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What we have learned from adult students' online learning experiences to enhance online learning of other students' groups?

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Abstract

Adults used to be the largest online student population before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the number of online students multiplied during the pandemic, and now includes the complete conglomeration of all student groups. Due to their longer experience of online education, adult students continue to provide valuable insights on how to enhance online learning for other higher education students. This article reports the results of phenomenographic research on the qualitative differences in the ways of experiencing learning by fifteen adult students enrolled in two online postgraduate programmes. The analysis on in-depth, participant-led interviews demonstrated that online learning is conceptualised in three ways: as an investment, as a process that brings structure, and as a process that enables and empowers an individual. The results of this study are of particular importance for those who are concerned with introducing online learning to the higher education curricula. The paper argues that the stigma of online education being the second choice, maintained in the educational research literature, should be replaced by a holistic approach to education as a process that organically incorporates the online educational elements into higher education. Focusing on how adult students experience online learning provides a broader and deeper understanding of adopted effective practices and the variety of online learning opportunities and outcomes for other students' groups. Insights based on the results of this study are summarised.

Keywords: Online higher education, Distance education, Adult learning, Phenomenography, Qualitative research

Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scale of online educational provision has increased exponentially. Scholars speculated that the global crisis would transform the way education is delivered forever (Li & Lalani, 2020). Paths for greater access and

opportunities to online education have now been forged, and there is a clear route for the next generation of adopters of online education (Singh et al., 2021).

Adult students, who represented the largest online student population before the pandemic, validated the expanding plans for online learning (OL) delivery, adopted by educational institutions worldwide. Therefore, their experiences may provide educators with insights on how to enhance the quality of online learning for other groups of students.

Research on adult students in online higher education (OHE) has expanded in the past decade, providing a complex and multifaceted picture of students' experiences and barriers to participation and emphasising the importance of successful adaptation to an online learning environment to avoid the negative consequences of dropout (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Tinto, 1975). A large number of studies emphasise the complexity of factors influencing adult students' learning experiences in an online environment. Among the most actively discussed in the literature are those assessing physical isolation and the rarity of interactions (Kuo & Belland, 2016; Phirangee & Malec, 2017), lack of support (Park & Choi, 2009), challenges associated with technological adaptation (Beqiri et al., 2009), and increased responsibility for learning and competing life demands (Thistoll & Yates, 2016).

Different theoretical models have been developed with the intent to understand students' experience and behaviour in online learning (see Kember, 1995; Rovai, 2003). There is no doubt that scholars have succeeded in developing models which incorporate a wide variety of possible factors and their interactions which may influence adult students' online learning, emphasising the complexity of influential elements. However, despite growing evidence that the adult student population is a highly heterogeneous group, there is a lack of research that specifically focuses on and investigates variations in their experiences in the context of OHE. Instead, adult students' experiences are over-simplified (Waller, 2006) to fit historical assumptions. Furthermore, the lack of consideration of adult students' experiences and perceptions in investigating the potential of online learning for other student groups is noticeable. By applying a phenomenographic approach, the purpose of this study is to uncover variations and commonalities in adult students' experiences in their online learning. This paper also summarises insights that can be used to enhance the online learning experience of other student groups. The following research questions are addressed:

1. How do adult students experience their learning in online graduate programmes?
2. What lessons can be learned from the experiences of adult students to enhance online learning for other student groups?

Fifteen adult students were recruited from two online postgraduate programmes. By utilising a phenomenographic research approach, I examined qualitative variations within a group of adult students enrolled in a UK university and its partner institution in Russia.

A decision to examine the experiences of participants from two research sites from the perspective of a single population (rather than comparing two student groups) was made to ensure a real-life international and cultural diversity of the adult student population.

This study has two main contributions. First, it reveals a variety of adult students' online learning experiences, as well as associated transformations, providing the educational community with further insights on the potential of online education. Secondly, based on the results of this study, implications for practice, alongside strategies to support student transition to online education, are offered.

Literature review

Adult students in OHE

Online programmes typically target working professionals. Thus, it is not surprising that before the pandemic, the majority of online students were adults (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). The capacity of online education to serve learners of all ages has now been effectively established as the pandemic forced campus-based students to adapt quickly to the online mode of learning. Now, there is a quest for educational quality. Adult students, as an established population of online learners, can provide valuable information that can be used to enhance the online learning experience of other student groups. Given the global shift to online learning, an examination of the experiences of the largest group of online learners can assist educators in better understanding the online learning process and its potential benefits.

In the current study, I use the term "adult student" to refer to an individual, 25 years of age or older, as this age is commonly reported in the literature (Bergman et al., 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). OHE has traditionally been viewed as an alternative pathway to gaining a degree, one that is particularly well suited to adults (Lockee, 2021). Indeed, before the pandemic, the purpose of distance- and online education was providing access to instruction for those otherwise unable to participate in traditional, classroom-based academic programmes, i.e., primarily adult students (see UNESCO report by Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg, 2015).

Adult students have diverse characteristics and life circumstances that impact their learning (Ashburn, 2007). Assumptions, historically associated with adults, are that they tend to be more autonomous and self-directed, expect to take the initiative in directing their own learning, learn best when content is relevant to their goals, and new information can be immediately integrated with previous knowledge and applied in practice (Knowles, 1973).

In online education, however, scholars argue that adults need as much guidance and motivation as their younger counterparts (Hashim et al., 2018). Cercone (2008) points out

that adults' preference for self-directed learning does not always mean that they possess the skills necessary for successful learning in an online environment. Moreover, there is evidence that older students may find online education difficult to adapt to (Dubois, 1996; Ke & Xie, 2009). For instance, Ke and Xie's (2009) study illustrates that adult students tend to feel insecure about their ability to succeed when learning online and require additional support and technology training.

Research on adult students' experiences in OHE

Adult students' experiences in online higher education have been intensively researched from different perspectives and with the use of various theoretical lenses (Rotar, 2020). It was argued that online education can offer numerous advantages for adult students, including flexibility and accessibility of learning alongside their commitments, independence, multimodality, and cost-effectiveness (Kember, 1995). Indeed, the online mode of learning provides the opportunity to learn synchronously or asynchronously, without time or territory boundaries for the diverse adult student body (Bates & Sangra, 2011; Kember, 1995). Ironically, it is the perceived benefits of online education that often create negative experiences for adult students. Challenges, such as the lack of the sense of belonging to the community, lower level of interactions (Boyle et al., 2010), inadequate and depersonalised support (Park & Choi, 2009; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016), insufficient course content, and the quality of teaching are commonly reported by adult online learners in empirical studies (Figure 1).

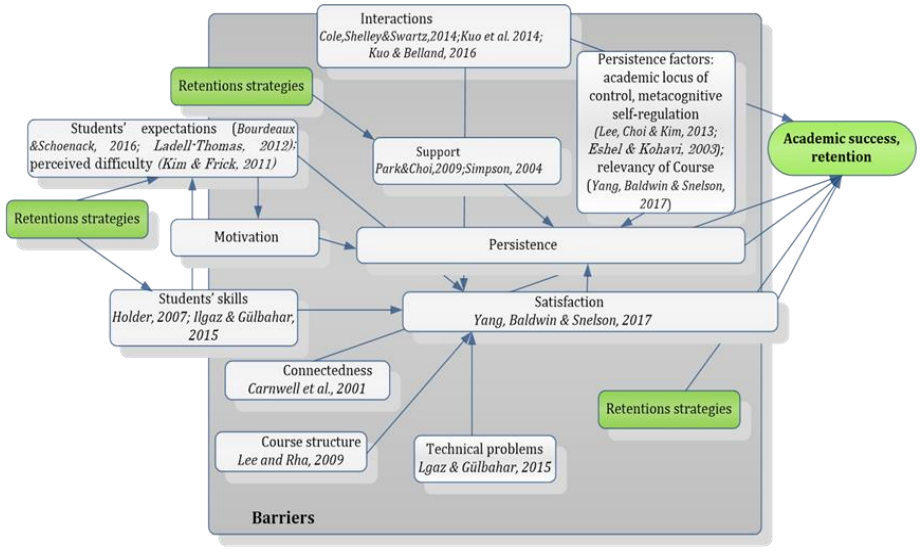

Fig. 1 Factors influencing adults' online learning (based on the systematic literature review by Rotar (2022)

Researchers made significant progress in identifying and examining factors that influence online students' learning, offering a complex and contradictory picture. However, they have not provided a deep reflection on the assumptions about online learning, the ways online students learn (Knowles, 1973), and on the potential of online learning. Following these assumptions, novice students can, for instance, mistakenly assume that the flexibility of online course delivery makes learning easier. These students may later find online learning disorienting and frustrating due to a heavier workload than expected that requires self-organisation and time management skills, as reported by Clay et al. (2009). Moreover, the freedom and flexibility allowed by online instruction require students to be more responsible for their learning. However, not all of them are able to show the necessary self-discipline in order to meet the deadline and course assessment requirements (Clay et al., 2009).

Recently emerged scientific discussion on the diversity of adult student accounts emphasises the differences among adults in regard to their perceptions, experiences and needs (see, for instance, Kim and Frick, 2011; Kuo and Belland, 2016, Waller, 2006). Yet, acknowledging these differences is one thing, but taking them into account when designing an empirical study is another. Rather than engaging students in a deep conversation about the potential of online learning, past research focused on factors prioritised by a researcher's experience. Additionally, the current research is more concerned with online students' attrition and retention, rather than listening to students' perspectives (see Figure 2).

The analysis of the previous research shows that there are variations in findings on adult students' perceptions, experiences or needs in online learning environments, but little is done to investigate these differences in-depth (see Carnoy et al., 2012; Gravani, 2015; Meyers and Bagnall, 2017).

Contemporary narrative and biographical research, which aims to bring student voices to the forefront, have largely been dedicated to the adult learning domain (West & Merrill, 2018) due to its interest in the personal stories of non-traditional and marginalised students (Finnegan & Merrill, 2017; Finnegan et al., 2014, Merrill, 2015, Reay, 2003). The results of such research emphasise that adult students celebrate both victories and failures during their learning journey, prioritising the process of learning rather than the learning outcomes. However, despite being welcomed into the discussion within the traditional HE domain, the voices of adult students in the context of online education are not strong, with little research located in OHE.

I believe that adult students' perspectives can provide an alternative narrative on what is assumed to be a successful learning experience. On the contrary, the lack of in-depth, qualitative research limits our understanding of how adult students experience online learning and what it offers to them. I agree with Moore and Kearsley (1996), in that if we

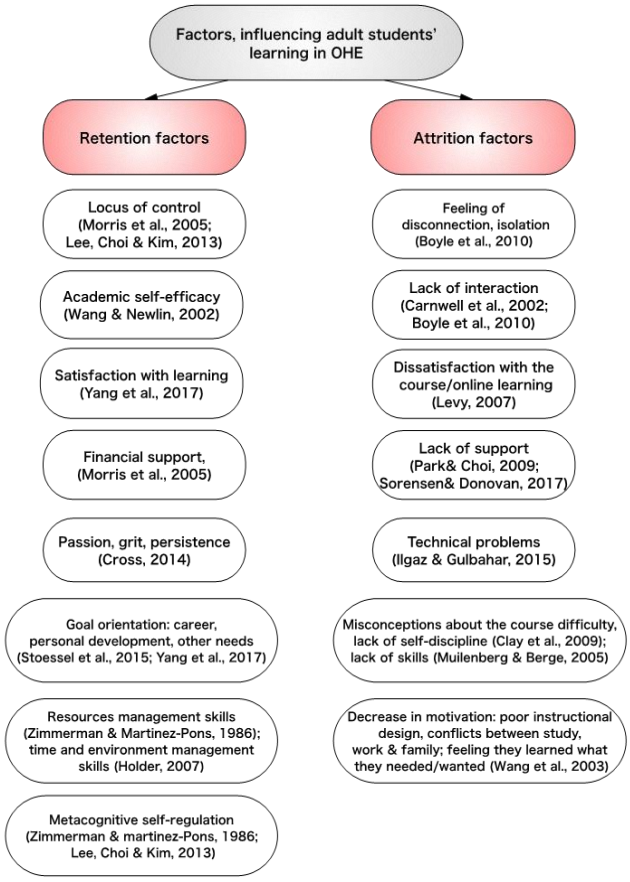

Fig. 2 Factors influencing adults' retention and attrition in online higher education (based on the systematic literature review by Rotar (2022)

want to better understand the potential of online education, we need to explore the diversity of adult students' online learning experiences in-depth. The well-established practices of adult online learning can serve as a guide for new ways of massively adopted online educational delivery.

Methodology

Philosophical stances of phenomenography

In this study, I used phenomenography as a research approach and a method of analysis. Phenomenography is a young approach to research, developed by and for educational researchers. It was selected as the most appropriate methodology to examine the experiences of online learning from the individuals' perspectives, and also due to its focus on uncovering qualitative differences in how the same phenomenon is experienced.

Marton (1986) argued that reality can be best explored from the experiences and perceptions of people, thus advocating a second-order perspective to examine the specific

phenomenon under question. This is one of the assumptions of phenomenography, rooted in a theory on the structure of consciousness (Gurwitsch, 1964). According to this theory, an individual's awareness has layers, and only specific features of the phenomenon can be discerned at a particular time (Marton & Booth, 1997). Thus, to develop a more complete picture of the phenomenon, various assignations of it, by different individuals, should be explored (Svensson, 1997). Furthermore, as assumed in phenomenography, the number of assignations is limited, as a phenomenon could only be presented in a small number of qualitatively different ways (Marton & Booth, 1997). Thus, the aim of phenomenography is to identify and describe variations and similarities in the assignations derived from individuals' accounts to map the features of the phenomenon under question.

Key concepts of phenomenography

The variety of meanings assigned to the phenomenon of the study (referential aspects) and their contexts (backgrounded and foregrounded structural aspects) are referred to in phenomenography as categories of description. The categories of description are typically arranged in a form of nested hierarchy, representing the expansion of awareness within a group of individuals who encounter the same phenomenon, from a more simplistic to a more complex way (Åkerlind, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997).

According to the leading phenomenographers, there are three criteria for the categories of description. The first is that each category should be able to relate to the phenomenon and describe a different aspect of it, in order to depict a unique way of understanding it. Secondly, each category should be logically and hierarchically related, from simple to complex. Thirdly, the number of categories should be controlled to be as few as possible (Marton, 1996; Marton & Booth, 1997). The categories of description could be deemed to be theoretically and pedagogically helpful as long as they meet all three criteria.

Aspects of peoples' awareness, and the structure between them, provide the theoretical framework for understanding various ways of experiencing a phenomenon (see Gurwitsch,1964; Marton and Booth, 1997). The phenomenographic process involves trying to uncover all the possible experiences a group of people have of a certain phenomenon (such as online learning) and to sort these into conceptual categories. An ordered set of categories of description is called the "outcome space" of the phenomenon or concept in question. An ideal outcome space would be expected to "represent the full range of possible ways of experiencing the phenomenon in question, at this particular point in time, for the population represented by the sample group collectively" (Åkerlind, 2005, p.323). Finally, one of the distinctive features of the phenomenographic outcome space is the internal hierarchical relationships between categories that represent its structure and logical connection (Åkerlind, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997). This hierarchical interpretation of the collective meaning is grounded in the idea borrowed from Gurwitsch's

(1964) field theory of consciousness that an individual's awareness is layered and has a certain structure. Doing phenomenographic research means investigating the different ways in which human beings are aware of a certain phenomenon at a particular point of time. From the point of view of this research, it denotes finding the differences in adult learners' structures of awareness with regard to their learning online experience.

Online learning context

This study has been conducted within two online postgraduate programmes offered by one UK university and its partner institution in Russia.

Two research sites were selected for two reasons. First, the UK university was selected as one of the largest providers of online education worldwide, whereas its partner institution in Russia was chosen due to its successful history of providing online programmes to adult students. Secondly, the research involved two languages, Russian and English, providing an opportunity to articulate voices for a broader national diversity of study participants.

Two programmes from the selected sites were specifically designed for working professionals with different backgrounds who seek to gain new knowledge, learn new tools and skills, and study various frameworks, theories and instruments used in a specific area. According to the topology suggested by Allen et al. (2007), both programmes could be described as taught online, as more than 80% of the interactions and activities happen on the Web. In the considered programmes, the learning took place in groups of about 16-20 students, facilitated by a tutor. The tutor provided tuition, professional and mentoring advice, regular feedback, and support on an individual basis. Students occasionally participate in group discussions, but mainly work online following a structured schedule of activities. These activities normally require participation in an online environment over two- to six-week periods and aim to develop students' reflection skills and to contribute to the assessment. The assignments take place throughout the module on a regular basis, generally every six weeks. Tutor-marked assignments are scheduled at regular intervals (approximately every six weeks) throughout the module and are based on the work the students do during the relevant block. Extensive guidance is given on all assignments submitted.

The course is delivered in English to students studying in countries of the European Union and in Russian to students studying in a Russian partner institution. Although the Russian partner institution is allowed to modify up to 25 percent of the course materials to fit the national regulation, the considered programme has the same content apart from the provision of additional tutorials.

As well as the tutorials and independent work on activities, students are required to participate in a four-day residential school. During the residential school, students were

offered an opportunity to meet their tutors and peers, and work in small groups on one case study. The offered case studies focus on the development of problem-solving skills, team working skills, an application of the main theoretical concepts in real-life situations, and on the personal and professional development of the student. The students have an alternative option to the 4-day residential school - to participate in a 21-day online equivalent. Specifically, the students are required to spend about 1.5 hours each day within the period of 21 days, working on the offered case study.

During the studies, apart from individual tuition provision, students had regular engagement with their peers, remote access to the university library and a variety of written resources, articles, case studies, and audio-visual materials available in print and/or online. Most of the teaching-learning process is designed to encourage students' independent work with the offered course materials. To register for this module, a student must have a UK honours degree or equivalent professional qualification and have a minimum of three years' working experience in a managerial, professional or technical role. This usually means that students are at least 25 years old.

Sampling

Permission was sought and achieved through the ethics committee of a UK university. Following this, a list of the potential study participants was obtained through its survey office. The following inclusion criteria had been applied: participants are 25 years of age or older, they are enrolled in, or have just finished their online programme, and have various educational experiences, including experience of learning online. The survey office generated a sample in accordance with the requested criteria. A sample of 233 students was supplied. Subsequently, as potential participants needed to represent different nationalities and cultures, a further selection criterion was applied. Finally, gender balance was considered. Invitation emails were sent to the potential participants through a university faculty member. As a result, fifteen adult students were recruited and interviewed. According to Marton (1986) and Trigwell (2000), fifteen to twenty participants is an optimal number for a phenomenographic study. The recruited participants from two research sites represented an international cohort of adult learners (Table 1).

By examining the experiences of adult students from two research sites from a single cohort perspective, rather than conducting a comparative research, I aimed to offer a collective picture of the online learning phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2005).

Data collection

In-depth interviews were used to collect data (Marton, 1986). A phenomenographic interview is a participant-led conversation, where people are encouraged to talk about dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation that are the most meaningful for them.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the study participants

Participant	Gender	University	Country of origin
1	Female	UK University	Greece
2	Male	UK University	Poland
3	Male	UK University	UK
4	Female	UK University	UK
5	Male	UK University	Greece
6	Male	UK University	USA
7	Male	Partner university in Russia	Russia
8	Female	UK University	UK
9	Female	Partner university in Russia	Russia/Ukraine
10	Female	UK University	UK
11	Female	Partner university in Russia	Russia
12	Male	Partner university in Russia	Russia
13	Male	Partner university in Russia	Russia
14	Male	Partner university in Russia	Russia
15	Female	Partner university in Russia	Russia

The conversational format of the interview allows people to reflect and to make meaning from their experience naturally (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Although a researcher typically designs a sample of interview questions in advance, these questions start a conversation that is sustained by asking the follow-up questions. In addition, a researcher may ask participants to provide examples of the situation relevant to the described experience. For example, in this study, questions like "Could you tell me more about …?", "What do you mean by ...?", "Could you give me an example when you ...?" were used to map the respondents' various meanings they attributed to the concept of success (see Appendix 1). As a result, 15 conducted interviews took unique routes, producing a collection of rich and unstructured data. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted within the 2019 academic year and transcribed by the author. If the interview was conducted in Russian, I translated it myself. The process of transcription was done within eight weeks.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved examination of qualitative variations in the meaning adult students assigned to their experience of learning online. Furthermore, I analysed the relationships between identified meanings that allowed me to arrange them in the form of a nested hierarchy.

The process of identification of differences in meanings assigned to online learning followed the eight-step analytical procedure. This process is presented on Figure 1 and is briefly explained below.

As Figure 3 shows, steps 1-2, 3-6 and 7-8 are repeated in an iterative procedure. The iteration between steps 1 and 2 ensured the inclusion of all relevant data into the analysis.

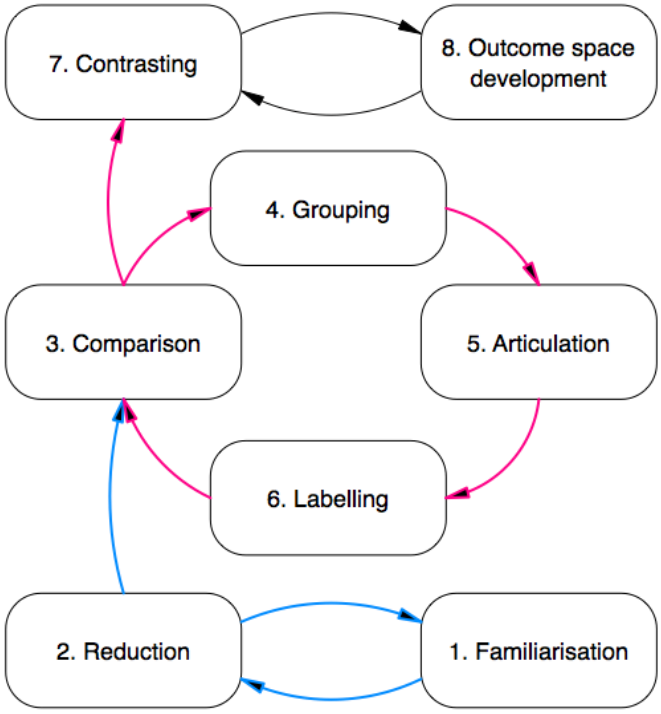

Fig. 3 Model of data analysis (adopted from Dahlgren and Fallsberg, 1991)

Iteration between steps 3 and 6 allowed us to discern similarities within and differences between the meanings assigned to a phenomenon of online learning in a reflective and considered way. Steps 3-6 also involved identification of the referential and structural aspects of the phenomenon of online learning. The referential aspects focus on the main meaning assigned to the phenomenon under question, whereas structural aspects represent "what is in the foreground and background" (Ashwin et al., 2016, p.968) of adult students' meanings. Together, the referential and structural aspects of the meaning form a category of description. The iteration between steps 7 and 8 allowed me to refine relationships between identified categories of description and gradually develop a "hierarchy of empirically grounded and logically consistent categories of description that together form an outcome space" (Ashwin et al., 2016, p.966).

Analytical framework

For the purposes of analysis, I have used the structure of an awareness framework developed by Marton and Booth (1997) to assist me in a rigorous discussion of the aspects of the phenomenon as they were experienced by adult learners. Within this framework, the assumption is that there is a relationship between ways of experiencing something and an individual's awareness. This idea is captured in Figure 4. By employing this framework

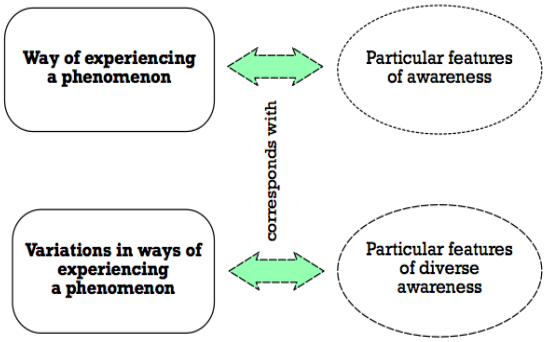

Fig. 4 Correspondence of ways of experiencing a phenomenon with the individual's awareness (Marton & Booth, 1997)

for the data analysis, I presume that each category of experiencing online learning, corresponds to particular features of awareness.

Phenomenographers translated ideas of Gurwitsch (1964), assuming that "more advanced ways of experiencing something are […] more complex and more inclusive (or more specific) than less advanced ways of experiencing the same thing" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.107). It is important to remember that although the lower-level categories are less complete, it does not indicate that they are wrong or unsophisticated. Rather, they are seen as lacking awareness of the key aspects of reality that come to the forefront when the phenomenon is experienced in a more advanced way. The lower level of categories is often "included" into the higher-level categories, while the development of the higher level of awareness is based on the awareness of the conceptions of the lower levels simultaneously. Therefore, phenomenographic data analysis is seeking hierarchical relationships that represent the increasing breadth of awareness of different aspects of the reality or phenomenon under question (Åkerlind, 2005).

Reflection on the data analysis

Since the development of the outcomes space is the result of iterative procedures and reflections of the author of this article, it is important to mention that it is possible that the proposed nested hierarchy is not the only possible way of presenting research results (Åkerlind, 2005; Ashwin et al., 2016). To address subjective biases in this study, the process of analysis was discussed with senior colleagues during the public webinar at the Department of Educational Research (Rotar, 2020), during the annual doctoral examination, and a number of conferences following the validation procedures commonly used in phenomenographic research (Kvale, 1996). Furthermore, using a Reflective Practice Framework (RPF) developed by the author (Figure 5), I produced a number of models with alternative structures until the final outcome space which is most grounded in the data was

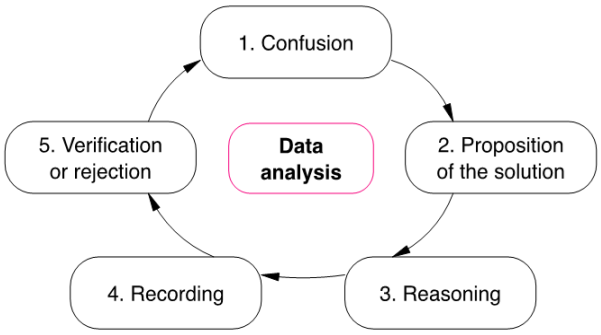

Fig. 5 Elements of the Reflective Practice Framework (source Rotar, 2021)

finalised. The preliminary and final categories of description are presented in Appendix 2. The RPF was also used to ensure the transparency of the analytical process (Rotar, 2021).

Results and discussion

Adult students' experiences of their online learning

To answer the first question: *How do adult students experience their learning in online graduate programmes?* I enumerate different ways in which adult students experience online learning, and then characterise existing variations in terms of underlying factors and context. Three qualitatively different ways of experiencing online learning have been identified:

1. Online learning is an investment.
2. Online learning is a process that brings structure.
    - Online learning brings structure to daily routine.
    - Online learning brings structure to experience and knowledge.
    - Online learning brings structure to work.
3. Online learning is a process that enables and empowers.
    - Online learning changes the way of professional thinking (enables).
    - Online learning broadens horizons (empowers).

The core meaning assigned to the phenomenon of online learning (OL) and the context within which OL is experienced are described in Table 2, following Marton and Booth's (1997) suggestion.

The three ways of experiencing (the categories of description) are related to each other, and, as advocated by Marton and Booth (1997), together represent a nested hierarchy. Differences in the core meaning assigned to OL (referential aspects) and the dimensions

Table 2 Referential and structural aspects of categories of description

Category of description	Referential aspects	Structural aspects			
		Focus: Motivation	Focus: Interactions with others	Focus: Learning outcomes	Context of experience
OL is an investment	*OL* is an investment opportunity with an expectation of return	External, driven by the return of investment	Orientation and benchmarking	Fit the demands of the labour market	University contexts/ economic benefits
OL is a process that brings structure	*OL* structures knowledge and experience, everyday life, and professional practice	External, with a potential to be transformed into internal	Sharing and shaping different opinions	Changed trajectories of professional and personal life	Broader context of professional and personal life
OL is a process that enables and empowers	*OL* enables professional and personal growth and empowers an individual	Internal, driven by the need for growth	Reflective way of communication, acceptance of alternative perspectives	Shift in ontological and epistemological perspectives	Daily life

of variation (foregrounded structural aspects) demonstrate a progressive expansion of adult students' awareness, as highlighted by Gurwitch (1964), from category one to category three (Figure 6). This implies that, as a student gains a broader awareness of the process of OL, they are able to experience it in a more complex and powerful way (Bowden & Marton, 1998).

Category 1. Online learning is an investment

Online education has traditionally been viewed as an alternative pathway to education that is particularly appropriate to adult students' lifestyles (Lockee, 2021). The theme of investment in education has been discussed from different angles, e.g., the human capital perspective and the widening participation agenda (Marginson, 2011). It is believed that "not only does a college degree allow one to remain competitive in the job market, but it also provides a foundation on which to build a career that allows [the student the] opportunity to transition their careers into other fields" (Milheim, 2005, p.120). In this category, the process of OL is conceptualised by adult students as an investment of time, money, and effort to gain benefits in the future. The emphasis is placed on the development of competencies that are considered as missing or lacking; on the acquisition of new skills and tools for professional use; and on gaining a degree that can provide more options in a labour market:

> *I knew exactly why I went on that course. I was aware of what kind of competencies I was lacking. (Participant 9)*

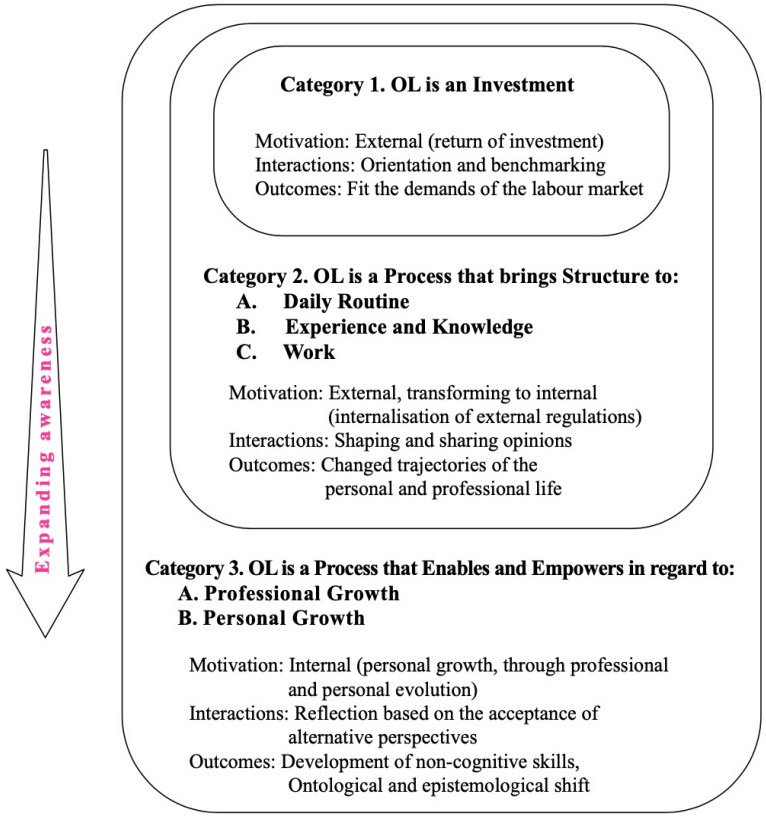

Fig. 6 Nested hierarchy of adult students' experiences of online learning: an outcome space

> *I understand what I am doing it for. It was my decision to go for [the study programme], and I knew I had to sacrifice something. (Participant 2)*

Although the theme of investment in education is not a new one, what is interesting is adult students' reflections on their sacrifices. For example, to pursue a degree, students had to reduce important elements of personal life, decrease leisure time, more carefully allocate family commitments, and reject emerging opportunities:

> *I think the important thing is that I had to allocate priorities. So, when the workload was critical and there was no time, I had to literally drop some things off, the things that were carried before automatically. (Participant 9)*

> *A couple of opportunities came up that were five days a week's work. And I thought I'm going to get my [degree] done before I step up to [that], because I don't think I would manage it [study] as well if I didn't have that one day in the [working] week where I can just get my head down. (Participant 8)*

The theme of investment in education that is presented in this category has been discussed within the widening participation agenda that aims to equip underrepresented student groups with education and skills which they could not obtain before. It is documented in various studies (Lockee, 2021; Owusu-Boampong & Holmberg, 2015) that adult students tend to return to university with the aim of gaining a degree and, thus, to stay "marketable and competitive" (Milheim, 2005, p.120). This theme also reflects an argument made by Stone and O'Shea (2019) that, for adult students, the rationale for participating in education is shaped by "pragmatic and economic reasons" (p.57). What is less emphasised in past research is that investment is associated with students' sacrifices. The results of this study showed that although offering a greater degree of flexibility, is not an easy version of campus-based education. OL also requires students to prioritise their time and commitments. The empirical evidence from this research suggests that sacrifices are accepted more easily if there are clear goals following course completion. As Carter Jr et al. (2020) suggest, setting expectations regarding the difficulty level and required commitment is critical. Overlaying this finding to other groups of online learners, educators should encourage students who are unfamiliar with this mode of learning to set goals that are linked to their aspirations.

Category 2. Online learning is a process that brings structure

This study confirmed that online learning facilitates the process of structuring and restructuring different aspects of adult students' life. Three sub-categories are distinguished in this category.

2.1 Online learning brings structure to the daily routine

In this category, the impact of online learning is associated with the development of organisational skills that are necessary for successful adaptation to the online learning environment. The concepts commonly used by students are self-organisation, self-discipline, time, time-management, and prioritising:

> *The study has given me some kind of push, some kind of impulse, a vector to increase my effectiveness, to increase my productivity. […] I think because the person has more to do, there was a need for self-organisation. (Participant 13)*

> *It organises your time very well. It was a good experience of organising your life; everything is in accordance with the SMART system - [everything] is precise, coherent and framed by time. (Participant 11)*

Another student described a process of finding a rhythm:

> *Then I found my own rhythm. And I realised that it actually suits me, because I can go to work, I can do my stuff and I can sit down in the evening and read a couple of pages of a book and do a couple of online activities and actually progress, actually learn something. (Participant 6)*

Students from this category do not merely integrate online learning into their lives. Instead, they go through a continuous and reciprocal process of structuring and re-organising their routine. At the same time, by finding their own "rhythm" and "pace" (Participant 6), students tailor online learning in a way that better suits them. However, not all students who were required to study online due to the pandemic possess skills necessary for successful adaptation to online learning. Thus, the provision of additional support to assist students in developing time-management, self-organisation and other skills is critical.

2.2 Online learning brings structure to experience and knowledge

Another discovery of this study is that online learning can systematise newly acquired theoretical knowledge and prior experience. Adult students described this process in the following ways:

> *Professionally, it was great. I felt like I have been doing this [applying theories in practice], I just haven't been describing it that way. (Participant 2).*

> *I even use them [theories] with experimental purposes. I read, make some notes from the textbook. […] And thanks to some models, my knowledge and experience have systematised. (Participant 13)*

Professional knowledge and experience are re-considered and modified to advance professional practice:

> *When we finished the course "Human resource management", a particular picture formed in my mind. [...] I gained an understanding, my knowledge systematised in terms of the management activities. (Participant 13)*

> *I have changed my approach to management. [...] I thought we needed to operate faster, and I didn't realise many things from a corporate culture perspective. After the completion of this course, I decreased the pressure [on myself], because I understood that rapid change should not be done. (Participant 12)*

This finding advocates the introduction of authentic and problem-based tasks for online students who do not have adequate work experience and may not easily link theory with practice. Authentic tasks teach students how to deal with real-life problems and

unstructured reality, enhancing their experience and resilience for learning in a fluid online environment (Shearer et al., 2020). Furthermore, it has been found that linking theory with real problems keeps students engaged in learning without the teacher's presence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

2.3 Online learning brings structure to work

In this category, online learning is experienced as a process that implicitly shapes professional behaviour and interpersonal communications. A student from this category is aware that theoretical knowledge can modify previously acquired knowledge and experience. Such awareness allows adult students to apply theoretical principles and knowledge in practice. In the following quotes, the students described their attempts to embed theory into professional practice:

> *I would specifically be doing some work at home, and I would flip through my [study] notes or textbook. And then I would incorporate something into a presentation I was making. (Participant 6)*

> *Everything that we were learning in the course I am applying in practice, in relationships with subordinates and in relation to the global issues for the future. (Participant 15)*

Another student explained that deeper theoretical understanding developed a greater confidence and made professional behaviour more considered and strategic:

> *By one way or another, I have changed my work. In relationships with people also. So, in some things, I have built a [communication] chain so I don't explain [...] from the beginning [...]. I am [only] trying to be a mentor for my closest subordinates. (Participant 13)*

Apart from influencing professional actions and work, the structuring effect of online learning was discussed in relation to the professional communications:

> *In general, the work became [more] effective, and with clients, the communication is more organised. There are more topics for discussions, justified, considered [discussions]. (Participant 11)*

A unique finding from this research is an identified structuring power of the online learning process. Although an ephemeral nature of an online learning environment allows great flexibility for adjustments to an individual's needs, the structure of the learning programme requires students to adapt to its regulations. The participants of this study

reflected upon their learning experience as a process that shapes, structures, or re-structures their life routine, work, and knowledge and experience. They talked about the permeability of online learning in positive ways and appreciated the order and efficiency that comes with that order. The results of this study are in line with the argument offered by Cook-Sather et al. (2014) that a transformative education is shaped by the lives of students and thus is dynamic and non-linear. This study showed that an online learning environment is a space that is adaptable to a student's life but also requires a student to make some adjustments. A need for integration and adaptation to the learning environment has been emphasised in various theoretical and pedagogical models of students' learning and success (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1995; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975). Yet, those models stress the need for a student's adaptation, whereas the results of this study suggest a mutual process of readjustment of both a student and a learning environment. In other words, the findings of this study suggest that what is important is how an individual student is able to negotiate the structure of his or her learning environment and align learning to meet an individual's schedule and professional and personal needs.

When considering this finding in relation to students whose learning was affected by the pandemic, the most obvious difference is that traditional age students are not always in the position to apply learning in practice. However, recent research provides evidence that in a self-directed environment students learn more effectively when they can link what they learned to real problems (Kalman et al., 2020). The lack of opportunity to test theoretical knowledge in practice can be compensated by designing authentic tasks and problem-oriented activities. However, without the appropriate support, students may experience additional frustration when working with ill-defined authentic tasks. Thus, an introduction of complex learning materials requires careful structuring and support at different stages of learning, especially if a student cohort represents students from different backgrounds and variations in prior experience (Turkkila & Lommi, 2020).

Category 3. Online learning is a process that enables and empowers

The last category, or experiencing online learning as a process that enables and empowers, points at how learning can facilitate an individual's growth and development. Additional elements within this category refer to conceptual changes and expanded horizons.

3.1 Online learning changes the way of thinking (enables)

In this category, online learning is experienced as a process that fosters the thinking process. The progression of awareness to the higher level is notable by the shift of the focus from the impact of acquired knowledge on professional practice (category two), to the learning experience culminated in a new way of professional thinking, leading to the qualitative

change in expertise (Beairsto, 1996). In the quote below, students reflect on how online learning experience opened up new horizons and amended their career trajectory:

> *I couldn't implement many things at my old workplace... I can apply myself better in a new working place, while I could not do it in the old place for a number of reasons. Basically, I have opened for myself new horizons for development. (Participant 12)*

> *[…] all my study at [the institute] coincided not only with my career, but also with my professional growth. I have been given a manager's position which I have been holding for two years already. When you start managing people, there is a big risk of making common mistakes, e.g., being emotional, too harsh, screaming at people or something like that. [Participating in the programme] reversed me radically [...] (Participant 15)*

Cranton and King (2003) emphasised that professional development influences not only professional practice but all areas of adult student personality. Values, beliefs, and perspectives on the world are changing as a result of this process. Similarly, the adult students emphasised a radical qualitative transformation in their personalities:

> *[...] It is a shift of consciousness. You see the organisation from a different perspective. I have studied for two years, but I already realise that I have started to think in a different way compared to my colleagues. (Participant 13)*

> *[…] within my work, I am becoming more confident. And it allows one to be a more creative thinker and to give views on, form arguments, do brainstorming […] actually to listen to other people's views and understand where they're coming from. (Participant 3)*

> *I'm much better now at thinking through problems, thinking through issues at work in a much more logical way. This is because of the models that we have been taught and because of the way you have to argue at the master's level, I am now thinking of different sides of the argument before forming my own opinion. This was drilled into us with every assignment. (Participant 8)*

3.2 Online learning broadens horizons (empowers)

In this category, online learning is an empowering experience. Here, the core meaning is similar to those described by Tsai (2009) and Zhao (2017). The concept of the highest level identified by Tsai is "seeing in a new way" or being able to interpret reality in a new perspective (Tsai, 2009, p.1096). In Zhao's (2017) study, the most advanced way of

experiencing learning was "gaining a new perspective to view reality" (p.219). When a student experiences learning as a process that broadens horizons, they embrace the opportunity for personal growth and development beyond the professional scope.

Marton and Booth (1997) emphasised that the process of personal development presumes the "most extensive way of understanding learning" (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p.70). Empowerment, as suggested by Marton et al. (1993), plays its role when a person develops a self-perception of being an active agent of life:

> *[…] it [participation in online learning] shows what I can achieve in a time management way, but also shows me that if I want to do something, I can absolutely do it. I've always been a believer in that, but I think this [learning experience] has convinced me even further. (Participant 10)*

> *In my opinion, my horizons became broader ... I think it [online learning experience] had an influence on my worldview. There was a change of priorities and I started a new job. Not very different from what I had before, but, in my view, more appropriate from the perspective of the personal development strategy. I think it wasn't mere coincidence [...] (Participant 12).*

The expansion of horizons can be expressed as a "shift of consciousness" (Participant 13). Chi (2008) explains this process of conceptual change as "mental model transformation" and "categorical shift", indicating a radical ontological change within an individual (p. 61). Similarly, in this study, the students talk about expanding worldview as a result of online learning:

> *I was surprised by how [online learning] made me immerse into it, just to completely switch on [...] There, you immerse entirely [...] you used to look forward, but you have to turn 180 degrees to think through and assess. This is cool [...] And this is hard. (Participant 15)*

> *You know, I became more judicious, more thoughtful. I noticed that I don't want to be impertinent or sharp [with the subordinates] anymore ... I look at the [professionalism] of my former managers and I think I also stepped on that path. (Participant 15)*

Adult students reported the experience of being exposed to the situation where they stretched their capacities, explored different opinions, and questioned personal assumptions. In times of the pandemic, all students have been exposed to a radical shift of the learning mode, which created the conditions for transformative learning:

> *There was constantly some kind of initiatory information for reflection. And many things you really had to get. The programme was designed in a way that makes students think more, analyse more, look from a different perspective ... I really had to [fully immerse into it]. This is a full immersion. This is hard, and this is the case. (Participant 15)*

Prior research suggests that transformation in learning can happen when an individual faces a challenging situation (Mezirow, 1991). As the quote above demonstrates, transformative learning experience is often uncomfortable, but is also rewarding (Mezirow, 1991). Purdie et al. (1996) also argued that through the learning experience, an individual matures and transforms in all areas. This, they continue, may lead to the feeling of empowerment. A prerequisite for a personal transformation is the change in ways of looking at and seeing the world (Marton et al., 1993). This research offers empirical evidence that personal change goes hand in glove with the development of the ability to see things from different perspectives. For these study participants, online learning experience was not only a mere occurrence in a student's biography but also a part of personal development history:

> *You are getting paid more. And this is because the scope of your competency is growing, the level of your professionalism is growing, the scale of your activity is growing and your personality is growing. (Participant 14)*

> *[...] I started to record our tutorials. And I was ... transcribing, reading, and rereading them. It was a really valuable material that [initiated] constant comprehension of the information he [the tutor] was giving. [I had] that constant worm of curiosity digging inside me, a worm in a form of not understanding. And this woke up more and more desire to find better understanding, to solve new puzzles. (Participant 7).*

> *It [learning experience] puts you in the mood to keep learning […]. It kind of motivates you and gives you something to deal with. And you feel good about yourself […] It gives you confidence, I think. It makes you feel better about yourself for having accomplished something. (Participant 1)*

> *[...] I felt like I was joining an elite group of people, if you like, who had got their degrees. A great sense of accomplishment, an improvement in self-esteem ... (Participant 6)*

Lessons learned from adult students and implications for practice

The pandemic emergency provided a rare opportunity for accelerated shift to online teaching and learning for all students, and examination of well-established practices of online education from the perspective of the historically largest adult student population can be particularly beneficial to facilitate and support that transition. In the following part of this section, I address the second research question, providing a summary of insights gained through the analysis of adult students' accounts.

Online learning is not an easy version of the campus-based education

One of the important messages from this study that should be articulated to all OHE students is that to study online is not easier than to study in a traditional way. The results showed that multiple sacrifices, such as limited leisure and family time, self-discipline and prioritising, were required from the adult students:

> *[...] It was difficult because of the type of roles I am in ... So, I dedicated my weekends - 10 hours on a Saturday, 10 hours on a Sunday - to maintain my studies. And, occasionally, during the week I might get a little bit of reading. (Participant 6)*

> *[...] when the workload was so critical and there was no time I had to literally drop some things off ... It was clear that it wouldn't be able to deliver all of them, and I had to stop and reject [them]. (Participant 9)*

> *I was struck by the design of the programme. I really had to [fully immerse into it]. This is a full immersion. This is hard, and this is the case. (Participant 15)*

Future commitments in terms of academic requirements, time, and effort should be made explicit to all potential online students. This suggestion is in line with prior research on students' adaptation to the online learning environment, as well as the recent inquiry into the emergency remote teaching. For instance, to prepare students for learning in an unfamiliar learning space, they need precise information about learning expectations, time commitments (see Carter Jr et al., 2020) and required sacrifices. For instance, Kear et al. (2016) designed an online tester experience that allowed students to evaluate existing skills and readiness for studying online, and clarify expectations before enrollment. Walters-Archie (2018) suggested a holistic orientation programme that contained introductions to the management system and to the programme structure and requirements. Indeed, this study confirmed that an immersion into the unfamiliar online learning environment can be associated with structural lifetime changes that require particular skills and adjustment strategies.

- *Key aspects of students' successful academic and social integration include ensuring that they are aware of time and effort required for learning, developing skills necessary for a smooth transition into the digital environment, obtaining knowledge about the use of educational technologies, and understanding the basics of online communication.*

Furthermore, faculty readiness to respond to students' questions and queries, handle technical and personal requests, as well as consider students' individual life circumstances are of critical importance.

- *Preparing the faculty staff for provision of targeted and personalised support is important for students' initial integration to online learning as well as their support at transitional stages (Rotar, 2022). This often requires additional staff training and an increase in the number of faculty available 24/7 to ensure the provision of support for students from different geographic and ethnic backgrounds.*

The flexibility of online learning should not be taken for granted

In this study, the adult students valued an opportunity to learn online anytime anywhere and to combine study with multiple commitments. However, they also emphasised a great degree of structure throughout their learning experience:

> *The biggest impact it had was probably on my social life. Yes, I know, I don't really have a lot of time outside of work to do anything, but it's just made me better at managing my time. (Participant 10)*

> *Of course, prioritising everything, limiting the sleep time ... And also, the allocation of the learning loads. (Participant 12)*

> *[...] time management is the biggest challenge. It is more or less how I expected it to be. The biggest impact was probably on my social life - I don't really have a lot of time outside of work to do anything. (Participant 10)*

Indeed, the flexibility of online learning often mentioned in the research literature may be misinterpreted by students unfamiliar with the online environment (Appana, 2008). Individuals who misjudge this concept may struggle with meeting their learning and personal responsibilities (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). To minimise this risk, online students should be made aware that greater time flexibility in online learning does not mean an absence of due dates and deadlines. This can be done through offering online students orientation programmes (Kear et al., 2016), pre-enrollment advice (Clay et al., 2008) and

providing comprehensive information regarding the programme schedule and required commitments (Farrell et al., 2016).

- *Familiarising students with how to learn and study in an online environment introduces them to the concept of flexibility in a self-directed, self-paced learning.*

The importance of course structure

The participants in this study reflected upon their learning experience as a process that structures and restructures many aspects of their lives, resulting in a more organised routine:

> *I will tell you frankly that I am still working on myself, on my schedule, on my effectiveness. But the study has given me some kind of push, some kind of impulse, a vector to increase my effectiveness, to increase my productivity … Most likely this is because I have got more responsibilities, probably this is the reason. And in regard to ... It is hard for me to remember ... maybe I have been using some kind of models unconsciously. It is difficult to say because the knowledge that I have gained is already in the subconscious. But most likely, what is coming to my mind, I think because the person has more tasks, therefore, there was a need for self-organisation. (Participant 13)*

> *[...] that's been a real learning process of how to structure my time very carefully. And that changes everything in your life because you have a different attitude towards time. (Participant 8)*

The adult students expressed appreciation for the efficiency that comes with that order. Thus, the relevant outcome of this study for other students is the importance of course structure and scheduling. In an online learning environment, structure is needed to address the risk of procrastination and to compensate for the lack of skills that are usually not fully developed in novice online learners, e.g., self-direction and time-management skills (Kalman et al., 2020). This idea is also supported by prior research. Recent empirical evidence confirms that students value structure and consistency in online course design (Shearer et al., 2020; Wilcox & Vignal, 2020). Structure and scaffolding increase students' feelings of confidence and control over their self-directed learning (Robinson & Persky, 2020). The development of self-direction skills can be also facilitated by incorporating support interventions into the course design (Rotar, 2022). Examples include offering workshops to develop insufficient self-direction skills (Grant et al., 2011), educational scaffolding (Boyer, 2003; McLoughlin & Alam, 2014; Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011), providing ongoing guidance on self-regulation of learning (Robinson & Persky, 2020) and mandatory peer mentoring as a part of the formal curriculum (Boyle et al., 2010).

- *The structure of an online course, as well as its explicit rules and principles, should offer students an opportunity to make learning more effective and efficient and enable further development of self-management and self-direction skills.*

Finding an individual routine

This study showed that adult students do not merely integrate learning into their lives, but rather follow a continuous and reciprocal process of finding an individual trajectory and routine. By doing so, they gradually adapt to and integrate into the online learning environment, finding their own individual pace and rhythm. The adult students mentioned that online learning provided a good experience of organising life in a precise, coherent and framed by time way. (Participant 11). The process of founding individual rhythm and learning pace was something that was greatly appreciated:

> *I realised that it actually suits me, because I can go to work, I can do my stuff and I can sit down in the evening and read a couple of pages of a book, do a couple of online activities and actually progress, actually learn something. (Participant 6)*

Rice and Carter (2016) provided an example of how flexibility of an online programme allowed students to negotiate submission deadlines, offering an opportunity to adjust individual learning trajectories. If online learning is successfully integrated into a student's life, it introduces an individually tailored structure and increases motivation for learning (Carter Jr et al., 2020; Wilcox & Vignal, 2020). This is in line with Kalman et al. (2020) who found that during the COVID-19 pandemic learning online was easier for those students who were able to find their own way to balance many things around them, and dedicate enough time to family, health, exercises, and household work.

- *Creating a personalised schedule and sticking to it is an effective strategy for online students to motivate themselves and keep track of their academic progress and life goals.*

Challenges provide an opportunity for growth

The results of this study showed that for some adult students the adaptation to the online learning environment was associated with academic and personal challenges and sacrifices. The students had to accept the challenge and restructure their lives accordingly. As a reward, online learning experience provided them with an opportunity for personal and professional growth. One striking example from this study is a student who expressed a deep discomfort from being unable to understand learning tasks:

> *I think if a person doesn't understand something, it pushes them away. And if you have to go and submerge yourself in that experience of "non-understanding", you feel inner disbalance or discomfort. (Participant 7)*

However, in a later discussion, the same student confessed that initially negative experience initiated a great deal of curiosity and desire for learning:

> *[...] I started to record our tutorials. And I was ... transcribing, reading, and rereading them. It was a really valuable material that [initiated] constant comprehension of the information he [the tutor] was giving. [I had] that constant worm of curiosity digging inside me, a worm in a form of not understanding. And this awakened and more desire to find better understanding, to solve a new puzzle. (Participant 7)*

Similar experience of having challenge to deal with was reported by another student:

> *It puts you in the mood to keep learning […]. It kind of motivates you and gives you something to deal with and you feel good about yourself […] it gives you confidence, I think. It makes you feel better about yourself for having accomplished something. (Participant 1)*

Linking the results of this study to the available scarce evidence on online learning experience of other HE students, it can be argued that those who were able to take responsibility for their learning during the pandemic and embraced the challenge transited to the online learning environment more easily (Kalman et al., 2020). Those students also perceived online learning as a positive challenge (Kalman et al., 2020).

- *Consulting students on developing personal adaptability and promoting the growth mindset is one of the unexplored directions of student support.*

Authentic learning results in the planned outcomes

Adult students are different from other student groups in that they often combine study and work. Thus, it is not surprising that the immediate knowledge application allowed adult students from this study to address the ongoing life and professional issues. By contrast, non-adult students often do not have the opportunity to immediately apply their knowledge in practice. It has been found that connecting theory with real-life tasks is an effective approach to keep learners motivated and engaged (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020):

> *Every single chapter that I read now, I'm trying to learn something. Where does it fit in my every day [life and] role? [...]. If I can find a connection, if I can find*

> *an explanation for something through what I read in the module - that's success. (Participant 6)*
>
> *[...] I already realise that I have started to think in a different way compared to the colleague with whom I am working - not for all the issues can we find a consensus. And they can, of course, get offended, but I understand that it is sometimes difficult to explain my point of view because of the developed gap in our knowledge. I can think a few steps ahead. (Participant 13)*

The research conducted during the pandemic also found that authentic and problem-based learning is beneficial (Kalman et al., 2020; Shearer et al., 2020). Shearer et al. (2020) advocated connecting course curriculum to the broader learning outcomes using meaningful and problem-based methods. Furthermore, it was suggested that authentic learning develops in students 21st century skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020) and ensures a smooth transition from educational to professional field (Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017).

- *To magnify the potential of online education, students should have the opportunity to apply newly acquired knowledge beyond the classroom, i.e., by working on tasks and cases linked to real problems.*

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated the growth of online learning. The International Association of Universities reported that by April 2020, 185 countries had closed on-campus operations due to the pandemic and moved to online instruction, affecting 89.4% of enrolled students (Marinoni et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021). A discussion is now around the question whether online learning will become an integral part of HE. Opinions are divided. For some, an immediate return to the traditions of the physical classroom is required, whereas others are confident that a paradigm shift has taken place and it is time to reimagine educational delivery. The pandemic has "likely changed the provision of education forever" (Li & Lalani, 2020, in Bragg et al., 2021, p. 2). The rapid, unexpected, and forced transition from face-to-face to remote teaching has entailed a number of challenges and constraints, but also created opportunities to explore the potential of online education (Rotar & Peller-Semmens, 2021). This study was conceived to generate such insights.

Specifically, this study is aimed at identifying and describing various ways of experiencing OL by the adult students from two online postgraduate programmes offered in the UK and Russia. The results showed that, for the study participants, OL is not only a means of gaining a degree, but a process that transforms their personal and professional

lives. According to the study findings, the lowest level of conceptualising OL is associated with investments in education driven by external factors, e.g., the need for professional development. With the adjustment to the OL environment, the awareness of the learning process was expanding as students modified their lifestyles and restructured their schedules to allocate priorities. This process of adaptation was challenging and uncomfortable, resulting in transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Such transformation had an enabling effect, whereby the adult students acquired the necessary tools to change and improve their practice, and an empowering effect resulting in a new way of thinking. It was also notable that adult students positioned the process of learning in relation to three different contexts, e.g., the academic and labour market context, professional practice, and social life, which may explain the difference in awareness of the online learning phenomenon. In other words, it is the context that seems to affect the students' conceptualisations of OL. Furthermore, it can be suggested that the factors influencing students' learning experiences are less significant than how those experiences and their contexts are absorbed and digested by the participants.

The study supplements qualitative research that applies narrative, biographical, and experiential learning research to studying online students' experiences (Dwyer et al., 2013; Shapiro et al., 2017). Specifically, it uncovers qualitative variations in the meanings attributed to online learning, based on the accounts provided by adults.

Reflecting on the results of this research, I argue that the existing assumptions about OL, e.g., its supplemental position to traditional education and taken-for-granted flexibility need to be further revised. Firstly, the functional view of online education was not confirmed by the participants. The results of this study showed that a student could initiate a transformative learning experience by embracing the learning challenges. As Mezirow (2000) emphasised, transformative learning comes with discomfort, sacrifice, and re-organisation of life. Therefore, the view of online education as a "second chance" for adult students to access tertiary education should be augmented with their individual aspirations aimed at personal development. Secondly, despite a certain degree of flexibility that OL offers, the study participants emphasised the great deal of structure in their experiences with OL. The students needed virtual studying places, personal schedules, and the deadlines to meet their commitments. Thus, the slogan of "anytime anywhere" access should not be taken literally. For the study's participants, OL was a process of crafting a new routine in all domains, rather than seen as just a second chance of obtaining a degree. Thus, this study supports the argument that focusing on gaining a degree and being interested in knowledge for other purposes are not mutually exclusive (Ashwin et al., 2016). Therefore, an examination of students' experiences of OL should not be limited to solely educational aspects (Ashwin et al., 2016; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Finally, the theme of investment is incomplete without considering the theme of sacrifice. In this study, the

students articulated multiple sacrifices they endured in order to adapt to and fulfil the online education requirements. This provides a counterweight to the consumerist narrative, wherein students simply expect to receive educational services rather than rely on personal effort, planning, and input. Marginson (2011) argued that even an economically determined notion of "human capital" may be embedded into the idea of broader individual and societal benefits of education.

The results of this study are of particular importance for those educators who are concerned with introducing online learning to the higher education curricula. The stigma of online education being the second choice, maintained in the educational research literature, should be replaced by a holistic approach to education as a process that organically incorporates the online, as well as face-to-face educational components. Carrillo and Flores (2020) state that for informed and effective online teaching and learning, it is important to discover more of its potential and new ways of application. As such, it is essential to go beyond the emergency online practices and develop quality online teaching and learning based on meticulous instructional design and planning (Hodges et al., 2020). Focusing on how adult students experience OL may provide a broader and deeper understanding of adopted effective practices and the variety of online learning opportunities and outcomes for other students' groups.

Limitations

It is important to mention several limitations in this study. This research is aimed to identify and describe the limited number of ways in which online learning is experienced by a group of adult students rather than offering an analysis of the nature of these variations. However, it is important to keep in mind that the main aim of phenomenography is to map and describe how people conceptualise the phenomenon and not to offer the interpretation of their experience.

Another limitation of the study is associated with the narrow focus on online postgraduate programmes at two higher education institutions in the UK and Russia. It is possible that the structure of the proposed outcome space will vary for other contexts of online learning delivery. Thus, educational institutions and educators should adopt outlined implications for practice with care. Besides, the subjective influence of the researcher should be explicitly acknowledged, meaning that the research outcomes may vary. To address this limitation, I introduced a Reflective Practice Framework into the research design. Finally, owing to the peculiarity of online learning experience that was studied, and a specific adult student cohort represented by working professionals, the limitation of this study is that it cannot offer generalisable conclusions. Instead, this study offers new insights into the phenomenon of online learning that can be helpful for educational communities aiming to introduce online learning into the HE curricula.

Appendix 1 Sample of the interview questions

Most of the questions in a phenomenographic interview follow from comments of the participant (Trigwell, 2000). Some of the follow-up questions that were used in this study are:

- Could you explain ... further?
- What do you mean by ...?
- You mentioned .... How is this related to what you say about ...?

Thus, whilst I was maintaining the focus on a research question, I was trying to provide room for the participant to fully express related nuances and details.

- Could you, please, briefly introduce yourself.
- I would like to ask you how it has been for you to study online? You mentioned X, can you talk about it more? What do you mean by ...?
- Could you please mention the most significant changes in your personal and/or professional life since starting this program?
- Could you please, share with me a particular example when you ... (follow-up question in relation to the students' reflection)? Could you explain … further?
- Could you remember a situation when you felt that your learning experience was particularly beneficial for you?
- Could you remember any negative/ challenging situations that influenced your learning experience? Could you explain … further?
- You mentioned ... How is this related to what you say about ...?
- Is there anything about your online learning experience you would like to share?

Appendix 2 Preliminary and final categories of description

First draft of categories

- Online learning is a process that empowers
- Online learning is a process that enables
- Online learning is a process that can be fitted into life
- Online learning is a process that allows fitting the demand of the labour market

Second draft of categories

- Online learning is an investment in a long-term goal
- Online learning is a process that influences the way of seeing and thinking
- Online learning is a process that triggers lifelong learning
- Online learning is an opportunity to "open doors"
- Online learning is a process that enables and empowers

Third draft of categories

- Online learning is an investment
- Online learning is a process that gives structure
- Online learning is a process that influences the way of seeing and thinking
- Online learning is a process that enables and empowers

Final draft of categories

1. Online learning is an investment
2. Online learning is a process that gives structure
    - Structures life.
    - Structures work.
    - Structures experience and knowledge.
3. Online learning is a process that enables and empowers
    - Online learning changes the way of professional thinking (enables).
    - Online learning broadens the horizon (empowers)

Abbreviations
OL: Online learning; OHE: Online higher education; RPF: Reflective Practice Framework.

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Availability of data and materials
The research data can be accessed upon a reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interests
No conflict of interest has been identified.

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