfer their knowledge to broader contexts. The capacity of the learner has also been associated to language competency. For example, Little (2007) underscores the interdependency between a learners’ target language proficiency and autonomous learning, and argues that the development of learner autonomy is not independent of the target language ability of the learner. The capacity of the learner may also indicate the preparedness of the learner to accept the new learning system, enabling them in their adaptation to such a system.

**Autonomy, Readiness, and Adaptation**

The educators in the field of linguistic, particularly second language acquisition area, enthusiastically intervened the learning contexts by shifting their control over students and making them more responsible towards their learning goals. There is a limited presence of literature; however, examining the relationship between autonomous learning, readiness and adaptation. This study argues that learners’ overall preparation towards the new learning strategy, style, or system enables them to develop their own strategies to adapt successfully to such systems. Cotterall (1995b) states the following regarding learners’ readiness for autonomy:

> Autonomous learners are likely to be individuals who have overcome the obstacles which educational background, cultural norms and prior
experience may have put in their way. The degree of independence with which learners feel comfortable will be a key indicator of their readiness for autonomy. (p. 200)

In addition, Cotterall (1995b) argues that the pre-established beliefs of the learners toward learning and the learning culture also determines their readiness towards accepting the learning approaches that are unfamiliar. Thus, it is important to investigate studies that emphasise learners’ preparedness towards autonomous learning practices.

Some researchers, such as Humphreys and Wyatt (2014), have attempted to help Vietnamese first year university students to exercise autonomy during their English learning classes. The authors exemplify how autonomy, which is the common academic practice in the Western academic environment, can be successfully employed in an Eastern learning context like Vietnam by adopting strategies such as teachers “planning the intervention” (p. 61) in advance by collaborating with the students, particularly reflecting on practice of autonomy, learners’ beliefs and their cultural/educational background. In addition, Pennycook (1997) also argues that autonomous learning is a Western construct and perhaps challenging for Asian learners. The students who come from similar prior learning backgrounds where they are motivated to learn through high pressure from teachers and competition among peers may struggle to adopt the values of autonomous learning. In particular, those who may pursue research degrees without having an intrinsic interest in research may find they are restricted in their capacity to adapt and transform to be an autonomous learner (Zhou, 2015).

Autonomous learning, which is far more pronounced and central in programs with an emphasis on research, can be culturally as well as academically challenging for international students who possess diverse levels of personal autonomy (McNair, 1997) and who come from an educational system that has not necessarily encouraged such practices in the past. A study by Campbell and Li (2008) supports this position by providing an example of when international students are aware of the outcomes of autonomous learning, however they still expect supervisors to constantly remind them of their responsibility as a learner. Building from the understanding of the practices of
autonomous learning in the field of linguistics, it is imperative for the investigation to also explore research that has examined the experiences of international HDR students in Western contexts in order to expand on the contextual knowledge underpinning this study. The next section explores literature specific to international HDR students’ experiences.

**International HDR Students’ Experiences in Australia and Beyond**

With the recognition of international students as an established institution that contributes to the economic and social development of the host countries, their experiences in the host societies has been one of great interest to scholars, educational institutions, and government. The growing trend of international enrolment in research programs has led to increasing research in varying aspects regarding the learning experiences of international HDR students (Ai, 2017; Bloomfield, 2013; Cotterall, 2011b; Due et al., 2015; Fotovatian, 2012; Hird, 1997; Silva et al., 2016; Soong, Thi Tran, & Hoa Hiep, 2015; Stracke & Kumar, 2014; Yu & Wright, 2016), by addressing academic and socio-cultural issues, and highlighting available support and personal attributes in evaluating how international students adapt to the host culture.

**Supervision**

The purpose of research supervision is to provide continuous guidance to the research student in order that they can become a competent, responsible, and autonomous researcher. Supervising international students requires more effort, and an awareness of this is necessary as students transition into the distinct research culture (Cadman, 2000). While the notion of supporting international students is generally understood as part of the university’s role when enrolling students in HDR studies, the research suggests that the practice of supervision is problematic. In an interaction with his master’s degree students regarding supervision, Hird (1997) noted that there is the need for supervisors to change their supervisory roles in different stages of the research process. Further, he observes that for effective supervision, it is imperative to understand and differentiate between the natural learning process (that any student goes through) and the cross-cultural factors that also contribute to the process in the new academic environment for international students, which would ensure sensitivity to the cultural uniqueness of the students.
Bryce (2003) identified three critical factors related to supervision, namely, “language problems, cultural influence on students’ perspectives and ways of thinking; and students’ dependence on their supervisors” (p. 6). He argued that these factors would impede effective supervision, preventing international students to become autonomous researchers and suggests some pragmatic solutions, for example, exposing them to an academic network, preparing them for seminars and conferences, and mentoring students to write journal articles and conference papers. The study of Due et al. (2015) examined both supervisors’ and international students’ experience in a single faculty and found diversity in supervisory relationships due to differing expectations of both supervisors and students. While the results of the studies suggest the need for improved supervision, they have not addressed the question of structured programs or training for both supervisors and students to attain skills in negotiating the relationship from the onset of the supervision.

**Feedback**

In a qualitative study on feedback practices with ten international doctoral students in Australia, Ting and Li (2011) reported that feedback can lead to an emotional and frustrating experience for some students. While those experiences seem to be culturally influenced, Ting and Li (2011) noted that they are “healthy reactions” (p. 110) of the students, however, they are still in need of approaches with culturally sensitive feedback. Similarly, following an opinion survey of 56 international HDR students regarding feedback, Bloomfield (2013) advocates the practice of direct explicit feedback, but also confirms students coming from different cultural and educational backgrounds may need individually negotiated feedback approaches between adviser and students.

**Culture**

A qualitative investigation on academic experiences among seven international PhD students found that cross-cultural issues were not that prominent for these students; instead factors such as motivation, English language proficiency, and supervision were making a greater impact in their academic development (Son & Park, 2014). The study also identified that international students were aware of the host culture; however, the challenge for them was to adapt and blend into the diverse academic
community. In a globalised world where access to media and information is becoming common to many parts of the world, it could be assumed that international students (especially in higher degrees) coming from different backgrounds may already possess cross-cultural awareness. A mixed-method study by Yu and Wright (2016) exploring the lived experiences of international HDR students revealed that academic challenges such as new learning styles, and accessing services to perform academic tasks such as printing and finding desk space, outweighed the socio-cultural challenges during the academic transition in Australia.

Identity Development
Fotovatian (2012) has identified that students construct their academic identities through their institutional interactions. She also found that students have different intentions behind investing their time in these interactions. She suggests that HDR students’ institutional interactions are pathways to secure their space in new academic communities. On the other hand, in an autobiographical narrative, Soong et al. (2015) explored students’ experiences of living and negotiating with multiple identities (academic, personal, and cultural) in becoming an intercultural doctoral candidate. Through their individual narratives as international doctoral students, the authors collectively discovered two dynamics, ‘self-empowerment and self-reconstruction’, in evolving as a professional learner. In a similar, but singular autoethnographic study by a Chinese PhD student, Ai (2017) portrays his gradual construction of academic identity in an Australian university. From being an ‘ordinary teacher’ in his home country to a PhD student in Australia and finding his identity in the academic community, he narrates his learning story as an outcome of supervision that was based on dialogical pedagogy, the supportive environment of his host university, and the progressive evaluation system in the university.

Motivation
Motivation is essential to become a persistent learner, and persistence is a driving force to undertaking research (Zhou, 2015). In a small but an in-depth study of international students who were enrolled in a PhD study after completing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program, it was identified that motivation is a key element

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6 Dialogical pedagogy: a notion that characterises the feature of the pedagogy based on the ‘dialogue’ to achieve the shared understanding of the academic practices (Skidmore, 2016).
to influence academic success of international research students beside language difficulties and supervision and highlighted the need of continuous guidance and encouragement to those students (Son & Park, 2014). However, this study had not identified the sources of motivation for the international students enrolled in PhD degree. Being an international doctoral student himself, (Zhou, 2015) was interested in investigating international doctoral students’ motivations to become a persistent learner despite their unsatisfying socialization in new academic environment. After thematically analysing the data from the 19 open-ended interviews conducted in a public research university, the findings related to international students’ persistence were discovered as: “intrinsic interest in research, intrinsic interest in teaching, high utility of a U.S. -earned PhD, and high emotional and social cost of quitting” (Zhou, 2015, p. 219). On the other hand, in a recent scholarship, (Takashiro, 2017) found that the influence of faculty, personal recognition, and utility of careers were the sources of extrinsic motivation for Asian international graduate students; however, an important motivating factor was to obtain professional jobs in academia.

Confidence
Ingleton and Cadman (2002) were particularly interested in international HDR students’ sense of agency, which they conceptualised as, “What enables them to act with confidence as learners?” (p. 93). Utilising memory work methodology based on the idea that people recall events that are significant, the study found that the group of international HDR students who participated shared many common experiences that they felt were individual or private issues that they must hold in silence. The common issues challenging them were related to family responsibility, colleagues and workplaces at home, self-image, and the need for early academic validation in a new culture. Further, the study illuminated their emotional attachment with their previous learning culture and context where students regarded factors such as scoring high marks, winning scholarships, and getting admission into top universities were the benchmarks to a successful academic identity.

Learner confidence also plays a significant role in academic success (Telbis et al., 2014). For international students, confidence may stem from socio-cultural aspects such as “acceptance, recognition, family support, academic performance and
competition” (Ingleton & Cadman, 2002, p. 109) in their home countries. The study conducted by Telbis et al. (2014), surveying 137 international students, revealed that the students who were confident in accessing resources were also confident as learners; whereas, those who had difficulties of “social adaptability, language barriers, academic ability, and financial need” (p. 330) grappled to accomplish their studies. In addition, (Bryce, 2003) argues that “Encouraging their autonomy and initiative without consideration of their cultural background, can cause those students’ serious loss of self-confidence” (p. 5) and suggests, building trust and intimacy between supervisors and international students; and introducing them to the wider academic community to enhance the confidence of those students.

Support System
In a distinct learning environment, international students need regular support to enable them to adapt quickly and the support may be extended in the case of international HDR students. A survey on support services for international research students in Australia found that three universities had similar support services, except for some institutional and philosophical differences in their delivery (Silva et al., 2016). Cotterall (2011a) emphasises the need for active learning communities in every research institution to support international students to engage in academic interactions and capitalise on their challenges. Similar notions have been echoed in the exploratory opinion survey among research students in three Peer Support Groups in New Zealand, Australia, and Malaysia (Stracke & Kumar, 2014). The study found that Peer Support Groups supported developing certain attributes, such as critical thinking, communication, self-motivation, team work, and research organisation necessary to prepare students for global academic communities.

While supporting international students in research programs, Son and Park (2014) underscore the value of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in mediating between international PhD students’ lack of academic English proficiency and their PhD candidature. The EAP program turned out to be valuable in introducing students to Australian academic learning styles—a shift from teacher-centric to learner-centric approaches. By emphasising the importance of EAP programs prior to the candidature, this study indicates a need to incorporate EAP programs into different Australian universities for non-Western research students.
In order to fully understand and make sense of the experiences of international HDR students, it is also imperative to understand their previous learning settings and this study is particularly interested in the students from Asian learning backgrounds.

Research Examining Prior Learning Backgrounds of Asian Students

Different studies have illuminated the shared understanding on learning styles and learning dispositions\(^7\) of international students, particularly from Asian backgrounds (Bryce, 2003; Campbell & Li, 2008; Eaves, 2011; Kang & Chang, 2016; Wong, 2004). In an earlier study, Bryce (2003) argues that memorising is deeply rooted in the Asian student psychology of learning; however analysing or criticising scholarly work is not prevalent. In addition, the author also found a high level of student dependence on their teachers. Similarly, Iyer (2015) argues that students from Asian learning backgrounds who are accustomed to teacher-centric learning styles, generally are less engaged in the learning process and more consumed by the competition as “Certificates and high scores are the main outcome” (p. 245) of their learning.

In other hand, the literature have argued that, there is the general and perhaps stereotypical understanding in previous studies that the students from non-Western backgrounds may lack cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking, arguing, analysing, and problem-solving, and that such practices may not have been institutionalised as they have been in the Western learning context (Campbell & Li, 2008; Durkin, 2008; Eaves, 2011; Pham Thi Hong, 2011). Hung (2006) also states that Asian international students are stereotyped in Western academia as passive and order-oriented learners. Hung goes on to state that there is a pressing need to understand their self-regulated learning and thinking processes so that this can be reflected in the curriculums and institutional policies to better facilitate the learning transition of international students. In contrast to this, Y. Zhang (2016) found that some international research students, particularly from Asia, are less likely to seek learning support available to them as they are reluctant to seek help.

\(^7\) Learning dispositions: “the way in which learners engage and relate to the learning process” (Department of Education).
On examining the learning styles of Asian international students, Wong (2004) suggests that the learning approaches of the cohort groups participating in the study were contextually based, rather than culturally based, and are able to adapt in a different learning setting, provided adequate learning assistance is available to them. The understanding is that students who come from an Asian context regard their teacher as the ultimate authority of knowledge and hence the supremacy of teachers in the learning environment (Kang & Chang, 2016; Pham Thi Hong, 2011) may have great implications on supervision approaches to such students in Western research universities.

The literature review on Asian international students’ learning backgrounds has led to the supposition that academic and cultural orientation has a great influence on the transitions of international research students; however, students are capable of adapting and coping in these different contexts. Therefore, their diverse learning experiences cannot be overlooked by institutions and academics involved in hosting international research students in Australia. To strengthen students’ previous learning and help them adapt quickly into the Western academic norms and autonomous learning practices, international research students may require extensive support and an empathetic eye from their supervisors, academic staff, and colleagues.

In order to address the research question for this study, it was pertinent to search literature on three key terms: autonomous learning, international students’ experiences, and their prior learning backgrounds. The literature search on autonomous learning entails rather an understanding of the construct itself, ‘autonomy in learning’, how it emerged in Western learning contexts, and where is it practised. This literature review identifies the importance of understanding international students’ transitions in distinct learning contexts. Through this study, I aim to open the discussion on autonomy in research learning (particularly for international students) where existing literature has focused on autonomy for international students in language learning.

The literature review I have compiled also draws on international HDR students’ experiences of learning in Western educational settings, which is the subject of this research. Most of the studies on international students focus on either undergraduate
coursework programs or doctoral research programs, and little is still known about international students’ challenges when they are enrolled in pathway research programs. My study has narrowed its focus from broad HDR programs to a research pathway (or what might be better identified as a research training program, as not all students will continue to a doctoral program), that is, the Master of Research. I am interested in this context because this program is a combination of coursework and research with a view that it may open different dimensions of experience for international students, while finding a balance between the two different curriculum structures—coursework that is teacher-guided in the first year of study, and conducting an independent research project under the guidance of a supervisor or supervisory panel that is highly autonomous in the second year.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

Introduction
To attain an “empathetic understanding” (Neuman, 2011) of the lived experiences of participants, this study is guided by a subjective worldview and seeks meaning as interpreted by the participants. In contrast to a positivist approach—which believes in the existence of one truth—interpretive science sets out to decipher the volatility of the truth that lies in the individual’s experience of their everyday lives (Neuman, 2011). Philosophical approaches informing an interpretive approach understate the notion of generalisation and helps to discern the multiple facets of realities based on the everyday social interactions of people, their understanding of being in the world, and making meaning with others. Inspired by this interpretive philosophical orientation, this qualitative research values the contexts and the natural settings of participants and seeks to understand their phenomenological knowing as governed by them. Neuman (2011) explains interpretive philosophy as:

Interpretive approach is the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds. (p. 112)

This study was guided by a subjective epistemology grounded on the belief that the creation of knowledge is the interpretation of an individual’s everyday life experiences (Creswell, 2007). The aim of any educational research is often viewed as the opportunity to have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (education/pedagogy) so that improvements can be made in everyday practices of teaching and learning (Merriam & Kim, 2008).

Narrative Inquiry
With an aim to explore the experiences of individuals in the study and understand the context of their individual lives (Creswell, 2007), I employed a narrative approach to
the research inquiry. Emphasising human experiences, Clandinin (2000) sheds light on the “unique capacity” of narrative inquiry to fathom the complexities of human lives on a temporal, spatial, and personal-social basis. Huber, Caine, Huber, and Steeves (2013a) illuminate the significance of narrative inquiry to understand people with complex lives:

…the attentiveness and ethics embedded within narrative inquiry that calls us to live, to tell, and to retell and relive stories of experience. It continues to be significant for the emerging field of narrative inquiry to attend to personal experience over time, in social contexts, and in place(s), particularly the experiences of people and communities whose experiences are most often invisible, silent, composed, and lived on the margins. (p. 37)

Narrative research has originated in different disciplines, with education being one of the major disciplines (Creswell, 2007). Used in an extensive number of educational experience researches (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), narrative inquiry is suggested for the purpose of understanding participants’ lived and told stories, (Creswell, 2007) and the story telling process that complements it by giving a “voice” to the participants that was previously suppressed (James, 1996). Dewey (1986) increases the understanding of experience and how the field of education benefits one to become “pure” and “real” as a result of growing through experiences. Expanding on Dewey’s notion of experience, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) shed light on the significance of narrative stories to study different human experiences, stating “the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2).

Recent narrative stories have underscored the intricacies of learning in a distinct educational landscape. To understand the educational experience in the Western context, Han (2012) examines the socially constructed performance of Asian international students in the United States through the collection of “performative data”, such as stories, letters, artistic works, improvised scenes, and images. The narrative inquiry enabled her to understand the identity transformation process of the international students in the foreign learning context. As an international student and a researcher in the cross-cultural space, Ai (2015) identifies his identity as being “hybrid” and learns to negotiate his “in-between identity” through the story telling
process. A narrative inquiry on Chinese students enables us to understand the nuances of international students’ experiences in a distinct educational setting (Z. Zhang & Beck, 2014).

To understand how the human experience changes as a result of change in social, cultural, and educational contexts, I found narrative stories as a strong method to come closer to the nuanced challenges faced by myself and the international student participants under my study. Adopting stories to further understand participants have been found in a number of studies related to international HDR students. For example, Cotterall (2011a) in her research on international doctoral students’ experiences, becomes a pseudo insider herself, weaving her own story of being a doctoral student alongside the participants in her study. She provides multiple rationale to employing stories in the study, these being mainly, “flexible means of accessing complex, elaborated accounts of participants’ lived experiences, exploring the ‘particularity’ of individual doctoral researchers’ lives, and potential for accessing sensitive issues in individual participants’ experiences” (p. 95). With that notion, I constructed seven narrative stories closely spaced with my own story of learning in a foreign context. I also found the experience of crafting stories as a very illuminating and enjoyable part of my thesis writing.

Overall, the research inquiry was an investigation of international MRes students’ experiences in a specific Australian academic environment, particularly in relation to their prior learning contexts. This project emerged as a result of my curiosity to learn and be informed by the challenges and issues encountered by international research students in an Australian context. I was primarily interested in understanding participants’ experiences as a research student who is ‘becoming’ an autonomous learner. In doing so, I utilised narrative stories as a means to represent their lived experiences and to grasp the essence of those experiences. The research design and the unfolding research process are explained in more detail in the following section.

**Research Design and Process**

To support the investigation, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants to collect the central data. This data was then shaped in a logical and contextual manner
and developed into narrative stories. Narratives helped to achieve the connection between the flow of events encountered by the students and to encapsulate the complexity of their lives. As noted by Polkinghorne (1995), “Narrative is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes” (p. 5). Additional to the interview, participants were requested to bring artefacts with them, such as reflective journals, letters, memory boxes, photographs or pictures that represented their learning experiences in the MRes program. These artefacts or objects acted as prompts during the interviews to elicit deeper conversations. Some specific key elements, such as recruitment of the participants, data collection methods and ethical considerations of the design process, will now be discussed in detail. Figure 3 on the below provides an overview of the research design and process:

Figure 3: Overview of the research design and process.
Engaging with Participants

How researchers engage with participants is important for building rapport. In a study where participants are peers/colleagues or where prior relationships have existed, the process of recruiting and engaging with participants should be attentive to the sensitivities of these relationships inside and outside of the study. During discussions with the Ethics Committee, this issue was of paramount importance and has been explored further in the section entitled Ethical Considerations. A process was established to advertise the study through a third party, the Graduate Research School (GRS), rather than through the researcher/student. The participant recruitment strategy ensured that the individuals selected for the study were adequately representative and had the specific characteristics sought by the investigation (Arcury & Quandt, 1999).

Guided by the main research question, inclusion criteria for participant selection ensured individual participants had distinct experiences of the phenomena specific to the study (Robinson, 2014). Purposive sampling may be defined as the sampling method that carefully selects the research participants within the pre-set criteria, keeping in mind the specific research question (Bryman, 2012). The particular sampling method was chosen with the purpose of engaging unique participants (international MRes students) who were rich in the information (non-Western learning background) required to address the research question.

Purposeful sampling has been used for an in-depth understanding of the research problem and as the central phenomenon of the study (Neuman, 2011). The qualitative investigations that need rich data but have limited time and resources are usually seeking to utilise purposive sampling; however, as this method also uses the researcher’s judgement to select the participants, it is critically looked upon that the research findings may not be generalised if the judgement of the researcher is prone to bias. Against the notion of generalisation is the idea of transferability underscored by Lincoln and Guba (2000). They argue that the idea of generalisation is an aim of natural positivist science, whereas qualitative research that generates “thick descriptions” of the data may be transferable or adapted to other similar contexts. As such, it is the knowledge of the context in which qualitative researchers should be mindful while showcasing their studies.
Selection Criteria
The recruitment of participants was conducted through WSU’s student database by sending a recruitment e-mail through the GRS’s main contact point. As I (the researcher) am also an MRes student at WSU, the criteria set during the participant recruitment was partly based on my own experience, along with the insights from a comprehensive literature review. The inclusion criteria or the selection criteria of the participants were as follows:

- International MRes students who speak English as an additional language;
- International MRes students who were in different stages of their research journey: who were doing coursework, who were in their second year of writing a thesis, and those closer to graduation;
- Students who were likely to come from a diverse learning background, such as an Asian background.

Students were accepted from any discipline, as MRes is an interdisciplinary program. I interviewed only six participants, with my story additionally making up a set of seven narratives that acted as the core of the research data.

Ethical Considerations
Any research that involves human participants is obliged to comply with ethical procedures during the collection, analysis, storage, and dissemination of the data. As such, this study has fulfilled all the ethical criteria during the research process. Prior to the data collection, it was imperative to receive voluntary consent from the participants. Ergo, the information sheet and consent form approved by WSU’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) was sent to each participant via e-mail and at least a week in advance was granted for their decision to participate in the study. The information sheet contained what the study was about and how participants could contribute to the study, where and when the interview would be conducted, potential risks and benefits of the research to participants, and the requirements of information collection were provided to participants to maintain the transparency between them.
and the researcher. I was also responsible for sending and obtaining consent forms from all the participants.

Although, there were no foreknown risks for participating in this project, considerations were made during the participant recruitment process. The participants and I are related as peers studying in the same program and this connection was identified as an ethical issue by the Ethics Committee. This relationship could have led the participants to feel an urge to participate and also may have restricted them to freely express their ideas during the interview. To minimise this foreseen ethical issue, the participants were contacted through the GRS and course coordinators. In addition, I read out the pre-interview statement to each participant prior to interviewing them to reiterate that the study had gone through the ethical procedures and that they had an opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

Given that the study involved collecting personal information about the participants’ experiences, anonymity was maintained throughout the research process by creating pseudonyms. Moreover, the participants were still in the program and this sensitivity had to be addressed by making them unidentifiable in the study. Similarly, as the principal researcher, I was responsible for maintaining confidentiality of the data by storing information in a locked cabinet at WSU in a password protected file for digital storage of collected data. The participants were given time to review and provide feedback on the findings throughout the research project.

**Data Collection**

Once the study received approval from Western Sydney University’s Ethics Committee, the in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Particularly, interviews were chosen with a view to providing a way to explore participants’ perspectives on their lived experiences of being cross-cultural learners in a foreign context, and granting those perspectives the “culturally honoured status of reality” (Silverman, 2013, p. 127). The semi-structured interview was specifically chosen for collecting data, as opposed to a quantitative data collection method such as questionnaires, which aimed to focus on researchers’ concerns, rather than emphasising perspectives that are relevant and significant to interviewees (Bryman,
2012). In addition, with a set of predetermined, open-ended questions, the semi-structured interview facilitated to elicit rich, detailed answers from the interviewees allowing some room for researchers’ agenda of the study. The semi-structured interviews enabled a degree of flexibility for both parties, the interviewer and interviewee, and ensured opportunities to pose questions in a way that elicited an in-depth understanding of the meanings that participants ascribed to their learning experiences. Inspired by interview guidelines suggested by Creswell (2007), I implemented the following guidelines:

- The interview proceeded after consent forms issued by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Western Sydney University were signed by the participants;
- Participants were approached by GRS using purposive sampling;
- A face-to-face interview method was adopted, as there were no circumstances of interviewing them remotely;
- A Smart phone was used to record the interview using a voice memo application;
- The interview questions were open-ended; sub-questions were asked to the participants as probing questions, enabling them to share various aspects of their experience;
- Interview questions were sent to the participants prior to the interview to receive their feedback and comments with a view that there may be questions that may potentially harm them in a particular way;
- As a mutually agreed upon space, the reserved room in the library was utilised to conduct the interviews;
- All interviews took no more than one hour which was the estimated time that participants were aware of.

The duration of each interview ranged from 25–60 minutes and they were conducted inside a private room in the library at WSU. The frequency of the interview occurred only once and with that, caution was taken to elicit adequate information during that time to support the investigation.
Collecting Objects of Significance

Within learning contexts, educational activities and practices are greatly shaped by objects and artefacts, such as books, documents, databases, computers, pens, and images. Recognising the significance of objects and artefacts, participants were requested to bring items that were pertinent to their everyday learning. Adams and Thompson (2011) have shed light on interviewing educational artefacts as:

…to ‘interview an educational artefact’ is to catch insightful glimpses of the artefact in action, as it performs and mediates the gestures and understandings of its employer, involves others, and associates with other objects in the pedagogical environment. (p. 734)

Adams and Thompson (2011) argue that despite the omnipresence of objects and artefacts in learning environments, they are “strongly overlooked” in educational research and advocate “giving artefacts a voice” (p. 734).

An autoethnography by Pitard (2016) discusses the significance of the vignette in her educational practices as a first-time teacher of international students. With six components she structured her vignette according to context, anecdote, emotional response, reflexivity, strategies developed, and conclusive comments on layers. She discovered ways to organise her different voices and consequently attained a richness of analysis. Pitard (2016) has emphasised the use of imagery in educational research, not only as a tool for visual attraction of a research project, but also as a research method—as a source of knowledge. In an insight to art-based educational research, Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, and Grauer (2006) reviewed different arts-based dissertations and identified various aspects that add significance to the field of education: diverse voices, variety in research, creativity and new flexibility in understanding, and conducting research.

Other studies have underscored the significance of photography in research, which is associated with the deeper conversations and visual understanding of the phenomenon (Dempsey & Tucker, 1994; Harper, 2002; Smith & Woodward, 1998). For instance, Harper (2002) believes that using pictures not only elicits more
information on the topic, but also gives access to different aspects of experience, thereby allowing the increased understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, he indicates the idea that inviting pictures into the study could be complementary to word-based research, particularly in knowing different levels of human awareness.

Including non-human participants in this research was an idea that emerged while discussing the project with academics in a workshop. Initially, the idea confused the researcher; however, exploring the topic further led to discovering the inevitability of objects in human lives. As a result, the researcher became conscious of their presence in her life and in others’ lives. The participants were requested to bring along the objects and artefacts that connect them closely to their lived experience as an international MRes student. Accordingly, the participants brought items such as laptops, notebooks, pictures and flyers that were significant to their learning experiences. Each interview started with the description of things brought by the participants which allowed for deeper conversations on the topic.

Meaning Making
A researcher cannot collect the data forever and at some point, the collected data must be analysed to give it significance. Once all the data was obtained the audio recordings of the interviews were then transcribed verbatim. The data analysis of this study is two-fold; firstly, through writing stories of the international student participants, researcher and the university that are included in chapter four—Narrative Stories. The six stories of the participants were written, based on the events and experiences that were deemed significant by the participants. By reading the transcripts multiple times, the significant statements were identified and weaved together to form stories. To increase the understanding of the participants’ stories and provide them a background, it was important to include my story as well as of the University’s which was written by utilising WSU website to understand the MRes program details, particularly the course structure. In doing so, it was less difficult to examine the challenges of the participants’ learning process within this structure. In the same vein, the story depicts the university’s value for multiculturalism, specifically highlighting the international student support programs integrated in its total support for students. Knowing this information enabled to understand universities perception of how they value international students.
and how that reflects in the participants’ experiences? I chose to present my story in tandem with participants, so as to give my own learning experience a voice through this study and to ascertain participants’ experience to be meaningful and pure.

The second phase of the analysis was performed by narrowing down the stories to form different meaning units or themes incorporated in chapter five—Meaning Making. Individual narrative stories of the participants were read multiple times to “locate epiphanies” and “identify contextual materials” (Creswell, 2007, p. 156). After analysing the major plots/events in the stories, the important themes emerged to address the research questions were related to the challenges of the participants, their strategies to adapt in the new learning system, and their evolving as an autonomous learner.

**Trustworthiness**

In a qualitative research, trustworthiness explains whether the ideas and findings in the study represent the true or correct meaning and makes sense of what is being conveyed (Neuman, 2011), and whether the data reflects the true experience of the participants. Trustworthiness in qualitative research has replaced the concept of ‘validity’ because the latter is often perceived by qualitative researchers as a positivist construct (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). The notable naturalistic scholars suggests that trustworthiness in qualitative inquiries helps to attain rigour (Krefting, 1991), credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

An inquiry presenting the whole study in a subjective manner is expected to be cautious of trustworthiness for the same reasons. A recent study conducted in two different African universities among 323 Master of Education students concluded that there is a malpractice of trustworthiness criteria in qualitative studies and suggests an improvement in teaching practices and supervisions to make the students capable of establishing rigour and trustworthiness during the conduct of qualitative research (Anney, 2014). To ensure confirmability (Lincoln, 1985), member checking was implemented by sending transcribed data and research findings prior to publication. Member checking is also critical to address the value of the participants’ views and
opinions for the investigation and to assess if it is truly represented in every aspect of
the study (Creswell, 2007). In this study, all participants were asked to support the
trustworthiness of the stories as representing their lived experience by having the
opportunity to read through both the interview transcript and then the narrated story
evolving from the transcript. The two supervisors who worked with the researcher
supported this process of meaning making and interpretation through a series of
workshop style analysis activities.

Challenges Encountered

Recruiting participants was the major challenge for this study. Participants were either
at the later stage of finalising their thesis or were engaged with the intensive
coursework and preparation of their proposals. Hence, the data collection process was
time consuming, as it was very difficult to set the interview time with the participants
who also had restricted time to complete their own projects.

As this is a small project, the findings should not be generalised; however, the
objective of any qualitative research is to illuminate the knowledge of the specific
question (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, this study has attempted to provide a deeper
understanding of the lived experiences of those who participated in the research.

The trustworthiness of this study could have been enhanced through deeper
engagement with a range of participants, such as interviewing local MRes students
who could have been used as a comparison, or supervisors/educators regarding their
thoughts on international MRes students’ learning. Although it would have provided
more layers around the complexities of the challenges, this was not viable due to the
limited scope of the study and could not have been achieved in the time and size
constraints set out in the MRes program. Needless to say, opportunities could exist in
further studies to facilitate deeper comparative analysis through expanding the
participant profile. As English is an additional language for all the participants who
were considered for the study to address the research question, some of the
participants had language difficulties to express their deeper feelings and perceptions
in English. For such participants, and to overcome these challenges, interview
questions were explained and given in advance, so they knew what to expect, and
participants also had opportunities to add further comments after the interview. The use of artefacts was also elicited as a strategy to create a relaxed atmosphere and to enhance the opportunity for non-verbal communication to exist as a launching point for further discussions.

Finally, I also found it challenging to suspend my own personal biases and judgements during the data analysis, as I am in a similar position to the participants. However, I also wrote my own story to add my experience and voice to the research, without integrating my own perspectives into participants’ stories. In addition, keeping an open mind and seeking support from peers/supervisors to review the data analysis enabled me to minimise these personal biases. Moreover, participants were given opportunities to provide feedback to ensure the analysis reflected the essence of the experience as it truly appeared to them.
Chapter 4: Narrative Stories

Prelude

Story telling has long been embedded in human actions and interactions to engage with the world around them. By nature, humans are capable of telling their own stories and those of others. Therefore, as quoted by Malone and Walker (1999), “Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 191). Through the stories we narrate, we tend to reflect on our past, reconstruct it in our present, and secure the future by identifying our responsibilities and obligations. The importance of narrative stories as a way to understand the human experience has emerged as an important construct in social science researches, one being educational researches (Huber et al., 2013b). Aligning with educational philosopher Dewey’s notion of growing with experience to make the field of education “pure”, it may be understood that, establishing a trifold relationship of education, life, and experience has been the major interest of research to the scholars in this field (Dewey, 1986).

As I understood the knowledge of experience relating to unfolding human lives, I have chosen to construct narrative stories of the participants to make sense of their living and learning in a distinct context. This chapter includes eight stories involving the story of the university, the story of the researcher, and stories of the six individual international student participants enrolled in the MRes program. Beside the participants’ stories, it was pertinent to construct my own story and the story of the University to provide the settings and rationale in crafting the stories of the participants. Through the portrayal of the stories of different characters, this chapter aims to exhibit how the interplay between the context (learning in a host country) and the subjects (researcher and the participants) create meaning to understand their lived experiences of learning. As the power of stories has long been recognised in the field of education, I have utilised narrative stories as a philosophical, as well as a methodical tool, to investigate the experience of international students grappling to adapt in a distinct educational landscape. Ergo, I aim to deliver the power that these stories will create
to connect to the readers, mainly the academic stakeholders, possibly leading to an increase in understanding international students’ experiences. The stories of the students are presented in order of interviews conducted.

The University Story

Established in 1989, Western Sydney University is an Australian multi-campus university located in the Greater Western region of Sydney. It consists of a diverse student community with more than 100 ethnic and cultural backgrounds across its ten campuses and also employs 20% of staff from diverse backgrounds (Western Sydney University, 2017a). Multiculturalism is deeply embedded in its values, which is reflected in its strategic plan in order to promote the inclusive and supportive learning environment for students throughout the different campuses (Western Sydney University, 2017a).

WSU offers a range of undergraduate, postgraduate, and higher research degree programs including the MRes program recently introduced as a pathway training degree leading to a PhD. Below is an excerpt from the MRes program details available on the university website (Western Sydney University, 2017b):

The Master of Research (MRes) is a two-year postgraduate research training degree that provides you with a pathway to PhD study and a research career. The first stage of the program involves an intensive
research training coursework program where you will engage with your peers and academics in an interdisciplinary environment. The coursework is designed to help you build your skills as a researcher, master the art of knowledge translation and develop a strong research proposal. You will gain deep knowledge in your chosen disciplinary area and have the opportunity to research a topic you are passionate about. In the second stage of the program, you will undertake your own research project under the supervision of an academic who is a specialist in your field of research. Your project will involve the development of a 20–25,000-word thesis that will be externally examined.

In order for students to thrive in the different programs it offers, WSU incorporates a range of academic support to international and domestic students through extended services such as Study Smart, a service designed to help students develop academic language and learning skills, referencing training, online library resources, and workshops. Additionally, it provides advisory support through Student Central and Student Welfare Service, where students can raise a range of issues related to their learning. Specifically, for international students it offers services related to accommodation, jobs, visas, and English language support.
Researcher’s Story

Figure 4.2: WSU premises: Riverside, clear sky and endless thoughts.

As the plane ascended into the grey sky, I could not stop viewing my motherland until the last sight of it, causing a feeling of insecurity—emotionally, socially, and financially. A strong desire to fulfil my own dreams led me to Australia. My dream is not mine alone; it is the dream of my extended family, my parents, and my child. In a developing country like mine, obtaining an international degree (especially from developed countries) is a status symbol.

So, it was that with a heavy heart, but high hopes that I arrived in Australia in February 2016 to pursue the Master of Research degree, leaving my family behind, including my one-year-old infant. It was an important, but painful, decision for me as I was still a breastfeeding mother. Particularly, we chose Australia because of similar climatic conditions and a large community of fellow Nepalese citizens. It felt like a good opportunity to land a professional job and offered the potential to settle down with the family in the long term. Therefore, it can be noted that I am no different than the
endless crowd who are leaving their home countries to secure their future in a developed country.

Research had always been something like climbing a mountain for me. I had never thought of coming closer to it until I was motivated by my father during a dinner conversation, who is a PhD graduate in Forestry. As I stood at the threshold of beginning a Master of Research, I felt like I was standing in front of a gigantic mountain and I wondered if I would be able to cross it. However, once I was in the lecture theatre and met the students who were in the same position as me, I felt relieved knowing we would all have to cross that mountain one day and we were doing it together. The intensive coursework in the first year was challenging due to my level of English. I was used to general English literacy, but not academic English. Like most of the international research students, I also had the challenge of researching and advancing into academic English skills at the same time. Referencing, attention to details, reading journal articles, locating thesis materials, accessing learning resources, and understanding the research environment were things that took me completely out of my comfort zone. I had not been accustomed to these practices and, within a constrained time frame, I had to master them. Personally, I felt as though I was in deficit in my learning at that point.

Communication was a bigger issue, starting with e-mail etiquette. I was not aware that e-mails to supervisors should be written in a formal tone. In my prior education system, I used to communicate with my lecturers less often and when I did it was face-to-face and informal. On many occasions, I kept my doubt and questions to myself due to a fear of approaching lecturers. Now, in Australia, I did the same, but this time it was not cultural fear, it was fear of my English language proficiency and feeling inferior. I deeply wanted to share my ideas, participate in the discussions, and talk about my topic, however the fear of not expressing the right words daunted me and held me back. I felt the local students were more intelligent than me as they were mostly from a research background. I was very reluctant to practise the openness in communication prevalent in a Western academic environment.

Despite the challenges, I was feeling as time went on that I was gradually learning how to communicate and how to study. Initially, I was under the School of Business
as the area of my research was related to Marketing. But eventually my interest shifted to education as I became familiar with the issues of international students and I was curious to see if those issues were more serious for the HDR students. With the support of my coordinators and the Graduate Research School, I was transferred to the School of Education, which I found very warm and welcoming, as were my new supervisors. I have always been a business student unwillingly, therefore everything was new for me in the School of Education—I felt an affinity to it. I was in a new space, but I instantly felt this was where I wanted to be.

In between these good feelings was the feeling of emptiness without my child and family. Worry about their health and wellbeing was always in the back of my mind. At the end of the first year, I came to know that my grandmother was diagnosed with breast cancer and may leave us soon. I was shattered as I had spent most of my childhood with and around her. I made a plan to see her in Nepal and communicated this with the supervisors and the GRS. With their support, I was able to travel back to my country to see my grandmother who has now defeated the cancer after a successful operation. I felt grateful for being heard, trusted, and supported by my peers and colleagues in the university environment.

In the second year, MRes students are required to do an independent research project, which involves learning autonomously with the occasional guidance of the supervisors. I knew this would be different from the coursework as I could interact with the cohort of international students and lecturers in person. I was no longer going to formal classes and started grappling with self-motivation at this time, especially when I was not connecting with my supervisors. I had a feeling of isolation which was impacting on my motivation. For me to maintain my motivation and perseverance, it was important for me to constantly talk to supervisors. Talking has helped me immensely by reducing any emotional upheavals in the research journey. Hence, when I was not connecting with my supervisors, it would intensify my feelings of uncertainty, often leading to anxiety, frustration, and procrastination. The crucial thing about researching is to discover yourself. I think you discover a lot about what you cannot do and what you can do. I had started to perceive things in totality by considering the wider impact. Similarly, I was noticing new concepts and ideas, making meanings of them, and developing sense out of them. To some extent, I was enjoying
learning with minimal guidance as I transformed my learning approach from being teacher-centred to student-centred. My confidence was growing and allowed me to start believing in my capacity to climb that gigantic mountain.

I was juggling between my student life, my job, and the expectations of my family. One afternoon, while my husband and I were having dinner, my husband received a phone call informing us that our loving mother-in-law had left us forever. We were in denial, as we had engaged in an hour-long conversation just the day before and she seemed healthy. Her sudden and untimely demise had left both of us in trauma. With this, we had to make a very early travel arrangement to attend the death rituals. I could not book the ticket until I got confirmation from my supervisors. I am grateful that my supervisors responded immediately and supported my travel back to my country. Even if the travel was made in the first instance, we still could not have seen our mother. She was cremated along the holy river bank before we reached there.

In the Hindu traditions, usually the sons and their wives are the chief mourners. The thirteen-day mourning begins, as the chief performs rituals to open the door of heaven for the departed soul, and this restricts sons and their wives from eating salt, and as such, they survive on boiled rice and fruits. We had to extend our stay to manage the aftermath of this event in the family.

In the back of my mind, my thesis submission deadline was hovering. I was contemplating how personal circumstances could overshadow my learning journey and shatter the momentum in a flash, turning our lives upside down. I had to pack up the spectrum of my emotions and return to Australia to continue my research journey.
Ming’s Story

Figure 4.3: My learning companions: A laptop, pen, mobile phone and idea note books.

I have always been an inquisitive person, right from my school days. I was always proactive in asking questions to my teachers and have always been open to learning new things. I was never scared to ask questions, even though I was told not to. I always wanted to explore beyond my life, unlike my friends, go further, and be one step ahead of the crowd. I think such a personality drove me to Australia.

Back in my country, I was working in an international mobility area where I worked for the expatriate community. Gradually, I became fascinated about the cultural differences that originated along the line of mobility of expatriates in different countries. I became hungry to know more and understand the lived experiences of the expatriates. I considered doing a PhD to further explore my interest, and whilst investigating the possibility of undertaking a PhD program, I came across details of the Master of Research (MRes) degree and discovered it is a training pathway leading to a PhD.

At the onset of MRes, the experience was so overwhelming as I was accustomed to the teacher-centric learning environment during my undergraduate degree. In no time,
however, I experienced a shift in the learning process where I, the student, was at the centre of the learning. I was responsible to initiate my own learning by developing my research topic, identifying research designs, and understanding the whole research process. Simultaneously, I had to develop my academic writing. I felt frustrated and partially blind with the burden and a sense of lacking direction—as research was something new to me. I was also shattered, at the beginning, by the feedback that I used to receive on my assignments. They were really harsh and made me feel like I was “circling in the circus”. My hard work was in vain. My supervisor also critiqued my work but was careful of my feelings at the same time. Eventually, I coped with the many frustrations coming from different sources through the support of my supervisor, PhD friends, unit coordinators, and Graduate Research School. As I stepped into the second year, the feeling was different when I looked back at where I had started. I was more confident learning autonomously, and started enjoying it as I found my own way of learning. I was more open to discussing my research project with other people and provide further research directions. I identified my strengths and shortcomings, and appreciated where my research was leading. I was finally enjoying the process of being an autonomous learner.

In my research journey, my supervisor has been at the centre of my support group. I was supported emotionally as well as academically throughout the research process. He has been caring and concerned about the progress I have been making. In the beginning, he helped me to shape my thinking to become more critical, as well as creative. Along the journey, he helped me to develop my critical thinking and writing, which I have improved on greatly. At the heart of my supervision and gradual development was the quality of feedback I received from my supervisor, which was reflected immensely in the time he devoted for his student’s work. I can confirm this is one of the reasons why I have reached this milestone in my research journey. I am also grateful to have made many PhD friends inside the HDR study space who have supported me to understand and endure the academic culture at WSU. I think socialising with like-minded people has helped me a lot in my research journey. Through talking among friends, unknowingly I learn much from their stories and experiences. University facilitated the independent research journey through some of the support services, such as library resources, workshops, and HDR meetings, and notably, the Early Learning Centre where I could leave my baby during my study hours
in the school. I was happy that I could access learning, and also enjoy the convenience of seeing my baby and feeding her.

In my prior learning experience, we were always loaded up with textbooks. As we had 11 units in a semester, we had to read a lot. We used to memorise the texts, but it would depend on the units. Initially, during coursework at WSU, even though we had four units, we had to do extensive reading to meet higher expectations. We were expected to read with a deeper understanding, by analysing and critiquing the arguments, with limited time. In my country, language teaching is also an issue. Although, my major was English language, the main language taught was Chinese. I think learning English as an additional language helped me to adapt into basic, but not advanced, academic English skills. I also did not have the privilege of learning through technologies as I do here in Australia. I think technology complements our independent study to the greater extent. Although I was very much interested in research, I did not explore the research environment in my country and although I knew that research would be hard, I didn’t know it would be as difficult as it has been.

I feel that, for me, the challenge has been more academic-related than cultural. During my professional work experience in my home country, I had the opportunity to engage with non-native people, therefore, my professional career gave me an insight into the expatriate community and this helped me to adapt to local culture when I first arrived in Australia. Regarding my learning skills, I thought I had learnt English skills and possessed a wealth of vocabulary knowledge. I found what I had learnt was useless because I couldn’t use it in my research area. During my time back home with work and university, learning was more about understanding other people’s ideas. But here, it is different, as we are encouraged to voice our opinions and agree or disagree on others’ thoughts, but in a disciplined way. You can admire scholars’ ideas, but I have learnt to adopt a different approach when communicating a counter-argument or identifying gaps in their research. It is tough, but quite interesting as well.

Initially, I found it challenging communicating with my supervisors. You have to find a good way to communicate your thoughts to them and understand their expectations. During coursework, I noticed a huge gap in expectations from lecturers between first and second semester. In the first semester, feedback from the educators was positive
and encouraging. They were saying, “you will be fine, you can do that”, but during second semester, the standards rose. Thus, it was challenging for me to find a way to bridge between these expectations. Besides being a research student, I am a mother to a baby and a housewife too. Because of these multiple identities, it was hard for me to focus on my role as a student. It is like wearing different masks at the same time. In terms of time management, I struggled to live the different roles. Sometimes, I feel like I have two babies—one is my biological baby and the other is my thesis project—both needing careful nurturing. I used to earn a great salary back home, but here my husband is the only financial supporter for the family. I feel insecure sometimes because I do not have time to work in a job. I feel that it is unfair that despite our hardships and the time we commit to research, there are no scholarships for international students. Often, we go through financial turmoil due to the high tuition fees. I wish the university would consider scholarships in its international student support list.
Naina’s Story

It is a phase. Research takes us through the different phases of learning where you evolve—you become a different person and you feel proud of it. Being a self-driven person, I was seeking a space where I could shape my interest, give it a life and use it for the betterment of others. I was not satisfied from other’s learnings, meaning I did not want to assume things and limit myself to the textbooks. I wanted to experiment on my own and discover the truth myself and get closer to the reality. My belief towards the knowledge construction welcomed me in the Australian research environment, allowing me to explore and learn from the newness of the place, people, and pedagogy. I love the freedom in research enabling us to try new ways of finding things you are interested in. At the same time, you have the biggest responsibility of keeping yourself motivated throughout the journey. I think it is the basic requirement of research, but it is a challenge, a huge challenge. Even though you are really interested in this project, getting the work done on paper is the challenging thing, the main reason being that the deadline is too far ahead. It would be better if we had small deadlines in between. Personally, I consider constant communication with the colleagues, teachers, and supervisors as great motivators. I miss the constant support and
opportunity to talk to my fellow classmates about my struggles. The regular interaction helps me to discuss our challenges and gain suggestions and feedback from one another. I wish we had the similar platform in the thesis year too. For instance, they should have offered research workshops, not as an option, but as a mandatory part of the program.

My school was a Catholic school, an English medium school and we were encouraged to pursue our own interests. I think that made an impact on my belief of learning. During my tertiary education, I had the opportunity to do an independent project. It was self-directed, but he (the lecturer) was right there backing me up wherever I struggled. Here, I felt the lack of instant support sometimes, and although I have an amazing supervisor, I don't have access to his immediate support. Where would you go then? I guess this is the way the research program works! What I felt to disagree with my previous learning was that it was boringly theory-based, and I would long to do some practical stuff, the hands-on learning. For instance, during research I engaged in poster presentation and focus group interview and I enjoyed it a lot. Students here are quite lucky that they already have such exposure since their schooling prepares them adequately to adapt in the complex learning environment. What I admire most about the learning system here is we really have to put in effort and develop on the personal level to be able to analyse and use our knowledge that we gained from books. But in terms of technology, I think India outshines Australia for its updated software and the cheaper access to it. Also, I can pay less money and learn a lot of things from them as compared to here. But, I think there is leniency in the learning system. I can easily get away without learning and still pass the units. Even though the technology part is more advanced, and the support is more accessible, the leniency, the loophole in the system, is the major drawback in our learning system. Through the distinct learning world, research has enabled me to transform into a different person. I feel more equipped with my research skills and I feel that I am learning. Great feelings! Over the course of time, the most important thing I have learnt is to evolve my ideas through writing. The original ideas, you know, not from the journal articles. So, I realised this shift already within me remembering how I used to stick to the text books! Besides understanding the value of ethics in knowledge creation, I think it was interesting to apply it in the real world—the way you behave with your participants and the
stakeholders around your knowledge project. Research is not just a study, not just something to consider academically, but more of a personal development.

As an international student, we have other burdens, such as looking after expenses and we don’t have enough family and friends to support us as compared to domestic students. It is quite challenging to manage everything on my own. Therefore, I think we need more flexibility with the time. But, I think the main reason for me is not just because of our different student status, but because of the unique nature of the research, which is very unpredictable. You don’t know how it is going to change over time. I think in any process of development you go through phases and to go through it, we need more support. I repeatedly say constant interaction is the biggest one. I mean, not just the research, but for your own personal development and having opportunities to be rewarded for facing challenges. Encouragement is one of the things that could be addressed, as at times it gets so hard to be encouraged by yourself. I have been lucky with my supervisor, but not all of us are very lucky. My experience with the supervision has been exceptional with reference to my supervisor. Through his feedback, I think I have improved my ways of conducting research and learnt various approaches to writing on my research area. He gave me feedback on the structure of writing when I didn’t know where to begin the writing. He has provided me extended support in every step of my research journey. For example, he was there while conducting focus groups and gave me a feedback on that as well. My supervisor gave me feedback on how to deal with my participants (elderly people), as they are people with special needs. He made efforts to find materials for me to read and videos to watch related to my research. He is always there to listen to my opinions and my ideas, and one of the things I appreciate the most is that he always gave me an honest opinion.

I also had a second thought: I should have taken a co-supervisor from the social sciences because of the nature of my research project. It involves the methodology which is common in social sciences and my supervisor comes from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). In STEM, people deal more with machines and technology, and less with emotions and values. I also appreciate the support during coursework, especially the feedback from coordinators since beginning. I really appreciate that they took our assignments seriously and they gave
us opportunities to discuss our problems. I was really surprised about my marks, but then they explained everything to me. I could feel that I improved a lot, maybe more than double, comparing to my first assignment.

Through my research, I have a dream of making some changes in the policies for elderly people, for example, increasing the amount of support to improve their lifestyle. I think technology has some capacity to improve their lifestyle, but for that I need to know what is the right way and how much support can be taken from government. I believe my dream will make a difference in somebody’s life. My dream so much relies on my learning and my learning relies on my continuous motivation.
Gunjan’s Story

Research has given wings to my ideas. I have become innovative and expressive with my own thoughts where previously, I was habituated to the context which did not encourage us to go beyond our textbook! I was more focused on understanding the text books, rather than exploring the new ways of gaining knowledge.

It didn’t take me long before I adapted into the research environment here in Australia. I had an experience of self-guided learning under the American curriculum as I went to pursue my Master’s degree in South Korea (SK). I was also familiar with the research philosophies, methodologies, and some research skills, such as doing a literature review in my research area, interviewing participants, preparing questionnaires, and finding the gaps in the literature. It was an amazing experience learning in SK because I felt that I was not limited to the text book. I could freely express my ideas, even critically.
Going back to where I started my learning journey, it was highly structured with old curriculums in the universities. Mostly, we had exams conducted annually. The new semester system has not started in the few universities we have. It means that we have to understand and memorise the textbook for one year and we are examined on the basis of a three-hour written exam only. How unfair is this? Students are not familiar with the research environment generally. The education system is not as strong as here… I think the main reason being the limited learning resources and course-based teaching-learning practices. And the silent learning culture we have—listening to the lecturers but not responding primarily. Coming from the learning context as such, it is an additional challenge to adapt into an unstructured, independent learning style. I think, we, as international students have an extra mile to walk.

The learning environment here contrasts so much with my prior educational context. There is the conducive environment for active participation like discussions and knowledge-sharing events. Learning happens alongside agreeing and refuting on the ideas and arguments. I haven’t actually evaluated this before, but both learning experiences have merits and demerits. But in this platform, you can be more expressive and participative, and you start to identify your potential as to how far you can go. I am delighted with my supervision experience so far. Currently, I have two supervisors supporting me in my project. I have the chance to meet them at regular intervals. I feel lucky for that because some of my friends rarely meet with their supervisors. My supervisors are very approachable and therefore I feel comfortable discussing my ongoing challenges with them. It enables me to prepare in advance for the unpredictable nature of research. We also discuss the literature that is key to my project and the feedback that I get on my work. I feel really motivated after meeting my supervisors—they are very encouraging and, most importantly, they are deeply interested in my project. I have a different perspective on feedback during our coursework. We did not have opportunities to submit the draft to get feedback from the coordinators in our core units. So, I felt no room for improvements. If only we had the chance to submit our draft earlier, we could have improved further on final submissions. Unlike core units, in elective units we had this opportunity to get feedback in advance. I am anticipating the research year and for now I don’t feel much progress. But, I must admit I have become more expressive and confident in
presenting myself in this learning context. I have progressed on my research skills to some extent, particularly on finding resources and sourcing appropriate referencing. I feel I still have a lot to explore in my research year. The real journey hasn’t started yet. I am hoping for a good one.

As I have some previous experience in doing some research work, here in Australia I felt that lecturers make it more complicated even to deliver the simplest things, such as research title, abstract, and methodology. Just for the simplest part of the research they are allocating three or four weeks for this, making me feel like it is so vast and very hard. Also, time consuming. But, my previous research experience has shown me that is not like that. It is how you comprehend the ideas that matters. I also felt that the content they deliver does not address the different disciplines. Also with elective units, they have very limited courses on offer, forcing us to select the units that are not relevant to our research interest. I feel university has sufficient learning support services in general. I attend most of the workshops on academic writing, the area where I struggle most. To make sure students do not miss the workshops, I like the idea of prior notifications through our student e-mails. I also feel that there should be some information sessions regularly, particularly for the international students, as we may be unaware of many other support services in our favour. I think timely information helps us not to miss any learning opportunities. In terms of challenges, I think the financial challenge is a huge one as I am paying my tuition fee by myself and there are no scholarships for international students, unfortunately. I sometimes struggle to balance between the financial need and the high academic expectations. I think we have largely different personal circumstances than local students—less or no family support, no financial support, and a distinct socio-cultural environment.
Shyam’s Story

Doing a Master of Research as a full-time student, it is very stressful to manage the large amount of money that it costs to do the research. Research is already like doing a full-time job, but we are paying money for doing the job. After completing my Bachelor in Engineering back home, I realised that I was not adequately equipped with the knowledge to solve problems in the real world. I was quite aware of the issues in my surroundings and around the world and wanted to contribute my knowledge and capacity to solve them, at least to some extent. I wanted to do some research-based or experiment-based study that would lead me closer to participating in the real world. In my four years duration of my undergraduate course, I had to study 52 units. But, when I completed my Bachelor degree and tried to retrieve my knowledge learnt thus far, I was literally surprised. I could not connect my learning to the real world. All these years of study, and I almost felt like I was in darkness inside a closed room clinging to the hundreds of textbooks. I must say, Master of Research is a great release from that! At the onset of this program, I felt like I should quit. The complexities of the learning environment here challenged me so much. In my undergraduate study, I never knew...
about journal articles and conference papers. I was just given a 500-600-page text book and had to read it to prepare for the exams. But here in Australia, I was asked to write a reflective journal and read peer-reviewed articles. I didn’t even know how to access the database. I felt unknown about so many things! So, I started learning how to focus on the basics. I Google searched articles, journals, and conference papers. I also met with my school librarian to get information on the relevant databases and the ways to access them. I had a challenge to learn research skills, do assessments, and improve my academic English skills. I thought it was far beyond my limitations! In our learning conventions back home, we used to have a fixed structure to learn—all guided by our teachers. They expected exactly the same output from the whole class. We have a different system of evaluating a student’s knowledge back home. Unlike here, if you cannot get good marks in one aspect (exams), you can easily pass with the help of others (assignments).

I am glad to be part of the research-based learning environment here in Australia. But, what I realised is that students come from different cultural and academic backgrounds, and their level of understanding and processing information would also be different. I was quite lost and wondered how I can do all these things on my own: analysing the contents and generating original ideas. The most challenging area was critical analysis and also the reading and writing because it is more academic. But, I started reading the reviews of different authors on others’ work and that helped me greatly. I found myself to be different in academic capacity than the native students. I could not compare with their ideas during group discussions and I felt hesitant to share mine as I thought I am not competent enough. If they finish reading in one hour, it took me 2-3 hours. I thought I can never be like them. In the research year though, we do not have an opportunity to collaborate with our classmates. I used to get more benefit through classroom discussions. In this year I feel like support has become less than the previous year. For the students who have a research background, it would be easier to manage. Not for the students like us. Doing a research degree without any prior knowledge on research environment and lack of information on preparation for research year is distressing. I think university should facilitate some programs that help international students to transition into the research culture before we start. They also need to identify if the students are capable of doing research or not. They need to analyse whether students are able to do research right now or not. They have similar
expectations from all students although we are not all from the same academic background. Most of the international students have learnt English as an additional language. I have met many international students during workshops who have similar problems of adjusting into the research environment, even if they are PhD students. Despite having a good understanding of their research problem and how to do the experiments, they struggle to write the thesis in a professional manner. I think this is a big issue because after completing the degree, you are required to publish your findings, otherwise it is no different than completing the coursework.

It is more academically challenging here. You cannot change the system, so either you need to change yourself or the university should provide opportunities for students to adapt in a short time span so that we can reach the level of native students. They (the university) have resources, but they do not have sufficient information to tell the students about the resources. For example, regarding the desk space, I had to find out myself about how to gain access. It’s about the funding too! The students who are accustomed to the learning system here, perhaps they know about the university services. But if you are from a different academic background, you may not know about such facilities. I would hope for an information class to save our time looking for the services. I feel different in the research year, and I feel like I have made a lot of improvements comparing to last year. I have increased my ability to extract the ideas from journal articles and also to arrive on arguments based on the limitations and strengths of the study. It is also taking me less time to do so. Continuous reading and writing as advised by our coordinators has made me more capable. It has become a habitual action for me and I have become more comfortable with the Western learning style.
It was very hard balancing between family and studies as a mother of two young children. It was very hard emotionally and physically. This program is really intensive, without taking into consideration that students may have other issues. But, I coped, I passed, and I progressed.

I completed my Bachelor of Finance from my country without any hint that I would be pursuing a research degree one day. Good thing is, I studied in a private college in Australia and TAFE and really enjoyed the Australian education system. If I hadn’t studied here prior to my MRes, it would have been more difficult for me to cope with the intensive nature of research. So, I kind of knew what to expect with MRes, especially because my husband is a recent PhD graduate and I have partly lived his research journey. That obviously made it not easier, but more manageable. I am
fascinated by the general learning environment in Australia. I feel the students here are more serious in their studies than in my home country. Here they choose to go to university to study, but there it is a ‘cultural’ thing. When you reach a certain age, you have to get a degree. It doesn’t matter if you want it or not. In my country, the curriculum itself is strong, but only if everybody takes it seriously. I feel the academics here are more passionate about offering knowledge to the students than in my home country. Thank god for the education there in my home country, which is mainly in English, and for the computer skills that I learnt. It has helped me a lot to adapt in this program. I would be nowhere without basic English and IT competency. Technical things such as these are key, such as how to do on-line research and how to visualise presentations using PowerPoint. The research environment in my country, however, has improved a lot. I had no idea how it was before as I didn’t have any interest in research. Recently, however, I attended a conference in my home country to find it has reached an international level.

I love the autonomous nature of the research program besides the challenges it throws upon us. Before you leave the student in such a challenging situation, you have to provide them with basic skills according to their respective disciplines. Otherwise, they are going to be lost. Even with resources in the library, and access to Google, unless you figure out where you are standing, the student could be lost. However, the most challenging part is not the system, but the student themselves. If the student is serious about their learning, it is autonomous, it is about themselves. If you want to make something beautiful to be proud of and to develop your life, it is up to you. In my previous learning, which was more teacher guided, the student has no option apart from learning what the teacher has offered. It is more rigid. But in this program, I find it is more student-centric. It is a type of learning where the student is mainly responsible for his/her learning and knowledge creation. They are free to learn what they want to learn, although they may be confused sometimes. Before, I used to say it is really hard, and that I am really unorganised, but as we are towards the end now and we can start to see the whole picture, it’s great! It was like a big transition for me. Because of it, I survived in the second year. After the intensive first year, they just left us in second year. You still have communication and a relationship with your supervisor, but not a close one because it’s your research. The supervisor will start working when you have developed the first draft. I felt the gap here. To be honest,
supervisors are very busy, and they want you to finish. They say, “it’s your research and you’ve got the experience and skills and you just do it”. At the end of the day, the supervisor is very important to monitor you, but you are the principal researcher, however I really appreciate the emotional and academic support I received from my supervisor. Thank god to have her. Her feedback is fair enough. She doesn’t always like my writing, but she gives valuable and constructive feedback.

I feel privileged with the support that university has provided us. To enable students’ learning, it offers workshops, and unlimited resources online and in the library. They even give us breakfast in the morning, just to encourage us to learn. So, there is no excuse for us! There is a huge difference between my beginning and now, regarding my research capacity. Difference in a good way, of course! Although I haven’t finished yet, I now find myself in a good academic position hopefully. I have learnt research skills, such as evaluating research problems, identifying suitable methodologies depending upon my research inquiry, analysing, and interpretation. It is not professional yet, you know, but I believe with more practise I will get there. When I look back, I am surprised and proud of myself because of the knowledge I have gained through my endless efforts. Perhaps, I have discerned where I am standing now in terms of my knowledge and where this will take me further in this insightful journey. Now, as I adapt, cope, and keep going, I am really proud. Not only academically, but also with organising everyday life regarding time management, stress management, and lifestyle. It’s a great opportunity and I am thankful to have this opportunity.
Rehan’s Story

I feel fortunate that I had some research experience in a Western learning context prior to coming here. I see some of my classmates grappling to adapt in a distinct learning environment, particularly into research culture. I enjoy doing research because I can learn independently. I can take my learning to any direction that I want. I couldn’t expand my ideas when I was in the traditional learning context. Exams were the primary method of judging students’ ability. We did not have much opportunity to improve ourselves, except securing good marks in the three-hour examination.

When I arrived in Australia, I felt that I have built the foundation ready for research. I already had key literatures and a set of data for my project, and experience of doing reviews, simulations, and forming a methodology, or at least I had my model or structure to consider. My previous research experience has helped me a lot in saving time, particularly during intensive coursework. I am doing the research in the same field here, which I did back in the UK. So, going forward has been easy! I have not reached the research year yet, but some of my experiences in the coursework have
been frustrating. I had to take some units that are not relevant for my research without any option. Back in the UK, we studied units that would push you towards your research, helping us to develop our literature review, methodology, and architecture. So, at the time of writing the thesis you could only focus on writing. In this program, I feel they teach you content that is not relevant to your research. For instance, writing an ethics essay. I don’t need ethics in my research and I told that to my coordinators too. Eventually, we are going to submit our thesis, so they should not waste our time in writing all these things! The major shortcoming here is there is one person evaluating the writings of different fields. How can one person have an idea about IT, psychology, engineering and social sciences? No! So, the judgement is going wrong here.

Despite having experience learning in a Western culture for a while, I was puzzled at the beginning of MRes. It was a very uncomfortable and uncanny feeling. I knew no one. If I had any academic issues, I didn’t know who to approach or whom to talk to about it. But right now, at least I know I should go to my supervisor. I am standing somewhere, and it feels comfortable to study here. I also had difficulties accessing the resources and understanding the library system. In terms of access, I am talking about some authorised papers that some organisations restrict to the general public. I knew the papers were important for my research, but I didn’t know how to access them. With research, finding something unique is the most challenging aspect. In my field of engineering, I have to come up with a solution that is unique, which has not been done by anyone else before, and coming to this point is extremely daunting. Sometimes, it is culturally challenging as well. Some people intimidate your self-worth but I can’t share this with you, it is not good to share that! Anyway, I have faced it. The negative effect of cultural differences affects the student both academically and personally too.

With my experience on feedback, it is good generally, but sometimes I have received feedback which did not make sense to me. This is where I faced the negative effect of cultural differences. I am satisfied with the relationship that I have with my supervisor. He is fantastic! When I get confused, he assists me with proper guidance. He also gave great feedback on my past research and informed me about the new trends in my research area and if I would be interested in them. Also, he familiarised me with the problems that Australia is facing in my area and if I am interested to go for it. He helps me to move further and guides me to carry my research to the next level. The
general support that the university provides for students is commendable, but for international students I think there is scant support. Particularly, with the funding. It would be better for students like us to get more scholarships, not just a mere 2000 bucks! As you know, Sydney is an expensive city and we have to think of our survival, not only the high tuition fees. Currently, I am putting in a lot of effort to prepare for my thesis next year. I am going to different agencies to get papers from them. Obviously, university helps me to get them, but you still have to put in your own effort. I have also started collecting data. If I leave it until next semester, it may be too late. I have to know my limitations and act in time. I hope with my hardship and continuous motivation, I will be able to discover new things and solve the major social problems that we are facing now and in the near future.

Conclusion

This chapter exhibited the learning stories of the six participants, including the researcher. In order to make sense of the stories and to avoid one-sided perspectives, I have also included the story of the university, which predominantly served as a setting to craft the stories. The construction of narrative stories helped me to come closer to each person portrayed in the stories and understand their experiences. This chapter also served as the basis to make meaning of the stories of the participants and highlight the important themes to be discussed in the succeeding chapters.
Chapter 5: Meaning Making

Introduction
This chapter presents the analysis of seven participants’ narratives, including the researcher, generating diverse perspectives of international students in a pathway research program to demonstrate their adaptation to a distinct learning context. On analysing participants’ backgrounds, their prior educational learning contexts were similar, coming from a teacher-centric learning environment, however they each had distinct cultural, professional, and linguistic backgrounds. Given that, some common and other varied themes have emerged. In this chapter I will explore different themes under two major findings. The first finding under the heading of Students transitioning from dependency to autonomy is related to the experiences reflecting participants’ transitions from a teacher-centric to a learner-centric educational environment, and the second finding under the heading of Students adaption strategies relates to the different adaptation strategies students deployed to thrive in the new learning context. This chapter argues that international MRes students' learning experiences are situated as such that they rebuild a distinct identity to adapt to the new system of learning by negotiating through their interaction with the system. The chapter concludes by revealing how MRes international students identified the means through which they adapted and evolved as an autonomous learner.

Students Transitioning from Dependency to Autonomy
According to the literature, encountering challenges is common to many students, whether domestic or international in research or non-research programs (Cotterall, 2011; Due et al., 2015; Gebhard, 2012; Ingleton & Cadman, 2002; Sawir, 2013; Soong et al., 2015; Yu & Wright, 2016, 2017; Zhu, 2012). However, international students who are in research programs and who come from highly structured learning environments have deeper issues, perhaps because of the higher academic standards in such programs (Cotterall, 2011; Due et al., 2015; Ingleton & Cadman, 2002; Son & Park, 2014; Yu & Wright, 2016), with the expectation that they will be autonomous learners. Moreover, they are exposed to a different academic setting with less or no
formal classes, a lack of constant interaction with fellow students, and minimal guidance from supervisors and educators. The following section explores the unfolding challenges experienced by the students in their journey from being dependent to autonomous learners under the headings of academic shock, language and communication barriers, and personal challenges.

**Academic Shock**

All the participants noted that their past experiences of learning were predominantly from teacher-oriented, authoritative learning environments. While integrating in a learner-centric educational environment, most of the participants expressed initial discomfort towards the newness of the learning, particularly discovering their leading role in the learning process. This has indicated that participants have experienced ‘academic shock’ due to four major academic barriers: distinct learning styles, language and communication, different academic environment, and previous learning background. This finding aligns with existing literature on international students’ adaptations with distinct learning styles and environments (Sovic, 2008; Yu & Wright, 2017) and adjustment to a new academic and social culture (Mukminin, 2012). Important to note is, Sovic (2008) argument that, while the individual academic barriers alone may not result in significant bearings on international students, there is a need to be wary of cumulative effects of the issues that may cause them stress.

**Distinct Learning Styles**

The participants who came directly to complete the MRes from their home country felt the tension of a significant shift from dependency on the teachers and textbooks to needing to act autonomously when finding new knowledge. The participants mentioned that after some time, they sensed freedom, felt responsible, and became self-motivated, but they had different responses to autonomous learning at the outset:

At the beginning, I don't feel very comfortable doing that because it is quite different from what I use[d] to have in China. And because [of] the shift between teacher-oriented to myself oriented, I feel like [I'm] frustrated…shift between teacher oriented to myself…I can feel partially blind because research is something new to me as well. (Ming)
I feel it was challenging, but in a good way and now I am bigger…it has to be challenging and I am not [a] school student anymore. (Zahra)

I felt like I should quit, and I cannot do anymore…I felt unknown about so many things…I thought it was far beyond my limitations. (Shyam)

Naina, who is passionate about improving the care for elderly citizens through technology, thinks that autonomous learning empowers her to follow her interests, while also mentioning the challenges:

Solving the problems and developing the new ideas with minimum external guidance. The freedom to be able to try new ways of finding things you are interested in. But, also having the responsibility of being self-motivated to reach your goal.

Despite coming from a similar background as the participants and being in the same learning program, although I have most of the experiences common to the participants, some of the aspects, such as emotional encounters that I have revealed in my narrative stories, did not echo their experiences of autonomous learning. This may be due to the fact that, as learners, we all have unique experiences although we may have similar backgrounds. Most of the participants experienced autonomous learning as challenging, mainly because of the different learning styles they are required to adopt in a new learning setting; however, what I felt was that new skills and strategies could be learnt if we get a hold over our emotions.

Autonomous learning transformed us all as learners in different ways, but what the technical definition of autonomous learning overlooked was our emotional well-being. I found it daunting to balance the array of emotions coming from different sources, such as family, friends, and academics, and the impact it had on my own capacity, while seeking to learn autonomously. I have always felt I needed help to negotiate between the cognitive and the emotional, and from this study I didn’t sense any of the participants had experienced this aspect in the same way as me. This led me to understand that it is very difficult to generalise students’ experiences. So, I cannot say that all students coming from a distinct learning culture will experience this change in
similar ways. There are too many factors involved, but what is important to recognise is that although there may be differences, they may affect students in particular ways, depending on their circumstances.

*Prior Learning Backgrounds*

My study has limited its inquiry to non-Western learners, notably from an Asian context. Therefore, the previous learning backgrounds here refers mainly to Asian learning contexts. Although the findings cannot be generalised across all Asian learning contexts, the perceptions of most of the participants were drawn from their home country learning environments and this aligns with the claims made in prior studies that Asian learners struggle to adapt in academic English skills, mainly in critical thinking, analysing, and problem solving (Campbell & Li, 2008; Due et al., 2015; Yu & Wright, 2016). Perhaps “due to significant disparities in language, culture, and communication styles between most Asian countries and Australia, Asian students need to adjust rapidly, and cope both academically and socially” (Yu, 2013, p. 731). In addition, the participants also noted that they are accustomed to a learning system that did not support them in developing autonomous learning skills, and rather made them dependent on teachers and textbooks. In becoming a dependent learner, most of the participants confirmed they did not get opportunities to attain deeper, more immersive critical learning skills required to thrive in a Western educational landscape. During the interview with Shyam, I could feel his exasperation as he described his initial learning experience at WSU:

> The most challenging part for me is to critically analyse the ideas. Also, with reading and writing I found difficulties because it is more academic. Previously, I used to refer to one book for one unit throughout the year. So, I would not get further ideas about the topic except what is written in that book. (Shyam)

Also, Naina shared the disappointment of her previous learning experience:

> What I felt to disagree with my previous learning was that it was boringly theory-based…I think there is leniency in the learning system. I can easily get away without learning and still pass the units. (Naina)
I can particularly relate my own experience with Naina’s comment, ‘I can easily get away without learning and still pass the units’. While this way of learning may be prevalent in the Asian context, it is not limited to it. For example, when I was in college in the UK, I used to study for the last two weeks of exams and still pass them. Most of my fellow students used to do the same. Sometimes, it may also be the individual learning beliefs rather than the context itself. For example, when students are aware of learning as an innate human need to fulfil their life goals, they will recognise their roles and responsibilities as a learner. Zahra, the only participant who is from a non-Western context, but not from Asia, stated that:

_The most challenging part is not the system, but the student themselves. If he is motivated and really wants this, then he can make it or not make it. So, if the student is serious about their learning, it is autonomous, it is about themselves. If you want to make something beautiful to be proud of and to develop your life, it is up to you._ (Zahra)

Some participants who were confident in their previous learning later discovered that it is not consistent or relevant in this Australian learning context. For example, Ming was assured of her English competency, including the extent of vocabulary that she felt would ease the burden of her research, but as she started the MRes she discovered that her prior English learning and vocabulary was limited, as she could not use it in her research area. Later, she also revealed that ‘language teaching is the main issue in China, which is mainly taught in our native language’ (Ming).

**Different Academic Environment**

In contrast with many Asian learning contexts is the Western academic environment where often international students are expected to learn distinct academic norms, adapt their beliefs and behaviour towards learning and, most importantly, take responsibility of their own learning. With this newfound freedom in learning, participants can also experience a number of academic issues, such as lack of supervision time, critical feedback, high academic expectations, researching with limited support, lack of critical thinking and writing skills, and mismatch of information. Overall, the participants reported in the study that from the outset of their coursework
in the first year, and also during the independent research project in the second year, they experienced many of these academic issues.

At the time of this study, two participants were still in the coursework and four were at different stages of the final thesis writing process. The study findings revealed that students even at these latter stages of their degree program were still struggling with a number of academic issues. Naina, who is in her thesis year, shared her experience of not being able to write because she thinks the ‘main deadline is too far’ and wishes there could be small deadlines in between as a means to help her move forward in stages in her writing.

Shyam perceived that educators have similar expectations from international students as local students and do not take into account their prior learning backgrounds. He reported that he felt pressured by the need to meet the high academic expectations of supervisors and educators in his learning, and ‘this sort of things’ he stated, ‘pushes us back’.

All of the participants reported that they struggled with critical thinking and writing. Some found critical thinking was easier, but when it came to critical writing they found it more difficult. Others claimed that they found it difficult to oppose scholars’ views because they had always been told to accept and value the pre-existing knowledge found in their textbooks. One participant shared that he gradually improved his critical thinking and writing skills through the reading of reviews in different books and articles.

The international students’ difficulties were not only limited to academic English literacy, but also to their research capacities and skills. Most of the participants revealed they did not gain basic research skills and capacities during their learning in their home country. However, Gunjan and Rehan, who had attained their previous degrees in a Western learning system, reported that they had research experience that enabled them to easily adapt to the MRes program. This confirmed that the research participants who had no prior knowledge of research in their past learning experiences struggled more than those who had some prior learning when starting their degree.
All the participants reported not experiencing autonomy while learning in their home country educational settings. However, three participants, including myself, had prior experience of learning in a Western learning context where there had been different degrees of autonomous learning or no autonomy in learning. When I was an international college student in the UK, for example, I did not find much deviation in learning styles from my home country. But, Rehan an engineering student, who also studied at university in the UK shares a different experience when he states:

*I think research is very autonomous learning. I don’t have any experience in my country with autonomous learning. I can tell you the difference between the UK and Australia though. When I came here, I felt that I have already built the base getting the paper, doing the reviews, doing the simulations, and, regarding methodology at least I had my model or structure in which I am going to work. That previous research helped me a lot in saving time, helped me to grasp things easily I mean, I can read and understand papers easily right now.* (Rehan)

Similarly, Gunjan shared that he also found it easier to adapt in the Australian independent learning setting in the beginning because he had pursued his previous degree in South Korea under an American curriculum.

**Language and Communication Barriers**

Upon asking about the understanding of autonomous learning, one of the participants said, ‘*how can you expect an international student to recount their experiences regarding such a difficult terminology?’* I could feel his academic dilemma immediately. With the simplified explanation of the same situation that I could understand, I proceeded to facilitate the interview; however, that was only after recognising that I needed to be mindful of using appropriate terminology when researching with the participants for whom English is a second language.

In the process of learning in a distinct context, all the participants shared that they encountered challenges in becoming an autonomous learner in a research degree. Yet, I felt during the interview process, some participants were hesitant to fully open up and discuss their issues despite the assurance of their anonymity in the study.
Some of the issues they shared in our out-of-class conversations during the coursework period of the degree were never breached by participants during the interviews with me. Conceivably, this may have been because all the participants were still in the program during the interview, or they might have become cautious about their outsider status, or perhaps there were cultural influences that were at play in their silences over certain disclosures.

Feedback is also an indirect way to communicate with supervisors and educators through which students improve their learning. However, the study found that there were some issues with feedback during the coursework. During their coursework stages, some participants felt feedback they received from staff was overly ‘rude or mean’ and not mindful of their personal feelings. For example, Rehan stated:

*Experience of feedback is mostly good, but sometimes I get feedback which does not make any sense. They ask for the explanation, but I have got none…Some people are really rude and mean, but I can’t share this with you, it is not good to share that. Anyway, I have faced it.* (Rehan)

Ming also had a similar experience with feedback during her coursework; however, she did appreciate feedback from her supervisor and the approach they used didn’t hurt her feelings:

*I think feedback on most of the units are quite constructive…And also, sometimes the feedback can be really harsh. I am thinking like if other lecturers in other units could be as good as my supervisor, [it] would be great. My supervisor’s approach is like he can make his points, but not hurt feelings. So, you know, they can be harsh and strict, but they do not necessarily have to be mean.* (Ming)

The communication issues were not limited to feedback only, but also to the information regarding the program itself and the support services available within the program for international students. One participant felt there was a discrepancy on the websites between information regarding the positioning of the MRes program. She thought it was merely a training program and the successful completion of the program
will ensure a direct enrolment into a WSU PhD program. She perceived there seemed to be a lack of coordination and synchronicity of information between the WSU marketing team, admission officers, and the program coordinators. She had not expected in advance, for example, that she would be mainly responsible for her own learning. Besides a mismatch of information, participants felt there was a lack of information regarding the support services available, such as resources like a designated desk space. Many participants acknowledged that there were adequate learning resources in the university; however, they were not always immediately aware of the supports available to international students. Shyam supported this notion when he stated:

_They have resources, but they do not have sufficient information to tell the students about those resources. If the student is from here, he is familiar with what services university offers. But if you are from [a] different academic background you may not know about such facilities. Either they need to notify us, or they need to arrange for some information classes._

(Shyam)

The analysis of the interview transcripts indicated that the key challenges of the MRes international students evolved from either academic or personal sources. In contrast to the existing literature on international student experiences, the participants did not emphasise cross-cultural issues as central to their learning obstacles (Kang & Chang, 2016; Yu & Wright, 2016). This absence will be discussed in more detail in the final concluding chapter.

**Personal Challenges**

Personal challenges cannot be separated from academic challenges during the learning transition, as learning also involves evolving as a person. In terms of personal challenges, the participants in my study did not openly discuss the extent of these as, for example, I have revealed in my own narrative story. Nevertheless, the personal issues they have raised are important to unpack and explore.
Family Responsibilities

Two of the three female participants mentioned in their stories the significance of their family lives. Both of them have young children and reported that the family responsibilities take up most of their time and energy. Most of their daytime is occupied by attending household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, and caring for children. Due to these multiple identities they have as a mother, housewife, and student, they have found it stressful to manage time for study:

Because I am an international student, I have a young baby, I need to find more time to do learning and I do not have external family here to help me; so, the time management was [a] kind of stress for me. (Ming)

It was very hard balancing between family and studies. It was very hard emotionally and physically. This program is really intensive, and I found the beginning really, really intensive, without taking into consideration that students may have other issues. (Zahra)

Being an international student and a mother, the challenge is not only when the children are living together with the student, but also when they are away. For me, leaving a baby in my home country to pursue a higher degree was a heart-rending experience. In the beginning, I was remorseful of my decision to come to Australia as I could not bear the pain of being separated from my baby. Consequently, I could not focus on my studies in the beginning which slowed down my learning. Moreover, I also lost an immediate family member during the last stages of thesis writing which meant I had to travel back to my country to perform death rituals. Losing a family member causes an irreversible damage to one’s life. It was difficult for me to cope with the pressure of a family loss and the thesis deadline. The incident impacted greatly on my thesis writing psychologically; however, with the timely support of the university and supervisors, I was able to continue it.

In addition to family responsibilities and family loss, lack of understanding by family members may also impede the learning journey. I am fortunate that my husband supported me, although as he was not studying he did not always understand the stress I was feeling. Zahra, whose husband is a recent PhD graduate, shared a
different experience: ‘So, I kind of knew what to expect with MRes, especially because my husband is a researcher as well. That made it not easier, but more manageable’.

Financial Burden

Other participants, including those with family responsibilities, discussed financial insecurities and financial expectations. Most of the participants had been students in their home countries, but few of them were earning a good salary. They felt the shift in their financial position too, in addition to their academic position, when they moved to Australia. Doing a full-time research degree did not leave enough time to engage in a full-time job and made them dependent on other family members:

I think it is financially challenging because when I was in…I had a very good salary, but after I enrolled in MRes, my husband was working, and he was the financial supporter of the whole family so this is changing and impacts on my attitude as well. I think it is kind of probably a little bit of insecurity, but may be psychologically. (Ming)

Participants also talked about financial expectations from the university, and particularly the availability of and eligibility for scholarships. The participants indicated that they wanted to focus on their learning rather than worry about the financial burden. Compared to local students who have the opportunity of getting stipends, and like PhD students who are in a similar educational context as MRes students but studying on scholarships, many participants felt that the financial pressure and not being able to apply for scholarships from the university had increased their levels of difficulties. Participants also talked about the small amount of project funding provided by the university to international MRes students. For example, Rehan stated:

Grants could be [a] bit more, because Sydney is an expensive city. It could be better for students like us to get more scholarships, not just a mere 2000 bucks. This would help me to become [an] autonomous learner, because I can buy stuffs and do my experiment, buy software to carry on my work. (Rehan)
Participants, such as Shyam, strongly expressed concerns about the financial challenges:

_In relation to the international student, the cost of research study is not favourable. Doing research and being a full-time student, it is very hard to manage the large amount of money. If it was for the coursework it is still manageable. It is already like doing a full-time job. So, it’s like doing a job and paying money for doing the job… There is discrimination between local students and international students, they are getting money for doing this degree and we are paying money._ (Shyam)

_Self-motivation_

Living and learning with constant challenges has the capacity to impact on international students’ self-motivation as a learner. Particularly, with higher research degrees where students are expected to illustrate high levels of autonomy, the challenge is to constantly find ways to enhance their motivation by themselves. Consistent with findings from other studies on motivation and persistent learning of international research students (Son & Park, 2014; Zhou, 2015), some participants reported having an intrinsic interest in the research; however, no participants mentioned the family and social pressure of pursuing this degree. One of the participants, Naina, mentioned that networking with her peers during coursework helped her to stay motivated in her project as she benefited from the exchanging of learning experiences with others. Naina reported feelings of a reduction in her motivation in her thesis year when she did not have networking opportunities with fellow students:

_The most challenging part is to be able to be motivated by myself… I also find myself struggling through the course in terms of having to do it on my own without constant support. Such as, the support I used to get by talking to my fellow classmates. I miss the opportunity to be able to talk about my struggles._ (Naina)

As an international MRes student, I also experienced challenges with motivation when it was an important source for ‘keeping me going’. Like Naina, I found it daunting to
‘self-motivate’, particularly during unforeseen situations such as: changing supervisors, changing school, or coping with family issues. I think this reflects the complexity of learning in a distinct space and learning in a different way.

**Students’ Adaption Strategies**

Despite the challenges, participants also spoke about the support they received when acclimatising to a student-centred learning environment. Students reported that academic support, friends and networks, and family support brought sustenance and comfort in their learning journey.

**Academic Support**

The participants discussed the academic support they received from supervisors, educators, GRS, and university resources in a positive way. Among all the academic support available, participants emphasised the quality of support they got from their supervisors. Most of the students revealed that supervisors had played a crucial role in providing academic, moral, and emotional support. One participant expressed that her supervisor had higher expectations regarding her research progress; however, they provided excellent support too, which sometimes went beyond her supervision expectations:

> They kind of have really high expectation about my development into research area and also my academic writing…He is always there, no matter what kind of support you need. Sometimes I feel like he did too much for me, probably, in terms of when I send my draft he always spends so much time giving me really good feedback. Sometimes, I kind of worry that he spends too much time working on my writing because myself I feel like it is only a draft, he treats it as complete work. (Ming)

Other participants reported receiving extended support from their supervisors from the beginning in terms of finding research materials, providing reading lists, helping them to build on their ideas, and ensuring they were available when necessary to provide support. For example, Rehan talked about the supervisor’s role in encouraging him to consider a PhD study:
When I get confused he gives me proper guidance… He guided me on how to prepare, [and] what to prepare so that the authority accepts it… Yes, he helped me to move on further. He guides me to carry on my research to the next level, maybe PhD level. (Rehan)

In terms of supervision, I had a mixed experience. Due to my topic change, it was suggested that I change the school where I was located and, consequently, I also changed supervisors towards the end of the first year. In the first year, I felt that I did not make the most of my supervision. I was not aware, nor did I fully understand, the unique need of international students like myself to make the most of the supervisor’s role. I believe international students from a teacher-centred background need more understanding, especially in the beginning, in order to become familiar with Western academic traditions, predominantly autonomous learning. In addition, intensive coursework keeps students so busy in the first year that students don’t consider the role of the supervisor. Coming into a research degree, I believe students can only expel time to adapt to the academic space, which means not leaving any space in between to adapt to the socio-cultural context of their learning and new personal lives.

Although my new supervision started fairly late in my course, I have received outstanding support, notably because I received individualised support from my two new supervisors. They were approachable, understanding, and alerted to the difficult situations international students may experience, always acknowledging the effort I have made on my project despite the personal issues I had experienced. Comparing my two supervision contexts, I realised that the type of supervision and the availability of a student to take up opportunities by recognising the value of their supervisor can make a significant impact on international students’ academic adaptation, on their motivation to learn, and on their development as an autonomous learner.

Friends and Networks

Only two participants, Ming and Naina, mentioned the significant support they received from their friends and networks. Ming found friendship with a number of PhD students whom she met in her school. They offered her extended support, particularly to minimise her burden of adjusting in the autonomous learning environment:
And because [of] the shift between teacher-oriented to myself oriented, I feel like frustrated, because normally it is like teacher guide the way but now I have to work through my own way… I have couple of PhD friends, they helped me a lot. They showed the same concerns when they start the research area and they were there to help me with all the frustrations…

(Ming)

Naina also talked about the value she attained from her peers during coursework. She stated:

… regular meetings with the teachers and class mates from the course work year can make [a] difference in being able to stay motivated through realising the fact that everyone is on [the] same page. Additionally, it can also give the students an opportunity to discuss their challenges with each other and gain suggestions and feedback that can help the peers share their current problems. (Naina)

It was not surprising to discover that only two participants talked about their friends and networks, as previous studies have revealed that international students may have less social networks while studying in host countries than local students (Cotterall, 2011):

International students’ lack of social and academic contact with local students is worrying for several reasons. First, international students who choose to study in Australia should be able to expect to have contact with local students as part of their experience of studying abroad; much can be learnt about different ways of viewing the world from discussing theoretical frameworks and research approaches with colleagues from elsewhere. Second, the process of academic socialisation operates more effectively when students interact, formally and informally, with a wide range of individuals at all levels of the academic and research community. (p. 184)
This may indicate that international students lack opportunities for contact with local student networks or even networks of fellow learners, including international students in HDR programs, as illustrated by Ming. If having these networks is important for students, it may indicate that the university should be seeking ways to facilitate social events in a regular manner, notably during the thesis year.

**Family Support**

The participants expressed family support had been a source of security and comfort while researching in a foreign context. Although most of the participants did not explicitly discuss family support in Australia, many had come from a collectivist culture. Zahra and Ming were accompanied by their husbands in their learning journey, and therefore they spoke of this family support as a great source of assistance. Ming was happy that her husband supported her with her tuition fees and her living costs in Sydney; while Zahra was grateful that her husband supported her academically, as he was a fresh PhD graduate. Besides his academic support, Zahra’s husband also helped her by caring for their two young children.

In my experience, family support is a significant influence for academic success. Particularly during the ‘give up’ moments, I felt the family pressure to continue with my study. “Research is an emotional journey”, was quoted numerous times by our unit coordinators during our coursework in the first year and it really was for me! To keep up with the unending emotions in my research journey, I always needed my family, and fortunately my husband was always beside me to cheer me up. Moreover, my family in my country of origin were looking after my precious baby, so I could continue my study without too much physical effort. I also felt grateful for their contribution to facilitate my study in a different learning context.

**Evolving as an Autonomous Learner**

This study was conducted not only to identify the challenges of international MRes students to adapt in the autonomous learning culture, but also to discover how far they have embraced and evolved in an autonomous learning culture. In this final section I conclude the analysis by sharing the ways in which students identified they had adapted and evolved as autonomous learners.
All the participants identified that they have, to a great extent, developed as an autonomous learner, giving examples of the academic and personal progress made. All the participants showed positive responses towards the outcome of MRes program, saying they felt comfortable with an autonomous learning style and had started to value it. Despite their initial discomfort with the Western educational system, they informed me during the interviews that they had now found their own individual way of learning. Although, Shyam encountered frustration in the beginning due to his inadequate research skills (in his own explanation) and capacity, he was now confident, finding his own learning strategy to fit into the new system:

*Continuous reading and writing made me more capable and do better. It has become a habitual action for me and I have become more comfortable with this learning style.* (Shyam)

Like Shyam, Ming gave an overwhelming positive response when asked about her progress as an autonomous learner:

*After I get into the second year, I am more confident learning by myself and I am quite enjoying that as well, because at one stage you look back at what you already achieved, and you will say ‘Oh my goodness, it’s really good, I feel really good’.* (Ming)

All the participants acknowledged their responsibility as a learner and claimed they had found their ‘own way’ of learning. Although the participants noted they were still in the ‘process of learning’, they found themselves transforming into a different person compared to their initial experiences. Zahra, who initially had concerns of juggling between research and family responsibilities, now states she feels proud of how far she has progressed as a learner. During her thesis writing period she also sought opportunities to be exposed in her research environment. For instance, she participated in a conference which made her confident in discussing her project in the wider community. She confidently boasts on her achievement to date:
When I look at the beginning, I am surprised, and I am proud of myself because I am not used to it and it is totally different in my country. Now as I could adapt and cope and keep going, I am really proud. (Zahra)

Participants who did not have previous research backgrounds informed they had not only improved their academic skills, but had also become confident in practical research skills, such as ethical procedures, selecting appropriate methodologies, and more importantly, developing their original ideas. Naina, for example, stated, ‘I have also learnt how to develop my ideas, my original ideas and not from reading the articles or journals related to my project’. Shyam, who earlier had a deficit view of his academic capacity compared to local students, confidently claimed he had progressed academically:

But over the time, I have progressed on my reading and writing skills. Now, I can understand and extract the ideas from the different journal articles. Now, I can arrive on some arguments based on the limitations and strengths of the study. It is also taking me less time to do so in comparison to when I started. (Shyam)

Shyam, Ming, and Gunjan commented on their improved academic skills, particularly critical thinking and writing skills. Initially, Ming found it easy to think critically, but struggled to write in the same way. Due to her authoritarian learning context and also her professional background where she had to understand people’s ideas rather than critique them, Ming had struggled with the critical writing process. At a time much closer to her thesis submission, however, she expressed her progress as, ‘I feel more comfortable to critique other author’s writing. Second one is academic writing. I feel more confident to write in an academic way’.

Despite advancing in academic and research capacities, the international students also commented on their personal development. Zahra and Ming, who had children to care for, said they had championed their time management and stress management skills while shifting between the multiple identities of mother, researcher, and housewife. Zahra felt that she was relieved to see the whole picture of her project in the second year and it minimised her stress after coming out of the intensive learning
experience in the first year. Gunjan and Shyam, who are from the same country, claimed that they felt more empowered, as they are no longer bound to textbooks and can now freely express their ideas in the form of their research projects. Naina subtly mentioned her personal development: ‘Research is not just a study, not just something to consider academically but more of a personal development as well…’.

Conclusion
This chapter has explored the experiences of international students incorporating their challenges, support services, and adaptation strategies to thrive in a pathway research program in an Australian context. In terms of challenges, participants reported on two categories originating from academic and personal sources. The findings indicate that academic sources such as distinct learning styles, a different academic environment, and language and communication barriers came to them as a ‘shock’, impacting their adaptation in the new academic environment. Personal sources included family responsibilities, financial burden, and self-motivation that have impeded strongly on their ability to focus in their autonomous learning trajectories. These issues were then addressed in line with the amount of support available to students, mainly regarding quality of supervision, GRS, friends and networks, and family. Although some of the participants were not aware of the range of university support available to them in the beginning, eventually they found ways to access those resources, seek support, and develop learning strategies that have enabled them to adapt in the new academic environment and helped them to develop as researchers through adapting and evolving as autonomous learners.

Where the silence in this final analysis of the students’ stories lies is what the response of academics and supervisors was to students prior learning experiences and whether strategies were in place to enhance the transition from dependency to autonomous learning. This omission, although partially due to the limitations of the study that is deliberately focusing on only the student’s perspectives, will be unpacked in the final concluding chapter that considers strategies to support international students enrolled in the MRes program at WSU.
Chapter 6: Where to from Here?

Through narrative inquiry, this study explored the challenges of international students and their adaptation to autonomous learning structures prevalent in a Western learning environment, specifically within the Australian context. The study sought to address the following research questions: How do international MRes students overcome the challenges of, and adapt to autonomous learning? What are the challenges for international MRes students when adapting to an autonomous learning mode during their MRes program? How do international MRes students’ prior learning experiences impact on their capacity to adapt to autonomous learning modes?

When addressing these questions, the study revealed that international students in a research pathway program have distinct experiences in adjusting to a unique course structure that consists of coursework in the first year and an independent research project in the second year, requiring them to become highly autonomous in their learning trajectories. Overall, international students who were mainly from Asian backgrounds, expressed satisfaction with being a part of the MRes program at WSU; however, they revealed some academic and personal issues that inhibited them during their adjustment to a new learning environment. Eventually, despite some of the challenges they encountered, international students were able to acclimatise to the Australian academic environment through a range of support functions. This has been mainly due to the supportive attitude of their university and the personal strategies they deployed to support themselves.

It is important to note that academic issues were more intense than other issues for the majority of the participants, which emerged as a shock to them in the beginning of their MRes studies. Those issues emerged from two transitional phases: firstly, to adjust to differences between their home country learning settings and the Australian academic environment and, secondly, the need to adjust to the difference between the structure of intensive coursework in the first year, and undergoing an independent research project in the second year, where their experiences as autonomous learners increased immensely.
All participants confirmed that the learning styles prevalent in the Australian academic environment are distinct from their country of origin, which impacted their habitual way of learning. This leads to the recognition that learning is contextual, and to the understanding that with appropriate and timely support, international students are flexible to cope and adapt within their new learning settings. These findings give weight to previous studies on Asian international students and how they adapt to the Australian learning context (Wong, 2004; Yu & Wright, 2016). Similarly, the findings may also indicate the preparedness of international students in how they approach a new learning context, which can enable them to attune to the new context without too much disruption. For example, Cotterall (1995) highlights the significance of learners’ readiness to engage in the new learning system and how this aspect will determine how well they survive within it.

The participants recognised that there was enough support available to them in the university, but they also perceived that not enough information was available to them to guide them towards those supports. Based on that, it may be understood that information on support services could be made more visible to international students to assist them further with their endeavours in a new academic environment. Or, it may also indicate international students’ reluctance in seeking support and emphasise the need to prompt them towards the available services that are pertinent to their learning progress. Particular attention may be needed in communication styles, specifically on feedback approaches during the coursework where students are still newly adapting to the educational context.

The findings suggest that feedback approaches of supervisors are more mindful of participants’ educational and socio-cultural contexts, than feedback during coursework, which they labelled as ‘harsh’ on some occasions. The findings on feedback resonated in the study, such as emotional and frustrating experiences (Ting & Li, 2011), however this contrasted with views that found direct explicit feedback as a positive experience for international students (Bloomfield, 2013). In addition, although participants understood the value of studying in an interdisciplinary program, they felt that it impacted on the evaluation of their performance in core units. Nevertheless, participants equally recognised the efforts of educators during their
coursework phase to equip them academically and psychologically to adapt to the thesis year that was to follow. Expectations had also emerged due to the gap in the communication and/or marketing of the program itself. For example, one participant raised an issue about the positioning of the MRes as a training program, which increased their expectation of educator/supervisor always having a central role in their learning, when in reality, the student realised they had to take up a more autonomous role in the learning process. Training to be autonomous and self-directed were found to be central skills for a developing researcher.

The second important issue raised by the participants was related to personal challenges stemming mainly from family responsibilities, financial pressures, and self-motivation. Coming from a collectivist culture and being attached to family values as central to their lives, the participants felt that being responsible towards their family influenced their learning opportunities. This concern was directly related to the time they allocated to study and the stress they encountered due to the lack of time management brought on by juggling work, study, and family commitments. However, data suggests that family equally played a crucial role in their ability to adapt to a new environment, which leads me to discern that there is a prevalence of reciprocity in the Asian culture. For example, parents of international students also take care of the students’ children, which has opened the way for them to study in Australia. This is a significant part of Asian cultural values and the devotion of parents to their children’s well-being should be perpetuated. However, even though the participants did come mainly from a collectivist culture, the results of this study have observed that participants did not overtly mention cultural issues in their process of becoming an autonomous learner, except perhaps subtly at times. This result is in direct contrast to the voluminous literature on international students’ cultural impact on adaptation. This further indicates that due to the intensive nature of the MRes program, academic factors may have overshadowed cultural factors and that this may have helped them to positively integrate into the new learning system.

As discovered in the existing literature (Son & Park, 2014; Zhou, 2015), self-motivation emerged as the general personal issue for the participants, specifically in the thesis year, and the suggestions made by the participants in terms of offering sessions that cover academic workshops and social interaction opportunities with peers and other
disciplinary people, could be a priority to allow space for international students to succeed. In addition, unforeseen life events, such as family loss, has impacted greatly on the motivation of students such as myself, which may be a common issue to all students. However, the challenges faced by international students in terms of travelling back to their home country for specific ceremonies may exert more pressure on international research students, particularly during the final thesis writing process. The findings also suggest that an empathetic eye and individualised support from both the university support services and the supervisors can enable international students to cope with their grief and successfully complete their research and thesis writing process.

Unlike available literature that has revealed the supervisory relationship in the university environment as being problematic (Bryce, 2003; Due et al., 2015; Hird, 1997) the participants in this study revealed the major sources of support during their academic adaptation to WSU were due to the quality of supervision. In addition, the participants in this study have reported that the supervisor’s role in keeping track of their progress and providing valuable feedback has enabled them to become successful autonomous learners who have been empowered to find the strategies that they need to learn progressively. In terms of university support, participants have unanimously agreed that the university supports them indiscriminately. In terms of the general learning environment, participants have revealed an overwhelming positive response, such as being happy to find an Early Childhood Centre within the university premises, which has saved them time to focus on study.

The findings from the study indicate that international MRes students have faced, and continue to face, a range of challenges during their learning trajectories. Nevertheless, the adaptation strategies they have sought have helped them to overcome those challenges and most of them are experiencing an evolution in terms of the process of learning. It is evident from the data that international MRes students became more resilient as they progressed in this program, which also supports the findings on literature on international Asian students’ adjustments in a Western university (Wang, 2009). A classic definition of autonomous learning requires the learners to become responsible for their own learning, and this study finds that exposing international
students to a highly autonomous environment has catered to their needs and encouraged them to become more responsible towards their learning.

As a researcher and fellow international student, I have had my own unique experiences, but in general I found international students who participated in the study, including myself, have common experiences in becoming an autonomous learner. I have been influenced to adapt to the new learning styles by building on my previous learning experiences and personal circumstances, followed by my motivation to learn. The Master of Research program at WSU has been an educational platform where I have evolved as a learner. I also feel that I have found my own strategies to learn, tackled learning issues, capitalised on challenges, and moved beyond personal interest towards the wider society. Looking back to a time where I saw the MRes as a giant mountain impossible to climb, I have now realised that over time I have adapted and now think differently, write differently, and behave differently as a learner.

This study was conducted with the aim of opening a discussion on the struggle of international students when transitioning to pathway programs and to investigate how students adapted to changes in learning from their past learning experiences. The research design as narrative inquiry has helped to explore the international MRes students’ experiences of learning in their everyday lives while enrolled in a two-year program that started with coursework that was more structured and teacher-directed to the shift of a more autonomous, self-directed research project year. Although this is a relatively small project and findings may not be generalised in the wider contexts, the personal lived experience as told by the participant-students and myself as participant-researcher provide a rich story of adaption and evolution. Future research could explore this topic with additional or alternative samples and utilise other research designs, such as the longitudinal method utilised by Cotterall (2011b) to enhance the meaning of the participants’ experiences.

The main obvious omission in the study is the story of how students past educational experiences could be more evident, available, and openly engaged with as part of their learning. For example, rather than international students adapting to fit into this new learning context, it could be beneficial to create more opportunities for them to contribute to a shared learning space. This shared learning space would allow
students to offer different perspectives by drawing on their own diverse cultural and educational life. Due to the limited time frame of the research year, I was unable to explore this or other areas of interest as they emerged during the study. Conducting research with domestic students, for example, to compare experience, and engaging with supervisors and educators to find out how they had considered or implemented strategies to support international students, would have provided more context to explore how this phenomenon of ‘learning’ was being experienced by all involved. These are all areas for future research.
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