# "IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR ADULT LEARNERS"

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# Keywords

*adult learners; adult education research; barriers to success; self-efficacy; theory of human agency; student attrition; student retention; higher education; university education; tertiary education; barriers for adult learners; strategies for success for adult learners; persistence to success; meta-synthesis; descriptive meta-synthesis*

# Abstract

There is a need for a deeper and more contextualised understanding of the influences contributing to educational success for adult learners returning to study. Such an understanding has implications for the increasing role of tertiary education in a post-industrial workforce and is supported on a policy level by the Australian Federal Government, the Queensland Government, and UNESCO. Much of the published literature to date has focused on single variables influencing the success or otherwise of adult learners during their educational journeys. The studies focus broadly on two approaches: environmental influences influencing persistence and success, such as psychology, family responsibilities, and personal time constraints; and structural issues, such as the range, availability and delivery methods of courses on offer, and opportunities to engage in the college community. Little work has been done to theorise how these multiple influences interact in a complex individual context to influence the attitudes of, and persistence to success, for adult learners during their educational journeys.

This research applied the methodology of meta-synthesis to examine and theorise the unique characteristics and requirements of adult learners undertaking post-compulsory education. It examined the barriers adult learners face as they re-engage and persist through their post-compulsory educational journey and also identified the most important influences that assist adult learners to successfully complete their studies. Studies selected for this meta-synthesis were peer-reviewed original research with descriptive studies investigating the phenomena through qualitative methodologies. Qualitative studies were selected for the personal and experiential nature of the data they report.

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# List of Abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics |
| DEEWR | Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations |
| GFC | Global Financial Crisis |
| HE | Higher Education |
| I-E-O | Input-Environment-Output |
| NBN | National Broadband Network |
| NGO | Non-Government Organisation |
| TAFE | Technical and Further Education |
| TQB | TAFE Queensland Brisbane |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| VET | Vocational Education and Training |

# Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signature:

Date: 2/5/16

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# Preface

*Personal statement: Situating the author in the context of the study*

This study is a very personal journey for me into the experiences, difficulties and successes adult learners encounter while engaged in vocational education and training in Queensland.  I have an extensive background in educational delivery that has led to the development of a genuine interest in, and understanding of, the complex interactions of personal, educational and vocational influences that challenge my students during their studies with me.  Over time I have formed opinions about what strategies might be best employed to enhance the educational outcomes for these participants. I have also developed a philosophical approach to the design and delivery of programs that is proactive and focussed on the diagnosis of potential issues and negotiation of training plans, rather than being reactive and focussed on remedial support to participants who may be experiencing stress and at risk of disengagement or non-completion of programs.

This personal investment in the research topic has two consequences.  Firstly, I am uniquely positioned to interpret and synthesise the rich volume of international research available for study.  My history, perspective and membership of the studied population as an adult learner myself enabled me to identify and understand the key issues emerging from the literature.  The second consequence is the challenge to remain open to the discovery of findings that are not aligned with my extant view of the adult learner experience.  It remained a significant challenge to report the findings of the research and draw unbiased conclusions in the face of my extensive experience and anecdotally collected information.

My role as a teacher in TAFE QLD began twenty-seven years ago when I joined the beginning teacher program at North Point Institute of TAFE in Brisbane.  The first nine years of my career as a vocational education teacher were predominately focused on Traditional Learners who were recent high school graduates transferring directly into Certificate IV and Diploma level qualifications that lead to direct employment opportunities.  The following ten years were spent managing or owning a series of SME businesses with a significant role being the professional development of existing

workers who were adult learners – the group of learners who are differentiated from traditional learners by their time away from formal education and the many conflicting priorities they have for their time, energy and resources. The past eight years of my career have been dedicated exclusively to the education and training of adult learners with my current employer TAFE Queensland Brisbane.

### *The author's current vocational context described*

TAFE Queensland Brisbane (TQB) operates in a highly commercialised and globalised post-compulsory educational market. In my field of expertise and operation, TQB has developed a commercial approach to the delivery of its educational programs that responds to a growing cohort of commercial clients that seek both accredited and non-accredited education and training across a broad range of educational disciplines. The delivery of this training utilises blended learning models including: accelerated face-to-face workshops; synchronous and asynchronous on-line delivery; and traditional self-paced distance-learning methodologies. The participants in these programs are geographically dispersed around the State of Queensland. The participants have the following characteristics in common:

- The participants are mature-aged (>25 years of age).

- They are existing workers employed by the commercial client.

- They are transitioning into managerial roles and as a result many are facing significant stresses associated with change resistance and self-doubt.

- They are re-entering study in a post-compulsory educational environment.

- Most have families with broad responsibilities beyond their work and study requirements.

- They have a wide range of educational backgrounds, achievements and work experience.

- They have a wide range of attitudes to technology, learning and change.

The funding models available to training providers in the VET sector influence the delivery of educational programs to these participants. The two major funding models in this environment are:

1. Full fee for service, where the corporate client pays the full commercial fee for the services provided – this leads to an expectation that the learning experience of the participants will result in measurable benefits to the organisation.

2. Leveraged Government funding arrangements from a variety of sources – these typically nominate a maximum funding amount based on successful completion of accredited units of competency from identified National Training Packages. Lesser amounts are paid for partial completion where achievements can be verified – this results in the need to maximise the number of participants successfully meeting all requirements of the courses enrolled in to access full funding.

These funding arrangements apply to all suppliers of VET in Queensland. As a result, the findings of any research into the influences influencing the successful outcomes for mature-aged students in Queensland will have broad interest and application across the Queensland VET sector.

The programs I deliver primarily utilise an accelerated workshop mode supplemented by web-based support that builds upon the acquired work experience of the individual to allow them to complete their Certificate IV or Diploma level studies in a much shorter time-frame. These cohorts are almost all commercial groups selected by their employers for management training in the workplace utilising contextualised organisational processes as a framework to deliver the learning.

As mentioned above, these learners are geographically dispersed throughout Queensland with many groups in regional or remote locations. This factor specifically has posed additional challenges to the successful completion of their studies because the participants do not have the same access to delivery and support that their metropolitan counterparts enjoy. Geography, economics and logistical constraints have resulted in an asymmetrical distribution of effort and attention based on the location and numbers of learners in each identified Queensland region. The locations, characteristics and delivery modes used to deliver training to these groups are summarised in the following table.

Table 1

*Summary of regions and delivery methods utilised by TQB in delivering VOCED training in QLD*

| Region | Local delivery | Air travel required | Driving required | Recognition of prior learning included training plan | Face to face accelerated workshops | On-line self-directed learning | Webcasts | Phone or email support |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brisbane Metropolitan | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Gold Coast | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Sunshine Coast | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Toowoomba and Downs | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Nanango and Kingaroy | | | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Hervey Bay | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Bundaberg | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Gladstone | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Rockhampton | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Mackay | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Proserpine | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Barrier Reef Islands | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Townsville | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Mareeba | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cairns | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

The table above illustrates clearly that participants studying for the same qualifications will not have the same experience of learning during their educational engagement. The extent to which these differences impact the outcomes of adult learners, and what might be possible in terms of support and interventions to maximise the results across cohorts must be examined in order to provide value and equity for these learners.

Many studies have been conducted over recent years focusing broadly on these areas. Much of the literature about adult learners, the barriers they face, their motivations and expectations from study and their needs for support during study, refer to a particular type of formal adult education and context that does not reflect the experiences of this selective population. As a result, care must be taken in the synthesis

following, to differentiate between reported findings and the broad or specific application of these findings to other contexts and educational systems.

### *Broader Queensland context supporting the need for this research*

The Queensland Government, in its response to the Queensland Post-secondary Education and Training Review report (Qld Department of Education and Training 2011), stated as a priority, its commitment to boosting participation and attainment levels in post-secondary education in regional Queensland. The report recognises the importance of: "…improving access to tertiary education and training for disadvantaged groups and Queenslanders living in regional communities and to improve pathways to qualifications" (Qld Department of Education and Training 2011, p.3).

Figure 1.1 below demonstrates the importance of improving access and outcomes for these learners by illustrating declining participation rates in Queensland compared to the other states, and the average Australian higher education participation rates.
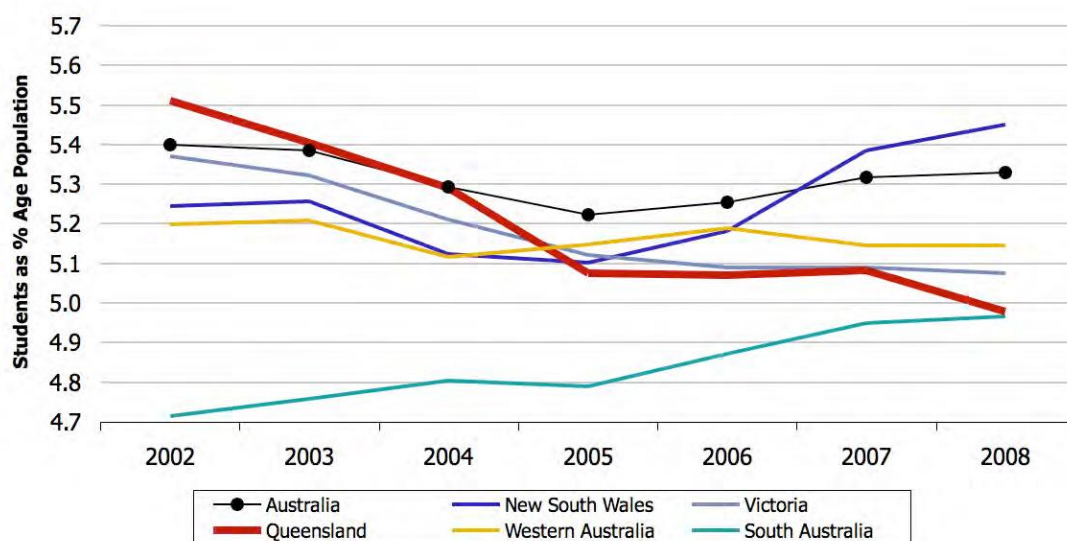


*Figure 1.1.* Higher education participation rate for 15-64 year olds – Australia and mainland states – 2002-2008 Source: DEEWR Higher Education Statistics Collection.

The figure above relies on data produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2008 and represents the most recent comparative analysis of participation rates for the populations described. More recent studies and reports still refer to the same data set as most of the contemporary analysis on participation rates does not compare data by state (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Much of the recent analysis appears

to focus on low S.E.S. and indigenous populations, which reflects current Government and HE policy in Australia (Universities Australia, 2013).

The Queensland Post-secondary Education and Training Review report (Qld Dept. of Education and Training 2011) responds to the 14 recommendations of the Queensland Post-secondary Education and Training Review published in 2010 by The Allen Consulting Group. The report investigated how the Queensland Government could reform the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) sectors to support increased workforce productivity through increased participation in, and attainment of, post-secondary qualifications. The report compared and analysed participation and completion rates across Queensland demographic categories against other Australian and international jurisdictions to determine the likely impact of proposed national changes to VET and Higher Education, and the opportunities to enhance to the role of VET and Higher Education in future post-secondary education in Queensland[1]. Universities Australia in a range of reports and advice to the in-coming Coalition Government in 2013 emphasised the role an expanded and focused Higher Education sector would have in leveraging the digital revolution, improving productivity and economic and industrial restructuring as well as fostering innovation and increased globalisation of Australian education and commerce. The report, An Agenda for Australian Higher Education 2013 – 2016, focussed on four themes driving change in Higher Education the first of which was increasing participation and outcomes for all Australians. Specific mention was made of low S.E.S., Indigenous and regional participants, which continues the focus of earlier policy makers and reports (Universities Australia, 2013).

### *Government priority for regional and remote learners*

Further reinforcing this emphasis on the benefits of improving access and inclusion for Regional Australian learners, the former Australian Federal Government on its NBN website discussed the role a skilled workforce will have in maintaining economic and social prosperity and the Government's desire to increase tertiary enrolments each year to meet these needs.

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[1] As conservative governments rose to power in both Queensland and federal Australian jurisdictions the methodologies for achieving these objectives have changed to reflect tighter economic circumstances and other drivers for change. Reform of VET and HE to achieve increased participation and completion for learners while maximising value for taxpayers remains the focus at all levels of government in Australia.

…The NBN plays an important role in the digital economy by providing high-speed broadband to every student, no matter where they live. The Australian Government has committed that, by the end of the NBN rollout, all schools, TAFEs, universities and higher education institutions will have the connectivity to extend access to online learning resources to the home, and the facilities to offer students, who cannot access specialist classes via traditional means, the opportunity for online virtual classes. (Australian Government Department of Communications, 2012)

Although investigating the validity of these political aspirations is beyond the scope of this review, the commitment of successive Australian Governments to invest in technologies that will provide geographically marginalised adult learners equitable access to the same educational opportunities as those learners in metropolitan areas is clearly demonstrated.

Confirming the need for the rapid development of technology infrastructure discussed above, numerous international and Australian studies over recent years have indicated that adult learners are re-entering post-compulsory education in increasing numbers and this trend is expected to continue into the future (Connell, 2008a; Deggs, 2011; Kazis, 2007; Kenny, Kidd, Nankervis, & Connell, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Australian Bureau of Statistics data from 2013 confirms that participation in formal study in Australia continues to increase each year placing demands on institutions to leverage the emergence of the digital economy and improved technology infrastructure to broaden access to Higher Education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Universities Australia, 2013)

Locally, a range of drivers have converged to create a post-compulsory educational environment in Queensland that focuses on a workforce that needs to become more flexible, responsive and highly skilled (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013). These same influences have also emerged in studies conducted in the United States and elsewhere (Kazis, 2007). Figure 1.2 below illustrates the range of influences shaping these developments in Queensland as well as describing some of the resultant strategies emerging to meet both the political and economic influences on education and training delivery.
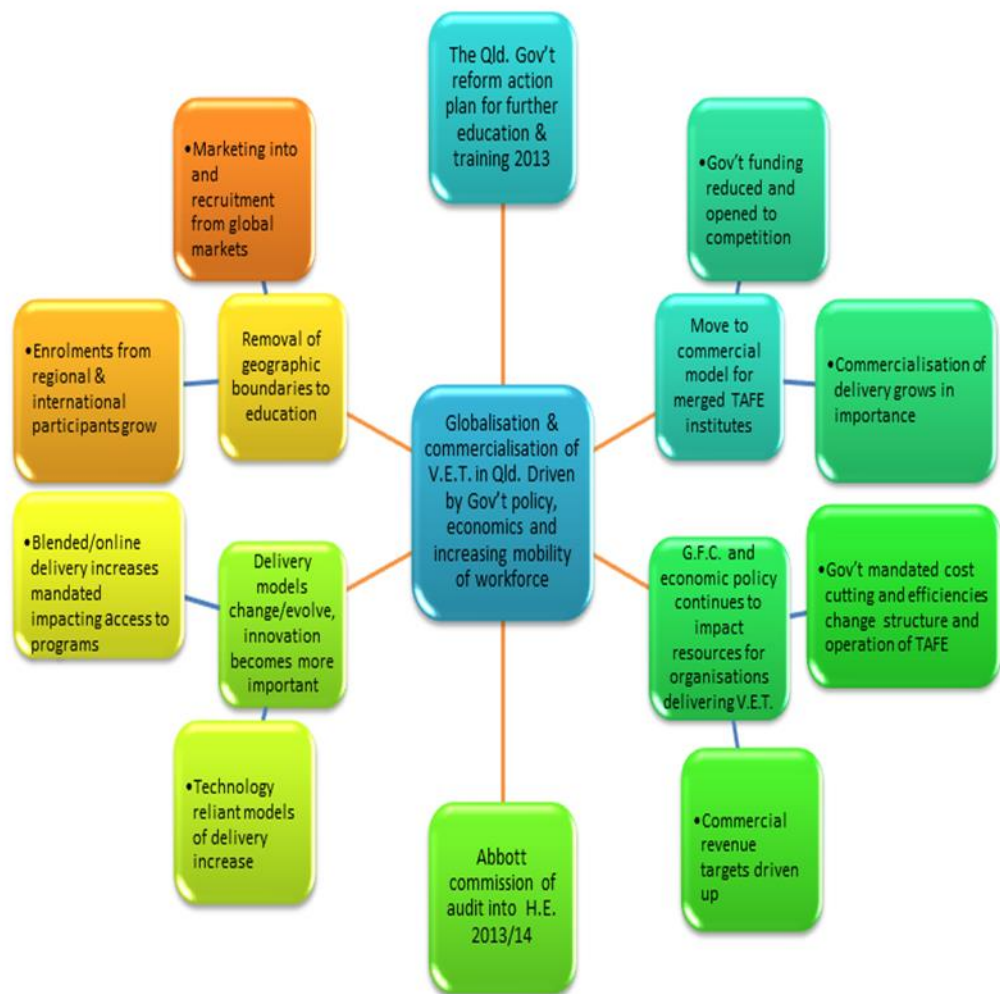
*Figure 1.2.* Observed factors supporting strategies for improving success rates for adult learners in Queensland (original conceptualisation).

Enquiries by both the Queensland and Federal Australian Governments in recent times have proposed plans for changing the structure, delivery and funding of VET and Higher Education in Australia and these plans have developed into the factors presented in figure 1.2 (Department of Education Training and Employment, 2013). The influences shaping these directions and policy decisions include the stated intention to make the provision of funding for VET more transparent and linked to employment outcomes as well as being focussed on the identified areas of greatest need in the economy (Department of Education Training and Employment, 2013). Maximising the benefits of the emerging digital economy and increased availability of

technology and innovation in education and training have combined with increasing globalisation and economic and industrial restructuring to create strategies that should benefit learners but will certainly have unprecedented impacts on the organisations delivering the programs (Universities Australia, 2013).

Policies of both Federal and Queensland governments relating to funding for VET have moved in recent times to a fully contested model with increasing power for the allocation of funds to training providers being in the hands of the user (student). This increased competition for funded and user-paid training places has forced training providers to develop different business models in an effort to remain viable. Changes in economic conditions have also impacted the training agendas of employers who now demand quantifiable benefits flowing from the allocation of their training budgets. A further influence on the Higher Education and VET sector is the geographic re-distribution of labour in response to emerging industries and the rapid development of the resources sector in Australia and globally. These influences have resulted in a Higher Education and VET sector in Australia that offers an increasingly blended and technology-reliant range of services to a global market financed by both reducing government funding, and full-fee paying candidates. These changing conditions for learners have a continuing impact on the access to and experience of their learning journeys.

In summary, there is an established need to specifically investigate the unique characteristics and requirements of adult learners undertaking post-compulsory education in order to increase enrolments and assist those learners to persist to success in their journeys. This review to examine the influences that support adult learners during their post-compulsory educational journeys is consistent with both Queensland and Australian Government policies as well as international human rights declarations and imperatives for economic and social prosperity. Outcomes of this study may also indicate strategies to address the aforementioned relatively low tertiary attainment levels in Queensland (Universities Australia, 2013).

# Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter outlines the background (section 1.1) and context (section 1.2) of the research, and its purposes (section 1.3). Section 1.4 describes the significance and scope of this research and provides definitions of terms used. Finally, section 1.5 includes an outline of the remaining chapters of the thesis.

## 1.1   BACKGROUND

Influences contributing to educational success for adult learners have been the focus of academic studies for decades. However, research regarding the need for a deeper and more contextualised understanding of those influences has been less evident.  Much of the research included in this review examines the contributing influences as single phenomena such as the availability of flexible programs, or in a single context, such as the experiences of adult learners balancing multiple roles in conflict with the demands of academic studies.  Goto and Martin (2009) made a strong recommendation to examine these influences holistically in order to understand the dynamics at play and to better support adult learners to achieve their educational goals.

The objective to support the success of adult learners in their educational journeys has also been an issue of significance for governments and international organisations, such a report by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2009). Australian policy development around concepts of lifelong learning for all and becoming a learning society have been a response to the pace of economic change, new technology and globalisation since the 1990s (Watson, 2003).  Australian policy development around concepts of lifelong learning for all and becoming a learning society have been a response to the pace of economic change, new technology and globalisation since the 1990s (Watson, 2003).  More recently, governments, policy makers and educational institutions have recognised the societal and economic benefits of promoting quality adult education in a broad range of contexts.  The UNESCO Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (2009) states that adult education is a key factor in transforming individuals, economies, and communities in the 21$^{st}$ century.  The report recognises the role that continuing adult education has in

transforming individuals and communities, as well as advancing the recovery of leading economies post the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis (Unesco, 2009).

A number of seminal theorists have contributed to the discussion and advancement of improving outcomes for adult learners. The following table summarises several of these theorists' contributions to the research included in this review.

Table 1.1

*Summary of Theorists and conceptualisations included in this review*

| THEORIST | CONCEPTUALISATION | APPLICATION |
|---|---|---|
| Knowles | Modern principles of adult learning | Defined the characteristics of adult learner engagement which can be applied in every aspect of developing, delivering and supporting programs for adult learners |
| Bandura | Social cognitive theory of human agency | Calls on researchers to situate the micro view of cognition within a macro view of the adult learners personal environment |
| Astin | Input-environment-output (I-E-O) categories | Used to group and analyse observed influences impacting on adult learners' decisions during study |
| Durkheim | Sociology and philosophy | Emphasised individual characteristics and dispositions as motivators for significant decisions – applied by Tinto in examining student attrition |
| Tinto | Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition | Applied Durkheim's theories to propose educational expectations, academic motivation, and goal commitment as factors influencing educational persistence |

This descriptive meta-synthesis describes how the concepts relating to adult learner success developed by such seminal theorists as Knowles, Bandura, Astin, Durkheim and Tinto can be integrated to promote adult learner success and serve the objectives of Government policies.

## 1.2 CONTEXT

This Master of Education dissertation investigated the complex interaction of psychological and so-called structural influences that shape the attitudes and experiences of adult learners as they re-engage and persist through their post-compulsory educational journeys. These influences included attitudes to study, self-belief, family responsibilities, and time pressures from work, financial considerations and institutional policies, which combined to shape the educational outcomes for adult learners. Seven key themes emerged from the literature review and were critically examined to propose a qualitative study to examine the influences that support adult learners during their post-compulsory educational journeys. The themes identified in the review are illustrated in the following diagram.



*Figure 1.1.* Emerging themes in the literature on adult learning persistence.

The influences examined in the themes above included both positive and negative experiences such as practical support from family, peers and employers as well as interventions from institutions and coping strategies the adult learners develop throughout their lives, and the tension between family responsibilities and the demands of academic study. The findings from the studies reviewed were used to synthesise a new understanding of the concept of persistence to success for adult learners.

Applying descriptive meta-synthesis research methodology produced the findings of this review. This approach enabled description, analysis, and systematic synthesis of the unique barriers faced by adult learners and the supporting influences

that allowed them to successfully undertake their studies in post-compulsory education. The goal of this descriptive meta-synthesis was to synthesise the findings of original studies that investigated the experiences of adult learners as they navigated their educational journeys. This review served as an exploration of both the positive and negative experiences of the subject population, with the ultimate goal of improving the understanding and appreciation of how adult learners can be assisted to successfully complete their studies.

This study presents a descriptive meta-synthesis of findings from 135 studies using the thematic synthesis research method and Knowles' (1970) theory of adult learning as the conceptual framework. Similar to grounded theory research methods, thematic analysis identifies the emergent themes in studies reviewed and develops concepts by coding the findings across the range of those studies (McInnes, 2013).

A further theoretical framework utilised in this descriptive meta-synthesis is Bandura's social cognitive theory of human agency (1993). Bandura's theory was used in this investigation to interpret the findings of the research. Bandura expounded the view that psychological influences determine how students respond to the barriers to educational success. Goto and Martin (2009) extended this theoretical approach further. The authors reported that it is imperative to place the educational experiences of the adult learners in the metacontext of their lives including their families, peer groups and work environments, in order to understand the dynamics at play. As a result, this synthesis seeks to place the findings of each study reviewed in the context of the other included studies to synthesise an integrated view of the experiences of adult learners on their educational journeys.

Descriptive meta-synthesis is a non-statistical method of evaluating and synthesising the findings of multiple qualitative studies, and is a research methodology in its own right (Polit & Beck, 2006). The studies are investigated to reveal the emergent common themes as well as the theoretical constructs and the methodologies used to generate the findings. The purpose of a descriptive meta-synthesis is to transform the findings from multiple studies into new interpretations and concepts surrounding the phenomenological, descriptive, grounded theory or ethnographic approached taken (Polit & Beck, 2006). Cooper, Hedges and colleagues in their 2009 volume, refer to this form of research as "research synthesis". Consistent with descriptions from Polit and Beck (2006), they define the term as attempting to bring

together primary research to propose generalisations by critically focusing on the theories discussed and resolving conflicts in the literature reviewed (Cooper, Hedges, & Valentine, 2009). The results of such a study goes beyond the narrow focus of existing research by emphasising the meta-context of the learners' experiences and may have practical application in policy development by contributing to addressing relatively low tertiary attainment levels in Queensland (Qld Department of Education and Training, 2011). Unresolved issues from the meta-synthesis inform recommendations for future study, and will define the focus of my future doctoral thesis.

## 1.3 PURPOSES

As stated earlier, one outcome from the literature review reported in Chapter 2, is the need to examine the psychological and social influences impacting adult learners, rather than looking at this phenomenon from only one disciplinary perspective. Such a cross-disciplinary approach has yielded a more highly contextualised understanding of the cumulative effects of these factors. It has pointed to effective strategies and interventions that will have a positive impact on adult learner success. Situating the analysis of these influences in the meta-context of the adult learner's life revealed that the individual's persistence and likely educational outcomes were moderated by a range of experiences and circumstances to shape the adult learner's educational outcomes. These moderating circumstances and interventions are grouped and analysed according to the classifications and theories of several key authors. The contributing theoretical frameworks that helped form the descriptive meta-synthesis are outlined here (See Table 1.2). The summary presented here is not comprehensive, but illuminates some primary thinkers, and their contributions to this area of investigation. The purpose of utilising them in this review is not to critically analyse the educational theories in depth, but to briefly describe them and apply their principles to the investigative methodology of the descriptive meta-synthesis.

Table 1.2

*Summary of contributing theoretical frameworks utilised in the descriptive meta-synthesis*

| Summary of contributing theoretical frameworks utilised in the descriptive meta-synthesis | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Influence or intervention** | Classification | | | Theorists | Contribution to the analysis |
| | Internal | External | Structural | | |
| **Motivation to re-engage in study** | x | | | Bandura De Vito Goto & Martin | Motivation may include: the desire to improve one's-self; the desire to master skills; the desire provide for one's family/loved ones, or the desire to be a role model for one's children or peers |
| **Self-efficacy** | x | | | Bandura | Influence of phenomena on success examined |
| **Andragogy** | | | x | Knowles | Design and delivery of educational programs as a positive influence on adult learner outcomes |
| **Integration into college life** | x | | x | Tinto | Influence on success and timing of interventions to improve outcomes for adult learners |
| **Environmental support factors** | | x | | Bremer, Goto & Martin, Wolf, Cross | Support from family and friends as well as assistance from employers moderates barriers to success |
| **Structural support** | | | x | De Vito, Tinto, Giles, Kazis | Administrative and educational support strategies employed by institutions to assist adult learners |
| **Environmental barriers experienced** | | x | | Johnson, Kelly-Hall, Tinto, Deggs | Analysis of the cumulative impact of |

| Classification tools and conceptualisations | x | x | x | Cross | Provides a classifying structure to group analyse and compare the phenomena observed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

A detailed and critical descriptive analysis of the reviewed literature is offered which parallels the different theoretical approaches summarised in the table above. In this integrative methodology, potentially rival theoretical foundations and findings make iterative contributions to produce a meta-contextualised view of the experiences and interventions influencing adult learner success. This approach integrates perceived barriers for adult learners as well as interventions that increase access, participation and success for adult learners. The review is conducted and reported to answer the two research questions developed for the study. Those questions are:

1. How are adult learners conceptualised in the literature?

2. What structural and dispositional factors influence adult learners as they re-engage and persist through their post-compulsory educational journeys?

These barriers include both situational or structural barriers, that are extrinsic, and that include time pressures, work and family responsibilities and institutional barriers such as the availability and flexibility of course offerings. The second cluster of barriers are dispositional and intrinsic, and that include anxiety, guilt, study issues, unrealistic expectations and failing to adjust to university life.

## 1.4   SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH DESCRIBED

The descriptive meta-synthesis focused its attention on the situational and dispositional barriers and supporting influences reported in the findings of the included research. These barriers and supporting influences are summarised in the following figure.

## Situational Barriers

- Time pressures inc. work
- Family responsibilities
- Financial constraints & cost of courses
- Balancing multiple roles
- Institutional policies & entry requirements
- Availability & flexibility of course offerings
- Curriculum design and delivery methods

## Dispositional Barriers

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feelings of anxiety
- Feelings of guilt regarding taking time from family
- Adjusting to university
- Learning/study issues
- Unrealistic expectations
- Lack of energy

## Strategies to overcome Situational Barriers

- Pre-entry strategies inc. tertiary prep. courses
- Modifying admin. processes to suit adult learner cohorts
- Course strategies inc. selection and enrollment assistance
- Employer valuing further/continuing study
- Flexibility in work hours & study options
- Study a component of annual reviews and discussion at work
- Financial strategies; Gov't, Employer, Institute
- Multiple role strategies & effective time-management
- Child care assistance

## Strategies to overcome Dispositional Barriers

- Emotional/psychological support/empathy from network
- Coping strategies developed by individual
- Communication strategies to access information and advocate for themselves
- Seeking rolemodels or mentors
- Joining peer groups
- Attitudinal strategies

*Figure 1.2.* Barriers and supporting influences identified in the review.

An initial review of the globally sourced literature encompassed a range of methodological approaches and theoretical constructs, which are described and evaluated in Chapter 2. The Australian materials include Government policies and initiatives, as well as research investigations relating specifically to the experiences of adult learners in a local context.

Bandura's social cognitive theory of human agency (2001) was the theoretical framework that helped form the focus of the analysis presented here. The theory calls on researchers to situate the micro view of cognition within a macro view of the subject's environment. The key premise of Bandura's theory that directed this review was that the values and beliefs of adult learners relating to their studies are embedded in their self-concept and the environmental, familial and cultural contexts of the individual participant. Furthermore, adult learner's educational experiences, behaviours and outcomes must be examined in the context of this complex interaction. This approach was applied in the practice of analysing the findings of each individual study in order to compare themes across papers and determine how the studies were related. This allowed the creation of new understandings of the phenomena and synthesise themes emerging from the findings of the combined studies.

The research focused on qualitative studies that discuss the attitudes and experiences of the participants in the context of their lives and the structural features of the institutions they attended, which parallels Bandura's central premise. The literature review examined the negative experiences that adult learners encountered and overcame to succeed in their learning, with a holistic focus on the interaction of these influences in the lives of the adult learners. The environmental contexts described above, and in Bandura's theory, refer to the sum of the personal, social, work, and educational milieus in which the adult learner exists and studies. These environmental contexts were identified in each study to situate the findings reported, within the theoretical foundation of the review. Bandura's theoretical framework was also used as a lens through which to view articles under consideration for inclusion in this review. Where Bandura's principles were applied in the literature in qualitative case studies, such as those involving semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and data collected through social media, blogs, and online communications with the participants, these articles were included. Furthermore, limiting the review to qualitative studies has provided a manageable volume of data to analyse and report.

One final note must be made regarding the decision to eliminate the examination of gender, race and low SES as barriers to access and educational success in the synthesis. Notwithstanding, these characteristics are clearly significant in contributing to the experience of adult learners as they re-engage and persist through their studies yet will be examined in the analysis and discussion only as they arise in the context of the broader synthesis. Treating them as major themes would expand the study beyond the scope proposed for this thesis for the topics themselves could well form the basis of individual syntheses in the future.

## 1.5   THESIS OUTLINE

This descriptive meta-synthesis was developed in a two-stage process that included a literature review reported in Chapter 2 which was conducted to frame the terms of reference of the study and the synthesis itself reported in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 brings together the findings of the expanded review to generate a descriptive statement of the research phenomena. The findings reported in Chapter 4 are presented in the context of the two stated research questions so that the discussion is aligned with resolving those questions. The findings of the studies have been presented under the headings of the situational and dispositional barriers, and supporting strategies described in the statement of the research questions. For consistency these headings will be used in the synthesis presented in Chapter 5 also.

The descriptive meta-synthesis is organised into five chapters. The current chapter describes the background of the research from the perspective of the political and economic benefits of improving outcomes for adult learners, as well in terms of the existing field of study into the experiences of adult learners. This is followed by a discussion of the scope and focus of the review, including a summary of the theoretical foundations used to conduct the review, and a statement of the two research questions. The classifications of factors used to analyse the results of the review are presented, and finally, there is a brief description and justification of the methodology used for the study. Descriptive meta-synthesis is addressed, and the application of the methodology for this study is explained.

Chapter 2 contains the literature review. This review was conducted to reveal the broad scope of the research directions explored in the included literature. Themes included the theoretical constructs that framed the research, and the key and common

findings presented in the studies were identified and critically analysed. The literature review also served to provide background information regarding the range of key constructs and methodologies used in the included studies. The review identified the seminal work of Knowles (1970); Bandura (1993); DeVito (2010); Tinto (1975); Kazis (2007); Kuh (2008); Gotto & Martin (2009) and Kenner & Weinerman (2011) as significant in describing the factors influencing adult learner success. The chapter gives a global perspective on the research examining the structural and dispositional experienced by adult learners in post-compulsory education. The Chapter critically analyses the findings of the included studies to demonstrate gaps in the literature reviewed. These identified gaps relate to Knowles' theory of adult learning, Bandura's theory of human agency, and Gotto & Martin's (2009) exhortation to situate studies in a meta-contextual view of the adult learner rather than examining the phenomena in isolation. Further discussion addresses opportunities to generate new knowledge from synthesising the existing threads into an integrated view of the structural and dispositional influences experienced by adult learners in their educational journeys.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology of the study. Descriptive meta-synthesis is described both in terms of its utility and also in terms of the affordances to create "new knowledge" by synthesising existing research findings in ways that extend beyond the scope of the original studies.

After conducting the expanded review of the literature, Chapter 4 presents the results from the descriptive meta-synthesis. Chapter 4 follows a similar structure as Chapter 2 in investigating and critically analysing the key constructs, theories and findings from the studies. These elements are: adult learners conceptualised; re-engaging in learning: motivation and self-efficacy; design and delivery of educational content; the benefits of 'integration into college life' in engaging adult learners and improving their educational outcomes; environmental support factors examined – family, social and workplace support; identified environmental barriers to success for adult learners and, juxtaposing individual and institutional concepts of success for adult learners.

Chapter 5 presents the discussion of the research findings. The chapter includes a discussion of the implications of the synthesis to policy and practice. It concludes with a section on the limitations of the descriptive meta-synthesis, and recommendations for future studies to examine the relative strengths of the influences that hinder or support adult learners during their post-compulsory educational

journeys. The topics discussed are: articulating the integrated theory of persistence to success for adult learners; a meta-contextual view of the adult learner in study; pre-engagement: self-efficacy, motivators, personal and structural supports [or barriers]; engagement and the first semester; persistence to success beyond the first year of study; final thoughts and implications for practice and suggestions for further research. Chapter 2 follows with the presentation of the literature review.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter begins with a historical background (section 2.1) and reviews literature on the following topics: Themes identified in the literature (section 2.2) which describes the 7 key themes emerging from the review; Silences and concerns raised in the literature (section 2.3) which describes the limitations of the studies identified by the review. Section 4 highlights the implications from the literature and develops the conceptual framework for the study.

## 2.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Many studies have been conducted over recent decades focusing broadly on areas concerning the characteristics of adult learners and the internal or psychological, structural, and environmental factors they face when re-engaging in post-compulsory education. Since the seminal work of Knowles in the 1970s, which set the scene for examining the unique characteristics and needs of adult learners, a significant body of research has been conducted and is available for scholars and practitioners to use in the development of educational programs and teaching practice (Knowles, 1970; Knowles & Bard, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Knowles, Holton Iii, & Swanson, 2012). More than 80% of the results returned from the search of the literature were from studies and reports from the year 2003 onwards. Such a volume of quality work allowed this review to focus primarily on research conducted since that time with earlier material included where deemed appropriate.

The work of Knowles is significant to this study because he articulated the principle of andragogy, which sees adult learners as having different characteristics to inquiry than children (Knowles, 1970; Knowles & Bard, 1984; Knowles et al., 1998; Knowles et al., 2012). The implications of these differences to teaching and learning were described from a humanistic orientation that proposed self-actualisation as the prime objective of adult learning. The findings indicate that the objective of educators was seen primarily to facilitate adult learners to achieve their full potential as intellectual beings.

Knowles described six assumptions about adults as learners:

1.  In terms of their self-concept, adults tend to see themselves as more responsible, self-directed, and independent.

2.  They have a larger, more diverse stock of knowledge and experience to draw from.

3.  Their readiness to learn is based on developmental and real-life responsibilities.

4.  Their orientation to learning is most often problem-centered and relevant to their current life situation.

5.  They have a stronger need to know the reasons for learning something.

6.  They tend to be more internally motivated.

(Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, 2004)

The application of these principles to the practice of teaching has broad appeal in terms of both understanding the differences between adult learners and their younger counterparts as well as conceptualising a contextualised approach to the design and delivery of programs that better meet the needs of adult learners. The implications of Knowles' principles to the observable characteristics of adult learners are illustrated in the following table which examines each principle in terms of contemporary experience and their relationship to teaching practice (See Table 2.1).

Table 2.1

*A contemporary view of Knowles' principles of adult learning – author's original concepts*

| A contemporary view of Knowles' principles of adult learning | | |
|---|---|---|
| Knowles' principles | Contemporary expression | Implications to teaching practice |
| In terms of their self-concept, adults tend to see themselves as more responsible, self-directed, and independent | They aren't reliant on others to direct their learning, they have a personal need to be involved in mapping their own educational journey | Adult learners must have the opportunity to engage in the design of the learning process including methodologies and entry and exit points and the pace of progress |
| They have a larger, more diverse stock of knowledge and experience to draw from. | Their personal and work histories provide a wealth of knowledge and context to the learning process and environment which must be recognised in the teaching practice | Scaffolding is important for adult learners as well as strategies that allow them to share their experience and knowledge and formally recognise the skills and knowledge acquired where they can be mapped to program or course requirements |
| Their readiness to learn is based on developmental and real-life responsibilities | Their participation is underpinned by the relevance of the program to their individual needs and must be appropriate to their current demands for time and convenience | Teaching practice must allow for theories and concepts to relate to contemporary real-life experiences and issues that adult learners to achieve their objectives |
| Their orientation to learning is most often problem-centered and relevant to their current life situation. | They are results orientated and will not persist if they perceive the program will not meet their needs or objectives in studying | New knowledge must be able to be applied to real-life issues to demonstrate relevance and must provide the opportunity to participate in problem-solving activities |
| They have a stronger need to know the reasons for learning something | They may demonstrate characteristics of scepticism and the need to be convinced of the value of concepts before committing to them | An orientation of theoretical concepts towards practical applications rather than a focus on broad theoretical constructs alone serves these needs better |
| They tend to be more internally motivated | They accept responsibility for their own learning achievements and the effort they contribute | Understanding their expectations from study and allowing debate and contradictory opinions to be discussed with respect and acknowledgement will encourage persistence |

These principles have informed the philosophical context of many of the studies examined in this review. The principles have guided both the analysis of the reported experiences of adult learners in the context of understanding their individual learner's perspective and in the sociocultural and structural contexts of family, community, work and institutional interactions.

### 2.1.1 Summary of search results returned

The total number of sources returned by selective database searches for this literature review was ninety-eight. Many of the results returned followed a similar structure that: defined the characteristics of the population studied; reported perceived barriers to successful completion of studies such as their individual attitudes, responsibilities and environmental/structural limiters; and identified strategies employed by populations including gender, racial, cultural and institutional variations to overcome those perceived barriers. These results were reduced to a smaller number of relevant references on the basis of several factors.

The reasons for excluding references returned in this search included redundancy and narrowness. The reasons for excluding references based on redundancy included cases where studies appeared to duplicate the focus of several previous studies without contributing new or challenging insights into how the reported phenome either contributed to or hindered the adult learners' persistence to success in their educational journeys. Studies were also excluded on the basis of the narrowness of the sample studied. In some studies the findings relating to one specific population studied may not reasonably be able to be applied to the population identified in the dissertation topic because the focus of the studies were groups identified as Hispanic, African-American students, 1st generation Asian immigrants, those with disabilities, and so forth. Several of the themes emerging in these studies such as pre-existing conditions of individual learners may impact their attitude to study or the various influences during initial engagement in study may contribute to persistence, may offer avenues for further research that are beyond the scope of this review in relation to understanding cultural norms relating to family responsibility and gender roles and learner's participation and success in post-compulsory study. These issues may have parallels and perhaps hold true in Australia, particularly where learner cohorts include Indigenous participants or migrants from the same cultures as these studies.

The total number of sources cited in this literature review was thus reduced to twenty-nine studies. These items were selected for their relevance to the thesis topic and the strength of their research based on: degree of currency (published in 2000 onwards), citations and references to common writers, and common theoretical constructs. The following figures (see Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3) summarise the characteristics of the references cited. The tables illustrate currency of the materials examined by indicating the numbers of artefacts from each of the years across the timeframe (see Figure 2.1) as well as describing the nature of the materials (see Figure 2.2) and the countries of origin for the materials (see Figure 2.3). Related literature covering foundation theories is not included in these three tables as although the principles informed the included studies they were not individually analysed in this literature review.
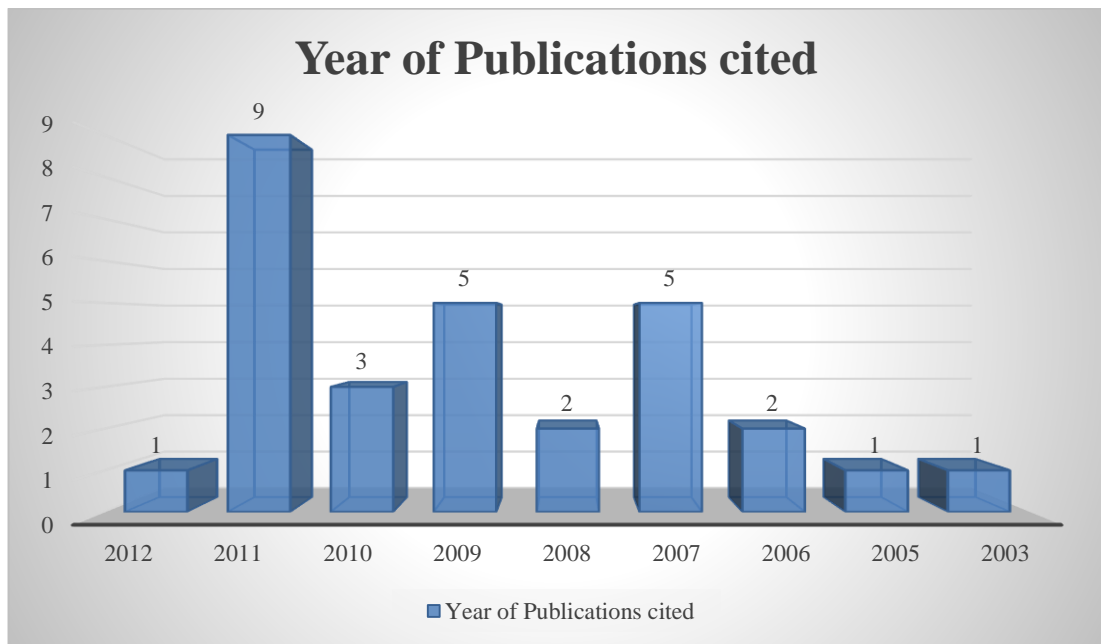


*Figure 2.1*. Year of publications cited in literature review.
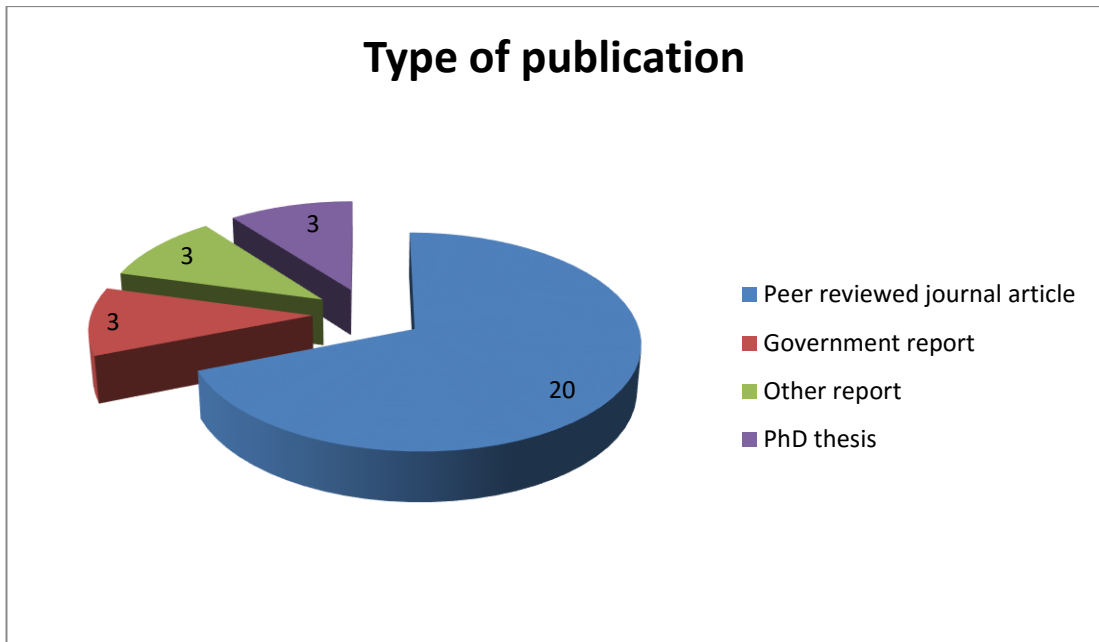
*Figure 2.2.* Articles classified by type of publication.
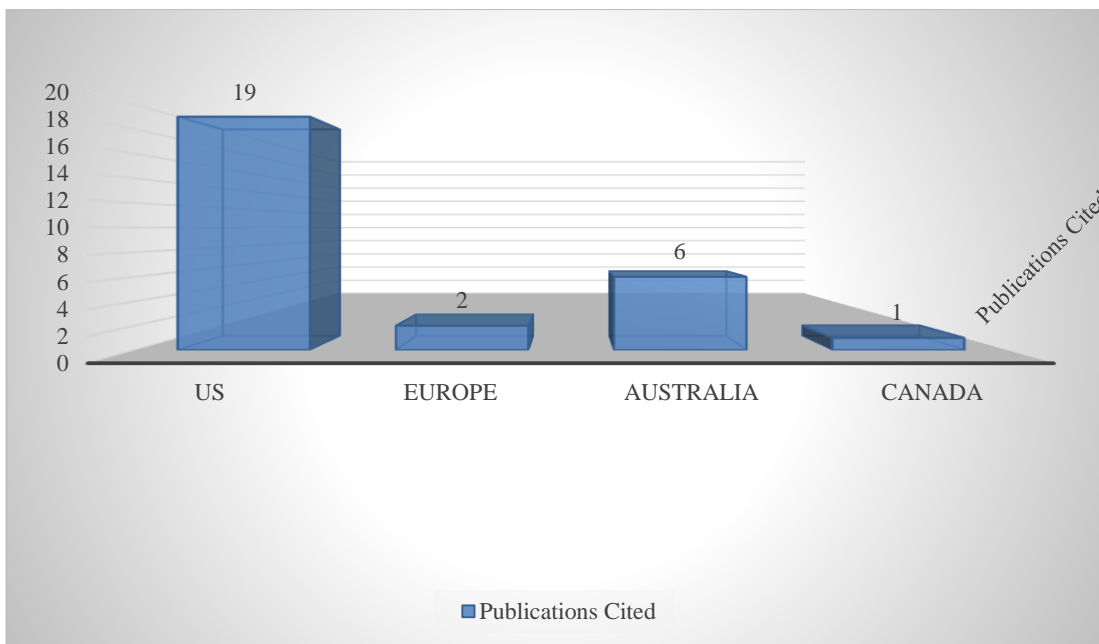


*Figure 2.3.* Summary of the references cited in this paper classified by country of origin.

This imbalance in the number of the publications reviewed is reflective of the broader literature available for study in this field. The implications of this imbalance are two-fold. Firstly, does this preponderance of literature from the USA represent a cultural or other bias that must be addressed? Does the location of the studies in the USA indicate the need for the research to be duplicated in other national and cultural contexts to broaden the understanding of the phenomena across regions and

populations? These issues are addressed in the following chapters. The results of the literature review are discussed in the following sections.

## 2.2 TOPIC 1: THEMES IDENTIFIED IN THE LITERATURE

Seven themes emerging from the literature were chosen for discussion in this review. During the initial screening of the articles returned, the main themes of each study were identified and tabulated to gain an overview of the key concepts being reported in this snapshot of the existing literature. The themes that occurred most frequently, or that were common to multiple research papers were identified and form the focus of this literature review. The seven identified themes or key concepts are conceptualising adult learners; the narrow focus of theoretical constructs employed in the reviewed literature resulting in a broad consistency of observations; the relationship between self-efficacy and adult learner resilience; concepts of success described from individual, societal and institutional perspectives; the individual motivations for adults to re-engage in study and their impact on resilience; perceived barriers to success for adult learners and observed support strategies that assisted adult learners to succeed. These same themes emerged in the expanded review also. Chapter four examined these factors in greater detail from the perspective of interaction of the experiences reported. These include the role of self-efficacy in success; integrating the principles of andragogy into the design and delivery of programs; the positive influence of integration into college life on success; environmental support factors assisting success; environmental barriers to success; the impact of time and timing on experiences and interventions and the cumulative effect of the adult learner's experiences in the meta-context of their life during study.

The findings of the research when viewed together, appear to indicate that the themes listed in the previous paragraph may combine over time to determine the educational outcomes for adult learners. No single report has posited such a unified theory of persistence to success. This hypothesis is indicated by viewing the articles analysed in the synthesis from a metacontextual perspective, and by placing the key theorists in a framework that seeks to illustrate the relationships between the findings of each individual study. This analysis of the individual theoretical constructs and the relationships that may exist between them was the basis for the framework presented in the synthesis. The observed relationships are detailed and summarised both in the narrative and the tables and figures included in the review. The themes identified in

this Literature review are described in the figure below. Each theme is briefly described in the paragraphs to follow so that the context of the literature review can be established.



*Figure 2.4.* Summary of identified themes from literature review.

In the literature much attention was given to defining "adult learners", as distinct from learners who have moved directly from secondary education to higher educational pursuits. Each study focused on specific characteristics that differentiate these adult learners, and in turn, significantly influenced their educational experiences. These definitions included characteristics such as age, educational achievement and outside responsibilities, as well as being employed full-time and having family responsibilities (Connell, 2008; Kazis, 2007; Wyatt, 2011). These characteristics are important because they differentiate adult learners from traditional full-time students coming directly from high school (Kazis, 2007). This distinction between the two categories of learners is the foundation upon which the need for this research is based.

Another commonality between the studies investigated was their utilisation of a narrow range of theoretical constructs to inform their research. The main theories referenced are summarised in the following table for illustrative purposes (See Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

*Theoretic concepts commonly utilised in this literature review*

| Theorist | Conceptualisation |
|---|---|
| **Knowles** | Knowles (1974) theory of andragogy – 4 characteristics of adult learners that impact their interactions and engagement in educational pursuits<br>Later:<br>According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998), the six principles of andragogy - Knowles believed individual learner differences, situational differences, and goals and purposes of learning are factors that affect adult learning |
| **Bandura** | Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory argues that self-efficacy mediates the influence of other variables that predict academic achievement |
| **Astin** | Astin's (1993) input-environment-output (I-E-O) categories:<br>Input refers to the characteristics that students bring with them to college, such as gender and academic preparation.<br>Environment refers to the student's actual experiences (on or off campus) while they are in college.<br>Output refers to educational outcomes, such as persistence, educational goal attainment, and degree completion. |
| **Tinto** | Vincent Tinto's model (1993).<br>The model presents a series of causal factors related in a longitudinal process. Student attributes and family background affect initial levels of commitment to goals and the institution. These in turn affect academic performance and interaction with peers and faculty, which in turn lead a student to be more or less "integrated" into the academic and social systems of the institution |

Although a number of theories shaped these studies, a common feature was the focus on examining the interplay of external, structural influences (range and availability of courses; sense of community; institutional support), and the attitudes or expectations that the learners brought to their educational journey. These barriers to further education may be institutional, informational, situational, or psychological - including goal setting, motivation, and self-efficacy in relation to the social context of the individual adult learner (Deggs 2007; Goto & Martin 2009).

Educational "success" was also investigated as a concept in the literature, in works such as studies by (Bremer, Hirschy, & Castellano, 2011) who proposed the following definitions of success for adult learners:

- Personal educational goal attainment,

- Completion of a degree or other credential and

- Institutions retaining students to completion.

Traditional perceptions of success as being the achievement of an academic award were challenged in response to the "drivers" for study that learners described. These included gender based observed drivers such as:

- For women - more about achieving balance in their lives, career and relationships.

- For men - more about acquisition of credentials, status, financial gains (Dyke & Murphy, 2006)

The impact these reported drivers had on the ability of learners to re-engage and persist in their studies towards their goals was examined in the studies cited above and the findings are reported later in this chapter.

The studies reviewed focused on the unique barriers faced by adult learners as a result of their position in life, and the internal and external factors influencing their educational journeys. Some studies such as those by Prevatt et al (2011); Goto & Martin (2009) and Kazis (2007) described the role of: general academic skills, internal motivation/confidence, perceived instructor efficacy, external motivation/future career decidedness, personal adjustment, external motivation, goal setting, motivation, and self-efficacy in relation to social context in creating perceived barriers to educational success for adult learners.

Equal space was given to reporting the factors that allowed adult learners to overcome those perceived barriers, and to succeed in their educational pursuits. Influencing factors such as involvement, engagement, and integration in college life; family support, self-concept; family identity; social network; satisfaction with institution were identified as contributing to adult learner persistence. The common themes here were consistent in many of the studies, either in direct responses from participants or as recommendations at the end of the studies (Bremer, Hirschy, & Castellano, 2011; Connell, 2008a; Kazis, 2007).

Finally, this review discusses the limitations of the included studies and the recommendations for further research that were outlined in the literature reviewed. These recommendations have clear application to the following descriptive metasynthesis, as well as any other future research on improving outcomes for adult learners that others may pursue. The seven identified themes identified above are examined individually in the remainder of this chapter. The seven identified themes are:

1. conceptualising adult learners;

2. the narrow focus of theoretical constructs employed in the reviewed literature resulting in a broad consistency of observations;

3. the relationship between self-efficacy and adult learner resilience;

4. concepts of success described from individual, societal and institutional perspectives;

5. the individual motivations for adults to re-engage in study and their impact on resilience;

6. perceived barriers to success for adult learners and

7. observed support strategies that assisted adult learners to succeed.

### 2.2.1 Definitions of adult learners.

For the purposes of this discussion adult learners are characterised as learners over the age of 24 who have broad responsibilities beyond their study (such as undergraduate degree or vocational program), and who have had at least one job or short career path of perhaps 2 – 3 years, prior to re-engaging in study (Connel, 2008a; Kazis, 2007). This characterisation has been selected for two reasons. Firstly, it

represents a distillation of the various arguments about to be presented. The conceptualisation of adult learners in the literature covers a wide range of factors, experiences and contexts in which adult learners are situated and these descriptions are rooted in both the national or cultural milieu of the learners and the setting of the research presented. Secondly, this characterisation aligns with common practice in classifying adult learners in the Queensland VET system. Regardless of the individual differences these adult learners exhibited, they have each of the three identified characteristics in common. The following section will describe the various definitions of adult learners found in the literature.

The definitions of adult learners in the research reviewed here included a range of characteristics from 'age' to 'educational achievement' and 'outside responsibilities' (Connell, 2008; Kazis, 2007). The number of years since the research participants had completed their previous study and current employment status were also features of the definitions discussed below. Connell (2008) developed a discussion of what constituted 'adult learners'. The definition although complex, sought to capture the diverse roles and influences shaping the experience of this group of learners: "Adult learners typically have a multitude of roles in addition to that of a traditional student. They may be employed full-time, have family responsibilities and be involved in volunteer activities" (Connell, 2008a, p. 8).

Connell also proposed an original third category of learners that she saw emerging. It was proposed that these learners were falling between traditional college students and adult learners and shared the characteristics of both. These learners were named 'adult cognates' and their emergence was attributed to changing economic conditions requiring students to work more hours due to higher educational costs as well as demographic shifts resulting in students taking responsibility for household duties for their parents. Connell reported: "…Similar to adult learners, the cognates were reported as also working with household commitments, single parent issues, and other responsibilities – they were not merely attending university" (Connell, 2008a, p. 272).

In summary, the study observed that adult learners could be better described in terms of their varied life experiences rather than the more common view of adult learners as students who have been: "…out of high school for two years, have completed at least Grade 10, and are at least 20 years of age..." (Connell, 2008a p.

275).  This insight is quite unique in the literature reviewed in that it recognises that adult learners cannot be adequately defined by a single factor such as the attainment of an arbitrary age, or the family or employment status of the individual.   The value in these findings is that it suggests a transition from one state to another rather than focussing on a point in time or a checklist of characteristics to define a learner as 'adult' and not 'traditional'.  This concept and its implications in teaching practice will be developed in the meta-synthesis to follow.

The broader aspects of Connell's definition find common threads in the reviewed literature and are supported in studies by Kenny, Kidd et al. (2011) and Wyatt (2011). Deggs articulated similar descriptions in his 2001 report, where adult learners were defined in terms of delayed enrolment due to employment.  Other features of adult learners described by Deggs also aligned with Connell's view.  Two examples were adult learners having dependents other than a spouse, as well as typically being financially independent.  A significant variation of this theme was the observation that many adult learners featured in this study had not obtained a standard high school diploma (Deggs, 2011).  This observation is paralleled in many studies that focused on 'disadvantaged'' or 'marginalised' adult learners where a range of socio-economic factors were seen to contribute to the difficulties that the participants faced.  Kazis and colleagues took a different view in 2007 by defining adult learners as: "Students over age twenty-four…" (Kazis, 2007, p. 2).

Findings of this study (Kazis, 2007, p. 2) defining adult learners as over twenty-four years of age represents a significant departure from other reviewed studies, which chose to define adult learners as over either twenty or twenty-one years of age.  The notion of using twenty-one as a benchmark may be consistent with cultural views of adulthood being achieved at that age, but is inconsistent with legal definitions in Australia and elsewhere as having attained eighteen years of age.  The seemingly arbitrary selection of age twenty-four as the milestone for 'adulthood' when describing learners is perhaps both conservative and practical in that it allows for the other common characteristics of adult learners to be acquired: "…financially independent, work part time or full time, have dependents, and must juggle many responsibilities with school" (Kazis, 2007, p. 2).

A further qualification proposed by Kazis' definition is that adult learners often were "employees who study" and who "…tend to be older, work more, attend school

less, and have family responsibilities, compared to their peers whose primary activity was being a student" (Kazis, R. et al., 2007, p. 9). Findings by Kazis and colleagues indicating the use of age 24 as the milestone certainly accommodates the view that adult learners have dependents and family responsibilities, as well as being financially independent, but this is not explicitly stated in the report and as such remains unresolved and may require further justification. Wyatt posits a similar view, which goes even further, in the findings of her 2011 paper. In this report Wyatt simply defined adult learners as "Non-traditional Students aged 25 and above" (Wyatt, 2011, p. 10). These non-traditional students were reported to comprise approximately 43% of all college students in the United States (Kazis, 2007). Statistically at least, this figure lends credibility to using such a definition, but two factors suggest rejecting this statement as an operational definition for adult learners. Firstly, the phrase 'non-traditional students aged twenty-five and above' is very general, and does not reflect the multiple characteristics that other researchers have found to significantly influence adult learners. Secondly, the study does not indicate that similar statistical trends or definitions might be applicable in contexts other than the United States.

Finally, a contemporary Australian study has placed their definition of adult learners in a similar space to the researchers discussed above. Kenny and colleagues in the findings of their 2011 journal article described Mature Age Students[2]:

> Within the vocational education and training (VET) and university sectors, mature age students are most commonly defined as over 21 years of age…Mature age students have generally experienced at least one job or career pathway during the time since leaving secondary school and many have dependent children and major financial responsibilities (Kenny et al., 2011, p. 107).

This definition is particularly relevant to my research as it specifically addresses the educational milieu in which I work and parallels the findings of other studies from different national educational systems. This consistency in approaches lends credence to the definition I have adopted for the purposes of this study.

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[2] In the Australian and Queensland context 'Adult Learners' are commonly referred to as 'Mature Age Students" in both policy and research. Where the narrative relates to local experiences the term mature age students will be used although generally in this thesis the more common term of adult learner will be employed.

The findings further indicated that mature age students were defined by their shared experience of balancing study, finances and family responsibilities. This definition closely parallels the most frequently cited definition articulated by Kazis and colleagues (Kazis, et al., 2007). Kenny's definition has other virtues in that it takes a holistic view of the learner in the context of their personal, educational and employment context in an Australian setting.

A significant weakness in the literature reviewed is that many of the definitions of adult learners were crafted from the specific circumstances of the subject populations in the individual studies (See, for example: Kuh 2009b). This context-centric approach to defining the characteristics of adult learners and why their differences from traditional students are significant is a key failure of the studies. The variation in describing adult learners casts doubt on the ability of the findings of these studies to be applied in other contexts and replicated in broader studies or other national and cultural milieus. Clearly defining adult learners so that their specific needs and experiences can be examined and understood is essential and warrants further clarification. However, variations in definitions do not reduce the importance of attempting to identify the similarities of these learners, or to attempt to apply the broad commonalities they share to future studies in different contexts. Specific attention is given to this matter in the synthesis to follow.

### 2.2.2 Theoretical constructs employed in the studies reviewed

According to Kezar's 2006 paper (as cited in Bremer, 2011), studies employ theoretical constructs and models "…to understand, explain and predict phenomena" (Bremer et al., 2011 p. 1). The studies reviewed here can be grouped together by five discreet theoretical constructs to examine the phenomena observed. These theories were used to understand and predict how adult learners may overcome the barriers to educational success they experienced during their learning journey. The studies included applying the aforementioned seminal work of Knowles to focus on how incorporating the principles of adult learning in the learning experience can help adult learners to overcome their perceived barriers to success. For example, De Vito (2010), reported that "…individual learner differences, situational differences, and goals and purposes of learning are factors that affect adult learning" (De Vito, 2010 p.4). The study cited the principles as: (1) The learner's need to know; (2) Self-concept of the

learner; (3) Prior experience of the learner; (4) Readiness to learn; (5) Orientation to learning; and (6) Motivation to learn.

De Vito's (2010) approach was mirrored by the findings of Kenner and Weinerman (2011) who applied Knowles' earlier principles to inform strategies for developing course materials that would better suit the needs of adult learners in a higher education context. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) incorporated theories from organisational development practitioners from the 50's and 60's as well as Knowles and Schraw and Moshman's (1995) metacognitive frameworks to analyse the experiences of adult learners as they re-integrated into study. The findings of the study moved from theory to practice concluding that developmental educators would need to develop strategies that incorporated principles of andragogy (Knowles' principles of adult learning discussed above), so that adult learners could see the benefit of learning rather than just another box to check on the way to achieving their true goals (Goto & Martin, 2009).

The findings indicate that when a learning program fails to connect with the adult learner's experience or context in life the risk of disengaging from study is significantly increased. Findings from Schraw and Moshman's (1995) study failed to develop this point or attempt to understand how significant this affect might be in the learner's resilience or tendency to drop out of study. The opportunity therefore remains to further investigate the role of making these connections in developing the adult learner's resilience.

Findings from DeVito's (2011) study went beyond the results of Kenner and Weinerman by recognising the tensions between personal and educational pressures and how the resulting conflicts might be a barrier to success for adult learners. DeVito acknowledged in the findings that moderating those personal factors was beyond the scope of institutions, but that they could contribute to the support of adult learners through the range and availability of courses offered and the provision of a range of services that may help to reduce the competition between these obligations. The services suggested by the study included admission processes, academic and financial aid availability and advice, registration, and access to the bookstore. The limitation here is that DeVito (2011) has focused on a single variable – the structural environment of the college – which influences the learner's ability to overcome the barriers they face without examining the other factors contributing to or moderating those barriers.

The findings of the studies discussed here indicate that such structural support factors cannot operate in isolation to assist learners to overcome their difficulties (For example, Wolf-Wendel, 2009; Wyatt, 2011). The implication of these findings is that the best academic support programs developed, if offered on-campus during normal operating hours for example, cannot help adults who are working or who have responsibilities for children, partners or others during those times. This investigation of effects and interventions in isolation from the meta-context of the adult learner's life is the single greatest failing in the literature reviewed here, and suggests a research approach that can integrate the findings of multiple studies with wide foci in order to develop an holistic view of the interactions shaping the experience and success, or otherwise, of adult learners.

Bandura's social cognitive theory of human agency (1993) was used by a number of theorists to interpret the findings of their research (Bremer et al., 2011; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kirk, Keith, & Edwin, 2009; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Bandura expounded the view that psychological factors influence how students respond to the barriers to educational success:

> …There are three different levels at which perceived self-efficacy operates as an important contributor to academic development. Students' beliefs in their efficacy to regulate their own learning and to master academic activities determine their aspirations, level of motivation, and academic accomplishments. (Bandura, 1993, p. 117)

This conceptualisation is useful in understanding how attitudes to study and self-belief combine to affect motivation during study and the individual adult learner's resilience in the face of perceived obstacles to their educational success.

In these studies, phenomena were examined in terms of the way a person's self-efficacy, that is, the concept of one's ability to succeed based on life-long experience, moderated the influence of other factors that impacted success or the overcoming of barriers to success. For example the findings of Goto and Martin (2009) indicated goal setting, motivation, and self-efficacy must be examined in relation to the social context of the learner. The study reported that barriers to further education may be institutional, informational, situational, or psychological, and that self-esteem and locus of control strongly influence how adults perceive their ability to succeed in their

studies. Finally, the study concluded that goal setting, motivation, and self-efficacy influence the ways that adults approach various types of barriers.

Goto & Martin's (2009) approach recognised the effect that experiences of success and failure during an adult's life would have in shaping their attitudes and responses to new educational challenges. This idea of influences having an effect over time was also utilised and expanded by Tinto in his work, which focused on the longitudinal effect of factors on the learner's attitude and resilience in their studies. Tinto is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

The strength of the research by Goto and Martin (2009) over similar studies by researchers using Knowles as their starting point comes from their recommendation to place the educational experiences of the adult learners in the metacontext of their lives including their families, peer groups and work environments, to understand the dynamics at play. The work of Goto and Martin has clear advantages over the other studies reviewed in that their approach acknowledges the need to examine the interplay of these psychological and structural influences in determining how adult learners build motivation and self-efficacy and form education-related goals.

An alternative theoretical construct developed by Tinto (1975, 1993) was central to two contemporary studies (Bremer et al., 2011; Nash, 2005). The model presented a series of causal factors related in a longitudinal process. This model proposed that learners' tendency to drop out or persist in study is shaped by the interaction of individual, academic, and social experiences over a period of time. The model further proposed that a learner's ability to integrate into the academic and social milieu at college has a compensatory effect to enhance the likelihood of success (Bremer et al., 2011). Tinto later revised his theory to recognise the importance of a student's financial resources and the role communities external to the institution (e.g., family, work, and neighbourhood) play in students' decisions to persist or depart from studies (Bremer et al., 2011).

Bremer, Hirschy, and colleagues, although discussing Tinto's (1975) model extensively through their paper, contended that the value of Tinto's model in understanding the decisions adult learners make regarding persisting or dropping out of study may be unproven, "…the explanatory power of Tinto's theory remains an open research question" (Bremer et al., 2011 para. 14) Tinto's (1975) original work applied Durkheim's (1953) theory of suicide to drop-out behaviour and emphasised individual

characteristics and dispositions, such as educational expectations, academic motivation, and goal commitment as factors influencing educational persistence or the tendency to dropout (Durkheim, 1974; Tinto, 1975).

Bremer, Hirschy et al. (2004) cited Braxton and colleagues (1997) review of empirical tests of Tinto's original (1975) model to report that some of Tinto's proposals may not transfer into other educational contexts. The main criticism was that Tinto's model was based on the experiences of traditional students in 4-year, residential institutions, and that these findings might not translate to other types of colleges such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) students, and students seeking academic majors at 2-year institutions. As a result, Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon (2004) proposed a modified model that incorporated the learner's characteristics upon entering study as well as the internal and external environments such as the sense of self of the learner and the broader college environment, in which the study took place to analyse the decisions taken by adult learners to persist in study. This untested model is of particular interest in the context of this current study, as the following meta-synthesis examines each of these factors influencing adult learners pursuing academic and vocational education studies.

An important contribution to this field of inquiry was Astin's (1993) input-environment-output (I-E-O) categories to group and analyse observed influencing factors impacting on adult learners' decisions. This model is significant because it is from one of the few studies that help to explain how the three identified factors combine to impact the learner's journey. The categories are described as 'input', 'environment', and 'output'. Input includes the sum of experiences and attitudes that adults bring with them to their educational journey, which shape their experience of learning. Environment includes the learner's experiences during learning, both on and off campus. Finally, output refers to observable outcomes of the learning process, such as persistence to attain, and achievement of, qualifications. The model seeks to understand how these interacting variables contribute to student attrition and develops a model for engagement and success related to career and technical education learners. The diagram reproduced below seeks to demonstrate how the two influencing factors of input and environment interact with each other to produce the observed output for the individual learner (See Figure 2.5).
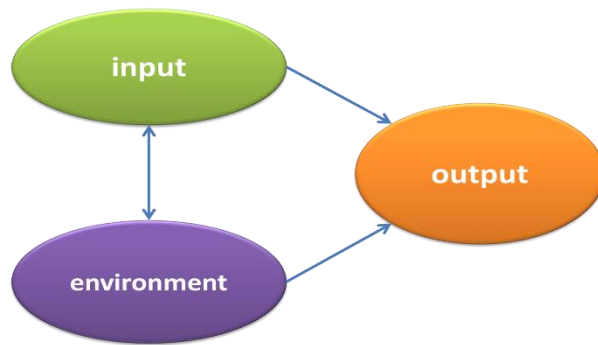
*Figure 2.5*. Astin's I-E-O Model. Adapted from (Astin, 1991).

A second descriptive representation of this relationship illustrating the factors themselves was developed by Soichiro Aihara in her 2011 paper (Aihara, 2011), and is presented here (See Figure 2.6).
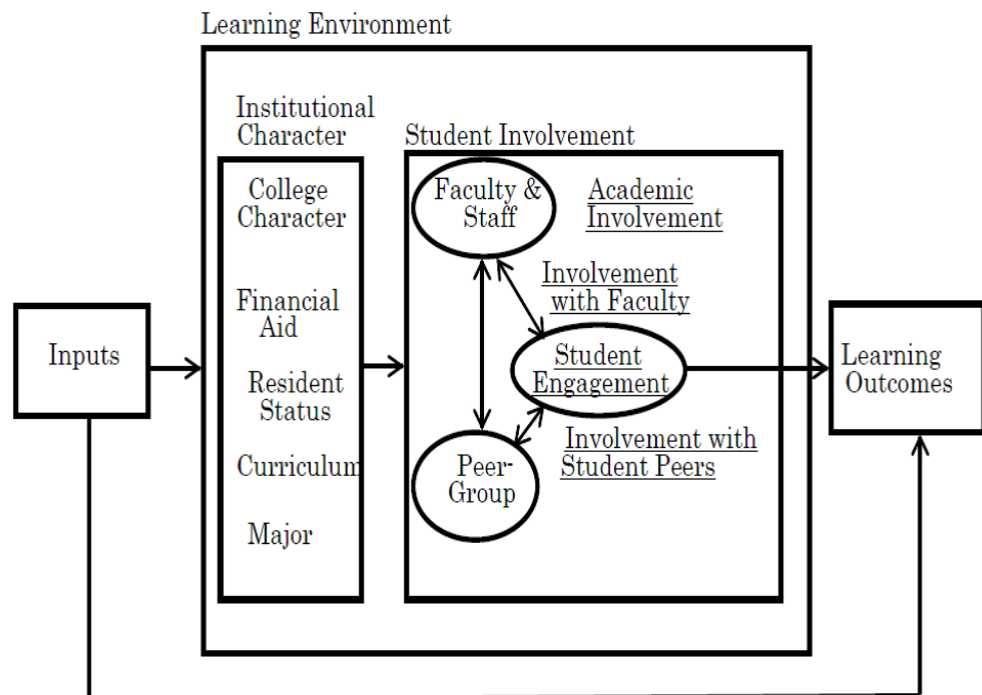


*Figure 2.6*. Conceptual frameworks for Astin's I-E-O Model. Reproduced from (Aihara, 2001).

Inputs in this model presented in Figure 2.6, included a wide range of complex characteristics and experiences from gender, age, race, family situation, secondary educational achievement, and attendance patterns at college. The learning environment, which is well defined in the conceptual model, includes all of Astin's key factors. This model is particularly relevant to integrated studies as it also incorporates the ideas from Tinto's work, which put student integration into the social

and academic life of the college community at the centre of developing resilience in students at the beginning of their studies. This proposition – that developing a sense of shared or aligned values and ambitions with peers and the academy helps the learner to overcome the difficulties faced during their studies – demands further investigation and will be the subject of a section in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Learning outcomes are characterised by grade, satisfaction, employment and income measures, as well as cognitive development and changed values and behaviours (Aihara, 2011). There are implications in these findings for the development of both academic and social programs within institutions that can target learners in the first semester of study. Such programs would seek to engender a sense of belonging and support that can powerfully influence the individual's ability to overcome the challenges they face in the first months of their journey (Tinto, 1975, Tinto, 1993).

One significant criticism of this very informative work is found in the statement by the author that the application of the model is easily understood and operationalised in research only when it addresses the observable behaviours of the subject population and becomes complicated and difficult to operationalise when the cognitive and emotional aspects of the students are added to the study (Aihara, 2011). This reliance on quantitative data analysis surely must have left much of the rich experiential information that would explain why behaviours were manifested unanswered by the study.

Another important construct discussed in the literature is that of Lepani's 1995 description of transformational learning (as cited in Willans and Seary, 2007). This concept offers much to this field of study in that it recognised the importance of taking a longitudinal view of a learner's beliefs and attitudes because they may change over time as a result of their experiences (Lepani, 1995). Therefore, an adult learner's ability to overcome their perceived barriers and succeed in their educational journey may be moderated either positively or negatively as a result of their self-reflexivity.

Integrating Tinto and Lepani's theories might offer some insight into the complex role that time and timing play in the development of resilience in adult learners from the point they re-engage in study through to the conclusion of their time in academy. The timing of experiences and interventions as a focus of study was not widely represented in the material included in this literature review and remains an opportunity for further investigation.

An analysis of the experience of adult learners as they returned to the formal learning context was conducted by Willans and Seary (2007) in their Australian study. The study utilised Cranton's (2002) phases of perspective to illustrate how a small group of adult learners changed their perspectives about themselves as they progressed through their educational journey (Cranton, 2002). Willans and Seary drew on Lepani's (1995) view of transformational learning in setting the scene for the theoretical construct used in their study: "…, learning that is transformative empowers learners to challenge and change their worldviews and prepares them to face new opportunities as they overcome their difficulties and disadvantages" (Willans & Seary, 2007, p. 441). The authors also discussed Cranton's 2003 theory which describes 'perspective transformation' as: "…an individual's revision of a meaning perspective or a worldview as a result of critical self-reflection and discourse" (Willans & Seary, 2007, p. 442)

Willans and Seary discussed the seven phases in the perspective transformation process and investigated how those elements, when incorporated into a course of study, could overcome the adult learners' perceived barriers to success. The authors emphasised the importance of integrating opportunities for self-reflection in the educational process to facilitate this transformational change.

### 2.2.3 Integrating the elements of the theoretical constructs used

There is a clear preponderance of evidence in the literature reviewed to suggest the need for the development of an integrated approach to the study of the barriers, and strategies to overcome the barriers to success among adult learners, in a way that considers the total range of influencing factors experienced by the adult learner over time. Such an approach would have taxed the resources and time constraints of many researchers and this may explain the lack of such studies in the literature. The common view held by all studies reviewed here is that adult learners bring with them a range of perceptions and pre-dispositions to success that influences their re-engagement with post-compulsory education. Further, their personal, institutional and work environments have a significant impact on their ability to persist and succeed in their educational journeys.

A synthesis of the theories above has led to the following diagrammatic representation, which I propose as a summary of my initial analysis of the theoretical constructs used in the literature (See Figure 2.7).
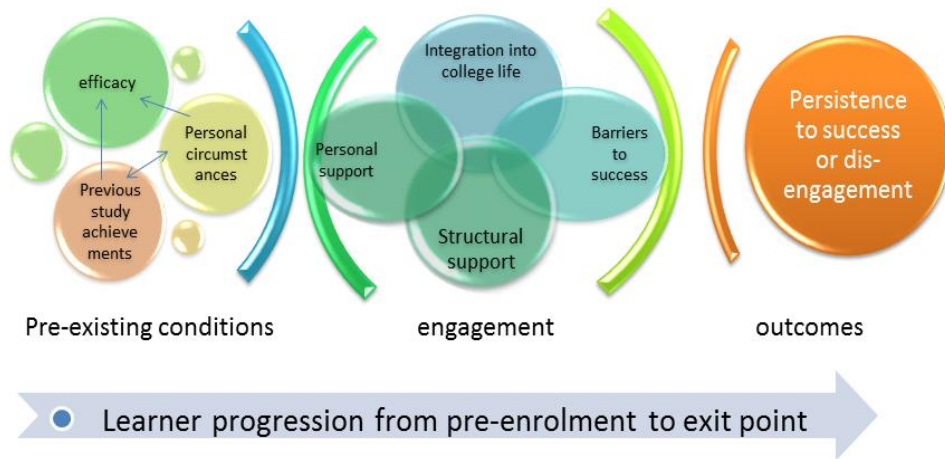
*Figure 2.7.* Conceptualising the journey of persistence to success for adult learners.

The concepts identified in the pre-existing conditions section of the model are further explained in the following figures (See Figure 2.8).
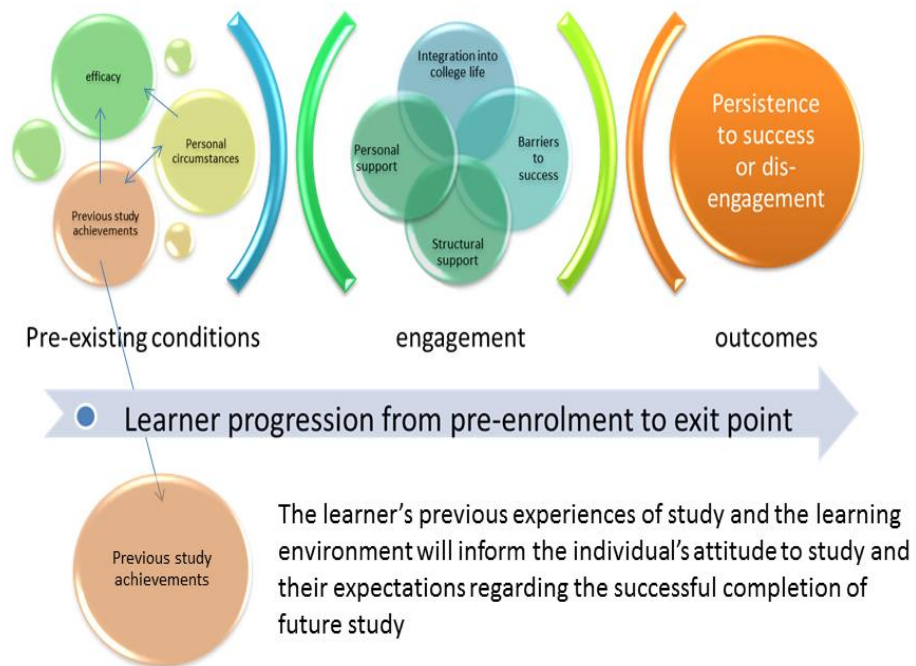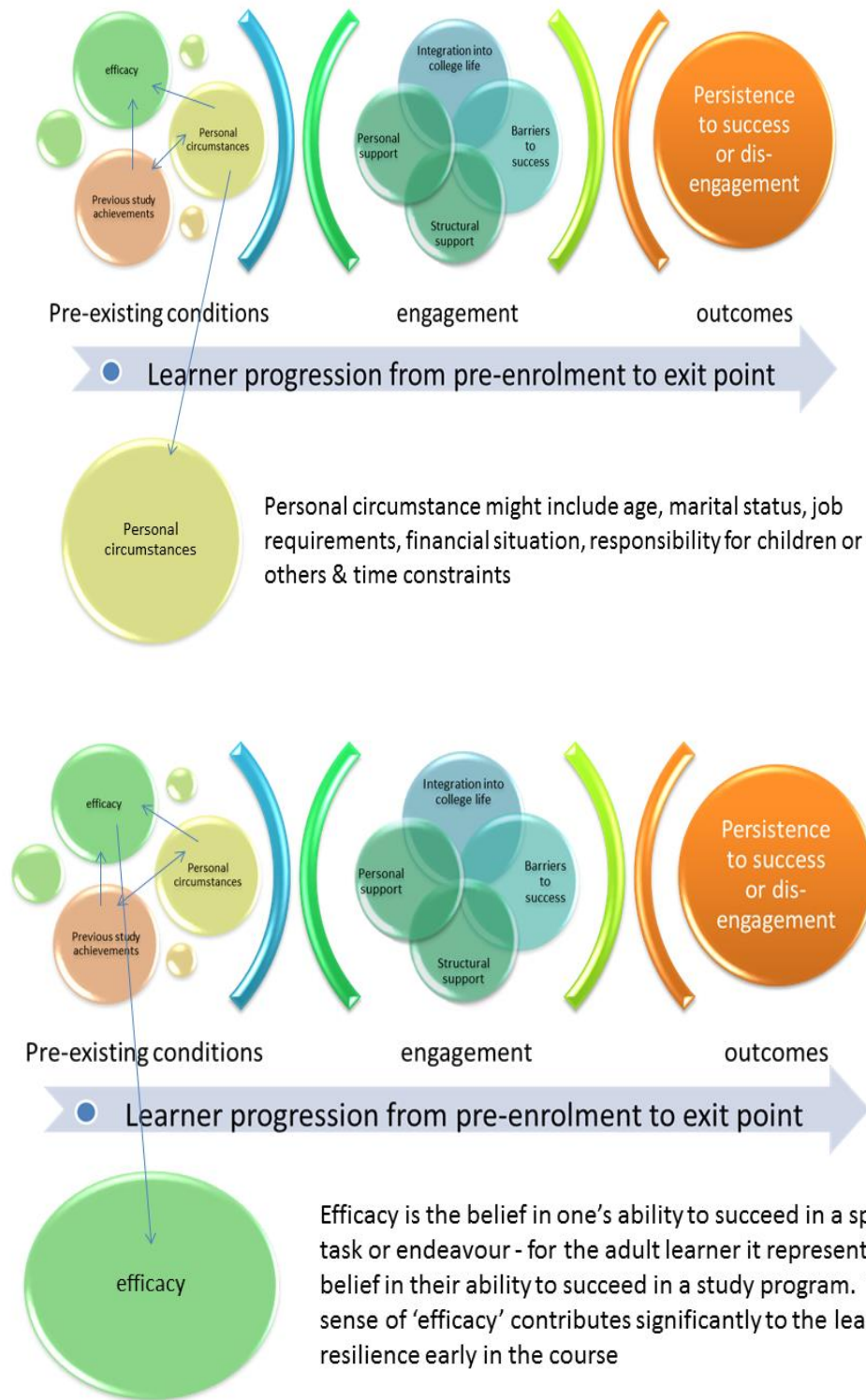
*Figure 2.8.* Previous Study Achievements, Personal Circumstances, and Efficacy explained.

This diagram (Figure 2.8) illustrates how the combined influences of previous study achievements and personal circumstances combine with the adult learner's self-efficacy to result in their initial state of resilience at the commencement of study. This summary of the studies reviewed to this point indicates that this initial state of

resilience is moderated by the interplay of various circumstances during the adult learner's early engagement in the educational program and institution of their choice. The influences listed in the second phase of the diagram include both internal and external experiences and interventions that combine to result in the adult learner's persistence to success or disengagement from the educational program. These second phase concepts are examined in the remainder of this chapter and begin with an examination of the concept of success as observed in the literature reviewed.

### 2.2.4 Concepts of success examined

The degree to which adult learners can engage, integrate, and persist through their educational journey has a direct relationship to the learner's success. These factors are enhanced by a range of moderating interactions that include both intrinsic and extrinsic influences that include their ability to cope with competing priorities, joining communities of educational pursuit, and support from family, work and institutions to help them overcome the barriers to their success (Frey Johnson, 2011; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Kuh, 2009; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009; Wyatt, 2011). These interactions will be described in detail in the following sections. This section will examine the concept of 'success' in terms of outcomes from educational pursuits for adult learners.

A significant gap in the literature reviewed was the scant attention paid to the definition of success in educational pursuits for adult learners (see for example Kenner & Weinerman, 2011 and Connell 2008a) where 'success' is discussed throughout the papers in terms of persistence and graduation or completion but never defined from the perspective of the adult learner populations studied. Contrast this with the research done by Dyke & Murphy 2006, who examine concepts of success in detail taking both a personal and broad view of conceptualisations of success including the differences between Female and Male paradigms of success.). When success was addressed by the studies it was defined simply in terms of the completion of a program of study and the attainment of a qualification or credential. This lack of discussion is surprising in view of the broad application of Knowles' theory of andragogy throughout the corpus of literature (Bremer et al., 2011; De Vito, 2010; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). A fundamental characteristic of adult learners according to Kenner and Weinerman is that adult learners must find relevance and value in the learning itself in order to be motivated to persist and succeed in their educational pursuits:

"…developmental educators would need to develop strategies that incorporated principles of andragogy so that adult learners could see the benefit of learning rather than 'just a hoop to jump through' on the way to achieving their true goals." (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011, p. 94)

The findings suggest that individual adult learners may have a wide range of goals and objectives for pursuing further education. The findings further indicate these goals may include such outcomes as acquiring new skills, accessing promotion or higher remuneration, compliance for professional accreditation, employment, and self-actualisation. As a consequence, success for these individual learners will be defined by their personal goals. The idea that the adult learner's concept of success will be defined by their personal goals, and whether these concepts might change over time, will be examined in detail in the synthesis to follow.

One interesting perspective on definitions of success offered in a study by Dyke and Murphy (2006), explained that there are gender differences in defining personal success. The study identified that females sometimes equate success more broadly in the context of their lives and relationships and that success must contain an element of 'balance' across all of life's dimensions. A lack of balance precluded the attribution of 'success'. A different view was report by male respondents in the study who typically defined success as extrinsic and characterised by more traditional views of material acquisition and the attainment of position and/or power. Common views expressed by both male and female respondents were reported as infrequent by the study, suggesting that further examination of the gender differences impacting resilience and persistence for adult learners might be a focus of investigation in future studies (Dyke & Murphy, 2006).

This idea that definitions of success in educational pursuits may vary along gender lines is very interesting. An aspect that must be considered is that these findings are from a U.S. study that represents a dominant paradigm from a dominant cultural population in a developed modern western nation (Dyke & Murphy, 2006). A question must be asked as to whether this concept can be applied broadly in other cultures, populations or nationalities. A reasonable concern arising from such a statement may be that such findings might lead to gender stereotypes. In the study cited, such a concern is ameliorated by the fact that the researchers identified themselves as women exploring the topic from a feminist perspective, thus clearly

situating the study in its theoretical grounding. Exploring this gender variance in adult learners would have relevance in a future meta-synthesis where the gender make-up of the populations studied showed contrasting gender balances. Indeed, the opportunity exists for future studies to examine in depth the impact of a range of factors including gender, race and disadvantaged or marginalised learners on the findings of this synthesis. The following chapter will build on the discussion of concepts of success by examining the factors reported in the literature that contributed to the success of adult learners.

### 2.2.5 Key concepts relating to educational success.

The concept of engaging and integrating into the educational environment and experience is central to several studies characterising success as an adoption of key values and culture (Frey Johnson, 2011; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Kuh, 2009; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009; Wyatt, 2011). The idea that integrating into, or belonging to a community of educational pursuit will help learners persist, supports the theme that predispositions to attrition are modulated by broadly defined notions of emotional and structural support. This support is described variously in the literature as relating to personal and family support, and structural support offered by institutions. Findings suggest that personal support might be manifested in the form of sharing family duties including childcare and other common chores (Bremer et al., 2011; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Kenny et al., 2011; Wolf, 2011). The findings further indicate the integration is enhanced by structural support provided by institutions, such as flexibility of enrolment and study, financial assistance for course fees, and a broad range of student services including study groups, social groups and sporting activities (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; De Vito, 2010; Frey Johnson, 2011; Kenny et al., 2011; Kuh, 2009; Nash, 2005; Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Unesco, 2009; Wyatt, 2011). A third class of support described in the literature was structural support from employers that might include making time available for study, the provision of resources to assist in study, and help with balancing work and family responsibilities, such as the provision of child care (Buchler, Castle, Osman, & Walters, 2006; Kazis, 2007). The literature describes situations where the availability of these three supporting factors will have a positive influence on the learner's educational outcomes. Institutions, as the main players in the delivery of educational programs, are identified in the studies as being in a position to develop and deliver a

range of opportunities for learners to engage and integrate into the broader culture of college life. As a result, a significant amount of the literature surrounding integration and success focuses on programs that currently exist in institutions.

The point is often made in the literature that institutions are not in a position to influence what happens at work or in the home for their adult learners. As a result, discussions around what institutions might be able to do to influence employers and family members are silenced. There is room for further research on how institutions can better support students in areas of family responsibility, such as by providing student counselling, childcare, financial support, and community and family events that create belonging and connection to the institution, given that institutions engage with the wider community on many levels, both directly through partnerships and indirectly through marketing campaigns. It seems reasonable the institutions may be able to leverage those relationships to advance the cause of supporting adult learners who in many cases are members of that wider community. This is a weakness, in the literature and will be examined in the synthesis to follow.

The terms 'college community' and' broader college community' often arise in the literature. There must be an argument that the workplace and family are by extension, important members of this community. Many institutions have programs that reach out to schools to build awareness of their programs and college life. The findings indicate that these same examples of advocacy and awareness building might be employed to involve employers and immediate family members in the college community to improve outcomes for adult learners.

The previous two sections have examined concepts and definitions of success for adult learners re-engaging in educational pursuits. In the following section, findings that identified barriers to success will be examined.

### 2.2.6 Identified barriers to adult learner success.

The perceived barriers to success experienced by adult learners followed a narrow theme in the reviewed literature. Several common barriers were discussed, including the notion of psychological factors brought to the learning experience by the individual: such as their success or enjoyment of previous study, or role-models from their family and friends. Another discussion included so-called 'structural barriers' to access and persistence including institutional policies and the availability and

flexibility of course offerings and resources. A further topic described environmental experiences of college life, including participation in academic and non-academic fellowships. Finally, external environmental factors were examined, such as responsibilities for family; financial independence, and employment and their influence on the learner's ability to persist and succeed. Specific examples are described in the following paragraphs.

### *Poor self-efficacy as a barrier to success*

Kenny and colleagues (2011) investigated a broad and complex interaction of factors to understand and predict future success in the educational pursuits of adult learners (Kenny et al., 2011; Prevatt et al., 2011). Kenny and colleagues described how a learner's academic skills upon re-entry to study contributed to the concept of their self-efficacy. This is the idea that the sum of the learner's prior educational experiences will form an attitude or belief about their likelihood to succeed in future studies. This idea was developed with the addition of an examination of the learner's ability to form educational goals and focus on those outcomes. The findings further proposed that external factors such as the skills of the teacher and the learner's ability to adjust to emerging issues were also significant factors in predicting success. Although the results indicate these statements to be supported, the findings may be criticized as superficial because they address only narrow aspects of the adults' complex lives.

The correlations between previous educational success and future educational success are universally accepted by educational institutions, and form the basis of the entry requirements for most academies when considering applications from high school students continuing directly to higher education. It can be seen then that these factors are not unique to adult learners. Likewise, the reported relationship between forming educational goals and the ability to achieve them seems common to all learners. Perhaps a significant shortcoming of the discussion in the cited study is that it does not recognise the experience of adults setting and achieving goals in a wide range of challenging areas such as their careers, financial security and desires for their children. What is not discussed in the findings is how success in many different areas of an adult's life may contribute to self-efficacy, and the ability for the adult learner to be resilient in the face of difficulties when re-engaging and persisting through studies

later in life. Attempting to integrate these wider influences into developing educational resilience for adult learners is clearly lacking here.

Goto & Martin (2009) examined a similar proposition to investigate how adult learners experienced their educational journey, focusing on how family and friends provided support to moderate poor or low self-efficacy and overcome the learner's perceived barriers to success. Several researchers also examined these moderating influences on self-efficacy (intrinsic influences as a result of reflection) and experienced environmental issues (extrinsic influences, such as the 'structural' factors described above) (Connell, 2008a; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). A consistent picture emerged from the findings of these studies pointing to the adult's changing state of self-efficacy or resilience over time as a result of the interactions of these experiences. In particular, the study by Goto and Martin added significantly to the argument because they explicitly articulated the need to examine the educational experiences of the adult learner in the meta-context of the adult's broader life and experiences rather than just the educational context (Goto & Martin, 2009).

No study reviewed here however, had the scope to examine these broader influences in any detail. The proposition that the learner's state of self-efficacy may be positively influenced by interactions and interventions from outside of their educational context during study might be strengthened by seeking similar observations in a wider range of studies. The meta-synthesis following was able to draw on large numbers of primary research that individually examined aspects of the adults' lives. Collectively these diverse studies offer a clearer picture of how educational success for adult learners is impacted by experiences not central to the educational pursuit itself.

### *Accessibility, affordability and accountability as barriers to educational success*

Accessibility, affordability, and accountability were identified as three central barriers to educational success for adult learners by (Kazis, 2007). The findings indicate that time-management, family responsibilities and the high cost of engaging in post-compulsory education were frequently described barriers to persistence and success. The study described the conflict between the economic driver to seek post-secondary skills and credentials and the impost the pursuit of further education has on finances and available time to achieve those goals (Kazis, 2007). Competing priorities

for time, between work, family responsibilities (and the enjoyment of family itself), and the time required for study, along with the cost/benefit struggle to pay for credentials that may improve the life of adult learners are identified in this study. The study did not examine the extent to which these factors will adversely affect the adult's educational success. Having some sense of the relative significance of these specific factors might indicate the priority that must be given to addressing them in an environment of scarce public and institutional resources to assist adult learners.

One specific benefit of Kazis' report is the offer of a range of possible strategies that government and institutions might implement to support adult learners, potentially yielding benefits to businesses and the wider community as a direct outcome. The suggested strategies included the use of technology and on-line delivery; curriculum and course content that are standardised, flexible scheduling with frequent entry and exit options, shorter course lengths as well as the use of workplaces as learning places, and employer financing of employee education costs (Kazis, 2007). The weakness here is that no evidence is provided to support the efficacy of these strategies, nor any indication as to which might have the greatest impact or result in the greatest benefit to any of the stakeholders identified. It seems that more work needs to be done on mapping strategies to barriers and investigating the experiences of adult learners involved in such strategies before conclusions can be drawn about what is both possible and desirable in terms of interventions that should be implemented at the government or institutional level.

The concept of accountability frames an argument about the need for quality educational experiences to be made available to adult learners. The studies reviewed here superficially discuss how 'quality' might be defined and measured by institutions and that these results should be communicated to prospective learners. The findings suggest that being able to quantify and compare the quality of an institution's programs will benefit learners. It is proposed that making this information available to students prior to enrolment might allow adult learners to make choices about what programs and institutions best align to their needs and preferences, thus improving their chances of successfully completing their studies and achieving the educational outcomes adult learners have identified for themselves. These themes were common to the work by De Vito (2010) and others citing seminal work by Cross (1981) on the quality of learning (Angelino et al., 2007; Deggs, 2011). Together, these studies suggest that

issues such as relevance of course content to the learner, the level of instructor skills when applied to adult learners, and the range of employment outcomes from completing programs, contribute to the quality of programs from an adult learner perspective.

What is not clear in these studies is how much of this information is currently available to prospective students and how it is used by them in forming their educational choices. An investigation into the effects on adult learner's success of using such information may not be possible at present, because it is unclear from this literature review just how much work is being done on measuring the quality of program offerings, or to what extent adult learners are seeking this information in making their enrolment decisions. It is possible that more insight might result from a meta-synthesis including studies examining a wide range of issues around quality in education.

### *1st generation further education participant status as a barrier*

A further area of investigation in the studies reviewed focused on 1st generation adult learners and college students. The findings suggest that the absence of parents or role-models, who have attended and successfully completed further education pursuits predisposes the participants in these studies to poor persistence and lower achievement of educational goals. The themes in these studies explored the disparity between the culture at home and the culture in the educational environment in terms of expectations for the allocation of time and resources to study.

This interaction could lead to competing priorities for time and resources as well as developing a sense that the learner was separating from family and friends who had not attended college (Bremer et al., 2011; Frey Johnson, 2011). The findings suggest that family perceptions that the 1st generation learner was placing more importance on their personal goals than the needs of their family, and that they were in some way advancing beyond the station of their family, placed stress and some attending guilt on the learner that might lead to disengaging from study (Bremer et al., 2011). This study did not examine the extent to which cultural, gender or other factors shape attitudes to study and work within family groups, or whether these factors may increase in significance where the cultural issues are ethnic as well – shaping attitudes to study and work and gender roles/issues. This is a significant area of interest that should be pursued in greater detail in future studies.

Deggs in his 2011 study suggested that these barriers are never really overcome as the adult learner is in a constant struggle to manage and overcome the barriers that emerge in their complex study/work/family environments over time (Deggs, 2011). This concept is reflected in the longitudinal representation described in Figure 2.7 above, where the interactions are seen to occur on a continuum beginning before re-engagement and continuing to the point where a learner leaves study for the final time. The next section of the literature review will examine the factors that led adult learners to re-enter post-compulsory education.

### *Motivators for returning to study*

The factors driving adult learners to return to post-compulsory education were defined in the reviewed studies as primarily relating to economic and workforce factors (Bandura, 1993; De Vito, 2010; Goto & Martin, 2009). The findings revealed connections to gaining employment or promotions and increased remuneration as frequent motivators to return to study for adult learners. Economic drivers encompassed meeting existing financial commitments and raising the standard of living for the families of the learners (Bremer et al., 2011; Connell, 2008a; Kazis, 2007). Parallel drivers recognized in the studies included becoming positive role-models for children and family members (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). The most frequently reported drivers for adult learners to re-engage in study revolved around employment and financial considerations, which were impacted by the changing economies where subject populations live and the desire to improve the quality of life for their families. What the findings do not answer pertains to the employment and financial characteristics of the learners, such as understanding how adult learners set goals and build motivation in order to persist and succeed in their educational pursuits. Goal formation, motivation and successful achievement of those goals are reported as being inter-related in complex ways (Goto & Martin, 2009) but are not examined by specifically in the studies included here. Studies examining the relationships between identified factors contributing to resilience and observed outcomes of study do exist in quantitative literature, but treat these factors as discrete variables rather than dynamic interacting experiences that are social and contextual as well as mental and individual. Goto and Martin criticise existing literature relating to goal setting and motivation as being 'microanalytic' in that it focuses on these processes from a personal perspective independent of context. Assumptions that clear goals and robust motivation equal

persistence and success are necessary starting points in understanding what influences adult learner's resilience, but remain inadequate to predict future success or to explain how adults may overcome past failures to succeed in future goals (Goto & Martin, 2009). A much wider qualitative examination of the interplay of these factors in a richly contextualised social narrative is required to understand and improve outcomes for adult learners   Limitations and concerns identified in the literature are discussed next.

## 2.3   TOPIC 2: SILENCES AND CONCERNS RAISED IN THE LITERATURE.

Limitations in the form of suggestions that studies should be tested for reliability by being replicated in other environments, contexts and cultures; or to use different approaches and theoretical constructs, was common to all the literature reviewed. The most significant concern raised was that for the findings of these studies might not be able to be applied to a broader audience, or to inform a wider practice. This sentiment was expressed by several writers and recognised that the studies represented here were each centred in a specific learning environment or focused on a specific cohort of learners with characteristics formed by their situations. This is both an outcome and a common criticism of qualitative studies in general.

Concerns that different barriers may arise in different programs or college environments was expressed by Deggs (Deggs, 2011). This belief followed concerns he expressed earlier in 2009: "… given the increasing diversity of college students today, it is erroneous to presume that what works in one setting for certain students will have the same effects in other settings for different types of students" (Kuh, 2009). The same view was expressed explicitly in 2010:

> "…These have important influences on the practices and their effects studied, so that findings may not be transferred, or completely transferred, to a different context…" (Trowler & Trowler, 2010)

The fundamental issue remains that focused empirical research seeking to gain a deeper insight into the phenomena being investigated must narrowly define the sample population and the factors to be investigated. Efforts to understand a clearly defined topic in such a focused way result in questions of transferability and the validity of the findings from these studies.

Qualitative studies, by their nature, must focus on small populations in order to return a manageable data set for analysis and quantitative researchers may seize on these methodological constraints to promote their own forms of research. However, an alternate strategy is also supported - that of meta-synthesis. The opportunity is clearly suggested here to analyse the large body of diverse research into adult learners in order to synthesise new theories and insights from the collective data reported in ways that were not possible in the individual studies. The end of this chapter will discuss how the synthesis in Chapters 4 and 5 will address these concerns. The following section discusses the range of topics suggested by the literature reviewed for future areas of study.

### 2.3.1 Critique of the literature and the need for this research

A range of suggestions for further research were proposed in the literature to more clearly define terms, issues, barriers to success and the methods that adult learners utilise to overcome those barriers. Key areas for future study are discussed in this section.

The first suggestion is for clarification of terms and definitions relating to adult learners. This topic needs critical examination as so many of the proposed interventions to assist adult learners during study rely on the observed differences between adult learners and continuing students to define their form. A deeper understanding of the defining characteristics of 'adult learners' will therefore better predict adult learner barriers and the factors that will help them to develop resilience and succeed in their educational pursuits

There is also a need for a critique of seminal paradigms as a way to assist researchers in future study, such as integrating several theories to gain a more richly contextualised understanding of the phenomena being investigated (Wolf, 2011). The opportunity here is to approach the synthesis from a theoretical standpoint that combines a number of complimentary constructs to interpret the findings of individual studies. I propose a focus on the work of the following theorists to bring sense to a wide range of findings reported in the studies included in chapter 4: Knowles (1984), Bandura (1993), Tinto (1987), Astin (1993), Lepani (1995) and Cranton (2002). Further study of adult learner characteristics and learning needs as well as the supports they require to be conducted in specific [and different] environments – as the majority of the research to date has been conducted in the United States. This is a significant

problem with the current research, highlighting the need for research to synthesise findings across more countries to identify commonalities and differences perhaps based on geography or cultural matters (Connell, 2008a).  The synthesis will incorporate a larger number of studies and specifically look for research conducted outside of the U.S.A. to validate the conclusions drawn.

Further international and Queensland research into aspirations for post-secondary education is required to address relatively low tertiary attainment levels in Queensland, compared to other Australian jurisdictions and international statistics (Qld Department of Education and Training, 2011).  This is a difficult goal to achieve as political and institutional policies undergo significant change in Queensland and Australia as a result of changes to governments at both levels.  The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) which has historically been the source for these statistical analyses no longer reports the comparisons or raw data as research has been directed into different areas as a result of changes to government policy and funding models (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

The broad policy directions and objectives of these new governments are in general consensus with previous parliaments, but the strategies and financial support offered will have as yet unclear long-term impacts on VET and Higher Education in Australia.  Contemporary Australian policies from government and institutions will be examined alongside international developments and directions for these educational sectors to gain a perspective on how adult learners' experiences will be impacted and what interventions might reveal themselves as appropriate;

Additional research is suggested to explore how gender and ethnicity interact with self-efficacy (Vuong et al., 2010).  This is a fascinating and important area of future research as many studies included in this literature review quoted statistics from the United States of America and other countries showing that the number of female students in VET and Higher Education institutions are beginning to outnumber males. The implications for adult learner policy development based around the barriers faced by female learners as a result of differing gender roles and attitudes to success and motivations for returning to study are far-reaching and critically important.  Clearly, this topic demands more primary research into the phenomena, and the policies about adult learners could form the basis of a metasynthesis in its own right to do it justice.

While it is acknowledged that policies play an important contextual role in adult learning, a review of policies is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

A further potential area of interest arising from the studies is the formulation of curriculum design and delivery for adult learners that both responds to their needs as adult learners, and which is offered in modes and times that provide the greatest access to the programs. For example, integrating workplaces into training sites, and partnering with employers to meet financial issues could positively impact adult learners, employers, and the economy (Kazis, 2007). This financial aid and assistance has provided access to further education for many adult learners who would otherwise have not had the opportunity to return to study. It presents a clear opportunity to investigate the influence this support has had in assisting those adult learners to overcome the barriers to achieving their educational goals. These themes will be examined in detail in Chapter 4 from the point of view of interventions and policy decisions taken by governments, institutions and employers, and how they might be utilised to assist adult learners to re-engage in formal study and develop the resilience needed to succeed.

In conclusion, areas for future research indicate a need to focus on adult learner characteristics and perceived barriers to educational success, as well as the strategies that contribute to their success, in the context of different specific environments. Such studies would test and perhaps verify previous methodologies and findings and their application to wider audiences and populations. The final section of this chapter presents the summary of the literature review.

## 2.4   SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature has been reviewed from a number of perspectives including definitions of what it is to be an adult learner and the perceived barriers to educational success and support for overcoming them. Much discussion has been devoted to comparisons of the theoretical constructs used to understand the phenomena under investigation as well as the role social and structural features of the adult learners' lives have played in their educational achievements.

The remainder of this section will discuss the characteristics of the literature reviewed under three headings: Contributions of this literature to the field of study;

overall strengths and weaknesses of the literature; and what is missing in the current research?

**2.6.1 Contributions of this literature to the field.**

The results of this literature have added to the body of knowledge by helping to focus definitions of adult learners (Connell, 2008a; Kazis, 2007; Kenny et al., 2011; Wyatt, 2011) and characterise their learning needs and issues for support (Connell, 2008a; De Vito, 2010; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Kuh, 2008; Nash, 2005; Willans & Seary, 2007; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The findings indicate that adult learners are returning to post-compulsory education and training in increasing numbers (Deggs, 2011; Kenny et al., 2011; Wyatt, 2011) and for a range of reasons including economic transformation, access to career advancement, financial improvement and personal growth (Bremer et al., 2011; Connell, 2008a;(Kazis, 2007); Kenny et al., 2011).

The research also indicates that industry, governments, policy makers and educational institutions recognise the benefits in delivering quality post-compulsory education to this growing population of adult learners re-entering study. Indeed, they understand the importance of providing an appropriate environment in which those adult learners are better able to engage, persist and achieve success in their educational pursuits (DETA, 2011; UNESCO, 2009).

Further, the seminal work of leading researchers has been tested and examined both in terms of the theoretical constructs employed in studies and the identification of the factors that emerge as barriers to the achievement of educational success. Another outcome of this body of research are suggestions for institutions and policy makers for developing curriculum design, educational support and clear and transparent communication in a way that supports adult learners to achieve their individual goals (Bremer et al., 2011; De Vito, 2010; Frey Johnson, 2011; Kenny et al., 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Several studies present clear requirements for flexibility in educational offerings as well as practical and financial support from institutions, family, and employers (Bremer et al., 2011; De Vito, 2010; Kazis, 2007). These strategies are proposed to help off-set the influence of competing priorities between study, family and work. A discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the literature is presented in the next section.

### 2.6.2 Overall strengths and weaknesses of the literature.

The key strengths of the literature are the solid grounding in accepted research techniques and theoretical constructs first proposed by seminal writers such as Knowles (1970; 1984), Bandura (1993), Astin (1993) and Tinto (1975). The contributions of each theorists are summarised in the following table for convenience (see Table 2.3)

Table 2.3

*Summary of contributing theorists*

| THEORIST | CONCEPTUALISATION | APPLICATION |
|---|---|---|
| Knowles | Modern principles of adult learning | Defined the characteristics of adult learner engagement which can be applied in every aspect of developing, delivering and supporting programs for adult learners |
| Bandura | Social cognitive theory of human agency | Calls on researchers to situate the micro view of cognition within a macro view of the adult learners personal environment |
| Astin | Input-environment-output (I-E-O) categories | Used to group and analyse observed influences impacting on adult learners' decisions during study |
| Tinto | Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition | Applied Durkheim's theories to propose educational expectations, academic motivation, and goal commitment as factors influencing educational persistence |

The studies reviewed demonstrate robust validation processes and appropriateness of research methods for the phenomena examined by them. Common factors supporting the value of the studies include the shared theoretical foundations, references to established seminal writings, and the strength of citations quoting the studies themselves. A further strength of the literature is the increasing number of search responses from recent years perhaps indicating a growing interest in and importance of research into this field. Weaknesses in the literature are discussed next.

There are two significant weaknesses in the literature. Firstly, there is a clear preponderance of research from the United States and this suggests that the populations studied are unique to the demographic characteristics of that country, 19 of the 29 studies analysed in the literature review were from the United States. As a result, many

studies focused on narrow populations such as: people of colour (Wolf 2011), Hispanics (Kuh 2008), and 1st generation Asian Americans (Vuong 2010). This focus suggests that the observations made may not transfer adequately to other or broader populations (Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). The concerns for this transferability could be addressed by encouraging the replication of similar studies in other geographic areas.

The second weakness of the research is the consequence of using qualitative methodologies to examine the phenomena studied. Qualitative methods are of course effective in gaining a personal and deep understanding of the phenomena experienced by the population studied (Deggs, 2011). The common weakness encountered by using qualitative methods is the lack of certainty necessary to accurately extrapolate the findings and implications from the studies to a wider audience or population (Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). For example, Deggs (2011), although providing many insights into the development of a contextualization of the meaning of the perceived barriers for adult learners, focussed his research on one program offered at one university in the mid-south of The United States.

The significant advantage of the synthesis to follow is the inclusion of a large number of studies and reports covering the topics examined which through integration; lend the necessary validity to apply the reported findings to a wider context. As a result of these tensions it is possible to identify areas of the literature that may suggest further investigation. These areas are discussed in the following section.

The literature reviewed here has identified many observable experiences and interventions that influence adult learners' abilities to overcome the personal and structural barriers they face in returning to formal studies after some time establishing their lives. A significant amount work exists to classify and describe the elements of these barriers such as identifying the many competing priorities that contribute to the personal barriers experienced by adult learners during their educational journeys, and the relationship of these barriers and compensatory strategies to resilience or persistence for the adult learner. What does not exist in the literature reviewed here is a systematic, cumulative integration of the observed barriers and strategies to examine how they combine to influence or perhaps predict adult learner success.

The descriptive meta-synthesis reported here treats the corpus of literature presented as one very large and comprehensive study that covers a wide range of

phenomena and interventions that have not been analysed in an integrated way. The factor topics that were presented here in Chapter 2 provide the starting point for the descriptive meta-synthesis to follow, which expands the number of studies examined and builds on the analysis so far presented to develop new insights into this complex area of study.

The following chapter addresses the selected research methodology, as well as the identified research questions for examination. These focus on the three types of barriers identified by Cross' (1981) classification of barriers – situational, institutional and dispositional – as an organizing framework for the analysis of the data from the studies in this descriptive meta-synthesis.

# Chapter 3: Research Design

This section outlines the methodological foundations of the Meta-Synthesis. The search strategy, research questions and selection criteria adopted for this Meta-Synthesis is discussed as well as descriptions of the types of studies reviewed. Analysis of the findings of the Meta-Synthesis is discussed in following chapters.

This chapter conforms to the following structure: The chapter begins with a description of Meta-Synthesis and justification for its selection as a research strategy. This is followed by the Research questions identified and a discussion of the search methodology and justification for selection of included items including the criteria for considering studies and other materials for inclusion in this Meta-Synthesis. Finally I discuss the data collection and analysis as well as the synthesis to be presented.

## 3.1 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

### 3.1.1 Description of Descriptive meta-synthesis

Descriptive Meta-Synthesis has been selected for this research because of its ability to bring together multiple contemporary studies utilising a range of theories and methodologies, rather than just replicating the previous studies in a different context. This review strategy was developed as a modification of the approach recommended by The Cochrane Collaboration - and associated Campbell Collaboration which has a focus on educational research among other areas - in their handbook for Meta-Synthesis and Meta-Analysis (Cochrane 2009). The Cochrane Collaboration is an international organisation established to provide quality research materials to help providers, practitioners and policy-makers make well-informed decisions. The Cochrane Review, a compilation of more than 5,000 articles and research papers is available on-line as part of The Cochrane Library (Cochrane 2011).

The purpose of Meta-Synthesis is to take the vast amount of existing primary research on a topic and integrate those findings to create generalisations that inform professional practice and the body of knowledge in the field studied as well as indicating areas for future study. Meta-Synthesis takes its cues from relevant theories and critically analyses the identified research in an attempt to resolve any conflicts in the literature. It is possible for Meta-Synthesis to create new knowledge from a large

number of studies that individually may not have carried the authority to shape the thinking in a particular field by applying validated procedures to the interpretation of existing empirical research (Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Sandelowski, Voils, & Barroso, 2006).

Meta-Synthesis uses a non-statistical methodology for the interpretive integration of qualitative findings and descriptions of phenomena, events, and cases. The synthesis must be supported by the findings of the individual studies, but results from transforming the results from the body of work investigated (Patterson 2001). This transformation is achieved by developing new interpretations of findings rather than just aggregating the sum or frequency of reported findings in individual studies (Polit & Beck, 2006). The methodology chosen can be described as a discussion of the primary research and critical analysis of the findings of the studies to advance new interpretations or theories and models in the results of the review. Arguments of important or controversial topics are presented in the body of the analysis. A final output of this Meta-Synthesis is to model the relationships among the forces at play by defining the environment in which the factors influencing adult learners exist, as well as the moderating effects that result in the observed outcomes.

### 3.1.2 Research Design: Research questions

Two questions were formulated for this research as a result of the literature review conducted in Ch. 2 as well as extensive discussions with academic staff and colleagues at the Queensland University of Technology. The questions are:

8. How are adult learners conceptualised in the literature?

9. What structural and dispositional factors influence adult learners as they re-engage and persist through their post-compulsory educational journeys?

These barriers include a) situational or structural barriers which are extrinsic and include time pressures, work and family responsibilities, and institutional barriers, such as the availability and flexibility of course offerings; b) dispositional barriers which are intrinsic and include anxiety, guilt, study issues, unrealistic expectations and failing to adjust to university life.

The answers to these questions may contribute to the dialogue surrounding the increasingly important need on the part of both Governments and employer groups to maximise the delivered benefits of their financial investments in Technical and Further

Education. As the funding of further education becomes scarcer and more competitive, institutions and training providers must deliver increases in completion rates in order to remain sustainable (DETA, 2011; Queensland Government, 2012).

### 3.1.3 Search methodology and justification for selection

A comprehensive search strategy has been used to search international research literature for qualifying studies. The search for this Meta-Synthesis involved interrogating a range of electronic databases for peer reviewed journal articles and other artefacts relating to the subject matter being investigated. Texts, government reports, theses, and other artefacts were included where appropriate. Sources from Australia, USA, Canada, UK, Western Europe, and South Africa have been included to improve the capture of relevant literature from national systems offering similar tertiary study experiences. This inclusion of a wide range of sources is intended to limit the possibility of omitting relevant materials and reduce the risk of publication bias in the Meta-Synthesis.

### 3.1.4 Documenting the search and selection process

I have used EndNote to manage the documentation of bibliographical materials in the search process. Potentially relevant materials identified through the electronic database searches have been exported to EndNote and each item has been individually scanned to determine if it should be included in the review. Relevant materials were copied to a separate folder in the EndNote library. Data are stored in multiple secure external storage devices. The parameters for this search are detailed in the following sections.

### 3.2 CRITERIA FOR CONSIDERING STUDIES AND OTHER MATERIALS FOR INCLUSION IN THIS DESCRIPTIVE META-SYNTHESIS

The purpose of the following inclusion/exclusion criteria is to define, redefine, and narrow the volume of returns to be investigated in the study to those that specifically address the topic. The strategy used was an iterative process that reduced the number of returns by modifying the search terms to narrow the focus of subsequent searches in order to increase the relevance of the returns. The number of returns generated by the search had to be large enough to demonstrate high recall and cover the corpus of contemporary research available on the topic. High recall defines the

proportion of documents retrieved relevant to the topic being investigated that are included in the review. The criteria must also produce high precision in terms of a manageable body of relevant qualitative artefacts (Sandelowski et al., 2006).

### 3.2.1 Types of studies

To be included in the Meta-Synthesis, artefacts had to be qualitative studies and address at least one of the questions above. Articles must have been from peer-reviewed journals or be contemporary policy documents from government departments focusing on issues such as post-compulsory education or life-long learning. Studies citing seminal qualitative theorists or theories are explicitly included. Studies identified as quantitative or mixed-methods were excluded, as they don't lend themselves to the kind of in-depth experiential synthesis needed for a descriptive meta-synthesis (Sandelowski et al., 2006). The purpose of the synthesis is to examine the experiences of the adult learners in the context of their learning, employment and social milieus, which can be pointed to but not examined in detail by the analysis of statistical information. An exception to this point is where studies of a quantitative nature discussed or expanded on relevant theories or their application to the subject of this study. Such artefacts may be explicitly referenced in the context of the discussion without being included in the synthesis.

### 3.3 PARTICIPANTS

The study was limited to populations defined as Adult learners as above. The population included males and females. The populations were engaging in education or training described as post-compulsory, tertiary, vocational, technical, and include all modes of delivery: e.g., online, face-to-face, distance learning.

The studies have been limited to Australia, United States of America, Canada, United Kingdom, Western Europe and South Africa and reported in English language. Other geographical areas are excluded for diversity in cultural norms, values and educational delivery models preclude drawing conclusions about the experiences of adult learners that would be applicable across all national contexts. Results of this synthesis may indicate the need to include explicit comparisons between the experiences of Australian learners and those in one or more other countries for a future synthesis or empirical study.

The time frame was selected to deliver artefacts that represent contemporary practice in an ever evolving political and economic climate. A time line of 2001 to 2013 was utilised to ensure that studies returned are contemporary and address factors influenced by the rapidly developing effects of new technology and the current global economic climate. Some materials from outside this time frame are present merely for they represent seminal works or theoretical constructs relevant to the research.

## 3.4 PROCEDURE AND IDENTIFICATION OF MATERIALS THAT WERE CONSIDERED

I selected eleven major electronic databases and search engines for this review: Eric; EBSCO Host/ASP; Google Scholar; Web of Science; ProQuest; Web Search; Digital Dissertations; Pro Quest Dissertations; A.C.E.R; and E.R.G.O.

### 3.4.1 Search Strings

Search strings for electronic database searches incorporated natural language processing as well as Boolean operators/logic. The Boolean search strings used the following terms:

#1 [(Keywords: adult and Keywords:" " and Keywords: learners) and (Keywords: quantitative and Keywords:" ")] and Full-Text Available and Peer Reviewed Publication Date: 2000-2011

#2 [(**Keywords:**KW= and (**Keywords:**TVET or **Keywords:**"technical education" or **Keywords:**"technical training" or **Keywords:**"tech* prep*" or **Keywords:**"technical college*" or **Keywords:**"technical degree*" or **Keywords:**"technical diploma*" or **Keywords:**"technical qualification*" or **Keywords:**"vocational education" or **Keywords:**"vocational training" or **Keywords:**"vocational stud*" or **Keywords:**"vocational retraining" or **Keywords:**"vocational work experience" or **Keywords:**"vocational cent*" or **Keywords:**"vocational school*" or **Keywords:**"vocational course*" or **Keywords:**"vocational program*" or **Keywords:**"vocational college*" or **Keywords:**"vocational degree*" or **Keywords:**"vocational diploma*" or **Keywords:**"vocational qualification*" or **Keywords:**)] and (**Keywords:**adult and **Keywords:**learners) and (**Keywords:**barriers and **Keywords:**to and **Keywords:**success) or (**Keywords:**success) or (**Keywords:**adult and **Keywords:**education) and (**Education Level:**"Adult Basic Education" OR **Education**

**Level:**"Adult Education" OR **Education Level:**"Higher Education" OR **Education Level:**"Postsecondary Education" OR **Education Level:**"Two Year Colleges") and **Peer Reviewed**)**Publication Date:**2000-2013

During the literature review phase of this study I learned that each country featured in the study has its own structure for higher education and specific terminology for the types of institutions and programs offered in academic and vocational fields.  For example in the United States there are several types and tiers of institutions offering programs to adult learners such as two-year colleges and community colleges that offer more vocationally oriented programs and traditional private colleges and universities where the focus is on academic study.  As a result I have included as many of the terms that I could find that might return information relevant to the two research questions and the broader context of vocational education that informed this study.

A sample result is illustrated in the following table (See Table 3.1):

Table 3.1

*Sample search results*

| Search ID# | Key word Search Terms | Search Options – limiters applied | Databases searched | Results returned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| S3 | adult education AND success factors AND qualitative | Limiters - Published Date from: 20000101-20111231; Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals Search modes - Boolean/Phrase | Interface - EBSCOhost Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - Academic Search Elite; ERIC | 2 |
| S2 | adult education AND success AND factors | Limiters - Published Date from: 20000101-20111231; Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals Search modes - Boolean/Phrase | Interface - EBSCOhost Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - Academic Search Elite; ERIC | 124 |
| S1 | adult education AND success AND factors | Limiters - Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals Search modes - Boolean/Phrase | Interface - EBSCOhost Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - Academic Search Elite; ERIC | 130 |

In the sample illustrated above, broad search terms were used to ensure that relevant studies were not missed. The results of these searches were further reduced after scanning the abstracts and introductions of the article to ensure relevance to this study. Restrictions to peer-reviewed articles were employed to ensure accuracy of interpretations. The search was confined predominantly to results from 2001 to 2013, with a handful of earlier returns included on the basis of references to seminal works or significant theoretical constructs and some more recent items discovered during revisions to the synthesis. The volume of literature available on the topic and the rapidly changing role and influence of technology in the delivery and support of educational programs necessitated the relatively narrow focus of publication dates (Deggs, 2011; Deggs, Grover, & Kacirek, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

## 3.5    SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

Focused searches in the review returned 315 results. Determining the relevance of returns for inclusion in the Meta-Synthesis was carried out using a transparent strategy to ensure validity of results and reduce bias in the study. The selection of primary studies was based on the pre-developed selection criteria described earlier in this chapter. The screening of literature for eligibility was undertaken in two phases. For the majority of the source types, an initial round of screening based on titles and abstracts was carried out, followed by an examination of the full-text of the study to determine eligibility. Citation checking provided a third method where eligibility was not readily apparent. Literature referencing seminal authors or methodologies, or literature cited in other works indicated relevance for inclusion in the Meta-Synthesis. A clear audit trail documenting all procedural decisions in the strategy was used to minimise selection bias. A template was used to record the information from each returned item that was included in the review. Reflexive reviews of those judgments assisted in maintaining the integrity of the sample studied.

As stated earlier, the question of how many returns represent an adequate size set for the Meta-Synthesis is a difficult question to answer. The pool of artefacts must be large enough to indicate high recall but be small enough to produce high precision and allow the kind of in-depth analysis and integration required by a qualitative study. As a result of the inherent difficulties in searching and selecting materials for synthesis, it is possible that some valuable information may not have been included in the review.

This synthesis has utilised multiple channels for accessing information and has given careful consideration to how those channels complement each other in returning the broadest range of returned materials. This is as a result of the discussion surrounding the use of research databases to generate returns and their inability to access unpublished materials and other grey literature – policy documents, books, and other non-peer reviewed journal sources – that may have significance in the synthesis (Cooper and Hedges 2009).

### 3.5.1 Classification of studies

The iterative process of reviewing each return from the data collection phase involved classifying the studies according to a logical set of criteria that allowed them to be grouped, summarised and fitted into the context of the synthesis. This process is an analogue to coding the key themes and concepts described in the studies and other materials which in turn developed the analysis presented in Chapter 4. The template used for recording this data is presented in Figure 3.1. Grouping the articles and findings in this way allowed the synthesis to emerge naturally as the weight of multiple similar discussions strengthened the findings recorded in individual studies.

In the first instance each item identified for inclusion in the synthesis was summarised in a table that allowed a quick review of the key points discussed. Inclusions in this table were metadata, methodology, key points, quotes, cross-referencing, questions to be clarified and recommendations for further study. In the second phase of the data collection each artefact was sorted and grouped according to the key headings emerging from the study such as definitions of adult learners; theoretical constructs employed; barriers identified; concepts relating to educational success etc. Finally, the selected studies and other materials were stored electronically in EndNote allowing easy and reliable access to the items when required. All electronic records were stored both in my primary computer and backed up in an external hard drive for security. The group headings employed in

the EndNote library is reported below.

The form of the synthesis presented in the next chapter was informed by these criteria that emerged from the review process and examples of the tables that were used to classify and group the studies for analysis are presented here.

| Research notes | Date: | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Journal Article: | | | |
| Author/s of article | | | |
| Year of pub & edition | | | |
| Article title | | | |
| Journal title | | | |
| volume no. | | Issue no. | |
| Page nos. | | | |
| URL/database name & date retrieved/DOI | | | |
| Key words | | | |
| Study method | | | |
| Limitations | | | |
| Themes/key concepts | Notes/quotes/content/page no. | | Comments/cross-referencing/questions to be clarified/terminology |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| Recommendations for Further Research | | | |

*Figure 3.1* Initial review of returns for inclusion

Table 3.2

*Sample of table grouping studies under identified criteria*

| Classifying the returned studies for analysis | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Source summary** | | | | |
| total sources returned from searches | | Notes | Most followed a similar structure in defining the characteristics of the population studied… | |
| total sources referenced in synthesis | | Notes | Selected for relevance to thesis topic and strength of research based on currency, citing and references to common writers or theoretical constructs… | |

| summary of references | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Year of publication** | | | | | | | |
| 22000 | 2001 | 2002 | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |

| Type of publication | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Journal | Report | Thesis | Book | Web page | Conference paper |
| | | | | | |

| Country of origin | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aus. | USA | UK | SA | Canada | EUR | Asia | UNESCO |
| | | | | | | | |

| Themes identified | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Definition of adult learners | Author/s | Theoretical | Author/s | Barriers to success | Author/s | Key concepts relating to | Author/s | Drivers for return to study | Author/s | Drivers for | Author/s | Limitations or | Author/s | Definitions of | Author/s |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

*Classification of studies stored electronically for the synthesis*

As many studies addressed multiple areas of relevance to this synthesis they are placed in each group as appropriate.

Table 3.3

*EndNote Group Headings*

| Citations grouped | |
|---|---|
| All references | 133 |
| **Group** | **References** |
| Theories | 22 |
| Seminal theorists | 11 |
| Theories applied | 35 |
| Conflicts in theories | 3 |
| Barriers to adult education | 62 |
| Overcoming barriers | 29 |
| Government policy | 18 |
| Organisational policy and structural matters | 22 |
| Opinions and articles | 10 |
| Integrated models | 13 |
| Syntheses | 16 |
| Research texts | 3 |

## 3.5.2 Assessment of risk of bias in included studies

A systematic approach to assessing study quality was used in this Meta-Synthesis. The issue was addressed by scanning the abstracts and introductions of results returned to determine the research methodology used and any self-reported bias by the author. A further scan of the conclusions and limitations noted in the returned items was used to determine confidence in the reported findings and their broader applications. The use of scales, checklists and domain-based evaluations were excluded, because such methods do not lend themselves to the results of qualitative studies where the risk or extent of bias in the reported findings is extremely difficult to determine (Cochrane, 2011). Often the only option available to reviewers is to take a subjective approach and balance the validity of the findings against the inherent risk of applying the findings of small studies focused on region-specific, demographic-specific or cultural-specific experiences to wider communities and circumstances (Cochrane 2011).

### 3.5.3 Summary of search results returned

The total number of sources returned by selective database searches for this Synthesis was 315.  The range of articles covers topics such as:

- the unique characteristics of adult learners;

- the barriers adult learners face when re-engaging and persisting through their educational journeys;

- causes of attrition for adult learners;

- factors supporting adult learners during study and

- the efforts institutions can make to improve outcomes for adult learners.

The returned items were reduced to a smaller number of relevant references on the basis of several factors including:

- reference to the research questions,

- duplication of outcomes;

- research methodology employed and

- reference to established theoretical constructs.

The total number of sources included in this Synthesis was thus reduced to 133 references.  Figures 3.2 and 3.3 summarise the characteristics of the items included.
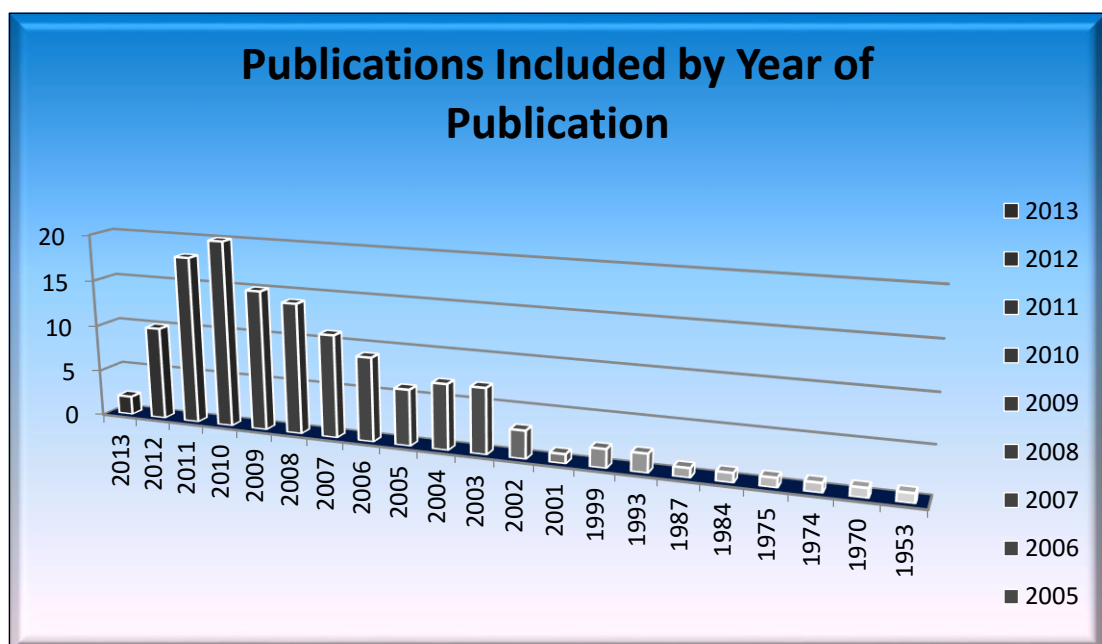


*Figure 3.2*. Numbers of Publications Included by Year of Publication.
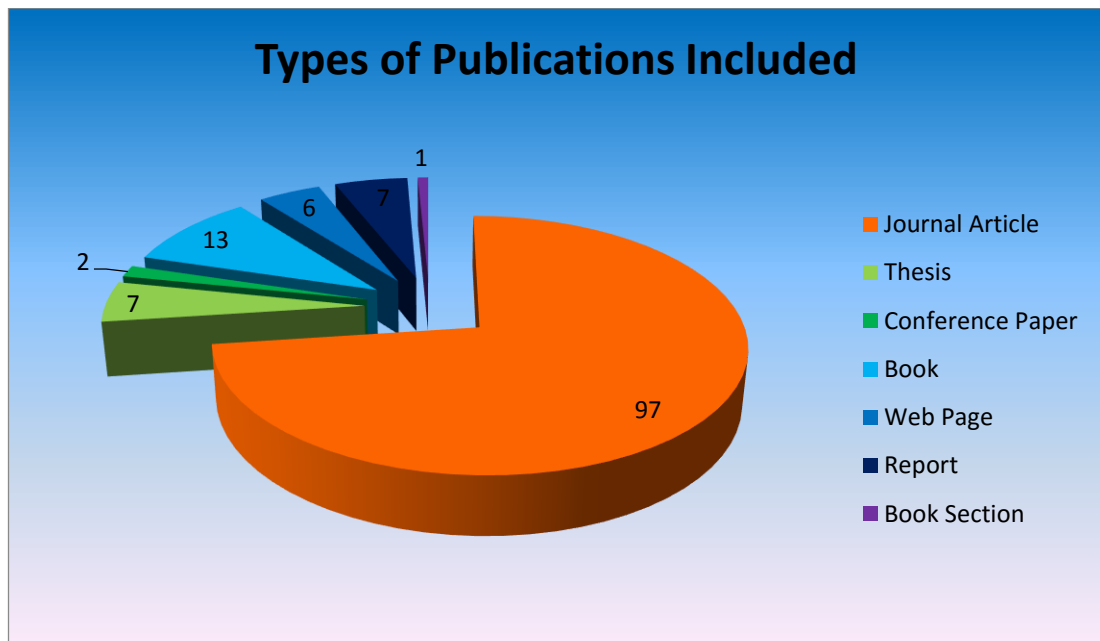
*Figure 3.3*. Type of Publications Included.

### 3.5.4 Data Analysis

The output of the synthesis presented here has emerged as an analogue to the grounded theory approach to analysing information. The data is attenuated and reconceptualised into new forms that give meaning to the findings not discussed in the individual studies. Structured coding aligned to the emerging themes identified in the literature review were used to build the theories presented here from the data.

Open coding was used to align the data in the reviewed studies to the identified themes described in Figure 4.2. Studies, and relevant material contained in them, was in this way grouped and identified for future reference and synthesis. Axial coding was used to connect the resulting categories and join the ideas presented in the articles into related concepts for further development. This process both informed the synthesis and resulted in the presentation of the material in chapter 4. Finally, selective coding was used to synthesise the concepts into an integrated theory of persistence to success for adult learners which is discussed in detail in chapter 5.

### 3.5.5 Data Synthesis

Chapter 4 presents the results of the Meta-Synthesis. It follows a similar structure to Chapter 2 in investigating and critically analysing the key constructs, theories and findings from the studies. Correlations between findings as well as contradictions in the studies are examined to advance new interpretations or theories

and models from the results of the review. A final output of this Meta-Synthesis is to model the relationships among the research variables by defining the environment in which the phenomena exist as well as the moderating effects that result in the observed outcomes. This model will be tested in a study to be conducted as the basis of a future doctoral thesis focusing on adult learners in Queensland.

This Meta-Synthesis employs a descriptive analysis of the key themes and significant characteristics of the studies included for investigation as they relate to the two research questions, which are identifying the barriers faced by adult learners and the strategies they employ to overcome them. Findings are discussed in descriptive form.

## 3.6    LIMITATIONS

Several areas give cause to regard the outputs of this synthesis with caution. While the studies incorporated in this synthesis meet the selection criteria I have described previously, the most significant concern is in the application of these findings to a broader audience, or to inform a wider practice of improving outcomes for adult learners. The reality is that the individual studies are rooted in their own contexts, periods and cultural settings. The extent to which these individual circumstances have shaped the findings of the studies has been cited by many of the authors herein as limiting their application in other settings or with other student populations (Deggs, 2011; Kuh, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

Another issue is that focused empirical research that seeks to gain a deeper insight into the phenomena being investigated must narrowly define the sample population and the experiences to be investigated. Qualitative studies, by their nature, must focus on small populations in order to return a manageable data set for analysis. Although quantitative researchers may seize on these factors to promote their own forms of research, an alternate strategy is also supported - that of meta-synthesis. The opportunity is clearly presented to analyse the large body of diverse research into adult learners to synthesise new theories and insights from the collective data reported in ways that were not possible in individual studies. The corpus of literature presents itself not as many individual discreet studies but as one very large and comprehensive study that covers a wide range of phenomena and variables that have not been analysed in an integrated way.

## 3.7    CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined the search strategy, research questions, and selection criteria adapted for the Meta-Synthesis.   The chapter also provided descriptions of the types of studies to be included in the synthesis as well as how the studies were grouped and analysed. The methodological foundations of the Meta-Synthesis were then discussed along with the outline for reporting the findings of the synthesis.

The chapter described how the research focused on the themes and methodologies emerging from the literature to produce a qualitative meta-synthesis that examines the factors supporting adult learners during their post-compulsory educational journeys.  It described how the Meta-synthesis can transform the findings from multiple studies into new interpretations and concepts surrounding the phenomenological, grounded theory or ethnographic approached taken (Polit & Beck, 2006).  Discussion was presented to demonstrate how Meta-Synthesis can create new knowledge from a large number of studies that individually may not have carried the authority to shape the thinking in a particular field by applying validated procedures to the interpretation of existing empirical research (Glaser & Strauss, 1971); (Sandelowski et al., 2006).  This transformation was achieved by developing new interpretations of findings rather than just aggregating the sum or frequency of reported findings in individual studies (Polit & Beck, 2006).  Analysis of the findings of the Meta-Synthesis is discussed in the following chapters.

# Chapter 4: Descriptive Summary of the Findings

This Master of Education dissertation investigates the complex interaction of psychological and structural influences that shape the attitudes and experiences of adult learners as they re-engage and persist through their post-compulsory educational journeys. The study sought to achieve this objective by answering two central questions that focused the research. Those questions are:

1. How are adult learners conceptualised in the literature?

2. What structural and dispositional factors influence adult learners as they re-engage and persist through their post-compulsory educational journeys?

These barriers include both situational or structural barriers, that are extrinsic, and that include time pressures, work and family responsibilities and institutional barriers such as the availability and flexibility of course offerings. The second cluster of barriers are dispositional and intrinsic, and that include anxiety, guilt, study issues, unrealistic expectations and failing to adjust to university life.

The purpose of this synthesis is to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between events and experiences that influence adult learners on their educational journeys. Assimilating the findings of the studies included in this synthesis has informed the development of an integrated model of persistence to success for adult learners that demonstrates how these identified factors can be combined to overcome the barriers to success for adult learners during their personal journeys.

## 4.1    IMPORTANCE OF THE SYNTHESIS

The importance of conducting the synthesis lies in the possible benefits of applying the findings of the study in order to better support adult learners as they persist through their educational journeys. Results of this research examining phenomena related to engaging, persisting, and achieving for adult learners in post-compulsory education may add significantly to the body of current knowledge in the field of Adult learning because currently there are few metasyntheses that

systematically bring together a wide range of studies that address internal, external, structural and socio-demographic factors impacting their educational experiences. Identifying factors surrounding the characteristics of adult learners and their particular needs relating to re-entering and succeeding in educational pursuits may also be of broad benefit to a range of stakeholders. Such findings could be applied by governments, policy makers and educational institutions to develop programs that are better designed, and support structures such as improved access to programs and interventions designed specifically to address adult earner needs, that are better focused, to improve participation and attainment for adult learners (Qld Government, 2012).

## 4.2    ORGANISATION OF THE DISCUSSION

This chapter is organised around the findings relating to the research questions and analyses those findings with the intention of synthesising the individual observations into an integrated metacontextual view of the adult learner's experience during study. The first section of the discussion addresses the first research question and examines how adult learners are conceptualised in the literature and links these definitions to the need to examine the unique factors that impact their educational experiences. Following is the discussion answering the second research question. For convenience the factors identified in the literature in this section are grouped using Cross' (1981) classification of barriers to organise the findings of this synthesis (Connell, 2008a). The three categories to be used are dispositional, situational and institutional. All three may be enabling or constraining in their effects and are therefore identified as either supporting factors or barriers in the narrative. Dispositional factors are intrinsic to the adult learner and include experiences and attitudes that influence the individual learner's resilience such as their motivations, goal setting abilities, self-efficacy and personal coping strategies. The extrinsic categories are situational (or structural) and its subset, institutional factors. The situational category includes time pressures, work and family responsibilities and the institutional category includes the availability and flexibility of course offerings and the support interventions offered by institutions. The chapter begins with a descriptive analysis of how adult learners are conceptualised in the literature reviewed.

## 4.3 RESEARCH QUESTION 1: HOW ARE ADULT LEARNERS CONCEPTUALISED IN THE LITERATURE?

### 4.3.1 Adult learners conceptualised

Any research examining the factors that impact adult learners on their educational journeys must begin with a descriptive analysis of what an "Adult Learner" is, and why they should be considered as different from other learners and have their particular experiences studied. Chapter 2 foregrounded some of the difficulties in relation to defining what adult learners are and differentiating them from their traditional learner colleagues who typically continue from school to higher education and have few responsibilities beyond their studies. The findings presented here in Chapter 4 move the field forward by helping to resolve some of these tensions in the theories of adult learning resulting from varied and idiosyncratic descriptions of the individual populations studied by each author. This chapter also includes a broader range of studies from which the conclusions are drawn. The following section describes the various definitions of adult learners found in the literature.

The term "Adult" has many legal and cultural definitions in countries around the world but these are largely procedural or practical in nature and offer little insight into the experiences of adults while they learn. For the purposes of this synthesis, it is important to understand how adults differ from other traditional students who typically are '18-to 22-year-old, dependent, full-time students coming right out of high school' (Kazis, 2007).

The research reported many characteristics and experiences of adult learners as being distinct from their traditional student counterparts. Adult learners were described in the literature by their responsibilities outside of study including family, work and financial cares as well as the wide range of educational achievements they had prior to re-engaging in study (Kazis, R. et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2011). Kazis (2007) also made much of the time adult learners had taken between leaving school and re-engaging in further study as impacting their experiences and justifying their inclusion in separate studies (Kazis, 2007).

An Australian study focusing on the complex roles that adult learners exhibit proposed that being employed full-time, having family responsibilities and being involved in volunteer activities, significantly differentiates them from their traditional counterparts (Connell, 2008). Further it was proposed that the distinctions between

adult learners and traditional learners were being blurred by a third emerging group that Connell named "adult cognates". Demographic and economic circumstances requiring these adult cognates to work in order to pay for their tuition and contribute to their family households were examined as themes. The circumstances contributing to the emergence of adult cognates were reported as:

"…Similar to adult learners, the cognates were reported as also working with household commitments, single parent issues, and other responsibilities – they were not merely attending university" (Connell, 2008a, p. 272).

This blurring of the commonly used distinct definitions or boundaries between 'traditional' and 'adult' learners is very interesting and has implications that may include the design of educational programs; the teaching methodologies employed and the opportunity to review concepts around Pedagogy and Andragogy in Adult Learning. This theme is developed in detail later in this chapter.

Several studies focussed on the time spent between leaving high school and re-engaging in further study as a defining characteristic of adult learners. Seeing adult learners as being commonly at least 20 years of age and having some break between their studies was supported by Connell (2008a) as well as Kenny, Kidd et al. (2011) and Wyatt (2011). Similarly, Deggs in his 2001 report defined adult learners in terms of their delayed enrolment due to employment. Other features Deggs discussed aligned with Connell's view also. Two examples from the findings include the acknowledgement that adult learners may have dependents in addition to a partner and also, adult learners are typically financially independent. A significant variation of this theme was the observation that many adult learners had not obtained a standard high school diploma (Deggs, 2011 p 1543).

This observation is consistent with the findings from many studies that focused on "disadvantaged" or "marginalised" adult learners. It is apparent from the findings of these studies that many definitions of adult learners will be crafted from the specific circumstances of the subject populations from each study. However, this does not reduce the importance of attempting to define the similarities of these learners, or to be able to apply the broad commonalities identified to future studies in different contexts. For example multiple roles and responsibilities along with at least one job were themes explored by both De Vito (2010) and Connell (2008) in their studies. A

contrasting view was suggested by Kazis et al. in their 2007 study in defining adult learners as:

> "Students over age twenty-four…financially independent, work part time or full time, have dependents, and must juggle many responsibilities with school." A further variant described adult learners as "employees who study" and who "…tend to be older, work more, attend school less, and have family responsibilities, compared to their [younger] peers whose primary activity was being a student" (Kazis, 2007 p2).

This classification of adult learners as over twenty-four years of age is a significant departure from many of the other reviewed studies, which chose to define adult learners as over either twenty or twenty-one years of age. The notion of using twenty-one as a benchmark may be consistent with cultural views of adulthood being achieved at that age, but is inconsistent with legal definitions in Australia and elsewhere as having attained eighteen years of age. The definition described in Kazis and colleagues (Kazis, 2007) may have been proposed to reflect the view that adult learners have dependents and family responsibilities, as well as being financially independent, although this is not explained in the report.

This view is supported by Wyatt in her study (2011), Non-traditional Student Engagement: Increasing Adult Student Success and Retention. Wyatt defined adult learners as "Non-traditional Students aged 25 and above" (Wyatt, 2011). The simplicity of the definition is compelling, but two factors oppose the use of the definition. The generic nature of the definition doesn't reflect the complexity reported in other studies to significantly influence adult learners. Secondly, the study is very specific to its context in the USA and may not translate into the experiences of adult learners in other countries. In contrast and of particular interest is the definition described in an Australian study by Kenny et al. in their 2011 journal article which described Mature Age Students thusly:

> Within the vocational education and training (VET) and university sectors, mature age students are most commonly defined as over 21 years of age…Mature age students have generally experienced at least one job or career pathway during the time since leaving secondary

school and many have dependent children and major financial responsibilities (Kenny et al., 2011 p 107).

What is clear from synthesising the findings in these varied approaches to identifying adult learners is that age is not the key determinant of adult learner status. Age is merely one indicator that conveniently allows researchers to classify learners as being either traditional or adult. The weakness in this practice is the overwhelming evidence that what defines adult learners are the shared characteristics relating to their personal, family, educational and employment situations and that more interestingly there seems to be an emergent blurring of the distinctions between adult and traditional learners as reported in one study (Connell, 2008a).

This is revealed by the reports of younger students taking on multiple roles apart from study due to financial and family constraints and older students who may demonstrate the lack of experience and academic maturity common to traditional learners. This merging of characteristics is examined in a later section where the implications for program design and teaching methodologies are discussed.

As a result of this integration of concepts I propose that adult learners should be defined by the following five (5) characteristics:

1. Returning to study after a period in the industry;

2. Employed prior to, or during, re-engagement in study;

3. Multiple roles apart from being a student;

4. Financially independent;

5. Responsible for partners, children and other family members.

When combined these identified characteristics of adult learners provide context to the competing pressures and personal circumstances that challenge adult learners. This conceptualisation clearly sets the scene for the need to answer the second research question. Now that a clear description of the factors that make adult learners different from traditional students (Wyatt, 2011) has been established the narrative will turn to examining the events and effects that shape their educational journeys when re-engaging in formal study.

### 4.3.2 Intrinsic factors impacting adult learners as they re-engage throughout their educational journey.

Three intrinsic factors are discussed in this section. They are: Motivation; Self-efficacy; and Meta-cognitive frameworks. The first topic examined is the sum of influences that define the individual adult learner at the point of re-engaging in study. This concept that adults re-enter study with a developed set of attitudes that will influence their ability to overcome educational barriers describes a set of intrinsic factors that will have a positive or negative impact on their success. Although these intrinsic factors are closely associated with the learner's sense of self, they can be moderated both by reflection during study and the intervention of external influences.

### 4.3.3 Motivation to re-engage in learning.

Findings of the studies synthesised show that the decision to re-engage in learning for adults is shaped by a range of powerful individual circumstances and environmental factors. The motivation to learn may be intrinsic or extrinsic but those reasons have a significant impact on adult learning and success (Bandura, 1993; De Vito, 2010; Goto & Martin, 2009). According to the findings intrinsic motivators may include the desire to improve one's-self; the desire to master skills; the desire provide for one's family/loved ones, or the desire to be a role model for one's children or peers. By contrast, extrinsic motivators may include a range of practical factors such as: being a requirement of one's job; the opportunity for advancement; access to higher rates of pay; and access to employment or career change. The individual adult learner's motivation to re-enter study and achieve a successful educational outcome, along with the ability to set goals and conceptualise their achievements is reported as fundamental in developing a psychological outlook that favours persistence to success for adult learners (Goto & Martin, 2009).

The results of these studies show that the desire to re-engage in learning is tempered by a range of identified enabling or constraining factors that adult learners face as they attempt to integrate and persist through their learning journey. These factors were described in the literature as: institutional, informational, situational, or psychological (Goto & Martin, 2009); individual, academic, and social (Tinto, 1987b); as well as educational expectations, academic motivation, and goal commitment (Durkheim, 1974; Tinto, 1975). Each author approached their research from a particular conceptual framework resulting in differing factors being identified. It

remains however that the examples reported fall into the categories proposed by Cross (1981) and are aggregated in the discussion. The findings of Goto & Martin cover all three categories while Tinto and Durkheim cover dispositional and institutional categories.

The findings from other authors also indicated what they referred to as structural factors, encompassing issues such as the location of institutions; the availability and timing of course offerings; enrolment and administrative processes; tutorial support; financial aid offered and the opportunity to engage in college life through social and group activities (Angelino et al., 2007; Baum & Milem, 2006; Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008; De Vito, 2010;). These constraining factors faced by adult learners and the enabling strategies that helped them overcome them and persist to succeed in their studies is discussed in detail in the remainder of this chapter. The remainder of this section will examine the adult learner from a psychological (dispositional) perspective at the start of their re-engagement into study.

### 4.3.4 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a concept expounded in this literature by Bandura and others to describe the sum of the adult learner's experiences that forms a belief that they can succeed in a task or pursuit. In this case the successful completion of a course of study or qualification. This state of self-efficacy, at the commencement of study, can be re-enforced or eroded by subsequent experiences during the program (Bandura, 1993; Goto & Martin, 2009). The following section will examine in detail how Self-Efficacy is developed and how it influences the adult learner's resilience upon re-entering study.

Several scholars adopted this framework in examining the experiences of adult learners in their research (Bremer et al., 2011; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kirk et al., 2009; Vuong et al., 2010). Bandura expounded the view that psychological factors influence how students respond to the barriers to educational success:

> "…There are three different levels at which perceived self-efficacy operates as an important contributor to academic development. Students' beliefs in their efficacy to regulate their own learning and to master academic activities determine their aspirations, level of motivation, and academic accomplishments" (Bandura, 1993 p117).

In these studies, phenomena were examined in terms of the way a person's self-efficacy; that is, self-conception of one's ability to succeed based on life-long experience, moderated by the influence of other factors that impacted success or the over-coming of barriers to success in the past. For example Goto and Martin (2009) considered goal setting, motivation, and self-efficacy in relation to the social context of the learner. The finding indicated that barriers to engaging and succeeding in further education may be institutional, informational, situational, or psychological and that self-esteem and locus of control strongly influence how adults perceive their ability to succeed in their studies. Finally, the authors concluded that goal setting, motivation, and self-efficacy influence the ways that adults approach various types of barriers.

Goto and Martin's (2009) meta-contextual approach recognises the influences that prior experiences of success and failure during an adult's life have in shaping their attitudes and responses to new educational challenges. This idea of influences having an effect over time was also utilised and expanded by Tinto in his work, which focused on the longitudinal effect of experiences on the learner's attitude and resilience in their studies (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's theories will be discussed in detail, and challenged later in this chapter.

One theme emerging from the findings of these studies was the assertion that any examination of the experiences of adult learners through their educational journeys must be centred in the metacontext of their lives, including their families, peer groups and work environments, in order to understand the dynamics at play (Bremer et al., 2011; Goto & Martin, 2009; Vuong et al., 2010). The authors concluded that research must consider the interplay of all of the psychological and structural influences in determining how adult learners build motivation and self-efficacy and form education-related goals is significant, and justifies descriptive meta-synthesis as the appropriate methodology for this study as it allows all of these influences in the one study. Empirical research must be conducted within practical boundaries that include available resources and time that result in studies being narrowly defined and focusing on limited parameters such as theories; hypotheses; factors or interventions. It has simply been beyond the scope of recent research to examine all of the interactions that influence adult learners in a single study. Such a study would not be possible in terms of practice and depth of inquiry with appropriate academic rigour. Descriptive Meta-Synthesis, as a methodology, provides the opportunity to combine the recent research

covering a wide range of factors into a single view of the sum of those influences on adult learners[3].

## 4.3.5 Metacognitive frameworks

Researchers have observed that adults develop individual learning styles and critical thinking abilities over the course of their lives and in the metacontext of their family, culture and work history (Goto & Martin, 2009; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Schraw & Moshman, 1995). These established frameworks of learning that adults bring with them when re-engaging in study can have a positive or negative effect on academic success for the adult learner depending on whether the sum of their previous experiences were positive or negative. The significance of this observation has driven the need to understand how an individual's learning profile will interact with the academic challenges of study. Three metacognitive frameworks were identified by Schraw and Moshman in 1995 and were examined in the context of how adults develop their own learning style by Kenner and Weinerman (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Schraw & Moshman, 1995). They proposed that of the three identified metacognitive frameworks: tacit theory, informal theory, and formal theory, only tacit and informal theory are relevant to adult learners when re-engaging in study. It was argued that formal theory only operates in higher levels of academic pursuit and was therefore not relevant to examinations of learner experiences when entering or re-engaging in study (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

### *Tacit versus Informal theory*

Tacit theory describes the unstructured development of learning styles for adults through the associations within their social context including family, friends, teachers and cultural norms. These frameworks are deeply integrated into the learner's approach and attitude to learning and may have a detrimental effect on academic success and integration into college life, such as when the learning processes themselves are unsound, or the attitudes to authority or learning itself are negative or adversarial. The influences of role models during the development of these frameworks are significant and can also be either positive or negative. The cumulative effects of these contributing factors can be difficult to change or modify when re-

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[3] See discussion of Meta-Synthesis in Chapter Three for more on how multiple findings can be integrated.

engaging in study as they are deeply embedded and form part of the learner's construct of self (Bandura, 1993).

In contrast, informal theory attends to a developmental process that is more conscious of the metacognitive framework experienced by the learner and recognises the connection between effort and reward in learning. Reported studies suggest that much of the development of informal metacognitive skills of adult learners may occur in the work environment. Workers progress through their role in an organisation by the acquisition of skills, experience and knowledge (Buchler et al., 2006). These transitions result in attributions of wisdom and respect, and engagement in reward programs in the workplace and these associations have a positive influence on the learner's attitude to further study and their motivation to persist and succeed. The relative strengths or weaknesses of the learning frameworks with which adult learners re-engage in study can be maximised by the integration of principles of andragogy in the design and delivery of learning content as well as the programs of study and administrative processes offered by institutions (Jass, 2012).

The following section begins the discussion of extrinsic factors influencing adult learners during their educational journeys and includes situational and institutional categories. As described earlier these factors can be enabling or constraining in their effects and will be considered as identified barriers to success and the reported strategies utilised to moderate their effects.

## 4.4 EXTRINSIC FACTORS INFLUENCING ADULT LEARNERS DURING THEIR EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

The extrinsic factors described here cover two categories. The first category is "Institutional" which includes: the design of programs that fail to meet the needs of adult learners; the degree of adult integration in college life – a factor for adult learner success and modifying administrative processes to accommodate the needs of adult learners. The second category is "Situational" which includes: personal and family factors influencing adult learners and structural factors relating to employment and employers.

### 4.4.1 Designing programs to meet the needs of adult learners

The following section investigates how the design of programs accessed by adult learners can have either an enabling or constraining influence on their resilience and

persistence to success during their educational journeys. The characteristics of adult learners that were enumerated in chapter 2 clearly indicate that the needs and learning styles of adult learners are quite different to those of traditional learners. The findings presented here report that adult learners can be assisted by the inclusion of adult learning principles in the design of programs for adult learners. The institutional factors described here are contextualised by a discussion of adult learning theory in the first section. The relative strengths or weaknesses of the learning frameworks with which adult learners re-engage in study can be maximised by the integration of principles of andragogy in the design and delivery of learning content as well as the programs of study and administrative processes offered by institutions (Jass, 2012).

### Knowles and adult learning theory

A significant body of research has been conducted and is available for scholars and practitioners to use in the development of educational programs and teaching practice since the seminal work of Knowles in the 1970s and 1980s, which set the scene for examining the unique characteristics and learning needs of adult learners (Knowles, 1970; Knowles & Bard, 1984). The work of Knowles is important because he was the theorist who articulated the principle of andragogy, which describes adult learners as having different characteristics to inquiry than children. The implications of these differences to teaching and learning were described from a humanistic orientation that proposed self-actualisation as the prime objective of adult learning in other words the objective of educators was primarily to facilitate adult learners to achieve their full potential as intellectual beings. Knowles described six assumptions about adults as learners (Kiely et al., 2004):

1. In terms of their self-concept, adults tend to see themselves as more responsible, self-directed, and independent.

2. They have a larger, more diverse stock of knowledge and experience to draw from.

3. Their readiness to learn is based on developmental and real-life responsibilities.

4. Their orientation to learning is most often problem-centered and relevant to their current life situation.

5. They have a stronger need to know the reasons for learning something.

6.    They tend to be more internally motivated.

Rather than viewing these characteristics as being potential barriers to learning for adults that must be overcome individually, the collective weight of the research reviewed here suggests that the development of programs with a focus on adult learning theory must reflect the fact that adult learning occurs in the context of personal and institutional interactions that can enhance or inhibit the success of the those educational endeavours (Merriam, 2008).  In short you can't use a template to design a generic program that will meet the needs of adult learners.  According to Merriam, the approach must be to provide curriculum that has flexibility at its heart so that the journey to successful outcomes may be negotiated to some extent by the participants in the program as well as the teachers delivering the content while maintaining appropriate academic rigour and assessment requirements.

### *Andragogy in practice*

The findings of several studies listed below indicate that andragogy in the classroom manifests itself in content that relates to the individual's experience and needs while being flexible in its delivery.  The elements of this approach were described as including the provision of opportunities for adult learners to exercise autonomy and self-directedness in their choice of programs and the focus of study within those programs.  Facilitating increased autonomy on the part of adult learners in this way was described as being effective in increasing motivation to participate in programs and being strengthened by the type of learning activities that teachers use to construct knowledge.  Attention to learning style preferences and the sequence in which content is introduced was also reported as being utilised to positively influence the experiences of adult learners in the classroom (Dewitt, 2003; Kiely et al., 2004; Townsend, 2008).  These concepts were also reflected in a study by Peach (2010) which proposed a curriculum that focused on problem-solving and activity-based instruction that connected the learning content with authentic work-based issues and experiences would maximise the success for adult learners (Peach, 2010).

This reported need to make meaningful connections between the knowledge and experience gained in life and the content of study is a common thread in both adult learning theory and the findings of these studies.  Critical reflection as a practice is discussed in each of the studies listed above as a strategy that allows adult learners to connect content with their existing knowledge and experiences and integrate the results

of this transformative learning into their behaviours and personal story. Incorporating the development of critical reflexive practice and the opportunity to engage in the practice with others was reported as an important factor in making learning relevant to adults (Merriam, 2008).

### 4.4.2 Degree of adult integration in college life – a factor for adult learner success.

*The factors of engagement and integration contrasted*

This section should perhaps begin with an examination of two words that appear together throughout the research on this topic: Engagement and Integration. Engagement in this context refers to attendance and participation in activities and communities rather than an examination of intellectual and emotional engagement which is far more complex and subjective to measure. The terms engagement and integration appear interchangeable, yet there are functional differences between the terms that are clarified here. Engagement is an observable behaviour that is demonstrated by learners participating in activities and groups, and is therefore easily measureable and is more objective. In contrast, integration is a 'state or perception of fit' or in other words the achievement of a sense of belonging to the college community and adoption of the community's values and beliefs, which are, as a result, far more intangible and difficult to measure (Schlinsog, 2010; Tinto, 1993). This section will discuss how this integration or alignment of values and sense of belonging can positively influence educational outcomes for adult learners.

*Integration into college life conceptualized*

There are two contending aspects of integration into college life that will be examined in this section. The degree to which learners integrate into the various aspects of college life will result in either a positive and supportive force that encourages success, or in the case of reduced or absent integration, a negative influence that may hinder the learner's ability to overcome the barriers they face during their study. This phenomenon is not exclusive in its effect on adult learners, but can influence learners of any kind entering or re-entering study in higher education and Vocational Education and Training. The following description frames the discussion of how integration can influence learner success.

Integration into college life is a phenomenon examined by Tinto and shown to have a significant effect on the learner's resilience and subsequent ability to overcome

challenges faced during study. Institutions that can foster identification with the college community and values particularly during the first semester of study have been reported as assisting learners persist to success in their educational journeys (Tinto, 1993). It has been described by the researchers cited in this section that learners transitioning from one cultural milieu into the culture of life at college experience 'affiliation needs' that compel them to make connections in both the academic and social aspects of their educational experience as they incorporate the new culture's values and behaviours into their own (Schlinsog, 2010).

The studies also describe gender and race[4] as significant factors or triggers in manifesting the sense of 'otherness' or not belonging. This can hinder integration and success and 'affiliation needs', and as a result, are greater in learners who identify as belonging to a marginalised demographic in their national or cultural context (Buchler et al., 2006). The examination of this topic is important for adult learners because the intervention of time on their educational path often leaves them vulnerable to feelings of self-doubt and otherness when they regard themselves as part of the cohort of students they join. It follows that as the strength of the barrier is emphasised in other non-traditional learner cohorts, so too the enhancement realised by encouraging integration at every opportunity will likewise be increased for adult learners. The aspect of integration that is a barrier to success will be examined in detail in a later section of this chapter. This discussion will focus on the positive impact of encouraging integration and participation for adult learners.

### *Tinto's model of student integration examined*

Perhaps the most significant development of the concept illustrating the enhancing effect of integration into college life has been the work of Tinto who has been both lauded and criticised since his early work in the mid-1970s. Early Tinto studies focused on the reasons for withdrawal from study, proposing that a lack of integration into the college community or a dissonance in values, either espoused or in practice, would lead to learners failing to persist in their studies (Tinto, 1975). This theme was re-focused and expanded by several scholars seeking to find a causal effect in learners who integrate into college life and persist to success in their studies (Aihara,

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[4] Issues relating to gender and race as well as socio-economic status appear throughout the literature as factors influencing educational success but are not explicitly examined in this thesis as they deserve to be studied in their own right. They will be discussed in the section 'recommendations for future study'.

2011; Astin, 1993; Connell, 2008b; Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010; Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009; Wyatt, 2011). In later work Tinto reframed his focus and clearly stated his theory:

> "…involvement or what has been frequently been described as academic and social integration, is a condition for student success. Quite simply, the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate." (Tinto, 1993, p.2).

This statement of Tinto's hypothesis realigns his original theoretical construct with contemporary studies that focus on the positive impact of supports and interventions that will enhance learner success. The concept of learner success is discussed later in this chapter as a separate section.

Numerous benefits have been ascribed to integration into college life beyond merely persisting in study long enough to graduate. The range of beneficial outcomes from integration identified in the research is broad and includes improvements in: general abilities and critical thinking, practical competence and skills transferability, cognitive development, self-esteem, psychosocial development, productive racial and gender identity formation, moral and ethical development, student satisfaction, improved grades, persistence and accrual of social capital (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). The research indicates that learners' perceptions of the benefits experienced change over time as they become more closely invested in the culture and values of the institution.

Tinto reported that the timing of interventions by institutions to promote integration were most effective in the first semester of study. Other references to the effectiveness of strategies being affected by the time at which they are introduced suggest the time and timing may be a situational factor in its own right. Once again time and timing of interventions is reported as having both enhancing and constraining effects on adult learner resilience and persistence to success. A short examination of the findings relating to time is discussed here.

### *Timing of interventions promoting integration – influence on adult leaner success*

Discussions in longitudinal studies that examine the changing experiences of integration, satisfaction and success have revealed that a learner's state of integration is not static, nor can it be identified at a point in time where the transition to integration

has occurred. The findings of the studies cited below indicate that the individual's experience of integration develops on a continuum that is the unique product of their on-going growth and sense of self. It must follow then that the learner's experience of integration can be influenced or impacted by events and interventions at any point on their continuum. In other words, positive and negative experiences on this journey as well as interventions by the institution can enhance or inhibit the individual's developing integration or perceived state of integration. Examples of these events might include the offer of support from faculty or social groups, or the on-going achievement of a strong grade point average over time (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Tinto, 1975, 1987a; Tinto, 1993). The proposition that the perceived state of integration and persistence may change over time is supported by Deggs in the statement that the "… barriers are never extinct for adult learners and they must work to consistently overcome or manage barriers which emerge from their multiple life roles" (Deggs, 2011 p1549).

Earlier in this section, I reported that the benefit of integration into college life is not exclusive in its effect on adult learners, but is rather typical in its effect on all learners entering or re-entering study in higher education. It was also reported that adult learners are particularly susceptible when re-engaging in study because the intervention of time on their educational path often leaves them vulnerable to feelings of self-doubt and otherness when they regard themselves as part of the cohort of students they join. This observation that all learners are very vulnerable upon engaging or re-engaging in study, along with the proposition that experiences and interventions can influence the achievement of integration, suggests that there is an optimum time - the first year of study - for effort and resources to be expended in encouraging learners to broadly and deeply engage in college life and foster their achievement of integration.

Quite simply, the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate. This is especially true during the first year of university study when student membership is so tenuous yet so critical to subsequent learning and persistence. Involvement during that year serves as the foundation upon which subsequent affiliations and engagements are built (Tinto, 1993).

The effectiveness of interventions in the first year of study is supported by findings that increased contact with faculty and peers during this period, counterbalances students' poor learning characteristics that might otherwise lead them

to drop out of study (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). The findings propose that these learned responses to compensate for intrinsic weaknesses may become incorporated into the learner's sense-of-self and academic strategy, and continue to be a positive influence in overcoming difficulties throughout the remainder of their studies (Kuh, 2009; Schlinsog, 2010; Tinto, 1975, 1987a; Tinto, 1993).

These propositions regarding the benefits of integration into college life, although widely accepted, are refuted in some of the literature and questioned even in some of the studies that have adopted and developed these theories and ideas in their own research. One area of contention lies in the nature of 'integration' and the difficulty of measuring the extent to which a learner has integrated into college life, as Crisp argues:

> Constructs such as social and academic integration are not yet fully understood in regard to their impact on community college student persistence (Crisp, 2010, p 43).

Findings regarding Tinto's (1993) constructs of institutional and goal commitment are not clearly theorised in relation to their influences on post-schooling persistence to success, with some findings revealing a positive relationship (e.g., Mulligan & Hennessy, 1990; Nora, 1987), while other results showing a minimal influence (Crisp, 2010).

Inconsistencies in the findings of research applying Tinto's model have led to calls for the model to be revised to make the theoretical model more internally consistent (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Several reviews of empirical tests of Tinto's original (1975) model report that some of Tinto's proposals may not transfer into other educational contexts. The main criticism was that Tinto's model was based on the experiences of traditional students in 4-year, residential institutions, and that these findings might not translate to other types of colleges such as Career and Technical Education (CTE), and students seeking academic majors at 2-year institutions (Bremer et al., 2011). As a result, a modified model was proposed that incorporated the learner's characteristics upon entering study, as well as the internal and external environments in which the study took place, to analyse the decisions taken by adult learners to persist in study (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005).

Since the publication in 1984 of the (US) National Institute of Education's Involvement in Learning Report, many reports from notable organisations, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training, (2004) have accepted that the 'engagement improves outcomes' proposition is no longer questioned (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). In order to surmount the stated concerns above, the final word on this debate goes to Kuh: "… virtually every report … emphasised to varying degrees the important link between student engagement and desired outcomes of college" (Kuh, 2009, p 684).

Perhaps the key factor identified through this volume of research is the ability of institutions to establish an educational community that encompasses both academic and social *opportunities* for learners to become involved with academics and peers. This is a significant point as it is a shared responsibility between the institute and the learner to create this environment. The institution can allocate resources to make opportunities available to learners, but it is the individual learner that must make decisions that promote integration with college life by choosing to seek out and join those activities that foster positive outcomes for them (Astin, 1993; Schlinsog, 2010; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

This section has investigated the proposition that the situational category of integrating into the academic and social community at college can help learners to overcome potentially negative characteristics they bring with them to study, and develop strategies that will continue to assist them to overcome the barriers they face in persisting in their educational pursuits. It was reported that the most effective time to encourage engagement and provide opportunities and interventions for learners is during the first year of study when all students are most vulnerable. It was described how the benefits of successfully integrating into college life had benefits far broader than supporting persistence to success, including improved performance and development in a range of academic, psychological and social areas. Finally, concerns on the broader application of findings from studies applying Tinto's model and internal inconsistencies of the model, were also addressed.

### Modifying administrative processes to accommodate the needs of adult learners

An earlier section examined in some detail how the principles of Adult Learning Theory could be incorporated into the design and delivery of programs to help Adult

learners engage and persist to success in their studies. It is perhaps not surprising that this discussion both overlaps and points to extrinsic strategies and interventions that institutions might employ from an administrative perspective to achieve the same goals. This section will discuss how a range of administrative processes may be designed with the principles of Andragogy in mind to make the experience of Adult learners engaging in study easier and more in tune with their circumstances and expectations. The elements of these administrative processes to be discussed are:

- Attracting adult learners to programs through tailored admission processes

- Restructure of administration departments

Just as the educational needs of adults are different to those of younger cohorts continuing directly from school to higher educational pursuits, so too are their needs in terms of the administrative processes that support them during their studies. It is perhaps logical to discuss these issues in a way that reflects the interaction between the adult learner and the administrative functions of the institution over time and in chronological order.

### *Attracting adult learners to programs through tailored admission processes*

The first opportunity to positively influence adult learners comes in the provision of relevant and comprehensive information that assists in the pre-enrolment decision. Adult learners have been characterised by some as 'consumers of education' who shop around, often on-line, to find the institution and program that best suits their individual needs (Giles, 2012). The literature cited here identifies a range of factors that influence the adult learner's decision to enrol in a particular program of study or institution. The reported factors include information such as: course offerings; flexibility in program design; entry requirements; enrolment modes; delivery modes; class schedules; reputation and standing; credit arrangements and articulation; costs; financial aid; student facilities; student support services; transportation; child care arrangements and employment outcomes are cited as areas of concern for adult learners making the decision to enrol in a particular program in a particular institution (Buchler et al., 2006; De Vito, 2010; Gidley et al., 2010; Longden, 2006; Tinto, 1987b).

These studies report that students who can pick from a wide variety of options to meet their educational needs require a range of marketing information to help them navigate through those choices to select the right program. Further, positioning that

information in spaces likely to be accessed by adult learners requires an investment in technology, staff and administrative structures to ensure program viability (Giles, 2012; Lawler & King, 2003).  Giles (2012), reports that the vast majority of information available to assist prospective students to make this important decision is however focused on the needs of traditional students who are likely to be transitioning from school and attending study full-time with few other demands on their time and energies.  It is reported that there is a need for institutions to focus on issues relating to adult participation as well as collecting and recording information based on enrolment, progression and completion rates, and employment and salary outcomes for adult learners from those programs  (De Vito, 2010; Kazis, 2007).

The findings indicate two other important types of information are relevant to adult learners at this decision phase.  Arrangements allowing for academic transfer of credit for previous study and learning gained in the workplace as well as articulation of courses or cross-sector mobility are seen as important for adult learners.  Adults need to feel that their accumulated experience and earlier study achievements will be recognised when entering new programs and that they will have the opportunity to choose their own learning pathway by building a program that meets their individual training and career needs (Soney, 2003).  Finally, the studies show that the information developed for adult learners must expressly address issues of flexibility in the delivery of programs such as offering courses that aren't confined to traditional schedules and are available in evenings and on weekends as well as utilising a range of technologies to make course work available to adults in their own time (Soney, 2003).

### *Restructure of administration departments*

Administration departments and systems that manage programs for adult learners are reported as having to face several challenges in developing strategies that will enhance the success of those adult learners.  The first priority is perhaps to foster the support and endorsement of the highest levels of leadership within the institution. Key stakeholders must be identified and engaged if the administration systems are to be resourced and sustained appropriately to ensure alignment with the needs of adult learners (Jass, 2012; Soney, 2003; Timarong, Temaungil, & Sukrad, 2002).  A further challenge emerging from these studies is the need to move from a faculty-centred approach to administration that is centralised and focused on semester-based yearlong programs, to a student-centred approach that allows for discrete programs that have

non-standard durations and multiple entry and exit points for participants (Giles, 2012; Soney, 2003).

One key issue reported is that the administrative functions required to manage programs for traditional students are incompatible with those required for adult learners because the skillsets for both traditional and adult focused program administration are specific enough to make gaining the expertise to manage both types of programs difficult for a single practitioner to master. The challenges created by these special characteristics may advocate for the separation of administrative functions for adult programs [and programs engaged in by adult learners] and traditional programs. Although this situation is exactly the response many institutions have adopted, it may be that separating the functions in this way could cause problems as the systems compete for resources and do not see themselves as cooperating to achieve shared organisational goals.

One study suggests an alternate strategy that would avoid these problems. In it the findings propose that a system, capitalising on the efficiencies of a centralised approach whilst concurrently allowing enough flexibility and autonomy to respond to adult needs would be an optimum solution. Such administrative systems would comprise integrating both general administrative staff with specific adult program staff, in conjunction with forming ad hoc relationships with academic staff who can be called on to provide specific information and advice to adult learners (Jass, 2012).

One study reported a key issue for administrative systems required to maintain the viability of programs for adult learners is the ability to monitor and respond to external factors that impact on the demand and design of programs sought by adult learners (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). The ability to analyse this environmental scanning data and apply it to the development and promotion of programs aligned to adult learner needs is wasted if the internal processes of the organisation cannot respond accordingly.

> "…This is not the world of the traditional academy, where life has an unhurried, more orderly pace, and where things are slow to change. This is the busy world of adult education—where the needs of adult students and their employers can quickly change and where those who market and offer adult education have to keep their fingers on the pulse of a rapidly changing world.

Adult degree programs require administrative structures that allow them to function efficiently and respond effectively." (Giles, 2012 p. 51)

Jass (2012) identified three types of responsive speed as essential for administration systems to function effectively. First is innovation speed, which describes the system's ability to respond with new programs that benchmark best practice in a given field. Second is identified as processing speed, which reflects the time an organisation takes to implement and integrate change. Finally is recovery speed, which describes the amount of time taken by the system to respond to problems and correct mistakes whether in the design or processes related to programs (Jass, 2012).

The previous section has described the many ways in which the extrinsic, situational factors relating to administrative departments and systems in institutions can be modified to support adult learners as they enrol and persist through their educational journeys. The discussion of institutional factors influencing the success of adult learners is now complete. The descriptive synthesis now moves to the discussion of findings that are categorised as situational factors including Family, Social and Workplace factors that influence adult learner success.

### 4.4.3 Situational Category

Two situational categories are discussed here:

- Personal and family factors influencing adult learners

- Situational factors relating to employment and employers

Several points must be addressed at the beginning of this section. In Chapter 2 a range of barriers experienced by adult learners during their educational journeys were identified and described from a theoretical and operational perspective. The discussion covered the characteristics of the barriers and criticised the studies for examining the influence of those barriers on the learner in isolation or at best in a narrow context of influence. This discussion was illuminating however because it clearly demonstrated the range of factors that adult learners had to contend with while re-engaging and persisting through their studies as well as examining the impact of these factors on their psychology, lives and resilience (Bremer et al., 2011).

A further benefit of this discussion was the framing of these barriers as applying to adult learners rather than their traditional aged fellow students. In other words

because the barriers were unique to adult learners the significance of the studies and the drivers for examining potential strategies and interventions to overcome them was emphasised. The main criticism of the studies and the results reported was that the findings needed to be framed in the meta-context of the adult learners' lives in order to truly represent the complexity of the interactions at play (Goto & Martin, 2009). A further proposal in Chapter 2 was for the nature of the interactions and their relative strengths to be examined and better understood so appropriate interventions could be proposed and applied when they would have greatest effect (Tinto, 1993).

### *Situational Barriers identified in the literature*

The following figure (Figure 4.1), represents the environmental barriers reported in the review as being faced by adult learners as a separate and distinct set of phenomena that exert a negative influence on individuals during their studies. The findings report that in isolation, the cumulative effect of these factors could overwhelm the learner and possibly lead them to disengage from their studies (Baum & Milem, 2006; Deggs, 2011; Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2009). These factors do not however operate in isolation but rather interact in a complex and dynamic way with all of the other phenomena identified in this review. The interaction is described as dynamic because the relative influence of each interaction as well as their timing and duration will result in a net state of resilience at a given time that will shape the learner's ability to overcome those barriers. This state of persistence is not static but changes over time as new influences and experiences arise and supports and interventions are offered (Frey Johnson, 2011; Kelley-Hall, 2010; Tinto, 1993).

In the preceding section Cross' (1981) classifications of barriers was utilised for convenience in summarising the phenomena discussed. Connell (2008) and other authors reviewed in this thesis used this approach as the starting point for their examinations also (Connell, 2008a; Deggs, 2011). The three categories identified by Cross are Situational Barriers, Dispositional Barriers and Institutional Barriers. Dispositional barriers relate to the psychological barriers experienced by learners and will not be revisited here as they do not fall into the categories of situational factors and have been examined in detail in the preceding section. They do appear in the summary diagrams as some situational strategies have the effects of ameliorating the influence of those constraining factors. For consistency these classifications will be

used again here to recount the barriers discussed in this review.  Figure 4.1 summarises the barriers identified in the studies reviewed.

## Situational Barriers

- Time pressures
- Family responsibilities
- Financial constraints
- Balancing multiple roles
- Health problems
- Learning issues
- Study issues
- Transportation issues

## Dispositional Barriers

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feelings of isolation
- Self-doubt
- Adjusting to university
- Fear of tests
- Feelings of anxiety
- Unrealistic expectations
- Lack of energy
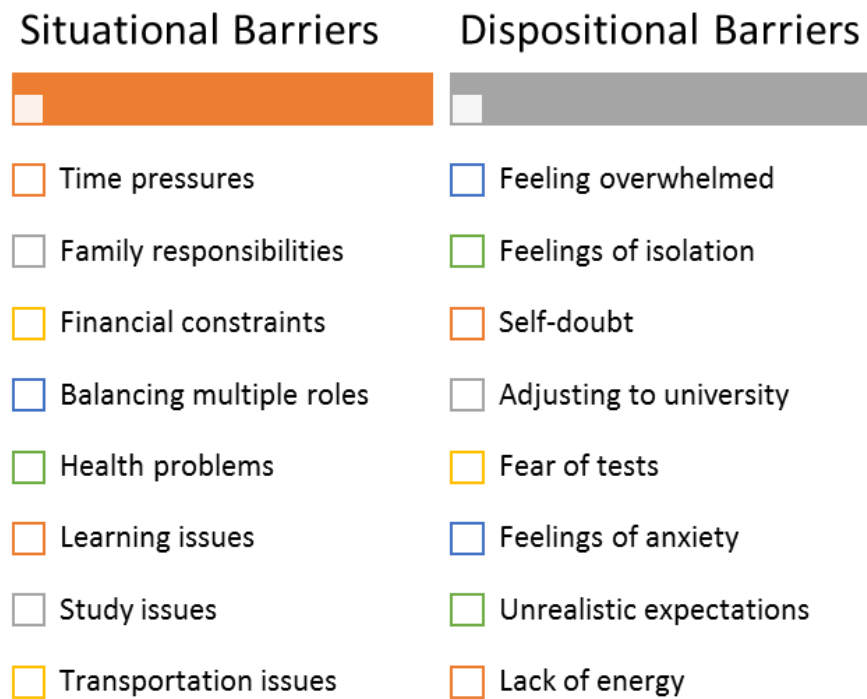
*Figure 4.1*. Brief description of Environmental and Dispositional Barriers experienced by adult learners adapted from (Connell, 2008a).

### *Extrinsic factor 1: Personal and familial factors influencing adult learners*

One theme found throughout the literature is that adult learners with support networks in place experienced significantly less severe reactions to these dispositional and situational factors (Brown, 2001; Dayton, 2005; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Kenny et al., 2011).  These support networks included family, friends, and fellow students, faculty, mentors, and workplace supporters such as managers who may themselves be engaged in study and therefore advocate support strategies.   Adult learners were found to differ from their traditional student colleagues by more frequently employing proactive and cooperative strategies to improve their academic performance (Crisp, 2010; Deggs, 2011; Horton, 2010).  This tendency for adults to actively seek out opportunities for collaboration and support to overcome difficulties is a common theme reported in these studies and will examine in detail in the following section.

### *Family support networks as a situational factor to overcome constraining influences*

Adult learners were also shown to have used their family support networks to provide practical assistance in meeting their home responsibilities. Partners, children, parents, grandparents and friends were all called upon to provide help with activities ranging from cooking and cleaning to editing papers and driving children to their activities. Learners with financial means were sometimes able to engage help with some of these duties while those with financial difficulties received monetary assistance from those family members (Connell, 2008a; Quimby & O'brien, 2004; Wolf, 2011).

Adult learners were shown to be able to utilise multiple support strategies to gain the flexibility they needed to overcome the barriers experienced during their studies. The key takeaway from the reported findings here is that these benefits and ability to overcome difficulties were experienced the entire subject populations studied. The same benefits were experienced regardless of gender, marital status or ethnic background. The implications of this conclusion are that finding opportunities to encourage and foster these relationships and strategies will have measurable and broad benefits for all adult learners in all educational contexts (Wolf, 2011).

Dayton in her 2005 study of adult success in community colleges pointed to an overlap between the situational and institutional factors described in her study by identifying the opportunity for institutions to engage family and friends in such support networks. Institutions can excite supporters and encourage their active participation by hosting events that demonstrate course content and illustrate the employment benefits of successful completion (Dayton, 2005). Such awareness and engagement campaigns might offer significant opportunities to increase integration and a sense of shared values between institutions and learners and their key relationship members.

The discussion now moves to an investigation of the range of strategies that employers can offer to support adult learners.

### *Extrinsic situational factor 2: Work and employment factors influencing adult learners*

One of the commonly defined characteristics of adult learners in the studies reviewed here is their engagement in employment while studying. The twin faces of this engagement are financial rewards that may allow access to study and meeting

living expenses while placing a significant burden on the learner in terms of finding the time to devote to study in the face of work commitments (Kazis, 2007). These competing priorities for time demanded by the learner's multiple roles indicate there is an opportunity for employers to influence the experiences and outcomes of their employee's studies. This influence may be positive or negative depending on the attitude of the employer to the study undertaken and their ability to provide support to the learner in the context of broader commercial constraints such as availability of resources and flexibility (Dayton, 2005; Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

The examination of the relationship between employer support and adult learner success occurs only as a minor theme in the literature reviewed. The theme arises from comments by learners describing the benefits of supportive employers to their persistence and success.

The experiences recounted by the adult learners in these studies indicate that although the level of support offered by employers is inconsistent and determined by individual circumstance, any level of support offered by employers will be beneficial (Dayton, 2005). Further, the way in which the employer approaches or frames the support they offer is significant in the terms of benefit experienced by the learner. The findings indicate that employer support parallels every other form of support or intervention offered to adult learners in that time and timing is a moderating force in effectiveness. The findings recount that support can be offered prior to study in the form of encouraging employees to return to study and providing financial support to access courses. Once re-engaged in study all of the supports listed in the figure above will contribute to the learner's sense of stability and ultimate success (Buchler et al., 2006; Dayton, 2005).

The employer's attitude to continuing education and the recognition of the benefits that will flow to both the learner and the organisation are central to a strong support structure in the workplace according to (Austin & Graber, 2007). The study found that employers who supported the concept of continuing education as contributing to the success of the organisation as well as the learners, were widely praised by adult learners and demonstrated three common attributes. The organisations led by example and had managers who were themselves engaging in further study. This culture of encouraging further study throughout the workforce

emerges from the findings as a powerful incentive and reassurance for adult learners considering a return to study.

These organisations also incorporated aspects of continuing education in their planning and review processes (Austin & Graber, 2007). The incentive to persist and succeed in study, as well as the offer of organisational support must be enhanced where elements of further study or continuing education are incorporated in the annual review process for employees. Setting goals and reviewing performance against standards have been demonstrated as powerful strategies to help adult learners overcome challenges during their studies and to persist to success in their programs (Bandura, 1993; Goto & Martin, 2009). Finally, the studies show these organisations demonstrated a desire to engage in regular discussions with workers about the opportunities for study and incorporate planning for study into their business strategies (Austin & Graber, 2007). The final call for increasing the support offered by employers to their adult learner workers comes from a South African study "To help students succeed, relationships with workplaces need to be nurtured, so that workplaces can support adult learners, even indirectly…" (Buchler et al., 2006, p. 142). These studies advocate that Governments and educational institutions must find ways to engage business and industry in meaningful discussions that highlight the benefits of encouraging continuing and further education for their workforce as well as increasing awareness of the kinds of strategies that will support their adult learners. The discussion is finalised with a summary of the topics discussed in this chapter.

## 4.5   CHAPTER SUMMARY

### 4.5.1 Conceptualising the complex interplay of factors shaping the experiences of adult learners.

At the end of the discussion of theoretical approaches examined in Chapter 2 an original model of learner progression from pre-enrolment to exit point was developed that presented the factors shaping the experiences and persistence of adult learners during their educational journeys. The model was represented on a timeline that began before the learners made the decision to re-engage in study and continued in a linear fashion until the individual either gained their credential or disengaged from study. This representation of the process was logical in that it tracked the experiences of the learner in the sequence that they occurred and recognised that when events occurred had an influence on how strongly the affects were felt.

The model made an attempt to recognise the complexity of the interactions between these phenomena yet the prime criticism of the studies remained unaccounted. There was still the need to examine these disparate factors in the meta-context of the individual learner's multi-faceted life – to try to get a view of how factors taken in isolation and therefore easily understood were moderated by the complexity of the other factors in existence at the same time and over time. This identified gap in the research has been addressed by answering the two research questions through the findings presented here in chapter 4. All findings were presented from a meta-contextual view of the adult learner's experience situated in the complex family, social, work and educational circumstances.

The methodology of meta-synthesis was chosen in this study for its ability to take large quantities of qualitative primary research and examine them in concert so that the suggestive findings in them could be corroborated and strengthened to the point where they could be applied to a much broader field of practice. That is, to take the rich experiential findings of small studies that are practically impossible to replicate on a large scale and lend to them the scientific rigour and validity afforded by a large-scale synthesis. To this end a new original model of the integrated theory of persistence to success for adult learners was developed in an attempt to incorporate the continuous interaction and cumulative effect of these factors operating in concert on the individual adult learner. That model is presented here (See Figure 4.2):

**Integrated theory of Persistence to Success for Adult Learners**

- Self-efficacy (Bandura; Hirshy et al.)
- Principles of Andragogy employed in course design (Knowles & others)
- Integration into college life (Tinto; Wolf-Wendel et al.; Trowler, V. & P.)
- Environmental support factors (Kuh; De Vito; Bandura; Hirshy et al.; Kenner et al.)
- Environmental barriers to success (Kazis et al.; Gotto & Martin; De Vito; Wyatt)
- Impact of time on forces & interventions (Tinto; Kenner & Weinerman)
- Persistence to success or Disengagement

*Figure 4.2.* Conceptualising the Integrated Theory of Persistence to Success for Adult Learners.

A closer examination of the model in Figure 4.2 demonstrates how the theories and observations from the descriptive meta-synthesis have been incorporated into this meta-contextual representation of the adult learners' experiences during study. This integrated model represents the overlapping and interactive nature of the situational, institutional and dispositional factors and interventions that influence the adult learner's ability to overcome the barriers they face during their educational journeys. The outcome for these adult learners may fall on a continuum from disengagement to successful completion of a course or program depending on the resilience of the individual learner and their experiences during study. Chapter 4 has revealed broad consistencies in the findings and conclusions of a large number of studies that have approached their topics from a wide range of theoretical, demographic and philosophical attitudes.

Chapter 5 moves from the observation of the phenomena identified in chapter 4 to the synthesis of a new theory that goes beyond the simple representations in figure

4.2 above, and points to the questions that still remain unanswered in this body of knowledge.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses in narrative the descriptive meta-synthesis of qualitative studies completed in Chapter Four. It synthesises the findings presented to integrate the results of the studies into a meta-contextual view of the adult learner's experience of perceived barriers to educational success and the strategies used to overcome them.

The topics discussed include: Research question 1. - Summary of how adult learners are conceptualised in the literature; Research question 2. - Summary of the constraining and enabling factors influencing adult learners during their educational journeys; Synthesis - Integrated meta-contextual view of how the constraining and enabling factors interact with each other; Success – How is it conceptualised in the literature; and Recommendations for further research.

The structure of this discussion begins with a summary of how adult learners are conceptualised in the literature. The characteristics identified as differentiating adult learners from learners continuing directly from high school into further studies are presented and discussed in order to provide a framework for analysing and answering the second research question. The following is a summary of the identified constraining factors presented in chapter four along with the enabling factors that improved resilience and persistence for adult learners during their educational journeys. The narrative then presents a conceptualisation of how those constraining and enabling factors combine to result in a cumulative state of resilience that is dynamic and moderated by each new experience during the adult learner's educational journey.

A more considered analysis resulting from the review conducted in Chapter Four is also presented here alongside a discussion pertaining to the nature of success. The notion of what constituted success to the adult learner was a significant focus in one study included in the literature review but was not discussed in Chapter Two or Chapter Four as it did not directly address the research questions and was not a specific focus of the research in other articles. The conceptualisation of the nature of success must however be central to any discussion of how adult learners persist to success. Without an understanding of what success means to the stakeholders in this descriptive meta-synthesis it is difficult to know if the second research question has in fact been

answered adequately. Tensions between individual and institutional conceptualisations of success are described and implications for future policy and decision-making are foreshadowed in this discussion. The final section of the chapter identifies opportunities for further research to enhance the understanding of how to improve the outcomes for adult learners.

## 5.1 RESEARCH QUESTION 1: SUMMARY OF HOW ADULT LEARNERS ARE CONCEPTUALISED IN THE LITERATURE

The findings presented in Chapter 4 moved the field of study surrounding adult learning forward by helping to resolve some of the tensions in the theories of adult learning resulting from varied and idiosyncratic descriptions of the individual populations studied by each author. This chapter also included a broader range of studies from which the conclusions are drawn. The following section describes the various definitions of adult learners found in the literature.

The term "Adult" has many legal and cultural definitions in countries around the world but these are largely procedural or practical in nature and offer little insight into the experiences of adults while they learn. For the purposes of this synthesis, it is important to understand how adults differ from other traditional students who typically are '18-to 22-year-old, dependent, full-time students coming right out of high school' (Kazis, 2007). The definitions of adult learners in the research included a range of characteristics from "age" to "educational achievement" and "outside responsibilities" (Kazis, R. et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2011). The number of years since the research participants had completed their previous study and their current employment status, were also features of the definitions proposed. Connell, in her thesis adult learner barriers and strategies in process-based learning within higher education (Connell, 2008), developed a discussion of what constituted "adult learners". The definition although complex, sought to capture the diverse roles and influences shaping the experience of this group of learners by describing some of the features that distinguished adult learners from school leavers for example:

> "Adult learners typically have a multitude of roles in addition to that of a traditional student. They may be employed full-time, have family responsibilities and be involved in volunteer activities" (Connell, 2008a p104).

It was observed from the findings of several studies that adult learners might be better described in terms of their varied life experiences rather than the more common

view of "adult learners" as students who have been: "… out of high school for two years, have completed at least Grade 10, and are at least 20 years of age..." (Connell, 2008a p. 275). This "life experience" definition was a common thread in the literature and was supported by Kenny, Kidd et al. (2011 p.107) and Wyatt (2011).

Similarly, Deggs in his 2001 report, defined adult learners in terms of their delayed enrolment due to employment. Other features Deggs discussed aligned with Connell's view also. Two examples from the findings include the acknowledgement that adult learners may have dependents in addition to a partner and also, adult learners are typically financially independent. A significant variation of this theme was the observation that many adult learners had not obtained a standard high school diploma (Deggs, 2011). A contrasting view was suggested by Kazis et al. in their 2007 study in defining adult learners as:

> "Students over age twenty-four…
>
> …financially independent, work part time or full time, have dependents, and must juggle many responsibilities with school." A further variant described adult learners as "employees who study" and who "…tend to be older, work more, attend school less, and have family responsibilities, compared to their [younger] peers whose primary activity was being a student" (Kazis, 2007 p. 2).

What is clear from synthesising the findings in these varied approaches to identifying adult learners is that age is not the key determinant of adult learner status. Age is merely one indicator that conveniently allows researchers to classify learners as being either traditional or adult. The findings reported in Chapter four led me to propose the following five (5) characteristics:

1. those learners who have had a break between formal study and the return to study subject to investigation;

2. who have had at least one job or career (even if briefly) prior to re-engaging in study;

3. who have multiple roles apart from being a student;

4. are financially independent; and

5. may have responsibility for partners, children and other family members.

These characteristics clearly differentiate adult learners from their traditional counterparts by focussing on their personal circumstances rather than their age.  The attendant complications and difficulties experienced by these adult learners informed the need to answer the second research question.

## 5.2    RESEARCH QUESTION 2: SUMMARY OF THE CONSTRAINING AND ENABLING FACTORS INFLUENCING ADULT LEARNERS DURING THEIR EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS

It is clear from the studies and theories described in this review that a complex interaction between attitudes, behaviours and influences come together to define a learner's state of resilience or persistence at any point in time (Bremer et al., 2011). How the interactions combine or manifest themselves, and in what relative strengths, are unanswered in the literature.  My conceptual model presented at the end of chapter 4 reflects the evidence that the various constraining and enabling elements combine in an as-yet undefined and unequal construct with the learner's state of persistence to success found in the overlap between all factors in the interaction.    Finally, the construct exists within the influence of time – both in terms of when these interactions occur, that is at a point in time; and also that the individual's resilience or persistence will change over time as the factors interact (Tinto, 1993). In other words, the effects are dynamic and cumulative, and can result in a constraining or enabling influence on the learner's state since the commencement of study.

A wide range of constraining and enabling factors that have an influence on adult learners during their educational journeys were identified in the research.  For convenience, the factors identified in the literature are grouped using Cross' (1981) classification of barriers to organise the findings of this synthesis (Connell, 2008a). The three categories to be used are dispositional, situational and institutional.  All three may be enabling or constraining in their effects and are therefore identified as either supporting factors or barriers in the narrative.  Dispositional factors are intrinsic to the adult learner and include experiences and attitudes that influence the individual learner's resilience such as their motivations, goal setting abilities, self-efficacy and personal coping strategies.  The extrinsic categories are situational (or structural) and its subset, institutional factors.  The situational category includes time pressures, work and family responsibilities and the institutional category includes the availability and

flexibility of course offerings and the support interventions offered by institutions. These findings are presented in the following table (See Table 5.1).

Table 5.1

*Summary of constraining and enabling factors presented in chapter 4*

| Constraining factors | Dispositional factors | Situational factors | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | Structural factors | Institutional factors |
| | Feeling overwhelmed | Time pressures including work | Cost of course |
| | anxiety | Family responsibilities | Institutional policies and admission practices |
| | Feelings of guilt for taking time away from family | Financial constraints | Availability and flexibility of course offerings |
| | Adjusting to university life | Balancing multiple roles | |
| | Learning/study issues | | Program design and delivery methods |
| | Unrealistic expectations | | |
| Enabling factors | Dispositional factors | Situational factors | |
| | | Structural factors | Institutional factors |
| | Study assists providing for family | Study is mandated by employer or regulation | Pre-entry strategies incl. tertiary prep. courses |
| | Study sets an example for family | Study allows access to employment | Modifying admin practices |
| | Study gains recognition for prior experience | Study allows access to higher pay | Course selection assistance |
| | Self-actualisation | Study results in increased power | |
| | Effective time management | Employer making time for study | |
| | Emotional support from network | Employer valuing continuing education | |
| | Individual coping strategies | Financial assistance | |

| | Communication strategies to access information | Child care assistance | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Dispositional factors** | **Situational factors** | |
| | | **Structural factors** | **Institutional factors** |
| | Seeking mentors | Flexible work hours | Organised study, support & mentoring programs |
| | Joining peer groups | Help with chores and family responsibilities | Flexibility in study and assessment modes |
| | Attitudinal strategies to gain perspective in addressing challenges | | |

The preceding table has presented the factors shaping the experiences and persistence of adult learners during their educational journeys. The factors interact on a timeline that begins before the learners make the decision to re-engage in study and continue in a progression until the individual either gain their credential or disengages from study (De Vito, 2010). This conceptualisation of the process is logical in that it tracks the experiences of the learner in the sequence that they occur and recognises that when events occurred had an influence on how strongly the affects were felt.

The descriptive meta-synthesis in Chapter 4 attempted to recognise the complexity of the interactions between these phenomena yet the prime criticism of the studies remained unaccounted. There was still the need to examine these disparate factors in the meta-context of the individual learner's multi-faceted life (Goto & Martin, 2009) – to try to get a view of how factors taken in isolation and therefore easily understood were moderated by the complexity of the other factors in existence at the same time and over time. This identified gap in the research has been addressed by answering the two research questions through the findings presented here in chapter 4. All findings were presented from a meta-contextual view of the adult learner's experience situated in the complex family, social, work and educational circumstances (Kirk et al., 2009).

The outcome for these adult learners may fall on a continuum from disengagement to successful completion of a course or program depending on the resilience of the individual learner and their experiences during study (Deggs, 2011).

Chapter 4 has revealed broad consistencies in the findings and conclusions of a large number of studies that have approached their topics from a wide range of theoretical and philosophical attitudes.

The next section moves from the observation of the phenomena identified in chapter 4 to the synthesis of a new theory that goes beyond the simple conceptualisations described above, and points to the questions that still remain unanswered in this body of knowledge.

## 5.3 SYNTHESIS: INTEGRATED META-CONTEXTUAL VIEW OF HOW THE CONSTRAINING AND ENABLING FACTORS INTERACT WITH EACH OTHER

The educational journey for the adult learner approaching re-entry into formal study begins after a hiatus of sometime and the influence of life's experiences. Two main factors impact the adult learner's predisposition to success at this stage. They are the accumulated personal experiences of previous / formative education that fundamentally inform the individual's attitude to study and likelihood of future success (Bandura, 1993; Bremer et al., 2011; Kirk et al., 2009) and the motivators to re-engage in study (Frey Johnson, 2011; Tinto, 1993).

The findings of the synthesis point to the complexity of the interactions examined and recognise that events and interventions can occur at any point on the individual's timeline. When and how frequently they occur are two of the many factors that moderate the cumulative effects of the interactions on the individual (Tinto, 1993). Throughout this thesis I have adopted the habit of relating the narrative in a progressive structure that allows a clear understanding of what is happening in the educational journey. It is possible in this way to identify phases and key points on the timeline that are significant in shaping an individual's resilience and persistence to success. As a result this section will adopt the same approach in order to maintain consistency and synthesise a clear view of the context in which adult learners confront and overcome their challenges.

### 5.3.1 Pre-engagement: Self-Efficacy, Motivators, Personal and Structural supports [or barriers]

Bandura proposed that self-efficacy will moderate the influence of the identified enabling and confining factors in a cumulative or reductive operation depending on

whether the factors are negative or positive in nature (Bandura, 1993; Kirk et al., 2009). This statement requires some explanation.

Self-efficacy develops over time as the net result of the experiences of an individual during early study and the impact of successes and un-surmounted challenges during those studies and to some extent in their broader lives beyond those early studies. Along with previous academic results, relationships with teachers and their perceived attitudes towards student's abilities play an important role in shaping the individual's attitude to further study and likely outcomes (Bandura, 1993). This holds true for all students regardless of their ages, but with adult learners the experiences between early study and re-engaging have an added effect. Where the adult has experienced success and the ability to solve problems and overcome difficulties at work and in their private lives, their self-efficacy will be improved from the state at leaving formal study (Kirk et al., 2009).

When the opportunity arises for the adult to re-engage in study, they will bring with them a state of self-efficacy that predisposes them to approach study with an overall positive or negative view of their prospects. At this stage the adult's motivators for study will have a significant effect (Durkheim, 1974; Tinto, 1987b). The motivators to return to study are many and varied and are summarised in the table below for convenience.

## Structural Motivators                    Dispositional Motivators

| Mandated by employer | Provide for Family |
| Mandated by regulation (licensing etc.) | Set an example for children |
| Access employment | Access a safer environment |
| Improve employment options | Gain recognition for previous experience |
| Access higher pay | Self actualisation |
| Increase power | |
| Acquire material objects | |

*Figure 5.1.* Summary of motivators for return to study adapted from (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Bremer et al., 2011).

The motivating forces identified in Figure 5.1 afford the adult learner some perceived benefit although where the study is mandated by an employer the benefit may be reduced by the sense that the learner is being forced to participate rather than choosing to participate (Dayton, 2005; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Even where the beginning state of self-efficacy is marginal or low, the benefits and strength of these identified motivators will provide the adult learner with the determination to proceed and the resilience to face the initial challenges of re-engagement in study. For example the motivation for parents to succeed in order to provide for, or improve the lives of their family and children is particularly powerful. These motivators allow the adult learners to shape clear goals for their study that are proven to assist in developing and maintaining resilience – to find the strength to persist in the face of significant challenges that lead many students to withdraw from study (Kazis, 2007).

The learner now faces the first real challenge in re-engaging in study. The process of enrolling in a program or course presents many challenges for the adult learner. The fundamental issue of identifying an appropriate program in a convenient

location is complicated by a range of factors that set up significant conflicts for the adult learner (Buchler et al., 2006). The factors are presented in the following table for convenience.
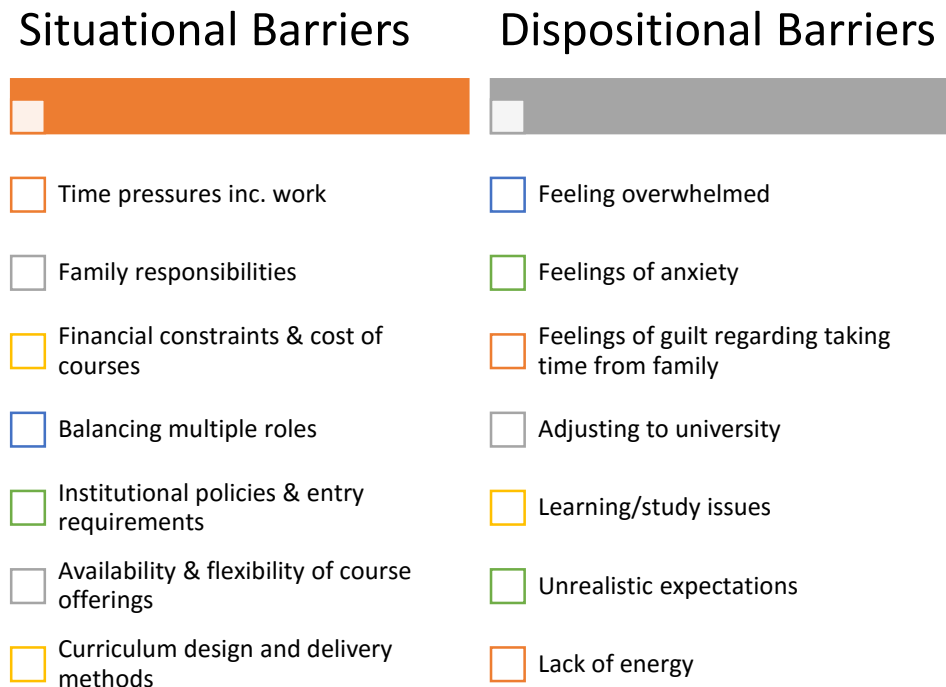
## Situational Barriers    Dispositional Barriers

| Situational Barriers | Dispositional Barriers |
|---|---|
| Time pressures inc. work | Feeling overwhelmed |
| Family responsibilities | Feelings of anxiety |
| Financial constraints & cost of courses | Feelings of guilt regarding taking time from family |
| Balancing multiple roles | Adjusting to university |
| Institutional policies & entry requirements | Learning/study issues |
| Availability & flexibility of course offerings | Unrealistic expectations |
| Curriculum design and delivery methods | Lack of energy |

*Figure 5.2.* Summary of challenges faced at re-engagement adapted from (Buchler et al., 2006l; Gidley et al., 2010; Longden, 2006).

The challenges identified in Figure 5.2 are not necessarily unique to the point of re-engagement. Many of these challenges will continue or re-emerge during the adult learner's study. The weight of evidence here indicates that these challenges are greatest at the beginning of study and the strategies to overcome them are most effective when applied from this point in time through the first semester of study (Frey Johnson, 2011; Kelley-Hall, 2010; Tinto, 1993).

In summary, the individual's state of self-efficacy at this point is bolstered by the adult's positive responses to challenges in their personal lives as well as the motivators they have to re-engage and succeed in study. Positive disposition and resilience of the individual is countered by the large number of significant challenges presented in Figure 5.2. At first glance the weight of these barriers may seem overwhelming but the adult learner may have access to a suite of strategies and interventions to overcome the challenges and gain a place in their chosen program or course. The following suite of responses presented in Figure 5.3 have been reported

to benefit adult learners by building their resilience and providing both practical and emotional support during this difficult phase (Quimby & O'brien, 2004).

## Strategies to overcome Situational Barriers

- Pre-entry strategies inc. tertiary prep. courses
- Modifying admin. processes to suit adult learner cohorts
- Course strategies inc. selection and enrollment assistance
- Employer valuing further/continuing study
- Flexibility in work hours & study options
- Study a component of annual reviews and discussion at work
- Financial strategies; Gov't, Employer, Institute
- Multiple role strategies & effective time-management
- Child care assistance

## Strategies to overcome Dispositional Barriers

- Emotional/psychological support/empathy from network
- Coping strategies developed by individual
- Communication strategies to access information and advocate for themselves
- Seeking rolemodels or mentors
- Joining peer groups
- Attitudinal strategies

*Figure 5.3.* Summary of strategies and interventions available at re-engagement adapted from (Dayton, 2005; Dewitt, 2003; Frey Johnson, 2011; Longden, 2006).

Taken in context it can be seen from Figure 5.3 that adult learners with these strategies available to them are well positioned to overcome the challenges they face at this critical stage of their re-engagement in study (Wolf, 2011). It is also reported that institutions, policy makers and key stakeholders should apply their scarce resources to these interventions if they are to maximise the benefits to their potential adult learners. The benefit of facilitating the transition to further study for this cohort has wider applications in practice. The benefits to institutions are reported to include more enrolments, more graduates, greater funding and fewer requirements for remedial interventions later in studies (Soney, 2003). The benefits to commerce and the wider society, of more people participating in further and continuing education are reported to include greater productivity, increased competitiveness, improved standards of living, and a society with broader access to opportunity and advancement (Kazis, R.

et al., 2007). The following diagram presents the interactions described so far in graphical form.
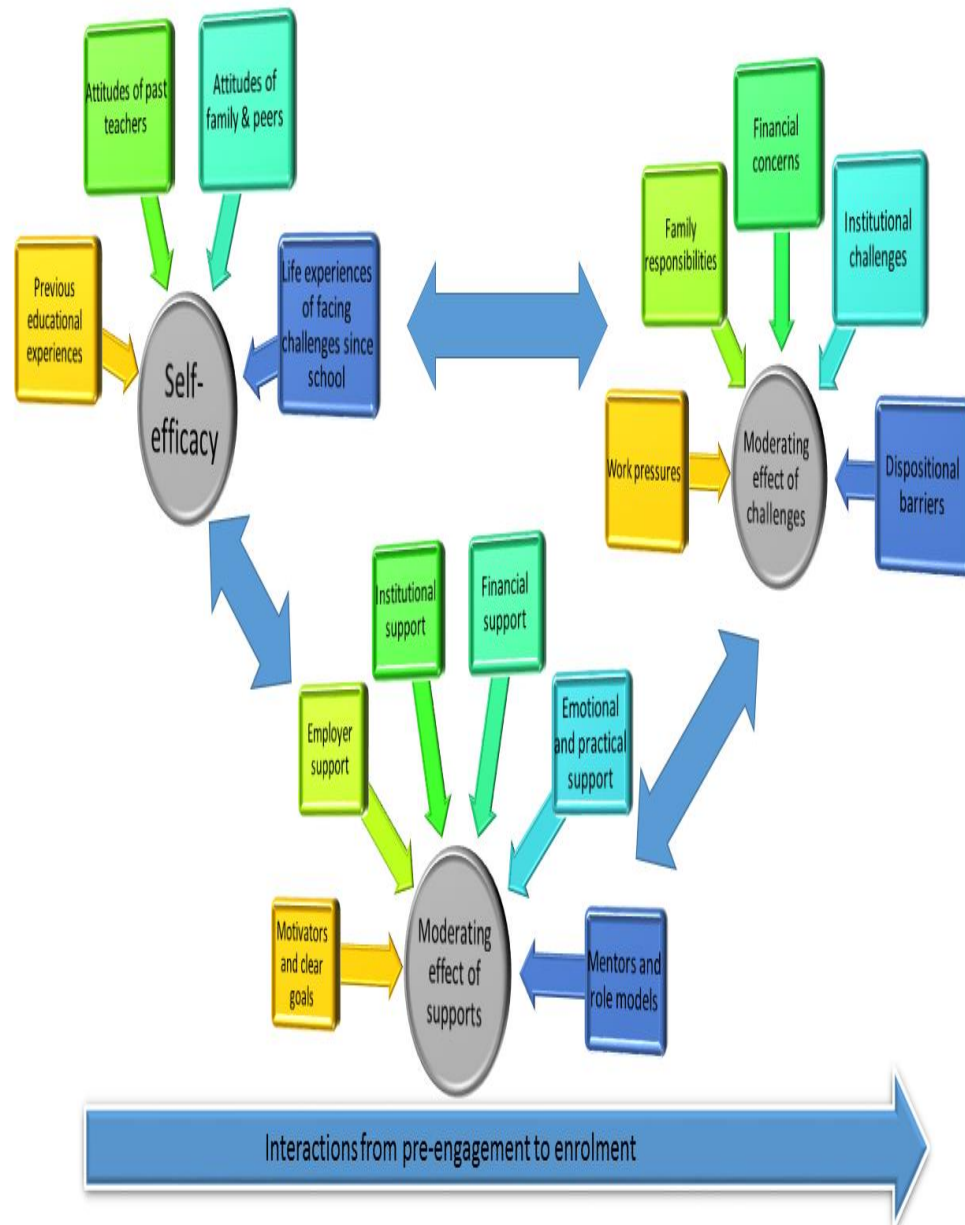


*Figure 5.4.* Original concept diagram of interactions from pre-engagement to enrolment.

Two issues from the previous discussion arise here. Firstly, each adult learner comes to this point with his or her own personal history and position of advantage or disadvantage that reflects their employment, social and familial circumstances. As a result, the effective provision of interventions are reported to depend on an accurate diagnosis of need and a personalised program of support to address that identified need (Austin & Graber, 2007; Buchler et al., 2006; Dayton, 2005; Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, & Osborne, 2012). Ideally, all strategies will be available but only

those needed by the individual should be offered to them. This concept will be elaborated on later in the chapter. For now the question of how these strategies might be provided or facilitated must be addressed – this is the second issue alluded to above.

It has been stated by institutions that strategies involving employers and the families and social networks of students are beyond their scope of influence (Connell, 2008b; Wyatt, 2011). For example how can an institution influence an employer to be enthusiastic about their employee's studies and perhaps make flexible work arrangements available to ease the time pressures felt? (Buchler et al., 2006; Dayton, 2005; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Or similarly, how can policy makers encourage family members to embrace the sacrifices that come from adults returning to study and provide the practical and emotional support that will reduce their feelings of guilt and the pressures of managing multiple roles (Dennis et al., 2005)? There is certainly no single remedy to these valid concerns and it is also true that not all stakeholders in this context will wish to, or be able to provide the support described. The key conclusion here is that any improvements that can be achieved will be beneficial and that there are reported examples of positive influence that can be applied widely to improve the awareness and provision of these supports (Gidley et al., 2010; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Communication and advocacy emerge as the twin approaches to engaging industry and family in the educational journeys of adult learners. Examples reported from the USA have seen past students advocating in their communities for adults to return to study as well as providing guidance and mentoring to prospective and continuing adult learners (Schlinsog, 2010; Scott & Homant, 2008; Soney, 2003). Such role models are in a position to influence opinions and engender an appreciation for the benefits of continuing study as well as delivering practical support in the communities they belong to.

Communication and advocacy have been particularly beneficial in communities where disadvantage and lower levels of education and affluence are observed. Institutions can also take direct action to engage family and industry in their academic community by hosting events that bring these stakeholders into closer proximity to the work and values of the institution. This has the benefits of increasing awareness and understanding of what happens at college and generating excitement and a sense of belonging that translates to enthusiasm for the institution itself and the adult learners they are personally associated with (Baum & Milem, 2006; Kuh, 2009). These

strategies are recommended to be implemented continuously and focus on increasing awareness of the benefits of study and the institution as well as providing information on assisting with the challenges that each participant may face when their adult learners re-engage in study. By placing the focus on delivering value to the stakeholders and seeking feedback to improve their services, such institutions may become a resource for the wider communities they belong to.

### 5.3.2 Engagement and the first semester

The challenges faced and overcome to arrive at the time where adult learners commence study may seem almost overwhelming to many re-engaging students. In reality, apart from the practical concerns of choosing a course and institution, meeting the entry requirements and finding the funds to pay their tuition, many of the barriers these adult learners faced were reported as perceived, anticipated or theoretical in nature. From the first class attended or logged-on to, those challenges identified in the previous section become real and require practical solutions. It is at the commencement of study and in the early weeks of the course that the learners are confronted by the reality of trying to find time to fit in work, classes, family responsibilities and social commitments (Baum & Milem, 2006; Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2009).

The adult learner's expectations about what college life and the requirements of their courses would be are challenged as the academic rigour and sense of displacement they experience creates anxiety and self-doubt (Deggs, 2011; Deggs et al., 2010). The risks at commencement of study are reported to include compromises in the time spent on separate responsibilities leading to poorer performance standards and emotional conflict as colleagues and family members question commitment and demand greater efforts. Relationships can suffer during first weeks of study also and the attendant feelings of guilt and self-doubt are reported to lead to academic risk and health issues (Connell, 2008b). This transitional period from prospective student to active learner has been observed as the most difficult period for adult learners (Kelley-Hall, 2010; Tinto, 1975). Authors have reported that support strategies and interventions applied at this critical time will have the greatest effect in reducing anxiety and building resilience in adult learners. The range of practical and emotional support factors needed at this time are summarised in the following figure (see Figure 5.5).

**Practical strategies to overcome situational challenges**

**Emotional supports to overcome dispositional challenges**

- Organised study support & mentoring programs
- Informal study support & social groups formed
- Flexibility in study and assessment modes
- Flexibility in work hours
- Financial strategies; Gov't, Employer, Institute
- Multiple role strategies & effective time-management
- Help with chores etc. from family and friends
- Child care assistance

- Emotional/psychological support/empathy from network
- Counselling services and advice provided by institution
- Coping strategies developed by individual
- Attitudinal strategies
- Employer support by valuing further/continuing study
- Reference to clear goals
- Integration into broader college community and alignment of values

*Figure 5.5.* Summary of interventions and support strategies during the first semester.

Within this transition from prospective to active student, the personal characteristics and circumstances of the individual adult learner were found to have a significantly moderating effect on the degree of difficulty and stress experienced by them. These included: financial resources; the presence of role-models and mentors; employment status; attitude of family and employer to study; alignment of values with the institution; the ability to seek out and utilise assistance; goal setting ability and sense of humour (Brown, 2012; Connell, 2008b; Dayton, 2005; Dennis et al., 2005; Kenny et al., 2011; Townsend, 2008; Vuong et al., 2010).

Some of these identified characteristics can be seen to positive in nature and in their effect on anxiety and resilience in adult learners. For example, the presence of role models or mentors can be seen to have a positive influence in assisting learners to gain a balanced perspective when facing difficulties as well as practical guidance in overcoming both educational and emotional challenges experienced during their studies (Crisp, 2010; Dennis et al., 2005; Horton, 2010; Scott & Homant, 2008).

In contrast, the attitudes toward study of family members, peers and employers may exert a positive or negative influence on the learner and in fact the various elements observed here may be in conflict with each other thereby further compounding the effects of these interactions (Quimby & O'brien, 2004; Wolf, 2011). The research again reveals that the unique characteristics and circumstances of individual learners shape their experience of barriers and difficulties and in turn moderate the effects of those hindering influences on their resilience and persistence.

The challenge here remains to order the chaotic interactions of these characteristics and come to some conclusion about how to encourage the positive factors and counter the negative ones. The conclusion suggested here is that strategies and interventions designed to address each of the identified barriers and challenges faced by adult learners must be resourced and available for implementation at the times they will be most effective (Deggs, 2011; Deggs et al., 2010). The issue of implementing these strategies efficiently depends on being able to assess the needs of individual learners and matching them with the strategies that their individual circumstances require and again, at the time that will yield the greatest benefit. The research consistently supports the view that the most effective time to implement supporting strategies begins prior to enrolment in assisting adult learners to successfully enrol in the right program for them and continues throughout the first semester of study in order to help them transition successfully into college life (Giles, 2012;Gidley et al., 2010;Longden, 2006; Buchler et al., 2006).

### 5.3.3 Persistence to success beyond the first year of study

The bulk of literature on this field of study concentrates either on the experiences of adult learners during their early interactions in study or focuses on looking for relationships between graduation success and the factors experienced by learners over time beyond the first year of study. The significant observation here is that the barriers and supporting factors examined in each area of study are the same. The same situational and dispositional barriers examined above are observed as arising throughout study. What is observed as emerging from the research is the phenomena of reducing impacts of the barriers and importance or significance of the supporting factors over that extended time period (Calcagno et al., 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Several conclusions can be suggested here. Firstly, this observation confirms the principle that interventions must be applied in the initial stages of re-engagement

in study to be both effective and efficient. Secondly, two complimentary theories emerge to explain these observed phenomena. All learners and adult learners in particular who persist through the first year of study have been able to access enough support to overcome the difficulties they faced in their individual contexts (Frey Johnson, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Kelley-Hall, 2010; Tinto, 1975, Tinto, 1993). Those with a preponderance of positive predictors for success at enrolment may not have required any external support to successfully negotiate the perils of the first engagement with study while those with an excess of negative predictors will have required a wide range of support strategies to build their resistance and ultimately succeed in transitioning through this critical phase (Bandura, 1993; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kirk et al., 2009). The combined work of the theorists reviewed here suggest that learners who experience a net negative interaction during this phase will be predisposed to withdraw from study and those learners whose experiences are cumulatively positive will build their resilience and self-efficacy and significantly improve their likelihood of successful completion (De Vito, 2010; Tinto, 1993).

At this point the adult learner has developed coping strategies that will allow them to successfully overcome any of the identified challenges above that may re-emerge during the remainder of their studies. It seems likely however those significant personal events may occur in the lives of adult learners during this time that will have a significant impact on their continued success. Events such as ill health, the arrival of children, financial difficulties and breakdown of relationships can been seen as posing potentially devastating challenges to adult learners during their educational journeys (Frey Johnson, 2011; Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2009). The continued availability of situational and dispositional strategies to assist adult learners during these later stages of study will afford learners with the best opportunity to persist to success in their personal journey (Kenny et al., 2011).

What becomes of the adult learner who successfully completes their studies and how they may positively influence learners who follow them is not covered in the research examined here and remains as an opportunity for future investigation.

## 5.4   SUCCESS: HOW IS IT CONCEPTUALISED IN THE LITERATURE

It is perhaps appropriate to cap this discussion of the perceived barriers to success for adult learners by examining the concept of success itself. A discussion of

what constitutes success for adult learners, the institutions they attend and the governmental and private bodies that provide their funding will help to highlight the complexity of the barriers experienced by adult learners.

Much of the research included in this section is based in the uniquely American concept of 'community colleges' which hold a distinctive place in the hierarchy of post-secondary educational institutions as they are publicly funded institutions responding largely to local needs and providing a democratising 'open access' to vocationally oriented higher education with pathways to traditional four year universities and colleges. The inclusion of the findings of these studies is justified because of the strong similarities between the community college model and equivalent institutions in the U.K., South Africa, and Australia (Gidley et al., 2010).

### 5.4.1 Conceptualising 'success'

The studies reported here have begun with introductions and background statements that describe economic and humanist influences that shape both the increasing involvement of adult learners in higher and further education and the pressure on institutions to develop and deliver adult-focused programs that are relevant and viable (Dayton, 2005; Gidley et al., 2010; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Viability is reported in this context as a complex blend of needing to attract and retain the largest number of adult learners on the one hand, and having to attract funding and revenue that will resource the delivery of programs and support services into the future. This tension between the mission of many institutions to increase participation in adult and life-long education and the strategic decision to allocate scarce resources to those programs is the basis for the discussion in this section (Buchler, Castle, Osman, & Walters, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

#### *Articulating success in adult learning*

Every study included in this synthesis has examined factors that either inhibit or enhance a learner's persistence to success in their studies. What was not emphasised in the research was a clearly articulated description of what 'success' is, or how the many concepts of success alluded to in the works might have competing and contradictory influences on the experiences of learners and the behaviours or priorities of institutions.

In the extensive literature addressing issues related to college students and their success, success was defined in a variety of ways, from cognitive growth, to psychosocial growth, to persistence in college; and the factors studied varied from academic involvement (Terenzini & Springer, 1995), to comprehensive 'out-of-class' involvement (Terenzini, Pascarella & Blimling, 1999), to social life (Astin, 1993), to interactions with faculty (Graham & Gisi, 2000), to place of residence (Inman & Pascarella, 1998), to athletics (Pascarella & Truckenmiller, 1999), and finally, to employment (Dundes & Marx, 2006; Can-abal, 1998; Gidley et al., 2010).

A significant and persisting concept of success in the studies cited above is the completion of a program of study and the attainment of a qualification or credential. Conceptualising success as such an output of study is both easily measured and significant in any conversation around the achievements of institutions in terms of student persistence to success [5]. Similar descriptions reported included success measured by end of year grades and whether students increase (or decrease) their educational expectations after entering study (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Saklofske et al., 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

### *Time as an influence on the concept of success*

Ostensibly the studies reviewed in this section report a wide range of conceptualisations of success that are articulated in ways that enable the individual dialogue around success to be examined and the outputs of study, classified as 'success', to be measured. Interestingly, the discourse has described conceptions of success at different points along the learner's timeline and noted that concepts of success change over time as the learner's experience influences their values and aspirations.

> …success based on initial measures of expectations or primary reasons for enrolment may be problematic (Bailey et al., 2006). Given that intended outcomes vary over time, some observers suggest that [community college] success is more appropriately measured with intermediate indicators or "milestones" … This approach credits incremental progress and takes into account [the] wide variation in student pathways (Goldrick-Rab, 2010 p. 440).

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[5] Such conceptualisations are often the basis for quantitative studies investigating success and quality in educational programs and will not be pursued in this synthesis of qualitative studies.

The studies report that initial measures of success for learners might include achieving a qualification, improving employment or articulating to a higher qualification. However over time these notions of success are given meaning by broader and more personal indicators such as higher order thinking, general learning outcomes, general development outcomes, self-actualisation and the widely discussed concept of 'social inclusion' (Calcagno et al., 2008).

### *Social inclusion as a concept of success*

Concepts of success incorporating access, equity and social inclusion are common in the several studies (Buchler et al., 2007; Calcagno et al., 2008; Coates, 2008; Crisp, 2010; Fee, Prolman, & Thomas, 2009; Peach, 2010; Townsend, 2008) and the dialogue around social inclusion has moved significantly over recent years from a focus on overcoming the negative aspects of disadvantage and marginalisation to a positive focus on the benefits of inclusion to the individual and broader society.

> :…social inclusion asserts and goes beyond both economic equity/access, and social justice notions of equal rights for all, to maximise the potential of each human being thus supporting broader cultural transformation… the term [social inclusion] means the empowerment of individuals to participate as fully as possible in society'… social inclusion is not just about access and equity but about 'the moral imperative of working with the complexity of humanity' and having awareness that 'education is transformative…" (Gidley et al., 2010 p. 23).

The idea that learning is transformative and that the educational achievements of individual adult learners will have positive impacts beyond their own personal experience is not novel or new to the discourse in this synthesis. This encapsulation of social inclusion as a desirable outcome of continuing education for adults and society is clearly understood and deserving of all study that will improve the results for as many adult learners as possible.

A matter of significance in this discussion is the importance given to social inclusion as a measure of success for individual learners by the number of studies using it (Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Delves, 2009). Interestingly the studies report no evidence that individual adult learners view social inclusion, in the context described above, as a personal motivation or definition of success. Rather the idea seems confined to researchers, forward thinking institutions and governments articulating

aspirational policies for the future of their societies. The discussion of concepts of success for adult learners will now be examined from an economic perspective.

### *Economic constructs for conceptualising success and the impact on adult learners*

Another construct within which success is examined in these studies is that of economics. All education and training requires the allocation and consumption of resources, whether derived from government funding at some level or commercial revenue. Regardless of the source of funding, there is an undeniable requirement for those funds to be applied effectively and efficiently. Whether considered as a requirement to deliver an acceptable return on investment for public or private sources of finance, or in terms of the strategic disposition of resources within an institution, economics has a real impact on the experience of learners and the support they receive while studying (Buchler et al., 2006; Calcagno et al., 2008; Dayton, 2005; Harreveld, 2005):

> "When an increase in enrolment creates a crowding of students vying for scarce college resources, rates of degree completion tend to decline (Bound & Turner, 2007; Kurlaender, Grodsky, & Howell, 2009) :…This is precisely the situation faced by community colleges, which have seen increases in student demand unmatched by increases in public subsidies (Mellow & Heelan, 2008)" (Goldrick-Rab, 2010, p. 443)

A development of this conversation explains the relationship between fluctuations in the economy and down-stream effects on service provision and the innovation required to attract greater revenue streams. The studies reviewed here report that governments at all levels use many approaches, and institutions to fund educational programs and services. In some instances it is reported that the majority of funding required for the operation of institutions is provided by government sources. This may take the form of general revenue funding that may be applied at the discretion of the institution or specifically directed funding for identified programs (Buchler et al., 2006; Gidley et al., 2010; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Harreveld, 2005; Townsend, 2008).

Such institutions are vulnerable to changing macro-economic conditions and budget allocations because of their reliance on public funding models. One 2010 study reported that these institutions are accountable to local, state and federal government bodies for the funding provided and this has led to the use of economic modelling to

inform educational decisions about the distribution of time and resources into programs and support strategies rather than academic concerns. The resulting emphasis is reported as focusing on programs and supports that are more lucrative or efficient in delivering measurable outcomes aligned with stated government policies. The evolution of this model of diminishing funding and increasing demand for places and accountability is also driving the development of entrepreneurial solutions for institutional revenues (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

These findings have implications both for the opportunities available to adult learners and the way in which metrics are defined and employed in assessing educational success for adult learners. Where the requirement for institutions is to report on the value delivered by programs for the funding received, or the return on investment for privately funded institutions, programs and services will be offered on the basis of inputs rather than the outputs described above and the metrics used to evaluate the programs will perhaps silence the important qualitative definitions of success herein and focus only on the quantifiable deliverables of course completions and employment outcomes.

### *The question of conceptualising success remains open*

Encapsulating all of these findings into a coherent view of the complex interaction of concepts of success for individual adult learners and the conflicting requirements for institutions to deliver and support viable programs is perhaps too ambitious to achieve, and was not the intention of this section. However, I believe the on-going conversation is framed impeccably by an insight quoted here:

> …if success is based on the outcomes of all [students], performance will be depressed unless success is very broadly defined. By the same token, measuring success only for a select group (e.g., those who indicate degree intentions or achieve credit thresholds) may produce a falsely positive appearance of success while also encouraging access to diminish. Therefore, descriptions of success … must carefully define its terms and conditions and recognise the implications of metrics. However, those caveats do not ameliorate the need to assess success, particularly given a climate of scarce fiscal resources and a push to increase the nation's stock of human capital. (Goldrick-Rab, 2010 p. 439).

The literature suggests that the discussion of what constitutes success for individual leaners and the institutions delivering programs of study is planted in fertile ground and will flourish for some time to come. The findings report that individual concepts of success for adult learners are informed by the sum of their circumstances, experiences and aspirations at the time of re-entering study. It is also described that those conceptualisations of success are changed by the act of engaging in learning itself and that as learners become aware of their metacognitive processes and expand their knowledge, they become aware of far broader benefits of their study and their concept of success evolves. Finally, in times of economic contraction, the tension between the desire to provide access to continuing education to all and the imperative for institutions to utilise scarce resources efficiently will result in an ongoing struggle to find balance. Solutions such as targeting funds to areas of greatest need, changing faculty employment arrangements, cutting programs or raising fees charged to students will all create other issues to be addressed in the next round of budget meetings.

The next section will discuss the recommendations for further research discovered in the literature.

## 5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A range of topics for further research was recommended in the preceding chapters. They are:

- Descriptive meta-analysis to test the validity of the findings of this thesis

- Duplicating the original research synthesised in an Australian context to determine if the findings hold true

- Duplicating original research to determine if recent policy and economic changes in an Australian context have resulted in observable differences to the findings

- Specific investigations into the effects of gender and race on the findings of this thesis

The first of these is the recommendation for a descriptive meta-analysis of this topic to test the hypothesis contained in the integrated model of persistence to success for adult learners. The large volume of quantitative research available addressing the barriers faced by adult learners might well yield valuable insights into the relative

strengths of the interactions observed.   Other areas of potential future research are summarised here.

There is the need to conduct research into the study of the constraining and enabling factors such as time pressures, family responsibilities, financial constraints, balancing multiple roles and learning/study issues, that influence the persistence to success of adult learners in an Australian context to determine if the findings from the overwhelmingly American studies reported here can be applied in a local context.

The current wholesale restructure of Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education in Australia may have as yet unexpected effects on the experiences of adult learners as they re-engage in formal study. There is a significant opportunity to compare and critically examine results from new studies with those derived from studies carried out prior to the current restructures to see what impacts are being experienced by adult learners.

At several points in this thesis it was identified that issues of gender, race and SES were observed to impact the experiences of adult learners as they re-engaged and persisted through their studies.  An examination of these influences was beyond the scope of this meta-synthesis but each one of these factors would serve as a valid topic for further examination.  Insights into how these unique characteristics of adult learners impacted their resilience and persistence would allow institutions and policy makers to further refine their interventions and support strategies so that they were more effective.

## 5.6   FINAL THOUGHTS

This Master of Education dissertation investigated the complex interaction of psychological and structural factors that shape the attitudes and experiences of adult learners as they re-engage and persist through their post-compulsory educational journeys.  The purpose of this synthesis was to gain an understanding of the complex interactions between events and experiences that influence adult learners on their educational journeys.  Assimilating the findings of the studies included in this synthesis led to the development of an integrated model of persistence to success for adult learners that demonstrates how these identified factors can be combined to overcome the barriers to success for adult learners during their personal journeys.

The use of meta-synthesis as the methodology for this thesis was challenging but rewarding because it allowed a much larger sample of studies to be examined in order to clearly understand the experiences of the adult learners in the meta-context of their complex lives. Some of the key outcomes of this synthesis are the clearer understanding of what constitutes 'adult learners' in terms of their experiences rather than their age as well as the range of barriers and challenges faced by these individuals and the scope of opportunities available to institutions and policy makers to successfully intervene and support adult learners during the critical phases of their study.

Finally the opportunity to use the outcomes of this thesis to assist adult learners overcome the challenges they face as they re-engage and persist through their educational journeys is deeply satisfying.

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