Improving Student Engagement: Fostering Partnership between Student and Teacher

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the

University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Education

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September 2019

Abstract

The importance of student success, commonly measured as course completion, is vital for all educational institutions. However, if students are not engaged in their learning or do not have a supported experience, they will not be able to successfully complete their studies. Literature in the field indicates that educational institutions around the world are confronted with increased economic pressure which increases the importance of learners' attraction and retention. Research also points out that there is a correlation between student engagement and student retention.

The purpose of this research is to investigate ways to improve student engagement, which can act as the foundation for a Students as Partners approach in their learning journey in the context of Vocational Education and Training in Australia. I utilised the pre-existing 'individual learning plans' and tutorial meetings to develop a personal support framework that improved learner engagement and empowered students to be active participants in their learning. The study used several conceptual frameworks and models including Kahu and Nelson's framework on engagement and the Higher Education Academy's model on values of partnership.

The study applies an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm of research and a qualitative method of inquiry, namely qualitative interviews, as the primary method of data collection through 15 interviews and an online survey which were carried out with teachers and students. A thematic analysis was conducted, and the data was interpreted which identified six factors for engagement; *communication*, *responsibility*, *motivation*, *adaptive support*, *trust*, and *reflection*. These 'triggers' played a role in engagement, and subsequently in developing partnership between student and teacher. The study concludes with recommendations to educational institutions on how to enhance engagement through partnership. Additional research into student engagement and Students as Partners in a wider context is also recommended.

Keywords   Retention, progression, learner engagement, students as partners, learning experience, individual learning plan, tutorial sessions, engagement through partnership

Table of Contents

Acknowledgment

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to many individuals who supported and guided me during my doctoral journey. This thesis was only finished because they were by my side.

Firstly, I would like to express my appreciation to my parents, my daughter Nardeen, and our family friend Fr. Morris who supported me during the doctoral program from beginning to end, believing in me at times when I did not believe in myself.

Secondly, I would like to thank my primary supervisor Dr. Rita Kop, for her knowledge, patience, inspiration, experience, finding the right words of encouragement, and companionship during this process.

I would also like to thank my secondary supervisor Dr. Janet Strivens, whose feedback and viewpoint helped me significantly to refine my arguments and strengthen my research.

Finally, I would like to thank my examiners, Dr. Ruth Healey and Dr. Ian Willis, for their expert and professional insight into my thesis, which advanced it to a higher level.

List of Figures

List of Tables

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1   Introduction

The issue of student engagement has gained prominence in educational institutions. Student engagement is a diverse concept and its meaning has changed over time. Its definition encompasses two distinct but related domains, namely enhancing the motivation of students to participate in learning, as well as the involvement of students in the processes of quality improvement and quality assurance, which contributes to their educational experiences (Olson & Peterson, 2015).   In terms of learning, student engagement can be defined as the level of attention, interest, and desire that learners demonstrate when they are learning, which motivates them to learn (Olson & Peterson, 2015). This is the definition that I have used during this study.

Students invest considerable time and commitment in acquiring the appropriate qualifications and establishing their life pathway and, therefore, it is imperative that they make informed decisions both before and during the course of their study about their learning journey. Krause (2005) stated that when learners start higher education, they join a battlefield. They come across several practices and procedures that are new and difficult to understand for most of them. When students engage in their learning, they win the battlefield. Others cannot cope and withdraw from the course and lose the battle, which means that it is important for educational institutions to support students, so they are engaged in their study.

It is worth noting that even though the meaning of student engagement has been the subject of intense recent debate; the notion of engagement (including recent developments and variants such as 'students as producers,' 'students as producers/co-producers,' and 'students as partners') has been around for many years (Bovill, 2017). The concept of student

engagement has been at the core of political discourses in the last few years, with talk of learners being a central stakeholder of the educational system (Thomas, 2002). The agenda appears to be informed, at least partly, by significant changes in higher education; its purpose, funding and student fees, the need to provide evidence for value for money, as well as the popular view of the student as a client or customer (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011).

In the context of higher education, partnership refers to a relationship where all the involved parties engage actively in and stand to benefit from the process of teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2011; Crawford et al., 2015). Partnership according to Troschitz (2017) is the process through which institutions of higher learning develop engaged students through enhanced teaching and active learning. It is different from consulting with, or even listening to students. Partnerships between faculty and students, between the institution and the student union, or among the students themselves, qualify as student engagement. However, it is crucial to call attention to the difference between engagement and partnership as not all forms of engagement can be viewed as partnerships and, therefore, a realistic and effective approach might be that of engagement through partnership (Troschitz, 2017).

It is also worth noting that defining engagement through partnership changes the nature of engagement. It means that an effective student partnership approach places the learner in different, non-traditional roles, such as that of an instructor, an assessor, or a mentor. This becomes clear through the practice of pedagogy consultancy and curriculum design, as highlighted by the Higher Education Academy (2015), which contends that students are frequently engaged through faculty-student committees and program evaluations. These approaches ensure that students are part of the formal and ongoing processes of professional staff development, curriculum design, and revalidation.

To really understand student experiences, it is crucial that the voices of students are heard and not merely in the form of surveys after their courses are finished. Indeed, education is a unique individual undertaking, and institutions of higher learning should be open to fully understand transformative learning experiences to be able to enhance their practices.

1.2   Research Context

This research took place in the Australian context and it is necessary to clarify some of the contextual issues influencing this research. After high school (secondary school), students in Australia can join a university to study for an undergraduate degree or join a Vocational Education and Training (VET) organization to study for a vocational qualification. At the end of their VET qualification, students find employment opportunities, take a pathway to a university undergraduate degree where they can receive credit for their VET study or do further higher-level studies at the VET institution. All Australian qualifications are bound by an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which is explained in the next section.

1.2.1 Australian Qualifications Framework

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is the national policy for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training (AQF, 2013). AQF provides the standards for Australian qualifications. The framework identifies the learning outcomes for each AQF level and qualification type. The AQF levels relate to a qualification type and go from one to ten corresponding to Certificate 1 to Doctoral Degree. For example, a Bachelor degree would be AQF level 7; a Diploma would be AQF level 5; and an Advanced Diploma would be AQF level 6. The levels indicate the relative difficulty and depth of knowledge required by students to demonstrate as an outcome of the qualification. Appendix A is an extract from the framework's handbook (AQF, 2013, p. 18). It summarizes the AQF level, the

corresponding qualification, and the skills gained by the learner after achieving a

qualification.

Diploma students are deemed equivalent to first year students in a university

undergraduate degree in the same or similar discipline area. After completing their Diploma

from a VET organization, students receive credit for the first year at an Australian university.

Students then continue their undergraduate degree from the second year.

1.2.2 My context

The Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) system offers a wide range

of training and qualifications based on AQF in several subject areas for learners of all ages

and backgrounds. The VET sector in Australia plays a core role in developing skills for the

workplace and pathways to higher education. I have conducted this study in a Vocational

Education and Training (VET) institution in Australia. This organisation offers over 1200

courses (from certificate to degree level) to over 500,000 students annually on campus, in the

workplace, online, or by distance. I have worked in this VET organisation for more than 20

years as a teacher. My passion for engaging students in learning motivated me to conduct

this study. I want to offer students the best possible support to assist them in their studies.

Student retention and successful completion of their course are world-wide concerns

for educational institutions, and they concern me. According to Mclnnis, James, and Hartley

(2000), learners' course completion is the responsibility of education organisations. Students

need to be engaged in their course to have a better learning experience and complete their

course. Yorke and Longden (2004) even go as far as stating that with the growing dynamic

global market for higher education, low retention rates can affect the institution's reputation.

This shows the pressure educational institutions are under to engage students in activities that

they find worthwhile and ensure their retention till the end of the program they have enrolled in.

"Smart and Skilled" is a New South Wales (NSW) Government's reform initiative to establish a competitive VET sector. The reform offers subsidised training based on NSW skills priorities. As a result of the new reform, funding rules for institutions were affected. Under this reform, Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) receive funding based on the number of units or subjects completed by individual students. According to the payment schedule, the more units or subjects that are completed by students, the more funds the organisation can collect from the government.

Under this reform, completion is a significant issue in the organisation in which I carried out the research. As stated by Anderson (2010), when teachers feel the pressure of student completion, they can yield to undesirable practices such as lowering ethical standards or recording unrealistic results.

For learners to receive subsidised courses, eligible students must have a completed individual learning plan (ILP) sometimes called training plan. It is a plan for the training and assessment to be delivered to a learner, which sets out how, when, and by whom the training and assessment are conducted to achieve their qualification successfully. It reflects the current state of training for an individual. The document is pre-populated by the enrolment system with the list of units or subjects that the student must complete to receive the qualification. It also helps to explain whether the student should receive recognition of prior learning (RPL) or be required to undertake a full training program, and any identified need for support. The Plan is a living document that is meant to enable competency-based development and completion.

All students ought to discuss the ILP with their teacher. Every eligible student must have a completed ILP by week 12 of their course. However, due to time constraints, it seems that the ILP process becomes routine where no discussion takes place between teachers and students. The pre-populated document is signed by both parties; teacher and student. The signed document is filed for safe record keeping.

The theme of 'Students as Partners' has never been studied in my organisation. Especially in higher qualifications, such as Diplomas or Advanced Diplomas, the concept would be relevant, because students at this level of qualification would be educationally mature enough to take responsibility for their learning and work with teachers to accomplish their anticipated goals. In this study, I wanted to investigate ways to improve student engagement, which acts as the foundation for a Students as Partners (SaP) approach in their learning journey, and to investigate how to make the use of the ILP as meaningful as possible.

The aim of this study was to make a better use of a mandated document, the ILP, that appears to have minimal value other than meeting requirements within the organization. My objective was to investigate how to get teachers motivated to use the ILP document as a partnership building tool for the benefit of student learning. I used tutorial meetings as a platform to create partnership between student and teacher.

1.3   Overview of the thesis

With this thesis research, I have studied the effect of offering tutorial support meetings in conjunction with the Individual Learning Plan on engaging students to foster partnership with teaching staff.

The remainder of this thesis is comprised of five further chapters. The second chapter reviews the literature on the changing purpose of higher education, engagement, students as partners, and a heutagogical learning approach. The third chapter details the research methodology used for this research. The fourth chapter presents the findings of this research. The fifth chapter discusses the findings, the literature, and the set of values identified in the framework for student engagement through partnership (HEA, 2015). In this chapter, I suggest a framework that might improve engagement through partnership based on the findings of this study. The final chapter concludes the research and presents limitations and recommendations for educational practice and further research.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1   Introduction

All through its history, higher education has witnessed very little evolution, even though it has flourished on the relatively modest changes. In the past 20 years, however, several innovations have forced significant changes in universities and colleges. It has forced executives and administrators to contemplate what Higher Education may look like in a decade, five decades, and beyond. From social and demographic changes to technology and politics, several trends continue to influence planning in higher education (Callan, 2013).

College and university students aged between eighteen and twenty-four years old are usually regarded as traditional students. This population constitutes the majority of those signing up for post-secondary education. However, Davenport (2016) pointed out that the population of adult learners (those aged 21 years or over at first entry) has been growing fast. Horn and Carroll (1996) identified non-traditional learner by the existence of any of the following attributes

> *delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attended part time, financially independent, worked full time while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, was a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma* (p. 5)

Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. (2017) identifies as some of the attributes of non-traditional students a delayed enrollment upon completing high school, no completion of high school, full- or part-time employment while studying, being financially independent of their parents, or having dependents under their care. Rabourn et al. (2015) also observe that the completion rate of non-traditional students in the U.S., who exhibit at least the following two risk aspects such as part-time studying or financial

independence, stands at roughly seventeen percent, which is significantly lower than the 54

percent of traditional students who have the same academic goals. A report by McDonald

(2018) suggested that in Australia, the national completion rate for Vocational Education and

Training (VET) qualifications sits around 49 percent.

2.2   The purpose of education

Kuh (2001) suggested that higher learning establishments increasingly face demands

for running universities as businesses with a high emphasis on ensuring financial

accountability, attracting and retaining learners, rewarding and preparing them and making

sure they graduate to be productive people. However, Gibb (2015) claimed that world

education suffers from a considerable amount of aimlessness and confusion. The rapid

changes put pressure on the educational system. Furthermore, Readings (1999) indicated that

as the school buildings grow more substantial, the graduates coming from these appear to be

less ready, in either intellect or personality, for the continuance of culture that used to be an

essential purpose of universities.

Mitchell (2011) claimed that education in society was viewed as a means of nurturing

people with moral teaching as an absolute component of it. The educator was not only a

trainer or a mere expert but also a counsellor and useful guide. For the past century, didactic

teaching models have been at conflict with more student-centred models of education. Jarvis

(2005) states that the function of education is to facilitate people to attain their full

potentiality as human beings, independently and as society members. It means that people

need to acquire knowledge that will promote their thinking. Society continues to evolve, the

world is diverse, people are different, and consequently, the learning system has to meet this

variation and these new demands. This means that the field of education also has to adapt.

As stated in Biesta (2015), education has three connected domains; *socialisation*, *qualification*, and *subjectification*. *Qualification* offers skills and knowledge to get employment and be part of the economic development of society. Concerning *socialisation*, education offers awareness of religious, cultural, and traditions characteristics of human beings. Education affects the existence of the learner as a subject of responsibility, which the author referred to as *subjectification*. Looking through the lens of the three domains while addressing educational issues would allow educators to have a better understanding of the purpose of education.

According to Tennant et al. (2010), technology has transformed higher education, and its role in learning has been the most notable change. It has also allowed for more considerable accountability efforts. Mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablet computers, have changed how both students and instructors approach education. Technology has changed the way instructors interact with learners, from chat and email interaction to online courses, the flipped classroom approach, and technology in the classroom (Ogden & Shambaugh, 2016). Today, it is possible for instructors to teach courses from an educational setting that is entirely online based on a learning management system, which makes it possible not only to stage PowerPoint slides and written items, as well as other lesson materials, but also to have synchronous communication sessions in which the students meet the instructor at a particular time online. This could have an effect on the purpose of education as it is now scalable to support students from a distance.

2.3   Factors affecting the current higher education landscape

According to Brennan and Shah (2011), the present situation as far as the higher education (HE) landscape is concerned is different from the past decade. This situation can be explained by factors such as the globalisation of higher education, the emergence of new virtual universities, a steady increase in higher learning institution numbers, the move to a mass HE education system, the decline in funding using public resources, competition by educational stakeholders to outdo each other, and fast declining entry grades or standards to appeal to more students. These developments also impact the student population as far as intake and those transitioning from the institution are concerned. Most institutions have to go through the changes just mentioned since most of these are beyond their control (Brennan & Shah, 2011). However, some changes are in the power of most institutions. These include changes in instructional methods or modes of content delivery, which have to be aligned with the current issues in the education sector and the institutional vision and mission.

Issa, Isaias, and Kommers (2014) claimed that the current higher education landscape across the world is a reflection of not only the exponential growth but also a demographic shift in the student population. Institutions of higher education have witnessed reforms during the last few decades that have sought to bolster their independence and ability to act strategically. Student numbers in India and China have grown exponentially. In other regions of the world, such as Africa and the Middle East, institutions of higher education continue to be stretched because of continuous growth. This situation makes it difficult for the existing structures to meet the ever-increasing demand. Over the last two decades, most countries have emphasized an increasing access to higher education, which has led to the growth in the number of not only colleges and universities but also the degree programs being offered. The International Strategy Office at the University of Oxford (2017) notes that the global

enrolment ratio for tertiary institutions increased from 14 percent to 32 percent between 1992

and 2012; and that China currently opens a new university every fortnight.

Sharma et al. (2017) argue that higher education systems are changing globally, with

the major contributors to this shift being the expansion of the Internet, a reduction in the cost

of computing and communication, reduced support in the form of government funding, as

well as changing demographics. A typical university student is not an eighteen-year-old fresh

high school graduate any-more. King (2015) contends that while the number of university

and college students enrolled in online courses has been growing steadily, the growth is

mostly attributable to the increase in non-traditional students, which includes adult learners.

In fact, according to Lechuga (2016), more than seventeen percent of university students in

the United States are *non-traditional*, which means they study online or part-time, attend

school while working, or already have a family. These students have different expectations

from traditional students.

Lederman (2017) argued that the free online courses that MOOCs offer via platforms

such as Udacity, EdX, and Coursera had challenged the traditional model of higher education

institutions about their capacity to sustain their long-established classroom and chalkboard

instruction. Clayton Christensen, a Harvard University professor and the founder of the

theory of 'disruptive innovations', predicts that 50 percent of American universities and

colleges will go bankrupt or close by 2028, which translates to an estimated 7,000 post-

secondary institutions, (Lederman, 2017). Higher education continues to face considerable

financial and other difficulties, with Internet technology providing several alternatives for

post-secondary education. This has proved very challenging to traditional universities and

colleges.

According to Sharma et al. (2017), such changes in the higher education landscape,

particularly concerning the mode of education delivery, will potentially transform the roles of

administrators, professors, and students. Professors are expected to become motivators, facilitators, resource developers instead of teachers. At the same time, the roles and definitions of student engagement, the university campus, the library, and interaction have changed. Brick-and-mortar classrooms are increasingly being replaced with online classrooms, complete with online discussion or chat boards. This challenges Higher Education structures and systems, but also student engagement.

2.4   Non-traditional learners

Matthews, Garratt, and Macdonald (2018) discussed trends and implications in the Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) sectors in Australia. The changing landscape described above is similar in Australian universities and VET institutions, where many learners aged 16 and above take part. They are considered adult learners with varied needs and goals.

It is worth noting that even though adult learners are usually referred to as non-traditional learners, these populations are different but often share specific attributes. Also, although adult learners might display some of these characteristics, Smoke (2013) argues that adult learners are a unique population with distinct needs both outside and inside the college campus.

According to Arfield et al. (2013), transformations in higher education have ensured that it is better placed to meet the needs of non-traditional learners. Jenkins (2014) observes that non-traditional students have become more visible in college and university campuses and that universities and colleges are now more responsive to the needs of these students than they were in the past. Indeed, this is noteworthy given the steadily increasing number of working and adult students entering institutions of higher education with the move to mass higher education (Mayhew, Deer & Dua, 2004). In recognizing that they are dealing with

adults and not children, institutions of higher education are now moving towards instruction

that is anchored in participative learning rather than solely using the lecture as the primary

mode of engagement with students (Smoke, 2013).

Chen (2017) claimed that the population of adult learners continues to grow in post-

secondary education, with attendant hurdles to academic success. At the same time, Harrison

and Hutton (2014) observed that institutions of higher learning continue to put in place and

follow policies that are favorable to traditional college students. According to Scott (2015),

because adult learners have become common within the higher education landscape, it is wise

to understand and respond to their experiences to make sure that this population is supported

to succeed.

Rabourn et al. (2015) found, systematically, that the main barriers to the education of

adult students include the cost of education, a lack of time by learners and the location of the

classes, as well as family and work responsibilities. These constraints tend to have a direct

and indirect impact on the ability and extent to which the learners can participate.

Consequently, the remarks made by Lambert (2014) are significant on the importance of a re-

evaluation of the place of adult learners in the current higher education landscape to make

sure that their needs are being met and to ensure their optimal learning and attainment of their

educational objectives.

Knowles (1984), who was at the forefront of supporting adult education, explicated

the principles that typify adult learners, namely that they tend to be self-directed, assume

responsibility for their learning, and reject the arbitrary imposition of information on them;

they are highly experienced, which contributes to their self-identity; and they exhibit a

readiness to learn. The willingness to learn is evident in the fact that they return to the

university or college voluntarily and engage actively in learning. The final characteristic of

these learners worth a mention is that they tend to be task-motivated. In other words, they pursue higher education for a specific goal, and their motivation is usually internally driven.

2.5   Andragogy versus Heutagogy

Canning (2010) and Hase (2013) contend that the traditional view of education is that it is a relationship between the learner and the instructor where the latter decides what the former needs to know, as well as how skills and knowledge should be imparted. Hase (2013) added that the last three decades had witnessed a revolution in the field of higher education through in-depth research into how teaching should be done and the various ways that people learn.

Educational and training systems of most countries, according to Harrison and Hutton (2014), are based on models that were developed many years ago to meet the demands of the industrial revolution. The goal of these systems was to prepare people to fit tidily into the economic models of the various societies. This is still primarily the prevailing model that informs educational policies. Nevertheless, Matthews et al. (2018) explained that this model could no longer meet the demands and challenging situations of the 21st-century world where education is driven by globalisation and the rapid speed of technological growth.

Increasingly, educational systems are emphasizing performance and standardization, and even though there are increasing possibilities for innovation, learning, and creativity, these lag behind (Harrison & Hutton, 2014). Harrison and Hutton (2014) and also Mentz and Oosthuizen (2016) claimed that the models that work are those that create and develop competent lifelong learners with a rounded skills set that not only prepares them to manage change but also imparts a yearning to learn. Within this context, this section of the literature

review examines the differences between andragogy and heutagogy, as well as the benefits of using heutagogy as a theoretical model in improving student engagement.

Andragogy refers to techniques and principles employed in adult education. Malcolm Knowles (1970) first used the term. It is difficult to discuss the literature on andragogy without talking about Knowles' work, as his work was instrumental in its emergence as a viable learning theory. Even though Knowles admitted that he did not invent the term 'andragogy,' he has written most of the texts that instigated serious scholarly discourse in this field. Knowles defined andragogy as "the art and science of adult learning" (Davenport, 2016, p. 113). He viewed it more as a method or approach than a theory, and he conceptualized andragogy and pedagogy as not a dichotomy but a continuum.

According to Knowles (1970), the andragogic approach embraces some ideas concerning the methods preferred by mature people in learning. It utilizes techniques of acquiring knowledge based on problem-focus and mutual strategies, as opposed to the traditional model in lecturing that emphasizes a didactic mode. Contrasted with the "instructor knows all" approach, andragogy takes into consideration and emphasizes more the need to have equality in the interaction between the instructor and the student as well as self-directedness in learning. Knowles' (1984) work on andragogy is still among the leading theoretical frameworks and references for studies on adult learners as a subpopulation of non-traditional college students.

Andragogy offers numerous practical approaches for improving educational methodology. Andragogy posits a big difference in the way adults and young people acquire educational understanding. However, despite andragogy's valuable knowledge perspectives, it still emphasizes the meaningful instructor-student relationship. Mentz and Oosthuizen (2016) argue that the information explosion, coupled with the brisk pace of change in society, means that practitioners and industry experts should be seeking educational approaches that

promote self-directed learning or a situation where the learner determines what he or she wants to learn and how learning should occur. Heutagogy, which refers to the study of self-determined learning, is seen as a move away from earlier education paradigms and provides a different approach to learning in modern times.

Educators can remove barriers and assist learners in acquiring knowledge; however, only learners can empower themselves. In this regard, Hase (2013) remarks that current pedagogical and andragogical approaches to teaching and learning are no longer adequate in preparing learners to thrive in the contemporary workplace. Put differently, self-directed approaches are required to enable students within the higher education setting to reflect on not only what must be learned but also how learning occurs.

Heutagogy is a learning approach that focuses on individualized learning methods. According to Pardo and Kloos (2011), there is a fast dynamism in the field of education, and transformation in the ways information is received, stored and shared by students. This process is strongly supported by heutagogists themselves. Splitter (2009) asserts that heutagogy allows students to wholly participate in the process of gaining knowledge as opposed to a situation whereby they passively receive information passed on to them by teachers, knowledge facilitators or other educational stakeholders. Splitter argues that heutagogy takes into consideration learners' ability, learning methods that are action-centered such as the ability to reflect and respect for the knowledge transfer and communication process, or activities between learners and teachers. These learning initiatives are what inspire students to be creative and own the learning process, thus improving their comprehension and knowledge retention. In heutagogy, the teacher enables the learning through offering direction and resources.

Canning (2010) defines heutagogy as not only the study of self-determined learning but also an effort at challenging the traditional ideas about instruction, delivery and learning

that continue to reign in instructor-centered learning. According to Halupa (2017), heutagogy

brings to the fore the need to share knowledge rather than hoard it. In other words, it is a form

of self-directed learning whose principles and practices are founded on andragogy. The

heutagogical approach to education promotes the autonomy of learners and puts a particular

emphasis on the development of learners' capabilities intending to produce graduates who are

well equipped to deal with the intricacies of the contemporary workplace. Today's educators

must confront the challenging task of nurturing lifelong learners who are capable of surviving

and thriving within the knowledge economy (Mentz & Oosthuizen, 2016).

It is also worth noting that novel technologies have created the need to consider new

approaches to pedagogy, with andragogy becoming less popular with some educators,

apparently outdated given the brisk developments in digital media and new methods of

teaching (Tiwari & Nafees, 2016). As a concept, the principles and concepts of heutagogy

could be regarded as a response to the aforementioned developments in the higher education

landscape in the sense that a heutagogic approach to learning not only focuses on the

development of capable learners; it also emphasizes the development of learners'

competencies and their ability to continuously learn.

The Internet has also led to a new interest in heutagogy due to the affordances of

Social Networking Services (SNS) that have greatly complemented an approach to learning

that encourages student engagement. It is not difficult to see how a heutagogic approach,

through the Internet, promotes and improves student engagement. Sharma et al. (2017) note

that SNS such as YouTube, Facebook, blogs, and Twitter, which initially functioned as news

and entertainment spaces, have transformed into learning domains where professors and

students can interact, exchange ideas, and tutor in the same manner as in the traditional

classroom. Therefore, heutagogy should be considered as a pedagogical approach that might

fit well with emerging technologies in higher education, such as in distance education, which tends to cater well for both traditional and non-traditional students.

According to Blaschke (2012), the concept of double-loop learning is another essential principle in discussing the concept of heutagogy. Blaschke (2012) notes that in double-loop learning, aside from learners thinking about the problem, as well as the resultant action and results, they must also reflect on the problem-solving process and its influence on their actions and beliefs. In this regard, it might be said that double-loop learning takes place when the learner interrogates and tests his or her values and beliefs as being the basis of the learning process with the guidance of the teacher.

Some scholars, such as Blaschke (2012), Tiwari and Nafees (2016) and Sharma et al. (2017), have indicated that higher education's response to heutagogy has thus far been characterized by hesitancy, which has partly been attributed to the unfeasibility of espousing a full-scale heutagogy framework. Blaschke (2012) argued for the need to include both andragogy and pedagogy, noting that taking away the teacher makes the idea of heutagogy unworkable in institutions that are expected to confer credentials. This makes it impossible and unreasonable, according to Blaschke (2012), to adopt heutagogy's hallmark of a learner-centered and learner-guided assessment. This notwithstanding, Hase (2013) claimed that educators in different fields – including engineering, medical sciences, and humanities – consider heutagogy a plausible response to the critical issues that confront learners within the workplace and, therefore, novel learning environments are increasingly being based on the model.

Ashton and Newman (2006) claimed that implementing a self-determined learning environment requires a significant shift in the teaching approach from the instructors, as their role will become that of a facilitator and a guide. This approach needs to be clearly explained to students from the beginning of their course, as it is different from the traditional learning

experience they are familiar with. The authors added that the expectations from both sides

ought to be addressed whereby the learner is responsible for knowledge construction and the

learning path. The instructor is responsible for guidance, feedback, sharing resources, and

creating a learning environment of mutual trust.

2.6   Student Experience and Student Engagement

According to Issa, Isaias, and Kommers (2014), students are at the core of higher

education and its systems, and the HE operation is driven by several changes that have been

witnessed in recent decades, including the framing of students as clients, changes in fees, and

an increasing need to show value for money. Under such circumstances, understanding and

enhancing the student experience becomes of importance if higher education is to generate

the caliber and quality of graduates required in the twenty-first century. Sharma et al. (2017)

claimed that higher education research suggests three predictors of student success:

motivation, adequate academic preparation, and student engagement. By focusing on student

engagement, higher education institutions gain the opportunity to improve their prospects for

retaining a diverse student population, particularly non-traditional students, to flourish and

succeed in higher education (Sharma et al. 2017).

Student engagement, claimed Olson and Peterson (2015), is an expression utilized to

conceptualise a person's curiosity and eagerness for learning, which influences their academic

behaviour and operation. According to Bergman et al. (2015), the need to ensure student

engagement is more pressing now than ever before. From the students' point of view, they

are investing considerable time and commitment into acquiring the appropriate credentials

and building a life pathway, which makes it essential that such students make informed

choices both before and after their academic programs. The pursuit of education is a personal

undertaking, and the college or university experience should be enhanced via inclusive and transformational learning experiences (Bergman et al., 2015).

The National Survey of Student Engagement in Indiana, US, (2013) stresses the value of scholars "bonding" with the university; the level of dropping out from university increases if there is no proper bonding or active participation. Positive engagement indicators include the students' active involvement in coursework and classroom activities and a connected sensation of recognition with school (NSSEI, 2013). Unlike social and economic status and IQ, lecturers can offer an encouraging influence, such as feedback, to enhancing student engagement.

Conner (2016) theorised three separate kinds of student engagement, which are behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Firstly, behavioural engagement is defined as a multifaceted conception categorized into three forms of school involvement: (a) positive behaviour, (b) participation in academic responsibilities, and (c) involvement in school-correlated programs. For instance, positive behaviour entails conforming to school policy, attending class often, binding to standards, and avoiding troublesome conduct. Furthermore, behavioural engagement suggests involvement in extracurricular activities, which might consist of sports, clubs, or even school governance (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Active learning methods promote behavioural engagement by making students responsible for participation through supportive learning groups and colleague discussion, which encourages learners to progress and adopt active learning (Fredricks et al., 2011).

Conner's (2016) second type of engagement is emotional engagement. Emotions refer to learners' affective reactions during teaching sessions such as being happy, bored, sad, frustrated, and interested. Mutual relationships promote emotional engagement through the learner's perception of the teacher's conduct, and it is supported through lecturers' positive behaviour towards students (Paraskeva & LaVallee, 2015).

Palmer (1997) stated,

Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on each other for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and education at its best, and we need to interweave them in our pedagogical discourse as well. (p. 16)

He argued that the lecturer's Self is central in education. Reducing any of the three paths (intellect, emotion, and spirit) would distort the real purpose of education. A warm and affectionate teacher who gives clear expectations will readily bond with the learners, and the students will feel happier and more passionate during class, resulting in establishing an emotional rapport among scholars and educators (Palmer, 1997).

Lecturers can promote emotional engagement by valuing the strengths, customs and life expertise of their colleagues. Conner (2016) proposed that emotional engagement stresses learners' feelings of relationship with or detachment from their educational institution, the students' perception about their institution, the methods and activities of the institution, and the individuals in the institution. Cardwell (2011) suggested that as a crucial part of their study in an educational institution, students look for a relationship with a peer, articulate a need for commitment through rapport, and need to be recognized.

The third type of engagement as conceptualized by Conner (2016) is cognitive engagement, which can be defined as the cognitive roles required in a scholar's learning procedure. Cognitive engagement is a critical factor in how learners accomplish interrelated instructional activities (Conner, 2016). Disengaging lessons allow the students' minds to wander, and they do not manage to make a case for application since students do not relate the topic to what is essential in their lives. Cognitively engaged learners would be involved in their study, would enjoy challenge, and would exceed the requirements.

It is suggested that learner engagement is an important topic which has been addressed in different ways by many authors (Kuh, 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008; Hu & Kuh,

2003; Coates, 2007).   Trowler (2010) classifies some of the obvious reasons for learners'

engagement, such as: improving learning; helping learners improve their retention; enhancing

education equality and promoting social justice; enhancing proper curriculum application;

building or developing an institutional reputation; improving a financial situation, and finally

enhancing institutional marketing. This suggests that from an institutional position, it will

pay off to ensure learner engagement.

2.7   The Concept of "Students as Partners"

The concept of "Students as Partners" (SaP) entwines several discourses within the

higher education landscape, including flexible pedagogies, employability, student retention,

assessment and feedback, student engagement and student success. At its core, partnership

entails the application of practical and well-demonstrated approaches to teaching, learning,

and assessment alongside a commitment to candid, constructive, and constant dialogue

between institutions, teachers, and learners. Cook-Sather (2011) characterizes partnerships

that improve student engagement as those that treat all partners as smart and capable

contributors to the academic community.

The definition by Cook-Sather et al. (2014) explains clearly the dynamics of the

student-staff partnership process:

a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the

opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to

curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation,

investigation, or analysis. (pp. 6-7)

According to this definition, the partnership process allows staff and students to bring

forward valuable forms of expertise to the learning journey. Partnership re-evaluates the

position and responsibility of students and staff to create possibilities for change in the

education process.

Various definitions of the partnership between students and staff exist in the Higher

Education section. In the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, the Quality Assurance

Agency (QAA) gives the following definition:

> *the terms 'partner' and 'partnership' are used in a broad sense to indicate joint*
>
> *working between students and staff. In this context partnership working is based on*
>
> *the values of: openness; trust and honesty; agreed shared goals and values; and*
>
> *regular communication between the partners. It is not based on the legal conception*
>
> *of equal responsibility and liability; rather partnership working recognises that all*
>
> *members in the partnership have legitimate, but different, perceptions and*
>
> *experiences. By working together to a common agreed purpose, steps can be taken*
>
> *that lead to enhancements for all concerned. The terms reflect a mature relationship*
>
> *based on mutual respect between students and staff. (QAA 2013, p. 3)*

The definition by QAA (2013) indicates the importance of having partnership values

between staff and students so that all parties are aware of the scope of the relationship.

Learning partnerships in higher education are contextual and are influenced by a cornucopia

of other factors, such as the expertise and experience of the partners, the context within which

the partnership occurs (such as the institution, the course being undertaken, the department),

and the broader political and social contexts of education. Healey et al. (2014) caution that a

rigid and firmly defined notion of partnership is not likely to include all the complex and

diverse contexts that characterize teaching and learning.

The notion of students as partners has received considerable attention over the last

decade, and most conferences on international higher education have involved some form of

debate of the concept (Troschitz, 2017). This debate has been fueled by several publications, mainly from Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, that discuss the idea. Engaging learners, professors, and faculty staff as partners in a participatory pedagogical process is a new idea for higher education practitioners.

According to Louth, Walsh, and Goodwin-Smith (2019), Student Voice Australia worked on a pilot project which involved ten tertiary education institutions in designing and implementing practices that facilitate student engagement through partnership. The project aimed to develop a culture of student partnership in the HE sectors. Student Voice Australia adapted a model (figure 1) from the IAP2 (International Association for Public Participation) Institute which demonstrates the difference between informing, consulting, involving, partnering and student control in student engagement process.

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	PARTNER	CONTROL
GOAL	To provide students with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and solutions.	To obtain student feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with students throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood.	To partner with students in each aspect of the initiative from identification to solution.	Students design and lead initiatives that matter to them and are in control of final decision-making.
STYLE	"Here's what's happening."	"Here are some options, what do you think?"	"Here's a problem, what ideas do you have?"	"Let's identify the issues and work together to develop a plan and implement a solution."	"You care about this issue and are leading an initiative, how can we support you?"

Adapted by Student Voice Australia from © International Association for Public Participation Spectrum of Public Participation www.iap2.org

Figure 1: Student Engagement Continuum

In this model, partnership is just one form of student engagement, the goal of which is to identify issues and work together to develop and implement a solution. The practice of partnership, according to Student Voice Australia, has the potential to improve the learning experience of students.

2.7.1 Learning Experience

The literature describes what might constitute a pragmatic and useful 'Students as Partners' strategy aimed at increasing student engagement as focusing on several areas, namely: teaching, learning, and assessment; pedagogy consultancy and curriculum design; discipline-based research and analysis; as well as the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (The Higher Education Academy, 2015). About teaching, learning and assessment, the Higher Education Academy in the UK (2015) argues that engaging students via partnership assigns students the role of active collaborators in their learning. Approaches to partnership focus on common and active learning methods – such as experiential learning, work, and community-related learning, and flipping the classroom – that give learners a degree of ownership and choice.

Facilitating learners to act as partners, according to Pauli, Raymond-Barker, and Worrell (2016), has been widely identified as an essential educational approach to involve learners fully in the learning process. The concept of SaP creates chances for collaboration and a changing learning experience (Pauli, Raymond-Barker & Worrell, 2016). Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) identified several significant values on which such a learning strategy is based. These values include trust among educational stakeholders, inclusiveness of all parties, empowerment of the student and the instructor, high levels of honesty, sincerity, the act of sharing, being responsible, and having mutual respect. Those who agree to be part of this kind of partnership must be ready to work together in an environment of trust and

understanding so that they can share desirable goals, the resultant or existing power, inherent risks, expected responsibilities and the general learning experience (Healey et al., 2014).

When a partnership approach is utilized, changes will be made to the usual teaching or educational approach. Healey et al. (2014) equate SaP to a process which involves extensive engagement. SaP intends to engage students in valuable ways by incorporating them in a trustworthy adult learning setting to address their discrete learning needs and competencies. Healey et al. (2014) further state that SaP leads to substantial improvement in student engagement, whereby it promotes student commitment, which subsequently can lead to transformative education.

Learner engagement is identified as being a critical element in SaP since it encourages necessary skills in building a foundation for each student (Dean, 2003). This can be achieved when learning is an active process, but prudently planned, so that students can work independently and discover things for themselves. Furthermore, Carini, Kuh and Klein (2006) suggest that students who are engaged in academically productive events in college are acquiring habits that increase their capability for lifelong learning and personal growth. Learners' needs are crucial in developing educational programs and making other educational decisions. Underlying effective partnerships are a series of values.

2.7.2 Partnership values

Various definitions and understandings of 'partnership' between students, universities, and student bodies abound in the literature, with the most common being the joint working between college and university staff and students (Pokorny & Warren, 2016). Within the context of this partnership, learning is based on some universally acknowledged values such as regular and consistent communication, honesty, and trust, as well as shared values and goals betveen the partners. Such a partnership does not rest on the legal notion of equal responsibility; instead, it acknowledges that all stakeholders are endowed with

legitimate, albeit different, experiences, and perceptions. According to Mentz and Oosthuizen (2016), by collaborating towards achieving a shared purpose, higher education institutions can take steps to enhance the experiences of all parties. Therefore, the concept of students as partners is reflective of a relationship founded on mutual respect between universities and colleges, students, and faculty staff.

It is important to have boundaries for framing and encouraging academic discourse on the concept. The conceptual model proposed by Healey et al. (2014) is informed by several values that have been drawn from the literature relating to partnership within the context of student engagement. These include authenticity (the partners have a meaningful justification for engaging in the partnership and are candid about their contributions and the parameters of their involvement) and reciprocity (the parties have a shared interest that they stand to gain from, such as learning in partnership) (Healey et al., 2014).

Others are inclusivity (the embracing of a diversity of talents, experiences, and perspectives that the partners bring, with no cultural or structural barriers to prevent the involvement of a partner), empowerment (the appropriate distribution of power) and trust (the parties must know one another and engage in a truthful discourse based on respect and fairness). A sense of community in which the parties are valued for their unique contribution is also crucial.

2.7.3 The Higher Education Academy Values of Partnership

The Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2015) presented a framework for student engagement through partnership. The framework was developed for all stakeholders (staff, students, organisations) to inspire and enhance practice and policy concerning partnerships in learning and teaching. HEA considers partnership as an association in which all parties are actively engaged in the learning process.

HEA (2015, p. 3) listed some values that underpin successful engagement through partnership. These values are;

- *Authenticity* - all parties agree on the foundation that partnership is a meaningful and trustworthy process

- *Honesty* - all parties are honest about the level of contribution and boundaries to partnership

- *Inclusivity* - all parties are offered equal opportunities and any obstacles preventing engagement are contested

- *Reciprocity* - all parties have a mutual interest in working and learning in partnership

- *Empowerment* - power is allocated properly, and healthy dynamics are promoted

- *Trust* - all parties endeavor to know one another, and mutual respect and fairness is granted

- *Courage* - all parties are encouraged to challenge practices and processes that destabilise partnership constructively

- *Plurality* - all parties embraces the different talents, perspectives and experiences that all parties bring.

- *Responsibility*: all parties are responsible for the aims of the partnership, and individual contribution is made accordingly

Taking the above-listed values as underpinning engagement through partnership would be a useful first step for partners to discover and decide on shared values collaboratively. In the next section, I will relate the literature to this study.

2.7.4 Transformation in Thinking

Troschitz (2017) warns that as the terms "student as partners" and "student engagement" become more prevalent in higher education discourse, it is possible that they will be employed interchangeably and uncritically without regard to their implications for education policy and practice. It is common, for instance, to see cases where institutions of higher learning consult students through surveys being referred to as a kind of partnership (Healey et al., 2014). Even though these institutions can take a partnership approach about incorporating the voice of students into the educational process, it is worth noting that listening to students cannot be regarded as a form of partnership by itself, but that a deeper level of participation in the educational process is desirable. This means that while all types of partnerships are also a form of student engagement, not all forms of student engagement can be considered partnerships (see Figure 1).

As practitioners within the field of higher education investigate and publish their findings on SaP, an enhanced understanding of the potential benefits of these partnerships to both institutions and individuals has started to emerge. Healey et al. (2014) claimed that the concept of students as partners is a very influential one, and its implementation has the potential to change higher education. The effects of SaP can be substantial. For instance, Pokorny and Warren (2016) emphasize that the benefits for faculty and learners engaging in teaching and scholarship are comparable and include improved engagement with learning and similar activities, a transformation in thinking about the general educational process, as well as a better awareness of one's role within the more panoptic academic learning community. Crawford et al. (2015) through their research in student-teacher collaboration suggests that pedagogic approaches that encourage partnership tend to engender supportive learning relationships that benefit learners through the development of discipline-specific and generic skills and qualities.

2.7.5 *Motivation*

Another advantage that the "students as partners" approach confers, and which has been identified in the literature, relates to motivation and responsibility. According to Alderman (2008), partnerships between students and faculty contribute to an enhanced sense of motivation and accountability on the part of students because partnership challenges their understanding of their role in determining how teaching and learning occur and of their responsibility about what happens in the classroom. Similarly, Healey et al. (2014) stated that partnership could engage students more in their study and improve their motivation, confidence, and enhance their learning experience.

In describing the different variants of partnerships in higher education, Bovill et al. (2011) assert that student-faculty partnerships serve to challenge the traditional, and often complacent, passive role of students within the university environment and the widespread erroneous assumption by academic staff that their disciplinary knowledge and experience confers on them total authority over the process of teaching and learning. This shift has been brought about by the need to accord students the freedom to make pedagogical choices, thereby placing more learning responsibility on them while concurrently increasing their eagerness and motivation.

Arguably, elements of partnership have characterized higher education for longer in terms of peer learning among students and collaboration between students and faculty in researching, even though the partnership language has not been as overt and unequivocal in the literature on these themes. Three themes can be seen in the literature that describe the benefits of using the "students as partners" concept in higher education. These include engagement, awareness, and enhancement. Regarding engagement, it is noted that partnerships between students and faculty tend to improve motivation and the desire to learn not only for the students but also for the faculty (Anderson & Freebody, 2014; Bryson, 2014).

Specifically, partnerships make student learning more in-depth and more profound, thereby increasing students' confidence and helping them focus more on the holistic process and not merely the product of learning. It is not difficult to see how the "students as partners" concept enriches learning.

2.7.6 Awareness and Reflection

Concerning awareness and according to Healey et al. (2014), to ensure that they extract the most from higher education, students should perceive themselves not as passive consumers of knowledge but as active contributors in a joint learning venture. Participation in such collaboration entails the students being enthusiastic about and able to challenge traditional approaches; carrying out independent and self-directed research; and also developing novel and critical approaches to understanding the world in general and their discipline in particular. Espousing the "students as partners" paradigm provides an enhancement in the form of freedom for faculty and learners to work in collaboration in developing and enriching their academic experiences. This way, it is feasible to move away from unsuitable and unsupportive provider/purchaser distinctions between academic staff and students.

According to Pokorny and Warren (2016), partnerships often lead both academic staff and students to develop not only a keen sense of identity but metacognitive awareness as well. The authors suggest that when students approach the educational process as a partnership with faculty, they do gain novel perspectives and a more profound understanding of the learning process and the pedagogical choices of faculty in instruction delivery. For faculty members, partnerships with learners help in evaluating instructional delivery consistently, which then transforms the teacher into a reflective practitioner.

2.7.7 Collaboration

According to Mello et al. (2017), collaboration in the scientific community is of the utmost importance, and debates are greatly enriched through shared understanding. Consistent with scientific teaching, learners should be able to interrelate the various academic disciplines and subjects and select the most appropriate tools to solve problems, particularly at the level of postgraduate learning. For faculty members, collaborating with students always offers new ways of thinking about, teaching, discerning, and improving the motivation and enthusiasm of students in the classroom. Mello et al. (2017) note that students as partners offer a means of re-conceptualizing the process of teaching and learning as a two-way process that involves collaboration between students and faculty.

Some authors have also found that partnerships between students and faculty tend to enhance the employability skills of students (France et al., 2015). Hardie and Day (2013) define employability skills as a set of personal attributes, accomplishments, and understandings that make a person more likely to secure employment and succeed in their selected occupations. Consequently, even though employment should be considered an outcome, employability is, without a doubt, a lifelong process (Jarvis, Dickerson, & Stockwell, 2013).

2.7.8 Active Learning

Cook-Sather (2011) proposes that partnerships between students and faculty translate to active and engaged learning for both faculty and students. She further observes that this process is cyclic in the sense that when faculty foster student engagement by promoting active and insightful teaching, the students, in turn, encourage faculty to be transparent about, engaged with, and open about their teaching. By adopting the students as partners approach, faculty must confront the need to make definite or shed light on their pedagogical preferences

and their specific teaching objectives (Crawford et al., 2015). This results in the development of greater knowledge and awareness of the pedagogical goals by faculty. Also, this adds to the ability to examine the said objectives and an enhanced capacity to articulate their aspirations and how they intend to accomplish them (Cook-Sather, 2011).

Furthermore, Chickering and Gamson (1987) highlighted that effective participation and engagement give students more space in identifying and contributing to their educational experience, which is confirmed by Gärdebo and Wiggberg (2012). Effective participation instils a reflective approach to learning and promotes active learning.

It is common for students to go through their college or university education assuming that the purpose of learning is to achieve better grades. The thought of actively engaging in the learning process is one that never occurs to most students, although the idea of students as partners changes this state of affairs (Alderman, 2008). More students are now beginning to realize that they have some level of responsibility for their education, tend to be self-directed, and refuse the imposition of knowledge on them (Knowles, 1984).

Without a doubt, this students' partnership with faculty members is helping them realize their part in the learning process and, following from this, leading them to a reinvigorated and improved commitment towards learning. According to Bovill et al. (2011), the same can also be said of faculty members, who now attribute their renewed and cordial relationship with students, as well as the newfound sense of renewal and vigor of teaching, to their partnership.

When faculty members engage in active learning, the same is also promoted among students. Cook-Sather (2011) contends that faculty members who partner with students through the learning process usually reflect deeply on their pedagogical choices, in addition to frequently inviting students to be part of the reflection and talk about their learning needs, goals, and experiences, with the outcome being the development of "metacognitive

awareness" by faculty members. Therefore, through the "students as partners" approach, both students and faculty members may gain a positively transformed sense of self-awareness, as well as a more profound understanding of the pedagogical process that involves teaching and learning. The outcome of this is an increase in confidence of both faculty and students because they know their abilities (Hase, 2013). This is because through partnerships; students can be more reflective about the role they play in the classroom and, therefore, they can think in novel ways about their abilities as learners. Conversely, faculty partners view their pedagogical practice and identity in innovative ways.

2.7.9 Enhanced Pedagogy

Another closely related benefit of the students as partners approach is enhanced pedagogical experiences. As Troschitz (2017) observes, because of the partnership, students have abandoned the traditional views of their role in the teaching and learning dichotomy and have become active learners who are slowly embracing more responsibility for their education. Concomitantly, the empathy of faculty towards students has increased to include an appreciation of the needs and experiences of learners, as well as the best ways of responding to these.

The study conducted by Dunne and Zandstra (2011) suggests that while attending to learners verifies the notion that students are seen as customers, it is quickly debunked as, "Students, as change agents explicitly support a view of the student as 'active collaborator' and 'co-producer,' with the potential for transformation" (p. 4). Dunne and Zandstra (2011) further state that branding students as customers mistakenly labels learners as though they consume learning. Students are eager to determine new concepts, propose explanations, and enact change.

Overall, student-faculty partnerships have been found to make both faculty and students more engaged, heedful and collegial in their approach to work and life on college and university campuses. As suggested by Bovill et al. (2011), because student engagement constitutes one of the core objectives and treasured values of many colleges and universities across the world, it is anticipated that such partnerships will become a more widespread practice in higher education systems globally. As Healey et al. (2014, p. 15) summed it up clearly

> *Partnership in learning and teaching is a way of staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement. This way of working requires active engagement and responsibility of all involved, and in this sense partnership is distinguished by the importance placed on the distribution of power. As a concept and a practice, partnership works to counter a deficit model where staff take on the role of enablers of disempowered students, implicit in some forms of student engagement, aiming instead to acknowledge differentials of power while valuing individual contributions from students and staff in a shared process of reciprocal learning and working.*

2.8   Action Planning

Action planning can be considered as a useful component of 'Students as Partners'. According to Foxon (2007), action planning can be used to enable the transfer of learning. Individual plans are prepared through discussions between trainers/educators and learners and can be used to monitor progress. The author stated that "Action planning goes beyond self-management and goal setting because it results in written commitments to action" (p. 9).

Moreover, Mahoney and Lyday (1984) claimed that action planning could take place as part of the course content to "build a bridge" to achieve better training outcomes. This claim is supported by Foxon (2007) who stated that action planning is an influential intervention to enable successful training, address the problem of bridging the gap between trainers and learners, and enforce the concept of learners' self-reflection and study commitment.

Personal Development Planning (PDP) is a process by which individuals reflect on and plan their studying. This name was originally given around 2000 to a UK HE initiative, although its use has since spread more widely (Tymms, Peters & Scott, 2013). The aim of PDP, according to Clegg (2004), is to produce self-directed learners who can plan for their career and personal prospects. PDP is a representation of several processes that attempt to benefit the learner: reflection, documentation, action-planning and completing what is in the action plan (Gough et al., 2003).

In the UK, a systematic review was carried out by Gough et al. (2003) to examine the role of Personal Development Planning (PDP) in improving learning outcomes. The review located over 14,000 references of PDP. Action planning was more evident in the UK and North America and very slim in Australia (Gough et al., 2003, p. 37).   The authors concluded that PDP has positive influences on student learning, student attitude towards learning and retention.

Strivens and Ward (2010) stated that the original definition of PDP stressed 'structured and supported' in its description of the process. The authors recommended offering varying help to students and acknowledged the extra burden on an organisation's budget

> *Learners will need varying degrees of help with all types of PDP activities,*
> *depending on their experience and maturity. Help and guidance can be*
> *provided by tutors, mentors and careers advisers but these are expensive and*
> *scarce resources in most HEIs (Strivens & Ward, 2010, p. 10)*

There are few studies in Australia about PDP. It is an area which I believe can benefit from further studies and research. In my context, the individual learning plan (ILP) is similar to PDP in concept. However, ILP is considered a requirement that needs to exist for each learner; otherwise, funding and compliance can be hindered. This suggests that it has developed from the PDP concept into an administrative requirement, which may mean that the function of supporting students in their self-directed learning is no longer present in as much depth as is proposed in the PDP literature.

2.9   Conceptual Framework of Student Engagement

To bring together all that has been said before about active engagement and particular tools that might support this, I will reflect on Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework of student engagement. The framework proposes a three-tiered model of engagement that occurs in an educational setting (figure 2). At the core of the framework is the learner's engagement; emotional, behavioural and cognitive connection to his or her learning.
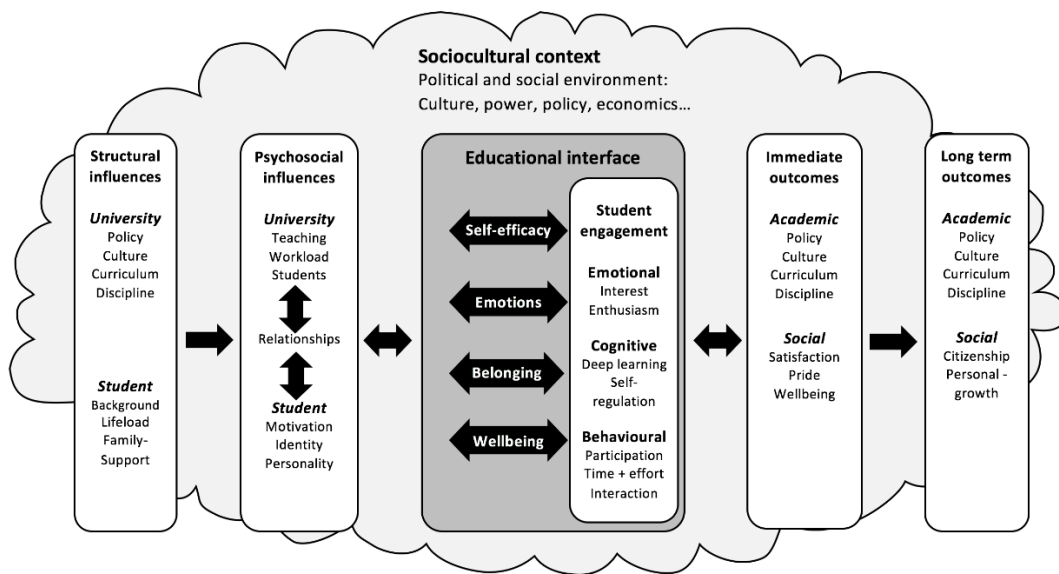
Figure 2: Conceptual framework of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018, p. 64)

Based on Kahu and Nelson's framework, there are four constructs that can influence engagement at a personal level: self-efficacy - "an individual's belief in their capacity to perform a given task'" (p. 64); belonging - the relationship learners feel to the organisation, discipline and individuals; wellbeing – affected by heavy life load; and emotions – caused by the learner's evaluation of their situation.

Kahu and Nelson (2018) refer to other influences (structural and psychosocial) that can influence the student's engagement – positively or negatively. Clearly, according to the model, how closely the interactions of the institution and learning context support these four

primary constructs will influence student engagement. For instance, if the institution does

not provide any support, this suggests that engagement would not be as good, and outcomes

will also not be as good.

This conceptual framework is a beneficial tool for identifying interventions intended

to improve learner engagement which is in line with Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris's

(2004) comprehensive review. The framework addresses Zyngier's (2008) concern that a

limited description of engagement can lead to the notion that 'if the student is engaged then

the teacher is responsible but if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the

student' (p. 1771).

The framework emphasized that there are several ways for improving student

engagement. Kahu and Nelson (2018) stated that learners' engagement is the responsibility

of all stakeholders; the learner, the teacher, the organisation, and the government. The

authors claimed that the learner experience happens in an educational interface – the

psychosocial space at the intersection of student and staff – the students' engagement was not

influenced by just their specific interests and ambitions, or just the learning environment; it

was the interaction or partnership that made it happen. This conceptual framework is a good

illustration of engagement through partnership, which is expanded upon in the next section

with a greater emphasis on the partnership elements through the Higher Education Academy

Values of Partnership framework.

2.10 Relating the literature review to the current study

This study aims to find out what constitutes a realistic and practical 'students as partners' strategy that increases student engagement within the context of vocational education and training. This means I need to gain a profound understanding of what constitutes student engagement via faculty-student partnerships.

The concept of action planning can be used as a mechanism for helping learners to articulate their current achievements more realistically, while their future goals might be achieved using ILP. However, researching it in-depth might show that it needs to be used in a different way than is currently happening to achieve the best possible learning outcomes. Currently, students use the ILP as a static document to record the details of their course, but I will find out in my research if using it in partnership with the instructor will add value to the exercise.

The ILP could be used in a meaningful way for the best interest of the student. I aim to investigate how to get the teachers more interested in this vital document for the benefit of the students themselves, by working with individual learners as partners and drawing a more strategic plan to engage them in their study through this approach.

In the research, a tutorial session will be introduced to utilise the Individual Learning Plan to record and review student goals, as well as any study issues discussed during the tutorial sessions. In the research setting until now, tutorial sessions have not taken place. These sessions can be the location for developing warm interpersonal relationships between teachers and learners; for trust to develop. Hence, this will offer early interventions for supporting the student to achieve their academic goal. Presently, the ILP is imposed on teachers for funding and audit requirements. My goal through this study is to create a positive learning experience while complying with the government requirement.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

3.1   Introduction

This methodology chapter presents a discussion on the research methodology and various research methods that I as the researcher incorporated in the research on the students' engagement and why. The research questions were fundamental in helping me determine the focus and the aim of the study. Various learning intervention tools including tutorial meetings, faculty feedback, and Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) were raised in the research questions giving me the direction of possible interventions in the study.

Various philosophical understandings on the topic of student engagement are discussed in this chapter as these developed my own philosophical perspectives on research, and the direction of the study. I researched and considered a variety of methodologies and methods, among them Appreciative Inquiry; sampling techniques, such as purposive sampling; and other methods that would be appropriate and could achieve the best results. I also encountered challenges as a researcher related to financing, time and the area of coverage of the study. The following research methodology chapter explains this process and details which methodology and methods were applied by me and why these were found to be sound for this study and would lead to findings relevant to the research questions. The ethics section will explain the ethical considerations that have shaped the study.

3.2   Research questions

The research aimed at studying the overarching question - Can student engagement be improved by fostering partnerships between student and teacher?

I used the following research questions in my study:

- What might be the role of tutorial meetings in improving engagement?

- What might be the role of an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) in improving engagement?

- How might a 'Students as Partners' approach enhance engagement in the context of vocational education and training?

3.3   Research Paradigm

The constructivist philosophical paradigm avows that individuals construct their knowledge and understanding of the world through their experiences, as well as their reflection on those experiences (Martin & Loomis, 2014). It is informed by the assumption that people tend to construct or form most of their knowledge through experience. Therefore, constructivists believe that learning is constructing meaning or knowledge. A constructivist/interpretivist approach to research aims at understanding human experiences, which suggests that reality is a social construction (Kecskés, 2014). Put differently, researchers who employ the constructivist/interpretivist approach may be concerned with the participants' perspective of the situation under study and recognize the effect of the experiences and backgrounds and perceptions of these subjects on the research.

Unlike in positivism, in constructivism patterns of meaning are inductively developed during the research process (Brown & Baker, 2007; Roy, 2014). Student engagement can be a hazy and controversial term that is subject to multiple interpretations as it refers to a complex process. It involves the commitments and behavioral predilections expected of students. This

study follows a constructivist/interpretivist approach, which derives from the notion that

people generate new meanings via the interactions they create between activities, ideas, and

events they have experienced before. According to Roy (2014), constructivism emphasizes

the significance of social learning, as well as the establishment of the student community, as

prerequisites for real discovery because it allows students to reflect continuously on their

experience.

3.4   Philosophical perspectives – underlying assumptions of the research

 Each research paradigm is founded on assumptions and presuppositions concerning

reality and the ways in which it can be understood. In other words, research paradigms are in

essence patterns of deeply held assumptions (Hersey & Bobick, 2017). The constructivist

paradigm is characterized by a relativist ontology, in which reality is perceived as an array of

ethereal mental constructs that are rooted in human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Constructivists/interpretivists are of the conviction that reality is not only multifaceted

but also relative. The many sides of reality are also contingent on other systems of meanings

that complicate their interpretations with regard to fixed realities. Constructivists eschew

rigid structural research frameworks and espouse paradigms that are not only flexible and

more personal but also effective in capturing the meanings attached to human interactions

and deciphering what is commonly perceived as reality (Kecskés, 2014). Constructivism

holds that the researcher and the respondents are mutually dependent and interact with each

other. According to constructivists, while the constructivist/interpretivist researcher

commences his or her research with some prior understanding of the context, he or she must

assume that this knowledge is not sufficient to formulate a fixed research design because of

the complex, multiple, and capricious nature of what is assumed to be the reality. In other

words, the researcher stays open to and embraces new knowledge in the course of the study

(Tang & Joiner, 2006). He or she allows the said knowledge to develop with the assistance of the respondents.

According to Roy (2014), such a collaborative approach is in line with the interpretivist notion that humans have the capacity to change to suit new circumstances and that no individual can have prior knowledge of social realities that are contingent on time and context. In this regard, the objective of any constructivist/interpretivist research is to develop an understanding and interpretation of the significance and meaning of human actions and behaviour instead of generalizing and prognosticating causes and effects. For the constructivist researcher, it is imperative to develop a firm grasp of the reasons, meanings, motives, as well as other personal experiences, which are context- and time-bound (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The ontological position for the current study is largely informed by an interpretivism/constructionist perspective. According to this view, people assume an active role in constructing their social reality (Eijk, 2010).

Constructivism further holds that the world can be perceived as a subjective rather than objective reality. The knowledge obtained in conducting this research is socially constructed and not objectively perceived or determined. As Bryman (2016) observes, although the social world and all the groups that accompany it are external to the players, they are built and constituted through interaction and social constructions. Therefore, a thorough discernment of the actions and words of people is accomplishable only if these can be related to the broader context in which they have taken place.

Because all academic endeavours, including student engagement, are about gaining some form of insight or knowledge, what is meant by "knowing" constitutes a very important question.

Constructivism is a form of epistemology, or a meaning-making or learning philosophy that explains the nature of knowledge, as well as how learning takes place. It

holds that reality and knowledge are created through social interactions and relationships and that these relationships also have an effect on the organization of scientific episteme. Universities and colleges can be viewed as social institutions. In this regard, it is worth noting that student engagement through the "students as partners" concept emphasizes the social and relational aspects of learning.

Engaging students and faculty in collaborative partnerships reflects the ongoing and dynamic character of learning that is increasingly characterizing higher education (Matthews, 2016). Social activity assumes that people occupy shared forms of life, and constructivist epistemology presupposes that humans utilize signifying and meaning making (semiotic) resources as regards institutions and social structures. According to constructive epistemology, and within the context of student engagement, real learning and knowledge creation occurs only when constructed based on the background knowledge and previous experiences of the student (Eijk, 2010). Put differently, people construct or create their own knowledge or new understanding by interacting with the activities, events, and ideas with which they come into contact and the things they already believe, have experienced and know. The instructor merely serves as a co-explorer, facilitator, or guide to encourage the students to challenge, probe, think deeper and come up with their own opinions, ideas, and conclusions (Smith, 2016). A suggested epistemological approach to student engagement is the emphasis to change the focus of university learning dynamics from instructor-dominated to learner-centered through a constructivist approach.

Constructivism encourages the students to actively process any new knowledge, connect it to any prior knowledge, and assimilate it by constructing their unique and distinctive interpretation of it (Gray, 2018). An intimate connection exists between meaning and experience and students come into the classroom with their previous experiences and ingrained cognitive structures that are based on the said experiences. The goal of the

constructivist methodology is to reconstruct or create better knowledge that is, at the same time, subject to constant revision. The interaction between the constructivist knower and the object of knowledge is one that is mutually transformative and directed at integrating the knower's perspectives and beliefs with those of others (Bleazby, 2013). Therefore, the aim of constructivist knowing is inter-subjective.

3.5   Interpretivism Theoretical Perspective

This research therefore makes the assumption that truth and the meaning that people construct from it are created through the interactions that people have with the world and these do not exist in some external, isolated realm. The result of this position is that it is possible for multiple, conflicting but equally legitimate accounts of the world to exist concurrently. Yet, even though objectivism and interpretivism hold diametrical opposed epistemological positions, they are all grounded on the ontology of being. Interpretivism is an anti-positivist stance that seeks to establish 'historically situated' and 'culturally derived' interpretations of the world of social life (Gray, 2018).

Relativist ontology holds that reality is a spatially and temporally bounded subjective experience and that nothing exists outside the individual's thoughts. Generally, however, the interpretivist approach is anchored on two beliefs, which are the relativist ontology and subjectivist or transactional epistemology. The relativist ontology is the approach that recognizes reality as being inter-subjectively based on understandings and meanings on experiential and social levels while the subjectivist epistemology holds that it is not possible to separate people from their knowledge and, thus, a lucid connection exists between the research subjects and the researcher.

The current study applies the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm of research because the goal is to understand the constructions that the subjects hold, while being open to new interpretations. In this regard, the study employs qualitative interviews as the primary

method of data collection. To understand the numerous perspectives on the student

engagement phenomenon, I interviewed different groups of participants and conducted an

online survey for one group of participants. Within the context of the current study, the

research serves as the facilitator and orchestrator of the process of inquiry, which generates

the findings by interpreting the subjective experiences and insights of the interviewees.

Therefore, the study seeks to co-create the findings through dialogues with the subjects or

participants being studied.

3.6   Appreciative Inquiry

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) were the first to develop the idea of Appreciative

Inquiry (AI). It has been defined in the literature as a methodology of transforming social

systems with the view of generating a shared image of an alternative and better future by

looking at the best of the current reality (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p.25). The authors

were able to argue for their views that repetition or the overuse of "problem solving" holds

back improvement. Thus, they suggested that there was the need to have new methods of

inquiry which could result in new models and ideas to assist in their organization. Therefore,

as a model, Appreciative Inquiry engages all the participants to embrace the change that they

are determined to have.

My institution was at a delicate stage in its development as strategies were developed

following policy changes that were sometimes experienced as challenging by the people

expected to implement the changes (to enhance retention). These considerations led me to

decide on Appreciative Inquiry as research methodology as it is a methodology used to look

at the positives of current practice to create positive change and improve the organisation

rather than to dwell on the negative. Appreciative Inquiry is seen as a way of working for

change in an institution by bringing people along with you. I based my notion of Appreciative

Inquiry in my research on Wegner and Wheatley's (1999) claim on the institution's

acquisition of knowledge. The article argues that any institution should be able to get the knowledge about itself from within itself.

Whitney and Cooperrider (2011) stated, "*Appreciative Inquiry (AI)* begins an adventure" (p. 275). This statement encouraged me to use Appreciative Inquiry as it is suitable to research and develop positive change in an educational situation. Appreciative Inquiry is predicated on the observation of the best of the current experiences and realities and collaboratively formulating "what could be" while ensuring the acquiescence of the participants regarding "what should be." Carrying out research by soliciting the views and perspectives of the participants regarding their experiences of engagement was a challenging process. Therefore, I, as the researcher, elected to employ Appreciative Inquiry to focus on the positive experiences of the participants and help to dispel any existing fears and potential tension that could have arisen during the research.

Due to its positivity, the method of Appreciative Inquiry handles the transformation from a constructive perspective. As Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) put it, it is not a matter of searching for the problem and looking for a way to fix the problem or overusing problem-solving. In contrast, the approach of Appreciative Inquiry makes good use of a positive outlook in making the change. These positive perspectives on change in Appreciative Inquiry appeal to me and made me decide to utilize it as research methodology in my study. Its application is practical when it comes to examining the use of the Individual Learning Plan in engaging the students, and following from this, it is focused on building recommendations that could see the process of student engagement improved. The positive model that attracted me to the use of the Appreciative Inquiry approach aimed to develop a document that could place the Individual Learning Plan at the heart of the learning process and the teaching practice within my organization.

According to Whitney and Cooperrider (2011), the four phases (4D) of an AI process are;

- Discovery – identifying the best of current engagement practices;

- Dream - creating a results-oriented vision based on the discovered potential use of ILP through tutorial meetings;

- Design - creating possibility propositions of the ideal engagement through partnership in the current context;

- Destiny - disseminating study findings and sharing the affirmative capability of the recommendations to improve the student experience

In my decision to apply Appreciative Inquiry, I was guided by the simultaneity principle of the 4D that made me believe that during the process of my inquiry into the education system, I would come across, and perhaps impact some changes. When I asked the first interview question to tutors, various aspects of change were implicit including the foundation of change, what discoveries the students make and learn, and what they talk about or ponder. Thus, any inquiry is never neutral at any point but serves a fateful purpose of having the system move towards the direction of the questions. Therefore, the Appreciative Inquiry method was well suited for the research especially in getting to understand more on the application of the Individual Learning Plan.

It seemed that the institutions of higher education and the potential participants would be more inclined to take part in the research if they knew that the focus of the inquiry would be on their positive experiences and improvement of their program, rather than negative ones. This was particularly essential in gaining access to the institution since the study was part of my doctoral thesis and had not been commissioned by the institution whose students were the subjects of the study. The position of the researcher as a doctoral student at the institution of

higher education, studying the student phenomenon of engagement, was an extremely

delicate one this is because the topic of the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) was of

some sensitivity, since they were a part of the required workload but not seen as a valuable

expenditure of effort by the teachers. While I had the consent to carry out the research at the

institution, the progress of the study was for the most part contingent on the permission of the

administrators and the cooperation of the student participants. Therefore, the researcher had

to negotiate the various phases of the study cautiously.

3.7   Tutorial meeting as part of the research

Tutorial meetings were introduced as part of this study to allow for early intervention, if

necessary, and to remind students that they are partners in this journey. I drew up guidelines

and a basic structure to the sessions to foster discussions in the meetings (figure 3). Both

teachers agreed with the structure and stated that it helped them to start conversations with

students. Towards the last session, teachers and students had the conversation going and used

the proposed format as a checking point. Tutors and students reported that they had already

built a good rapport with each other.

Tutorial Meetings Structure and Discussion Points

Welcome Week (this meeting will take place during orientation week)
Main purposes:
- To introduce students to the tutor, explain the role of the tutor and provide contact details;
- To determine the motivation, initial expectations and any concerns of the students;
- To complete the initial Individual Learning Plan with the student

Examples of questions to foster discussions:
- *Why did you choose this particular diploma course? Why did you choose this College?*
- *Do you think you have a good understanding of what will be expected of you as a student on this course? What are you expecting from the staff and from the Section?*
- *Do you have any initial questions or concerns right now?*

Weeks 4-8 (This will occur after the student has submitted some assessment tasks and received some formative feedback)
Main purposes:
- To check that students are settling in well and identify any early issues for which support might be needed
- To establish the importance of formative and summative feedback to student learning and check that the student understands any tasks set and any feedback that has been received
- Update the Individual Learning Plan

Examples of questions to foster discussions:
- *As you are about half way through your first term, what are your first impressions of your programme and life at this College? Do you still feel the same motivation to follow this diploma course? Do you like studying at this campus? Were any of your initial concerns justified, or have they disappeared? Do you have current worries or concerns about your work, your social life, or anything else?*
- *How do you see yourself fitting in with your group?*
- *How are you getting on in your specific units? Do you understand the formative and summative feedback you have received?*

Weeks 12-16: (This will occur after several assessments have been received)
Main purposes:
- To encourage the student to think about his or her progress, identify strengths and areas of weakness and start to take responsibility for their own studies by being active in the following;

The student should collect any feedback received from assignments or exams completed so far and bring these to the meeting. These could then be discussed with the tutor.
- Within the meeting itself, the student could then create an action plan to tackle areas that have been identified as areas for development.
- At this stage students should be encouraged to think about their future plans
- The student will be asked to comment on any employability skills within the course and to comment on how he/she feels these are developing.
- Update the Individual Learning Plan.

Example questions to foster discussions:
- *Do you have any issues with your assessment performance? Were the results in line with your expectations?*
- *What have you learnt so far from your feedback from your assignments and exams? What seem to be your strengths? What are your areas of weakness? What could you do to improve your performance? Do you know where to get help if you feel you need it?*
- *Do you have any plans for what you want to do after graduating?*

Figure 3: Tutorial Meetings Structure and Discussion Points

3.8   Study Design

The study was carefully designed and used a variety of research techniques to obtain the data. These were: initial online survey of students to find out their experiences with the use of the ILP; interviews with tutors about their experiences with the use of the ILP; student interviews and tutor interviews after the tutorials between students and tutors had taken place, to find out whether tutorials might make a difference to the experience.

I introduced the tutorial meetings for this study to investigate the effectiveness of having personal support on learner engagement and fostering a partnership between tutor and student through the discussion of the usefulness of the ILP in the tutorial. Only students who agreed to participate in this study attended these sessions with the participating teachers. I provided the tutors with discussion points that they could use to facilitate conversation in their individual sessions with the students (see section 3.9).

 The first tutorial session was before the students' online survey and after the teachers' first interview. The reason for conducting the students' online survey after the tutorial session was to study their experiences with the use of the ILP.

Tutorial sessions were held during the semester; the participating tutors scheduled meetings with the students individually to discuss their progress and listen to their concerns. These meetings were scheduled around the weeks 1, 4-8, and 12-16 of their course to ensure that there were continuous communications between the tutor and the student. The ILP was used to record the students' progress as the tutor was able to see the units that needed to be completed and asked targeted questions regarding progress, barriers and required support. Figure 4 below briefly explains data collection stages which I will explain in detail in section 3.8.2.
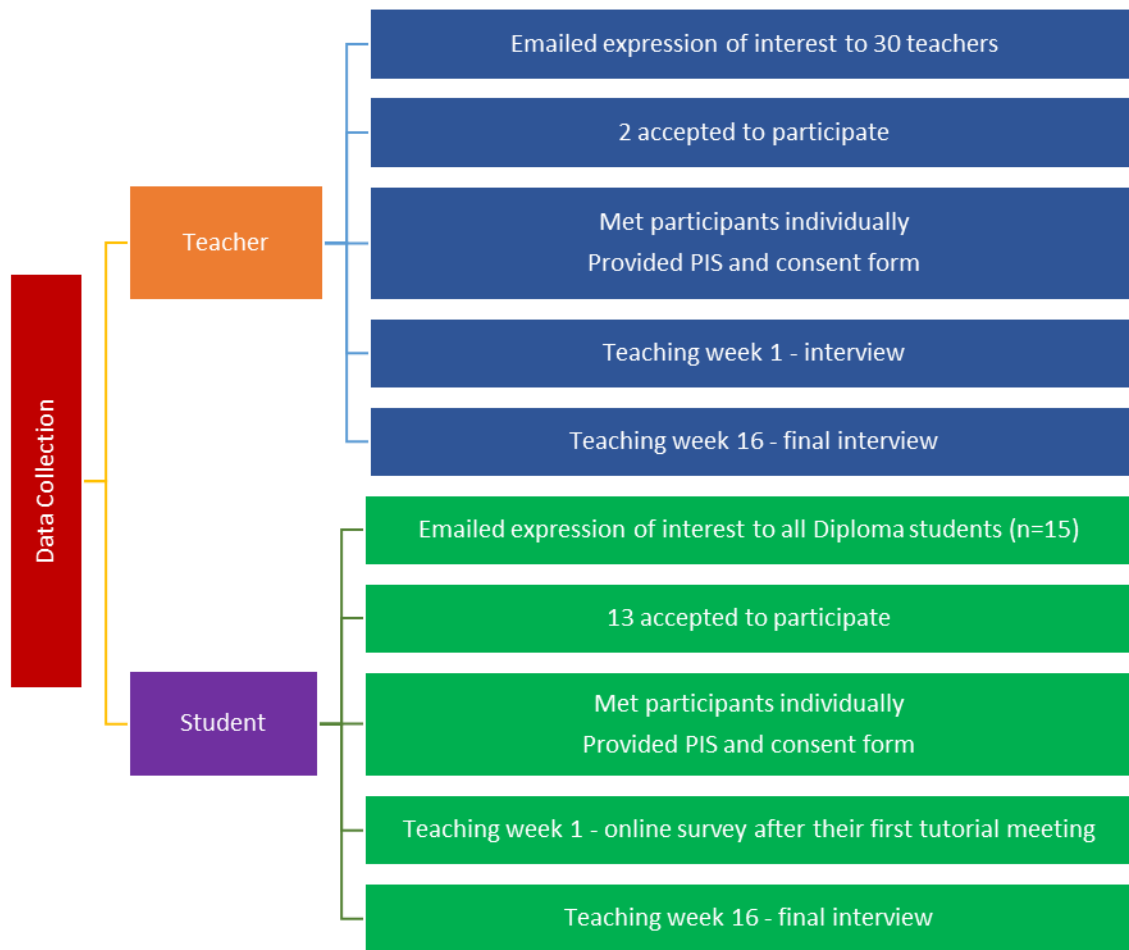
Figure 4: Data collection stages

3.8.1 Sample

The size of the sample according to Marshall (1996) depends on the suitable number that will facilitate the conclusion that is valid for the entire population. For an optimum size of the sample, the characteristics of the phenomena being studied play a role where consideration is given to the rarity of the event or any particular outcome expected.

The type of the sample that the researcher opts for in the study depends on the aims of the investigation. Marshall (1996) presents one of the most commonly used sampling techniques, purposive sampling. In his definition, a purposive sampling strategy involves selecting the participants for the study based on the specificity and the distinctiveness of the issue in question. In this case, only the sample that seems productive to the researcher is

selected for the research. To facilitate the selection process, the researcher often develops a framework with specific variables of what he wants from the sample. The researcher uses the knowledge he already has in the field of study, through literature review and as evidenced in the study itself to have his best sample.

The sample size in the research is as important as the actual outcome of the study since it plays a significant role in the error definition of the sampling process. According to Glaser and Strauss (2017), the validity of the inferences made about the entire population determines the optimum number of the participants to be selected for the research. Glaser and Strauss state that in qualitative studies, the sample size needs to follow the saturation principle – when no new themes are emerging from the data analysis.

The discussion by Glaser and Strauss (2017) introduces the issues of relevance of the sample size. I think this is an essential point, suggesting that any present or future researcher needs to have informed knowledge when sampling for their research project. The indication by Glaser and Strauss (2017) is practical in that it is erroneous for researchers to continue collecting additional data when such data seems to add no extra value to the matter under study. Such data according to Glaser and Strauss (2017) is saturated and the researcher does not need to continue collecting more data. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) also supported the view that 10 to 15 respondents will be likely to be sufficient for data saturation.

In this research, my data sample consisted of 13 students and 2 teachers who self-nominated and accepted to participate in this research. The thirteen students were studying at Diploma or above qualifications. The number of participating students from the overall 15 students can be considered as a good proportion of the total student population. This is a strong suggestion that their experience has some generalizability in this study.

The two self-nominated teachers, who volunteered from a pool of thirty teachers, had the immediate knowledge for the Individual Learning Plan. The participating teachers were

willing to; take part in this study, follow the suggested intervention, and be interviewed twice for this study.

Although all students in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector are required to have an ILP, I chose Diploma students to be my participants as according to Marshall (1996), in purposive sampling, "*the researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question*" (p. 523). Diploma students would be educationally mature enough to understand the importance of action planning, self-directed learning, and reflective practice. Therefore, I found purposive sampling suitable for my research process by selecting Diploma students to be my participants as they have almost finished their VET qualification and would be ready for either the workplace or further studies.

3.8.2 *Obtaining participant access*

To access the information from the participants, I had to first contact the students and the teachers and seek their willingness to participate in my research. I regarded the informed consent of the participants as part of my research requirement. I provided the participants with information sheets (see Appendices B and C) which were in the form of an agreement between the researcher and the participants that I had been given consent by the participants to use their information. That forced me to live by the access agreement we had made with the participant. Therefore, as the way to ensure that the anonymity was guaranteed for all participants, I could not at any point reveal the raw data of the participants to the management. As well we agreed that given the access to data by the participants, I was not at any time to collect information that identified participants. All these measures were aligned with ensuring that all of my participants owned the confidentiality of access to their information.

I emailed all teachers (30 teachers) who could teach at Diploma level an "Expression of Interest" to participate in this research. The research details were explained, and a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) was attached to the email and my contact details were listed so that they could contact me if they had any questions (see Appendix B - Teacher Participation Information Sheet). Only two teachers were interested to participate in the study. I would have preferred to see five teachers willing to participate but the two teachers who accepted were very passionate and experienced about the study topic. They were willing to take part in the proposed intervention and be interviewed twice. I met with the teachers individually and answered any questions they had. I gave them another copy of the PIS and asked them to contact me if they wanted to participate and to sign the consent form.

The students were from the Diploma group which I do not teach and over whose grades I also do not have power. The total population of eligible students depended on the enrolment number in the Diploma course. The participants varied in age, gender and background; however, they all shared the same discipline area, Information Technology, which was the section/faculty where I conducted the study.

All students enrolled in the Diploma course (15 students) were sent an invitation to participate in the research. The students were initially emailed and asked to meet me to be part of a research project. The research details were explained, and a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) was attached to the email and my contact details were listed so that they could contact me if they had any questions (see Appendix C - Student Participation Information Sheet).

Only 13 students were interested to participate in the study. I met with the students individually and answered any questions they had. I gave them another copy of the PIS and asked them to contact me if they wanted to participate and to sign the consent form. All participants were given at least a week to consider whether they wanted to participate or not.

3.8.3 Role of ILP as an engagement tool in the research

In my context and from my previous observation, the individual learning plan (ILP) is a compliance requirement that teachers feel as a burden and extra administration work which cannot be avoided. The ILP contains a list of units that students must complete to receive their qualification, together with a notes page that most of the time is left blank. The teaching staff complete the form and request students' signatures. The form is then filed in the departmental office to tick a box for auditing purposes. Since this is a new requirement for funding purposes, most teachers believe it is a waste of their time as they cannot see any benefit from embracing its use in the section. In this study, my aim was to investigate how to get teachers motivated to use the ILP document as a partnership building tool for the benefit of students. I agreed on the use of the tutorial as a method to create a partnership between student and tutor. I used it to examine the following opportunities:

- Tutors having regular tutorial meetings where they work with students towards their goal and recording these meetings in the ILP;

- Tutors, in partnership with students, using the ILP as a tool to record barriers to student's journey, support required, student progress, and agreed actions

3.9   Qualitative Data Collection

Appreciative Inquiry can use both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. The current study employed a qualitative online survey and interviews as methods of identifying participants' experiences within the context of student engagement as these seemed the best fit with the research questions and my interpretative constructivist perspective on knowledge and reality.

3.9.1 Online Survey

After the students accepted the invitation to participate in the research and signed the consent form, they were contacted by their teacher to organize a one-to-one meeting (tutorial meeting) to discuss their ILP. In week 1, students were sent a link to an anonymous online survey about their opinion of the tutorial meeting and the development of their learning plan. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete (see Appendix H – Students' Online Survey Questions). The questions were around students' experience after the first tutorial meeting and the effectiveness of these sessions in relation to their learning experience. I designed the survey questions to capture as much information as possible from the students about their feelings regarding the first tutorial session. All thirteen students completed the survey (figure 5).

I used the online survey instead of face-to-face interviews to capture students' feedback on the tutorial meeting because I thought that the students would have been overwhelmed by the number of meetings if an interview had been arranged at this stage. According to Lefever et al. (2007), online surveys have a major downside as participants may not answer openly. I found that students provided short responses in their answers to the online survey. They did not expand on their answers and some of them skipped some questions.

The students met the researcher initially, where they had the opportunity to ask any questions about the study and sign the consent form. This was followed, within a week, by a tutorial meeting with the allocated teacher. Having a third meeting to interview them might have caused a hesitancy and reluctance from the students. The online survey captured their feedback, and the data were analysed at the end of the study.

Student Online Survey after Tutorial Meeting 1

1. After having your tutorial meeting, do you have a good understanding of what is expected of you this semester?
2. Did the tutorial meeting help you understand the requirements?
   □Yes   □No
   Please explain:
3. How did you complete your individual learning plan with the teacher in the tutorial meeting?
   □ the teacher completed it and I was not involved
   □ I completed it by myself and did not discuss it with the teacher
   □ the teacher and I completed the plan together
   Please explain:
4. What did you learn from this meeting in regard to the following;
   □ Study habits
      Please explain:
   □ Your expectations from the course
      Please explain:
   □ Your learning gaps
      Please explain:
   □ Your responsibility towards your study
      Please explain:
   □ Assessment tasks and deadlines
      Please explain:
   □ Available support
   Please explain:
5. During the semester, if you need help, what is your plan on initiating this?
   □ Ask the class teacher
   □ Ask a class mate
   □ Ask the Head Teacher
   □ Have additional tutorial meetings with the tutorial teacher
   Please explain:
6. Would you like us to contact you at set times to ask if you need support?
   □Yes   □No
   Please explain:
7. If you answered "No" for question 6, would you prefer to contact the tutor teacher?
   □Yes   □No
8. If you answered "Yes" for question 6, how often would you like us to contact you?
   □ 1 time during the semester
   □ 2 times during the semester
   □ 3 times during the semester
   □ other

Figure 5: Student online survey

3.9.2 Interviews

According to Vogt (2014) and Bogner et al. (2018), although interviews are an important and reliable method of data collection in qualitative studies, they can also be difficult to get right. One of the main reasons for carrying out interviews is to ascertain the things that cannot be observed directly, as well as to develop an understanding of the inner perspectives of the interviewees. Because this study endeavoured to understand the perspectives of both teachers and learners, the choice of interviews as the method of data collection was both justifiable and appropriate.

There are some drawbacks to interviews as a data-gathering tool. Hammersley and Gomm (2008) mentioned;

> *what people say in an interview will indeed be shaped, to some degree, by the questions they are asked; the conventions about what can be spoken about; by what time they think the interviewer wants; by what they believe he/she would approve or disapprove of (p. 100).*

The above statement indicates that interviewees will only reveal their current interpretation of events and viewpoints. These opinions might change over time, depending on the circumstances surrounding the individual. In this study, due to time constraints, I only used interviews with teachers and used an online survey and interviews with students.

Teachers and students were interviewed with the goal of determining the cognitive-behavioural as well as emotional engagement they experienced within the classroom. Semi-structured interviews were the preferred type for the current study because the use of open-ended questions permitted the researcher to explore the perspectives and experiences of the interviewees in a flexible and comprehensive manner (Bogner et al., 2018). The qualitative data was critical in shedding more light on the experiences and visions of the research subjects.

My research aimed at collecting the data from the multiple stakeholders on how the Individual Learning Plan was being used by recording their viewpoints and if the tutorial aided in partnership development in their learning journey. I used interviews to investigate relevant aspects of my study. However, I was keen on getting the vital information that could help me accomplish my research objectives and therefore, I only used open-ended questions in my interviews. By using open-ended questions, it was possible for me to collect data on deep thoughts and perceptions from participants on how they view attitudes and behaviour involved in students' engagement.

All the questions that were adopted for the research were open-ended where the participants were asked as well to give suggestions on how best to engage students. This was to ensure that their perceptions were taken into account. The interview questions did not explicitly state the wording "Partnership" or "Students as Partners" because this terminology is foreign to the participants in this context. I did not want the terminology to be a distracting factor in this study for my participants. Individual interview sessions with students took between 15 to 20 minutes in time to avoid boredom and exhaustion of the participants. However, with the teachers, the interview sessions went up to 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent (see Appendix D – Participant Consent Form).

After every session of the interview process, I reflected on the procedures I had employed in dealing with the participants. Towards the end of the sessions, the collected data were transcribed, and the responses for all sessions combined to create two transcripts for the teachers and the students.

3.9.2.1 Teacher Interviews

The main role of the participating teachers in this study was to oversee the Diploma students' progress during the semester. They invited the participating students for an individual tutorial meeting where they discussed any issues that students would bring along.

During the session, the teachers also updated the Individual Learning Plan with the student. I invited the teachers to participate in two semi-structured interviews (weeks 1 and 16) to get feedback on the implementation of the tutorial meetings and the use of the ILP as an engagement and partnership building tool.

In previous semesters, the most common practice was that students signed the ILP at the beginning of the semester as acknowledgment of receipt of the document, which then got filed for safe keeping. In this study, in week 1, before the teacher started the tutorial meeting sessions, I interviewed them individually for approximately 30 minutes each in a commonly agreed private place where their identity was safeguarded according to the UoL ethics process (see Appendix F – Teachers' First Interview Questions). I asked them various questions about their experience in previous semesters with completing the individual learning plan (see the frame below). I chose the questions to capture as much information as possible about the teachers' feeling on previous practice (figure 6).

Teacher Interview 1 (Week 1, before the first tutorial meeting) – semi structured guiding questions

1. What was your experience last semester with the completion of the Individual Learning Plan?
2. What were the challenges, and what do you see as opportunities for positive change?

3. What do you think is required to engage students more in their study?

4. Do you want to add anything else?

Figure 6: Teacher first interview questions

In week 16, I conducted a second semi-structured individual interview for approximately 30 minutes (figure 7). I asked various questions about their experience with the implemented tutorial meetings across the semester (see the frame below). Both interviews were audio recorded with the teachers' permission and transcribed by me.

Teacher Interview 2 (Week 16, after the third tutorial meeting) – semi structured guiding questions

1. How long did you spend with each student individually in the tutorial meeting?

2. Did you discuss the entries in the Individual Learning Plans with students?

    a. If you did, what particular issues emerged?

    b. If you did not, what issues did you discuss?

3. Were the tutorial meetings beneficial? Please explain

4. What has been your experience so far this semester with the completion of the Individual Learning Plan?

5. Do you think the tutorial meetings made a difference in how students engaged in the Individual Learning Plans? For instance, do you think the students took responsibility for their learning? Please explain.

6. Do you think the students engaged in their study more because of the tutorial meeting? Please explain.

7. The introduction of tutorial meetings is new. Do you think this process is sustainable? What could we do to make them even more meaningful? Please explain.

8. Do you want to add anything else?

Figure 7: Teacher second interview questions

3.9.2.2 Student Interviews

In week 16, I invited the students individually to a face to face interview for approximately 15-20 minutes in a commonly agreed private place where their identity was safeguarded according to the UoL ethics process (see Appendix I – Students' Interview Questions). I asked them various questions about their experience with the tutorial meetings across the semester (figure 8). The interview was audio recorded with their permission and transcribed by me. All 13 participants agreed to be interviewed.

Student Interview (week 16, after the third tutorial meeting) – semi structured guiding questions

1. How did your work in the course go this semester?
2. I have some questions for you around the use of the individual learning plan. Did the action plan in your individual learning plan document help you in any way? Please explain
3. Did you have any input into the individual learning plan during the tutorial meetings? Please explain
4. How did the individual learning plan assist you in your study?
5. Did you feel that you were in charge of your individual learning plan? Please explain
6. Did you find having an action plan positive or negative? Please explain
7. How often, did you update your individual learning plan? Why?
8. Were the tutorial meetings beneficial? Please explain
9. How did the tutorial meetings assist you in your study?
10. Do you want to add anything else?

Figure 8: Student interview questions

3.10 Data analysis

The collected data during the study were fundamental in responding to the research questions I had earlier raised. The data analysis method chosen was thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) documented an effective procedure for researchers who want to accurately apply thematic analysis in their studies. They outlined the multiple phases the method undergoes while paying close attention to those steps that allow the researcher to thematically analyse his or her data. The procedure defines thematic analysis, its boundaries and the flexible nature of the method. The researchers applying this method acknowledge their desire to truly understand the question and topic of discussion in-depth.

Since thematic analysis involves the researcher identifying, analyzing and reporting various themes with the provided data, the method is therefore not anchored to any specified theory. Thus, at no point is the researcher restrained by any ideological commitment that is implicit. For this analysis as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006), first, the researcher needs to familiarize herself with the provided data through transcription of the responses from the participants in the interview. The extracted data items are then merged to form the data sets before the coding process begins. At the data transcription stage, which is the initial stage of data analysis, the researcher ensures that accuracy of the transcription is attained by repeatedly going through the transcribed data.

The coding phase is the second step after data transcription. Codes bring out the significant features portrayed by the collected data that the researcher finds crucial in addressing the research questions. This process requires equality in the treatment of all data sets as the researcher pays attention to the themes that have been repeated.

In this study the codes were organized into various concepts that were described to facilitate the generation of the analytical themes. At the third phase, the different identified codes were combined and the similarities in them exposed as obtained from the data. The

combination of these similar initial codes formed the themes that seemed relevant from the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) further suggest the use of visual tools such as charts, maps, and graphs when developing the themes. The suggestion was quite significant and helped in visualizing and considering the relationship that existed among the themes that I had identified.

Thematic analysis facilitates the researcher with an understanding of the meanings expressed by the participants. The themes can be developed, classified and these methods of classification can be used in data examination. I used thematic analysis as the data analysis method on the data that I had collected after carrying out the surveys and various interviews to identify the patterns used in data, then developed relevant codes and themes.

As a researcher, in this case, I had the urge to have an elaborate understanding of the application of the Individual Learning Plan which would enable me to define the extent to which it could be used in students' engagement and partnership between tutors and students. The usage of thematic analysis gave special consideration to the meanings expressed by the participants in the research. It was an iterative process. I went back to earlier transcripts, while analyzing, after I found particular themes in later transcripts. After that, I examined extracted themes in the relevant context to give them the right meanings. Thus, this became a crucial approach in my application of the thematic method as I extracted the meanings from the participants I interviewed, examined their meanings from the context of the education setting and compared and screened the transcripts for codes related to the research questions and unexpected results. My recommendations for the facilitation of how to create an education system that enhances student engagement and partnership between participants were then derived from the data.

As a researcher, I have a duty to ensure that only relevant themes are developed which are related to this study. The whole purpose of the theme refinement was to help discard any

themes that appeared too diverse and that did not have enough information to support them.

The refinement ensured that only coded data that formed a pattern that was coherent were

accepted. Then upon determination of the coherence of the codes, the themes were examined

regarding the whole data presentation. Braun and Clarke (2006) also argue that the developed

ideas should be well evidenced across the entire data set and this was the accuracy I sought

through theme refinement. Upon the completion of this process of fitting themes together, the

next step involved defining the identified themes and naming them as brief analysis was

accorded to every pattern. Details within the identified topics were considered about the

relevant story that had emanated from the data details. I considered theme names precisely

and carefully in such a way that they indicated the essence of the identified themes.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

It is a requirement in any educational study that the researcher pays close attention to

the ethical component (Isman et al., 2009). If the researcher fails to take the ethical aspect

into serious consideration, then chances are high that the research process will run into

privacy risks and other ethical issues. Some of the privacy risks likely to be encountered

include accidentally causing a breach to the private information. Also, the participants are

likely to be heard or viewed by others when they meet the researcher and those taking part in

the research process as meddling or causing an invasion into the private information of those

not part of the study team. To this extent, all the privacy information of those engaged in the

study should be kept confidential and the researcher needs to pay close attention to this.

However, the privacy of those not taking part in the research is equally important and need to

be taken care of by the researcher. In preparation before I carried out the research, I had to

seek ethical approval for my study from my organization's management and the Virtual

Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) of University of Liverpool (UoL). My

organization and the University of Liverpool required all the necessary approval to be

submitted before I could commence the research process. The document is listed in

Appendix E – UoL Ethics Approval Certificate.

I carried out the research within my own institution although I used a different campus

to avoid ethical issues that could have arisen because of my dual role of manager/educator

and researcher. Since my study was within the institution, accessibility matters needed to be

considered regarding seeking the research permission for any facility or the equipment of the

institution I used. I obtained permission to go ahead.

The other access problem I encountered was the difficulty in determining the

appropriate time to research since my research was not meant in any way to interfere with the

regular running of the institution. Having been given consent, I had to informally make some

local arrangement with the participants on the odd hours that would not interrupt their regular

businesses. However, even with such mechanisms in place, inconveniences made it difficult

to arrange for data collection with all the participants in one day. The first session we had

planned failed due to the differences in the time of commitments of participants. Several

attempts to interview teachers were changed because of other duties, which meant that I had

to rebook the meeting room for an alternate time. Thus, equally, the issues of access were a

breakthrough in my study and at the same time challenging for my research.

All the interviews were conducted in the one room that was very quiet and private at

the college, for all the participants where their identity was safeguarded. For this research, I

was the principal investigator in this case, taking the position of the researcher and

conducting the interview. The participants (students and teachers) read and acknowledged

receipt of the participant's information sheet that informed them of the purpose of the

research and their roles as participants. However, since the participants were uncertain of the

details of the research, I had to explain to them that our mission was to talk about the

Individual Learning Plan and how it affected the engagement of the students. Furthermore, to relieve any nervousness among the participants, I had to ensure that my body language and the interview environment were not intimidating during the session. I then urged them just to have the feeling that as a researcher, I had no idea of the topic and just wanted to get a glimpse of what they individually knew. I think this strategy was significant in my interview sessions since it made the participants have a feeling that they knew much more than I did and that I was only interested in finding out what they had experienced.

Instructions concerning the interview were communicated to all the participants verbally and any consent sought before the recording of any information. The participants signed a consent form that explained in detail their role in the research (see Appendix D – Participant Consent Form).

Since the nature of my study needed access to very confidential information from the participants, it was only prudent that I anonymized the data. By this, anonymity was observed for all the participants, and my outcome could not indicate any of the actual details of the participants as I maintained the anonymity of the interviewees. Although I conducted the research in my work organization, my role as Project Officer did not give me any power over teachers or students.

For the durability of the collected information from the study and to avoid any future accidental access to private information, I converted the physical files into electronic ones and stored them on a password-protected external hard disk. After that, I destroyed all the physical records by burning them. At no point did I use the classifying information such as actual names and addresses of the participants. All measures in place, I ensured that none of my participants were exposed to either physical, psychological, ethical, or legal risks during the whole process of my study.

Chapter 4 – Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

The current study utilized qualitative methods through interviews and online surveys. The findings from the interviews and surveys are presented in the sections below. My objective was to find out the perceptions of the interviewees, and participants in the survey on the use of Individual Learning Plan (ILP) in conjunction with individual tutorial meetings to create partnership and engage students in the learning journey.

Transcripts were coded to identify the major themes that were evident throughout the interviews and surveys. The themes discussed in this section are those that emerged from the data and were identified by me through the coding process. By the end of the analysis process, several strong themes emerged from the interview data and the online survey. It should be noted that even though the research identified several factors that influence student engagement through partnership, the list is in no way exhaustive. However, it comprises most of what the interviewees considered as contributing towards effective student engagement. The themes include all the factors that the researcher identified in the course of the interviewing process. Most importantly, by answering the interview questions the respondents identified the themes discussed below. The emerged six themes from the data were identified as;

- Communication
- Responsibility
- Motivation
- Adaptive Support
- Trust
- Reflection

In this chapter, I will present the themes in relation to tutorial meetings and Individual Learning Plans. Two themes are common between tutorial meetings and ILP; communication and responsibility, however, they carry different weighting. For example, there were more comments about communication in relation to tutorial meetings than in relation to ILP. Similarly, responsibility emerged more in relation to ILP than in relation to tutorial meetings. On the other hand; trust, motivation, and adaptive support were only mentioned in relation to tutorial meetings and reflection was only mentioned in relation to ILP.

4.2   Tutorial Meetings

Tutorial meetings were introduced as part of the research to find out their effect on student engagement in combination with the ILP. Tutorial sessions are periodic meetings that students individually have with a tutor. These meetings were introduced as part of the research to find out whether they would foster engagement and encourage students to talk in-depth, in a safe environment, about their views and ideas regarding what they had learned and the problems they had encountered. The tutorial sessions were not intended to offer technical support for students but rather emotional, motivational, personal, assurance, and reflective support by engaging the students through partnership with staff.

Participating teachers were interviewed before the first tutorial meeting in week 1 to capture their previous experience with completing ILP. I interviewed the teachers again in week 16 to capture their feedback on the implementation of the tutorial meetings and the use of ILP during these meetings to record students' progress.

In Week 1, students were requested by a tutorial teacher to meet at an allocated time to discuss and complete their Individual Learning Plan. After the first meeting, I sent the students a link to an anonymous online survey (see Appendix H – Students' Online Survey Questions) that captured their thoughts about the initial tutorial meeting where they

completed the Individual Learning Plan with the teacher and discussed any early signs of

concerns. Students were interviewed in week 16 of an 18-week semester. I asked questions

related to the individual tutorial meetings they had across the semester (see Appendix I –

Students' Interview Questions). All 13 students completed the survey and attended the

interview.

Five main themes emerged in relation to tutorial meetings; communication;

responsibility; motivation; adaptive support; and trust. In the following sections, I will

present the participants' comments in relations to these themes.

4.2.1 Communication

This theme arose primarily from the teacher interview data. I interviewed the teachers

before the first tutorial meeting to capture their views on how students can engage better in

their study. Teacher 1 said;

> *I think we need to talk to students on one to one basis to see how they are*
> *coping so far in order to make sure they aren't behind in any way. By doing*
> *so, we can identify issues that might affect their study and help them with*
> *strategies to stay on track. This will also allow the students to see any*
> *obstacles in their way that interrupt their study*

When asked the same question, teacher 2 included the thought that the tutorial

meetings can be a means to identify learning style or preference and allow students to reflect:

> *...a chance to look at the individual student and ask them how you learn. That*
> *way, we get the information from them; they then reflect on how they learn*
> *themselves. Then we can develop a learning habit with them, which helps them*
> *through their life.*

One of the interview questions asked for teachers' view on how beneficial the

implementation of the tutorial meetings for better student engagement. Both teachers

indicated the importance of having individual sessions based on the feedback they received

from students. Teacher 2 noted;

> *Students found it good that we initiated the meetings, and they were happy to*
> *have more sessions.*

Likewise, Teacher 1 articulated;

> *Students mentioned that they would prefer more follow-ups/meetings to discuss*
> *their progress and ensure that they are on the right path. The more meetings*
> *we have, the more they open up and discuss their individual study needs or*
> *struggles. At the end, they asked for more meetings and more individual*
> *attentions.*

The quality and nature of the interactions between the teachers and students are

essential in understanding student engagement. As reflected in the response by Teacher 2

above, the process of engagement is relational. The importance of communication in

fostering student engagement is apparent in the data. For instance, Teacher 1 observed:

> *I believe that student engagement comes from communication. It puts the*
> *students at ease and makes them feel that they can come talk to you about any*
> *issues.*

The above quote indicates that establishing a connected and engaging relationship

between teachers and students requires effective and sustained communication.

A theme that emerges from the data is that effective communication increases student

engagement primarily through the feedback process. The response by Teacher 1 detailed

above suggests that personalizing interaction plays an essential role in increasing the levels of

student engagement as students and staff partnered. As Teacher 1 observed, one way that an

instructor can show students that he or she values and cares for them is by talking to them

individually to see how they are coping in their study, making sure they are not behind, and identifying issues that might be affecting their education.

4.2.2 Responsibility

Implementing individual tutorial meetings seemed a little daunting at the beginning. However, it has been established by the tutors through this research that students tend to grow in confidence and improve the skills needed to ensure successful academic discussions, irrespective of their educational backgrounds, through tutorial meetings. This was apparent in Teacher 1's comment;

> *They knew that the onus on them to complete their work. They could ask for help or support, but it was their responsibility to do the work. This continuous care allowed students to complete their course.*

The responses from the online survey indicated that students came out of the tutorial meeting with a better understanding of what was expected from them. Student 1 stated, "*I have an overall idea but not in great detail.*" Along the same lines, student 3 disclosed, "*I learned that I have to put a lot of effort to pass the course.*" Student 12 mentioned that from the initial tutorial meeting, it was clear for him that he needs to "*keep track with the workload, required assessments, and deadlines*" while Student 5 observed that he "*learned to complete the assessments early and seek help when needed.*" Student 6, on the other hand, expressed the idea that the tutorial meetings made him "*aware of available support.*" Students reflected on the benefit of implementing tutorial meetings. Student 3, for example, learned about and had reflected on study habits from the tutorial meetings. His response is, "*I learned that I would study 2 hours per day on the weekend. I'll increase it if I need to do more work.*"

4.2.3 Motivation

Tutors play an important role in ensuring that students are motivated in their studies. For instance, Student 8 said that he had an incentive for action only by

> *Having someone to talk to for support and motivation. I work part-time. In the tutorial meeting, we discussed my options, and I was encouraged to speak to my employer and take some steps in my career advancement*

The one-on-one conversation that is possible through tutorial meetings allows the tutors to encourage learners to develop self-motivation as a way of becoming independent learners. This point of view was reflected by Student 12, who noted, "*Having a one-to-one meeting with the tutorial teacher helped me engage in the course*". Student 11 stated the following;

> *In the tutorial meetings, I learned how to study. I had difficulty studying and focusing for a long time, so the teacher suggested that I gradually increase the study time at home by adding half an hour of study every week. This technique helped me to focus better and trained me to study. I learned to manage my time*

Student 13 observed tutorial meetings "*offered me more reassurance that there is someone here if I need help*". This response suggests that the tutorial meetings contributed towards motivating the students by encouraging them to be engaged participants in their learning. Providing feedback through tutorial meetings permitted effective learning through the direct interaction between the student and the tutor, as well through active engagement that promoted problem-solving by actual doing. This point of view was evident in student 13's response,

> *Having someone to go to made me at ease during the study. Tutorial meetings helped me to have a study schedule at home and go through the plan to finish*

the required assessments. Tutorial meetings offered me reassurance that there is someone here if I need help.

4.2.4 Adaptive Support

The teacher offered leadership and direction for learners who were supported by the tutor on a personal basis during the tutorial meetings, thereby helping them stay on track and making sure that the students learned through the provided course materials correctly and without any hindrances. This was evident in the response provided by Teacher 1 regarding the effectiveness of the tutorial meetings, as captured by the comment below:

> *In the beginning, students did not think they would need help at all. They thought they could manage by themselves. In the middle session, they thought they were on track, but in the end session, they actually could see that they would have preferred more follow-up sessions during the semester to stay on track.*

> *It [tutorial meeting] gave us the opportunity to keep them [students] on track and provide them with support as soon as they need it.*

The average time spent with each student individually during the tutorial session was between fifteen and twenty minutes for Teacher 1 and ten to fifteen minutes for Teacher 2. Similar to Teacher 1, Teacher 2 was also of the view that the tutorial meetings gave valuable information as

> *Some indicated that the workload was too big for them… Others said that they are having trouble studying, so we looked at study methods to address this issue. We also discussed resume building items such as volunteer work at local schools offering their assistance to teachers or the school or sporting clubs. I gave them ideas to develop a study plan to assist them with their study habits and discussed their progress in the following meetings.*

Tutorial meetings gave the students the freedom to push themselves academically and direct their learning. At the same time, the teacher was able to monitor the progress of individual students closely and help them with any problems early during the course.

The responses by both interview respondents point out that teachers have a significant role in facilitating learning and engagement. Concerning the effectiveness of the tutorial meetings, Teacher 2 noted:

From the teacher view, it helped us to identify the students that might fall behind early on. We were able to apply early intervention to fix the issue before it becomes a problem. It gave the students a confidential environment to seek help and for us to address their concerns as soon as possible. For students, they were very happy and appreciative to the discussions we had with them.

The importance of the interaction between the teacher and the student in promoting increased classroom engagement is well established in the literature (Nguyen, Cannata, & Miller, 2018). Both respondents agreed that the students engaged in their studies more because of the tutorial meetings. Teacher 1 noted:

As students were aware that we will ask them about their progress, they would discuss issues as they arise which allowed us to provide support earlier on. Through the meetings, we were able to identify learning difficulties with some students and were able to offer support as an early intervention rather than leaving the student to slip through and not achieve.

The above response suggests that the tutorial discussion not only excited the students, it also engaged them in their study more than previous semesters. Teacher 1 further added:

I found this study very interesting as it showed me the positive side of how more interactions with students can help them more focused and improves their engagements in their study.

Tutorial meetings offered support to students when they needed an early intervention. Student 1 noted,

> *Tutorial meeting helped me to identify where I need to focus and try and keep track. I was aware of the issue and I was able to work on it. They were very beneficial, and I can see that they can be beneficial for other students who may not cope in class, it would give them that extra support they need. It took a bit of pressure off in my case. It made it a bit easier to focus on what I need to do because I knew that there is someone I can come and talk to if I ever need help. I try to keep my study up, but I know that sometimes I drift off.   These issues were clear to me in the tutorial meetings with the support teacher. It puts me in the driver seat of my studies. It was more about what direction I want to go in, whereas previously I was told this is where you are going, and this is what you have to do. It gave me more freedom but at the same time under control. I was aware of my strength and weakness*

The above comment indicated that the student learnt to reflect on his learning skills and built up his confidence in being self-directed. These are crucial skills in learner engagement and the study journey.

Similarly, Student 2 was of the view that the tutorial meetings were crucial in providing the much needed academic support ;

> *Tutorial meetings offered me motivation and kept me on track. The meetings helped me with my time management and Support as I knew I can go to someone for help. Knowing that I have that support network gave me that extra level of reassurance. The sessions were beneficial.*

Student 3 noted that "k*nowing that I have that support network gave me that extra level of reassurance. The sessions were beneficial*". According to Student 6,

> *Tutorial meetings were a positive experience. Having someone to talk to who can guide me during my study was very beneficial. I was not aware of some of*

> *the available services for students until the tutorial meetings, when we*
> *discussed them in one of the sessions*

Student 9 had remarkable comments about his experience with the tutorial meetings,

> *At a certain time in my course, I was about to drop out because of personal*
> *reasons and I was behind in my study. The tutorial teacher encouraged me to*
> *continue studying in the course and helped me to break down the study*
> *requirements into manageable portions. I think the tutorial meetings should be*
> *2 or 3 times each semester to reach out to the students and sort out any*
> *problems or concerns.*

The response provided by Student 10 also supported the notion that by facilitating both academic and social support, tutorial meetings play an important role in increasing student engagement. Student 10 remarked:

> *In the tutorial meetings, I discussed the issues we have in the course, and the*
> *tutorial teacher suggested options for me. I pursued a couple of his suggestion*
> *and things got better. I knew that there is a safety net for me.*

Tutorial meetings are a form of social engagement between the students and the tutor that contributes to an improvement of the overall engagement of students because such meetings occur in a controlled environment under the guidance and supervision of a professional. These meetings lead to more student engagement through academic and social support, as was suggested by 12 out of the 13 interviewed students, who observed that having someone to go to was beneficial and made their study more accessible. Another way of interpreting this information is that the implementation of tutorial meetings made the students feel legitimately supported in their academic endeavours, thereby increasing their level of engagement and assisting them in becoming more self-directed.

Tutorial meetings help students with time management by guiding them and assisting them to have a realistic sense of the time they have to complete academic work. Student 4 observed, "*I discussed with the tutorial teacher ways to improve my time management and techniques to overcome uncontrolled distractions,*" while Student 9 remarked, "*The tutorial meetings help me with my time management and study and life balance*". The attention given to the student during tutorial sessions serves to increase the focus of the student by removing distraction. Student 1 shared this perspective by observing that,

> *Having tutorial meetings made it a bit easier to focus on what I need to do because I knew that there is someone I can come and talk to if I ever need help*

A similar view was shared by Student 11, who remarked:

> *I had difficulty studying and focusing for a long time, so the teacher suggested that I gradually increase the study time at home by adding half an hour of study every week. This technique helped me to focus better and trained me to study*

4.2.5 Trust

Some of the duties of teachers include assessing the work of students, including tests and assignments, and consulting with the learners both within and outside tutorial meetings. It is worth noting that the use of tutorial meetings as a strategy for achieving and maximizing engagement to promote student development and success is scarcely a new issue.

When asked whether they thought that the students engaged more in their study because of the tutorial meeting, it is not surprising that both interviewed teachers responded in the affirmative. According to Teacher 1:

> *They would discuss issues as they arise, which allowed us to provide support earlier on.*

On the same point, Teacher 2's response identified guidance, support, and authentic care;

> *They [students] found someone who listens to them and can help them with*
> *their journey. We [teachers] were like the contact point to the students and*
> *were able to guide them if they wish. We were not fixing the issues for them*
> *but helping them to identify their needs and assisting them in developing a*
> *study plan. The students asked for more meetings, once a month, as they found*
> *them very beneficial. They saw that we care and want to genuinely to assist*
> *them.*

'Trust' did not explicitly come out from the participants' quotes; however, the term was interpreted by myself. The responses above clearly indicate that tutorial meetings fostered an emotionally safe environment for students and the 'human' part of engagement as it embraced students' trust. Students sensed that tutorial meetings created an atmosphere of 'trust'. This supportive environment allowed them to engage better. Teacher 2 added that tutorial meetings clarified the role of a student and increased the level of trust between teacher and student which improved student engagement;

> *We [teachers] could not study for them [students] or hold their hand and do the*
> *work for them. It [tutorial meeting] made them see that they have to take the*
> *responsibility and ownership of their study. They can come to us for support*
> *and advice, but it is their responsibility. We had to break the ice with students*
> *so that they can feel comfortable to talk with us and seek help.*

The relationships and interactions that students have with their teachers can serve to either inhibit or promote developmental change that causes them to engage. It is in this manner that interactions and relationships between the learners and the teacher are important in understanding student engagement. This relationship fosters the building of partnership between students and tutors. It is worth noting that the classroom is an intricate social system and, therefore, the relationships and interactions between teachers and students are equally complex systems; an observation by Teacher 2 highlights this:

The students come from a school environment where teachers are spoon
feeding them. They come to this environment, adult education, and they expect
the same. Through our tutorial meetings, we explained that this is adult
learning environment where they need to take responsibility of their learning
and seek advice. Some were shy at the beginning and not seeking help but
gradually were able to drop the shield and take responsibility for their own
future.

4.3   Individual Learning Plan

In the VET sector, qualifications are subsidized by the government and consequently driven by government requirements. For learners to receive subsidised courses, eligible students must have a completed Individual Learning Plan (ILP) which is sometimes called training plan. In my context, a complete ILP is a major compliance document that must exist for every learner.

An ILP refers to the student-specific education strategy or program that considers the strengths and weaknesses of a particular learner. It is usually written collaboratively and spells out the learner's current level of ability, in addition to specifying targets for future accomplishment. An ILP permits the teacher not only to plan and monitor but also to manage and assess student achievement as per the identified needs. The goal of an ILP is to examine the weaknesses and strengths of a student, establish individual goals, come up with an evidence-based intervention to assist the student in attaining the established goals, assign the responsibility of the student, set a timeline, and assess the student's progress.

An ILP is a reflection of the most current practice for improving student academic achievement through engagement based on collaborative inquiry and is intended to foster reflectivity in students. This is because it is meant to be drawn up through negotiation between the teacher and the student to set the targets for the student's learning.

In my context, the ILP is pre-populated with student details and units needed to complete and achieve competency required in a particular qualification. Before the first tutorial meeting, I asked the teachers about their experience in the past with completing the ILP. My purpose was to draw a comparison between the ILP being completed as per the traditional way and as part of the tutorial meeting with the purpose of student engagement. Teacher 1 noted that completing ILP in previous semesters was clinical;

> *I found it very clinical. There was no personal interaction between the student and teacher. I found that the main point of completing the training plan was to complete the task. I did not get any extra information from any student*

When asked the same question, teacher 2 completed the ILP with students later in the semester, as teachers have a 12 weeks deadline to sign-off the ILP;

> *I completed them individually with each student. They were done later in the semester, which didn't give me the opportunity to put what I learnt into as good effect as I would have hoped. For example, there was a student who had little to none computer experience and was from non-English speaking background, but I was aware of his struggle. I related his struggle to the language barrier.   I gave him a lot of attention but only after completing the training plan, which is when I found out he has limited computer experience. If I knew this before the class, I could have given him homework tasks to assist him. I didn't get a chance to re-visit the plan and see how they are coping in their learning and going in their study.*

Teaching staff finds completing ILP with students very challenging and time-consuming if it is done to fulfill an audit requirement. The first interview with the teachers explored their views on challenges faced by teaching staff while completing the ILP in the existing model. Teacher 1 reflected by saying;

> *The challenges were I felt that I was just trying to get the information out of the student just to complete the form in a very short time space. There was no*

allocated time for a proper conversation. It was completed in the middle of the
semester, not at the beginning. We should interview them one to one. It gives
students the opportunity to be open and discuss their needs and understanding
of what is required. By doing it one to one, the student engagement is higher
because they are in an environment where they can be open. The students
would know that they can seek help if they require.

Three main themes emerged in relation to tutorial meetings; communication; responsibility; and reflection. In the following sections, I will present the participants' comments in relations to these themes.

4.3.1 Communication

This theme arose primarily from the teacher interview data. For this study, I introduced tutorial meetings and requested that Individual learning plans were completed during the first session with individual students. About the effectiveness of the ILP as a tool for promoting student engagement, Teacher 1 noted:

[It was a] *positive experience. I looked at the ILP as a tool to help me*
understand the students' needs, keeping them on track, reminding them of the
process to help them and offer support. This continuous care allowed students
to complete their course. The ILP as a tool allowed us to monitor the students.

It is imperative to point out that ILPs are considered suitable interventions to improve student achievement when engagement in learning is found to be the main hindrance to academic success (Hopkins & Barnett, 2015). This view was also gleaned by the comments from Teacher 2, who observed:

The student found it easier to speak to us as Tutor or Support teachers rather
than their class teacher as sometimes the issue is with the class teacher. If we
identify an issue regarding learning style, we go back to the teacher and

discuss possible solutions to assist the student. The earlier we identify and

resolve the issue, the better chance we have to complete students successfully.

Overall, it was established from the tutor interviews that an ILP serves as a powerful strategy for individualizing instruction, encouraging collaborative learning where teachers work together with individual students to help them achieve their academic goals and raise the level of engagement, thereby improving academic achievement.

Teacher 1 noted his view about using ILP as an engagement tool as it allowed further communication with students. The plan became more viable than a compliance task.

I found this study good because it highlighted the potential of having the ILP
as a tool and a process to engage students rather than just a compliance tool.

Teacher 2 identified the importance of tutorial meetings and ILP for better student engagement;

The conjunction of the ILP and the tutorial meetings made a difference as it
allowed us to converse with the students and help them to take responsibility of
their study. The student found it easier to speak to us as Tutor or Support
teachers rather than their class teacher as sometimes the issue is with the class
teacher. If we identify an issue regarding learning style, we go back to the
teacher and discuss possible solutions to assist the student. The earlier we
identify and resolve the issue, the better chance we have to complete students
successfully.

4.3.2 Responsibility

Collaboration between the teacher and students is an integral aspect of learning. The fact that all students completed their ILPs together with the teacher epitomizes collaborative learning. An ILP offers students a comprehensive roadmap to support their educational journey. It is up to the teacher to work in collaboration with the student to create a unique plan for every student, designed to appropriately sequence and organize the learner's

coursework while bringing to the fore his or her academic challenges and strengths. Student 1

aptly noted, "*I was aware of my strengths and weakness*".

ILPs represent a strategy to assist the teacher make the correct and most appropriate

choices for the learner. This view was shared by Student 1, who noted,

> *The individual learning plan helps me to be part of my learning and feel*
> *responsible for my learning. I felt I was in charge of my study.*

Student 1, in his online survey response, was categorical about completing the

individual learning plan during the first tutorial session;

> *I had an input in developing the action plan. There are things that I need to*
> *work on personally; like getting work experience, volunteer work, 5-year plan*
> *for education and career, build my networking of people.*

Involving students in the completion of their Action Plan as part of the ILP seemed

very beneficial as it made the learners reflective and aware of their responsibilities in their

learning journey. This was evident by the comment made by student 3: "*I realised that the*

ILP is my action plan." Likewise, student 5 noted,

> *I completed the learning plan with the tutorial teacher and I found this*
> *experience positive and beneficial as he explained the details of the plan and*
> *available support.*

Student 7 felt related: "*I had an input in the training plan. It made me aware of my*

responsibilities in this course". Student 12 confirmed this:

> *I was fully involved in drawing the individual learning plan as I am*
> *compassionate about my study and wanted to make sure that my passion is*
> *articulated in my learning plan*

Student 8 indicated that the action plan helped him with his career decision,

I had a say in my action plan as I was looking at my career path. It helped me
to engage better in my study as I realised what the big picture is in my study.
It gave me better understanding of the available support system.

4.3.3 Reflection

The main aim of the student-teacher collaboration is twofold. The first is to give the learners the chance to ask questions that are of interest to them, while the second is to ensure that they have a say in decision-making as partners in the learning process. Both are important for motivating and engaging students, as well as for the self-regulation of learning. Student 1 remarked,

I felt I was in charge of my study. I had an input in developing the action plan.
There are things that I need to work on personally; like getting work
experience, volunteer work, 5-year plan for education and career, build my
networking of people. I try to keep my study up, but I know that sometimes I
drift off. These issues were clear to me in the tutorial meetings with the
support teacher.

In this context, the partnership was established by working with the students to achieve their goals. Student 5 acknowledged this concept in his comment:

I found the tutorial meetings good because I had an action plan in place and it
gave me a place to fall back if I was overwhelmed by things there was someone
to go to and ask for help. We talked about certain tasks that I need to work on
and encouraged me to ask other teachers for help and get the answers that I
need. It is the reassurance of what we are doing really helped. Even if the
tutorial support teacher is not expert in the topic of study, I found it very useful
to have someone that I can go to who knows the system and can guide me to
where I can get help from. Having the tutorial meetings were beneficial
because they were to touch base of how things are going and made sure I am
on track.

Because of the sound relationship between students and tutorial teachers, there was open conversation and discussions that went beyond their studies. "*I work part time. In the tutorial meeting, we discussed my options and I was encouraged to speak to my employer and take some steps in my career advancement*", said student 8. Student 10 remarked, "*It was good to have someone to hear my concerns and help me stay on track. I knew that there is a safety net for me.*"

Successful mediation by the tutorial teacher helped learners to figure out the things that they should do to ensure that they are engaged, and that learning is effective. For example, student 12 revealed;

> *I had issues with the amount of study load during the semester. I discussed these issues in the tutorial meeting because I was overwhelmed by the amount of work. The teacher suggested that I break down the big problem into smaller, manageable pieces. That was a very good advice and I made a plan for each day of the week and allocated tasks for each day. I worked through the plan and crossed out the tasks. I completed all the tasks and found that I completed the assignment on time.*

Overall, the results of the student survey and interviews revealed that a collaborative learning environment promotes student engagement by treating students as partners in the learning process.

4.4   Conclusion

Tutorial meetings constitute an important part of the educational process, although they are one of the numerous ways of improving student engagement through staff-student partnerships. Krull and Duart (2018) contend that tutoring plays a very critical role in the process of teaching and learning and can be typified as a strategy for improving the professional goals and academic success of students.

The role of ILPs in promoting student engagement is rather straightforward. The use of this tool is founded on the recognition that the curriculum must be designed to respond to the specific needs of every learner and, therefore, work programs should meet the said needs. In that regard, it can be said that an ILP serves as an additional personalized way for recording specific learning goals to support the learning outcomes of students. Using the ILP in tutorial meetings created an environment for students to reflect on their progress, academic achievements, and goals through engagement based on the student-teacher interaction.

Student engagement has been characterized as a broad concept that embraces important non-academic and academic facets of learner experience (Sherman, 2013). Some of the aspects of student engagement include participation in educational activities that challenge the students: feeling genuinely supported; collaborative learning through student-teacher interaction; taking responsibility of their learning journey; and having a trustful environment between teachers and students. Student engagement can also be viewed from the perspective of the time and effort that learners invest in undertakings that are empirically associated with the desired academic outcomes and the deliberate actions of the institution to stimulate students to take part in such activities.

The themes found in the data - communication; responsibility; motivation; adaptive

support; trust; and reflection - are all essential and form the basis of student engagement

through partnership between tutors/teachers and students. These themes can be seen as

triggers for engagement through partnership. Figure 9 highlights the critical words that came

out of the findings. Communication is the most common word which indicates that students

were in desperate need of personal meetings to discuss their issues and have adaptive support.

Figure 9: Word cloud from the findings

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1   Introduction

This chapter discusses the results of my study in relation to the overarching question – Can student engagement be improved by fostering partnerships between student and teacher? I used the following sub-questions to investigate;

- What might be the role of tutorial meetings in improving engagement?

- What might be the role of an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) in improving engagement?

- How might a 'Students as Partners' approach enhance engagement in the context of vocational education and training?

The current study was conducted in a Vocational Education and Training (VET) institution in Australia. The students are considered adult and non-traditional, according to the description in section 2.4. The learners have different needs and goals and cannot be treated the same way as traditional HE students. This information helped in understanding the findings through the lens of an engagement through partnership model.

The four phases (4D) of an Appreciative Inquiry process, according to Whitney and Cooperrider (2011) were utilised in this study; *Discovery* – recognising the existing engagement practices, *Dream* – developing a plan for using ILP during newly introduced tutorial meetings, *Design* - designing possible model for engagement through partnership, *Destiny* – share the findings to improve the student experience.

As mentioned before, for any Registered Training Organisation (RTO) in NSW to deliver VET qualification that is government subsidised, eligible students must have a completed individual learning plan (ILP), sometimes referred to as a training plan. It is a plan for the training and assessment to be delivered to a learner.

The introduction of tutorial meetings was new to staff and students. The College runs some technical support sessions to assist students with their practical work. However, what I introduced in this study is a different type of support; emotional, motivational, assurance, and reflective support.

The findings indicated that the tutorial meetings were welcomed by staff and students. Several positive outcomes were identified by staff and students as a result of the tutorial sessions, which will be discussed further in this chapter:

- The meeting offered students a means to set their goals and encouraged/supported them to pursue their study;

- It offered an environment where adaptive support mechanisms were utilised, such as getting useful tips on time management;

- It offered a feeling of security; as having a safety net and an environment of trust for students;

- Students were able to focus/re-focus on their study;

- Students were able to update their ILP with the teacher to realign achievements;

- The meetings gave an opportunity for early intervention and may have improved retention;

- Students were able to reflect on their study experience and goals;

- Some students appeared to feel that they were more 'in the driver seat' of their own study experience, in control of their studies.

The findings indicated that students engaged in their study by having open discussions with the tutor about their issues; by seeking advice and guidance from the teacher; through being motivated and inspired to pursue their goal; by taking responsibility for their learning; through feeling the genuine care of the tutor, and by reflecting on their study journey.

It appeared from the findings that engagement through partnership provided a healthy, respectful, trusting relationship between students and staff for better student experience. The six most prominent factors that have been apparent and identified in this study to support engagement are; **communication**; **responsibility**; **motivation**; **adaptive support**; **trust**; and **reflection**. Figure 10 visualizes these six triggers for engagement.

Figure 10: Triggers affecting Engagement through Partnership

Some academics might prefer the term 'factor' to describe the most important dimensions to engagement. I chose the term 'trigger' instead of 'factor' as I believe that the word 'trigger' initiates an action that is geared up to happen. For example, when students started to take responsibility for their study, engagement occurred. In the following sections, I will relate the findings with literature and the values identified in the *Framework for Student Engagement through Partnership* (HEA, 2015). I will then discuss the triggers in relation to the research questions.

5.2 Relating the findings with the framework, the HEA partnership values and literature

Student engagement is a complex concept. In my attempt to understand what engages or disengages students, I used Kahu and Nelson's (2018) three-tiered engagement framework (see *section 2.9, figure 2*), where engagement is seen "*as an individual student's psychosocial state: their behavioural, emotional and cognitive connection to their learning*" (p.59).

Perceiving learner engagement as a psycho-social practice, where it is influenced by personal and organisational issues as well as social context, offers an integrated framework of student experience.

There are some other aspects of the student experience that lead to engagement or disengagement that are at the intersection between student and institutional staff. In conjunction to the above three-tiered model, Kahu and Nelson (2018) included four other factors that influence engagement; **self-efficacy**, **emotions**, **belonging**, and **wellbeing**. The framework shows some of the mechanisms that can be used as influences to help engage students. Although "Partnership" was not explicitly mentioned in Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework, student engagement cannot occur unless staff/institutions work together with students to achieve a better learning experience.

In addition to the framework, I will discuss the study findings in relation to the Higher

Education Academy (HEA, 2015) values of partnership. Figure 11 lists these values;

Figure 11: Partnership Values (HEA, 2015, p. 3)

Tutorial meetings and Individual Learning Plans were not mentioned explicitly in

Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework. However, the framework identified factors that can

improve engagement. These factors that were mentioned in the framework relate closely

with the findings of this study and are the outcomes which appear to arise from having

individual tutorial meetings with students and using the ILP during the sessions to record progress.

Table 1 relates triggers revealed in this study to relevant existing literature, Kahu and Nelson's (2018) conceptual framework, HEA (2015) partnership values, and illustrative quotes from the study findings. Four of the identified triggers in the study (*communication*, *responsibility*, *motivation*, and *reflection*) appear in several sources of literature, while the other two triggers (*trust* and *adaptive support*) are more tangential and might be related to partnership building. Comparing the identified triggers with Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework revealed that three triggers (*responsibility*, *trust*, and *reflection*) are not explicitly mentioned. They might be implicit in one of the influential factors or considered as an outcome of student engagement.

From the list of HEA (2015) partnership values; *responsibility, empowerment, authenticity,* and *trust* are similar to the triggers in this study. The other values (*honesty*, *reciprocity*, c*ourage*, *inclusivity,* and *plurality*) did not seem to explicitly or implicitly come out of the study. The reason for this lack of similarity might be because of the context of this study, where students and staff are not familiar with the depth and knowledge of partnership in an educational setup.

In the following sections, I will discuss the six triggers of engagement presented in figure 10 (see section 5.1) in relation to the research sub-questions;

- What might be the role of tutorial meetings in improving engagement?

- What might be the role of an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) in improving engagement?

- How might a 'Students as Partners' approach enhance engagement in the context of vocational education and training?

Trigger	Literature Review	Conceptual Framework	Partnership Values	Illustrative Quotes from the Study Findings
Communication	Splitter (2009) Pokorny and Warren (2016) National Survey of Student Engagement in Indiana (2013) Mentz and Oosthuizen (2016)	Psychosocial influences, Behavioural	No explicit mention	• *I believe that student engagement comes from communication. It puts the students at ease and makes them feel that they can come talk to you about any issues* – Teacher 1 • *we need to talk to students on one to one basis to see how they are coping so far, make sure they are not behind in anyway* – Teacher 1 • *We had to break the ice with students so that they can feel comfortable to talk with us and seek help* - Teacher 2 • *I knew that there is someone I can come and talk to if I ever need help* – Student 1 • *Having someone to talk to who can guide me during my study was very beneficial* – Student 6 • *We talked about certain tasks that I need to work on and encouraged me to ask other teachers for help and get the answers that I need* – Student 5
Responsibility	Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) Alderman (2008) Bovill et al. (2011) Troschitz (2017)	No explicit mention	Responsibility Empowerment	• *They (students) knew that the onus on them to complete their work. They could ask for help or support, but it was their responsibility to do the work* – Teacher 1 • *It (ILP) allowed us to converse with the students and help them to take responsibility of their study* – Teacher 2 • *It [tutorial meeting] made them see that they have to take the responsibility and ownership of their study* – Teacher 2 • *We (teachers) explained that this is adult learning environment where they need to take responsibility of their learning and seek advice* – Teacher 2 • *It (ILP) made me aware of my responsibilities in this course* – Student 7 • *It (ILP) puts me in the driver seat of my studies* – Student 1 • *I realised that the ILP is my action plan* – Student 3
Motivation	Sharma et al. (2017) Alderman (2008) Bovill et al. (2011) Healey and Healey (2018)	Self-efficacy	No explicit mention	• *Tutorial meetings offered me motivation and kept me on track* – Student 2 • *Having someone to talk to for support and motivation* – Student 8

Trigger	Literature Review	Conceptual Framework	Partnership Values	Illustrative Quotes from the Study Findings
Adaptive Support	Conner (2016) Scott (2015)	Well-Being	Inclusivity	*It [tutorial meeting] gave us the opportunity to keep them [students] on track and provide them with support as soon as they need it – Teacher 1* *They (students) would discuss issues as they arise which allowed us (tutorial teachers) to provide support earlier on. Through the meetings, we were able to identify learning difficulties with some students and were able to offer support as an early intervention rather than leaving the student to slip through and not achieve – Teacher 1* *The meetings helped me with my time management and Support as I knew I can go to someone for help. Knowing that I have that support network gave me that extra level of re-assurance. – Student 2* *It (tutorial meetings) gave me better understanding of the available support system – Student 8* *I discussed ways to improve my time management and techniques to overcome uncontrolled distractions – Student 4* *I had difficulty studying and focusing for a long time, so the teacher suggested that I gradually increase the study time at home by adding half an hour of study every week. This technique helped me to focus better and trained me to study – Student 11*
Trust	Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014)	No explicit mention	Trust Authenticity	*We had to break the ice with students so that they can feel comfortable to talk with us and seek help – Teacher 2* *They saw that we care and want to genuinely to assist them – Teacher 2*
Reflection	Splitter (2009) Blaschke (2012) Cook-Sather (2011) Hase (2013)	No explicit mention	No explicit mention	*...they then reflect on how they learn themselves – Teacher 2* *I learnt that I will study 2 hours per day on the weekend. I'll increase it if I need to do more work – Student 3* *... feel responsible for my learning... I was aware of my strength and weakness – Student 1*

Table 1: Triggers, Literature, Conceptual Framework, Partnership Values, and Quotes

5.3   Research Question 1 - What might be the role of tutorial meetings in improving engagement?

Individual tutorial meetings are not a common practice in my context. Technical sessions are offered to support students in their technical and practical study. I introduced such tutorial meetings to engage students and allow them the opportunity to be partners in their study journey.

Tutorial meetings not only engaged the students but also allowed an opportunity for an in-depth conversation between teachers and students. The introduction of these meetings allowed teachers to follow-up with students' progress, created a safety net for students, built confidence and trust in students, motivated students and involved them in their study.

Five triggers emerged regarding tutorial meetings; *communication*; *responsibility*; *motivation*; *adaptive support*; and *trust*. In the following sections, I will discuss each trigger as seen in the relevant literature; compare its relevance to the conceptual framework by Kahu and Nelson (2018), and the partnership values identified in the *Framework for Student Engagement through Partnership* (HEA, 2015); and follow-up by a summary of the findings respectively.

5.3.1 Communication

Splitter (2009) discussed the view that communication between learners and teachers inspires students in their learning process. Similarly, Mentz and Oosthuizen (2016) stated that having an interpersonal relationship between teachers and students which is aimed towards achieving a shared purpose enhances the experience of students in their study. In the same spirit, Pokorny and Warren (2016) claimed that learning is based on regular and consistent communication between students and staff. According to NSSEI (2013), lecturers can offer an inspiring impact through communication to enhance positive engagement.

Kahu and Nelson (2018) acknowledged the criticality of the relationship between teachers and students as a critical construct in their framework, within the "Psychosocial Influences". According to the framework, the relationship between staff and students is considered as an antecedent to student engagement. Kahu (2013) affirms;

> *good relationships foster engagement, which in turn promotes good*
>
> *relationships; and engagement leads to better grades, which in turn motivate*
>
> *students to be more engaged (p. 767)*

In the context of their guidance to develop partnership agreements, Student Participation in Quality Scotland (Sparqs) defined partnership as follows;

> *Partnership implies an equal relationship between two or more bodies working*
>
> *together towards a common purpose, respecting the different skills, knowledge,*
>
> *experience, and capability that each party brings to the table. Decisions are taken*
>
> *jointly between those organisations, and they co-operate to varying degrees in*
>
> *implementing the consequences of those decisions … it is an effective working*
>
> *relationship between an institution and its students, as individuals and through its*
>
> *collective representative body, working towards an educational institution of the*
>
> *highest quality possible. (Williamson, 2013, p. 8)*

This was reflected in the context of this study as well, as students and teachers argued that having individual tutorial meetings allowed them to interact and build a professional relationship to promote developmental change that causes learners to engage. Teachers were able to offer leadership and guidance to students because of the trusting relationship. Teachers had to break the ice for students to feel comfortable enough to open up and seek help. When students felt that teachers were going out of their way to discuss their learning

plan and work on an action plan, they felt the genuine nature of the discussion and started to engage in a meaningful conversation.

The response by Teacher 1 suggests that personalizing communication plays an essential role in increasing the levels of student engagement. As she suggested, one way that an instructor can show students that he or she values and cares for them is by talking to them individually to see how they are coping in the classroom, making sure they are not behind, and identifying issues that might be affecting their study.

This trigger was evident from the comments made by Teacher 1 regarding her positive experience in this study. She indicated that having more interactions with students can help them to become more focused and engaged in their course. It emerged from the interviews with students and teachers that tutorial meetings promoted engagement mainly through supporting students, helping them to manage their time, helping them focus, assisting them in understanding the course requirements and serving as a source of motivation.

Student engagement is relational in the sense that it reflects the learner's motivational, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural capacities. According to this perspective, student engagement can be best grasped by having a deep understanding of relationships and how they manifest in interpersonal interactions within the classroom. However, it is essential to remember that some students might not take part fully in the teaching and learning process for various reasons, including dominant personalities, language, and cultural issues, shyness, lack of interest, disaffection, or normal anxiety about involving themselves in the assessed activity. Overall, within the context of the theme of student-teacher interaction, student engagement reflects a rationally mediated involvement in opportunity.

People are more inclined to go out of their way to please those they feel value them as individuals and treat them with respect and dignity. Students explore the same style and, therefore, it is only prudent for teachers to develop positive relations with their students

(through effective communication) as one way of establishing a positive rapport and promoting engagement. Teachers who are keen on knowing their students will always try to understand their hopes and aspirations and help them with strategies to stay on track with their education. However, it is imperative to remember that the way teachers communicate with their students is likely to be the most prominent factor in determining the level of engagement, as well as whether the students will accomplish the intended learning outcomes. Consequently, putting in place a clear communication plan between students and teachers will lead to better learning outcomes through improved engagement as noted in the literature (Splitter, 2009; Pokorny & Warren, 2016; Mentz & Oosthuizen, 2016) and from the findings of this study.

5.3.2 Responsibility

Ashton and Newman (2006) argued that self-determined learning would engage students. However, learners need to be clear about their role and responsibility. Students are responsible for knowledge construction and the learning journey, whereas instructors are responsible for guidance, feedback, resources, and creating a secure learning environment. Behavioural engagement, as explained by Conner (2016), included positive behaviour of students towards participation in academic responsibilities and taking ownership of their study.

According to Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014), there are several significant values to engage students, one of which is being responsible for their study. Correspondingly, Bovill et al. (2011) state that the relationship between teachers and students challenges the passive role of students. It increases students' eagerness and motivation alongside learning responsibility.

Self-directed and self-determined learning are essential concepts in a heutagogical learning approach (Canning, 2010). When students are taking responsibility for their education, they are moved from being spoon-fed learners to active learners ready to embrace their learning journey. Alderman (2008) asserts that a healthy relationship between staff and students enhances the sense of accountability on the part of learners.

The conceptual framework by Kahu and Nelson (2018) did not explicitly mention "responsibility". It might be implicit in one of the influential factors for student engagement, but I found it very clear in the comments from both teachers and students.

HEA (2015) listed *responsibility* as one of its partnership values, which indicates the importance of this trigger in engagement through partnership. The responsibility definition, as per figure 11 (see section 5.2), states that all parties have a stake for the success of the partnership, along with individual students taking responsibility for their learning as well as their contribution to the partnership process. In a HE partnership environment, learners would not expect to be 'spoon-fed'; they have a responsibility towards their learning journey.

Another partnership value from HEA (2015) that relates to the trigger *responsibility* is '*Empowerment*'. Students felt in control of their studies. When students were engaged through partnership, they felt empowered and in charge of their destiny.

One important outcome from the tutorial meetings was for students to take responsibility for their studies. This trigger was apparent from Teacher 1's comments as students were aware that it is their responsibility to do the work. However, they can seek help when needed.

Teacher 2 emphasized that educators cannot hold students' hands and do the work for them. It is the students' responsibility to do the work. They are the owners of their study journey, but at the same time, they are not alone in this journey. They can come for advice

and support. This clarification of roles was explained clearly to learners during tutorial sessions.

Student 1 was clear about being responsible for his own study and how tutorial meetings helped him take control of his future. Tutorial sessions allowed him to discuss study options, whereas, in the past, he was told what to do with no discussions. He became aware of his strengths and weaknesses.

The findings in this study indicated that "responsibility" is vital in the learner journey. As soon as students realized that they were out of the school system, and they were considered to be adult learners, they adapted and became self-dependent learners. They could ask for support and assistance when they needed it and not sit back and wait for teachers to spoon-feed them.

5.3.3 Motivation

Sharma et al. (2017) suggested that motivation is one of the three predictors of learner success, together with academic preparation and engagement. Anderson and Freebody (2014) and Bryson (2014) claimed that motivation and the yearning to learn have a significant influence on engagement. Similarly, Knowles (1984) suggested that the principles that characterise adult learners are being self-directed, assuming responsibility for their learning, and being task motivated. The last principle indicated that learners would pursue higher education because of their internal driven motivation. Healey and Healey (2018) mentioned that motivation is crucial in partnership as it triggers other positive behaviours in learners towards their study engagement.

According to Kahu and Nelson (2018), the student's experience is influenced by their background, motivation, and skills. At the same time, motivation influences self-efficacy by

its effect on perseverance and goal setting. In return, self-efficacy increases engagement and

success, expressed as follows:

Students indicated that motivation was an outcome of having tutorial meetings. These

meetings motivated not only study but also planning towards career options as per the

comments made by Student 8, who indicated that having someone to talk to for support and

motivation was vital for him. He worked part-time and needed to discuss options related to

his career progression. After the tutorial sessions, the student was encouraged and spoke with

his employer about steps for career advancement.

As indicated by Student 5, tutorial meetings offered a checkpoint for students to

ensure that they don't lose their enthusiasm. Similarly, Student 10 commented that having

someone available to listen to his concerns and keep him on track was very beneficial for

him. He felt that the tutorial sessions were a safety net for him. This clearly highlights the

motivational effect of the tutorials, leading to engagement.

Participating students in this study were studying vocational courses after leaving

school either at year 10 or 12. Some students had gap years after school before returning to

study. They either preferred not to go to university or could not because of their school

results. Vocational education is their pathway to university and further study. Students are

not necessarily self-motivated to study and would not necessarily possess an internal drive to

study.

From the findings, individual tutorial meetings and partnering with staff developed

their motivation and engaged the students in their study by providing a safe and encouraging

environment. The findings suggest that tutorial meetings triggered motivation, which in turn triggered self-efficacy and engagement.

5.3.4 Adaptive Support

Scott (2015) claimed that it is crucial to understand and respond to learners in higher education when they request support to overcome the hurdle of academic success and encourage lifelong learning. According to Jarvis (2005), having a support mechanism in place for students would allow engagement and positive experience for learners. This view resembles Fredricks et al.'s (2011) look at active learning methods that can promote engagement. One of the methods mentioned by the authors was supportive learning groups; having supportive or positive associations with tutors. This type of personal support improved engagement and students' experience.

According to Kahu and Nelson (2018), attending higher education is stressful, especially in the first year, due to personal and institutional factors. Stress can hinder engagement. Well-being can be viewed as an interaction with the educational interface and can explain learning differences in adult/non-traditional students' engagement. Non-traditional learners are more likely to be stressed because of family and work responsibilities.

The teachers who participated in this study were very clear in their opinion about the support offered during tutorial meetings. It wasn't technical support in the discipline area but emotional support. Participating teachers noticed the change in students' behaviour towards their study during the tutorial meetings. Teacher 1 claimed that tutorial meetings allowed the opportunity to keep students on track and provide support as soon as needed. Teacher 2

pointed out that spending time with individual students allowed him to offer adaptive support

when needed based on their current state.

Teacher 2 mentioned an essential point about running these sessions by a member of

staff different from the students' regular teacher; for example, a support teacher, as

sometimes the issue is with the class teaching. Teacher 2 stated that if the learning style was

identified as an issue with one of the students, the support teacher could report back to the

class teacher and discussed possible solutions to assist the student. The earlier such problems

were identified and resolved; the more engaged students were and the better the results they

achieved.

The participating students indicated different needs that were addressed in the

individual tutorial meetings. Student 2 was after support in the area of time management.

Knowing that there was someone available for help gave him re-assurance, and engaged him

in his study. On the other hand, Student 3 did not need much support. Recognizing that

support is available if he needed it gave him the required reassurance. Student 5 needed

specific technical support: during the tutorial session, he discussed the tasks that he needed to

work on. The tutorial teacher encouraged him to ask other teachers for help so that he could

get the knowledge required for completing his assessment. Another student, Student 8,

needed a boost of inspiration and motivation as support, whileStudent 5 needed more support

but was not aware of what the institution could offer him regarding counselling and literacy

and numeracy support: tutorial meetings allowed for further discussions and clarity to keep

him on track and engaged.

Students were able to discuss any study issues as early as possible, which allowed

teachers to offer early intervention support and adapt the support based on individual needs.

Through the sessions, teachers were able to identify learning difficulties, for example, early

in the semester which allowed proper support to be provided rather than allowing the student to slip through and not complete his/her study.

Participating students were very appreciative of the tutorial meetings as they found them beneficial for adaptive support and guidance. The meetings were not meant to be counselling sessions as teachers are not necessarily qualified in this area, but they offered a friendly, supportive, and open environment for students to focus on their study and ask for help when needed.

Each student is different in their support needs during their learning journey. Also, the type and level of support needed varies between times for each learner. For example, one student might need assistance in study skills as he hasn't studied for a while, but two month later, he might need support with time management. Support cannot be "one-size-fits-all"; it needs to be adaptive to students' needs.

It is apparent from the findings that having adaptive support and positive interactions with teaching staff laid the foundation for psychosocial influence on emotional well-being for students. Having a teacher who understands the course structure and assists students in breaking down obstacles before they become barriers is vital in this context.

5.3.5 *Trust*

Building an emotionally safe environment for students is formed by an important factor, trust. As identified by Healey et al. (2014), several critical values can assist in engaging students in their study; trust, inclusiveness, empowerment, honesty, sincerity, responsibility, and mutual respect. Ashton and Newman (2006) claimed that when students are placed in a learning environment which has trust as a principal value, self-determined learning flourishes, which enhances engagement. Healey et al. (2014) claim that engagement

involves incorporating students in a trustworthy adult learning setting to address their discrete learning needs and competencies.

The framework presented by Kahu and Nelson (2018) did not explicitly mention "trust" as one of the factors affecting engagement. Nevertheless, the findings in this study indicate that this trigger, "trust", allowed students to engage and complete their study. Teacher 2 reported that tutorial meetings increased the level of trust between teacher and student, which, in return, improved student engagement.

The *Framework for Student Engagement through Partnership* developed by HEA (2015) listed *trust* as one of the partnership values.   At its core, all parties need to allow the relationship to build in a genuine, respectful, fair, and trusting environment. Mutually agreed on values such as trust, openness, honesty must be in place between staff and students.

Another partnership value (HEA, 2015) that relates to the trigger *trust* is 'authenticity'. In this study, staff were genuinely caring for students and believed in the ethos of partnership. The authentic nature of the tutors created a trusting environment for students to build their partnership and better engage in their learning. *Authenticity* could be seen as a pre-requisite for *trust* in this study.

Through tutorial meetings, students built a trusting relationship with the teachers, and they became engaged in their studies. This was apparent from Student 8's comment about his non-academic issues that were discussed in the meetings. This student works part-time and needed advice on how to approach his employer regarding career advancement. Because of the relationship created during the tutorial meetings, the student was engaged with his study and felt comfortable to seek advice from the teacher.

Students attended tutorial meetings not knowing what to expect. Teachers' genuine care was noticed by students, and a trust relationship started to be built, which led to more open discussions, and practical action plans to be developed and followed. Through this

continuous care from teachers and trust from students, learners were able to complete their

study successfully. A level of trust needs to be formed before learners feel confident enough

to seek help. Trust among educational stakeholders, in this context, students and teachers,

empowers all parties, and improves engagement.

5.4   Research Question 2 - What might be the role of an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) in improving engagement?

In the context of Vocational Education and Training (VET), eligible students study

qualifications that are subsidised by the government under the "Smart and Skilled" reform

scheme. All students under this scheme must have a training plan or an Individual Learning

Plan (ILP). All students ought to discuss with their teacher the ILP, which sets out how,

when, and by whom the training and assessment are conducted to achieve their qualification

successfully. The plan is a compliance document and mandatory for each learner. It also

helps to determine whether the student should receive recognition of prior learning (RPL) or

be required to undertake a full training program, and any need for identified support. The

Plan is meant to be a living document to enable competency-based development and

completion. It reflects the current state of training for an individual. As mentioned in section

1.3, every eligible student must have a completed ILP by week 12 of their course. Students

discuss their plan with the teacher and any issues that might cause barriers to the course

completion, and both parties sign the document. This document is meant to be updated with

any progress, or lack of it, that might hinder student completion.

Currently, due to time constraints for teachers or lack of teachers' interest in the

process, the document may not be utilised as well as it could be in many sections. The

process is routine where the plan becomes another auditing document that needs to be

completed and stored for compliance evidence.

As noted by Teacher 1, in previous semesters completing the ILP was "very clinical". Teachers found it challenging to get the information from the student (section 4.2.1) to complete the form in a tight time space. There was not enough time allocated in the teachers' schedules for discussing issues with students individually. The primary purpose of completing the plan, according to the participating teachers, was to complete a task and file the document for compliance reasons.

Teacher 2 reflected on the previous semester process by saying that he finalized it later in the semester as he didn't have any time allocated for such task in the beginning. For him, it was completed as a required task, not with any intention to get to know the students or their needs. He realised after completing the ILP with one student that the student had no underpinning knowledge of the subject, and this was the reason for his struggle in the unit. The teacher regretted completing the plan later in the course. However, he was within the allocated time frame, which is 12 weeks from the beginning of the course.

I used the ILP in this study as a tool to capture essential discussions that occurred in the newly implemented tutorial meetings. This way, the ILP is kept up-to-date and records the current steps achieved in the student learning journey. It allows students to reflect on their study and to realise their role and responsibility in their study journey. The plan seeks to be transparent, encourage trust, and inspire continuing self- reflection and a reflective habit.

One trigger, reflection, emerged regarding the ILP. In the following section, I will discuss this trigger as seen in the relevant literature; compare its relevance to the conceptual framework of Kahu and Nelson (2018); and follow up by a summary of the findings.

5.4.1 Reflection

Learners' self-management was discussed by Foxon (2007) as a transformational process for students. When students utilise self-management strategies, they enhance their self-efficacy, reflect on their capabilities, and transfer new skills from the learning environment to the workplace. Learner's reflection is the basis for heutagogy learning approach as discussed by Splitter (2009). The author claimed that heutagogy considers learners' capabilities regarding reflection and communication between staff and students. Similarly, Blaschke (2012) discussed double-loop learning in regards to heutagogy learning approach. In double-loop learning, the student must reflect on the problem-solving process and its influence on their actions and beliefs.

On the other hand, Foxon (2007) discussed action planning as an influential intervention for successful training. It allowed self-reflection and training responsibility. Along the same lines, Cook-Sather (2011) argues that having action planning enables the lecturers to listen to students' reflection about their learning needs, goals, and experiences. This conversation develops "metacognitive awareness".

Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework did not mention 'reflection" as a factor in student engagement. This could be because reflection might be considered as an outcome of the engagement.

This became apparent in my research as reflection was a factor in the student responses. When asked about ILP being a tool in this study. Student 3 noted that he needed to adjust his study habits, which he never learned before. He reflected on his current practices and discussed them with the teacher, who suggested alternative study habits that seemed to have worked with this particular student. The same student considered the ILP as his action plan to follow until he achieves his goal.

In this study, teachers used the ILP as a tool to keep students on track and remind students of their goal. Students understood their role in the learning process. They reflected on their role and took control of their study.

Students realised that the ILP is not just a document listing all the units they need to study. It was much more than this. Students considered it as their action plan, their career pathway, and a tool for available support. The benefits of using the ILP was indicated in action planning and Personal Development Planning (PDP) literature, section 2.8. Investing time in using such a tool can assist students to reflect on their study, their role, and their responsibilities. Participating students indicated that they were able in reflecting on their current skills and adjust their learning habits to achieve better results. They were able to be in the 'driving seat' of their learning.

In this study, I found that the ILP, when visited regularly, created an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning and discuss where they are up to concerning their original plan. This is significant as it led them to be more engaged, motivated, and responsible for their study.

5.5   Research Question 3 - How might a 'Students as Partners' approach enhance engagement in the context of vocational education and training?

Healey et al. (2014) state that SaP is a process that involves engagement as it affects students in a trustful adult learning environment to address their specific needs. The authors state that this would promote student commitment and would lead to transformative learning. Cook-Sather (2011) suggests partnership translates to active and engaged learning for both parties (students and academics).

The conceptual framework that was developed by Kahu and Nelson (2018) offered essential factors for student engagement. The framework presented the idea of the educational interface, which is the point of intersection between student, institution, and staff where engagement occurs. Each of the mentioned factors in the framework influence engagement. The authors presented four critical pathways to engagement; self-efficacy, emotions, well-being, and belonging. The framework points out the reasons that these four points affect engagement. For example, because students feel they belong, they turn up to class, which is their behavioural engagement. It will be easier for them to learn as they are emotionally comfortable in the classroom. The framework shows some mechanisms that we, as educators, can use as triggers to help engage students. Kahu and Nelson (2018, p.67) claimed that including students as partners may provide students with a sense of belonging, which leads to improved engagement.

The concept of SaP is a significant one, even though it was never studied in my organisation. The SaP approach could assist students in VET and Higher Education sectors to take responsibility for their learning and become better citizens. Based on the findings in this study and the discussions presented above for research question one (section 5.3) and research question two (section 5.4), I found that implementing regular tutorial meetings was a

positive experience for both stakeholders. Using the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) as a tool to record issues, goals, and resolutions during the tutorial meetings fostered an environment where students became partners with staff in their learning journey. This environment allowed for a heutagogical learning space where self-determined learners are taking control of their study and their learning.

In this study, the six triggers, namely *communication*, *responsibility*, *motivation*, *adaptive support*, *trust*, and *reflection*, appeared to influence engagement through partnership. As students become more engaged in their study, they grow more in their partnership with staff.

In this context, a partnership was established by working with students to achieve their goals through discussions and addressing their concerns as early as possible. The tutorial teacher was not an expert in the discipline areas of the students. However, students found it beneficial to have conversations with someone in the educational setting who could guide them to seek further assistance if needed.

From the findings, the six triggers can positively influence engagement, which is the foundation of the Students as Partners approach. It is interesting to note that tutorial meetings were not compulsory; however, students were keen to attend individual meetings. Students' recommendation at the end of the study was to have one session every three to four weeks to keep on track and address any issues as soon as possible before they became a blockage to their study. This feedback indicates that students would benefit from this type of personal support. This leads me to the next chapter, in which the recommendation and limitations of this study will be discussed.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.1   Introduction

In an organization, stakeholders are the partners who work together to see whether and how the objectives and the accomplishments are achieved. This is not different from the college or higher education settings where the students are partners of the institution. Therefore, as partners, ideally, students should be fully engaged and incorporated into the learning process.

Engaging students in their learning is a complicated matter. An array of factors influences engagement as we are dealing with human beings who join the educational arena bringing along their personal life, workload, family, background, personality, previous experience, culture, goals, and dreams.

A myriad of reasons exists for students' disengagement. Some of these reasons are; dissatisfaction with the learning experience, the teaching style or the quality of learning and teaching; study load; work/life balance; the student's capabilities; course demands; lack of social inclusion; and lack of a feeling of belonging. If students drop out of the course most of them do this as soon as they hit a barrier in their study (Rabourn et al., 2015). Having personal support seems to improve student engagement in the learning process and reduce non-completions.

In this research, students were engaged in their learning through partnership with staff. Tutorial meetings allowed staff and students to develop a trustful partnership and the ILP was the tool to record the action plan.

6.2   New Knowledge

When students in this research started to partner with staff and worked together towards achieving their individual goals, they were engaged in their learning. As shown in figure 10 (see section 5.1), six factors came up from the findings that can trigger engagement through partnership: *communication; responsibility; motivation; adaptive support; trust;* and *reflection*. All these factors played a role in the partnership between student and instructor and subsequently in student engagement. I have modelled these factors and I think this model can offer a tool for targeting early interventions designed at improving student engagement. It is essential to acknowledge that my research showed that engagement through partnership is not an outcome of any one trigger, but rather the compound interaction between them.

The introduction of tutorial meetings in this research triggered a deeper student engagement than had been the case without them. Having communication between staff and students in an environment outside the classroom allowed students to open up and feel the genuine care, guidance, and leadership that staff offered them. These meetings were not part of the curriculum and were not compulsory; however, students were keen to attend as they felt the benefit of this type of interaction. In subsequent sessions, students brought forward issues to the discussion table, which allowed the teachers to take on the mentor role in these meetings. Students realised that the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is not just a compulsory document; it is an action plan that can assist them in their studies and their learning journey to complete their qualification. Teachers felt the importance of the ILP in the student's journey after using it in conjunction with the tutorial meetings. In previous semesters, completing the ILP was clinical, routine, and a burdensome task. In this study, ILP is an action plan and a living document that assists both parties - teachers and students - in achieving their goal as the tutorial intervention made it meaningful.

In most courses, departments offer technical support sessions which are relevant to a discipline area. In this research, it was apparent that students needed adaptive support, which varied from one student to the next. Students required a bouncing board or a safety net to discuss issues that bothered them in the course and affected their study progress. These types of problems may not be considered in a class environment or in technical support sessions. Having a support teacher is ideal in these circumstances so that they can guide the students to the relevant area; class teacher, counsellor, or career advisor. Not all students have good study habits. Having tutorial meetings allowed teachers to identify students who needed to learn about time management, breakdown of tasks, and other study habits. Adaptive support worked well in this study as it catered for individual needs rather than a one-size-fits-all type of support.

The support students received in tutorial meetings also meant that students reflected in their role and took additional responsibility for their learning and improved their chances of completing their course. Students ought to move from being spoon-fed to being active, self-determined, and self-directed learners to adopt a heutagogical learning approach. Through the tutorial sessions, students were made aware of their role and the responsibility they can take on for themselves in the learning journey and were offered adaptive support to assist in the transformation process.

Not all students are self-motivated in their study. Students' motivation varies from one individual to another. During the semester, students learned, in tutorial sessions, to draw an action plan that will allow them to accomplish their goals. Students and teachers reviewed this plan regularly, and students reflected on their progress and achievements.

Trust came out in the findings as a major factor for student engagement. When students felt the genuine care of their tutorial teachers, they were more engaged in their studies, then developed a partnership between students and staff, which improved learners'

experience. Tutorial meetings were a channel for individual discussions, encouraging comments, follow-ups, keeping on track, self-reflection, reassurance and re-alignment of goals to take place.

The use of ILP as a tool for action planning allowed students to reflect on their progress and their learning journey. It was interesting to hear from students that they discovered strengths and weakness in their learning habits. Students were able to take control of their learning and sit in the driver seat of this journey. They became more self-reflective and responsible for their training as opposed to previous experiences when they were expecting to be told what to do — having the ILP regularly updated and discussing their progress kept students' awareness of their progress. For these students, ILP became an influential intervention for a better student experience.

SaP is an association between staff and students to improve the learning experience. When students became ready to build a partnership with faculty, they shifted to the engaged stage in their study for a better learning experience. This relationship was well described by Healey et al. (2014, p. 12)

> *partnership is understood as fundamentally about a relationship in which all involved—students, academics, … are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together.*

The literature indicates that engaged learners are more likely to complete their course than disengaged learners. Accordingly, it is not surprising that all participating students in this study successfully completed their course because of their engagement.

If completion is an indication of success for an individual, then the institution owes it to their students to assist them in achieving their goal. On the other hand, completion also affects the organisation financially, as funds are not fully released until the student completes his or her course. This means that as institutions we need to work on ways to improve the

conditions for engagement to ensure that it can lead to achieving better results. As Healey et

al. (2014, p. 7) described SaP as a process, "*It is a way of doing things, rather than an*

outcome in itself". The Students as Partners approach is a process of building relationships

by having an open dialogue between staff and students and the right trustful environment.

Students can proceed from the partnership stage towards the engagement stage which

improves the learning experience.

The shift to heutagogy facilitates learners' independence and creativity; actions that

spur more learning benefits whereby interaction between the teacher and learner is open,

mutual and beneficial in knowledge transmission and acquisition. This learning approach

will offer a student-centered method since the student will be significantly in control of their

education efforts. Teachers, through joint efforts with other players in the learning

environment, develop processes, content, and methods that will promote a better

understanding of content or increase student-teacher engagement.

6.3 Study Limitations

There are limitations to this study. However, these limitations can be considered as opportunities for further research. My research was based on the findings from a small set of self-nominated participants – two teachers and thirteen students. I could not avoid the sample size as only these participants agreed to take part in this study. However, since the participants volunteered for this study, this indicates that I attracted a sample which was predisposed to be interested in engagement and student partnership. The two teachers who volunteered to be part of this study were very passionate about students' journeys and were willing to embrace the suggested intervention. As a result, the collected data was rich and valuable to the study. The findings brought out new knowledge that can be tested in other areas. I would have preferred to interview a wider pool of participants to enhance the collected data and offer a broader tutor perspective.

It is worth noting that there were twenty-eight teachers who did not want to participate in this study. The question that needs answering is; what stopped the other twenty-eight teachers from volunteering to take part in this intervention? There could be several possible reasons, such as no scheduled time allocated to teachers, lack of interest, the study did not fit with their teaching philosophy, extra work in addition to their teaching schedule, or not enough caring factor in regard to the engagement process. This study presented the benefits of tutoring when both students and teachers have volunteered. The participating tutors were able to sense the benefits of partnership as it fits with their teaching philosophy and caring personalities. The low number of participating teachers in this study is an example of how the Appreciative Inquiry approach was utilised in this study. The research made good use of a positive outlook from the participating teachers in making the change.

Reflection during the analysis of this study raised the question of whether the positive nature of Appreciative Inquiry might have shadowed important knowledge that was dismissed or overlooked, such as budget constraints and course delivery. It seems that by focusing on the positive, Appreciative Inquiry might create an incomplete picture that hides part of the reality.

Another limitation in the study is that the data was collected from one section/faculty/discipline area in the VET sector. Any further expansion to accommodate other sections/faculties could involve quite long protocols and procedural issues. It was a lengthy bureaucratic process to seek the authenticity of my study limited only to one section/faculty/discipline area. All participating students were under the same administrative conditions and the running of the discipline area. Although being in the same faculty produced consistency in the process, it might have limited the students' perspective in this study as there might have been other factors that were not mentioned in this study due to the nature of the cohort that could affect engagement. Having one section to collect the data from, allowed me to focus my analysis and ability to produce a framework that can be trialled in a different context

As Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, a small and self-selected sample "may or may not be a reasonable sample of the larger universe" (p. 15). The findings of this study might not be generalisable. Surely, the outcome of this study could have been further enhanced if I had had more data collection points in other faculties, VET institutions or in higher education institutions to compare the findings. However, I hope that further research can be done to investigate the trigger factors and their effect on engagement.

6.4   Reflection on the Study

During my research journey and up until I started collecting data, I was investigating my original research question about how SaP can improve engagement. I was not sure how to establish partnership between staff and students. However, by the end of the study, partnership was established spontaneously because of the tutorial meetings. In other words, this study created the environment for partnership to start which allowed students to engage in their learning. The themes that came out of the data drew a picture in my mind as triggers to engagement through partnership; hence the diagram in figure 10 (see section 5.1).

It is important to note that engagement through partnership is not an outcome of one of the triggers but a multifaceted interaction between them. As Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) state, substantive engagement "depends on what teachers and students do together and how they work in terms of each other; neither can do it alone" (p. 14).

From this thesis journey, I have advanced as a researcher as I am more confident now in reading a research report and identifying what the limitations might be. I also learned that the outcome of any research is based on multiple factors that the study was conducted on (context, participants, policy, etc.). Qualitative studies especially cannot be taken out of context and implemented in another context without analysing all the factors influencing it and identifying the strength and weakness. It is not "one size fits all". I have become a more critical researcher, and in any paper I read, I can identify the strengths and weaknesses as well as appreciate the entire research process.

My plan for disseminating this research is to present an executive summary to my organisation's management team. This will be followed by publishing my thesis and working with the staff development unit to include a presentation on the findings of this study. During these sessions, I can reach a wider range of audience and allow for a change in the institution's educational support practice.

6.5   Recommendations for Professional Practice

The result of this study indicates that students valued the personal support that was offered to them through tutorial meetings. They were delighted to monitor their progress through their ILP, while before they did not value the ILP process. The six triggering factors identified; communication; responsibility; motivation; adaptive support; trust; and reflection, can positively influence students' engagement.

Based on the findings from this study, I would recommend the implementation of regular compulsory tutorial sessions for each student studying a Diploma or higher qualification to support the ILP process. The tutorial meeting would run with individual students, so it does not defeat the purpose of personalised attention and genuine care of the teacher.

The tutorial meetings occurred once a month to allow for regular follow-ups with the teacher and keeping the students on track, which was a good frequency that I would recommend for the future. During these meetings, the individual learning plan should be updated, and progress should be noted on each student. These meetings are not to be confused with technical support sessions, which aim to assist students in their practical work; they are personal support to identify early intervention for at-risk students. Students might not see the benefit of these sessions at first, but they will relate to the genuine care and adaptive support that the teacher will offer them, which in turn will engage them in their study, as happened with the students in my study.

I am suggesting using a tutor to run the tutorial sessions. Students will be able to open up to a member of staff that is not their class teacher. The tutor can communicate any issues through to the relevant teacher in the best interest of the student.

There is a downside of using a tutor as they might not be familiar with the details of all courses which students have to study. However, the purpose of a tutor is to act as a mentor to students and build a relationship that allows for better learning experience to students. Having a tutor who displays genuine care and concern for students' progress is great advantage as teachers might not have the appropriate skills for this role.

The implementation of a similar structure exists in the UK. Personal tutoring is a crucial aspect of how HE institutions support learners, helping them fulfil their academic and personal potential. A personal tutor can discuss with students which modules to take, gain further study skills, and any other matters affecting their study. The tutor can direct the student to additional support services such as counselling or disability learning support. The benefits of using personal tutors are apparent from the student's and the institution's perspective (Simpson, 2006).

Having professional advisors might not achieve the same result as having a local tutor who is aware of the student's course and can offer adaptive support according to the learner's needs. Students might not be inclined to open up and discuss their issues to an external advisor. It goes without saying that not all academics are suitable for this role in terms of their skills and motivation, just as several tutors in my own context expressed a lack of interest in the proposed initiative of tutorial meetings, but the practice of using them continues in many institutions for the reason that they know the details of the course and its requirements better than a professional support person.

In this study, students were enthusiastic about the offered opportunity to engage with the tutor as they felt the care that these tutors offered. The participating tutors were genuinely interested in supporting the students. They allowed the students to maximize their potential through the developed partnership.

I would also recommend that the ILP is completed during the tutorial meeting to foster discussions. In every session, the ILP should get updated to show progressive student involvement in the learning process. Any identified issues would need to be recorded and suggested resolutions noted down. Utilising the ILP in this manner allows for it to become a living document, a true reflection of the student's journey and partnership between student and tutor.

There is an understandable budget imposition in this recommendation for paying the tutor. However, I believe that it deserves further investigation, as having students complete their study will be beneficial and rewarding for the educational institution, student, and society.

6.6   Recommendation for Further Study

Tinto (1987) suggested that "sense of belonging" may be a good alternative for a term like integration. He added, however, that belonging does not mean just connecting to other people. It is how we visualise our connections on campus in relation to other groups. Tinto emphasised that students need to feel connected in a way that does not isolate or devalue them. He stressed that students need to feel welcomed and not intimidated. In his opinion, sense of belonging increases retention. Tinto's view is shared by Kahu and Nelson's (2018) conceptual framework. Read et al. (2003) claimed that some students feel "alienated by academic culture itself" (p. 271) regardless of their study engagement and might decide to drop out of the course.

Belonging can be different for each student as it depends on their personality, background, and life experience. I would recommend more research is required on the extent

to which the concept of "sense of belonging" is relevant to positive educational outcomes such as engagement and retention.

Further study would also be suitable to investigate the effect of the six triggers to engagement through partnership in other educational sectors and higher education with a wider range of disciplines and cohorts. A more extended research project could assist in evaluating the effect of engagement through partnership and the anticipated benefit on completion.

6.7   Conclusion

Students today have many challenges to overcome as they travel through Higher Education. As academics, if we want our students to maximize their own potential, we need to look at their journey and find ways to best support them.

There are several gains from developing an engaging learning environment for students, such as learning enhancement, improving learner retention, promote social justice, build institutional reputation, and enhance institutional brand.

Several works of literature discussed one or more aspects or elements for engagement through partnership. It is challenging to consider all factors that can influence engagement in any one study. However, each research study can improve our understanding of learners' engagement by explaining the factors affecting students' learning experience. When students are engaged in their study, they feel responsible and act as partners in the learning process. According to Healey and Healey (2018), implementing a SaP approach can be transformative to all parties.

This study discussed fostering partnerships between students and teachers can improve student engagement through the following six triggers; **communication**; **responsibility**; **motivation**; **adaptive support**; **trust**; and **reflection**. The feedback from participating students and tutors indicated that it was an "amazing affirmative and stimulating experience for all parties" (Healey & Healey, 2018, p.6).

It is my genuine optimism that this research will contribute to better student engagement through partnership in educational institutions.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

Level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Summary	Graduates at this level will have knowledge and skills for initial work, community involvement and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have knowledge and skills for work in a defined context and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have theoretical and practical knowledge and skills for work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have theoretical and practical knowledge and skills for specialised and/or skilled work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have specialised knowledge and skills for skilled/paraprofessional work and/or further learning
Qualification Type	Certificate I	Certificate II	Certificate III	Certificate IV	Diploma

Level	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Level 10
Summary	Graduates at this level will have broad knowledge and skills for paraprofessional/highly skilled work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have broad and coherent knowledge and skills for professional work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have advanced knowledge and skills for professional highly skilled work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have specialised knowledge and skills for research, and/or professional practice and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have systematic and critical understanding of a complex field of learning and specialised research skills for the advancement of learning and/or for professional practice
Qualification Type	Advanced Diploma Associate Degree	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Honours Degree Graduate Certificate Graduate Diploma	Masters Degree	Doctoral Degree

Appendix B – Teacher Participation Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF
LIVERPOOL

Teacher Participation Information Sheet May 21st, 2017

How can student partnership improve learner's study experience and engagement?

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends and relatives if you wish. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

Thank you for reading this.

1. **What is the purpose of the study?**
   I am an online student at the University of Liverpool and currently studying for my Doctor of Education. As part of my degree, I am carrying out a study about improving students' engagement. This study could have a significant impact on TAFE, especially with the effect of student engagement on retention and progression. I am hoping that the recommendations from the study will be thought of as an engine to make decisions or guide actions regarding the improvement of teaching and learning. The purpose of this research is to study the use of different interventions to improve students' engagement. Through investigating the use of a variety of interventions such as developing individual learning plan with the learner, tutorial meetings to monitor progress, and listen to the learner feedback, I will develop a student support framework that has applying these strategies at its heart and can be utilised across TAFE.

   My research proposal has been approved by my thesis supervisor, and ethical clearance has been granted by the University of Liverpool's research ethics committee.

2. **Why have I been chosen to take part?**
   You self-nominated yourself by responding to the "Expression of Interest" to participate in this study. Your main role in this study is to oversee the Diploma students' progress during this semester and to provide feedback through the interviews on the implemented tutorial meetings. I am inviting you to participate in 2 semi-structured interviews (weeks 1 and 16) this semester.

3. **Do I have to take part?**
   Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. You can remove yourself from the study at any time if you are uncomfortable or do not wish to

continue. In the event of any emotive issues that might arise during the interview or you felt discomfort at any time, I will stop the interview at once. You can also stop participating at any time during the research period with no consequences. You are also advised that you can refuse to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Please note that my role as a researcher is separate from my professional one.

4. What will happen if I take part?
We will meet twice for a semi-structured interview. In week 1, before you start the tutorial meeting sessions, I will invite you to a semi-structured individual interview for approximately 30 minutes in a commonly agreed place where your identity will be safeguarded. I will ask you various questions about your previous experience with the individual learning plan where it was completed by teachers only without learner involvement.

In week 16, I will invite you to another semi-structured individual interview for approximately 30 minutes in a commonly agreed place where your identity will be safeguarded. I will ask various questions about your experience with the tutorial meetings across the semester. This will be conducted as Appreciative Inquiry focusing on positive aspects of TAFE classes.

Both interviews will be audio recorded with your permission and transcribed by me. No one else will listen to the audio recording.

To remember what happened during the tutorial meetings, I would advise you to keep a log, however you are not required to do so. Keeping a log of the tutorial meetings will help you record the progress and the feedback of the Diploma students.

5. Expenses and Payments
There will be no payments or gifts.

6. Are there any risks in taking part?
There are no risks from this study, but if you feel discomfort at any time, please tell me. You can also stop your participation at any time. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You can remove yourself from the study at any time if you are uncomfortable or do not wish to continue. In the event of any emotive issues that might arise during the interview or you felt discomfort at any time, I will stop the interview at once and I will ensure that you can see a counselor at the counselling unit in building L, if you wish to do so. You can also stop participating at any time during the research period.

7. Are there any benefits in taking part?
There are no direct benefits for you to take part in this study. However, potential benefits can be expected from this study with future students especially with the effect of student engagement.

8. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?
If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting myself at the following address Gihan.Ebaid@online.liverpool.ac.uk or my thesis supervisor Professor Rita Kop Rita.kop@online.liverpool.ac.uk and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with, then you should contact the Participant Advocate at Liverpool University (email address liverpoolethics@ohecampus.com). When contacting the Participant Advocate, please provide details of the name or description of the study

(so that it can be identified), the researcher(s) involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

9. **Will my participation be kept confidential?**
All participation will be anonymous, and I will make every effort to ensure that it is not possible to identify the participants in the study by giving each participant a code which will be referred to in the report. No personal details including names and email addresses are stored as part of this study. I will not discuss the contents of the interview with any other members of TAFE. The audio data and anonymized transcripts will be stored in password protected files on my personal computer which is also password protected. These files will be kept for 5 years and will then be destroyed. Any other transcripts not on the computer will be kept in locked cabinets in my office accessible only by me for five years after which they will also be destroyed.

10. **What will happen to the results of the study?**
The final findings will be used in my doctoral thesis and recommendations for change shared with members of this department. It might then be published in an Australian education journal. At no point will participants be identifiable.

11. **What will happen if I want to stop taking part?**
You may withdraw from the study at any time during or after the survey and/or the interview, you may also refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. The interview will be recorded and transcribed by me. The recorded interview will not be heard by anyone other than me. After results have been made anonymous it may be impossible to delete individual data.

12. **Who can I contact if I have further questions?**
If you have any questions about this study, could you please email me at the following email address: address Gihan.Ebaid@online.liverpool.ac.uk or my thesis supervisor Professor Rita Kop Rita.kop@online.liverpool.ac.uk or Research Participant Advocate at Liverpool University (email address liverpoolethics@ohecampus.com)

Appendix C – Student Participation Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF
LIVERPOOL

Student Participation Information Sheet May 21ˢᵗ, 2017

How can student partnership improve learner's study experience and engagement?

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends and relatives if you wish. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

Thank you for reading this.

13. What is the purpose of the study?
I am an online student at the University of Liverpool and currently studying for my Doctor of Education. As part of my degree, I am carrying out a study about improving students' engagement. This study could have a significant impact on TAFE, especially with the effect of student engagement on retention and progression. I am hoping that the recommendations from the study will be thought of as an engine to make decisions or guide actions regarding the improvement of teaching and learning. The purpose of this research is to study the use of different interventions to improve students' engagement. Through investigating the use of a variety of interventions such as developing individual learning plan with the learner, tutorial meetings to monitor progress, and listen to the learner feedback, I will develop a student support framework that has applying these strategies at its heart and can be utilised across TAFE.

My research proposal has been approved by my thesis supervisor, and ethical clearance has been granted by the University of Liverpool's research ethics committee.

14. Why have I been chosen to take part?
Since you are a current Diploma student at TAFE, I am inviting you to participate in an anonymous online survey in week 1 and an interview in week 16 of this semester. The questions will be around your experience in the tutorial meetings and the effectiveness of these sessions in relation to your learning experience.

15. Do I have to take part?
Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. You can remove yourself from the study at any time if you are uncomfortable or

do not wish to continue. In the event of any emotive issues that might arise during the interview or you felt discomfort at any time, I will stop the interview at once. You can also stop participating at any time during the research period with no consequences. You are also advised that you can refuse to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Please note that my role as a researcher is separate from my professional one.

16. What will happen if I take part?
In week 1, you will be sent a link to an anonymous online survey about your opinion on the tutorial meeting and the development of your learning plan. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. In week 16, I will invite you to a face to face interview for approximately 30 minutes in a commonly agreed place where your identity will be safeguarded.   I will ask you various questions about your experience with the tutorial meetings across this semester. The interview will be audio recorded with your permission and transcribed by me. No one else will listen to the audio recording.

17. Expenses and Payments
There will be no payments or gifts.

18. Are there any risks in taking part?
There are no risks from this study, but if you feel discomfort at any time, please tell me. You can also stop your participation at any time. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You can remove yourself from the study at any time if you are uncomfortable or do not wish to continue. In the event of any emotive issues that might arise during the interview or you felt discomfort at any time, I will stop the interview at once and I will ensure that you can see a counselor at the counselling unit in building L, if you wish to do so. You can also stop participating at any time during the research period.

19. Are there any benefits in taking part?
There are no direct benefits for you to take part in this study. However, potential benefits can be expected from this study with future students especially with the effect of student engagement.

20. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?
If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting myself at the following address Gihan.Ebaid@online.liverpool.ac.uk or my thesis supervisor Professor Rita Kop Rita.kop@online.liverpool.ac.uk and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with, then you should contact the Participant Advocate at Liverpool University (email address liverpoolethics@ohecampus.com). When contacting the Participant Advocate, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher(s) involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

21. Will my participation be kept confidential?
All participation will be anonymous and I will make every effort to ensure that it is not possible to identify the participants in the study by giving each participant a code which will be referred to in

the report. No personal details including names and email addresses are stored as part of this study. I will not discuss the contents of the interview with any other members of TAFE. The audio data and anonymized transcripts will be stored in password protected files on my personal computer which is also password protected. These files will be kept for 5 years and will then be destroyed. Any other transcripts not on the computer will be kept in locked cabinets in my office accessible only by me for five years after which they will also be destroyed.

22. What will happen to the results of the study?
The final findings will be in my doctoral thesis. Recommendations for change will be shared with members of this department. It might then be published in an Australian education journal. At no point will participants be identifiable.

23. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?
You may withdraw from the study at any time during or after the survey and/or the interview, you may also refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. The interview will be recorded and transcribed by me. The recorded interview will not be heard by anyone other than me. After results have been made anonymous it may be impossible to delete individual data.

24. Who can I contact if I have further questions?
If you have any questions about this study, could you please email me at the following email address: Gihan.Ebaid@online.liverpool.ac.uk or my thesis supervisor Professor Rita Kop Rita.kop@online.liverpool.ac.uk or Research Participant Advocate at Liverpool University (email address liverpoolethics@ohecampus.com)

Appendix D – Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Committee on Research Ethics

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: How can student partnership improve learner's study experience and engagement?

Researcher(s):   Gihan Ebaid

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated 21st May, 2017 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.

4. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications.

5. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the analysis of student engagement in learning.

6. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in relevant future research.

7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant Name	Date	Signature

| Gihan Ebaid | | |
| Name of Person taking consent | Date | Signature |

| Gihan Ebaid | | |
| Researcher | Date | Signature |

Principal Investigator: **Student Researcher:**
Name   Gihan Ebaid
Work Address   TAFE NSW, Cnr North Parade & Mount Street Mount Druitt NSW 2770
Telephone   02-92086203
Email   Gihan.Ebaid@online.liverpool.ac.uk

Appendix E – UoL Ethics Approval Certificate

Dear Gihan Ebaid		
I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.		
Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)	
Review type:	Expedited	
PI:		
School:	Lifelong Learning	
Title:	How can student partnership improve learner's study experience and engagement?	
First Reviewer:	Dr. Lucilla Crosta	
Second Reviewer:	Dr. Baaska Anderson	
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Marco Ferreira, Dr. Josè Reis Jorge, Dr. Kathleen Kelm	
Date of Approval:	21/06/2017	
The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:		
Conditions		
1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.

This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc.

Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).

Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.

Kind regards,

Lucilla Crosta

Chair, EdD. VPREC

Appendix F – Teachers' First Interview Questions

Teacher Interview 1 (Week 1, before the first tutorial meeting) – semi structured guiding questions

1. What was your experience last semester with the completion of the Individual Learning Plan?

2. What were the challenges, and what do you see as opportunities for positive change?

3. What do you think is required to engage students more in their study?

4. Do you want to add anything else?

Appendix G – Teachers' Second Interview Questions

Teacher Interview 2 (Week 16, after the third tutorial meeting) – semi structured guiding questions

1. How long did you spend with each student individually in the tutorial meeting?

2. Did you discuss the entries in the Individual Learning Plans with students?

   a. If you did, what particular issues emerged?

   b. If you did not, what issues did you discuss?

3. Were the tutorial meetings beneficial? Please explain

4. What has been your experience so far this semester with the completion of the Individual Learning Plan?

5. Do you think the tutorial meetings made a difference in how students engaged in the Individual Learning Plans? For instance, do you think the students took responsibility for their learning? Please explain.

6. Do you think the students engaged in their study more because of the tutorial meeting? Please explain.

7. The introduction of tutorial meetings is new. Do you think this process is sustainable? What could we do to make them even more meaningful? Please explain.

8. Do you want to add anything else?

Appendix H – Students' Online Survey Questions

Student Survey after Tutorial Meeting 1

1. After having your tutorial meeting, do you have a good understanding of what is expected of you this semester?

   _____

   _____

2. Did the tutorial meeting help you understand the requirements?

   ☐Yes   ☐No

   Please explain: _____

   _____

   _____

3. How did you complete your individual learning plan with the teacher in the tutorial meeting?

   ☐ the teacher completed it and I was not involved

   ☐ I completed it by myself and did not discuss it with the teacher

   ☐ the teacher and I completed the plan together

   Please explain: _____

   _____

   _____

4. What did you learn from this meeting in regard to the following;
    ☐ Study habits
         Please explain:
         _____

    ☐ Your expectations from the course
         Please explain:
         _____

    ☐ Your learning gaps
         Please explain:
         _____

    ☐ Your responsibility towards your study
         Please explain:
         _____

    ☐ Assessment tasks and deadlines
         Please explain:
         _____

    ☐ Available support
         Please explain:
         _____

5. During the semester, if you need help, what is your plan on initiating this?

    ☐ Ask the class teacher
    ☐ Ask a class mate
    ☐ Ask the Head Teacher
    ☐ Have additional tutorial meetings with the tutorial teacher

    Please explain: _____

    _____

    _____

6. Would you like us to contact you at set times to ask if you need support?
    ☐Yes   ☐No

    Please explain: _____

    _____

7. If you answered "No" for question 6, would you prefer to contact the tutor
    teacher?

    ☐Yes   ☐No

8. If you answered "Yes" for question 6, how often would you like us to contact
    you?

    ☐ 1 time during the semester

    ☐ 2 times during the semester

    ☐ 3 times during the semester

    ☐ other _____

Appendix I – Students' Interview Questions

Student Interview (week 16, after the third tutorial meeting) – semi structured guiding questions

1. How did your work in the course go this semester?

2. I have some questions for you around the use of the individual learning plan. Did the action plan in your individual learning plan document help you in any way? Please explain

3. Did you have any input into the individual learning plan during the tutorial meetings? Please explain

4. How did the individual learning plan assist you in your study?

5. Did you feel that you were in charge of your individual learning plan? Please explain

6. Did you find having an action plan positive or negative? Please explain

7. How often, did you update your individual learning plan? Why?

8. Were the tutorial meetings beneficial? Please explain

9. How did the tutorial meetings assist you in your study?

10. Do you want to add anything else?

Appendix J – Tutorial Meetings Structure and Suggested Discussion Points

Welcome Week (this meeting will take place during orientation week)
Main purposes:
- To introduce students to the tutor, explain the role of the tutor and provide contact details;

- To determine the motivation, initial expectations and any concerns of the students;

- To complete the initial Individual Learning Plan with the student

Examples of questions to foster discussions:
- *Why did you choose this particular diploma course? Why did you choose this College?*

- *Do you think you have a good understanding of what will be expected of you as a student on this course? What are you expecting from the staff and from the Section?*

- *Do you have any initial questions or concerns right now?*

Weeks 4-8 (This will occur after the student has submitted some assessment tasks and received some formative feedback)
The Main purpose:
- To check that students are settling in well and identify any early issues for which support might be needed

- To establish the importance of formative and summative feedback to student learning and check that the student understands any tasks set and any feedback that has been received

- Update the Individual Learning Plan

Examples of questions to foster discussions:
- *As you are about half way through your first term, what are your first impressions of your programme and life at this College? Do you still feel the same motivation to follow this diploma course? Do you like studying at this campus? Were any of your initial concerns justified, or have they disappeared? Do you have current worries or concerns about your work, your social life, or anything else?*

- *How do you see yourself fitting in with your group?*

- *How are you getting on in your specific units? Do you understand the formative and summative feedback you have received?*

Weeks 12-16: (This will occur after several assessments have been received)
The main purpose:

- To encourage the student to think about his or her progress, identify strengths and areas of weakness and start to take responsibility for their own studies by being active in the following;

    The student should collect together any feedback received from assignments or exams completed so far and bring these to the meeting. These could then be discussed with the tutor.

- Within the meeting itself, the student could then create an action plan to tackle areas that have been identified as areas for development.

- At this stage students should be encouraged to think about their future plans

- The student will be asked to comment on any employability skills within the course and to comment on how he/she feels these are developing.

- Update the Individual Learning Plan.

Example questions to foster discussions:

- *Do you have any issues with your assessment performance? Were the results in line with your expectations?*

- *What have you learnt so far from your feedback from your assignments and exams? What seem to be your strengths? What are your areas of weakness? What could you do to improve your performance? Do you know where to get help if you feel you need it?*

- *Do you have any plans for what you want to do after graduating?*