

Perceptions of Transformation and Quality in Higher Education:
A Case Study of PhD Student Experiences

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Abstract

Stemming from increased levels of participation and diversity of the student base (Biggs & Tang, 2011) and growing scrutiny on the quality of university degrees (Crowley, 2013; Marr, 2013), governments have begun putting in place mechanisms to monitor and support quality in higher education. Over the last few decades, a notion of quality that has gained traction in the scholarly community is that of quality in terms of enhancement and transformation (Cheng, 2017; Houston, 2008; Williams, 2016). Guided by the discourses of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000) and transformative conceptions of quality in higher education (Harvey & Green, 1993), this study examined graduate student learning experiences and perceptions of quality. Of further interest was the extent to which these learners were living the intended transformation that academic programs are seeking to foster.

Using a multiple case-study design, Seidman's (2013) three-stage interview protocol served as primary source of data from a sample of six PhD candidates across three faculties. Secondary data sources included collected documents, a reflexivity journal and field notes. A within-case analysis was performed for each case and compared via a cross-case analysis. Institutional characterizations of quality were examined across 25 artifacts via a document analysis.

The four principal factors that characterized the PhD candidate learning experience emerged as the significance of intentional individualized guidance, becoming an independent scholar, the importance of social interactions and community, and the transformative nature of learning. Gaps were identified between institutional intent and the learner experience. However, complementarity between discourses of transformation appeared to offer bridges

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between the macro-level institutional orientation toward fostering student transformation and the micro-level transformative learning experiences lived by students. The dissertation makes conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions to the domains of postsecondary quality and transformative learning. Implications for policy related to quality assurance as well as practice in program development and doctoral supervision are equally shared.

Keywords: Transformative learning, quality in higher education, quality as transformation, student transformation, student perceptions, PhD learning experience

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Quite fitting given the topic of this study, this doctoral journey has certainly been a transformative one for me. I have traced varied iterations of conceptual challenge, reflection, dialogue and integration of renewed perspectives. All towards a broadening of my worldview and what I hope is an enhanced skillset and a meaningful contribution to the scholarship.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Increasingly in recent decades, public scrutiny has focused on the quality of a university degree (Crowley, 2013; Marr, 2013). Arguments supporting this scrutiny point to employers who state that graduates have not acquired and mastered adequate skills and are unprepared for the workforce (Crowley, 2013). Other arguments cite that academic programs from the bachelor to the doctoral level are outdated, suffer from significant attrition and should be redesigned (e.g., Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Park, 2007). Stemming from concerns such as these, governments have begun putting in place mechanisms to monitor and support quality higher education over the last few decades.

While recent in North American research literature, much has been written about how quality is defined in higher education, particularly in Europe, the United Kingdom and Australia (Cheng 2014; Chung Sea Law, 2010; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Houston & Paewai, 2013). A definition gaining traction in the scholarly community is the notion of quality in the context of enhancement and transformation (Cheng, 2017; Houston, 2008; Williams, 2016). Grounded in the notion of “qualitative change” from one state to another (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 24), this definition sees quality in higher education as an ongoing process of development, growth and empowerment of a student through the learning process (Harvey & Green, 1993). As this definition of quality gained momentum in the academic sphere, government and institutions of higher education have begun adopting the discourse of enhancement and investing resources and energy in ways to optimize conditions for this transformative notion of quality (OUCQA, 2012). This significant investment is undertaken

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without an accurate understanding of how students conceptualize their own transformation as learners and if they equate transformation to quality learning.

Postsecondary institutions, as supported by government, continue expanding quality assurance policies and processes related to an enhancement-oriented agenda. This push seeks to align with the provision of transformative learning experiences that institutions increasingly promote via strategic and promotional documents, such as UBC, 2018; uOttawa, 2018; Queen's, 2011. Recent research by Goff (2015) highlights that in many cases a misalignment exists between the institutional vision of quality and their respective systems of quality assurance as evidenced by their tools and measures. This gap has become an important one to close in recent years, which has encouraged alignment of quality assurance work with that of educational and program development (Brown, 2014). However, questions remain regarding the impact of institutional approaches to quality assurance on students (Gunn & Cheng, 2015). Unfortunately, the transformative learning experiences intended by institutions have yet to be examined in terms of their alignment with the lived experience of students. To ensure that students are achieving the outcomes promoted by the institution, and ultimately ensure the quality of their university degree, the student perspective is necessary.

This introductory chapter presents the statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study and is followed by a brief overview of the thesis.

Statement of the Problem

Student perceptions have commonly been gathered in higher education settings, however, these principally relate to their satisfaction regarding specific issues (e.g., Sarrico &

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Rosa, 2014). Student perceptions concerning programmatic, curricular or learning related themes are rarely collected. Of the times when this occurs, it is collected as part of lengthy program exit surveys completed by graduates or every few years by provincial or national associations such as the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) and the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE). As part of these larger student surveys, specific institutional context aligning with strategic vision or aspired institutional outcomes is infrequently addressed. Studies that have examined student perspectives regarding their views of learning quality within the institutional context principally represent the views of European undergraduate students (Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi & Leitner, 2004; Jungblut, Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2015). Little research in this area has examined North American or Canadian student populations, much less the views of graduate students. This study seeks to bridge this gap in the literature by examining the perceptions of graduate students, particularly PhD students. This understudied student population may reveal especially helpful insights about the learning process given this group's extended experience in formal learning and practiced capacity to reflect and interpret their learning experiences (Cheng, 2014; Fenge, 2012).

Further than mere perspectives of quality, no known studies purposefully examine the alignment between the student learning experience and the intended quality learning experience that postsecondary institutions are stating as outcome of their graduates. This is problematic as program evaluation and development work is increasingly driven by an institutional strategy and orientation aligned with transformative learning that has yet to be validated with respect to student outcomes. Students may enter academic programs with certain expectations as promoted by the institution, however, not experience what was

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intended and perhaps be at greater risk of attrition. With institutions increasingly defining the nature of their learning outcomes as transformational, perhaps this may provide an opportunity for the examination of alignment via the integration of Transformative Learning Theory from the domain of adult education.

Over the past several decades, scholarly work focused on the transformative nature of student learning has evolved as part of two separate discourses. One discourse serves as part of the aforementioned transformative view of quality in higher education (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996). The second discourse stems from a dominant theory in adult learning coined transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; 2000; Cranton, 2013). While the former discourse appears to be a suitable framework to identify intended transformation at the institutional level, the latter discourse of transformation is focused on student-level transformation and may be a suitable framework to examine the student learning experience. A critical assessment of these two discourses of transformation may identify areas of complementarity that could allow for the needed comparison between institutional promotion of transformative outcomes and the actual learning experiences of students. The conceptual framework used in the present study brings together these scholarly spheres of transformation to help examine student perceptions as influenced by the institutional context.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to understand PhD candidate learning experiences, examine their perceptions of quality and explore the extent to which these candidates are living the intended transformation that their postsecondary institution seeks to foster. Six PhD candidates across several disciplines served as individual cases within a first level

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of analysis. A subsequent level consisted of a cross-case analysis to shed light on thematic similarities and differences across all cases regarding perceptions of transformative learning and quality within one medium-sized Ontario University. The study sample consisted of PhD candidates who were in the dissertation-writing phase of their programs to ensure that they could speak to a comprehensive view of the doctoral journey. Qualitative data sources allowed for a deep and thorough exploration of student learning and perceptions of quality as well as of governmental and institutional characterizations of quality. These included: 1) three-stage interviews with each participant, 2) collected documents, 3) reflexivity journal, and 4) field notes. The following three research questions, and related sub-questions, were used to guide this investigation:

1. How do PhD candidates describe their learning experiences once they reach the dissertation-writing phase of their doctoral program?
 - a) How does this align with contemporary conceptions of transformative learning?
2. How do PhD candidate learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and by their academic program?
 - a) How do PhD candidates characterize quality in the context of their degree?
 - b) How is quality characterized in governmental and institutional-level documents?
3. What congruity and contradictions exist between the discourses of quality as transformation and transformative learning theory?
 - a) How do PhD candidates perceive connections between both discourses?
 - b) What bridges exist in the scholarly literature that may reconcile both discourses?

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Significance of the Study

Until presently, few qualitative studies have been conducted that examine the perceptions of quality and transformation through empirical analysis of learning experiences. This investigation attempts to tell distinct and shared stories of the highly contextualized and complex phenomenon of PhD student learning. In so doing, the findings of this study contribute to three main areas of evolving scholarship. The first relates to research in postsecondary quality. Recent research in this area seeks to better understand the nature of quality and how it is perceived by specific stakeholders such as government, postsecondary administrators, faculty and students. While student views are increasingly examined, little has been collected at the graduate student level or in the North American or Canadian context. The second area of scholarship is associated with the examination of student transformation. At present, few known studies investigate student learning at the doctoral level via this lens. Scholarship examining learning experiences across disciplines and in traditional research programs is equally limited. In examining this population, the study addresses varied calls from researchers regarding further research at the doctoral level, in more informal and independent learning contexts, and using more contemporary perspectives of transformation (Stevens-Long, Shapiro & McClintock, 2012; Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). The third area of scholarly contribution relates to the possibility of bridging two distinct discourses of transformation in higher education, namely the transformative view of quality stemming from Harvey and Knight (1996) and Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). This study provides a critical examination of areas of congruity and contradiction between these discourses. The outcome of this examination enabled the elicitation of possible pathways to reconcile the

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macro sphere of the institutional notion of quality as transformation and the micro sphere of processes fostering transformative learning at the student level.

Beyond contributions to the expanding bodies of empirical research above, implications for policy and practice equally emerged. Despite the increased development of quality assurance systems and practices within postsecondary institutions, both researchers and practitioners have limited information regarding how programmatic development is lived by students and how student input may inform practice. This study's comparison of institutional characterizations and student perceptions of quality sheds light on existing strengths to leverage and gaps to invest in.

Informing practice, recommendations emerge regarding opportunities for student input at the program level and the integration of reflective checkpoints throughout the doctoral program. Resources and training in connection with the latter may enable students and doctoral supervisors to harness the tenets of transformative learning to increase student productivity and enjoyment in learning, and help reduce program attrition.

Thesis Overview

Serving as the source of the aforementioned contributions to theory and practice, this multiple case study is organized in eight chapters. In the upcoming two chapters, the background information that drives this study's inquiry is presented. Chapter 2 hosts a comprehensive review of the discourses of transformation that serve as a theoretical foundation to this study. This chapter also critically analyzes selected research literature that address relevant approaches taken in previous studies that connect with each discourse. It

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concludes with a presentation of the conceptual framework addressing the macro level institutional view of quality as transformational and the micro level view of student transformation. Chapter 3 presents this study's research approach, assumptions and design, and outlines the context of the inquiry, the data collection methods and the analyses employed.

The remaining chapters present a synthesis of the study findings, interpretations and conclusions. In Chapter 4, each of the study participants is described along with the themes emerging from a within-case analysis of each. In the following chapter, each individual case is compared via a cross-case analysis revealing four dominant themes. In Chapter 6, the results of the analysis of 25 governmental and institutional documents are outlined, equally resulting in four dominant themes. Chapter 7 serves to interpret and discuss the findings as they relate to referenced scholarship and other supporting research domains. This chapter is organized following the sequence of research questions, responding to each of the three questions, and sub-questions, in turn. The last chapter brings all elements of the study together by providing an overview, discussing contributions to theory, policy and practice, outlining the study's limitations and proposing noteworthy areas for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter critically reviews and seeks to integrate two separate bodies of literature that discuss transformation in the higher education learning context. This literature serves as the foundation of this inquiry. Gaps will be identified and inform the development of the study's research questions, conceptual framework, and study design. The first body of literature to be presented is the scholarship examining quality in higher education that stems from the seminal works of Harvey and Green (1993). The second is the extensive research on transformative learning in adults that began from the original conceptualizations of Mezirow (1978). The following review of the literature examines each of these bodies separately, and then critically assesses how they may align and how an integrated view may shed light on a more robust image of how PhD students experience learning and perceive quality in Canadian higher education. It is intended that by the end of this chapter the reader be able to identify the contributions of both bodies of literature and view the relevance of the current study in addressing gaps and issues in these areas of scholarship. Specifically, these include: gaps regarding graduate student perceptions of quality in higher education; gaps regarding the study of PhD student transformation; and a lack of scholarship comparing discourses of transformative learning.

Quality in Higher Education

Resulting from increases in levels of participation and diversity of the student base in both undergraduate and graduate programs, coupled with pressures on human and physical resources, notions of quality began increasing in profile in the higher education agenda in the 1980's and 1990s (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Harvey & Green, 1993). In those decades, notions of

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quality were largely employed in the service of accountability that largely stemmed from fiscal conservatism in the context of a growing system of mass higher education (Harvey & Knight, 1996). An emphasis on efficiency in terms of institutional management and the use of existing resources in a climate of increasing student enrolment prevailed. In the face of an accountability agenda, performance indicators were developed to track student success in terms of graduation rates, employment rates, and even measures of teaching quality. These were coupled with input measures such as the number of faculty members with terminal degrees, the number of volumes in the library, reputation, and size of endowment. Collectively these were utilized in ranking systems (such as the Maclean's University Ranking) to determine institutional excellence (Koslowski, 2006). Even as recently as 2018 MacLean's uses similar performance indicators. In that year, they broke down their methodology as follows: Student indicators included the number of students winning prestigious entrance awards, ratio of full-time students to full-time faculty and a student satisfaction survey. Faculty indicators included the number of faculty members having won major awards and scholarly output and citations. Other indicators included the amount of institutional monies available for current expenses per full-time equivalent student and percentage of the budget spent on student services and the number and amount associated with scholarships/bursaries. Lastly, Maclean's performs a reputational survey with senior administrators, secondary school guidance counsellors and persons from industry (Maclean's, 2018). The increased profile of quality along with stronger links between quality and cost-effectiveness made by governments, gave new urgency to the analysis of quality in higher education. It was not until the mid-1990s that growing innovation in teaching and learning encouraged a focus on the outcomes of the learning process – what

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students know and are able to do (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Ramsden, 2003).

Given the origins of notions of quality and the complexities of the varied stakeholders involved in higher education, tensions emerged between approaches which focused on assurance and accountability, and approaches which focused on the enhancement of educational processes and student learning (e.g., Chung Sea Law, 2010; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Houston, 2008; Kis, 2005). Stemming from concepts borrowed from industry, accountability was increasingly associated with a verification process that aptly rendered account to external groups such as accreditation bodies, government agencies and the public. The enhancement-oriented approach focused on internal processes associated with student learning such as improvement of curriculum and the quality of academic programs (Williams, 2016). According to Koslowski (2006): “Quality occupies the middle ground between the external and the internal; a philosophy or system that focuses and guides the interaction between the external calls for increased accountability and the internal efforts of an organization that is addressing it” (p. 280). Characteristics of quality discussed in this study bridge both the external and the internal; however, it is the enhancement approach that will be emphasized as it serves as the common thread between the two discourses of transformation.

This study is situated in a mid-sized public university in the Canadian province of Ontario. As such, it is important to consider the context in which the university operates. In Canada, education falls under the purview of the provincial government. Following the trends in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia and the United States, Ontario adopted Degree Level Expectations (DLEs) for both undergraduate and graduate levels of study in 2005. It was intended for these DLEs to identify the knowledge and skill competencies reflective of

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progressive levels of intellectual and creative development accomplished by a student at the end of a program. DLEs were set up to be used as a benchmark in the new Ontario Quality Assurance Framework approved by the Executive Heads of Ontario Universities (OUCQA, 2012). This was followed by the establishment of the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA) to operate at arm's length from both government and from universities (Goff, 2015). Since 2010, each publicly funded university in Ontario developed and implemented Institutional Quality Assurance Processes (IQAP) consistent with their respective mission statements to aid in structuring their own quality assurance and program enhancement processes. While policies and supports are presently in place at the provincial level,

the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents fully acknowledges that academic standards, quality assurance and program improvement are, in the first instance, the responsibility of universities themselves. This [Quality Assurance] Framework recognizes the institution's autonomy to determine priorities for funding, space, and faculty allocation. (OUCQA, 2010, p. 2) as cited in Goff (2015)

As the above summary suggests, the early emphasis on accountability in higher education is important when seeking to understand the diverse and evolving representations of quality. Harvey and Green (1993) first began examining the multiple meanings of quality in higher education and outlined five overarching definitions (see Table 1). In the last few decades, these definitions of quality have been regularly used to examine the orientation of quality assurance practices and have served in many studies as a framework when investigating the dimensions that constitute quality in higher education.

Table 1

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Definitions of Quality in Higher Education

Exceptional	Linked to the idea of “excellence”, quality is operationalized as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement and is realized if the standards are surpassed.
Perfection	Focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right the first time.
Fitness for Purpose	Suggests that quality only carries meaning in relation to the purpose of its “product or service”. A purpose that is generally characterized by an institutional mission or by customer (student) requirements.
Value for Money	Born out of a drive for efficiency and effectiveness, providers are expected to be accountable to funders (principally government) and customers (students) - being able to do more for less.
Transformation	Defines quality as a process of qualitative change with emphasis on adding value to students and empowering them.

Adapted from Harvey and Stensaker (2008) and Nicholson (2011).

As it does in a general context, the meaning of the term quality varies considerably in the higher education context and is often dependent on the position of the stakeholder (Williams, 2016). Whether the public, the government, institutional administrators, faculty members or students, it seems more intuitive for certain stakeholders to align with particular definitions of quality over others. This positionality is of interest in the present study as institutional and student perspectives will be examined.

Institutional perspective of quality in higher education.

Taking a step back from the definitions proposed by Harvey and Green (1993), what are institutional perspectives regarding quality in higher education, particularly following the

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adoption of learning outcomes and the establishment of quality assurance processes? Language relating to the enhancement of educational processes and student transformation is increasingly becoming part of the discourse in the professional postsecondary community, specifically for those working in higher education quality assurance (Council of Ontario Universities, 2016; Harvey, 2008; Newton, 2013; Williams, 2016). Albeit, it should be noted that the shift in language used at the ministerial and institutional levels has been slow and has a more policy and procedure oriented tone than that of the scholarly literature. However, given the focus on enhancement, empowerment and student growth, a transformative definition of quality is increasingly adopted by institutions of higher education (Cheng, 2011, 2014; Harvey, 2002; Harvey & Newton, 2007). For instance, Cheng's (2011) study of institutional stakeholder perceptions of quality emphasized that staff viewed the optimal role of quality processes to be about transformation of learning. This is more recently exemplified in current institutional strategic plans and procedural quality assurance documents, for example those at the University of British Columbia (UBC, 2018) and Queen's University (Queen's, 2011).

At the University of British Columbia, one of four core areas of the strategic plan, is aptly titled "Transformative Learning" and opens by stating that "at its best, education is transformative and has a lasting and continuing impact on the learner" (UBC, 2018, p. 53). The strategic plan shares institutional specifics and ends with transformative learning strategies such as *Education Renewal* that aims to facilitate sustained program renewal and improvements in teaching effectiveness. Yet another transformative learning strategy is listed as enhancing the *Student Experience*, which aims to strengthen undergraduate and graduate student communities and experience. At Queen's University, the institutional vision statement

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reads, “Queen’s University is the Canadian research-intensive university with a transformative student learning experience.” The University’s Academic Plan outlines the many facets of the undergraduate and graduate student learning experience suggesting that all students must “engage in the analysis and discussion of important issues and problems that will challenge them deeply and foster their growth, [...]” (Queen’s, 2011, p. 20). Stemming from their 2011 Academic Plan, the university echoes the transformative learning theme in their subsequent Teaching and Learning Action Plan in 2014 and their Strategic Mandate Agreement in 2017.

A well-documented example of an institution enacting its stated mission of student transformation is at the University of Central Oklahoma. Beginning in 2014, the institution was granted \$7.7 million in federal funding to develop the Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) that records students' growth and learning across the institution's central six tenets, namely: Discipline Knowledge; Global & Cultural Competencies; Health & Wellness; Leadership; Research, Creative & Scholarly Activities; and Service Learning & Civic Engagement. Faculty and staff intentionally create transformative learning experiences and environments that, along with co-curricular events, are designed to expand students’ knowledge and perspectives about the six tenets, themselves and others so that they understand the benefit of developing important life skills, and can demonstrate that they have mastery of these skills (Barthell et al., 2014; Hynes, Pope, Loughlin & Watkins, 2015). For example, one instructor shared that she used the STLR in an undergraduate women’s history course with emphasis on readings, research and teamwork. Over the duration of the semester students engaged in a community service learning project in teams. Each team was assigned one of six community partners and collectively delegated a series of tasks. Each student documented their hours of service and

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reflections in a STLR rubric on the institutional Learning Management System (LMS) (in this case D2L Brightspace). In the STLR rubric students were asked to comment on three themes.

Exposure – how they encountered new ideas. Integration – incorporation of concepts into their lives or thinking. Transformation – any evidence that they have changed their perspective regarding an aspect of the service learning project. Additionally, students submitted service-learning essays reflecting on the value of the project and making connections with the course readings and related theory. An excerpt from a student reflection stated:

It [the project] changed my perspective regarding the seriousness of human trafficking.

[...] Coming into this semester, I was still unsure of what I really wanted to do when I left college. Money has never been my main objective. I've always wanted to help people. It was only after being introduced to this community partner and their mission that I learned my heart is in nonprofit work, and I want to continue to volunteer with them.

(Hynes, Pope, Loughlin & Watkins, 2015, p. 5)

The transformative definition of quality is increasingly supplementing and, in many cases, gradually replacing approaches to quality borrowed from business and industry (largely fitness for purpose and value for money) that have dominated over the last decades (Nicholson, 2011). In their review of scholarly literature relating to quality in higher education, Harvey and Williams (2010) allude to this trend favouring transformation as the aspired approach to quality, which is itself beginning to transform quality assurance practises within institutions from solely accountability driven to enhancement driven ones (Houston & Paewai, 2013). Following the establishment of quality frameworks as part of the Bologna Process in Europe in the early 2000's (Wächter, 2004), the bulk of the discourse regarding quality assurance

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processes has been centred in Europe, the UK and in parts of Australia given a strong interest in the evaluation of, institutional quality. In North America, however, the establishment of quality assurance frameworks is more recent and relatively unexamined to date (Harvey, 2008). In general, across continental boundaries, the nature of discussions regarding quality focuses less on inputs (number of classes and subjects being taught, number of faculty with terminal degrees, library holdings). Instead, the focus is towards an outcomes-based approach to learning (sequential alignment of course outcomes, tailored learning approaches for student achievement of outcomes) (Biggs & Tang, 2011). As such, academic programs are playing an increasingly significant role in how the vision of institutional quality is lived and communicated via program-level learning outcome statements. Consequently, this affects how students experience these outcomes in the context of their program journey (Kumi-Yeboah, 2012), and perhaps how academic programs foster transformative learning experiences via factors such as curriculum, student supports, and sense of community (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). While academic program structures and processes are said to be central in the enactment of institutional quality (e.g., Moses, 1994) and, consequently, of influence to student transformation (e.g., Gedeon, 2017), little has been written on the topic.

Given that institutional perceptions of quality in higher education are increasingly trending toward a transformative orientation, let us return to the literature to narrow in on what characterizes this definition of quality.

Harvey and Green's (1993) definition of quality "as transformation".

The notion of quality as transformation, as initially suggested by Harvey and Green (1993), postulates that the purpose of higher education is not to generate a product or

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deliver a service; rather it is to foster the participative process of continuous transformation of a learner. They contend that the end goal is to enable learners to develop skills and knowledge, but also to reflect on what and how they are learning; in essence, to go beyond simply gaining a grasp of concepts, procedures, knowledge and a series of skills pertaining to their subject of study, and to develop a sense of confidence and metacognitive awareness. Expanding from the work of Harvey and Green (1993), Harvey and Knight (1996) break down the notion of transformative quality into two elements. The first of which is enhancement. This refers to how quality education fosters value-added changes, transformation from one state of knowing and/or ability to another, within learners. This is seen as the development of domain expertise (knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes). The second element is empowerment, which emphasizes student ownership of their learning process that allows them the ability to influence their transformation and provide opportunity for self-empowerment. This may subsequently influence decision-making and lead to increased awareness and confidence. Harvey and Knight (1996) emphasize the importance of confidence by sharing that the development of: critical ability is about students having the confidence to assess and develop knowledge for themselves rather than submitting packaged chunks to an assessor who will tell them if it is sufficient or correct [...] and to enable students to decide what is good quality work and to be confident when they have achieved it. (p. 9)

Harvey and Knight (1996) place a great deal of weight on the notion of criticality in the process of transformation. They suggest that transformation has a critical component that

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“sees quality in terms of the extent to which the educational system transforms the *conceptual* ability and *self-awareness* of the student” (p. 11). In addition to enhancing a learner’s domain expertise, it enables learners to think and act in such a way that they question and move beyond prepared information, preconceptions, and frames of references. It equips learners with a certain metacognitive capacity enabling them to be more critically aware of their limitations and the wider context within which they are learning, and to justify their opinions and be able to self-assess (Harvey & Green, 1993). Critical transformation involves a process of deconstruction of embedded values and popularized facts and information that opens to opportunities for reflection and investigation of whether “underlying abstract presuppositions conflict with concrete reality” (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 11). This process is eventually followed by a process of reconstruction that consists of the creation of alternative conceptualizations that make sense of an experience or concept. An example might be a student who views a teacher as a person in a very directive and didactic role based on their existing assumptions, experiences and on the surrounding norms. This student’s view may undergo a deconstruction as a result of experiences where teachers in a different setting are more facilitative and position themselves more as coaches as students take ownership of their learning. Eventually, should this set of experiences be sustained, the student’s views may be reconstructed with a conceptualization of the role of teachers which is different from the one that they originally held. More recently, Harvey (2009) reflects on components of transformation as having both personal and emancipatory dimensions, but also involving larger changes within institutions that work to encourage and foster student transformation.

With a transformative view of quality becoming increasingly central to discussions

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related to institutional quality and the student experience in higher education, are students, in fact, experiencing transformation of their scholarly and professional capacities, and even transformation of themselves as learners, as intended by the institution? Can a transformative definition of quality be associated with actual student transformation during the learning process? Amid the growing discourse about how higher education institutions increasingly define quality as successful student transformation (Goff, 2015; Houston & Paewai, 2013; Harvey & Newton, 2007; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Keeling, 2004), little research examines student perceptions of quality, along with the nature of the student transformation, and how it aligns, or not, with institutional rhetoric.

Student perceptions of quality.

Studies investigating student perceptions are not uncommon in higher education. However, these predominantly focus on student satisfaction or student attitudes (e.g., Sarrico & Rosa, 2014). Few studies examine student perceptions of quality (Cheng, 2014; Jungblut, Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2015). Of the few that do, they either focus on perceived factors that influence quality where there is no mention of learning or transformation (Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003; Iacovidou, Gibbs & Zopiatis, 2009), or they are specific to European or Australian contexts and do not consider disciplinary differences in student perceptions. For instance, Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi and Leitner (2004) examined dimensions that constitute quality in higher education by conducting 29 interviews and surveying 448 Swedish and Austrian undergraduate students. Using factor analysis, seven dimensions relating to educational issues important to students emerged as corresponding to the student's views of quality (e.g., courses offered, computer facilities). The authors found that all seven dimensions

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denoted excellence as a focal point of varying aspects of the universities' activities. Comparing their findings to previous research, they suggest that of the definitions outlined by Harvey and Green (1993), the interpretation of quality as "excellence" best matches the student's view of quality.

In another study regarding student views of quality, the concept of transformation emerges. In their work investigating student perspectives on quality in higher education, Jungblut, Vukasovic and Stensaker (2015) surveyed students (n= 6643) in several European countries to gauge their expectation and perception of quality as compared to Harvey and Green's (1993) definitions of quality. In addition to survey items addressing Harvey and Green's conceptions of quality, levels of agreement to different statements concerning motivations for, and expectations from, higher education were measured using a 5-point Lickert scale and analyzed using a combination of univariate and bivariate statistics. Their findings suggest that both 'quality as transformation' and 'quality as fitness for purpose' were highly supported. The least supported conceptualization of quality was that of 'value for money'. The authors suggest that:

the high level of agreement with 'transformation' and 'fitness for purpose' views indicates that students prefer notions of quality that put them in the centre of the process, although not necessarily only as an active participant (transformation), but also as a somewhat passive customer (fitness for purpose). (p. 166-167)

The authors call for further investigation beyond the student perspective that includes an examination at the institutional level and across disciplines.

Also identifying a link to quality "as transformation" in a study investigating teachers'

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and students' conceptions of quality in pedagogical practices, Vieira (2002) surveyed Portuguese students (n=1356) about pedagogical and situational factors whose presence or absence may affect the "transformative and emancipatory potential of pedagogical action" (p. 259). Via an analysis of the influence of each factor presented in the questionnaires using descriptive statistics, those that students found most ideally suited to transformation were critical reflection about disciplinary content and the development of self-evaluation skills. Overall, Vieira (2002) found that students held an idealized conception of pedagogic quality as one of emancipatory transformation (Harvey & Knight, 1996). However, the author noted that the students' lived experience did not always align with their expectations and ideals. This is to say that "experiential conceptions of pedagogic quality deviate from that idealized conception" (Vieira, 2002, p. 268), or in other words, that undergraduate student perceptions of ideal transformation and quality (as well as that of their teachers) were not always the same as their experience of quality and transformation as lived in the academic programs. Students appeared to stress institutional factors such as large class sizes and an inadequate understanding of their study needs as influential regarding the misalignment between the ideal and the reality. The author points to

a significant absence of factors within pedagogical principles like relevance, reflectivity, self-direction and creativity/innovation in a collective view of positive pedagogical realizations [that] seems to point out the need to deepen the understanding of why this is so and what the implications on the processes and outcomes of higher education are. (p. 268)

In terms of graduate education, there are only two known scholarly pieces that address

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definitions of quality. The first is a chapter published in a book entitled *Quality in Postgraduate Education*. While student perceptions are not featured in her chapter on *Planning for Quality in Graduate Studies*, Moses (1994) addresses factors that influence quality. She shares a limited description of her 1990 study of gender barriers in Australian graduate schools, where she collected 407 undergraduate and graduate student surveys and data from 122 interviews with students and program administrators. Moses collected data from across eight disciplines including: Veterinary Science, Physiology, Zoology, Agriculture, Economics, Social Work Psychology, and History. She outlines that a student's ability, motivation and preparedness, along with the nature of their supervisor's guidance, infrastructure and facilities, funding and child-care are the factors that have significant influence on the quality of the graduate education experience.

The second study is far more recent and targets doctoral education specifically. Cheng (2014) interviewed 16 PhD students and 16 PhD supervisors across the disciplinary areas of Education, Physics and Engineering to examine how Harvey and Green's (1993) notion of quality as transformation could be applied to Ph.D. training. Interviews were followed with a workshop where interviewees exchanged views of quality and transformation and interpreted them visually via collage-making. Using what she labelled as an interpretive research approach to enable an in-depth understanding of interviewee perspectives, Cheng found that 22 of those interviewed saw the notion of quality as transformation as an ideal, but didn't always see it as applicable in all areas of study (such as engineering). The concern was that it would be hard to quantify transformation at the PhD level in the context of external demands for the evaluation of quality programs and learning. Eight of the interviewees fully supported this notion of quality

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and felt that if a PhD student had not experienced a change in their perspectives during the program, than their experience would not have been successful. The remaining two interviewees did not perceive this view of quality as a relevant one for doctoral education. They saw the program as an enabling process akin to training, rather than one that produces changes. The author suggests that there is a gap between perceptions of quality as transformation and the practice of evaluating it. While this study was designed to gain an understanding of how notions of quality and transformation are applied in PhD programs, it sheds light on the types of methodological designs that may best enable the examination of student experiences and views. To gain greater depth in the student experience, it may be pertinent to select a methodology that includes multiple interviews, each with a specific purpose. Attention should equally be paid to the recruitment of a diverse representation of PhD candidates across disciplines and demographics to ensure adequate heterogeneity. In addition, if an institutional perspective is to be discussed, rather than pull from the perspectives of PhD supervisors or other specific stakeholders that may hold diverse opinions, an analysis of institutional documents may provide greater objectivity.

It is clear from the studies summarized above that a number of gaps are preventing a clear image of graduate student perceptions of quality and whether these align, or not, with the institutional perspective. Some gaps relate to methodologies used, yet others relate to the geographical location and targeted participants in the studies. With regards to research design, the aforementioned studies showcase that survey tools aid in identifying student views about the dimensions of quality in higher education, however, they do not allow for an in-depth understanding of how a student's view of quality and program experience may be associated

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with the intended experience as set by the institution, especially in graduate studies. There is equally limited information about the factors that contribute to quality and the catalysts that contribute to the transformative definition of quality. It should also be noted that existing research is largely situated in European and Australian contexts and focuses on student satisfaction. No studies focusing on student perceptions of quality in North American higher education appear to exist. Given that frameworks defining and governing quality are understudied in North America, the present study investigates the quality context at a Canadian institution and relates findings to those from contexts in the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia. More specifically, to shed light on the paucity of related literature in graduate education, an examination of how PhD students perceive their educational experience and whether this is coherent with the increasingly prevalent institutional concept of quality as transformation will be the focus of this qualitative case-study approach.

Serving as a framework to examine the student learning experience and to see if links may exist between this experience and the transformative notions of institutional quality, Transformative Learning Theory is presented in the following section.

Transformative Learning Theory

The second body of literature that directly addresses student transformation relates to the Transformative Learning Theory. This theory will serve as a framework to make sense of how students describe quality learning experiences, whether these experiences align with current conceptions of Transformative Learning Theory, and lastly whether student transformation over the course of the PhD program relates to the aforementioned transformative notion of quality at the institutional level.

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As a primary focus of adult education, transformative learning is fundamentally a process of critically reflecting upon previous assumptions or understandings in order to determine whether one still holds them to be true or challenges their claims leading toward a renewed understanding, appreciation and action (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Perspective transformation, leads to a “more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective” and is seen by Mezirow as a central process in adult development (Mezirow, 1991, p. 14). Inspired by his study investigating the experiences of adult women re-entering community college, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory derived into a 10-step process (Mezirow, 1978) to help explain how these women changed the way they interpreted the world. Grouping these steps into four main phases (see Table 2); the process begins with a “disorienting dilemma” where adult learners confront their assumptions (Mezirow, 2000). The dilemma is often experienced when there is a firm realization that something key to a person’s functioning or understanding is not consistent with their beliefs. Next, critical reflection, which is defined by Mezirow (1991) as “the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances” (p. 5), may serve as a catalyst for transformation. Thirdly, as this transformation begins, learners engage in critical discourse which is characterized by discussion with others about their new perspective to openly question and validate the evolution of their thinking (Mezirow, 2000). The final phase concludes with a determined set of actions related to the new found perspective, ensuring that a shift in beliefs and assumptions is not only observed but also lived.

Although presented linearly, Mezirow maintains that the transformation process is recursive in nature and that persons experiencing transformation may not pass through all

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steps or experience the series of steps in exactly the same order (Mezirow, 2000).

Table 2

Main Phases of Transformative Learning

1- Disorienting Dilemma	Confrontation of assumptions and beliefs that may lead to the realization that something key to one's functioning or understanding is not consistent with their beliefs.
2- Critical Reflection	Reflection on prior learning to determine whether what was learned is justified under present circumstances.
3- Critical discourse	Discussion with others about a newly held perspective to openly question and validate the evolution of ones thinking.
4- Reintegration	A determined set of actions related to the newly found perspective, ensuring that a shift in beliefs and assumptions is not only observed, but also lived.

As the theory has evolved, Mezirow's initial contributions expanded. He refined the transformative learning definition in 1991 by stating that individuals "reinterpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to an old experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 11). In 1991, these sets of expectations were termed "meaning perspectives" and revisited once again in 1997 to be replaced with "frames of reference" (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (1997) defined frames of reference as "the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set 'our line of action'" (p. 5). In transformative learning, it is these frames of reference that are "transformed" to become more open, inclusive and discriminating. In reference to a study by Courtenay,

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Merriam and Reeves (1998) which examined the meaning-making process in the lives of those diagnosed as HIV-positive, Taylor (2017) suggests that once a transformation has been actioned, whether for a life-changing event or not, it is enduring and generally irreversible. Frames of reference are often uncritically acquired during childhood, argues Mezirow (2000). These are usually acculturated via learning experiences with family and teachers and represent the dominant culture and norms within which one is socialized.

Over time these perspectives become more ingrained into our psyche providing a rationalization for an often, irrational world. They are a reflection of our cultural and psychological assumptions, constraining our worldview, often distorting our thoughts and perceptions. We become dependent upon them and change in perspective is often very difficult. They are like a “double-edged sword” whereby they give meaning (validation) to our experiences, but at the same time skew our reality. (Taylor, 2017, p. 18)

Perspective transformation and revision of frames of reference can either occur gradually via the cumulative process of gaining progressive insights and experiences, or occur suddenly as a result of a major event in one’s life (e.g., birth of a child, accident, death). These acute personal events can be positive ones (e.g., marriage or new employment), however, are generally stressful and challenging experiences that lead to questioning and self-reflection.

Following his original contribution and initial expansion of the theory, Mezirow’s conception of transformative learning saw significant critique. The most notable of these can be categorized, as suggested by Howie and Bagnall (2013), in four main types of criticism. The first of which point to areas where the theory is lacking or in need of greater explication. For

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instance, a first area is the role emotion and intuition (Dirkx, 2001). This consists largely of the process of understanding oneself through reflecting on psychic structures that make up an individual's identity such as the ego or the unconscious. Transformative learning is also lived by a process of individuation (Dirkx, 2001) that "involves a sense of empowerment and confidence, a deeper understanding of one's inner self, and greater sense of self-responsibility" (Taylor, 2017, p. 20). A second area relates to issues of context and relationships (Baumgartner, 2012; Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Here, Baumgartner (2012) reflects on the influence of context on the transformative learning process. How do we recognize its influence when learners often occupy multiple contexts simultaneously? In terms of relationships, learning is a process by which "individuals suspend judgement and struggle to understand others' points of view from their own perspective" (p. 8). Here Cranton and Taylor (2012) suggest that the "goal is to see holistically, not analytically" (p. 8). The final area in need of greater explication touches on ethical dilemmas related to coercion and power dynamics (Brookfield, 2000, 2012). In Brookfield's (2012) work, he embeds notions of critical theory in adult learning. He questions how people learn to identify and challenge the mechanisms of social control, how learners become aware of power and hegemony's influence over them and how dominant ideology limits the process of transformation.

Returning to the main types of criticism identified by Howie and Bagnall (2013), the second type of criticism relates to arguments that can lead to issues of circular causality where it becomes challenging to argue about which event or action comes before another. This includes the argument that a person has to be mature enough in their cognitive functioning to engage in rational discourse to be able to critically reflect and engage in transformation

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(Merriam, 2004). That critical reflection is merely an ideal outcome that rarely occurs given a variety of contingent variables (Collard & Law, 1989). Equally part of this type of criticism are the comments of critics regarding the lack of emphasis on social action and change. Collard and Law (1989) appear to be the first to suggest that Mezirow's theory reverts from a collectivist underpinning that was formerly present in adult education to an individualist one where the emphasis is now on the psychological and the individual rather than the social and the collective. These comments become a circular argument via Mezirow's rebuttal that transformative learning focuses first "on creating the essential foundation in insight and understanding essential for learning how to take effective social action" (Mezirow, 2006, p. 30).

The third type of criticism consists of rejection of the theory because of difference in philosophical view. For instance, Newman (2012) argued largely that transformative learning theory was merely the description of what good learning is and how it manifests. He further notes that the theory is better situated as a conceptual metaphor for learning. Howie and Bagnall (2013) extend on Newman's argument to suggest that serious questions and critique about the validity of Mezirow's transformative learning theory are few and that as a result the adult education community has taken the theory to heart, even though in the view of Howie and Bagnall (2013), it is inadequately theorized. The fourth type of criticism calls into question specific elements of the theory itself. An example of this type of criticism is reflected in Brookfield's (2000) comments about the relative meaninglessness of transformation as a term, as supported by Newman's (2012) argument about the overpopularization of the term. The varied critiques have in turn led to multiple theoretical perspectives (e.g., psychoanalytical, social emancipatory, neurobiological, and cultural-spiritual) which, in light of recent calls for a

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more unified theory of transformative learning, are just beginning to be studied in terms of their complementarity. The idea of complementarity seeks to bring together the numerous fragmented views of transformative learning that critique or depart from Mezirow's original conception. Integrating these contributions in a more holistic theoretical perspective is gaining momentum as scholars begin to examine the commonalities between perspectives rather than solely distinguish between them (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). An expanded description of alternate conceptions of transformative learning and their complementarity will be presented in a subsequent section.

Slow to garner popularity in the academic sphere, empirical studies involving Mezirow's transformative learning theory only began to appear in the late 80's. In his 1997 review, Taylor found only 39 studies with specific reference to the theory, most of which were dissertations and conference proceedings. Thereafter, interest in the theory grew quickly and spread beyond the shores of the United States. Studies featured transformative learning as a lens in the examination of adult learning in a variety of educational contexts (Taylor, 2007). In Taylor's 2007 review, and as reaffirmed in a 2012 review, he outlines that many settings for studies are situated in structured postsecondary classrooms. Until recently, descriptive examinations have focussed on if transformation occurs, how it occurs and what triggers foster transformation. Taylor and Snyder (2012) report that studies are evolving into investigations of specific conditions that foster transformative learning and the impacts of a variety of instructional strategies. In their review of literature on interventions that foster transformative learning in higher education, Kasworm and Bowles (2012) highlight that evidence is starting to emerge that certain instructional strategies (e.g., service learning and the use of portfolios) positively aid in

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scaffolding the main phases of transformation.

A majority of studies examining transformative learning are “situated in formal higher education inclusive of graduate students, faculty or workshop participants” (Taylor 2007, p. 175). However, of this collection, few specifically examine the nature of doctoral student learning and how it informs an understanding of transformative learning, namely Kumi-Yeboah and James (2014) and Stevens-Long, Shapiro and McClintock (2012). Kumi-Yeboah and James (2014) investigated the factors that facilitated the transformative learning experiences of international graduate students (including PhD students) from Asian countries. Data collected via 198 respondents to the Learning Activities Survey (LAS), along with 10 follow-up interviews indicated that 82.3% of the participants reported experiencing transformative learning. 31.8% of these experiences were associated specifically with the formal education program and 33.3% experienced transformation via both their program of study and extra-educational means. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were used to indicate that educational factors such as critical thinking, assigned readings, laboratory experiences, classroom discussion and mentoring were found to be the most influential factors contributing to transformative learning experiences. Using Pearson’s chi-square test, the authors determined that there were no significant associations between either gender ($\chi^2 [1, N = 198] = 0.360, p = 0.549$) or age group ($\chi^2 [3, N = 198] = 1.444, p = 0.695$) and experiences of transformative learning.

Stemming from a sample of 59 respondents to a semi-structured and self-administered questionnaire from a multidisciplinary PhD distance education program, Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock (2012) used a qualitative approach to examine the outcomes and processes of

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doctoral study and how these related to transformative learning. Doctoral experiences were described using three types of potential change (cognitive, personal and behavioural) as was outlined in the questionnaire. Respondents, who were all recent graduates of the doctoral program, were also given the opportunity to add any other educational outcomes and experiences that they felt was pertinent during or resulting from their studies. Data analysis consisted of coding responses using the types of potential change listed above. The findings were grouped as transformative outcomes and as transformative experiences. Emerging outcomes consisted of being able to view concepts from multiple perspectives, thinking in more complex ways, and becoming more confident. These resonated with Mezirow's (1991) notion of perspective transformation in that being more perceptive involves critical thinking and reflection, and that through their increase in confidence and complex thinking skills respondents indicated that they were not just thinking about them but beginning to act on them as well. In terms of transformative experiences, participants identified key factors as an interactive learning process, relationships characterized by community support, and a curricular structure that leads to critical reflection and human development. The authors concluded that doctoral students can experience a wide array of learning outcomes, beyond the traditional emphasis on intellectual development. The study's summary equally ended with a call for further investigation using methods that would solicit experiences as well as outcomes in greater depth (such as interviews) with students from more traditional doctoral programs and in different fields of study.

While higher education remains, and will likely continue to be, fertile ground for the study of transformative learning, graduate students—especially PhD students—are of particular

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interest given that they represent a population of learners who are being trained to be both critical and self-reflective (Fenge, 2012; Kasworm and Bowles, 2012). Making reference to the work of Fenge (2012) on supervision within doctoral education, Cheng (2014) adds that likely as a result of their extended experience in formal learning environments “doctoral students are mature learners who are more capable of reflecting on and interpreting their transformative learning experience than undergraduates” (p. 274). Studies frequently document retrospective experiences of student transformation as described by Mezirow’s original 10-step perspective transformation model (Snyder, 2008, Taylor, 1997). These studies only seek to look for evidence of the ten steps as learners recount a part of their lives or of a learning journey. In addition, few studies examine the specific characteristics that aid in moving from one step, or a series of steps, to another. There is a need to move beyond these delineated steps to examine conditions that foster the revised and updated elements of transformative learning (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). In terms of study settings, a call has equally been made to go beyond the walls of formal classrooms and to examine informal and independent teaching and learning contexts. In essence, these include educational contexts that are less controlled by an instructor and more susceptible to a broader array of influences such as cultural change, community, environment, and language (Taylor, 2007). This study responds to this call by examining the experience and perceptions of PhD students across a variety of disciplines as they progress through a multitude of less structured, independent and often informal learning contexts as situated within a large institution with a host of possible influences.

Contemporary views of transformative learning theory.

Since Mezirow’s original conception of the theory and the introduction of the ten steps

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leading to transformative learning, the theory has evolved significantly. Mezirow has since presented several types of reflection (content, process and premise), emphasized the importance of critical self-reflection, acknowledged the importance of affective, emotional and social aspects of transformative learning, and further refined original terminologies by introducing the terms frames of reference, and subsequently, habits of mind and points of view (Kitchenham, 2008). In his revision of the theory, “frames of reference” outlined “the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions” encompassing the cognitive and affective (Mezirow, 2000, p. 17). These frames of reference comprise “habits of mind” which are subsequently expressed as “points of view”. Habits of mind include a variety of dimensions: cultural, sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic (Kitchenham, 2008; Baumgartner, 2012) that constitute habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting. These dimensions are then expressed as a point of view, which are subsequently comprised of “sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments” that shape interpretation (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). Borrowing from an example outlined by Kitchenham (2008):

Teacher A can share the point of view [and consequent expectations and attitudes] that a PowerPoint presentation can replace an overhead projector presentation. However, this does not mean that she has adopted Teacher B’s constructivist position of educational technology’s role in the classroom (habit of mind). Teacher B believes that all present media (e.g., overhead projector, video recorder and television, blackboard) should be replaced by a laptop and a data projector. Teacher A could easily duplicate the replacement of the media (point of view) but not Teacher B’s belief system

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underlying that replacement (habit of mind). (p. 118)

In his most recent revision of the theory, Mezirow builds on previous versions by suggesting that learning can occur in four ways: by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming habits of mind, and by transforming points of view (Mezirow, 2000).

Overall, Mezirow's enhancements have taken into account many of the critiques of his original conception of the theory and have led to its expansion and a clearer understanding of each of its components. In addition to Mezirow's revisions of transformative learning, other scholars have equally contributed to its evolution. For instance, the work of various researchers who examined the role of emotion and spirituality in perspective transformation (Charaniya, 2012; Dirkx, 2001, 2012), along with the importance of context and its influence on transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2012; Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Baumgartner (2012) shares that continued research on the effects of context are necessary and should broadly examine four realms. The first is the sociocultural realm and the effect that culture, class or religion may have on transformation. The second is the interpersonal realm and the impact that a support network or community may have on individual transformation. The third is the temporal realm, which examines, for instance, how transformation manifests during different stages in career or life. The fourth is the situational realm, which relates to contexts associated with specific personal experiences like moving to a different country, marriage, or having a child.

In terms of contribution to, or expansion of, the transformative learning theory, one would be remiss not to mention Brookfield (2000, 2012). His focus has been on encouraging

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scholars of transformative learning to avoid falling into an unproblematized focus on the socially and politically created self. Brookfield (2012) highlights the central elements of critical theory as challenging dominant ideology, uncovering power, and contesting hegemony. The first two elements, he continues, connect with strands of analysis in critical theory that have direct relevance to transformative learning. Firstly, how adults learn the components of dominant ideology and how they may be blinded in seeing how this ideology fosters and/or constrains their life choices and the possibility of transformation. Secondly, how adults come to understand the power dynamics that surround them, both in personal relationships and the broader political sphere. For instance, critical theory can aid in understanding how educators use or abuse their power in classrooms or roles of mentorship, particularly as these environments and relationships claim to foster empowering transformation for students. Brookfield (2012) illustrates this use of power via an example of an educator seeking to foster agency in their students by asking them to form a sharing circle with their chairs in the centre of the class. While the educator may seek to promote a more democratic environment, it could be interpreted from the students' perspective as an act of surveillance. He suggests that

learners now experience themselves as being in full view not only of the teacher but also of peers. So as educators are congratulating themselves on rearranging the furniture in ways that make learners feel welcomed and respected, and that consequently create conditions under which transformative learning can occur, those same learners feel themselves to be under the gaze of teachers and peers and focused chiefly on not making a humiliating mistake that will be noticed by both groups. (p. 133)

One might add, regarding the third element central to critical theory, that a person seeking

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transformative learning must also try to “identify assumptions they hold dear that are actually destroying their sense of well-being and serving the interests of others; that is, hegemonic assumptions” (Brookfield, 1991, p. 126). An example of assumptions that are generally believed to be in our best interests, but that in fact may be working against us could be the weight instructors place on getting a perfect score on teaching evaluations.

Many teachers take an understandable pride in their craft wisdom and knowledge. They want to be good at what they do and, consequently, they put great store in students' evaluations of their teaching. When these are less than perfect - as is almost inevitable - teachers assume the worst. All those evaluations that are complementary are forgotten while those that are negative assume disproportionate significance. [...] A critically reflective teacher recognizes the error of assuming that good teaching is always signalled by the receipt of uniformly good student evaluations. (Brookfield, 2017, p. 50-51)

This quotation reinforces Brookfield's point of not falling into an unproblematic focus on the socially and politically created self and the constraints that may be imposed on one's life choices and the possibility of transformation.

As put by Kokkos et al. (2015), “transformative learning has been gradually shaped as an extended, multidimensional theoretical framework in progress” (p. 311) and has moved well beyond Mezirow's original 10-steps to include a reframed expression of one's perspectives as habits of mind and points of view, and a growing interest in the way that context influences the transformation process.

Integrating original and contemporary views of transformative learning.

With the conceptual evolution of transformative learning as a theory in progress and the development of many alternative conceptions and ideas focused on change processes over the last few decades, transformative learning offers an opportunity for what Kasworm and Bowles (2012) call a unifying and expansive framework for learning in higher education. To that end, how might the varied conceptions of transformation work in complementarity and how might the enduring aspects of Mezirow's initial contributions be integrated with the contemporary iterations?

Edward Taylor outlines eight alternative conceptions in a recent 2017 revision of his Taylor (2008) chapter on Transformative Learning Theory in Merriam's (2008) book entitled the Third Update on Adult Learning Theory. Taylor (2017) identifies the range of perspectives, summarized in Table 3, by unit of analysis. The first four perspectives relate to the individual as the unit of analysis and emphasize personal growth and learning over consideration of the collective or context. The last four perspectives align with a social, or collective unit of analysis where the emphasis is placed on ideology critique and positionality in terms of the process and practice of transformation (Taylor, 2008).

Table 3

Alternative Conceptions of Transformative Learning

Perspective	Summary	Related Scholars
Psycho-critical	Perspective transformation as a process of construing new or revised interpretations of experience through reflection.	Mezirow (2000)
Psychoanalytic	Reflecting on psychic structures to better understand	(Boyd & Myers,

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	one's own identity. Viewing transformative learning as a process of individuation.	1988; Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2000)
Psycho-developmental	Examining epistemological change by looking at continuous, incremental growth over the lifespan. The role of relationships, personal contextual influences and holistic ways of knowing in transformative learning.	(Kegan, 2000; Daloz, 1986)
Neurobiological	Stemming from the study of medical images, this view is based on the notion that the brain structure transforms during learning.	(Janik, 2005)
Social-emancipatory	Consideration of the role of context and social change in the transformative learning experience. Working toward social transformation where the oppressed develop a critical consciousness of their world.	(Freire, 1984; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Brookfield, 2012)
Cultural-spiritual	Exploring cross-cultural relationships, the development of spiritual awareness, and notions of intersecting positionalities such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and class.	(Tisdell, 2003; Brooks, 2000)
Race-centric	Where people of African descent are the subjects of a transformative experience. Focusing on an analysis of race, emphasis is placed on the social and political dimensions of learning.	(Williams, 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Sheared, 1994)
Planetary	Focus is on the interconnectedness of the universe, planet, environment, humanity, and the personal world.	(O'Sullivan, 1999)

Adapted from Cranton (2013) and Taylor (2008, 2017)

Arguing the need for integration of theoretical perspectives rather than further

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fragmentation of the concept of transformative learning, Cranton (2013) categorizes perspectives as cognitive, beyond rational, and as social change. For her, the cognitive perspective encapsulates the core elements of Merizow's theory of transformative learning. That is to say the transformation of problematic frames of reference that are comprised of sets of assumptions (habits of mind). This is achieved by consciousness-raising to make more explicit one's habits of mind, engaging in discourse with others, critical reflection in relation to assumptions, and finally action regarding one's change in perspective. The beyond rational perspective consists of a collection of catalysts ranging from emotion, relationships, ecology and nature, and arts-based experiences. Cranton (2013) makes particular reference here to the work of Boyd and Myers (1988) who describe transformation as "an event which moves a person to psychic integration and active realization of their [sic] true being" (p. 262). Extending from their works, Dirkx (2012) discusses the importance of understanding one's unconscious psyche through soul work and the awareness of, and attention paid to, everyday experiences. As for the social change perspective, this category encapsulates themes that place emphasis beyond the individual and toward ideology critique and the transformation of society. Learning and transformation here relate to "social justice, unveiling oppression, [and] social action" (Cranton, 2013, p. 272). Exemplifying the integration of theoretical perspectives, Cranton (2013) suggests that

the same person can experience transformative learning in different ways depending on the context and the content of the learning; transformative learning related to my work might be purely cognitive, and transformation related to a personal loss might be primarily beyond rational. And different people might respond to the same situation in

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diverse ways depending on their personality or learning style preferences. In other words, the rational, beyond rational, and social change perspectives can be a part of the same theoretical framework. (Cranton, 2013, p. 273)

The notion of an integrated and more holistic approach is increasingly echoed by scholars of transformative learning. For instance, in Taylor's (2017) most recent commentary on insights from research he states that current scholarship

further substantiates the importance of a holistic approach to transformative learning in addition to the often-emphasized use of rational discourse and critical reflection. A holistic approach recognizes the role of feelings, other ways of knowing (e.g., intuition, somatic), and the role of relationships with others in the process of transformative learning. (Taylor, 2017, p. 24)

Stevens-Long, Shapiro and McClintock (2012) make mention of how an integrated definition of the outcomes of transformative learning has supported their scholarship and cite a definition that they deem as particularly comprehensive by Yorks and Kasl (2006). They state that "a wholistic change in how a person both affectively experiences and conceptually frames his or her experience of the world when pursuing learning that is personally developmental, socially controversial, or requires personal or social healing" (p. 45-46).

As with the call to move beyond the enduring focus on the rational perspective of transformative learning, there is also a need to place greater emphasis on *what* is transforming in an individual or collective rather than simply *if* transformation occurs via the steps outlined in Mezirow's original 1978 study. In Mezirow's (2000) most recent iteration of the theory he reorients emphasis on critical (self-)reflection of assumptions. In essence, "critical assessment

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of the sources, nature and consequences of our habits of mind – and second, participating fully and freely in dialectical discourse to validate a best reflective judgment” (p. 28). The emphasis aligns with Kasworm and Bowles’ (2012) call to examine the specific elements that allow for progression between the main transformative phases. Are there particular catalysts that enable this critical assessment of one’s habits of mind and the opportunity to discuss, rethink and validate a revised set of assumptions?

The present study examines the learning experiences of PhD candidates beyond the enduring steps of transformation and Mezirow’s initial rational conception of transformation. Borrowing from Cranton’s (2013) three overarching categories, participant experiences of transformation are examined from cognitive, beyond rational and social action perspectives and how these relate to transformations of habits of mind and points of view.

Bridging Two Discourses

Scholarship in the arenas of quality in higher education defined as transformation and of Transformative Learning from the domain of adult learning theory appear, at a cursory glance, to address similar issues and may offer a form of complementarity. This section features an examination of key similarities and differences and discusses the possibility of cross-application and integration.

Within either field the only known mention of the two discourses simultaneously is made by Harvey (2009) and briefly by Cheng (2014). In the first article, Harvey devotes a few paragraphs to a description of Mezirow’s conception of transformative learning and how core components of his view of transformation are different. Harvey (2009) speaks to the continuous and ongoing development of a critical attitude as transformation rather than “an

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assimilation of periodic changes” (p. 7) or paradigm-shifting moments as transformation. He states that “if the deep structural shift is the shift to a critical attitude, it more or less matches the Harvey and Knight (1996) approach. However, if the definition is ambiguous and the structural shift is recurring and occasional, than it is closer to the Mezirow-style paradigm shift.” (p. 8). In Cheng’s (2014) recent article about PhD student and supervisor perceptions of quality, she acknowledges both discourses and suggests Mezirow’s transformative learning may add value to the overall examination of higher education quality “as transformative”. The author suggests that there is a gap between perceptions of quality as transformation and the practice of evaluating it. To reduce barriers associated with the viability of the transformative notion of quality, Cheng notes the importance of fully understanding student transformation to refine the indicators and practices associated with measuring quality. In so doing, the prospect that quality assurance processes would inhibit student transformation may be reduced. Beyond the limited acknowledgement and comparison of these fields of scholarship, a more robust analysis and possible integration of these two discourses may be helpful to simultaneously guide the development and implementation of quality assurance practises and our understanding of the context and conditions that foster transformative learning at various levels within higher education.

At first glance, both discourses reveal the notable similarity of addressing the transformation and enhancement of learners. Mezirow defines this transformation as a learner’s frame of reference changing via critical reflection and discourse about their assumptions toward a renewed understanding and way of viewing their world (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Harvey and Knight (1996) see transformation as a process of deconstruction

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of embedded values and information that, via investigation and reflection, is followed by a process of reconstruction of new alternative conceptualizations. In addition to similar notions regarding the importance of reflection in support of transformation, the theme of empowerment is equally present in both discourses. Harvey and Knight (1996) speak largely of student ownership of the learning process as having influence over their own transformation. While this theme is not present in Mezirow's original work, Harvey and Knight's (1996) conceptions mirror the contributions to transformative learning made by scholars such as Brookfield (2000, 2012). Brookfield, as inspired by the works of Freire, also adds an emancipatory dimension to transformative learning that engenders learner empowerment.

Both discourses feature similarities regarding the intent to question and revise pre-existing conceptions and assumptions toward enhanced and more open and inclusive ones. This extends to the mention of facilitators (e.g., teacher) or systems (e.g., educational programs) that enable or support the fostering of transformative learning. These areas of scholarship claim that in educational settings a teacher's interventions can be instrumentally influential in facilitating the transformation process. In transformative learning theory, there is a subset of the field that examines specific strategies that foster this type of learning (Taylor, 2008). In Harvey and Knight's (1996) explications of higher education quality "as transformation", they discuss the role of the teaching and professional development for transformative learning in two dedicated chapters. In essence, they outline that teaching which promotes transformation is facilitated by the quality of the institutional environment, well-conceived assessment systems, knowledge of teaching techniques, seeing the parts in the context of the whole, and academic staff's beliefs about their role as teachers (p. 155).

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Upon closer examination, both discourses of learner transformation also carry certain distinct differences. Firstly, the roots of their conceptions of transformation come from different origins. While Mezirow is concerned with rationalization drawing from the work of Habermas, Harvey takes a broader approach to critical social research and draws on Marx's analysis of dialectical deconstruction and reconstruction (Harvey, 2009).

Secondly, the original purpose of each discourse and the reasons behind their expansions appear somewhat different. In terms of Harvey and Green's (1993) original definitions of quality, transformation was the definition among a series that held that quality in higher education is directly related to the learning process and that the product of quality learning is transformation. Harvey and Knight (1996) later make the case "that quality needs to be understood as a transformative process, which means that it cannot be addressed separately from issues to do with assessment, learning and teaching" (p. 9). This discourse emerged out of scholarship in quality assurance and the distinction between approaches geared toward accountability versus those that were more developmental and learner-oriented. Emerging from a different scholarly context, Mezirow's transformative learning came together around the examination of adult learning experiences and the way adults changed their interpretations about their surrounding worlds. Stemming from a study that employed a grounded theory methodology, Mezirow intentionally crafted a theoretical framework that could be used, and expanded on, in the field of adult learning (Mezirow, 2000).

A third distinction about the discourses rests in their level of analysis. Mezirow's conceptions (notwithstanding the alternative conceptions that followed) are almost exclusively geared toward the micro level with the learner (or learners) and how they go about reframing

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knowledge and beliefs. Harvey, on the other hand, takes a more macro perspective by speaking about what characterizes student transformation and how systems within higher education should foster a transformative learning experience. Fourthly, there are a myriad of differences in the terminology used to describe similar themes relating to the process of transformation and the ways that transformation may be fostered. These distinctions likely stem from the separate scholarly cultures from which these discourses have originated and evolved; that is to say the separate disciplines of higher education quality assurance and adult learning. To help organize the key ideas outlined above, a brief summary of the similarities and differences between the two discourses of transformation is presented below in Table 4. Further comparisons, in light of this study's findings and links with the work of other relevant scholars, are presented in a section dedicated to reconciling both discourses in Chapter 7 and summarized in Table 12.

Table 4

Summary of Key Similarities and Differences of the Discourses of Transformation

Similarities
- Intent of transformation to question and revise pre-existing conceptions and assumptions toward renewed and enhanced ones - Importance of reflection in support of the transformation process (albeit by different means) - Themes of empowerment stemming from transformation - Suggest that an educator's interventions can be instrumentally influential in facilitating the transformation process

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Differences

- Roots of their conceptions of transformation come from different origins
- Purpose of each discourse and the reasons for their expansion are influenced by different scholarly contexts (both geographic and disciplinary).
- Levels of analysis (level of the learner vs. level of the institution/system)
- Terminology used to describe the process and outcomes of transformation

Following the consideration of the substantive similarities and differences between the two discourses, possible areas of integration may exist, particularly given the growth in alternative conceptions of transformative learning that support a more emancipatory perspective. From a broad standpoint, even considering their distinct theoretical origins and initial “raison d’être”, the similarity in nature of the concept of student transformation from both discourses implies the possibility of a cross-application in their respective sectors of higher education. Each discourse may stand to benefit from the knowledge developed by the other. For instance, specific to the discourse of institutional quality “as transformation”, a greater emphasis on how the learner transforms as examined via perspectives such as the cognitive, emotional, relational, emancipatory and neurobiological, may shed light on how the structure of, and processes within, academic programs influence the transformation of students as an indicator of quality. Provisions for programs and instructors to plan for and make use of elements core to the transformative learning theory may also be integrated in policy, and enacted in the practice, of developmental-oriented quality assurance processes. That is to say that students could be informed of the transformative process so that they may track the

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phases they go through (e.g., disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, discourse, reintegration) along with the transformations they may experience along the way.

Regarding the expanding area of transformative learning in adult education, an institutional perspective of quality as transformative, could contribute to a subset of the field examining the development of academic programs and curriculum which fosters transformative learning (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). These intentional interventions in specific professional disciplines could engage faculty and program administrators to make curricular and environmental changes in academic programs that could help foster transformative learning (Glisczinski, 2007). They could benefit from a broader policy and institutional-level view of parameters serving as supports and barriers to an enhancement-oriented quality agenda that enables the fostering of transformative learning. In addition, consideration of the various institutional stakeholders and their understanding of, and intent for, transformation may help in the ever-growing interest in how context influences transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2012; Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

Given the long-standing influence that each discourse has had in their respective disciplines that so frequently develops in silos, it is not surprising that these two discourses of transformation relating to learning remained independent. This initial exploration indicates that each discourse may complement the other and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of transformative learning in settings of higher education, either at the programmatic level or via the approaches used to foster transformation. To facilitate cross-application, a possible bridging mechanism between the individualistic focus of Mezirow's conception of transformative learning and the broader empowerment focus of Harvey and Green's view of

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transformation may be found in the works of Brookfield's alternate conception of transformative learning. As highlighted earlier, Brookfield brings an emancipatory and critical dimension to the study of transformative learning which may lend clarity to areas of congruity and contradiction between the two discourses. Equally contributing to the examination of congruity and contradiction are the study participants. These details will be presented in Chapter 3.

This literature review examined the contributions of Harvey and Green's (1993) transformative definition of quality in higher education as well as the discourse of Transformative Learning Theory. Via this examination and as can be noted in a descriptive summary of selected studies investigating both student perceptions of quality and experiences of transformative learning in Appendix A, several substantive gaps in the research become apparent. Namely, a lack in understanding of graduate student notions of quality along with a limited understanding of factors that contribute to quality, particularly from a North American perspective. With respect to transformative learning, only two studies examining transformation in doctoral education were found and were both limited to the study of a single program, and which focused on non-traditional distance and online programs. Calls for further research found in the scholarship reviewed in this chapter suggest moving beyond Mezirow's original 10-steps of perspective transformation and using a broader range of Transformative Learning perspectives, such as Cranton's (2013) cognitive, beyond rational and social action views. Additionally, a call was made to examine informal and independent teaching and learning contexts that are outside of structured classrooms, and focus on a population of learners capable of sophisticated levels of critical reflection such as doctoral students in

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traditional research programs. This study aims to address the gaps identified above and the calls in current scholarship by examining the learning experiences and perceptions of quality and transformation of PhD students across a variety of disciplines as they progress through a multitude of less structured, independent and often informal learning contexts as situated within a Canadian institution of higher education.

Conceptual Framework

A social constructivist worldview underpins the proposed study. Firstly, constructivism is a paradigm that holds that learners construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world (Piaget, 1972). Social constructivism maintains this subjectivist view of knowledge and emphasizes the importance of interaction and dialogue with others in the construction of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). It assumes that individuals construct their own reality based on interpretations of, and reflections on, their experiences (Kim & Merriam, 2011). In the context of adult education, Fenwick (2000) emphasizes that this perspective focuses on how learners' view and reflect on lived experience and how their interpretations of, and social interactions about, these experiences form meaning and transform their conceptual structures.

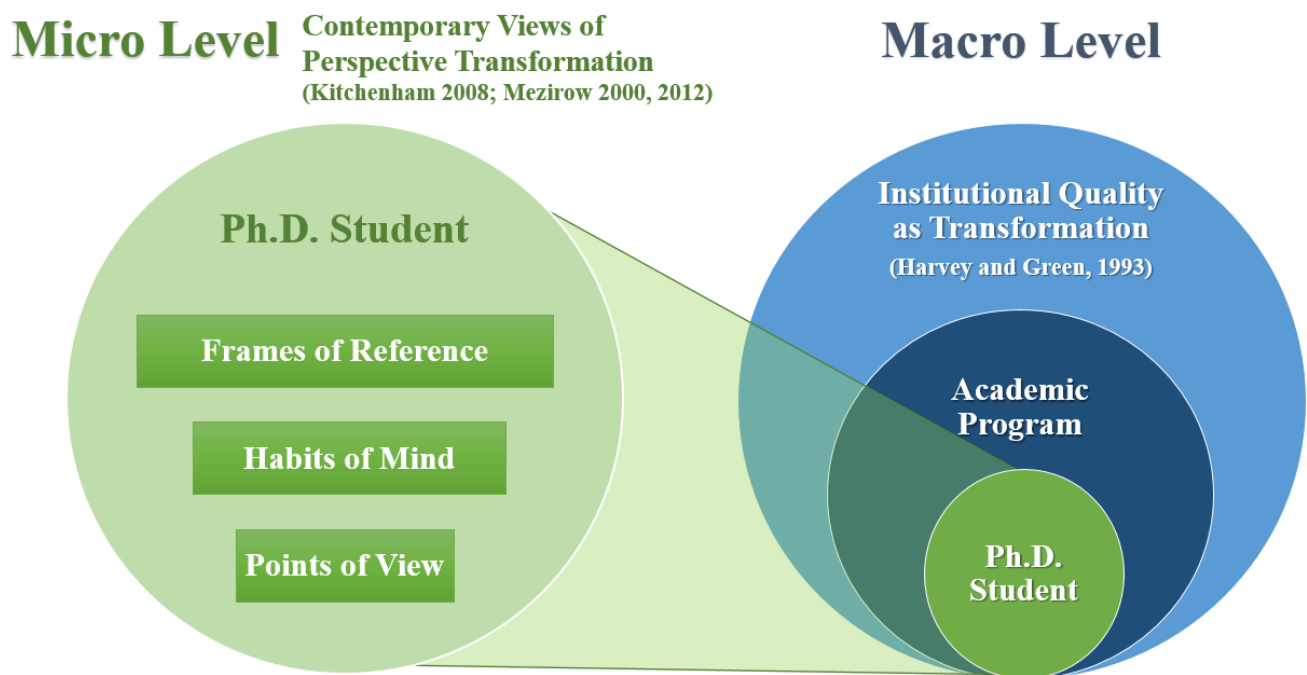
Two seminal discourses connected with higher education literature serve as a framework through which this study will be analyzed: 1- Harvey and Green's (1993) conceptions of quality in higher education; and 2- Contemporary conception of Transformative Learning Theory (Cranton, 2013; Merizow, 2000). In Figure 1, the framework is represented as a concept map (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The macro level in blue represents the institutional definition of quality "as transformation" within which academic programs function. These blue circles exemplify the macro context which influence how PhD students experience their degree (Kumi-

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Yeboah, 2012), how transformative learning experiences may be fostered through the academic programs (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012), and perhaps how PhD students perceive quality education. At the micro level, within and influenced by the larger context represented in blue, the student may undergo a transformative learning experience via changes in their frames of reference, habits of mind and/or points of view as presented in the green circle. This conceptual framework guides this inquiry toward a greater understanding of PhD student perceptions of quality and transformation and the extent to which these perceptions are aligned with the promoted definitions of quality by the academic programs. In an ancillary capacity, this framework supports an examination of the extent to which the two discourses of transformation mentioned above may work in complementarity.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



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Research Questions

This investigation examines PhD candidate perceptions of quality and explores the extent to which they are living the intended transformation that institutions of higher education are seeking to foster. More specifically, the purpose of this multiple case study is to understand how the transformative notion of quality may be related to transformative learning within the student over the course of a PhD program.

1. How do PhD candidates describe their learning experiences once they reach the dissertation-writing phase of their doctoral program?
 - a) How does this align with contemporary conceptions of transformative learning?
2. How do PhD candidate learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and by their academic program?
 - a) How do PhD candidates characterize quality in the context of their degree?
 - b) How is quality characterized in governmental and institutional-level documents?
3. What congruity and contradictions exist between the discourses of quality as transformation and transformative learning theory?
 - a) How do PhD candidates perceive connections between both discourses?
 - b) What bridges exist in the scholarly literature that may reconcile both discourses?

Chapter 3 – Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methodology used to examine this study's three research questions and related sub-questions. In subsequent sections, the research approach and assumptions, research design, data collection methods and data analyses are outlined.

Research Approach and Assumptions

A researcher's approach to study design is in large part driven by their paradigmatic assumptions or basic beliefs that shape their worldview (Creswell, 2012). As a researcher, I find that my approach reflects a social constructivist paradigm. As such, I believe that learning is an active process where learners construct their own subjective representations of reality. Further, I believe that meaning is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds (Vygotsky, 1978). In reference to Patton's (2015) criteria for judging the quality and credibility of qualitative inquiry, a central component is acknowledging subjectivity in the research approach. The following highlights the experiences that have shaped my assumptions and my orientation toward this inquiry.

In qualitative research, investigators must acknowledge their positioning and any biases they may have toward the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012). In effect, that their cultural and experiential and personal experiences influence the planning, administering and reporting phases of the study. As the researcher planning and conducting this study, I strove to ensure that my past experiences and assumptions would not influence the study's participants or unduly affect observations, reflections, analyses, interpretations or conclusions. To reduce the likelihood of interference, I sought to be as explicit as possible about my experiences,

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presuppositions and biases and to be particularly mindful of them throughout the duration of the study. The following is a summary of relevant experiences and philosophical and theoretical assumptions central to this study's research approach.

Experiences that shaped my assumptions in the context of this research derive from professional roles that I have played relating to quality assurance and program development in the very institution that hosted this research study. From 2012 to 2014, I served as a curriculum design specialist tasked with supporting program administrators and curriculum committees reflect on the outcomes and processes of their educational programs. This included the drafting of program learning outcomes, coordinating curriculum mapping exercises and facilitating reflective discussions with students, faculty members and alumni. From 2014 to 2017, I served as acting director of the centre that provided this support. While seldom facilitating the work directly, I managed the specialists that did this work and I aided with the development of new processes and tools to support the work of curriculum mapping, data interpretation, and action planning. In this role, I also served, as needed, on institutional committees that related to the work of quality assurance and program development and played a role in co-leading a curriculum development and evaluation working group at the provincial level for five years. These professional experiences instilled in me a certain understanding of how the work of quality assurance was evolving and embedding itself in postsecondary institutions. It also confirmed how organizational change within these institutions was slow and gradual. A particular challenge brought on by the experiences noted above was to separate the role of professional in this domain from the role of researcher of phenomena in this domain. More specifically, the challenge involved remaining as an observer and not engaging in issues.

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Particular attention was taken to listen and document interviewee experiences and not problem solve and offer suggestions relating to experiences identified as problematic.

In addition to professional and researcher, another dimension that shaped my assumptions was my concurrent status as a PhD candidate myself. In this capacity, I was living many of the very experiences that I was asking this study's participants to share and comment on. I was particularly mindful of how I was interpreting participant experiences, free of comparisons with my own by staying focused on the voice of each participant and verifying my interpretation of their accounts with them via a written narrative following each interview. This strategy will be further described in the data analysis section.

Ultimately, as researcher, I have pursued the research process with an open mind and an attentiveness to hear and see the essence of the phenomenon. It is my hope that my experience and passion for learning in higher education along with my practical experience with program design and quality assurance systems have enriched the research setting. With continuous reflexivity, my goal was to leverage these experiences and related knowledge as a support, rather than as a hindrance, in the planning and conducting of this research study.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach to better understand the PhD student perceptions of transformation and quality once they reach the dissertation-writing phase of their doctoral program. "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). With this intention, and driven by research questions that pose both "how" and "why" questions, Yin (2009, p. 13) suggests that a case study

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approach is particularly well suited. In a more recent version of his text on case study research, Yin (2013) defines this approach as follows. Case studies are “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). He further indicates that case study research is appropriate for researchers that aim to “(a) define research topics broadly and not narrowly, (b) cover contextual or complex multivariate conditions and not just isolated variables, and (c) rely on multiple and not singular sources of evidence (2003, p. xi).

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), case studies can be categorized into three types: instrumental, intrinsic or collective. The instrumental case study focuses on a particular issue and selects one bounded case to illustrate it. In the intrinsic case study, the focus is on the case itself because it presents an unusual or unique situation. The goal in this context is not to compare with others or to test a theory. The collective case study (also called multiple case study) consists of the examination of an issue as illustrated by more than one case. For this type of case study, the researcher is commonly tasked with purposefully selecting multiple cases to show different perspectives of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Yin (2003), examining more than one case can strengthen findings, is considered more compelling, and is seen to result in more robust findings. Merriam (2008) equally suggests that including multiple cases in a study can add variation that consequently makes the findings and interpretations more compelling. She refers specifically to an excerpt from the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) to emphasize this point. “By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible,

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why it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings” (p. 29). In the context of the present study, a multiple case study design was favoured. The logic behind choosing this design over a single case study was driven by the idea that studying a variety of cases addressing the same phenomenon might corroborate, qualify, and extend the findings of a single case approach. It was equally selected in order to include the perspectives of a representative diversity of PhD candidates across disciplines and demographics.

Following Thomas’ (2011) case study categorization, the design outlined in the present study can be defined as an examination of *key cases* with an *exploratory purpose*, an *interpretive approach*, and a *multiple case process*. As the general purpose of the study was to understand “how” PhD candidates perceive transformation and quality and “why” this is, *key cases* of inherent interest, in this case PhD participants, were chosen. Given the lack of research in this area and a first examination of connections and contradictions between the two discourses of transformation, the focus was not on hypothesis testing, but on *exploring* possible understandings of PhD candidate perceptions. An *interpretive approach* manifests itself in the case studies by giving room for thick descriptions of central themes within the individual cases that seek to understand the perspectives and position of the participants. Finally, a *multiple case process* enabled the illustration of the complexity and diversity of perceptions among PhD candidates in two layers of analysis. First, six cases were analyzed individually; and second, a cross-case analysis served to broaden the analytical frame to the overall case of PhD candidate perceptions of transformation and quality within one institution.

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Setting and participants.

The study setting and site of the six case studies was selected out of convenience to the researcher and is the same institutional setting that the researcher serves as both professional and PhD candidate, as detailed earlier in the researcher approach and assumptions section. To answer the study's research questions, two PhD candidates from each of three faculties were selected. Each of the six cases were recruited from one urban research-intensive institution with a student population of approximately 43,000, of which about 2,000 were enrolled in doctoral programs. This institution has nine faculties, which include specialized professional programs in medicine, law, engineering, business and education. A particularly unique characteristic of the institution is that nearly all programs are offered in both English and French. In the context of this study, all recruited participants had followed their programs in English. Using purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), PhD candidates served as the target group as they were capable of drawing and interpreting from both undergraduate and graduate learning experiences and had a practiced capacity to reflect and interpret their learning experiences (Cheng, 2014; Fenge, 2012; Green & Macauley, 2007). Additionally, as PhD student perceptions of either transformation or quality are particularly understudied. The three faculties from which PhD candidates were recruited were Engineering, Arts, and Education. These were selected to represent varied cultures of research and approaches to graduate training. Selection of these faculties also helped to capture a broader set of student perspectives where no discipline-specific data at the doctoral level appears to exist in research on either perceptions of quality or transformative learning. A detailed description of the study participants will be provided at the outset of Chapter 4.

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Recruitment.

Participant recruitment occurred in two phases. The first phase consisted of an e-mail sent to graduate student associations for each of the programs within the faculties mentioned above. E-mails requested the circulation of a call for interested participants who were in the dissertation-writing phase of their PhD program. See Appendix B for the e-mail sent to the graduate student associations and Appendix C for the call for participants sent out via graduate student association listservs to prospective PhD candidates. To help incentivize participation and as a token of appreciation, \$30 per interview was offered as compensation. Recruitment within faculties took place one faculty at a time. Once interviews were nearly complete with the participants from one faculty, the recruitment process began at the next faculty. From beginning to end, this process took six months.

The second phase of participant recruitment consisted of the selection of study participants from those who had demonstrated interest over the two weeks following the distribution of the call for interest via the listservs. Prospective participants who contacted the researcher were sent an expression of interest form (see Appendix D). When more than two PhD candidates in their dissertation-writing phase from a given faculty demonstrated an interest in participating in the study, the responses on the expression of interest forms were used to help ensure demographic diversity among the selected participants. This was necessary in the recruitment process for each faculty as more than two candidates responded to the call for participants within each. Once participants from a given faculty were selected, consent forms (see Appendix E) were sent to them by e-mail for their review.

Ethical considerations.

Following the ethical guidelines of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for*

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Research Involving Humans – 2nd edition, this study received ethical clearance in May 2017 by the University of Ottawa’s Social Science and Humanities Research Ethics Board (see approval notice in Appendix F). As indicated in the recruitment process, access to the participants was gained via program level graduate student association listservs. Consent was indicated in writing by participants following a review of the study’s consent form at the outset of each participant’s first interview. Both privacy and confidentiality were discussed with each of the recruited PhD candidates, particularly in the context of their participation in a study featuring a multiple case study design with the possibility of being identified. To help mitigate any concerns, participants were sent narratives of each interview to review for accuracy and if they felt comfortable with the experiences that were reported. Pseudonyms were equally used throughout the reporting of findings to aid in maintaining the privacy of the study participants. In the data collection process, participants chose the location of the interviews.

Data Collection Methods

As indicated by Patton (2002), the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research. As such, the researcher serves as a mediator of data originating from multiple data sources. In case study research more specifically, it is these multiple types of converging evidence that measure the same phenomenon, and consequently, strengthen this methodological approach (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2013). An overview of the multiple data collection methods used in this study is provided in Table 5.

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Table 5

Overview of Data Collection Methods and Association with Research Questions

	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Three-Stage Interviews	✓	✓	✓
Field Notes	✓	✓	✓
Reflexivity Journal	✓	✓	✓
Collected Documents		✓	
Review and Comparison of Literature			✓

Note: RQ = Research Question

The primary source of data in the case study was semi-structured three-stage interviews. This source explicitly collected data on each of the main research questions via direct questioning. Supporting data was pulled from field notes and a reflexivity journal maintained by the researcher. These secondary sources added further data, which at times corroborated and contradicted the data collected via the interviews. Also, collected documents served as a secondary data source to aid in answering the second research question, particularly the second sub-question (2b) regarding the characterization of quality in governmental and institutional documents. Lastly, in order to shed light on the areas of scholarship mentioned in the third research question, specifically the second sub-question (3b) concerning possible bridges between discourses of transformation, a critical literature review was undertaken. The review located and analyzed published documents that make mention of both discourses and expanded to an examination of the seminal works for each discourse to identify areas of congruity and contradiction regarding the conceptualization of transformative student learning. The outcome of the review was used in the preparation of the *Bridging Two*

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Discourses section in Chapter 2 and as part of the *Reconciling Both Discourses* section of the discussion in Chapter 7. To illustrate the sequence in which data collection methods were used, a timeline is provided in Appendix G. The following section outlines each of the data collection methods used.

Interviews.

Interviewing is the process in which a researcher and participant engage in a focused conversation to elicit the participant's perceptions, attitudes or an account of their behaviours about the phenomenon being examined (Merriam, 2009). Mears (2012) suggests that interviewing is the best approach to discover and record what a person has experienced, what they think and feel about their experience and the significance or meaning it might have with respect to the topic at hand.

In this study, interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to aid participants in sharing their perceptions unconstrained by the rigidity of fixed questions or the perspectives of the researcher (Creswell, 2012). This allowed the researcher a certain degree of flexibility to further probe and focus on issues that the participant considers most important (Mears, 2012).

To achieve a level of depth of reflection, a three-stage interview protocol was adapted from Seidman's (2013) qualitative interview model. The first stage focussed on the first research question and served to put the PhD candidates' past educational experiences in context and featured questions about how past experiences have informed their view of learning. The second stage focussed on both research questions one and two and allowed PhD candidates to expand on details of their current program experience. Questions asked about

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how the PhD program is structured, the nature of student learning experiences in the program and initial student perceptions of quality learning. The concept of transformative learning was introduced by the interviewer during this second stage. This was introduced as a framework to question PhD candidates more directly about any learning experiences they deemed as transformative, and if relevant, what enabled the transformative process. This was equally a concept that the researcher wanted the participants to become familiar with, as they would be asked about their impressions regarding possible alignment with Harvey and Green's (1993) view of quality as transformation in the third interview stage. As way of introducing participants to the Transformative Learning Theory, the interviewer shared a diagrammatic representation of Transformative Learning and its main phases (see Appendix H and I) with each participant and presented the principal tenets of the theory. Depending on the nature and number of questions posed by participants, this process generally took between 5 and 10 minutes. The third stage focussed on the second and third research questions and served to bring the first two interviews together. In this final interview PhD candidates reflected on the meaning they associated with their experiences and consequently their perceptions regarding the quality of this experience and the extent to which this aligned, or not, with the notion of transformation. They were presented with Harvey and Green's (1993) definitions of quality in higher education and asked about the congruity and/or contradictions between these definitions and the quality lived in their PhD learning experiences. Similar to the introduction of Transformative Learning Theory in the second interview, a copy of the definitions of quality in higher education (see Table 1) was shared with participants and further explained by the interviewer for about 5 minutes during the third interview. See the complete list of interview questions for all three

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interview stages outlined within the interview guide in Appendix J.

Seidman (2013) suggests “that each interview provides a foundation of detail that helps illumine the next” (p. 19), and states the importance of reflection and preparation between each of the three interview stages. As such, interviews were spaced 1-2 weeks apart to enable respondents to reflect on what they had said and provide greater potential for a more reflective and insightful series of interviews. PhD candidates were sent interview questions several days in advance of the interviews as part of a reminder e-mail to allow them to prepare for the interview, if desired. Each of the three interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes in duration. Each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim and uploaded to NVivo 11 for storage in a research database. In five of the six participant cases, interviews were conducted face to face at a location mutually convenient to both interviewer and interviewee. These principally took place in graduate student offices or empty study rooms. In the remaining case, interviews were conducted via videoconference using Skype.

Following each interview stage, 3-4 page narratives were compiled using the recordings and the interviewer field notes. At the outset of each subsequent interview, and by e-mail following the final stage interview, participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the researcher’s representation of their views. This verification practice, termed member checking, is recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a method to further leverage the trustworthiness of the findings. Greater detail regarding the notion of trustworthiness is discussed in the upcoming data analysis section.

To help alleviate any weaknesses in the recruitment process, consent form, three-stage interview approach, interview guide and the process of reviewing interview narratives, a pilot

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of the three-stage interview process took place shortly after ethical clearance was obtained (Seidman, 2013; Turner, 2010). To test the recruitment process, the researcher reached out to the graduate student association in a program within one of the targeted faculties. Only one PhD candidate meeting the dissertation-writing phase criteria demonstrated an interest in participating and was therefore maintained as a pilot participant. Following each of the interview stages, the recordings were reviewed and notes were taken regarding alternative prompts that may better clarify the interview questions. Overall, the three-stage pilot interview went as planned and revealed findings that were deemed to be well aligned with the research questions. While minor changes were made to a few of the semi-structured interview questions and related prompts, no significant modifications were made to the interview approach, questions, or to the recruitment process. Given the minor nature of the changes and the relevance of the collected data, the pilot three-stage interview was included as one of the participant cases in the study.

Field notes.

To complement interview transcript data, field notes were maintained over the course of participant interviews and used as a means of collecting data. These notes contributed to the provision of rich and thick descriptions (Merriam, 2009) and principally documented what was said and related observations, such as body language and interviewee attitude and context. Notes were taken during and after each interview and were used along with interview transcript data in the analysis phase. As highlighted by Patton (2002), note taking in the field is key to capturing significant insights. “Ideas for making sense of the data that emerge constitute the beginning of analysis; they are part of the field notes” (p. 436).

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Collected documents.

As an “objective” source of data where the presence of the researcher does not influence what is being studied, Merriam (2009) views documentation as a prime way to enrich interview data. In the context of this study, relevant documents sought to provide insight into how the government, institution, faculties and programs frame the discourses of quality and transformation and how these governmental and institutional levels characterize the PhD student learning experience. This purpose aligns specifically with the second research question’s second sub-question (2b): How is quality characterized in governmental and institutional-level documents? Overall, data emerging from the subsequent documentary analysis served as a comparative with the outcome of the analyzed interview, field note and reflex journal data to respond to the second research question more directly: How do PhD candidate learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and by their academic program?

Documents used in the analysis were sourced from governmental and institutional public websites and each addressed themes of quality, quality assurance and learning in higher education. Documents fell into three categories: 1- Visioning; those that spoke to the purpose of an educational system or presented the strategic vision of the institution, 2- Procedural; those that described the mechanics of a process such as quality assurance framework, 3- Promotional; those that presented the objectives, features and experience of a course of study or program. During the initial documentary search, 31 documents were selected, however following a closer read, 25 documents were deemed to be most suitable for the themes and research questions of this study. Collected documents included policy documents, strategic

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plans, program descriptions, PhD student guides, and promotional and procedural web content from institutional, faculty and program websites. Greater detail pertaining to each document is presented in Chapter 6.

Reflexivity journal.

To enable a reflexive approach (Etherington, 2004) to the qualitative research process, the researcher maintained a reflexivity journal. This served as a space to share assumptions, experiences and actions taken during the entire research process and share the impact of such a critical self-reflection on the research design (Ortlipp, 2008). Entries into the journal also noted trends and connections of possible significance between cases. These entries were used in the data analysis and writing process to provide greater transparency to the issues that emerged and decisions that were taken throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

As is common in qualitative inquiry, the boundaries between data collection and analysis are not absolute (Patton, 2002). As such, data analysis in this study was an ongoing process and occurred iteratively in tandem with data collection rather than separately. This practice allowed the researcher to continuously refocus and refine interview probes and processes, from one interview to the next; all while being immersed in the data (Merriam, 2009). In terms of analyzing case study data, Yin (2003) remarks that this phase is often the most challenging and least developed. He suggests “the best preparation for conducting case study analysis is to have a general analytic strategy” (Yin, 2003, p. 115). Such a strategy would “help to treat evidence fairly, produce compelling analytic conclusions and rule out alternative interpretations” (p. 111). Given the exploratory nature of this study and the theoretical

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framework that has grounded this inquiry, a descriptive analytical strategy seemed most appropriate. This strategy uses the conceptual framework to guide the case study analysis and help to focus on data relevant to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2003). In the context of a multiple case study, Creswell and Poth (2018) further suggest providing detailed descriptive analysis of each case using an analytic technique “called within-case analysis”, followed by a thematic analysis across all cases, “called cross-case analysis” (p. 100). The following subsections will address the processes associated with data management along with the within-case and cross-case analyses undertaken in this study.

Data management.

To ensure the manageability of the amount of data collected from each source, all information about each case was organized in a case database (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2013). This database allowed for information to be “edited, redundancies sorted out, parts fitted together, and organized for ready access” (Patton, 2002, p. 449). The software used for this process was NVivo 11, a qualitative analysis tool that also enables the archiving and detailed classification of audio recordings, transcript data, field notes, collected documents and reflex journal entries.

Within-case analysis.

The process of within-case analysis, according to Creswell (2012), involves forming an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon through description and thematic development of each individual case treated as a separate study. To develop themes across three of the data sources (interviews, field notes, and reflex journal) that best answer the research questions, Creswell’s (2012) recommended coding process was adopted. This process adheres to the constant comparison method and involves the following iterative steps as

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facilitated by the use of qualitative data analysis software NVivo 11. Steps include: 1- initial read through of text data; 2- division of text into segments of information; 3- categorization of segments of information with codes; 4- reduction of overlap and redundancy of codes; and 5- collapse of codes into themes. During the coding process, within each case the researcher constantly compared newly coded data and categories with previously coded data and related categorizations within each case. This constant comparison served to refine categories and make appropriate adjustments to the overall conceptual representation of the case.

To facilitate the organization of data during the coding process, NVivo 11 was used. Within the software, groupings of data sources were organized for each case that consisted of the verbatim transcripts from the three interviews with each participant and the set of field notes and reflex journal entries pertaining to each participant case. While auto-coding features within the NVivo 11 software were initially used to get an overall sense of trends in the data within each case, the output of these features only served to provide initial impressions. In fact, while clusters of similar terms were identified using auto-coding, the resulting output was not helpful in responding to the study's research questions. Subsequent coding of documents for each case took place manually within NVivo 11. Using the software for manual coding provided the researcher the ability to quickly search documents and organize coded content in a variety of ways helpful to the analysis process.

Using an approach whereby the researcher reread over and reflected on the data allowing themes to emerge, categorized these themes and compared emerging themes with initial impressions, this study stood true to its exploratory nature (Yin, 2009). The within-case analysis was both an iterative and reflexive process that sought to provide rich descriptions of

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each case and consequently detail the experiences of each PhD candidate.

Cross-case analysis.

During the cross-case analysis, the researcher seeks a general representation of themes that fits across all cases (Yin, 2003). Among the varied ways of going about this type of analysis, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest a variable-oriented strategy for cross-case analysis. Using this strategy, the researcher examines the entire data set simultaneously for overarching themes that span across cases.

An inductive approach to thematic development was once again pursued across all case documents. Integrating themes from across cases necessitated merging, collapsing, expanding and creating new thematic categories which best represented the researcher's interpretation of key cross-case themes. The resulting analysis allowed for an understanding of comparisons and differences in the experiences and perceptions of PhD candidates in the context of one higher education institution. In this analysis, an overarching set of dominant themes emerged.

Document analysis.

As with other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be analyzed and interpreted to elicit meaning, develop understanding and provide insight on a set of issues or phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Often used along with other types of qualitative methods, document analysis is a means of triangulation that pulls together a variety of data sources examining a same phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). Furthermore, Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006) suggest that documentary data including reports, plans, and guides can serve as an important data source for case studies where they may shed light on the context within which study participants operate and experience a phenomenon.

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Following an approach outlined by Bowen (2009) for analyzing documents, two steps were undertaken. The first was a content analysis that examined the frequency of occurrences of key terms (such as learning, quality, transformation, enhancement, and program experience) within the documents. Stems of these words (such as to learn, transform, enhance) were also included. The key terms listed above were selected for examination given that they were used in the interview questions and are the core concepts listed in, and examined by, this study's research questions. The goal of this process was to provide an initial overall sense of which documents addressed key terms and to identify relevant and meaningful passages within each document. This first step enabled the researcher to begin categorizing documents based on their type and provided for a first read of the documents ahead of the thematic coding process. The second step presented a deeper thematic analysis of the documents to identify emerging themes via coding and category construction. Using the same coding strategy described in the within-case analysis, initial coding of documentary text was based on the key terms mentioned above. During subsequent readings of the documents, an inductive coding approach was used to further identify themes of significance and allow these to emerge naturally from the data. All selected documents were acquired electronically and uploaded into the NVivo 11 software, which supported these analyses.

Verification strategy.

Qualitative case study research seeks to examine participant conceptions and experiences of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Given the co-construction of multiple truths by the researcher and participants, notions of validity and reliability that are common in quantitative research are less appropriate in an interpretative context. In lieu, notions of

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credibility and trustworthiness are used as criteria to define the rigour of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the strength of qualitative research, Creswell (2012) further suggests that researchers employ at least two verification techniques. In the following section, five techniques used in this study to support credibility and trustworthiness are described.

Thick and rich descriptions.

Thick and rich descriptions are suggested by scholars of qualitative methodology (e.g., Merriam, 2009, Patton, 2002) to ensure a level of detail necessary to aid with transferability. Analogous to concepts such as generalizability or external validity in quantitative research, the notion of transferability results from providing readers with evidence that a study's findings could be applicable to other contexts. In this study, both the descriptions of participants and of the study's findings sought to be in-depth and make explicit the cultural and social contexts that surrounded data collection.

Triangulation.

As an indicator of credibility, triangulation of multiple data sources aids in providing rich descriptions, as introduced above, and also helps reveal patterns and trends that may not have been as easily identified if only one data source had been used (Patton, 2002). The technique is equally known to support the corroboration of findings across data sets and the reduction of the potential influence of researcher biases in the processes of data collection and analyses. The multiple data sources used in this study are listed in Table 5 along with their association with the study's three main research questions. Dependent on the nature of the research questions, at least three data sources aid to inform each main question by shedding light on a different perspective of the phenomenon being examined.

Member checking.

Credibility and authenticity of the findings were supported by using a member checking process (Polizzi, 2007). According to Mertens (2003), this process is a key criterion for establishing credibility as it allows the interviewee an opportunity to assess the accuracy of both the data and preliminary results and confirm initial interpretations. In this study, participants were asked to review narrative summaries of each interview session to ensure that no representations made by the researcher were inaccurate or misleading. While two participants requested a few minor edits related to wording, no concerns regarding the reporting of participant perceptions and experiences were shared.

Integration of a critical friend.

An additional measure to help ensure the credibility of the data and subsequent interpretation of trends or emerging themes was the validation of research themes by a critical friend. In a frequently referenced article addressing the notion of integrating critical friends in teaching, decision-making and action research, Costa and Kallick (1993) describe the role as “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend” (p. 49). Validation and critical discussion took place at two key moments during the research process in this study. The first moment followed the data analysis phase before writing the within-case analysis findings. The role of the critical friend at this stage was to validate findings, supply alternative perspectives and ultimately help protect from bias. Overall, this process helped to shed light on broader themes and connections that were difficult to see given the researcher's closeness to the data. The second moment followed the drafting of the within-case, cross-case and document analyses. At

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this time, the main strands of the discussion and interpretation chapter were being drafted. The critical friend's role at this stage was to review and validate the coherence of analyses and discussion of findings and to identify any possible connections or themes of note that may have been overlooked. Reflections, suggestions and other questions and comments shared by the critical friend were considered in the review of analyses and the drafting of the study's discussion and interpretation chapter. The critical friend selected to support the analysis and interpretation phases of this study was a scholar and senior university administrator whose work was embedded in curriculum and program development and teaching and learning. This person was selected for his knowledge of quality assurance and related organizational processes at the institution in which the study was taking place.

Reflex journal and audit trail.

In addition to the techniques outlined above, the reflex journal maintained throughout the duration of this study contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study's outcome. Firstly, it allowed a space to track researcher bias from the conceptual stages of the study. These notes aided in the clarification of the researcher's position and assumptions that may influence the research at the outset of this chapter. Secondly, the reflex journal also served as an important instrument in maintaining an audit trail. This included notes about the conceptualization of the study, the development of instruments, and decision-making throughout the planning, preparation, implementation, analysis and interpretation phases of the study as seen in the data collection and analysis timeline in Appendix G.

Summary

This chapter began with a description of the researcher's position, assumptions and past experiences that may have influenced the research process. It was noted that the researcher's approach reflected a social constructivist paradigm and that he had played various professional roles relating to quality assurance and program development in higher education. All of which shaped the design of this study as well as his interpretation of the findings. Carefully using these experiences as leverage rather than as a barrier was discussed.

Further, the research design in this study was outlined as an examination of key cases with an exploratory purpose, an interpretive approach, and a multiple case process. In this section, key definitions and processes related to case study research were presented.

Participants consisted of six PhD student cases across the Faculties of Arts, Engineering and Education selected within an urban research-intensive institution. Recruitment occurred via graduate student associations in two phases following ethical protocols relating to access, consent, privacy and confidentiality.

Data collection methods consisting of three-stage interviews with each of the six interviewees, the review of 25 collected documents, a reflexivity journal and field notes were each presented in turn. Descriptions of each method highlighted their theoretical and practical relevance to the research questions as well as the operationalization process of each.

Presented as an iterative process, data analyses began with within-case analyses that consisted of inductive thematic development for each of the six cases individually. This first examination was followed by a cross-case analysis to outline a general representation of themes across all cases. Lastly, a document analysis was described as part of a two-phase process consisting of a

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content analysis to examine the frequency of occurrences of key terms, and also of a deeper thematic analysis that identified emerging themes via coding and category construction. As part of the data analyzes section, strategies to aid in ensuring the strength of the qualitative study were highlighted, namely: thick and rich descriptions, triangulation, member checking, integration of a critical friend, and the use of a reflex journal and audit trail.

Following this chapter's description of data collection methods and analyses, the next three chapters (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) describe the outcomes of each of these analyses sequentially.

Chapter 4 – Within-Case Analysis

The purpose of this multiple case study was to understand how PhD students describe their learning experiences and characterize notions of quality. In addition, to examine how their learning experiences over the course of a PhD program relate to the intended transformation of the institution. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a common analytical approach to multiple case studies is to first provide comprehensive descriptions of the themes within each case (within-case analysis), followed by a thematic analysis across the cases to examine commonalities and differences (cross-case analysis).

This chapter will present the findings for each participant case and is organized in two sections: an overview of the participants, and the within-case analysis of each of the six cases. The results of the cross-case analysis will be presented in Chapter 5.

Overview of the Participants

Six PhD candidates within one university participated in the present study. Participants represented three faculties (Arts, Engineering and Education) and were all in the writing stages of their PhD programs at the time of the interviews. As outlined in Table 6, participant information collected as part of the recruitment process indicates that four participants were male and two were female; two participants were under the age of 25, one between 26 and 35, and three participants were between 36 and 45; four participants were domestic students and two reported as international students.

To help preserve the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are typically used in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant by identifying the most common name for their gender and age group from the geographical

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location or culture the participant identified with. The pseudonyms for the participants were Lukas, Leslie, Kyle, Chen, Saad, and Alexander.

Table 6

Overview of Participant Information

Participant	Faculty	Stage of Program	Age Category	Student Designation	Sex
Lukas	Arts	Analysis and writing	25 and under	Domestic	Male
Leslie	Arts	Writing	36-45	Domestic	Female
Kyle	Engineering / Health Sci	Writing	25 and under	Domestic	Male
Chen	Engineering	Final revisions	36-45	International	Female
Saad	Education	Writing	36-45	International	Male
Alexander	Education	Writing	26-35	Domestic	Male

Findings from the Within-Case Analysis

As recommended by Merriam (2009), the presentation of findings of within-case analyses should include a description of the context of each case and the themes that emerge from the analysis. As such, each case description will integrate the components mentioned above in three subsections: a participant profile, a narrative organized by the themes identified during the case analysis, and a graphic summary of the connections between major themes as interpreted by the researcher.

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The various themes that emerged from the within-case analyses can be grouped in three main ways, namely: Learning, Program Experience, and Quality. This is not surprising given that the questions posed in the three-stage interview process for each participant revolved around: past and current conceptions of learning; descriptions of the PhD program and participant learning experiences within it; and perceptions of quality in the context of a participant's learning experience. As a result, the thematic narratives for each case participant will be grouped under the headings of: Learning, Program Experience, and Quality. These thematic headings reappear in the graphic summaries where the reader will find a visual representation of relationships between themes. Each emerging theme within a case is connected to one, or more, of the three thematic headings. Solid lines indicate strong links between themes, or thematic headings, and dashed lines indicate weak links between them. The placement and strength of links in each graphic summary are determined by how the themes emerged across the three interviews with each PhD candidate. For instance, when speaking about learning, several themes may have been emphasized which subsequently re-emerge when speaking specifically about the program experience. These themes are then linked to both thematic headings (learning and program experience). The graphic summary serves as an overall visual of each case and the themes presented in the respective narratives. Themes presented in the graphic summaries have been bolded in the text for easier reference.

Lukas.

Participant Profile.

Lukas was born in Yugoslavia and moved to Canada briefly during his childhood before settling in the United States. He was homeschooled during his elementary years and was

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deemed advanced as tested by the American school system. Because of his high test scores, Lukas was granted the opportunity to take college-level credits as of 10 years of age and completed the equivalent of an associate's degree (community college) before transitioning to university at age 16. Following his schooling in the United States, Lukas returned to Canada to begin a PhD. Dissatisfied with his experience after a few years at a first institution, Lukas changed over to the University of Ottawa to complete his PhD.

Lukas became interested in the field of geography at age 16 because of a professor. This professor demonstrated a passion for the subject and was particularly critical of the processes in the field and current global issues. Lukas shared that this professor's passion was contagious and was a driver for his continued study in geography. While Lukas found schooling easy, he shared that he needed to develop note-taking skills when entering university and that there was a brief adjustment period for him given that the instructional approaches used at this level necessitated more independence than what he was used to in earlier schooling.

Interest in eventually becoming a professor was what drove Lukas to enroll in the PhD program. Given that geography had been his field of study, he felt that this was the most intuitive area of inquiry to develop disciplinary rigour and eventually teach.

Thematic Narrative.

Learning.

Learning for Lukas seemed to carry two distinct descriptions. While he was adamant that learning boiled down to memorization, as the first interview progressed Lukas spoke to

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more nuanced notions of subjectivity, reflection and production of knowledge in terms of his beliefs about learning.

Lukas felt strongly that **memorization** was a central part of learning. An example of a learning experience shared by Lukas related to an early typing lesson where he was encouraged to develop a poem to help learn the placement of the keyboard keys – based on memorization. This really stuck with Lukas as a powerful learning experience and he remembers the poem to this day. Lukas commented that given his view of learning and the importance of memorization in this process, he felt that learning also consisted of “exposure” to new knowledge in order to memorize it. Prompted to explain his use of the term exposure, Lukas pondered about the concept saying: “Exposure versus learning – like, what’s the different, you know. If learning is only a matter of gaining information, then maybe it’s just exposure to ideas, or exposure to methodologies, or exposure to other stuff. I don’t know.”

Following the introduction of the Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and its various stages, Lukas shared that learning likely takes place at the reflection stage after a disorienting dilemma, which to him largely consisted of exposure to something new or different. Lukas felt that maybe one needs time to consider new concepts or ideas before any learning happens. He noted that there were instances when his supervisor, and scholars at disciplinary conferences, engaged him in discussions about the benefits and drawbacks of specific disciplinary approaches and ideas, and how this solicited a form of **critical reflection** that enabled him to gain a point of view on something and influence his perspective about it. Lukas highlighted one instance when a professor spoke about the integration of interactive technologies in teaching as an approach to engage students. He felt that the resulting discussion enabled him to reflect

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on the implications of integrating technology in formal learning and view active learning more favourably. However, his views regarding the integration of technology in teaching remained unchanged – in that the integration of technology was not necessary to enhance student learning.

In terms of knowledge, Lukas suggested that his experiences in the PhD program enabled him to transition between consuming knowledge to becoming a **producer of knowledge**. This said, Lukas stated that he had not really thought about the learning process before and that it is easiest to equate learning to memorization. Lukas suggested that this was something that he was particularly successful at which may be why it is so central in his view of learning.

A final thread that wove through Lukas' comments about learning, revolved around how his learning flourished when around those who were **passionate educators** and disciplinarians. Lukas shared the significant influence that a particular professor had on his learning. He said that this professor not only made learning interesting and fun, but that he encouraged his students to challenge themselves by questioning what they knew and how they knew it. About this professor, Lukas indicated that he "enjoyed how the professor was critical, he taught real stuff that is often not mentioned and... all sorts of critical topics and ways of thinking about them."

Program Experience.

By far, the characteristic that has marked Lukas' PhD program experience the most has been his interactions with his **supervisor**. This theme was immediately brought to the fore as

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Lukas described his experiences where he began his PhD studies before transitioning to the University of Ottawa. Lukas noted that he lived a great deal of tension with his supervisor at this former institution because of unclear and changing expectations and insufficient guidance. This experience led to Lukas' firm belief that the role of the supervisor, and their availability in supporting their students in pushing boundaries, has a clear impact on how much the student will be able to "take away from the program". Just as learning is subjective, Lukas mentioned that the program experience could look quite different based on the approach and commitment of the student's supervisor. Since transitioning to the University of Ottawa, Lukas' program experience has been more stable. He credits this in large part to clearer expectations and communication with his supervisor.

The second theme that had a particularly positive influence on Lukas was the **social and community building** component of the PhD program that was often seen as informal and unofficial. Lukas felt strongly that the PhD learning experience could not only be comprised of a cognitive component. There is great importance in the student life piece. He said, "Students are human and have a social side - we are not robots and develop from being social." Examples shared by Lukas included his experience playing on a departmental volleyball team and going camping with the incoming student cohort as a team-building exercise. In Lukas' view, community building is important and enhances the learning environment along with the general happiness of program community members.

On a less positive note, Lukas also characterized both his earlier and recent PhD program experiences as ones where an agenda favouring research productivity was clearly prioritized over the time and energy spent on student learning and advising. He posited that a

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professor could have poor teaching and advising skills, but that if they had grants and produced strong research then no concern would be raised. He said that “quality **research can trump quality teaching, learning** and advising unfortunately”. In essence, Lukas emphasized that one (research) can come at the cost of the quality of the other (teaching).

Lastly, Lukas mentioned that the opportunity to **gain teaching experience** was a catalyst to enrol in the program. Teaching experience to him consisted of how to lecture and interact with students, presentation skills, how to develop exams, and use rubrics to grade. Lukas further expressed concern that few experiences of this sort emerged in his program and that even teaching assistantship opportunities seemed rare. He felt that he was not alone and that many of his fellow PhD students did not get to develop and practice their teaching skills either.

Quality.

As way of a first thought, Lukas suggested that the quality of the PhD program is reflected by the quality of the people that you bring in. “The student should already be a good one if he or she is admitted”. Upon further reflection, Lukas shared a broader institutional level perspective stating that “the university wants to milk money from students and **mill out diplomas**”. Lukas felt that the institution seems to define quality by the number of diplomas that it confers. It defines success by having high enrolment, high graduation rates, and high **research output**. Lukas mentioned that he feels the institution is focused on these quantitative factors more than on the student learning experience.

Following the presentation of Harvey and Green’s definitions of quality in higher education and a question about the relevance of student transformation as an indicator to

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quality, Lukas remarked that he did not see transformation as very relevant. Lukas particularly saw the concept of **empowerment**, embedded in Harvey and Green's definition of transformation, as problematic. He commented that he does not see how a student could be empowered by getting a diploma.

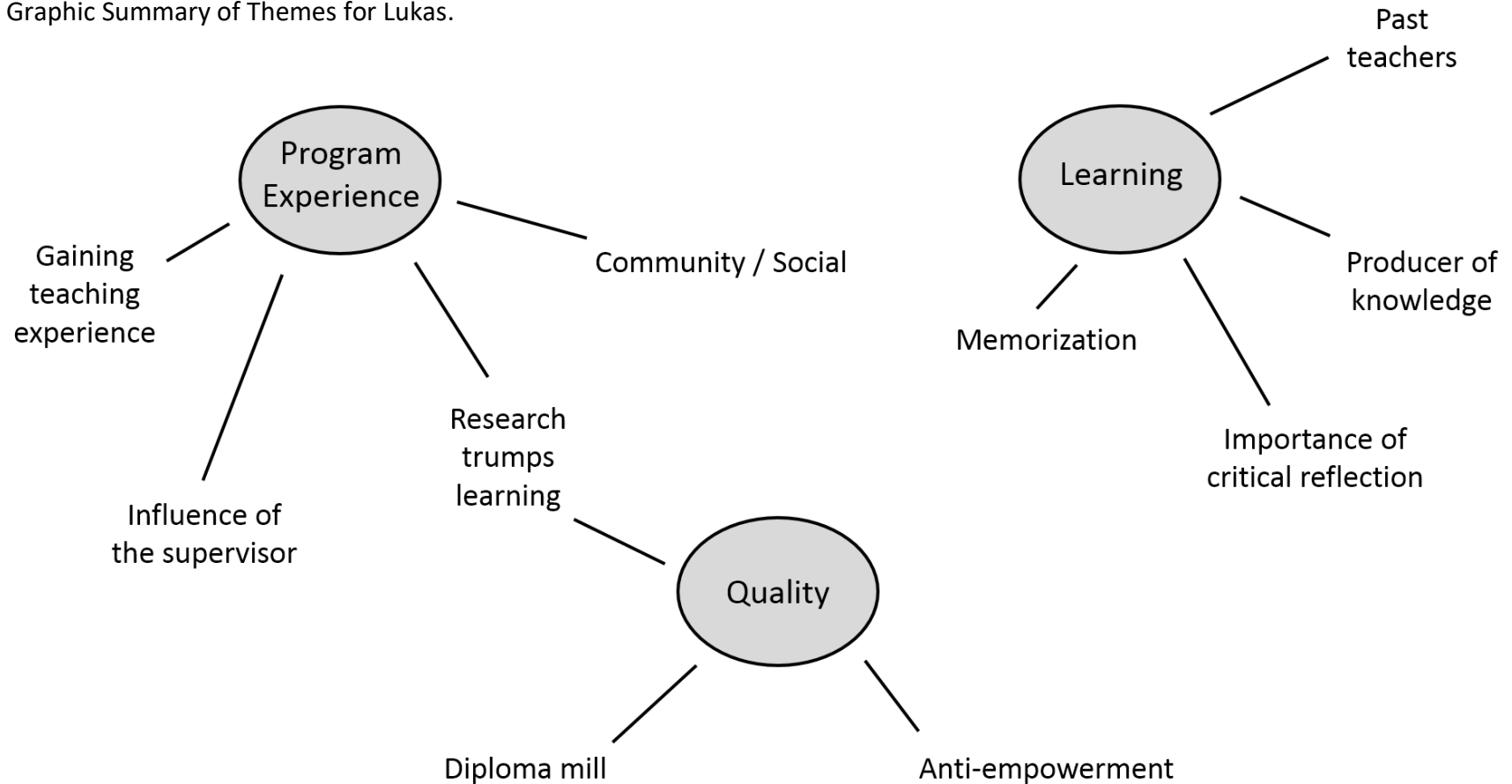
I don't like the word empowering. It seems like a fluff word to me with a focus on feelings and political correctness. It is like the government and elementary school boards who 'empower' kids to make them believe that they are all great and none of them can fail.

Lukas felt that the word empowerment aligned with getting students "out the door" faster. If you can lead students to believe that they have achieved something by going through the motions of the program, he felt it might aid in graduating more of them.

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Figure 2

Graphic Summary of Themes for Lukas.



With regards to the interconnections between themes within Lukas' narrative, only his view regarding how research trumps teaching emerged. Lukas shared that he observed evidence of this throughout his program experience, which led him to believe that notions of quality were primarily focused on research over teaching and learning.

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Leslie.

Participant Profile.

Leslie attended school in the 1970's and shared that her health played a big role in her learning as food intolerances led to behavioural issues. While she had straight A grades, she was not where her peers were developmentally. Overall, though, her feelings about learning and school were positive. Leslie mentioned that she "absorbed concepts well" and was an intelligent child, but that she was not as emotionally mature as her peers. She dropped out of secondary school in grade 10 as she was bored and quite angry. Later, she found out that her undiagnosed food intolerances played a significant role in this decision and in wellness at school.

Leslie moved to the province of British Columbia and gained "life learning experiences" which consisted of interacting with others and seeing the world. These experiences helped frame how Leslie thought about things and how she saw nuances in concepts and in her surroundings. Later, Leslie came back to Hull, Québec to enter CEGEP (a level of schooling similar to community college). She loved this educational experience as teachers treated her like a young adult and she felt respected. However, not long after Leslie got bored again and dropped out. She enrolled at Algonquin College for a short period and once again dropped out. While Leslie loved the structure that schooling imposed which is likely what had her keep trying new programs, she felt that the education system had failed her. She was good at learning what she needed to learn, "but could not retain it."

Moving back to British Columbia Leslie worked and began completing course credits part-time at a local college. She eventually was accepted at a university with her transfer credits

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and got her first taste of linguistics. Leslie continued her schooling in Ottawa via an MA, then a PhD, because of conditions set by courts for her to keep custody of her child. She received significant funding which served as a catalyst to stay within the program. Leslie also felt that getting a PhD would be a way to begin teaching which she aspired to do.

Thematic Narrative.

Learning.

Health issues were central to Leslie's learning experiences in her youth and impeded her ability to focus. She suggested that food intolerances contributed to her difficulty in regulating emotions and ultimately led to behavioural issues. Once these health issues were resolved, primarily after her bachelor's degree, Leslie felt more open to learning. This progressed in her Master's degree as she came to the realization that she had been a passive learner and was increasingly becoming more active in terms of her approach to learning. Leslie stated:

I have realized that I've been quite passive in the past. And if anything, what's changed is that if I want to learn something, I need to take a more active role. Not just sit back and follow or jump through the hoops that I'm asked to jump through but actually take a **more active approach**. And learn it for my own sake and not for the sake of the meeting or the – you know, syllabus.

Rather than seeking to gain knowledge for the purposes of assessment and getting good grades, Leslie began pursuing topics and explored new concepts with the goal of enhanced understanding and more actively **challenging** her existing thinking and practices.

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Following the introduction of the TLT in the second interview, Leslie shared that:

this does change my view of learning. It is interesting and I will think about it in the context of my learning much more. Embracing the disorienting dilemma is OK. Accepting **cognitive dissonance** is natural and part of the learning process.

Cognitive dissonance, which Leslie described as tensions and contradictions in her understanding of things that emerged in the learning process, were common for Leslie and this produced anxiety for her. Leslie expressed some relief at seeing the disorienting dilemma in Mezirow's phases of transformation. Leslie concluded that:

I do see learning as **transformative and developmental** in the sense that I can apply my learning in other aspects of my life - that it can be integrated. [...] I feel that a change in perspective outlined by the phases is **critical for transformation to occur**.

Lastly, Leslie pointed to the positive influence that certain **past teachers** had on her. These were the teachers that treated her like an adult, who made her feel respected, and who were inspirational in their passion of the topic and for learning in general. Leslie shared that she still thinks of these teachers and their passion for learning as she finalizes her PhD.

Program Experience.

During her PhD experience over the past six years, Leslie noted that she had excellent grades, had uninterrupted funding, presented at international conferences, and published articles. However, in reality she had been struggling for the majority of her doctoral journey. On more than one occasion, she had gotten sidetracked in terms of topics, change in supervision,

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and changes in committee members. Leslie stated that the **checks and balances** were never in place within the program to track and support her progress. “[...] in many ways this program failed me, or I failed it,” she exclaimed. Leslie was adamant that there should be better support early on and throughout the program to ensure that students are adequately following the timeline and that they all have active supervisors and functioning committees. She said, “I shouldn’t have to fight for my own progress every step of the way”. Given the changes that Leslie experienced between supervisors and having to find a new one, she felt that **little guidance** was ever provided to her, either by any one faculty member or by the program itself. She indicated: “I was pushed to meet milestones, and following the comp. exams [was] left entirely on my own.” Leslie mentioned that this experience was a significant barrier to her moving through the program in a timely fashion and completing within the established **timelines** of 4 years. She shared that she knew of many other fellow PhD students in her program that had similar issues with timelines. Even with a supervisor, she said that these PhD colleagues were pushed to complete the program in 5 years, but often completed it in 6-7 years.

Of the challenges lived by Leslie, the one that she still battles with and continuously seeks to overcome is an “**imposter syndrome**”. She commented:

I really felt misplaced when arriving into the [PhD] program. I was one of the strongest students in my classes, but coming into the PhD program where everyone was ‘smart’ was a shock – what am I doing here? My old type of learning was ‘invalidated’. I would have to work hard to validate myself and prove that I’m not an imposter by the end of the program. Perhaps a successful defence will validate.

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Leslie felt that she was different from her student colleagues, she had not had the same experience leading to this degree and she was struggling through the program due to lack of guidance stemming from changes in supervision, the delayed creation of a proposal committee, and limited communication and check-ins with her current supervisor who had recently changed institutions. Leslie acknowledged that the intended program experience was likely to develop independent scholars that would take ownership of their learning and manage their own program journey. However, she saw this as a double-edged sword in that she had certainly become more autonomous, but at the cost of becoming very isolated.

On a positive note, Leslie shared that the program experience served as a **catalyst for transformation** in terms of her approach to, and understanding of, the field of linguistics as well as her approach to learning. She stated:

I came into the program in a prescriptivist way and now am about to leave the program with an understanding of linguistics in a descriptivist way, with no rights or wrongs. My learning has afforded me a much more nuanced view about people and concepts.

One of the catalysts in question, “was being around, and **being challenged** and pushed by, disciplinarians and eventually a supervisor. Challenge has been an important push for learning to occur.”

Lastly, Leslie mentioned that social events and networking opportunities with experts served as inspiring program experiences and **catalysts for her transformation**. These countered much of the isolation that she was experiencing. She noted that social opportunities and events **build community** and are key to a vibrant program-level community. Vibrant and engaging

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environments in turn attract good faculty and students. In comparison to other institutions that she had attended and visited, Leslie felt that in her department most professors either worked with their doors shut or were not there. This, in her view, was detrimental to the community building momentum.

Quality.

In terms of the institution's intent around quality education, Leslie shared that it was difficult to speak to that level as she saw the faculty/program and professor levels being most influential to establishment both **timelines** and **checks and balances** that enable successful completion of the program. Leslie felt that quality at any level was likely defined in multiple ways – “a mixed bag”. One possible definition was the **development and transformation** of the student, however, her transformation made her more critical of the institution itself and the education she received.

When discussing TLT and transformation as a defining characteristic of higher education, Leslie mentioned that this concept seemed quite student-centric. The notion of **transformation of the discipline** should somehow be integrated in these concepts. In her view, the purpose of higher education should not just be student transformation, it should be broader and should foster continuous transformation of disciplinary ideas. Leslie stated that:

the discipline needs to grow and change and be transformed too [...] It has to go through its own transformative process and transforming students is an integral part of that so I think there's an interplay there. Higher education is—is a place for us to share ideas and grow the discipline, right? Learn more about what we don't know. And so it's not just

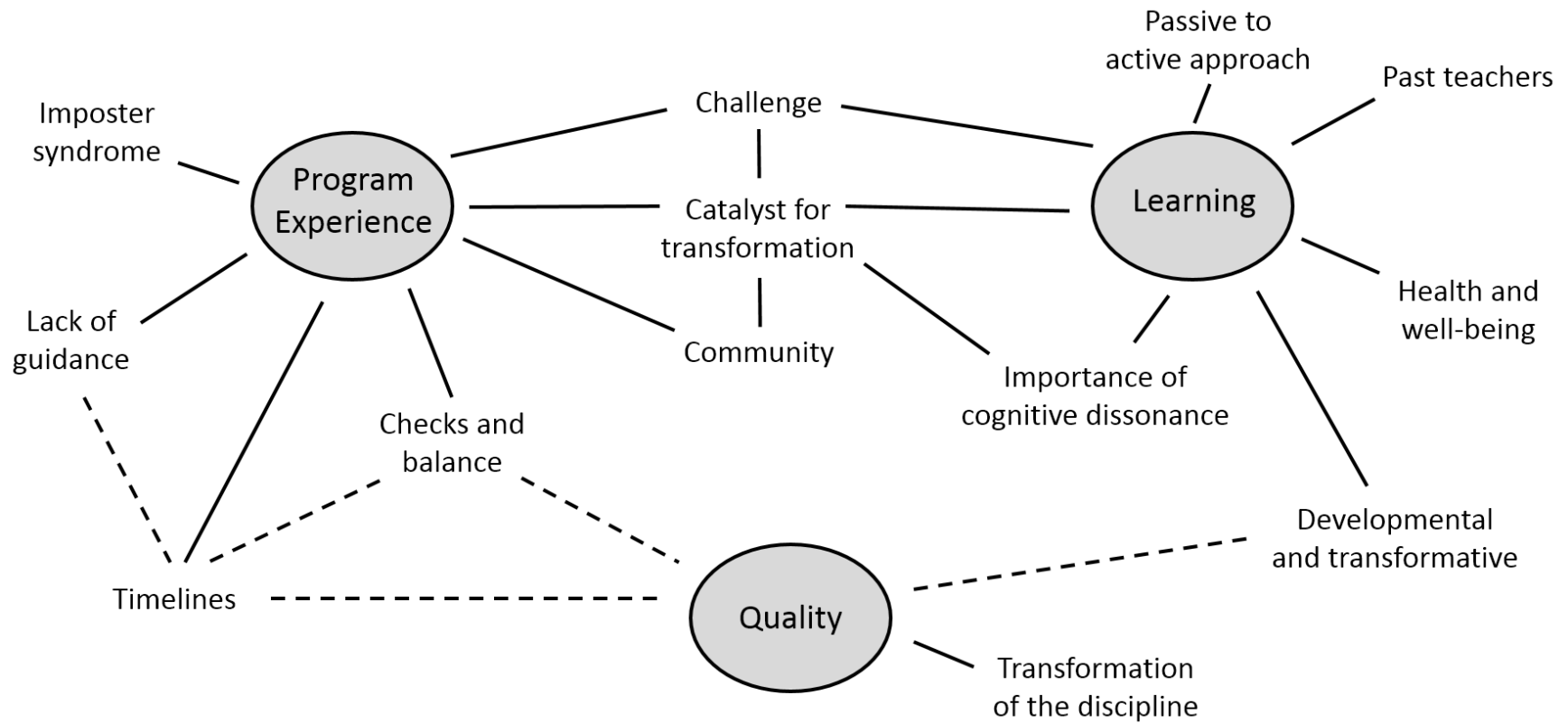
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the learner that's transformed, it's the discipline. So I think that's really important and missing here.

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Figure 3

Graphic Summary of Themes for Leslie.



Predominant links between Leslie's themes related to the interconnection between issues of guidance and the lack of checks and balances within the program, each negatively affecting her progress with respect to program timelines. An interplay was also observed regarding catalysts for transformation in the program, which led to learning. These were directly associated to being challenged in her learning and experiencing a sense of community. Equally of note was Leslie's view of learning as a developmental and transformative experience, which was tangentially linked to her ideal view of the nature of quality.

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Kyle.

Participant Profile.

Kyle grew up in a rural area and went to school with only two dozen other children from junior kindergarten to grade 8. Growing up in the countryside featured a lot of exploring, making up games, and forced Kyle to be creative. For his secondary-level schooling, he went to a large Catholic school with a student population of about 1100, but this school community was equally close knit. At home, Kyle was the youngest of three siblings and learned a lot from them. High standards were set for him as all other siblings had high grades and pursued university degrees. Kyle shared that “the idea of grad school was definitely not out of the norm.”

Thinking ahead to his aspired professional stream in sport science, Kyle felt that a PhD was the quickest means to get there, rather than a series of professional certificates and additional training.

Kyle fast-tracked from the Master’s program straight into the PhD. During the second year of his PhD program, he lived in Copenhagen for his data collection phase as his supervisor was there on sabbatical. Through the university, he also experienced being a lecturer in Austria for a few months and working with other researchers in Bologna, Italy. From these experiences, he mentioned learning a lot about networking, about how others across the world run their labs, and about how to better contextualize Canadian work in his discipline in a global context.

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Thematic Narrative.

Learning.

Kyle had a lot to say about learning. He felt that his approach to learning at present is quite different to his approach in his youth. Up until late in his undergraduate degree, his learning approach focused largely on memorization for tests and other evaluations. Near the end of that degree, he began shifting to a view of learning characterized as one “about understanding and being able to apply this understanding to different contexts and eventually create something new.” This shift came to be as Kyle no longer believed that there was “a black or white understanding of knowledge with very defined right answers”. He began to see **knowledge as more fluid and contextual.**

Kyle exclaimed that “learning has got to be **developmental**. We start with a blank slate and learn by doing, experiencing, and **being challenged**. [...] If one is not evolving in their understanding and skillset, they are not growing.” Following an introduction to the TLT, Kyle commented that “it seems that TLT assumes that you have a frame of reference and that you can develop from that point, perhaps the blank slate already has something on it”.

Referencing TLT, Kyle noted that having a disorienting dilemma is not necessarily a bad thing as he once thought it might be and is often necessary to advance. He highlighted how he has particularly grown to appreciate the importance of being able to view things from different perspectives and that this can hold different answers.

The TLT reminded Kyle of the **scientific method** where one accepts or rejects a given hypothesis. For instance, he said:

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For the effectiveness of a type of knee surgery [...] perhaps we would find that it is not effective, counter to the prevailing beliefs and that we need to reflect, undergo this discourse, and reintegrate different views.

This thought led Kyle to a concern about the transformative phases presented by TLT. He shared that it often seems that humans love compartmentalizing and categorizing things, even how learning occurs, and that he wants to be able to become self-aware of when he is exhibiting this trait. This is important, as Kyle shared, because he needs to be mindful that he is not “P-value hunting” in the process of learning. He does not want to find himself going back to “question variables” if he does not achieve the expected result. He commented, “perhaps what I most needed to learn has already taken place, even if inconvenient or not representative of the norm.”

Lastly, Kyle felt strongly that the most meaningful learning does not always take place in formal settings and that for him important learning instances took place at conferences and disciplinary **social** events where Kyle became acquainted with other researchers who were doing the same thing in different ways or who were doing different things using similar methodologies. These opportunities often led to new insights.

Program Experience.

As for the intended student learning experience, Kyle indicated that his experience was largely dependent on his **supervisor**. In general terms he shared that “the advisor could be more hands-on, more guided or not. The advisor can often control how and when a student would go through the learning phases.” Kyle shared that he had very good experiences with his

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supervisor and that the latter took the time to guide him as little or as much as needed along his journey. Kyle mentioned that he felt he had grown within the program and that his growth as a scholar, author and a learner was “emphasized and nurtured the most by my advisor.”

Beyond supervision and in terms of the way the program was structured, Kyle emphasized the importance of **challenging** students. He said, “to achieve excellence, students need to be pushed outside of their comfort zone. Broadly speaking, being prepared to be questioned and challenged, and evolve in terms of ability to reflect critically.”

Kyle felt that the listed objectives of the program, particularly to prepare students to become **independent** researchers, was quite accurate. For instance, “knowing how to ask your research question, how to attempt to answer that research question, how to validly collect the data, how to do the analysis and like—come to conclusions and how to disseminate those conclusions. [...] how to present at conferences.” He commented that the emphasis made on autonomy has been very present. In fact, he did not quite foresee how independent and often slow moving the work would be. This was a catalyst for him to learn to better organize himself and take control of his timelines. Kyle stated that:

it’s more independent than what I would have expected. I’d probably say it’s slower than I would have expected because it takes so long to get anything done. Either, it might be administration, [...] waiting for the committee to get back but it’s summer so they’re on holidays. [...] or it takes a lot more time to understand something and then apply that to a different situation.

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In terms of outcomes of the program thus far, Kyle indicated that the PhD experience has provided him with a great deal in terms of outcomes. Chief among the list of outcomes is confidence. Kyle described this as “defeating the **imposter syndrome**” - gaining confidence in yourself, in your capacity, in your data, in your methods and being better able to stand behind these. He shared, “I am more confident personally now and about my ideas. [...] I think that’s what the PhD is all about, it is humbling. This program has been a growth experience”

Quality.

The institution does not seem to describe quality and how it seeks to transform us, remarked Kyle, “I believe that this is left to the advisor. The institution seems to take a hands-off approach. Students seem to pick a school based on the advisor, not just the school.”

Kyle felt that the university was not explicit about its stated objectives or student outcomes. “I don’t believe these are clear and well known by faculty or students.” He felt that the determination of purpose of the program journey and the objectives for the PhD students is mostly set at the **supervisor** level. Overall, Kyle concluded that he felt the university’s notion of quality as demonstrated by institutional communications and the actions of the program and supervisor **matched his perceptions of quality** higher education. He shared that student transformation and **development** was part of this.

Lastly, Kyle noted the importance of **publications** as part of the program and a quality journey through it. He said, “if a student’s work isn’t published it may put into question the quality of their data and their capacity as a scholar”. He specified that it may also speak to the quality of the program if many students are not publishing. Kyle believed that this was the case

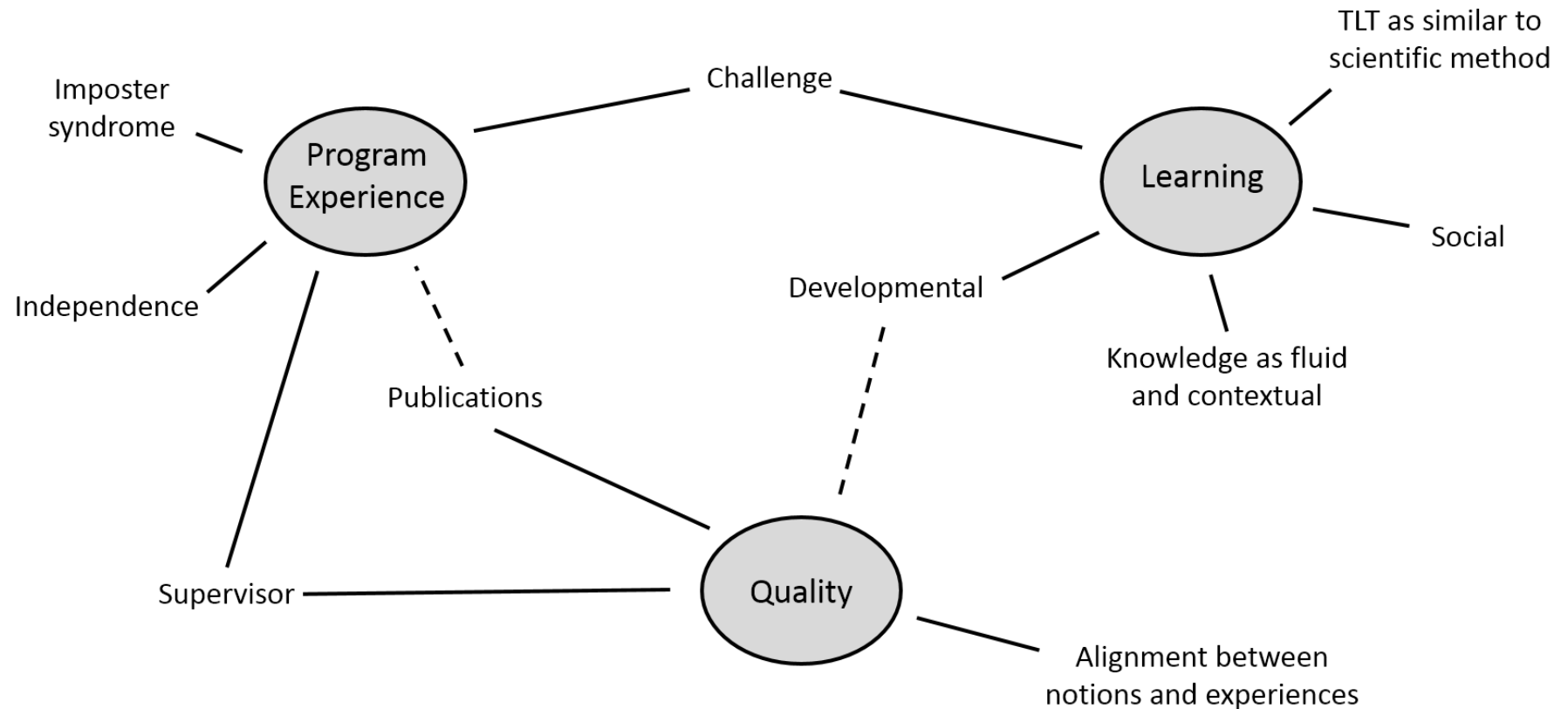
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“especially in sciences. Like your publication list is your currency. It’s like you don’t get funding if you’re not publishing.”

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Figure 4

Graphic Summary of Themes for Kyle.



With regards to thematic interconnections, Kyle viewed the role of the supervisor as directly related to a quality experience. He equally associated quality with the ability to produce publications in good journals, which he felt was a secondary objective of his PhD program. Challenge was something that Kyle saw as essential to effective learning and as a constructive part of his program experience. While defining learning as a developmental process, Kyle also saw this as a suitable definition of quality, among others.

Chen.

Participant Profile.

Chen came from China to complete her PhD in Canada about four years ago. For this transition, Chen had her husband and children move to Canada along with her, which has made for a growth experience for the whole family. She feels that the culture of learning in Canada is quite different from the learning experiences she has had in China. She felt that the focus of learning in her youth and in her workplace in China were about the transmission of information and memorization with very little critical thinking and application of concepts or skills.

Schooling for Chen was focused almost exclusively on knowledge acquisition and getting the highest possible grades. This approach changed slightly for Chen in her undergraduate studies where she was exposed to social initiatives such as clubs, sports, leadership, and collaborative learning opportunities; however, this remained a small amount of her undergraduate experience.

Chen completed her Bachelor and Master's degrees in China before entering the workforce as a researcher for a telephone chip company where she worked for 9 years. Chen decided to enrol in the PhD program to gain a deeper and more profound understanding of the theory underpinning her sub-area of engineering and build a greater methodological skillset. Before Chen began the PhD program she expected that the program would be about the development of research skills, would allow her to publish in her research area, and allow her to go on to higher paying job prospects back in China. So far, she believes her expectations have been met.

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It should be noted that Chen had only been working on her English language fluency since arriving in Canada for the PhD program. At times it was difficult to fully comprehend some of the ideas expressed by Chen during the interviews. The researcher summarized his understanding of Chen's response to each question to help ensure accuracy. This was further validated by Chen's review of the narrative summary following each interview.

Thematic Narrative.

Learning.

Chen stated that her past schooling experiences still influence her approach to learning to this day. She shared: "I like exams and am good at this, but the why... the creative and application components of learning are key. I now realize this". Before her experiences here in Canada, Chen mentioned that her view of learning was about reading to acquire new knowledge. In her youth, the focus was on rote memorization, processing of information and achieving high grades. Chen felt that her learning approach until recently was influenced both by her formal educational experiences in China and by the nature of the topics that she either worked at or studied. "In my discipline of computer engineering there is often a 'solid answer' with no real gray zone" commented Chen. It has been hard for her to **become more active** and **independent** in her learning. Chen mentioned that she often falls back into her "previous way of thinking" in terms of looking up and memorizing ready-made solutions to problems or definitions of concepts. Rather than passively memorize or follow instructions, Chen recognizes the need to develop independent problem-solving skills.

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As she completes the writing of her PhD dissertation, Chen shared that she sees learning as a process of becoming more skilled and **independent**. She sees it as active, efficient and autonomous and states that effective learning consists of using one's own ability, and engaging appropriate support when needed, to get ever better solutions. Support in this context consisted of reaching out to one's **social network** such as one's supervisor, other professors, and fellow students. Chen mentioned:

Independently [doing] the research, results, methods. It's most important for learning. You should not [be] dependent on the supervisor. You should not [be] dependent on other persons. But, at the same time, if you find difficulty, do not focus just by yourself [...]. Go outside to talk with others, you know, persons, papers, conference.

Following the presentation of the TLT, Chen indicated that the parts of the model that resonated most with her were the flexibility and transformative potential of the habits of mind and points of view. She commented that her changing environment, especially her move to Canada and resulting **culture shock**, has served as a catalyst for the transformation of her points of view, and maybe even habits of mind. Chen stated:

You have [a] new study, new culture, [new] environment, so something happened. I think [these] influence most in the habit[s] of mind and point[s] of view. [...] When you are born, it's hard to change. But I think my contact with my PhD program [has] changed the habits of mind—like my view [about] how to do the research.

The theory itself does not change how she views learning, she said "it makes sense". Chen felt that different phases described by the TLT model were more **influential at different stages** in

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her life and in her studies. For instance, in her earlier elementary and secondary learning experiences, learning was less about critical reflection and discourse – “you tell me the answers [and] we accept unconditionally”. In these earlier learning experiences, it seems as though some steps in the model were simply ignored, she felt it was less about transformation. Her PhD experience has been different. Chen remarked that it has been far more focussed on the integration of knowledge and skills. All steps in the theory have been relevant to her most recent learning experiences. She enumerated these when sharing:

Research is just like the four stages, you know. If I have some difficulty, like the first stage, I [have] a dilemma. And the second, I independently think, you know, reflection to find [...] the right resolution of something wrong or if I’m wrong. So it’s like a personal [...] reflection. And the third one, [...] I can ask and [discuss] from outside. The last one,—I find the solution [to the] research problem.

By the end of the program, Chen mentioned that she has high expectations regarding the transformation of certain habits, such as how one conducts research and working autonomously as an independent researcher. She has already begun seeing changes in herself as a scholar who **takes a more active approach** to the independent resolution of issues that emerge in her research by broadening her search for solutions and speaking with others, rather than simply requesting a solution from her supervisor.

Program Experience.

The intended student learning experience, as set by the university, is likely not about changing one’s view of learning but about ensuring students pass program requirements and

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complete important milestones, shared Chen. She said that adequate achievement of the milestones is largely interpreted by the student's supervisor and that the nature of their **guidance** is a large factor in how the PhD program is experienced.

A significant outcome of the program for Chen has been developing "a new way of thinking [regarding] **independent working skills**". Chen spoke about the program enabling her to work on her skills related to research methodologies and writing, develop confidence in herself and be able to enact her new research and writing skills independently. Chen further explained her view of being independent as not needing her supervisor to tell her what papers to read and what to take away from each paper. This type of guidance represents "passive" learning in her view. She now prefers to increasingly make these choices on her own in order to take on a more "active" approach to her learning.

An additional characteristic of what Chen found influential and enjoyable in her program experience was the **social interaction**. Beyond the courses and support in the development of technical knowledge in the field, were informal conversations with colleagues within and outside of her discipline along with exchanges that occurred in PhD seminars and symposia. She mentioned that the cumulation of informal experiences complemented the formal ones, and were quite important in her development as both an independent researcher and a capable collaborator. Chen shared: "For example, I [was] stuck [on] a topic at the beginning of this year. And I have [a] friend [...] she's a math major and I [spoke] about my difficulty [with her] and she give me [new] idea[s]. So cool."

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As Chen wraps up her program, the major anticipated outcome of the PhD is the development of **confidence**. For her, confidence grew in her approach to break down and analyze research and move ahead with her study independently, and to competently engage and collaborate with other experts. Chen noted the importance of one's advisor in this process and that often the value of confidence in research is underestimated.

Quality.

Chen suggested that the university should “**be more about transformation**”. That the focus be more on the development of expert problem-solving skills, working independently, and an emphasis on the human connection that makes collaborative problem solving work most effectively. While transformation is a noble goal, Chen felt that it would be hard for universities to achieve without the revision of program milestones to incorporate the concept more fully. “There should be more **guidance** around [and between the] milestones [...] am I on the right track”.

Incongruity between institutional and student notions of quality is normal, stated Chen. What's important to students may be different to that of the institution. This may account for some of the incongruity and some possible contradictions. The university has different requirements and pressures from a number of sources that the student may not see or be aware of, particularly as pertains to enrolment and graduate targets. This said, Chen noted that ideally the **notions of quality should be closer aligned** between the university and student perspectives and that institutions should work toward this goal. Similar notions of quality would

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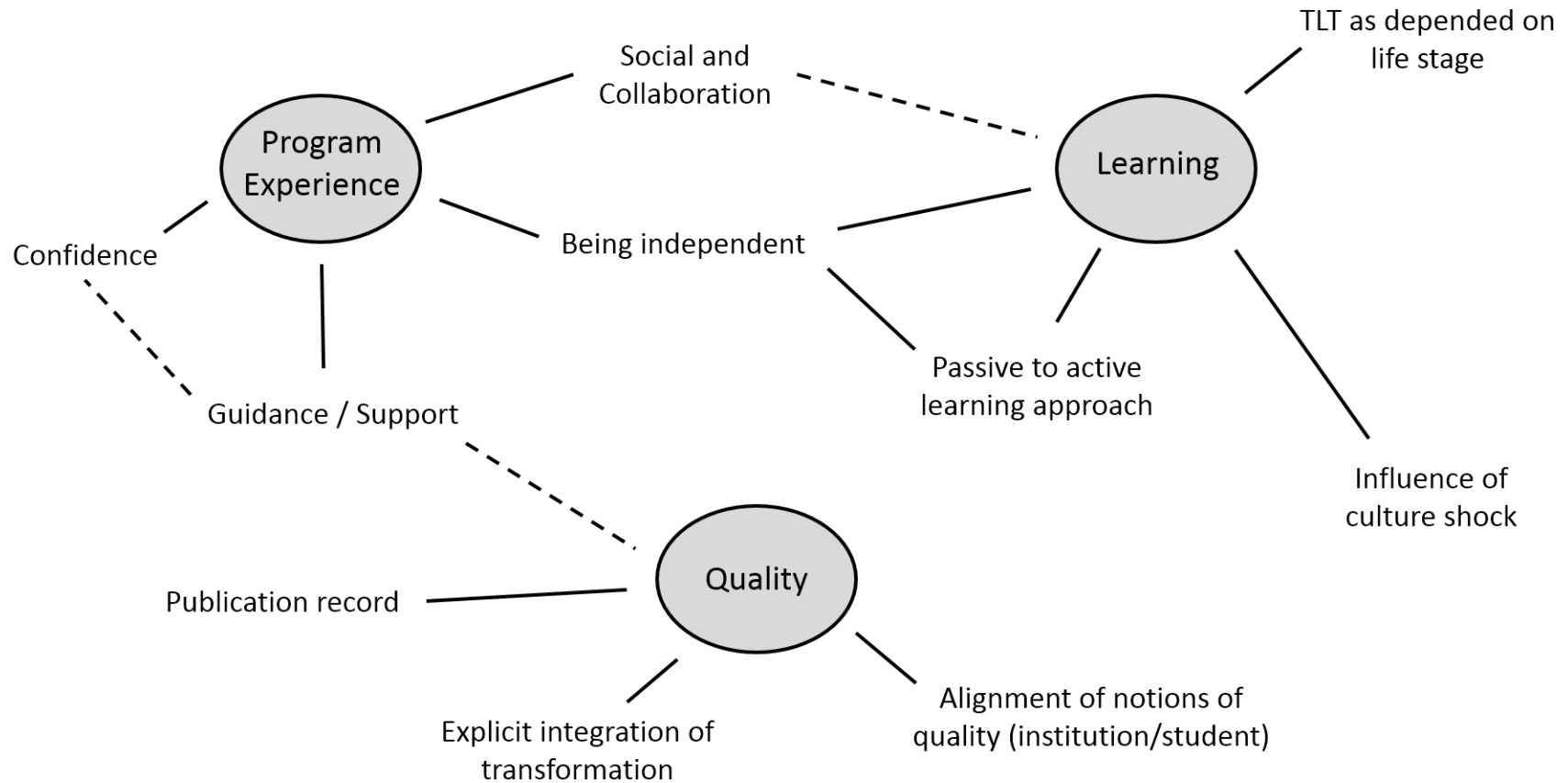
be more productive and likely yield better results for the achievement of goals and outcomes for both institution and student, shared Chen.

In terms of indicators of quality, Chen indicated that a program experience yielding a good **publication record** was certainly favourable. She specified that the number of publications, citations, and whether articles are published in good journals was important to her as it was valued by her supervisor. Chen also felt that a student's publication record speaks to the quality of a program's students and of the program itself. She commented that some supervisors in her program are of the mind that if "you published at least four paper[s], okay you're done. [They then] agree you will have [a] defence meeting. Otherwise, just continue [in the program]. But some supervisor[s] [are] okay [with] just publication [in] one journal, [...] with a lot of conference paper[s]."

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Figure 5

Graphic Summary of Themes for Chen.



Interconnections emerging in Chen's narrative focused on guidance and support offered by the program and her supervisor as related to quality. Increased confidence served as a main outcome of the program, as influenced by the nature of the supervision received. A second focus was the level of independence provided by the program which enabled a more autonomous and active approach to learning. Similarly, social interactions occurring in the context of the program were identified as influential to learning.

Saad.

Participant Profile.

Saad's first formal school experiences were in Saudi Arabia in a Pakistani school which was deemed a school for students from families in the lower socio-economic sphere. Saad mentioned that learning at this time was strictly a rote process and that it was about memorizing what teachers read or showed. He did not really understand the significance of what was taught or the application of this knowledge. The mindset was very grades driven. Up until grade 7, this was the only learning culture that he was exposed to which somewhat clouded his expectations about what learning was or could be. Saad felt that at that time the passive learning approach and significant pressure to get high grades adversely affected his health and emotions. He shared that he had grown overweight and had become depressed.

Saad was later accepted in an American school where there was a significant difference in approach and environment. He shared that "the school was so bright" and "opened the doors of my mind". At this school, it was all about understanding and applying concepts, with an emphasis on the act of learning. Instead of the focus on grades, the focus turned to what the student actually learned and could convey in a variety of ways. Undergraduate studies for Saad took place at the University of Maryland in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia). The school followed an American curriculum and teaching style where the focus was on literature and writing and quite similar in approach to the American secondary school. Midway through, Saad transferred to a Pakistani university in Karachi where he continued to study in English. Here courses were developed in an American style, but often taught differently. As was the case in his earlier

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schooling, teaching was very lecture-centred with a focus on grades and an emphasis on exam performance.

Saad went to the United States to complete a Master's in Information Systems where the program took a very skills-based focus. He then went back to Riyadh for a teaching job and stayed for about eight years. Following this teaching work, Saad immigrated to Canada with his wife and children for a degree in education. Given his schooling thus far, a PhD seemed to be the logical progression. With eight years of teaching experience behind him, he felt he needed a stronger grasp of learning theories in order to progress as a scholarly educator.

Thematic Narrative.

Learning.

Saad felt that his perceptions of learning had changed significantly since his childhood. Up until secondary school, he saw learning strictly as gathering and remembering as much information as possible for a test. Saad described his current view of learning as follows:

The student is taken from an initial state (point A) to a different and better one (point B). There must be a difference, an evolution, in what the student can produce in terms of research work, capacity to write good applications, like for grants and ethics, and evolve in their teaching skills, among other things. Once students pass a certain threshold, the standard should keep increasing.

Saad shared that the characteristics of reaching point B are twofold: that a student **develops and transforms** in some way; and that a student is capable of **applying the new knowledge**.

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Not only in the area it was learned in, but also apply this new knowledge and/or skill to resolve new problems or advance ideas in other areas of one's life.

The extent to which he **was challenged** was influential in Saad's learning experiences. He stated: "It's only when I was challenged that I had to sort of unlearn something and relearn or change my perspective about something. It is when I actually got value out of the exercise."

Culture shock was another influential factor that affected learning for Saad. He began the program only days after moving to Canada with his wife and children. Not only was the teaching and learning approach somewhat new to him, but the resettling process for the whole family made learning, or relearning, a challenge that extended far beyond just the PhD program.

Program Experience.

His time in the program, and more broadly in Canada, has permitted Saad to critique many of his existing beliefs and revise his thinking. Saad shared that the program made him "**more critical**" and reframed some of his habits of mind, not only about his research and his approach to teaching and learning, but also about social norms such as women's rights in Canada. Saad stated: "I started critiquing what my beliefs were before I came here. I started critiquing them and understanding, [...] [that] what I have believed so far can be wrong. I can be wrong. I need to realize that [and] revise those things that I've always thought." Of equal significance, Saad credited the program in the **development** of increased independence in his research work. He said, "I feel very empowered, in the sense of being able to do research **independently**. I feel well equipped to continue the steps independently and under ever

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reducing amounts of guidance.” While independence was not something that Saad explicitly sought to work towards, he stated that when starting the program he needed far more **guidance** than he expected and that after 4 years he felt that the program enabled him to exercise his skills and foster autonomy in his work.

Being **challenged** was an important feature of the program for Saad. He commented that PhD students need to be challenged; otherwise the experience is not of value. The journey cannot merely reaffirm what a student already knew. “For me the PhD needed to be high stakes to get the most out of it.” He felt that he learned more via his comprehensive exam experience in one month than through his year and a half in the courses that had preceded it. Saad mentioned:

I did a few mock exams - they were disastrous. [...] I was preparing for that fate [of failing]. By the end of comps, I was quite confident because I had learned so much. [...] the year of courses that I did [...] and about six to eight months doing mock comps, were [...] nothing compared to that month’s learning that I did during comprehensives. So that was for me, you know, the moment that turned it around in this program.

He really did not think that the program was going to be that challenging. He indicated, “I really needed to be pushed to get the most out of it”.

Lastly, getting into the program was quite intimidating and once in it, it was even more intimidating. Saad shared that he experienced:

a sort of **imposter syndrome** – was I good enough? I struggled through the first 6 months. [...] Sometimes students do feel overwhelmed about being in a new

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environment or just the fact that they might feel that everybody around them is so much more scholarly advanced compared to them. But I feel for myself, it was justified. I genuinely feel it [...] the jargon [...] the field itself was so new for me.

Quality.

In terms of drivers of quality, Saad commented that the institution seems disconnected from the faculty level. He said, “faculties appear to operate independently and very differently from one another. [...] Notions of quality are likely driven by the faculty and very different from one faculty to another.” When reflecting on this question, Saad mentioned that he was thinking principally about the faculty-level and not the institution as a whole when speaking about his perception of the institutional notion of quality in education. Moving from driver to influencer, Saad felt strongly that the factor that had the greatest influence on the quality of his PhD experience has been the **guidance** from his supervisor. “It is what they know, their approach and way of guiding that are important”, stated Saad. In terms of influencing quality learning and mentoring, “I think the most important thing is the kind of people the institution is hiring to teach.”

Indicators of quality brought up by Saad focused on **publication records** as a sign of productivity and rigorous research, and on **employability**. Saad continued to say “where graduates end up and what employers say about them” is likely important to the faculty and likely the institution.

Lastly, Saad emphasized that one’s determination of quality and **satisfaction with their education is relative**. Saad mentioned that his point of reference is his past experiences outside

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of Canada. As such, what is offered at the University of Ottawa in terms of the PhD program, along with the supports available to him as a student, are much better than what he has seen or experienced before.

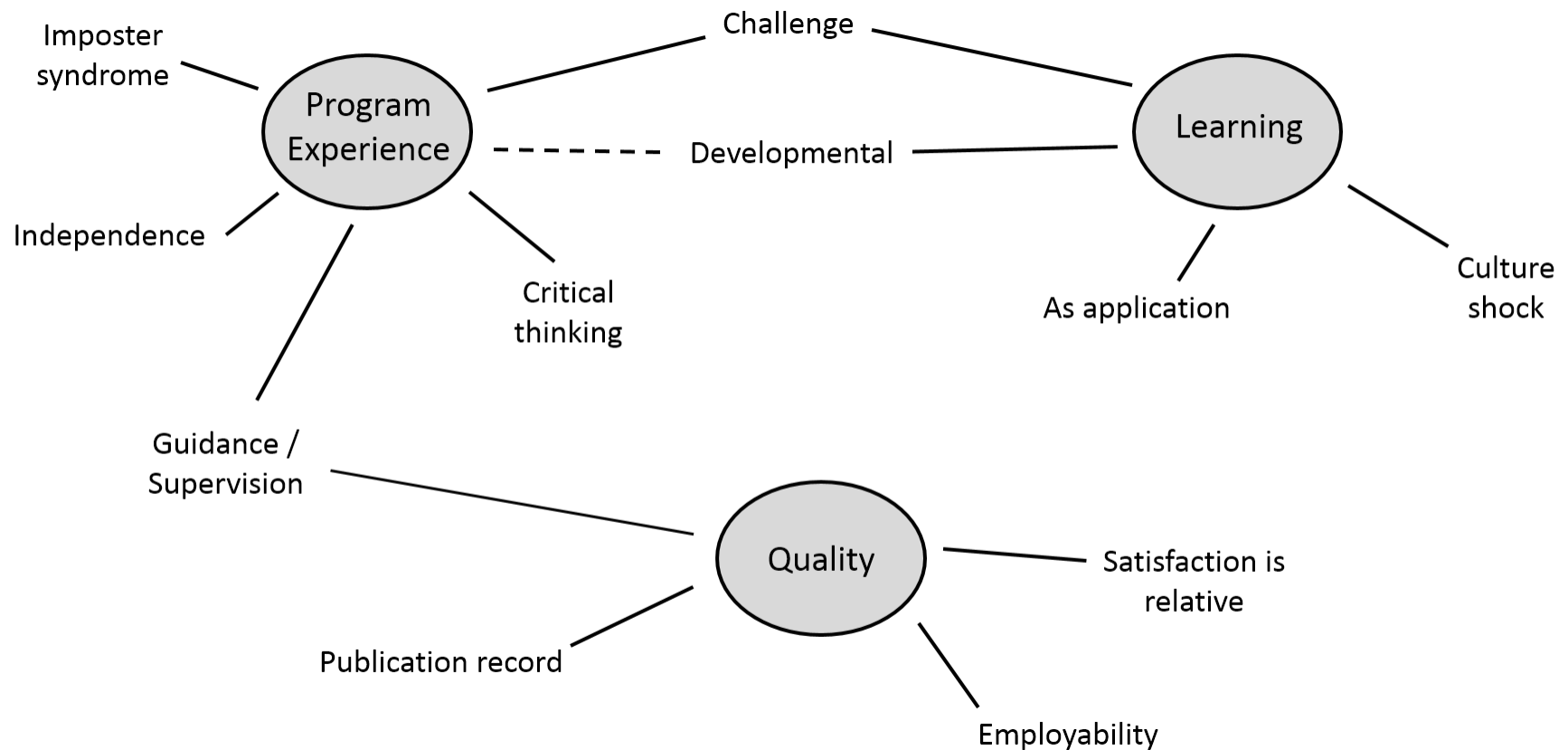
My point of reference is always where I came from. [...] The kind of services the university is providing is much better than what I've seen before, so I'm definitely going to say it's great. [...] Even if it's sort of not perfect, it's very acceptable for me.

Saad felt that perhaps some students might take the University of Ottawa context for granted given that they have not experienced many other programs outside of Canada or the Western world.

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Figure 6

Graphic Summary of Themes for Saad.



Guidance and supervision was a theme that was equally linked to both how Saad experienced the program and his view of the resulting quality of his learning experience. Being challenged by features in the program was an important part of his experience, which he credits as a principal catalyst for learning. Saad viewed learning as developmental in nature and remarked how the program, likely by design, aided in the development of his skill set and may operate with this view of learning.

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Alexander.

Participant Profile.

Alexander completed the bulk of his elementary schooling in Russia. He described this educational experience as “very formal and serious”. Along with his family, Alexander moved to Canada near the end of elementary school and entered grade 6 in an ESL class in Toronto. Alexander was particularly struck by his ability to freely move around the classroom and by the approachability of his teachers.

By grade 7/8, Alexander had acclimatized to the culture and to the language. He enjoyed the variety of classes outside of literacy and math, making mention of his freedom to take topics such as shop class. At the secondary level, Alexander moved around between several schools. During this period Alexander mentioned being absent from about 40% of classes and that behavioural issues negatively influenced his perceptions of formal learning. Following a brief time away from secondary school, Alexander came back to school as a mature student to complete his diploma. He grew fond of the teaching profession because of several teachers who encouraged and believed in him during this difficult time in his educational journey.

In his undergraduate studies, Alexander remembers attending many large classes, however, he shared that TAs often made sessions more personal by fostering discussion. He equally experienced a combination of transmission, inquiry-based and independent learning while an undergraduate student.

Following the completion of his degree, Alexander sought to become a teacher and, inspired by his past experiences, contribute to changing the educational system to better adapt

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it to student needs and experiences. Alexander never planned to enrol in graduate school. He was looking into B.Ed. programs when a career advisor encouraged him to pursue a Master's degree. Subsequently his MA supervisor encouraged him to pursue a Ph.D. Given his curiosity for his topic in education and an interest in academia, Alexander enrolled.

Thematic Narrative.

Learning.

For Alexander, "Learning is understanding and accumulating content knowledge of interest to you or that society has determined is important. It is a process of socio-emotional change and of becoming who we are. Learning is a continuous act of shaping our beliefs." This view of learning is one that Alexander has adopted over time as he shared that his view had somewhat **shifted over time** and via his experiences in education-based graduate programs. He also shared that his experiences have led him to see how there is more than one-way of doing things and learning things.

Alexander stated that learning is **developmental** and when digging further into the processes, Alexander commented that for him learning often occurs over a set of stages that he views as a state of mind. Alexander outlined these stages this way: 1- being confronted with something that does not align with one's beliefs, 2- instead of dismissing, being able to grapple and engage with it and try to learn more. To not accept everything as fact and truth, 3- Choose where you go from there and/or defend or justify one's stance. When further discussing the developmental nature of learning, Alexander equally tied in the notion of **challenge**. "During and following an experience, did the person change in any significant way? They may have

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gained more information, but that isn't enough - learners must be challenged. They don't have to accept ideas, but have to consciously engage with them".

Moving away from the mere acquisition and consumption of knowledge, Alexander noted that graduate school offered training and practice "in writing, critical thinking, ability to do research, and ability to just comprehend and process vast amounts of complex information". Learning new things now has an application and contribution component, which leads to being a **producer of knowledge**.

Program Experience.

Alexander mentioned that he viewed the PhD program as a training ground for academics. His program experience featured many aspects of what it would be like to be a professor. He shared that "in the PhD program students are to the Ontario Hockey League (OHL), what faculty members are to the National Hockey League (NHL). Students do similar types of work, but for a fraction of the income." He indicated that he feels further along in his abilities as an academic but certainly has a gap to fill to be at a tenure-track level. For him the gap consists of how to design one's course, grant writing and managing grant monies, and navigating the publishing process. "I feel like I've managed to figure it out [...] but that being said, I think the process could have been made a little more easier with assistance from the faculty." These are all areas where Alexander feels that the program is lacking and should offer **more guidance** for emerging scholars.

Alexander feels that he has learned a lot in the program, even about his **evolving learning processes**, and that it has been a life-changing experience. At the macro level, "it

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changes the way you look at life". You become **more critical** about the systems, processes and people around you as the program trains students to be critical of ideas and to be able to poke holes in their own thinking and beliefs. Alexander mentioned that a consequence of this training is that he now looks at the institution through a critical lens as well, being both a blessing and a curse. At the meso level, his writing has improved significantly, stating that he has gone from a high school drop-out to a published author. Alexander also credited the program for his improved research skills and ability to comprehend a wider array of research articles. At the micro level, his course design and group facilitation skills have enhanced along with his ability to advise other students and provide guidance. Overall, Alexander felt that it has been a life transforming experience to be in the program and feels very privileged to have gone through it, sharing "I'd do it all over again".

Alexander brought up a **sense of community** and social connection in the program several times. He mentioned that the proximity of offices and support was beneficial to him. He said, "Beyond school work, the social aspect of this community was supportive, even the competition between students, in terms of achievements when so and so got published, served as a motivator."

From a more critical standpoint, Alexander shared that he sometimes felt as though the rigour of the program was compromised. He said:

critical discourse often gets diluted where all points of view are accepted and not challenged via a climate of walking on egg shells and being overly **politically correct** and sensitive to the opinions and perspectives of students. It seems that no students get less

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than an A- for having done the minimally required tasks and following the path of least resistance. As long as you go through the motions of the PhD, you'll eventually complete it.

Alexander also spoke of perceived **favouritism** in the program that he felt advantaged certain students over others. He commented that the institution, via their faculty members, has a reputation to keep and consequently places value in students who bring in grants, but also that put out publications.

This often leads to favouritism toward certain students at the expense of others. If faculty like you and the nature of your research, you'll move ahead and be offered more opportunities. For instance, if you seek to study language and math instruction, you'll be in – if your topics are outside of these you'll be less likely to be in the zone of the institution's intended experience.

Quality.

Alexander shared that a quality program experience to him is characterized by a supervisor who is very committed and enthusiastic about their student's research direction and the nature of their work. A supervisor who will help navigate the processes within the program, help the student learn the ins-and-outs of grant proposal applications, include their student in publications, and will ensure opportunities to be involved in their own projects (both process and product). Alexander continued to mention that this **guidance and mentorship** is particularly valuable at the beginning of the student's experience in the program. He stressed the importance of

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having a supervisor who was extremely committed, interested, well-rounded, knowledgeable, enthused about what you were doing. So basically, somebody who wasn't your supervisor just because they had to be or just because they were assigned to [you] but somebody who had a keen interest to work with you. And, the reason why I say that is because seeing how a supervisor/student relationship can be, and the amount of guidance that a supervisor can provide, I really wish I would have had that, especially at the earlier years of my doctoral degree.

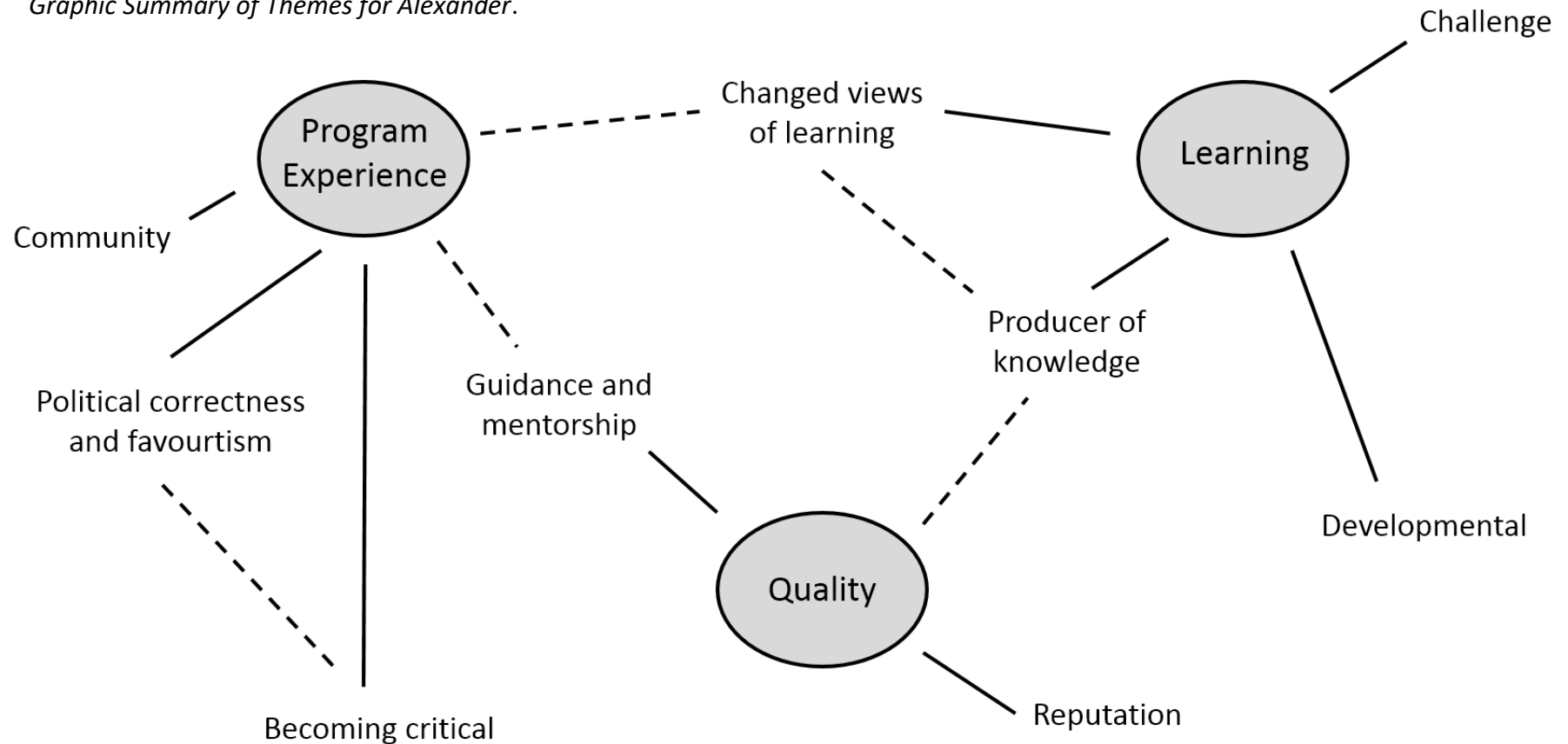
As for knowledge, Alexander felt that content knowledge is mostly the responsibility of the student, being learned independently yet guided by their supervisor when needed. The supervisor's mentorship role is more prevalent in the context of skills knowledge. Alexander noted that he did not necessarily experience the above with his supervisor, which has led to these reflections.

At the institutional level, Alexander remarked that the university wants us to believe its view of quality is that it is cultivating the best and the brightest. "Quality is developing the best minds, enlightened minds who will enact social change and find innovative solutions to problems." Alexander continued, "the reality is that universities are businesses and money driven." **Reputations** within the institution are often influenced by how much money you bring in. This said, he equally commented that the institutional stance on quality is likely multifaceted and included the transformation of students into agents of change and producers of knowledge, however, it just might not be the primary driving force.

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Figure 7

Graphic Summary of Themes for Alexander.



A few interconnections emerged in Alexander's narrative. A first around becoming critical both as a scholar, but also of the system and favouritism that he saw within it. Guidance and mentorship were less discussed in the context of the program, however, heavily tied to notions of quality. Regarding views of learning, these were in part influenced and developed by the program, but also key to becoming a producer, rather than consumer, of knowledge. This change was seen as somewhat tied to quality.

Summary

Aligning with the questions posed in the three-stage interviews (see interview guide in Appendix J), each PhD candidate had experiences and opinions to share regarding their program journeys along with views of learning and of quality in the context of their PhD training. While distinct in their individual contexts, cases appear to present some similarities in the emergence of themes. Across the six cases, discussions regarding four dominant themes seemed to come to the fore. The first related to how guidance can serve as either a facilitating or inhibiting factor in the program experience. The second outlined the process of becoming an independent scholar. The third theme emphasized the importance of community when grappling with the intellectual challenges of the PhD degree. The fourth was associated with the transformative nature of learning in the context of the program.

In this chapter, participant experiences and views were grouped under the headings of learning, program experience and quality, which aligned with the grouping of questions across the three interviews associated with each case. These topical groupings allowed for PhD candidates to speak to each without being led by any specific theme. With each of their narratives now shared in this chapter, the cross-case analysis featured in the next chapter will no longer use these groupings and instead be organized by the dominant themes identified above. The forthcoming analyses in Chapters 5 (cross-case analysis) and 6 (document analysis) will respond to research questions #1 regarding how PhD candidates describe their learning experiences, and #2 about how PhD candidate learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and academic program.

Chapter 5 – Cross-Case Analysis

Serving as a second level of analysis that follows the within-case analysis in Chapter 4, this chapter describes and evidences the emerging themes via a cross-case analysis. More specifically, this form of analysis seeks to examine trends in commonalities and differences across the individual cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Engaging in this synthesis of data across multiple cases provides an opportunity to better understand relationships that may exist across individual cases. It also enables an examination as to why one case may be similar or different from the others, to untangle inexplicable or puzzling findings and to further explain concepts emerging from individual cases (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). The cross-case analysis will help answer the first research question by shedding light on the program learning experiences shared by the PhD candidates. Discussion regarding the sub-question to the first research question (1a), namely how student learning experiences align with contemporary conceptions of transformative learning, will appear in Chapter 7. These student experiences will also serve as a comparative to the intended institutional experiences that are central in the second research question. Following the presentation of the cross-case findings, a brief section is devoted to presenting student perspectives regarding the notion of quality. This section addresses the second research question's first sub-question (2a): How do PhD candidates characterize quality in the context of their degree?

At the end of Chapter 4, four dominant themes were identified across the six cases. These are further broken down into sub-themes that describe common views shared, or experiences lived, by the PhD candidates. Table 7 presents an outline of the dominant themes and related sub-themes that are described in this chapter.

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Table 7

Themes Resulting from the Cross-Case Analysis

Dominant Themes	Sub-themes
Guidance and Supervision	- Importance of guidance - Change in supervisor - Challenge - Supervision as influential to quality of the PhD experience
Independence	- As an intended outcome of the program - Becoming autonomous - Isolation - Imposter syndrome - As a learning preference
Social Interactions and Community	- Informal social interactions - Formal social interactions - Community building
Transformative Nature of Learning	- Alignment with existing views and experiences of learning - Phases within Transformative Learning - Disorienting dilemmas as productive - PhD as transformative

Guidance and Supervision

“The advisor has a huge role [in a quality experience] because [...] when they already know you’re going down a dead end or road, they’ll bring you right back” Kyle

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Experiences and discussion relating to guidance and supervision within the PhD program easily emerged as a dominant theme across each of the six cases. Stemming from both positive and negative experiences with their supervisors, PhD candidates shared the importance of guidance in the context of their PhD journeys and, retrospectively, shared what they saw as ideal guidance and support within a PhD program. Several cases made mention of the effects of a change in supervision and nearly all cases spoke to the constructive effects of being challenged and being encouraged to push boundaries. A final subtheme of note was the extent to which supervision was an influential factor in the perceived quality of each candidate's PhD experience.

Importance of guidance.

A pattern that emerged in four of the six cases was the important nature of guidance from a student's supervisor throughout their program of study. In particular, Leslie, Chen and Alexander noted that their view of an effective supervisor is one that has a clear understanding of the timelines of the PhD program and that helps their students navigate these and plan for them in order to ensure good progress. For Leslie, her view stems from a poor PhD program experience. She shared: "I have a supervisor who is not supportive [...] and a department that has kind of just left me to my own devices because I have a supervisor who is [located elsewhere] and now is telling me I need to hurry up, or I'm going to get kicked out". Leslie spoke about feeling disoriented:

I didn't know what the heck I was doing at the beginning. I didn't realize that this was the design of the program and I just was focused on completing the milestones. Not

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recognizing the bigger picture and that's unfortunate. Where some of my peers did because of strong guidance.

Pulling from remarks highlighted in the within-case analysis, Alexander noted his view of an optimal supervision relationship as he reflected on his wife's graduate school experience.

Seeing how a supervisor/student relationship can be, and the amount of guidance that a supervisor can provide, I really wish I would have had that, especially at the earlier years of my doctoral degree. So the processes of how to navigate course work, how to navigate proposals. Opportunity to publish with your supervisor or being involved in projects that your supervisor is doing.

Leslie, Alexander and Chen all commented that at certain times in their respective programs they felt as though they were navigating blindly and not working efficiently toward key milestones that would enable them to stay on the timeline promoted by their programs.

Lukas changed institutions as a result of challenges regarding supervisory guidance. He indicated:

I didn't have guidance and —it was like you're supposed to do everything on your own, like without any help. [...] When I was at [institution], I had to resort to turning to some other professors from some other schools and even talking to my past TA, who had recently finished his PhD. [...] It's like here's your lane, learn how to swim, you know. You're not supposed to be thrown in the water and expect to—well what happens, you drown? Or, you know... You're supposed to get some sort of guidance from a supervisor.

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Guidance played a central role in the PhD experience of all doctoral candidates in this study. The four PhD students above shared challenges regarding lack of guidance and unclear expectations that they feel were a hurdle to progress in their respective programs.

Change in supervisor.

Both Lukas and Leslie experienced changes in supervisors. In Lukas' case the change made for a positive experience as he was moving out of a supervisor/student relationship that had grown tense given what Lukas called a lack of guidance. Leslie had changed supervisors on two occasions for diverse reasons.

My supervisor left early on in my program and moved to [...]. And so, we didn't have someone in my subdiscipline for quite a while. They replaced him with someone else and then he quit. And so, we were again without a [specialist in my area] in the department. Well we—we have [one] but he was on paternity leave or sabbatical or so—like we've been—I spent a lot of my time here without anyone in Ottawa who works specifically in my area and that's been really challenging.

Challenge.

Emphasizing a more positive perspective than the preceding subthemes, four PhD candidates in particular outlined how their supervisors challenged them in very constructive ways throughout their program. These candidates felt that their supervisors were committed to supporting their individual journeys and helping them push the boundaries of their intellectual comfort zones when they were ready. Kyle shared:

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The advisor has a huge role in this [challenging the student] because they can either be the hands-on advisor, where they're kind of over your shoulder at all times and as soon as you go off the path, when they already know you're going down a dead end or road, they'll bring you right back and push you outside your comfort zone. And again, I think that's what the PhD is all about. It's humbling.

Lukas and Leslie commented on how the approach of their supervisor enabled them at times to challenge preconceptions along with their thinking about how research takes place. When reflecting positively on his experiences with his current supervisor Lukas stated that for him the "role of the advisor and their availability in supporting their student to push boundaries is key". Further, he noted an advisor's influential "guidance in the student developing something conceptually new. Developing their research project, which is hopefully going to be conceptually, perhaps methodologically new." Similarly, Leslie mentioned that "one of the catalysts [for her learning] was being around, and being challenged and pushed by, disciplinarians and supervisors." Speaking about her first supervisor, Leslie shared the following example: "having a supervisor who pushed me to submit to an international top tier journal in my subdiscipline, [...] that helped call me to task on things and force me to—to, you know, be clear about what it was that I was asserting."

Supervision as Influential to quality of the PhD experience.

Whether it was lived in their own PhD journey or not, each PhD candidate made mention of supervision as being influential to the quality of the program experience. Saad stated this clearly when speaking about aspects of his experience that influence program

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quality: “the supervisor – what they know, their approach, and their guidance.” Alexander commented that a quality experience is characterized by a supervisor who is very committed and enthusiastic about their student’s research direction and the nature of their work. “I think a quality PhD program, in my opinion —I think a really good PhD program would have that kind of guidance and mentorship from a supervisor to the student.”

Independence

“I learn the best when I’m doing [...] something that interests me or forces me to be independent” – Saad

A second dominant theme referred to in all cases associated with varied notions of independence. The subthemes that characterize these varied notions related either to program experiences or views about learning. In terms of the program, much mention was made about the development of independent scholars as an intended outcome of the PhD program. Across cases, experiences about becoming autonomous researchers, about isolation within the program, and about living an imposter syndrome were common. Lastly, a few candidates spoke specifically about how the independent nature of learning within the program aligned well with their own learning preferences.

Independence as an intended outcome of the program.

A common view shared by five of the six PhD candidates was that the development of independent researchers was a primary objective of their PhD programs. Kyle stated this clearly when speaking about his experience entering the program. One of the “objectives of the PhD program was to prepare the student to become an independent researcher”. Following a

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review of his comments from an earlier interview, Kyle said: “I think that’s pretty accurate. Like the last bit about how the PhD program has [...] been very independent for me. Like there’s not someone to walk you through [the work]—like there’s not that superior on the wing person.”

Saad mentioned a similar view of the program objectives: “The program sort of inculcates those, you know, those skills into students. Working independently on major projects. Yes, it does train you for this.”

Leslie’s comments add to that view by suggesting that the intended program experience was also to develop the capacity to navigate the program autonomously. She said: “The intended experience is most likely to take ownership of learning and manage one’s own program journey.” Kyle also made mention of autonomy navigating the program when reflecting on his initial expectations of the PhD experience:

it’s more independent than what I would have expected. I’d probably say it’s slower than I would have expected because it takes so long to get anything done. Either, it might be administration, [...] like, you’ve submitted something and you’re waiting for [the] committee to get back but it’s summer so they’re all on holidays. [...] It’s also slower because of just memorizing right and wrong, it takes a lot more time to understand something and then apply that independently to a different situation. And, that leads to lots of frustrations when stuff doesn’t work. So, yeah, so I wouldn’t say I was naïve about everything would go as planned but I don’t know if I really saw the curveballs and the changes in direction, the changes in thesis topics, paper topics.

Becoming autonomous.

Two of the six PhD candidates explicitly mentioned that they had developed a sense of autonomy in their research work over the course of the program. Saad stated: “I feel very empowered, in the sense of being able to do research independently. I feel well equipped to continue the steps independently and under ever reducing amounts of guidance.” Speaking about her experience Chen also mentioned that

Independently [doing] the research, results, methods. It’s most important. You should not [be] dependent on the supervisor. You should not [be] dependent on other persons. But, at the same time, if you find difficulty, do not focus just by yourself [...]. Go outside to talk with others, you know, persons, papers, conference.

Isolation.

While becoming autonomous was viewed as a favourable skill, many independent aspects of the PhD experience have been quite challenging for several of the candidates. Leslie, in particular, saw this as a double-edged sword in that she had certainly become more autonomous as the program progressed, but at the cost of becoming very isolated. She noted that “Overall, the journey through this program has been an isolating experience. I’ve been disappointed and don’t feel like I’m the only one.” Alexander shared a similar view:

PhD grad work, it’s so isolating, right? Like if you don’t want to get involved, you literally can sit at home and never leave if you really so chose. Or, never come to university. For example, now I am still technically a PhD candidate or student but I live like literally like

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4000 km away from the university and I'll go back to defend and go back to deposit and that will be it.

Imposter Syndrome.

Based on a lack of confidence related to a perceived lack of competence, the term “imposter syndrome” independently came up in four of the six case studies. This was tied to the dominant theme of independence in that participants felt that it was a barrier to becoming more independent as a scholar. However, once confidence was developed and the feeling of being an imposter had diminished, they felt more capable of undertaking research tasks independently. In two cases, it was an ongoing concern that appeared to be affecting the candidate's progress. Leslie highlighted this view on two separate occasions:

I have always felt like I am an imposter because I dropped out of high school, right? I feel like I'm an imposter and because I get straight A's but don't value those A's because I know I don't retain the information. So you ask me a week later about stuff on an exam and I cannot answer you, like I just cannot answer you. So that—that then invalidates the learning for me and it invalidates the success, as defined by the system. Uhm, so for me, I feel like an imposter today.

Saad suggested that this was a significant problem at the outset of the program, but that this was something he was working through.

Like the thing with the imposter syndrome is that, you know, sometimes students do feel overwhelmed about being in a new environment or just being the fact that, you know, they might feel that everybody is so much—everybody around them is so much

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more scholarly advanced compared to them. But, I feel for myself, I think my—my feeling was justified. I mean I genuinely feel because I, like I said, I mean the jargon—you know, I mean the field itself was new for me.

Kyle also mentioned the development of confidence in “defeating the imposter syndrome”. He shared that “it’s definitely given me a belief in myself, not only a confidence but also the way [to get past] the imposter syndrome.”

Alexander brought up the concept as one that is common for graduate students, particularly as it relates to confidence in their abilities. In his case, however, he described an imposter experience for different reasons. He felt that his adolescence and subsequent meandering path in getting to the PhD program was very different than that of other students and consequently that he was an imposter amidst students who were all likely to have lived more traditional academic experiences leading up to the PhD program.

I’ve never had—I mean the imposter syndrome is so common, I’ve heard of it a million times but it’s not something—never something I really came across. The only times I would call it is—my imposter syndrome was more in as like my upbringing and my outlook on life and education as, I would say, as significantly different than the vast majority of people I’ve encountered during my time in the doctoral program. As I felt more as an outsider instead of—and so that way, I felt like as an imposter because like I was an outsider trying to be undercover, so I was faking it, if that kind of makes sense.

Independence as a learning preference.

Two PhD candidates made mention of how the structure and delivery of their PhD program aligned well with their personal learning preferences. Leslie commented that “it [the program] was something I could do independently and at my pace and that worked for me, I loved that.” Similarly, Alexander stated: “I’ve always been a very independent learner and I found the PhD program was really tailored to that—there’s so much independent work that’s involved that was quite aligned with the way I like to learn. I like to kind of be left alone and do my own thing and the PhD program was a pretty good fit in terms of that.”

Further, both Saad and Chen spoke about how their progress in the program pushed them to change their view of learning, and that optimal learning for them increasingly favoured independence. Saad outlined how his view of learning has been shaped by his PhD experience.

In the [other institution], we were being taught how to write a report. Here, nobody would teach me how to write a report. They would say, okay, write a report and we expect you to know, right? If you don’t know, learn, right? And that’s what happened to me. So, it’s much more independent. It’s student driven rather than instructor driven. I would say learning, it depends from student to student, but I think that’s how I learned the best, independently. I need guidance, of course, but it happens—it happens very much independently and I never thought it would, before coming here. Even when I did my master’s, at [other institution], it was a very different experience, of course. But here, I learned about myself also... that I learned the best when I’m doing it myself in something that interests me or forces me to be independent, I would say.

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Now at the end of her PhD program, Chen shared that she sees learning as a process of becoming more skilled and independent. She also commented that gaining skills as an independent researcher has enabled her to become a more efficient learner.

I think effective learning, you know, used the—almost the same time you get the high efficiency. You know use the, more independent skill or method. Independent learning is now good learning view, you know, follow the step independently, maybe you will be high efficient, better learner.

Social Interactions and Community

“Students are human and have a social side. We are not robots and develop from being social...”

– Lukas

It was clear across all six cases that the PhD candidates saw their experience as more than simply an intellectual one. Candidates spoke to how informal social interactions and opportunities to socialize within the program helped them progress in their thinking about their research and how formal interactions via conferences and networking events were instrumental to becoming part of their respective scholarly communities. Of interest were also remarks across cases regarding departmental community-building and the importance of proximity and a collegial environment in ensuring well-being within a program.

Informal social interactions.

In all six of the cases, the notion of informal interactions with fellow students emerged as an important catalyst for community building and well-being in the PhD program. Alexander, Chen and Lukas outlined the significance of conversations with peers and of seeing colleagues

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on a regular basis. Alexander spoke to the collegiality and competitive spirit generated by these interactions.

to workshop your work and share what people are doing was good, a more social aspect. It kept you grounded, it kept you with other people. It was interesting to see what other people were doing. It got a little competitive sometimes which was a bit of a drawback because you're always trying to keep up with the Joneses, so to speak. So and so published, so and so got accepted, so and so got this and you're like, oh damn. But in a sense that was also good because it motivated you to work harder [...]. So yeah, social and motivational, I definitely think it was good.

Chen indicated that conversations with colleagues within and outside of her discipline often helped her solve problems that she was encountering in her work:

Talk with your colleague, your supervisor, anybody outside to give some new ideas. [...] Sometime you talk with your friends, maybe friends [who are] a little far relative to your area. [...] For example, I [was] stuck [on] a topic at the beginning of this year. And I have a friend [...] she's a math major and I [spoke] about my difficulty and she give me idea[s].

Lukas emphasized that learning is not only a cognitive exercise and that a social element has also been an important part of the PhD experience.

We're humans, we're social beings. We're not robots. So like – it's important to have a social side also to things. [...] Well, I think yeah, it enhances it a little bit, enhancing the learning environment. Because if you know who's around you, like who's in the building,

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it makes it more pleasant to be here, to be there, to be able to say hi to a person, you know. [...] It's just nice to get to know some of your colleagues, you know.

Tying into the notion of quality, Leslie shared that “opportunities to socialize as a group with the professors and other graduate students. You know, these are the sorts of things that I think separate a quality [program] you know, like make the difference in terms of quality.”

Both Lukas and Alexander expanded on the nature of their informal interactions and specified that student associations and clubs played an important role in facilitating these. Lukas stated that “the grad student association, they have these little groups, each department has a group [...] each part gets a little bit of funding for certain activities. So people might have some sort of social activities and interaction within them.” As a student leader himself, Alexander mentioned:

I got quite involved in [a student group] and things like that in my latter years, so being—feeling like you're doing something positive as well and bringing people together. Kind of [...] giving back to the students. Other people have helped me out, I'm going to help you out in terms of just passing down some of those tips and knowledge.

Extending on the theme of social activities, Lukas and Kyle provided specific examples of successful community building activities that were very influential to them. Lukas said “one thing I think they did really good [...] was that every incoming cohort, they take them camping [...] a weekend out with your colleagues, just to get to know your colleagues and stuff like that.” Lukas also went on to share that:

My department once had a volleyball team in my first semester [...] I also came up and I

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organized a soccer team. [...] It was first meant to be a departmental team and then we added some other people and I thought that was a great experience, you know. To just be social, have those kind of social activities, you know, through soccer, any sort of sports, you know.

Kyle shared the sentiment that the PhD experience is more than just studying. He also emphasized the significance of being able to connect with faculty members on an informal level.

They [department] do a good job of stressing... like taking part in different things. That it's more than just academics. So yeah, it definitely does not feel like you come here just to do your work and leave. [...] My faculty, they do a great job of bringing the school together. Like the students and profs play hockey once a week together and that's been very nice because you get to know the profs on a personal level as well.

Formal social interactions.

In addition to the informal interactions, two PhD candidates mentioned the importance of formal learning opportunities outside of the program structure such as disciplinary conferences and networking events. This was a particularly important way of becoming acquainted with other researchers, getting feedback and gaining exposure to new insights.

[At] conferences you get that exposure to people [who] are doing similar things, maybe in a slightly different way than you, people are doing something completely different but using a technique that could be applied to yours. [...] So I think conferences were

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really important for that, because it's just that exposure, um to people, and to that new, that new insight.

Chen stated something similar:

It's very important, like a social network, you know, talking with the peers in the conference or my supervisor or other professor. Yeah, it's also good. But you know for me, I think I have this kind of experience, [...] it's very important for the research. Research, you know [can] carry on and on, and you know, life and the social connection [is] important, you know.

Community Building.

Two of the six cases made mention of how proximity to one another and an "open door culture" within the department are influential to community building and maintaining a spirit of well-being. Alexander remarked:

we had one floor where all the grad students, predominantly PhD students, were housed in our offices. And being able to kind of pop in and out of people's offices and asking like hey, can you look at this really fast, or hey, can I email you this. Having to get feedback like instantaneously. And yeah, it was a really cool experience because you kind of peek in to see who would be there and who would not and while you're all working separately, you're also kind of working together. It was a shame when we got relocated to [another building] and that just felt hard.

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Leslie spoke to the frustration she felt when comparing her current experience to that of one at another institution where the atmosphere felt more collaborative and energizing. She mentioned that in her department there are:

A lot of shut doors. I mean, it just doesn't feel like an open—as an open department.

That's one thing that I've noticed in this department is a lot of the profs work with their doors shut, or mostly shut, or they're not here. And that was not my experience at [another institution], in my undergrad. all the profs had their doors open and people—we had a big room where—a lunch room, where everybody would—profs and students alike would sit and work and communicate and there was a big, you know, chalkboard or white board and people would share ideas and like it was just a really vibrant environment where there was a lot of exchange and learning and stuff.

Leslie further reflected on how the types of informal and formal social interactions mentioned above could help generate a more vibrant department community.

Perhaps if the faculty—if the department had money to do, you know, team building activities, social events, you know, bring people to the department for presentations—you know, [experts] from all over the place to give presentations. If they could host conferences. Like there are all sorts of things that could feed into that [community building].

Transformative Nature of Learning

"I see learning as transformative in the sense that I can apply my learning in other aspect[s] of my life. [...] I feel that a change in perspective is critical for transformation to occur." - Leslie

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Over the course of the three-stage interviews, PhD candidates shared their views of learning and how these had come to be - often shaped by past experience and in some cases by recent experiences in the PhD program. While many of the participants noted a shift from passive learning experiences to more active ones, the commonality across each case was the mention of notions of transformation, development and change. Each PhD candidate spoke of alignment between these notions and existing views and experiences of learning, several making specific mention of phases within Transformative Learning in their reflections and in some cases pointing to the initial phase of transformation, disorienting dilemmas, as productive even when encountering these dilemmas is often be seen as problematic. Lastly, common experiences of the PhD as transformative came to the fore across several cases tying together many of the views about learning that candidates had expressed earlier.

Alignment with existing views and experiences of learning.

Throughout the three-stage interviews with all six PhD candidates, each candidate revealed views about the learning process. For some it was easy to put into words, while others benefited from consideration of the Transformative Learning model to help prompt their thinking about the learning process and past learning experiences. Regardless of how the discussion took place, however, each candidate shared a developmental view of learning in the context of some or all learning experiences. When initially asked about his views regarding how learning happens, Kyle stated: "It's got to be developmental, like there's no doubt about that because all humans start as basically a blank slate, right? And you have to learn by touching something, looking at something, putting something in your mouth."

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Following a discussion regarding how their views about learning may align or not with the Transformative Learning Theory, the other five candidates seemed to identify areas of alignment. Alexander shared: “When I look at it, it makes perfect sense to me because the way that I approach—like when I think about my learning experiences, particularly the more profound learning experiences, not just rote knowledge gathering or knowledge accumulation.” In a similar vein, Chen mentioned that the theory itself does not change how she views learning, “it makes sense” she also said. Different components of the model were more influential at different stages of her life and of stages in her studies. In her earlier learning experiences in China a focus was placed on identifying “dilemmas” and applying readymade solutions, whereas her studies in the PhD program have emphasized critical thinking and discourse along with the integration of knowledge and skills. Saad also outlined a similar perspective regarding the alignment of his views with the Transformative Learning model:

I don’t think anything changes in my view, as far as I’m concerned. I believe that this is how things happen when your knowledge is being transformed or your way of thinking is being transformed. This a very good depiction of how things happen. Not the only one, but yes, this is very relevant.

Leslie spoke about how this view of learning helped her explain the application of new perspectives. She said: “I see learning as transformative in the sense that I can apply my learning in other aspect[s] of my life – that it can be integrated. The structure of ideas can be applied elsewhere. I feel that a change in perspective is critical for transformation to occur.”

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While the word “transformation” did not align well with his views regarding quality as it relates to learning experiences, Lukas seemed to equally share a developmental perspective of learning.

Like I don't look at it as [...] transformation, you know, transformation is such a big word. [...] it kind of implies that you're coming from a state of zero, you know. I like to look at it more as enhancement rather than transformation. [...] Improvement, I guess. Well, basically the same thing here. The development of the main expertise and knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes.

Phases within transformative learning.

Four cases made mention of the relevance of the main phases in Transformative Learning Theory (summarized as the disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, critical discourse, and reintegration) with regards to their doctoral learning experiences. The PhD candidates each explained how these had been lived. Alexander spoke to four phases in detail:

It definitely was that four-stage process. Parts of it where I was being exposed to information that I personally was quite resistant to. I didn't want to believe it, I didn't want to agree with it and it took a lot of soul-searching and a lot of really difficult conversations with myself. And then, once again, I started kind of reflecting back on well, why do I think these things? And why do I believe these things? And that kind of thought process. And then, I kind of came to a realization that yeah, the evidence is irrefutable. It's me that is in the wrong here and it's me that is—that needs to change, not the other way around. And, it's a process that I'm still going through. It was like—it

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is a four-stage process but I'm still—it's obviously quite drawn out. It is fairly linear but that being said, I'm still negotiating those thoughts on my own, of how—what do I do now moving forward? Now that I've accepted these things, now that I've become cognisant of them, how do I incorporate that into my own practice?

As enumerated in her case narrative, Chen also spoke about how she lived the phases of transformation in her PhD research work:

Research is just like the four stages, you know. If I have some difficulty, like the first stage, I [have] a dilemma. And the second, I independently think, you know, reflection to find [...] the right resolution of something wrong or if I'm wrong. So it's like a personal [...] reflection. And the third one, [...] I can ask and [discuss] from outside. The last one,—I find the solution [to the] research problem.

Saad stated his views about the importance of unlearning and reaffirming in the stages of learning.

It does happen in stages. It builds on your previous frames of reference, right? And of course, you might have to sort of break down your habits of mind in order to—what they call, uh, unlearn something, right? Unlearn something and then learn it in a different style or learn something—totally something different about something else. Or reaffirm, if that's the right word. Reaffirm what you already knew but through a different frame of reference, right? So you looked at—or a different point of view—you looked at something and you believed that this was true, uhm, but just to test whether

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your belief stands true to this new frame of reference, right? You put it through the test and see if it reaffirms, if it's reaffirmed or not.

Kyle noted that he viewed the phases of Transformative Learning as similar to the construction and testing of knowledge via the scientific method.

It [transformation] just kind of reminded me of the scientific method. How you ask a question, you create a hypothesis, you test the hypothesis, you make conclusions and then you re-evaluate. Did it fail or did it like reject or fail to reject the hypothesis and now it kind of, it kind of jumps in here once you've done all the analysis, disorienting dilemma, no, it does not fit the hypothesis. Well why did it not fit the hypothesis? This is talking to people why it didn't fit and then reintegrating. So re-evaluating your—your hypothesis.

Disorienting dilemmas as productive.

As part of their experiences with the varied phases of Transformative Learning, two candidates mentioned similar positive views about the first step called the “disorienting dilemma”. In essence, the doctoral program had helped them see this dilemma phase as a productive one instead of as a problematic hurdle. Leslie spoke about her eventual acceptance of this phase of the learning process.

I think accepting this disorienting dilemma as being a necessary part of learning and growth, embracing it, instead of shying away from it, that's a really powerful thing as well, right? Like, that person does this better than I do. [...] But then that spurs me to shift the way that I do things so that I can benefit myself and my students, ultimately.

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[...] accepting that this cognitive dissonance, this disorientation, is a necessary part of growth is a healthy—healthy thing.

Kyle shared a very similar view, stating that: “having a disorienting dilemma isn’t frame shattering, or isn’t habit of mind shattering to me. It’s—I can work that in somehow that it doesn’t rock my boat to say.”

PhD as transformative.

In the third interview with PhD candidates, they were asked to think of their PhD program experiences in terms of how they described their views of learning. Four candidates explicitly described notions of change, development and transformation – in essence, evidence that they lived significant learning experiences in their programs. Reflecting on his own experience, Alexander summarized his view in these words:

I think that [change] is the whole point of a doctoral degree. Yeah, I think if you’re the same person who started and you’re the same person when you’ve finished, there is—the program is not achieving, in a sense. It’s hard to put into words, to be honest, because it [the degree] is a life transformational experience to be in a doctoral program.

You can read as much as you want but unless you can transform that knowledge into a product, it’s only half of a PhD, in my opinion and it’s the process of a transformation of going from accumulative knowledge to produced knowledge, is where I think the PhD program really should assist students in that transition, so to speak.

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Both Chen and Saad shared a similar view of transforming one's ability as observed or measured by a constructive change from a starting state to a more enhanced and improved state. Saad described it the following way:

a quality learning [experience] for a PhD candidate would be when a student is taken from or she is taken from point A and he, sort of, you know, goes through the process and reaches point B. Now, that point B could be anything but it has to be different from—and better, in terms of the kind of work they can produce, the kind of research they can produce, right? So it's just taking them from that point and bringing them to a different point. Uhm, yeah, where they can do something better.

Kyle remarked that his experience in the PhD program has made him revisit the way he sees the process of learning. "The PhD program has changed how I view learning and very much expanded this view". He specified that "I can get to ask the question now, rather than be asked to respond to it." With respect to his view of the PhD program as transformative, he mentioned:

I think it [transformation] is integral. I think it's one of the most important aspects of the doctoral education is that if you're—if you're not evolving as a person, as a researcher, there's—you're not—I don't think you're becoming better. Because learning, learning is a trans—I see learning as a transformation because if you learn something, your views might change. So, if you're not transforming, it means you're not learning. If you're not learning, what's the quality of the doctoral education?

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In contrast to viewing a PhD program as a transformative experience, Lukas stated that given the academic level of the PhD, not much transformation should need to occur – that students should have past that hurdle before entering into the program.

In the ideal case there's less transformation because the person already is a critical thinker there, in their field. They know their stuff, you know. So hopefully they're just, they're not going to be transforming as much, I want to say.

Another dichotomy that emerged when PhD candidates spoke of notions of transformation in terms of their program experiences was with respect to feeling empowered. Saad commented that empowerment is very representative of the evolution in his expertise and skillset since the beginning of the program.

This [program] is definitely a transformative process. And, when we talk about empowering the students from a personal perspective, like when you say a doctoral education or doctoral student perspective, I feel very empowered. When, you know, empowered in the sense of, being able to do certain things in research independently, right? I have sort of started to feel that I can, you know, do these studies independently. [...] When I came to this program, I was, you know, a fish out of water, right? I didn't know where I was or nothing made sense, right? To this point, where I'm saying that I feel very equipped, not 100% of course but very equipped to be able to do all those different steps of research independently.

On the contrary, Lukas noted that the notion of empowerment in the PhD experience did not seem plausible to him.

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I don't see this whole empowering notion to be very... [relevant], like what's empowering? Like I don't see how much here's empowering—like maybe someone will say, 'Oh, getting a diploma is empowering for me.' I don't see what's empowering there.

Student Perspectives Regarding Quality

During the third interview with each participant in this study, the PhD candidates were asked about what they felt the intended institutional stance was regarding definitions of quality in higher education. As part of comparing and contrasting the views of each of this study's student cases, a synthesis of student perceptions is presented in Table 8. Organized using Harvey and Green's (1993) original definitions of quality in higher education (as listed in Table 1, Chapter 2), each PhD candidate's perception of the institutional intention (II) is identified, followed by an identification of their lived experience (LE), and finally what PhD candidates felt their ideal experience (IE) should be.

Table 8

Student Perceptions of Institutional Quality

Definitions of Quality	Lukas	Leslie	Kyle	Chen	Alexander	Saad
Exceptional	II, LE, IE	II, LE	II, LE	II, LE	II	
Perfection						
Fitness for purpose		II		LE	IE	II, LE
Value for money	II	II, LE		II	II, LE	

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Transformation	IE	II, IE	II, LE, IE	IE	II, IE	II, LE, IE
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Note. II: Institutional intention; LE: Lived experience; IE: Ideal experience

As can be seen in the last row of Table 8, many students picked up on the institutional intention of quality as *Transformation*. This may be the result of institutional, faculty and program documents that reflect a developmental outlook to learning. In terms of the lived experience, only two PhD candidates claim to have experienced the intended transformative approach that they feel was promoted by their program. Finally, it should be noted that each PhD candidate indicated that quality as transformation would be the ideal experience in the context of their doctoral studies. This is not surprising given that each candidate identified favourable notions of transformative learning as part of their PhD journeys. The second most frequently mentioned definition of quality is that of *Exceptional*, where all but one participant shared this as an institutional intention. In a climate where rankings, publication output and the obtainment of grants is viewed as paramount, both in the institutional and disciplinary discourses, it seems normal that students both recognize and live this pressure. All but one PhD candidate felt that this focus was not ideal for a quality learning experience. With regards to the remaining three definitions of quality in higher education, the notion of *Perfection* was not seen as relevant by students. A combination of responses for *Fitness for Purpose* and *Value for Money* can also be observed. Both definitions were viewed by some students as consumer oriented and derived from traditions of business and industry – particularly the mature students who had former experiences in the workforce.

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Summary

The four dominant themes in the cross-case analysis were identified, via the categorization of subthemes, across all six cases in this study. When broadening the scope of analysis and considering commonalities and differences across cases, it was evident that with respect to the perspectives and experiences of each PhD candidate there was far more congruity than contradiction. A summary of the dominant themes along with a brief commentary on their interconnections is presented below.

Coined as the first dominant theme, the most resounding commonality across cases was the importance of strong guidance and supervision and how this factor is seen to play an influential role on the quality of a student's PhD experience. Positive supervisory experiences were those that encouraged PhD candidates to push boundaries and exceed their own expectations. Conversely, experiences regarding changes in supervisor over the course of a program were described as a hindrance to program progress. The second dominant theme to emerge related to the notion of independence. This was viewed as a process of becoming increasingly autonomous as a scholar and, as such, as an intended outcome of the PhD program. Several PhD candidates identified this outcome as one that aligned with their learning preference, which made for a particularly insightful experience. Others made mention of isolation in the program when experiencing too much independence. At times isolation added fuel to an imposter syndrome that constrained the development of independence in several candidates. A third dominant theme addressed the important role that social interaction and community play in fostering healthy and productive academic environments. Informal social interactions with peers as driven by a work environment where doors are open and

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community-building events are encouraged was a common refrain across cases. This was complemented by the value of participating in disciplinary conferences and networking events. A fourth dominant theme emphasized the transformative nature of learning which emerged through each PhD candidate's description of growth and development in the PhD program. In several cases, it was explicit that the PhD experience itself was seen as a transformative one, while in others the notion of transformation aligned more with an existing notion of learning. Common views shared across PhD candidates related to experiencing learning in incremental phases and that the most impactful phase was the disorientation lived when facing a dilemma or the state of unrest surrounding a problematic belief or assumption.

As the dominant themes and related subthemes unfolded and were subsequently described in this chapter, it became evident that a multitude of interconnections between them existed. A first of three compelling connections rests between the dominant themes of Independence and Social Interactions and Community. Stemming from comments made by both Alexander and Chen, the independence of doctoral study can often lead to isolation. However, this effect can be countered by social interaction and by being involved in the program community. Contrasting two very different program descriptions brings the power of community to the fore. Taking the example of Kyle's case, it appears that a program that has a strong community and promotes opportunities for formal and informal social interactions, can contribute to productive and confidence inspiring learning experiences with steady completion rates. Conversely, taking from Leslie's case, a program that seems to have a faculty and student body that are less engaged and with limited opportunity for interactions appears to contribute to greater frustration, anxiety and time to completion. A second connection between dominant

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themes brings together Guidance and Supervision and the Transformative Nature of Learning.

In essence, thoughtful and intentional guidance can lead to student transformation by supporting and fostering periods of dissonance, reflection, discourse, and reintegration. As Kyle points out, to help get the process of transformation started, his supervisor often provided specific challenges to him during strategic moments along his PhD journey. This served to disorient and cause him to question an existing understanding of a concept more deeply. Furthermore, and as mentioned in several of this study's cases, dialogue necessary to sound off and validate ideas toward transformation was equally a beneficiary of the formal and informal social interactions that an active program community offered. A third and more paradoxical thematic connection identified in this study's field notes was evident between Guidance and Supervision and Independence. It appeared that PhD candidates required sustained guidance, particularly at the outset of the program to develop independent research skills and eventually become more autonomous. Similarly paradoxical, the more autonomous one became, the greater the possible threat of isolation. This was highlighted well by Leslie when she remarked that becoming autonomous was to her a double-edged sword, she saw the advantages in the application of her skillset, but at the cost of becoming further isolated.

Given the interconnections mentioned above, it seems that thoughtful and intentional supervision as well as opportunities for social interactions as part of a healthy and vibrant program community appear to go a long way in preventing or remediating emerging challenges and issues arising across the six cases examined in this study.

This cross-case analysis has helped answer, and will inform further discussion, regarding the first research question: How do PhD candidates describe their learning experiences once

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they reach the dissertation-writing phase of their doctoral program? The associated sub-question (1a) is specifically examined in Chapter 7. Moreover, these student experiences also serve as a comparative to the descriptions of institutional quality and intended student learning experiences that are analyzed in the next chapter. The student perspective in this chapter and the institutional perspective in Chapter 6 will serve to answer the second research question: How do PhD student learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and by their academic program? Following the thematic description of student experiences in the cross-case analysis, the second part of this chapter outlined student perceptions of the intended, lived and ideal experiences relating to quality. These findings respond to the second research question's first sub-question (2a), namely: How do PhD candidates characterize quality in the context of their degree and why? Student perceptions will be further examined with respect to relevant literature in Chapter 7.

Chapter 6 – Document Analysis

This chapter presents the findings from a separate source of data, namely governmental and institutional documents, along with notes taken in the study's reflex journal. Overall, the purpose of document analysis is to analyze and interpret data generated from the examination of documents related to the study. In the context of this study, this form of analysis seeks to provide insight into how the government, institution, faculties and programs frame the discourses of quality and transformation and how academic programs characterize the PhD student learning experience. The findings of the document analysis will be compared to those of the cross-case analysis in the former chapter to respond to the second research question: How do PhD student learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and by their academic program? The document analysis specifically answers the following sub-question (2b): How is quality characterized in governmental and institutional-level documents?

Documents considered for inclusion in the document analysis were required to be public, available and needed to address the themes of quality, quality assurance and learning in higher education. On the latter point, some faculty websites only hosted documents from several years ago. Initially, 31 documents were selected, however following a preliminary read, six documents were removed from the collection as they, either provided content that overlapped with other documents retained in the analysis or addressed the key themes in a way that was less relevant to this study. The final 25 documents included in the analysis were obtained via publicly accessible websites and consisted of both public records (such as mission statements, strategic plans, annual reports, informational webpages) and physical evidence

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(such as program brochures, guides and training materials). A list of the documents included in the analysis is presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Documents Included in the Document Analysis

- National level
 - Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) - Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada
 - Universities Canada – Principles on Quality Assurance Website
- Province level
 - Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA) – Graduate Degree Level Expectations (GDLE)
 - Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA) – Quality Assurance Framework and Guide
- University level
 - uOttawa Strategic Plan – Vision 2020
 - uOttawa Strategic Plan – Imagine 2030 (consultation website)
 - Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA) - Public Summary
 - uOttawa Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP)
 - Office of Quality Assurance Website
 - Program Self-Study Report Template
 - Cyclical Review Guide for Program Learning Outcomes
- Faculty
 - Faculty of Education 2014 Annual Report
 - Faculty of Education Graduate Studies Brochure
 - Faculty of Arts Strategic Plan – Arts 2015
- Academic Program
 - Graduate Program Evaluation Committee Report Summaries (Education, Linguistics, Geography, Electrical Engineering, Biomechanical/Human Kinetics)
 - PhD Program Information Webpage (Education, Linguistics, Geography, Electrical Engineering, Biomechanical/Human Kinetics)

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This part of the chapter is further divided into two sections following an approach outlined by Bowen (2009) for analyzing documents. The first provides the outcome of a content analysis that examines the frequency of occurrences of key terms within the documents. The goal of this process is to provide an initial overall sense of which documents address these terms and to identify relevant and meaningful passages within each document. The second section presents a deeper thematic analysis of the documents to identify emerging themes via coding and category construction.

Content Analysis

Providing a broad sense of where and how key terms (such as learning, quality, transformation, enhancement, and program experience) are used in each document, a content analysis, as suggested by Bowen (2009), enabled the researcher to get an initial overall sense of documents, to identify relevant and meaningful and to begin categorizing documents.

Presented in Appendix K, details of the content analysis allowed the researcher to filter the document content by what was pertinent and what was not. By examining the frequency at which the key terms emerged in each document, it became evident that longer documents with a more procedural purpose, principally at the institutional-level, made most frequent mention of key terms as they were often repeated throughout. Documents where the key terms emerged less frequently were short promotional pieces put out by the departments and faculties. About midway between, a moderate mention of key terms was found in strategic mandate agreement, strategic planning and ministerial statement documents. Overall, it became clear through this initial analysis that documents could be categorized in three types:

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procedural, visioning, and promotional. This categorization aided in the interpretive analysis that follows.

Thematic Analysis

Using a strategy similar to the within-case analysis for which results are presented in Chapter 4, the initial coding of the contents of the documents was based on the key terms presented above (learning, quality, transformation, enhancement, and program experience). During subsequent readings of the documents, an inductive coding approach was used to identify additional themes of note and allow categories to emerge naturally from the data.

Unsurprisingly, given the document selection process and the initial content analysis, the dominant themes identified in the document analysis can be placed into two overarching groupings. The first is notions of quality academic programs (dominant themes: Characteristics of quality; and Indicators of quality). The second is notions of quality learning (dominant themes: Student learning experience; and Transformative outlook to learning). Several sub-themes are organized under relevant dominant themes that are collectively presented in Table 10. The Table also indicates the distribution of themes across the governmental and institutional level documents. For each level, the frequency that a theme appears in the document is indicated along with the percentage of text in the document that has been coded in relation to that theme. For example, the theme entitled “Characteristics of Quality” emerges once in national documents, and the coded text associated with the theme accounts for 1.68% of the national documents. In provincial documents, the theme emerges seven times and the coded text relating to the theme only accounts for 0.36% of the total text in the provincial documents, and so on. The value representing the percentage of text covered by a theme has

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been added to help highlight how much of a given text addresses the theme. For instance, an extensive text at the provincial-level may make seven brief mentions of a particular theme; however, a more abbreviated text at the program-level may only make one mention of the same theme in a more substantive capacity. This representation may shed light on the value associated to a particular theme. For instance, noting that a particular theme carries more substantive coverage in documents at certain levels (e.g., the institutional over governmental), may help identify trends and inform any inferences made.

Table 10

Distribution of Themes Across Level of Document

Themes	Document Level				
	National	Provincial	Institutional	Faculty	Program
Notions of Quality Academic Programs					
1- Characteristics of Quality	1*(1.68)**	7(0.36)	6(3.27)	1(0.25)	
• Program improvement	2(2.20)	13(0.64)	5(2.69)		
• Meeting standards	5(4.67)	7(0.28)	2(0.16)		
• Student feedback	2(5.51)	3(0.70)	2(0.19)		
2- Indicators of Quality		3(0.53)	7(5.21)		
• Achievement of learning outcomes	2(0.29)	6(0.22)	7(4.34)		
• Modes of program delivery		4(0.33)	7(1.64)		
• Excellence of faculty members			8(0.78)	1(0.10)	
• Time to completion		2(0.10)	7(1.17)		2(1.72)
Notions of Quality Learning					
3- Student Learning Experience		1(0.05)	14(5.3)	4(0.67)	
• Supervision		5 (0.14)	6(1.19)	1(0.20)	1(2.55)
• Community and sense of belonging			2(0.94)		2(3.16)

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4- Transformative outlook to learning		2 (0.1)	5(21.2)	2(1.93)	
• Challenge		2(0.07)	2(1.09)	1(0.73)	
• Autonomy	2(0.25)	2(1.20)			2(2.13)

* the frequency for which the theme appears in the document

** the amount of the document (in %) which has been coded to the theme

As can be observed in Table 10, specific themes tend to emerge across certain levels more than others. For instance, nearly all themes seem to appear in both provincial and institutional documents. However, national documents seem to have a greater focus on the broader “programmatic” perspective, rather than deeper descriptions relating to student learning. Emphasis in the national documents seems to be placed on communicating the importance of being mindful about quality in higher education and outlining the jurisdictions of responsibility. Conversely, the faculty and program documents appear to highlight themes relating to student learning and the outcomes of the learning experience. In these documents, greater focus is placed on the ideal student experience in academic programs of quality, as set out in the national, provincial and institutional documents.

The section below presents each of the dominant themes and related subthemes in turn in the order presented in Table 10. The grouping that outlines the notions of quality academic programs appears first and is followed by the grouping of themes addressing notions of quality student learning.

Characteristics of quality.

A dominant theme in many documents relates to the delineation of characteristics that ensure academic programs are of quality and mention of who has the responsibility of

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determining and ensuring program quality. Several documents acknowledge processes set up to monitor quality, particularly at the provincial and institutional levels with seven and six mentions respectively in Table 10. For instance, the OUCQA QA Framework made specific the fact that the purpose of a “robust quality assurance process, which does not require but may include the Quality Council, is to assure the institution, and the public, of the ongoing quality of all of the institution’s academic programs” (p. 18). The Quality Council or “The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance is the provincial body responsible for assuring the quality of all programs leading to degrees” (p. 36). At the institutional level, the notion that quality is linked to the program-level is prevalent. In the University of Ottawa Destination 20/20 strategic document, the introduction states that “Great universities become so by developing quality programs” (p. 1). These same documents denote several sub-themes that highlight characteristics of programmatic quality. Reoccurring subthemes relate to ensuring that programs met standards, that mechanisms to ensure quality were focused on program improvement and that student feedback was included in discussions regarding the quality of academic programs.

Meeting standards.

Much is mentioned about the assessment of the quality of a program against standards. The Ministerial Statement on QA outlines that:

The policy and procedure [regarding quality assurance] includes assessment of programs against the degree-level standard in the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework and any program- or institution-specific standards for programs, and assessment of individual student work in the terminal stage of programs to determine whether the

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standards are being achieved by students. (p. 10)

When addressing what is meant by quality, the same Ministerial Statement notes that quality is determined when “the program offers an education of sufficient breadth and rigour to be comparable to similar programs offered by other degree granting institutions that meet recognized standards in the host province or territory and in other jurisdictions” (p. 9). No other mention of comparison between programs emerge in the collection of documents.

At the provincial level, standards for program outcomes are outlined as Degree-level expectations. This is made explicit in the OUCQA QA Framework:

OCAV’s adoption of the Degree Level Expectations set out the academic standards of Ontario’s universities. Each university is expected to develop its own institutional expression of the undergraduate and graduate Degree Level Expectations and to have them applied to each academic program. (p. 2)

The provincial framework also outlines that institutions responsible for monitoring program quality are to use “Degree Level Expectations, combined with the expert judgment of external disciplinary scholars, [to] provide the benchmarks for assessing a program’s standards and quality” (p. 19). The collective of documents in this analysis suggests that for a program to be of quality, it is necessary for its structure and outcomes to be aligned with a hierarchy of standards, namely the degree-level standard in the Canadian qualifications framework, the provincial degree level expectations, and any institution specific standards.

Program improvement.

While the notion of aligning with specific standards, and ensuring that these are met, is present in the collection of documents, there exists a very strong improvement-oriented tone

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in policies and procedures that relate to quality academic programs. On the Universities Canada website, explicit mention is made of this orientation. “The institution has in place a formal, approved, transparent policy committing it to ensuring the quality and continuous improvement of its academic programs”. At the provincial level, the tension between the often accountability driven versus enhancement driven process of quality assurance is brought up. Emphasis is placed on the importance of quality assurance as formative in nature.

Care has been taken in developing the new Quality Assurance Framework for Ontario universities to balance the need for accountability with the need to encourage normal curricular evolution. [...] In particular, if quality assurance measures become too onerous or restrictive, they can become impediments rather than facilitators of continuous program improvements. [...] Ontario universities have kept this issue in mind in order to produce a Quality Assurance Framework that supports innovation and improvement while cultivating a culture of transparency and accountability – i.e., quality assurance that produces quality enhancement. (p. 1)

This perspective is also echoed at the institutional level via the University of Ottawa’s Quality Assurance Office opening webpage. In its introductory statement, the webpage positions the cyclical review process (a process by which academic programs undergo a review every 7-8 years via self-study and external evaluators) as a catalyst for an institutional culture of quality enhancement.

The goal of the cyclical review process is to constantly improve our quality programs and engage the academic units in a culture of progressive and continuous learning. The cyclical review is not simply an administrative requirement. Rather, it is an opportunity

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to develop and strengthen programs that are currently of good quality and to address any challenges within our programs.

Student feedback.

A subtheme relating to the inclusion of the student voice in the assurance of program quality was evident while coding the documents. Connected with the notion of examining program quality from a perspective of continuous improvement, the importance of student input is mentioned multiple times as is its inclusion in specific quality assurance processes such as the program self-study that is part of the cyclical program review process.

At the national level, the Ministerial Statement on QA urges institutions to have “an adequate information system to gather and analyze data needed for planning and decision-making, and procedures for the development of curricula and academic policies that include participation by academic staff and consultation with students” (p. 11) when examining the quality of academic programs. Universities Canada also makes mention of the participation of students as stakeholders when outlining the “key characteristics of quality review”. Their website suggests that “the process involves internal and external stakeholders including students, faculty, and the administration of the institution, and may also involve alumni and representatives of the community.”

In terms of the self-study report that programs are requested to prepare in relation to the cyclical program review process at the institutional-level, the provincial framework mandates that “the Self-study shows active involvement of students in the agenda-setting, the self-analysis, and the preparation of the Report” (p. 29). The institutional IQAP document also

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mandates that reports show “evidence of student input into graduate program amelioration and development (e.g., exit surveys, student representation on committees, etc.)” (p. 16).

The OUCQA QA Framework and Guide includes a section outlining further ways to involve students in the discourse regarding the quality of academic programs. These include representation on curriculum review committees and academic councils, regular meetings with members of student associations, responses to additional questions appended to student evaluations of teaching, and the analysis and collective interpretation of results from surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS). As an overarching approach to better involve students and obtain their feedback, the OUCQA QA Framework suggests that programs:

ensure that there is ongoing involvement of students in the academic unit’s governance structures and processes. When students are providing regular input on their courses and program requirements, it is very easy to gather and incorporate that information into a self-study that results in meaningful analysis and reflection. Constant contact with students, through their representation on departmental committees and through their involvement in departmental seminars or workshops, can facilitate their engagement in quality assurance processes. (p. 31)

Indicators of quality.

A second dominant theme emerging from the documents is the mention of indicators of quality. The OUCQA QA Framework defines indicators as “proxies for reflecting program quality” (p. 25). Further, regarding the use of quality indicators, it outlines that “institutions are encouraged to include available measures of their own which they see as best achieving that

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goal. Outcome measures of student performance and achievement are of particular interest” (p. 25). In addition to outcomes of student achievement, the IQAP document outlines indicators of program quality as “evidence of a program structure and faculty research that will ensure the intellectual quality of the student experience”. This description is elaborated somewhat in the institutional program self-study template as follows:

[The self-study] is an in-depth, evidence-based reflection on quality indicators and meaningful data, with an eye to the future, i.e., forward looking. The resulting self-study brief is an informative, descriptive, analytical and critical document that must provide an accurate portrait of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. (p. 4)

While it is clear that a diversity of both student and program level quality indicators can serve as strong evidence of quality, specific measures that can serve as evidence are somewhat scarce. Of the examples provided across the documents, however, several reoccurring themes are noted, such as: the achievement of learning outcomes throughout a program, the modes of program delivery, evidence of faculty excellence, and time to completion of the program.

Achievement of learning outcomes.

Across documents, the term “learning outcomes” is very present. In strategic documents, such as the SMA Public Summary, it appears as part of the institutional priorities: “As requested by the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, we will identify in this Strategic Mandate Agreement three differentiating, strategic and value-added dimensions in which we will [...], provide an enriched and rewarding experience for our students, [...] and achieve better learning outcomes” (p. 1). In more procedural documents such as the provincial

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QA framework, achievement of learning outcomes is presented as an indicator of quality. One highlighted indicator in the OUCQA QA Framework is stated as the “Appropriateness and effectiveness of the means of assessment, especially in the students’ final year of the program, in clearly demonstrating achievement of the program learning objectives” (p. 24). The importance of well-designed assessment strategies to determine outcome achievement was clear and was present in the self-study template as well.

In institutional documents such as the IQAP, the achievement of learning outcomes seem to be positioned as a reference point for the structuring (such as program timelines and milestones) and resourcing (such as staffing, space allocation) of program components and academic services. In a section addressing the evaluation criteria of program reviews, the IQAP states that academic authorities at the program level must ensure “that the program’s structure and requirements allow for learning outcomes to be achieved [...] and to be consistent with OCAV’s Degree Level Expectations” (p. 6). This is supported by statements made in the OUCQA QA framework about academic services and how these are “defined as those services integral to a student’s ability to achieve the learning outcomes expected from a program” (p. 3).

Such services would typically include, but are not limited to, academic advising and counselling appropriate to the program, information technology, library and laboratory resources directed towards the program, and internship, co-operative education and practicum placement services – where these experiential components are a required part of a program. (p. 3)

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Also of note is the concept of consistency and alignment that arises with respect to learning outcomes. In provincial documents, this is emphasized as the “consistency of the program’s learning outcomes with the institution’s mission and Degree Level Expectations, and how its graduates achieve those outcomes” (OUCQA QA Framework, 2016, p. 21). The Ministerial Statement on QA suggests that achievement of proposed learning outcomes needs to be aligned with methods of program delivery and “should normally be measured by looking at whether the delivery methods are appropriate to the course content, the students involved, and the proposed learning outcomes” (p. 9).

At the level of the learner, student learning outcomes and specific statements regarding what the student would gain or develop by the end of their program are only indirectly acknowledged in the documents. Explicit mention of formal program learning outcomes was not found for any of the programs associated with this study. This is surprising given the emphasis placed on these at all levels of government and institution. Instead, educational tools and resources regarding the definition of learning outcomes and their importance in the context of course and curricular design are evident in institutional documents such as the program review guide.

Program learning outcomes are a description of the knowledge, competencies and values a student displays at the end/conclusion of the program. Learning outcomes help students understand why this knowledge and these competencies will be useful to them. They highlight the context and potential applications of knowledge and competencies, help students connect their learning to various situations, and guide the selection of evaluation methods. (p. 1)

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Overall, the concept of learning outcomes seemed to be positioned as a focal point of program quality, yet evidence of actual program learning outcomes seemed elusive for the programs associated with this study.

Modes of program delivery.

In the spirit of “promot[ing] the quality of teaching as part of our institutional culture” (uOttawa Strategic Plan - Vision 2020, p. 3), modes of program delivery are mentioned as an indicator of quality in several documents. The OUCQA QA Framework describes modes of delivery as “the means or medium used in delivering a program (e.g., lecture format, distance, on-line, problem-based, compressed part-time, different campus, inter-institutional collaboration or other non-standard form of delivery)” p. 7). As indicated in the achievement of learning outcome subtheme above, evidence of alignment between the selection of modes of delivery and learning outcomes serves as an indicator of quality. The IQAP makes explicit mention of this as it mandates that processes examining program quality must demonstrate that “mode(s) of delivery to meet the program’s identified learning outcomes are appropriate and effective” (p. 59). Concrete questions pertaining to the alignment of teaching methods and outcomes are evident in the program self-study template. For example:

- Explain how these teaching methods, modes of delivery and related assessment methods (labs, internships, case studies; blended learning, online, distance) pertain to the program learning objectives and help students attain them. (p. 19)
- Comment on the appropriateness of the teaching methods (lectures, laboratories, internships, etc.) in regards to program learning outcomes. (p. 19)

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- Indicate the appropriateness of considering new teaching methods, which could improve the achievement of program learning outcomes. (p. 19)

Excellence of faculty members.

Mentioned as an indicator of program quality, the notion of faculty excellence is noted on multiple occasions. In faculty documents, such as the Faculty of Arts Strategic Plan, it is indicated that “A core strength of the Faculty of Arts is the quality of its professors” (p. 8). The quality of professors in institutional documents seems to encompass a broad set of items. For instance, in the IQAP document it states that “quality indicators for teaching staff [include] training and skills, distinctions, [and] ability to make a significant contribution to the proposed program.” (p. 8). But also that “evidence of quality of the faculty [includes] qualifications, research, innovation; scholarly record; teaching excellence; appropriateness of collective faculty expertise to contribute substantively to the proposed program” (p. 45). In the self-study submissions, program representatives are expected to provide evidence of the above as supported by faculty member CVs.

In its Vision 2020 strategic planning document, the institution outlines a commitment to faculty excellence by “facilitate[ing] the career development of professors who want to focus their efforts on teaching innovation and on pedagogical research” (p. 3). Later in the same document, similar support is offered for disciplinary research and related mentorship as well.

Time to completion.

Across both governmental and institutional documents, concern regarding student times to completion of the program is noted. Transparency regarding expected timelines as

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well as tested mechanisms to ensure students are on track are regarded as an indicator of program quality. The OUCQA QA Framework indicated a need for graduate programs to provide: “a clear rationale for program length that ensures that the program requirements can be reasonably completed within the proposed time period” (p. 10) and “evidence that students’ time-to-completion is both monitored and managed in relation to the program’s defined length and program requirements” (p. 25). These statements are echoed in the IQAP document, under section 2.2.3.9 on “quality and other indicators” where programs under review are requested to describe “appropriate administrative structures [...] that ensure oversight of students’ progress” (p. 16).

Two program evaluation summaries corresponding to the programs of three of the six PhD candidates who were interviewed in this study indicated that in practice there is a critical need to “continue to monitor completion times and graduation rates” (p. 2), in this case mentioned in the evaluation summary for Human Kinetics graduate programs. Similarly, the evaluation summary for graduate programs in Education stated that “continued attention must be paid to the drop-out rate in programs. Specifically for the PhD program regarding the duration of studies” (translated from French, p. 2). Since these program evaluations, the University of Ottawa has committed in the institutional SMA for 2014-2017, to increase support for program completion, by stating: “We will also enhance graduate students’ experience by providing the support needed to enable them to complete their master’s and doctoral programs within reasonable, stipulated time periods” (p. 3).

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This concludes the themes addressing notions of quality academic programs. The remaining themes below highlight notions of quality student learning which emerge from the collective of documents analyzed.

Student learning experience.

The term “student learning experience” or “student experience” is embedded in each of the institutional documents and in nearly all of the faculty documents examined. At times, there is a nebulous use of the term as it can refer to a broader university experience outside of learning (such as the variety of activities offered at the athletics complex or efficiency and cost of food services). The theme entitled “student learning experience” has only been coded in those instances where the documents are indeed referring to learning. As such, it is clear given the 14 occurrences of the theme in the institutional documents that the student learning experience is a focal point of the University of Ottawa’s strategic priorities. This is clearly articulated in the SMA document:

The quality of each student’s experience is the first priority in Destination 20/20, our strategy for the decade. Teaching and learning are central to that experience and core to our mission. It follows that focusing on the best ways to teach our students, and for them to learn, is the first of our three objectives in this document. (p. 2)

Nearly all other institutional documents reference the first objective described in the university’s strategic plan. The Faculty of Education annual report states that the “Student Experience is our top priority” (p. 8). More specifically, the Faculty of Arts further stipulates in its strategic plan that “to ensure a high quality learning experience, it therefore intends to offer all students opportunities to study in a small group format and will continue its mentoring

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system that pairs professors with new students as soon as they begin their university studies” (p. 7).

“The University prioritizes teaching and learning, especially as it relates to enhancing the student experience” (SMA, p. 6), at all levels of study. Referring more specifically to graduate studies, five documents address the sub-themes of student supervision as well as community and sense of belonging.

Supervision.

In part stemming from concerns relating to time to program completion as mentioned above, the supervision and mentorship of graduate students is clearly seen as an influential factor of a quality student experience. While this subtheme appears mostly in institutional documents, the provincial OUCQA QA Framework stated that “departments should address the times to completion in the PhD program especially as it relates to the role of faculty advising and supervision of PhD students” (p. 41) in processes relating to the examination of quality. Linked to the provincial quality assurance framework, the institutional level IQAP document provided guidelines for the inclusion of program-level information specific to graduate student supervision. For example, programs are requested to provide evidence regarding:

- “The way supervisory loads will be distributed, and the qualifications and appointment status of faculty who will provide instruction and supervision;” (p. 32)
- “Mentoring policies in place for junior professors” (p. 32) and
- “Quality and availability of graduate supervision.” (p. 70)

Further, each program’s self-study template is pre-populated with a table containing the

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results from graduate exit surveys about dissertation advisor performance. Likert-style statements include items relating to provision of constructive feedback, availability for regular meetings and helpfulness at the varied stages of the dissertation process. Program representatives are asked to discuss the survey results presented in this table as part of their response to questions such as: “Describe the departmental approach and guiding principles to thesis supervision” (p. 38) and “Describe the support and supervision offered in view of students retention (related to admission, course selection, progress issues, career development, job opportunities, graduate studies options” (p. 38). These questions are part of the program self-study to be completed within the cyclical program review every 7-8 years.

At the faculty and program level, documents revealed concrete actions with regards to enhancements to supervision. For instance, the Faculty or Arts Strategic Plan stated:

We can take immediate and concrete steps to improve the supervision of our students and tracking their progress effectively by agreeing at both departmental and faculty levels to adopt recommended practices for supervision and by adopting policies regarding the distribution of thesis supervision amongst professors and limiting the numbers of students who can be supervised by a professor at any given time. (p. 79)

In response to its program evaluation summary and recommendations regarding the enhancement of its graduate student supervision practises, the Linguistics program “indicated that it has begun to address problems related to the distribution of the number of theses to be supervised per professor and the uneven quality of some thesis supervision cases that are exceptions to the overall excellence of the program in this regard” (translated from French, p. 2).

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Community and sense of belonging.

The importance of community and belonging resonated in several institutional level documents. In the university's Vision 2020 strategic plan, a commitment to this theme is evident. The strategic plan states: "To make it easier for students to enrich their learning experience, we will enable the creation of social networks and communities of learners" (p. 4). The Education program made specific mention of the sense of community and how it is lived via a student testimonial.

There is a real sense of community in the Faculty of Education: the Education Graduate Students Association is one of the most active graduate student associations on campus and there is never a shortage of social activities or workshops to attend or ways to get involved. (p. 6)

In a more subdued fashion, notions of collegiality and community were brought up as a strength in the Human Kinetics graduate program evaluation summary. It was commented that "Students are satisfied overall with their experience. A collegial environment was observed, which is important given the diversity of the research interests among faculty members and graduate students" (p. 2).

Indicating the value of community with respect to the quality of the student learning experience, three questions in the program self-study template related directly to this theme.

- Describe the diverse academic activities (public lectures, conferences, debates, workshops for thesis writing, etc.) that are made available to students of all levels and comment on how they enrich the achievement of program learning outcomes and ensure students retention. (p. 39)

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- Describe, if applicable, practices or mechanisms that help maintain or develop a program learning community. (p. 39)
- Evaluate the sense of belonging to a community defined by the program(s) or the unit. (p. 39)

Transformative outlook to learning.

The fourth dominant theme relates to the transformative outlook to learning in the context of quality student experiences. When outlining the outcomes of the graduate-level experience, these were frequently presented indirectly as the development of skills and the expansion of knowledge. For instance, embedded in the current institutional strategic plan, the University's Vision 2020 document states: "We put students at the centre of our educational mission. All our efforts are dedicated to ensuring that our students expand their knowledge, discover their creativity and develop their capacity for critical thought" (p. 2). In addition, notions of transformative learning were equally mentioned explicitly. For example, a website released in November 2018 during the consultative phase of the University of Ottawa's upcoming strategic plan, entitled "Imagine 2030", makes specific note of a transformational outlook to the learning experience.

We are very conscious of the need to prepare our students, whatever their field of study and their future direction, for rich and successful lives and careers. To promote transformational learning, we will favour inclusive, innovative, and nimble teaching, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, nourished by best practices in pedagogy and give teaching the same standing as our research.

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This transformative outlook to learning is also referenced in the program review guide used across the institution for quality assurance purposes. Following an orientation toward program improvement, rather than program accountability as introduced in an earlier subtheme, the guide alludes to student transformation as central to quality learning.

Almost all quality assurance procedures in the West are centred on program learning outcomes. This reflects different concepts of what quality means in higher education.

Registration, retention and degree granting rates, research intensity, the prestige of the institution or program, graduate job placement rates, etc. are all important criteria.

However, there is unanimous agreement that a program's most important quality indicator is its capacity to transform students so that they acquire the knowledge that their professor considers to be essential. This transformation, this acquisition of knowledge, competencies and values, is defined through program learning outcomes.

(p. 2)

The development of multiple skills is mentioned across documents, for instance the OUCQA QA Framework's mention that graduate students must "develop a conceptual understanding of fundamental aspects of the discipline(s) and appropriate levels of analytical, interpretative, methodological and expository skills" (p. 47). Of the listed skills, common mention is made of working through challenge, reflection, critical thinking and collaboration – all skills related to the main phases of transformative learning. While the intended development of these skills is mentioned in documents across all levels, they are rarely mentioned in direct association with the stipulated transformative vision of the learning experience.

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As way of specific sub-themes, the most frequently credited catalyst for the development of skills was intellectual challenge and the most cited outcome developed was that of increased autonomy.

Challenge.

Labelled using a variety of similar terms across documents, the notion of intellectual challenge as a student outcome is a resounding one. Challenging students is not only presented as a commitment by the institution, but sources of challenge are also identified. In the institutions Vision 2020 strategic planning document, the first goal of the plan states that “Our students will be offered high-impact academic experiences. They will be challenged by a vast array of educational activities, including scientific experiments and research projects [...]” (p. 3). Sources of intellectual challenge are highlighted in the IQAP document as “all elements of the academic unit, program structure, composition of teaching staff and possible partnerships [...] will ensure an intellectually stimulating university experience” (p. 8). In the education program, for instance, the graduate program brochure promotes experiences that prospective students would benefit from, including: “Experienced professors who challenge your thinking, fuel your commitment and work with you to develop ideas and apply knowledge” (p. 2). Intellectual challenge is framed favourably across documents and appears as an aspired outcome of the PhD experience as a whole.

Autonomy.

Emerging in documents across nearly all levels, the development of intellectual autonomy is outlined as a principal outcome of the graduate, specifically PhD, student

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experience. The Ministerial Statement on QA document outlines this outcome clearly in its Canadian Degree Qualifications framework as follows: “Holders of the doctoral degree must have demonstrated a high degree of intellectual autonomy”(p. 2). They must also demonstrate “the intellectual independence to be academically and professionally engaged and current” (p. 7) and demonstrate “the intellectual independence required for continuing professional development”(p. 7). Provincially, this theme reappears in the Graduate Degree Level Expectations and extends to a graduate’s ability to take initiative in future employment settings. The document states that the doctoral degree “extends the skills associated with the Master’s degree and is awarded to students who have demonstrated the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex situations” (p. 4).

In program level documents, brief mention is made in the PhD in Human Kinetics program description document. The introductory paragraph describing the PhD program notes that among other skills, “PhD graduates acquire autonomy in their field of research” (p. 1). The development of intellectual autonomy and independence as a scholar is easily the most consistent outcome of the PhD journey mentioned across government levels and referenced at the program level.

Summary

Stemming from the examination of the 25 documents listed in Table 9 that span across governmental and institutional levels, the document analysis outlined four dominant themes as presented in Table 10, each with several sub-themes. The first dominant theme, Characteristics of Quality, outlines the intent of quality assurance systems to work toward program

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improvement rather than serve to assure accountability. This enhancement orientation is typically achieved by aligning with a set of common standards (national, provincial, accreditation related), and by maximizing opportunities for student input in the process. The second dominant theme is Indicators of Quality. These indicators manifest as the achievement of carefully crafted learning outcomes and as output variables such as modes of program and instructional delivery, demonstrated excellence of faculty members, and times to completion of the degree. Serving as the third dominant theme, the Student Learning Experience outlines the importance of strong guidance and supervision as well as a sense of belonging in a healthy academic community. Lastly, the fourth dominant theme is the Transformative Outlook to Learning. The most important factor in the development of skills as an emerging scholar is intellectual challenge. Subsequently, the most cited outcome developed during the PhD journey is that of increased autonomy.

Across documents, particularly visioning and promotional texts specific to the University of Ottawa, there were several direct mentions of transformative learning and student transformation as core principles of the institution suggesting a clear intention that educational processes and student learning align with a transformative notion of quality. Several sub-themes emerging from procedural documents align well with this transformative and enhancement-oriented view of quality, such as quality assurance mechanisms focused on program improvement and that student feedback be solicited regarding the quality of academic programs. Equally, indirect mention of student transformation via the development of key skills such as working through challenges, reflection, critical thinking, collaboration and autonomy associate with the main phases of Transformative Learning Theory. However, mention of

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transformation is relatively limited and several noteworthy contradictions emerge between the aspired *Transformative* notion of quality and of student learning and the stated indicators that align more with *Exceptional* and *Fitness for Purpose* notions of quality. This was characterized by indicators determining the quality of a program as dictated by blanket standards, by the number of faculty receiving awards, by the number of published articles and related citations and via tabulations of modes of course delivery. These contradictions seem to indicate a tension between agendas of quality that are compliance driven versus those that are enhancement driven – greater discussion regarding this apparent tension is presented in the next chapter. An additional area of misalignment is evident between the ardent promotion of the development and tracking of learning outcomes as seen in provincial and institutional-level documents, and their notable lack of use or mention in any faculty or program-level documents. These contractions and misalignments may serve as evidence that while the intention toward a transformative view of quality and of learning is present; it has yet to be fully actioned in practice. In essence, the leap from principle to practice may still be taking place.

Overall, it is clear that notions of quality in terms of academic programs and of student learning are woven through the collection of documents in this analysis. Just as the spirit of program improvement and enhancement over mere accountability (albeit with notable contradictions) imbues the first two dominant themes related to the quality of academic programs, so too does a parallel spirit of learning as development and transformation over learning as mere collection of information and experiences in the latter two dominant themes. The documents host aspirations of a “culture of progressive and continuous learning” (Office of

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QA website) and of a sense of community and developmental learning. While this portrait of ideals addressing research sub-question 2(b) may be intended, in reality how does this align or not with the lived experiences of PhD students in sub-question 2(a), as per the overarching research question #2 about the alignment of the two perspectives? Interpretation and discussion regarding this and the other research questions are presented in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7 - Interpretation and Discussion

This chapter examines the findings from the varied data sources used and analyses undertaken in relation to the study's research questions. The within-case and cross-case analyses stemming from the three-stage interviews with PhD candidates and related field notes, the document analysis examining 25 governmental and institutional documents, along with the reflexivity journal are each used to inform the interpretation of findings.

The chapter is divided into three sections that each address the interpretation, discussion and expansion of the key ideas associated with each of the study's research questions in turn. The first section examines how PhD student learning experiences align with contemporary conceptions of transformative learning, linking with the first research question. The second section compares the institutional and student perspectives regarding the PhD student learning experience and perceptions of quality, responding to the second research question. The final section discusses opportunities to bridge two separate discourses of transformation in higher education that addresses the third research question. Each section will offer interpretations relative to cited literature and expand to other scholarship that may aid in elucidating the outcomes of this research.

PhD Student Learning Experiences

Discussion in this first section addresses the first research question: How do PhD students describe their learning experiences once they reach the dissertation-writing phase of their doctoral program? And, in particular, the sub-question: How does this align with contemporary conceptions of transformative learning?

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One commonality across PhD candidates is the mention of development, enhancement and transformation when discussing their definitions of learning and their learning experiences during the PhD journey. Each candidate spoke about increasingly complex learning experiences that have shaped their views of learning over the course of their informal and formal education, and in particular experiences lived during their PhD training. In many cases, PhD candidates had shifted in their approach to learning from one characterized as passive in primary and secondary schooling to one characterized by transformation by the end of their PhD journeys – in essence exemplifying the very transformative process that they would come to see as learning.

Whether transformed in their learning approach or not, however, in each case learning was consistently framed as enhancing a skill, broadening a particular perspective, or growing and developing as a researcher, scholar and, in some cases, as a person. This serves as a first indicator that alignment with transformative learning exists in the notions held by the PhD candidates. When examining the transcripts and field notes, each candidate made clear mention of having experienced some, if not all, of the main phases of transformative learning. In four cases, the candidates spoke about the process of learning and how their learning experiences mirrored the main transformative phases. Several candidates emphasized the significance of a particular phase of the transformative learning process. Highlighting the importance of being challenged (or confronting a dilemma) to start the learning process and the importance of discourse to test and validate ideas. The last of the main phases in transformative learning, namely the reintegration phase, was identified as being the most

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difficult one. Candidates attested that incorporating a new understanding or approach into practice is something that takes time and concerted effort.

Connecting with more recent conceptions of the theory, several PhD candidates adopted the terminologies of frames of reference, habits of mind and points of view to describe their learning experiences. It should be noted that this was prompted by an introduction of Transformative Learning Theory in the second interview with each candidate (see Appendices I and J for the description presented to each candidate). Some PhD candidates subsequently chose to adopt language from this theory that they felt would help them make sense of, and describe, recent learning experiences. Pulling from several reflex journal entries made during the data collection and data analysis stages of this study, candidates appeared to see logic in the nested concepts of transformative learning. It seemed that the ideas were not necessarily foreign, but that they did not have the terminology to adequately put the learning process into words. More specifically, candidates had an easier time identifying habits of mind and how they influenced points of view, than considering broader frames of reference that may have been embedded in their thinking since childhood. This said, it appeared that the transformative phases describing how learning takes place were easier to conceptualize and see as relevant in their learning experiences, as compared to the description of what is transforming via Mezirow's description of broader frames of references to narrower points of view. PhD candidates were able to share examples of moments in their learning process with greater ease than what had been transformed or changed in the context of their learning. One candidate called the types of learning presented in Mezirow's representation of transformative learning (Appendix H) jargon that seemed to make it more complex than was necessary.

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As a way to help make sense of the learning experiences shared by the PhD candidates and expand beyond Mezirow's cognitive perspective of transformative learning, Cranton's (2013) most recent representation of integrated perspectives will be used as a guide. Cranton's (2013) categorizations of transformation include the cognitive, beyond rational and social action perspectives. When using these representations, it is not difficult to see evidence of varied factors contributing to transformative learning across the six cases presented in this study.

From the cognitive perspective, which for Cranton (2013) equally integrates a social dimension, each PhD candidate mentioned experiences of critical self-reflection in relation to held habits of mind or pre-existing ways of undertaking research and writing tasks. Several candidates equally noted social interactions as important in the broadening of perspectives. In fact, the importance of social interaction was highlighted repeatedly and was discussed as both a catalyst for reflection and a remedy for isolation. Eisen (2001), King (2005), and Taylor (2007) note the dynamic of social interaction and the establishment of relationships as a key component in creating transformative learning opportunities. Mezirow (2003) further identifies social interactions as dialogue involving the examination of beliefs and assumptions that may lead to questioning current habits of mind and eventually transform problematic frames of reference. Cranton's (2013) cognitive perspective of transformation stems directly from Mezirow's conceptualizations. She integrates in this perspective the recent addition of consciousness-raising in order to make current habits of mind more visible. Examples of this include when facilitators of learning use journaling, critical questioning or experiential activities to help reflect on the origins of existing assumptions and expectations. Similarly, Cranton

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(2013) emphasizes the importance of discourse in consciousness-raising via “contexts where people exchange views related to their perspectives and habits of mind” (p. 269). This view adds credence to the connections revealed between transformative learning experiences reported across cases and the social interactions and program communities that have helped foster them.

With reference to the beyond rationale perspective, Cranton (2013) states that in this case “it is not the cognitive processes of thinking and reflecting that are central to the learning, but rather intuition, imagination, emotion, narrative, and embodiment (p. 271). While no participants in this study spoke of “soul work” via experiences defined by Dirkx (2012) as developing a conscious relationship with the unconscious through art, music, film, nature, joy, or suffering, PhD candidates did note significant anxieties that generated both positive and negative emotions. For instance, anxieties regarding isolation in the PhD program experience that hindered learning and that subsequently led to experiencing an imposter syndrome for a few of the study participants. Yet others mentioned intense moments of positive emotion when being awarded scholarships or honours for their work or having their work accepted in renowned publications. Moreover, experiences of culture shock and beginning to embody a Canadian identity were lived by Saad, Chen and their respective families following their move from abroad. These significant and emotionally ridden experiences were described as leading to learning in both sudden and incremental ways. Sudden from the initial shock of interactions and new ways of doing things, and incremental via the gradual adaptation to the new environment and culture. The experiences shared by Saad and Chen appear to connect with the scholarship of Illeris (2014) regarding the concept of identity in relation to transformative

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learning. Illeris stipulates that frames of reference and subsequent habits of mind are parts of a person's identity and that changes to these, whether sudden or incremental, link an individual with their cultural, social and societal environment. This substantiates many of the institution's initiatives targeted at international students for which the goal is to reduce the anxiety-ridden aspects of culture shock and help foster the incremental constructive transformations with respect to the cultural, social and societal environments. In the case of the University of Ottawa, internationalization, which includes integrating a greater number of international students and scholars in the university community, has been a principal pillar in the current Destination 2020 strategic plan (uOttawa, 2016). The benefit that internationalization is expected to bring includes greater exposure to diverse perspectives as well as an opportunity to expand knowledge of cultures different to ones own, broaden networks of learning and better appreciate the complexities of different societies.

Regarding social action, this was not a perspective that emerged in many of this study's cases. Only two PhD candidates specifically mentioned learning about social injustices and oppression that led to the transformation of perspectives on large social issues. In this case, expanded or changed views related to oppression experienced by indigenous peoples in Canada and the role and rights of women in Western culture. Both candidates shared actions that they have been involved in that extend from the individual level of transformation to a larger commitment to social action and change.

The catalysts for transformation, whether associated with the cognitive, beyond rational and/or social action, seem to collectively contribute to perspective change in all six cases presented in this study. Cranton's (2013) broad representation of transformative perspectives

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has worked well as a structure to help make sense of participant transformation, and do so in a less fragmented capacity given the numerous theoretical perspectives of transformation that have been promoted over the last few decades. However, given the emergent nature of Cranton's (2013) representation of transformation, it is still evolving. It acknowledges many, but not all, diverging areas of the transformative learning literature. Until present, it serves as the most promising integrated representation of transformation and can perhaps serve as a springboard to further examination of a holistic approach to transformative learning that recognizes the many perspectives that address the roles of reflection and discourse, feelings and intuition, and relationships and context (Taylor, 2017).

Serving as one of few studies for comparison which examined transformation in doctoral education, Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock (2012) witnessed similar student views of learning to the present study using an adult development framework crafted for their study which examined the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural domains. In terms of cognitive development, the authors largely described this in terms of the emergence of critical reflection as per Mezirow's (1991) work. Emotional (also called personal) development outlined emotional and spiritual change following the works of Consedine and Magai (2006) and Kang (2007). Lastly, behavioural development referenced Brandtstädter (1998) who promoted observable behaviour as a reflection of a person's beliefs, values, and goals. In their investigation of transformational outcomes of doctoral students, they found that students could live a variety of learning experiences that go beyond intellectual development. Emotional and behavioural developments described in this study were also coined as transformative given "their perspective changing character" (p. 193). Examples of transformational outcomes in the

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cognitive domain included: reflectivity, acknowledgement of multiple perspectives and thinking in complex ways. Outcomes related to personal development included: tolerance, confidence and self-awareness. Behavioural outcomes included continuous learning, collaboration and resilience. The findings of the present study expand on this work as it highlights similar outcomes across disciplines in more traditional doctoral programs. It serves as evidence, however, that not having the vibrant cohort model in the program studied by Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock (2012) leaves far more room to experience the imposter syndrome, isolation and consequently delayed completion times. Given the richness of the data collected from the interview process and related field notes, the present study is able to inductively pull many of these themes from candidate narratives, rather than have participants identify relevance to their experience by way of a survey. The in-depth descriptions of participant narratives and context ensured a level of detail necessary to aid with transferability. This methodological choice is considered a strength of the present study.

Expanded understanding of PhD student learning experiences.

Expanding beyond the scholarship examined in this study, research regarding student conceptions of learning is relatively plentiful. Starting with scholars such as Saljo (1979), Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty (1993), Purdie, Hattie and Douglas (1996), Tynjala (1997) and more recently Van Rossum and Hamer (2010), research in this area has honed a list of hierarchical student conceptions of learning as represented by Thomson (2017) in Appendix L. One of which relates to seeing things in a different way, widening horizons and viewing learning as a developmental process. The “transformative nature of learning” theme emerging from the cases in this study aligns well with this developmental category and provides credence to

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Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty (1993)’s claim that conceptions of learning that are developmental are characteristic of learners with greater exposure to formal education and a greater collection of both formal and informal learning experiences in general.

In addition, and supporting the studies of Hou (2009) and Thomson (2017) on graduate student conceptions of learning, it was evident in this study that learners could hold more than one conception of learning and that this was dependent on context. For instance, both Lukas and Chen still held conceptions of learning as memorization and gaining information, however, did not see these conceptions as relevant in all parts of their doctoral experiences. As part of Saljo’s (1979) pioneering scholarship on conceptions of learning, he proposed that experienced learners with developed conceptions of learning are more aware of the varied contexts within which alternative learning processes can be used. As such, these learners are able to use this to their advantage when optimizing the achievement of specific learning outcomes. The doctoral candidates in this study, who were sought out for their extensive learning experiences, appeared to demonstrate a certain awareness of their learning approach and noted times when they opted for alternative approaches as they encountered specific difficulties or collaborated with different people.

Summary.

This section addressed the first research question that asks: How do PhD students describe their learning experiences once they reach the dissertation-writing phase of their doctoral program? Along with the following sub-question: How does this align with contemporary conceptions of transformative learning? Whether in whole or in part, each PhD

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candidate described learning experiences that aligned with transformative learning. Using Cranton's (2013) representation of cognitive, beyond rational and social action transformation as a guide, the diversity of aspects that contributed to transformative experiences was examined across the six student cases. Beyond the intellectual, the role of anxiety, emotion, culture shock, oppression and larger social issues played important roles in student transformation. It was equally noted that the findings in this study support the notion that learners with greater exposure to formal education and a greater collection of learning experiences (in this case doctoral candidates) tend to be more aware of the varied contexts within which different learning processes can be used. This level of awareness can lead to advantages when optimizing the achievement of specific learning outcomes. In the context of describing PhD student learning experiences, this study answers Taylor's (2007) call to examine learning and transformation in independent teaching and learning contexts that are less controlled by a formal instructor. It equally appears to serve as a ripe example of how a variety of influential factors, such as guidance, community and a new culture in the context of this study, can leverage or hinder transformative learning.

Institutional and Student Perspectives of the PhD Learning Experience and of Quality

This section seeks to shed light on the second research question: How do PhD student learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and by their academic program? As such, a first part will examine alignment between institutional descriptions of PhD learning experiences (as presented in Chapter 6) and those lived by PhD students (as presented in Chapter 5). A second part will then discuss alignment with regards to institutional descriptions of quality, addressing

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the second sub-question (2b), and student perceptions of quality in response to the first sub-question (2a).

Alignment of perspectives on PhD learning experiences.

It is striking how closely the inductively drawn themes align between the two independent analyses of student perceptions of quality learning experiences and the characterization of quality learning in governmental and institutional documents (see summary of themes in Table 10). This may be due to a renewed focus on the quality of academic programs in Ontario over the last decade (Goff, 2015; OUCQA, 2012). It may also relate to the evolving systems (often coined quality assurance) recently put in place to support program-level reflection regarding factors influential to the achievement of student learning outcomes and the quality of academic programs (e.g., Biggs & Tang, 2011). Standout themes that are similar between the two analyses are the Notions of Transformation in Learning, Supervision, Social Interactions and Community, Autonomy and Challenge. These are examined in more detail below, followed by remarks regarding areas of misalignment between the analyses and contradictions noted within the documents examined.

Table 11

Summary of Themes from Cross-Case and Document Analysis

Cross-Case Analysis Themes	Document Analysis Themes
Guidance and Supervision - Importance of guidance - Change in supervisor - Challenge	Characteristics of Quality - Program improvement - Meeting standards - Student feedback

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- Supervision as influential to quality of the PhD experience	
Independence - As an intended outcome of the program - Becoming autonomous - Isolation - Imposter syndrome - As a learning preference	Indicators of Quality - Achievement of learning outcomes - Modes of program delivery - Excellence of faculty members - Time to completion
Social Interactions and Community - Informal social interactions - Formal social interactions - Community building	Student Learning Experience - Supervision - Community and sense of belonging
Transformative Nature of Learning - Alignment with existing views and experiences of learning - Phases within Transformative Learning - Disorienting dilemmas as productive - PhD as transformative	Transformative Outlook to learning - Challenge - Autonomy

Transformative nature of learning.

From a broad perspective, a distinct similarity regarding a transformative outlook to learning emerged from both the student and institutional perspectives. This outlook is characterized by an overarching theme in both the cross-case and document analyses. Alignment suggests that in principle, the systems involved in setting up and operating higher

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education programs, specifically at the graduate level, along with the students experiencing those programs view the definition of quality in higher education as transformative. This is to say that both institutional and student perspectives view higher education, at least in part, as a process of qualitative change with an emphasis on enhancing capacity and empowering students (Harvey & Knight, 1996). While this alignment exists in terms of ideals, it is not always present in practice via the lived experience of students. Further discussion regarding the nature of this (mis)alignment is presented in a section below entitled: Alignment of perspectives regarding quality.

Supervision.

Strong graduate student supervision and mentorship is clearly outlined as important to a quality learning experience in the documents and as referenced by PhD candidates. Provincial and institutional quality assurance frameworks feature reflective questions about the principles and logistics of student supervision and both faculties and departments speak to the enhancement of supervisory practices to ensure good time to completion in their strategic plans. Study participants shared that regular supervisory guidance was linked to a better understanding of a PhD program's milestones, procedures and culture. Regular guidance at the outset of the program was emphasized by PhD candidates in order to establish expectations, navigate through the comprehensive exams and support the drafting of their project proposals. Similarly, the notion of supervisor availability throughout the duration of the program emerged as a characteristic of quality in institutional documents as well. While the notion of availability does not emerge in any of the studies cited in this project, it is mentioned as a quality of academic guidance that is associated with the self-efficacy of doctoral students (Overall, Deane

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& Peterson, 2011). Looking to the studies cited in the literature review, the characterization of supervisory guidance in the present study is consistent with the Kumi-Yeboah and James (2014) study in that it was pivotal to successfully navigate the program. The study concluded that “faculty mentoring is an important step in helping students in their perspective transformation” (p. 45) and, as indicated by King (2005), provides a key support in a journey that is rarely linear, requiring frequent rerouting along the way. Among their findings, however, the authors highlight the appreciation which graduate students had for their supervisors emotional support through periodic counselling. This type of support was not mentioned in the narratives of the PhD candidates nor the documents analyzed in the present study. In Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock’s (2012) research, guidance did not stand out as a central experience. The authors merely characterized the faculty mentorship role as one responsible for affirmation and challenge. It should be noted that the study sample was not from a traditional PhD program, rather the participants were graduates of a distance PhD program in education for professionals.

It should be noted that while all study participants commented on the importance of supervisory guidance and indicated ideal characteristics of strong guidance, three of the PhD candidates shared critical comments about their own experiences and how detrimental some of their lived experiences have been toward their continuation of the doctoral journey. Problematic experiences included unclear and changing expectations, changing supervisors, lack of availability, limited knowledge of program milestones and poor mentoring ability. While literature discussing similar problematic experiences in doctoral supervision was not located, several recent works (Collins, 2015; Halbert, 2015) outlined a student perspective on the

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importance of good communication, flexibility, clear roles and responsibilities, and availability to avoid tensions in the supervisory-student relationship.

Social interactions and community.

The theme of community particularly shone through in the institution's strategic plan where social networks and communities of learners were suggested as mechanisms to enrich the learning experience and progression through programs. This was echoed by PhD candidates, as they noted that community fostered a sense of collegiality and well-being that was helpful in their progression through the program. In the program cyclical review documents, reflective questions asked about actions in place to foster program community and well-being. Study participants highlighted factors that led to a vibrant program community as strong participation by faculty and students at departmental events, space and time for regular informal interactions (e.g., active lunchroom), team-building and social activities, brown bag lunches and an inviting atmosphere with many open doors. Several PhD candidates equally mentioned the negative impact of isolation when the former factors were absent in certain program experiences. This theme resonates with the findings of Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock (2012), in that a main experience aiding in the achievement of PhD outcomes was described as interpersonal relationships characterized by community support. Provident, Salls, Dolhi, Schreiber, Mattila and Eckel (2015) identified something similar, however, consistently referenced the importance of the program cohort as a source of peer support and community. The notion of a program cohort was mentioned in only one of the six cases in the present study, and was not present in any of the documents analyzed. Given the reoccurring emergence of the influential nature of program cohorts in graduate programs, perhaps this is fertile territory for

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further investigation comparing cohort and non-cohort doctoral groups. An examination of conceptual frameworks related to social interaction and learning may help make sense of the themes of community that emerge from the student contributions and the document analysis. For instance, PhD candidates who shared that they maintained a set of regular interactions within one or more communities saw these as important resources to overcome challenges and as influential catalysts for their own transformation. With a focus on social interaction and context, perhaps the theoretical lens of situated cognition (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) may aid in further examining the nature of learning and the role of community in the context of program cohorts in the doctoral journey?

Challenge.

In both documents and participant perspectives, the theme of being challenged was seen constructively as a catalyst for intellectual development. The source of the challenge was primarily the supervisor, who was often described as a conductor who would orchestrate the right balance of periodic dissonance for their supervisee. Challenge was also mentioned as something that PhD candidates experienced independently, particularly in the conceptualization and interpretation phase of their work. It was described in institutional documents in general terms as part of a program's developmental process and as the nature of scholarly work. Conversely to the findings of Provident et al. (2015), the experience of being challenged was rarely associated with one's peers. This was surprising given the emphasis placed by participants on the importance of social interaction in learning as well as the significance placed on community as part of the learning experience across institutional documents. Provident et al. (2015) link the idea of challenge with peer support by outlining that

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community and close relationships create a supportive forum for disorientation and challenge brought on by divergent perspectives. Further, the resulting dialogue and discourse allow for the untangling of the challenge, higher-order thinking, the onset of sense making, and ultimately for learning to occur. Given the importance associated with challenge and community as indicated by both the institution and students, perhaps a closer examination of where links can be made at the programmatic level may be helpful.

Autonomy.

The theme of autonomy bridges across the span of document levels, from the federal to the program-level, as well as all PhD candidate cases. Autonomy was viewed as a central outcome of PhD programs. The primary perspective was autonomy as a researcher who is independently able to plan, undertake, manage and disseminate the results of research projects. However, a secondary perspective of autonomy was described as taking ownership of one's learning and becoming fully self-directed. This perspective connects well with notions of self-directed learning, which is itself linked with fostering transformative learning (Merriam, 2001). Both Mezirow (1985) and Brookfield (1986) outlined that critical reflection on one's own assumptions and context serve as an important part of autonomy in self-directed learning, and that educators should help enable self-direction in the transformative learning process. In the present study, self-directedness was not only evident as an objective of the PhD programs and of the institution, but by the PhD candidates as a capacity to be fully adopted and refined. Perhaps a contribution to the well-established scholarship of self-directed learning in doctoral education may be how the process of self-direction changes in learners across the duration of the doctoral journey.

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While program documents suggested that PhD graduates transition over the course of their programs to become autonomous scholars, not all cases in this study reflected a smooth transition to becoming autonomous. For years, former educational experiences (primary, secondary and undergraduate schooling) have positioned students as consumers of knowledge. Now in a PhD program, many students are for the first time asked to become autonomous producers of knowledge. The mutually emphasized theme of autonomy (in both institutional documents and via student perspectives) showcases an example of where student experiences may, in fact, deviate from institutional intentions.

An existing discourse in the area of psychology and motivation that appears to bring together several of the aforementioned themes is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Stemming from research on the social conditions that facilitate and hinder a person's development and function, SDT highlights three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Persons whose needs are met are found to have enhanced motivation, well-being, and self-regulation. Studies examining the application of SDT in educational settings support the notion that strategic guidance and facilitation provided by an educator can serve as a strong enabling factor in satisfying these psychological needs in learners (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Reeve, 2002). In the present study, notions of competence are embedded in themes such as overcoming intellectual challenge and developing scholarly independence. Notions of autonomy are explicitly outlined in the section above and evidenced by the self-directed structure of PhD programs. Lastly, the notion of relatedness was pervasive among PhD candidate descriptions of the importance of social interactions and community. The themes inductively identified in the present study provide further evidence of the importance

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of the psychological needs expressed in SDT, as extended to the context of less structured doctoral learning experiences. Further investigations in doctoral learning contexts may benefit from the use of this theory as a guiding framework.

While alignment may exist between several themes in the cross-case and document analyses in Table 11, it is quite clear that the lived student learning experienced does not align as cleanly to the intended student learning experience as outlined in the varied governmental and institutional documents. This is particularly evident for the first two themes of supervisory guidance and of community emerging in both the student and institutional perspectives. For both of these themes, students reiterate the value of each in the context of a quality PhD learning experience, just as is the case in the program documents. Several students report living these ideal experiences in their respective doctoral journeys, however, three of the students comment unfavourably on the very aspects of each theme that the documents present as influential to quality. For instance, PhD candidates shared challenges regarding the availability of supervisors, and the nature of support in guiding them through the program milestones to help them stay within reasonable timelines. Three of the candidates reported challenges with the guidance that they received. However, all candidates shared, unprompted, examples of colleagues who had quit the program over issues relating to lack of guidance, unclear expectations or troubled communication. Similarly, at the program-level, several candidates listed barriers navigating program milestones, and long delays in resolving administrative issues such as being assigned a supervisor and setting dates for meetings and presentations.

Regarding the theme of community, several PhD candidates also describe a limited sense of belonging in their programs with problematic states of isolation and cases of imposter

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syndrome. When examined by discipline, it was noted in the study's reflex journal that PhD candidates who categorized their research as being part of the humanities or social sciences were also the ones who reported struggling with isolation. The PhD candidates who associated with the sciences made greater mention of regularly collaborating with groups and program-level communities. This observation is consistent with the findings outlined by McAlpine and Norton (2006) in an extensive literature review examining doctoral attrition. The authors highlight that disciplines in the humanities and social sciences often promote a more individual approach to research in contrast to the sciences that are more team-based. They suggest that disciplines in the sciences tend to provide communities of practice that enable reflection and sharing of experiences related to common research projects.

Based on the document analysis, it seems that good questions are being asked of programs within the institution, particularly via the current quality assurance processes that have been put in place. However, there appears to be contradictions in the quality assurance agendas and a gap remaining between principle and practice. The documents largely reveal a vision of a quality assurance process that is enhancement oriented and focused on enriching the culture of teaching and student learning, yet few indicators of quality align with this vision. Most still relate to a definition of quality aligned with Excellence, via their reference to awards, publications and rankings. Might there be place for indicators relating to themes such as the timely completion of program milestones, the functioning of the supervisory process, the nature of student and faculty member engagement in the program community? In addition, notions of compliance observed in the documents frequently referenced alignment with a series of standards; be they quality frameworks, degree level expectations, disciplinary

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attributes/outcomes or institutional objectives. These findings indicate tensions between an agenda of compliance and accountability and an agenda of enhancement and transformation that echo trends observed by quality assurance scholars such as Chung Sea Law (2010), Harvey & Williams (2010), Houston (2008). Must the two agendas be mutually exclusive? Perhaps there is a way to bridge both and further integrate a focus on enhancement into existing quality assurance processes (Groen, 2017). Working from the reflective tone of the existing self-study guide used in the institutional cyclical review process and by developing and implementing indicators that further align with the student learning experience, may be productive in both comparing to standards and reflecting on enhancement. This type of investment may allow for the completion of a rigorous enhancement oriented quality assurance process internally that also serves external bodies monitoring quality standards. Or as put by Houston and Paewai (2013), “information collated [solely] for external accountability might not support internal improvement but information gathered for internal improvement could facilitate external accountability” (p. 275). A system with quality indicators primarily focused on the process and outcome of student learning along with broader notions of productivity and rankings may meet a variety of needs that touch on the Excellence and Fitness for Purpose as well as the Transformative notions of quality. Regarding the gap between principle and practice, it appears that the espoused principles of transformation that governments promote and that institutions claim to offer align poorly. While there is recognition of the importance of themes such as supervision, community for a productive doctoral journey, they are still labelled as the most common problem areas by students in the midst of the program experience.

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Pulling from reflections in the researcher's reflex journal, perhaps there is a need to better integrate the student voice in the cyclical review process by ensuring that approaches like those suggested in the OUCQA QA Framework and Guide (p. 75) are woven into the ongoing work of program development and enhancement. Much the same way course evaluations exist, perhaps a few key moments to collectively take stock and reflect on facilitating and hindering factors within the PhD program experience should be built into the doctoral journey. For instance, following each of the program milestones such as coursework, comprehensive exams, thesis proposal and data collection, a reflective questionnaire regarding themes such as study/work habits, learning approaches, use of services and facilitating and hindering program characteristics would be requested of each student. Students could be invited to draft action plans moving into the next phase of their program. An anonymized synthesis of annual submissions could be analyzed by program administrators who would subsequently be called upon to address any issues collectively with students as part of their cyclical program reviews. Moreover, if greater institutional value were to be placed on the work of strong mentorship and community building, perhaps professors may have more time to devote to their PhD students and to the health of the program community.

Alignment of perspectives regarding quality.

Overall, the student perceptions of quality, as presented in Table 8 at the end of Chapter 5, further support the important gap observed between the intended and lived experiences highlighted in the document and cross-case analyses regarding the themes deemed influential to development and transformation. While PhD candidates clearly view transformative experiences as ideal and as the institution's intent, they seldom live that

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experience. A second gap of note is that overall PhD candidates perceive an *Exceptional* definition of quality as both intended and lived, but not as ideal. In the document analysis, several themes aligned with this definition, namely: indicators of quality, meeting standards, and excellence of faculty members. Ideas of excellence, rankings and surpassing standards, attributes, expectations, and indicators are deeply embedded within the higher education system and PhD candidates are not immune to this culture. As Chen put it, the university is under many different and changing pressures by different groups and bodies and has to stay competitive. Indicators of quality focussing on the definition of *Exceptional* may well serve certain facets of the institution and be easier to collect; however, indicators of quality focussed on transformation, particularly in the context of doctoral studies, may serve students better.

The findings above regarding the *Exceptional* notion of quality, resonate with the works of Nicholson (2011) which indicate that quality is operationalized in several ways within the Ontario higher education system. Using Harvey and Knight's (1996) framework, Nicholson highlights these as Exceptional, Fitness for Purpose and Value-Added (transformative). Nicholson (2011) notes that evolving quality assurance processes that increasingly focus on enhancement-oriented approaches rather than accountability driven ones may better support a "value-added impact of a university education on student learning and development" (p. 13). Goff (2015) also found an interplay between Exceptional, Fitness for Purpose and Transformation as institutional definitions of quality in a study of 11 Ontario universities. Seeing misalignment between institutional messaging and quality enhancement practises used at the program level, Goff proposes recommendations to recalibrate statements relating to quality within institutional quality assurance documents to enhance the alignment between discourse

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and practice. While Goff (2015) offers a rare analysis between institutional messaging about quality and quality assurance practises, no known studies extend this analysis to include the students lived experience. The present study offers a unique view of the areas of alignment and misalignment between institutional messaging and the students' lived experience within one case institution. The outcome should serve as a strong compliment to Goff's (2015) work, to provide a more robust image of quality assurance and quality learning from both institutional and student perspectives in Ontario universities.

Summary.

This section sheds light on the second research question that asks: How do PhD student learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and by their academic program? Areas of alignment between institution and student are numerous when it comes to ideal PhD learning experiences. In particular, this study features strong evidence that the institution's intent is to provide the conditions for the same types of transformative experiences that students value and see as important in their doctoral training. However, a significant gap is noted between this ideal and the experience lived in many of the student cases examined in this study. Factors identified as influential in supporting transformative doctoral experiences include: reflective and intentional supervisory guidance, programs that foster a strong sense of community, and planned moments of intellectual challenge throughout the doctoral process. To help realign the intended and the lived experience, suggestions were made to better integrate the student voice in program and curricular development, build in reflective checkpoints throughout the PhD program, and place greater institutional value on the work of strong supervisory guidance

and community building. To help institutions realign their practice with the intent of a *transformative* definition of quality, there appears to be a need to define and adopt indicators of quality that clearly focus on the intended student transformation rather than indicators borrowed from the former, rankings and output driven, *exceptional* definition of quality.

Bridging Discourses of Transformation in Higher Education

Two separate discourses of transformation are woven through this study. One from the scholarly domain of adult learning known as transformative learning, and the other from the domain of quality in higher education where one definition of quality is that of student transformation. This section addresses the third research question: What congruity and contradictions exist between the discourses of quality as transformation and transformative learning theory? Along with the related sub-questions: 3(a) How do PhD students perceive connections between both discourses? And, 3(b) What bridges exist in the scholarly literature that may reconcile both discourses? As such, the section begins with an outline of the views expressed by PhD candidates regarding connections between these discourses of transformation and is followed by an examination of possible bridges that could reconcile the two discourses.

Student perspectives.

Near the end of each participant's third interview, PhD candidates were asked about the extent to which they saw quality *as transformation* as relevant to their doctoral education, and if they felt that this notion of transformation aligned with the concept of transformative learning presented during the second interview (Mezirow's Transformative Learning as per Appendices I and J). In all but one case, PhD candidates saw the transformative definition of

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quality as particularly relevant to their doctoral journeys, some speaking to the enhancement strand of Harvey and Knight's (1996) definition and others to the empowerment strand. In the outlying case, the PhD candidate in question felt that transformation implied that one was starting from zero and that the term empowerment was a trendy word born out of political correctness to make students feel good about themselves. The candidate stated that he was more open to terms like enhancement or development of his domain expertise. Further probing concluded that the issue was predominantly with the terminology and not the concept.

In terms of connections between the notion of quality "as transformative" and Transformative Learning Theory, PhD candidates collectively viewed the discourses as quite similar in practice. They saw an institution adhering to a transformative view of quality as an enabler of the learning process as described by Transformative Learning Theory. When asked to provide examples, it was noted in the field notes that participants tended to focus on the cognitive domain. For instance, suggesting that a program promoting an objective of enhancing a graduate student's skills as a researcher, and supporting this objective via checkpoints in the program, would likely result in greater cognitive development as opposed to a program simply promoting that they had award-winning faculty members with strong research outputs.

Overall, comments from the PhD candidates place importance on the alignment between how the institution values and defines quality and the type of learning that they, as students, are expected to experience. These comments echo Cheng's (2014) inquiry into the perceptions of quality by supervisors and PhD students. Cheng commented that a majority of students saw a transformative view of quality as favourable, however, identified a "gap between what interviewees expected of quality and what was evaluated as quality" (p. 285).

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This appears to be a similar way of saying what was found in this study; that there is misalignment between the intended experience and the one that is lived (via program evaluations and supporting instruction) by students. Where the Cheng (2014) study and the current one differ, is that Cheng's study is referring to both student and supervisor perceptions of quality in a university system where the quality evaluation structure is described by these stakeholders as used mainly for management purposes. In the current study, the emphasis was placed on a document analysis to determine the stance and intention of the institution, which includes its quality assurance (evaluation) system – not relying solely on perceptions of those interviewed to determine institutional intent. The specific gaps between the design of the educational system and the perceptions expressed by Cheng's (2014) PhD participants along with the gaps demonstrated in the present study via the comparison of representative documents and student narratives from diverse disciplines add stock to issues of misalignment. Moreover, it lends to the need to find ways of bridging the larger institutional discourse of transformative quality with the student learning experience. Perhaps this may be an ideal place for a more learner-centred focus via the Transformative Learning Theory.

As the institution seeks to enable and foster transformative learning experiences for its students, it will consequently need a mechanism to determine whether transformative outcomes are necessarily achieved. Transformative Learning Theory, as a well-recognized theory of adult learning with emerging developments enabling a broader and holistic representation of transformation, may be the ideal analytical tool to examine the student learning experience and frame a series of indicators of quality. Quality indicators grounded in the key tenets of Transformative Learning Theory such as a constructive dilemma or challenge,

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critical reflection, dialogue and discussion, and integration and application may help evidence and further support the very “transformation” of program learning experiences. These quality indicators could ultimately breed a cycle of transformation whereby a transformation of indicators towards evidencing transformation in student learning could lead to programmatic transformation that finally leads to enhanced alignment between institutionally intended and student experienced transformation.

Reconciling both discourses.

Following an examination of the key similarities and differences between the discourses of transformative notions of quality in higher education and Transformative Learning Theory in adult education in Chapter 2, it is evident that analogous concepts are being addressed in both. Table 12 outlines a comparison of the main ideas underpinning each discourse.

Table 12

Comparison of Conceptionalizations of Transformative Learning

Quality “as transformation” (Harvey & Knight, 1996)	Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 2013)
Driving Assumptions: - Education is a participative process that involves the ongoing change of a learner. - Students are not clients of a service, they are participants of a process.	Driving Assumptions: - Meaning exists within ourselves rather than in external forms. - Personal meaning attributed to our experience is acquired and validated through critical reflection and human interaction.

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Enhancing the Participant - Value-added notion of quality in terms of enhancement of knowledge, abilities, skills of the student.	Rational Perspective - Perspective transformation as a process of construing new or revised interpretations of experience through reflection.
Empowering the Participant - Develop metacognitive awareness and critical dialectical thinking. - Enable students to take ownership of their learning process and have influence over their own transformation. - Provide an opportunity for self-empowerment via increased self-awareness and confidence. - Encourage Independence of the learner.	- Consciousness-raising to make more explicit one's habits of mind, engaging in discourse with others, critical reflection in relation to assumptions, and finally action regarding one's change in perspective.
	Beyond Rational Perspective - Role of intuition, imagination, emotion, narrative, and embodiment in developing a conscious relationship with the unconscious.
	Social Action Perspective - Emphasis beyond the individual and toward ideology critique and the transformation of society. Learning and transformation as related to social justice, unveiling oppression, and social action.

The difference in the driving assumptions of each discourse clearly indicates the distinct contexts and purposes that inspired each of these areas of scholarship. Quality “as transformation” emerges from a more expansive perspective where transformation is the process that higher education seeks to enable. This discourse places emphasis on the systemic

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factors (e.g., culture, quality assurance procedures, pedagogies, evaluation of learning) that enable and that hinder the process of transformation. This discourse is tailored to the notion of quality in the higher education sector and is a response to former organizational views of quality that have been translated from industry and problematized in terms of their relevance and applicability in higher education over recent decades. Stemming from a very different set of driving assumptions, Transformative Learning is a theory of adult learning that seeks to explain how we understand the meaning of our experiences and integrate it into our way of being and doing. Originating from an examination of learning at the individual-level, transformative learning theory sought to map out the catalysts of transformation (e.g., dilemmas, critical thinking, dialogue). As mentioned in Chapter 2, a difference in the level of analysis of each discourse (organizational versus individual level) is immediately witnessed. Similarly, there appears to be a difference in the temporal quality of the concepts. Harvey and Knight (1996) describe transformation as an ongoing dialectical process of deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge. For these scholars, transformative learning is a continuous process of critical dialectical thinking and growth. Alternatively, Transformative Learning Theory, as has evolved from the original conceptualizations of Mezirow, is more episodic in nature. This is to say that this form of transformative learning places more emphasis on a paradigm shift that may occur gradually over time (incremental) or in a more sudden capacity (epochal) (Mezirow, 2012). Contributing to a possible bridging opportunity, it was noted in this study's reflex journal that perhaps the episodic nature of transformative learning theory could serve as a representation of learning experiences nested within the larger process of change and constant growth presented by the transformative definition of quality. That is to say that a series of

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transformative episodes could meaningfully be examined via transformative learning theory, all the while contributing to a larger continuous dialectical process over the duration of a degree.

Further examination of the central characteristics of each discourse in Table 12 reveals a surface-level similarity in the outcome of transformation. For both concepts of transformative learning, the qualitative change in an individual, particularly within the cognitive domain, is described as the outcome. This is to say that transformative learning leads to an enhancement in what an individual knows or can do. A deeper-level connection appears to exist via the concept of empowerment of the learner. Harvey and Knight (1996) and Harvey (2009) outline empowerment as an outcome of a learner's transformation where they take ownership of their learning process and become more self-aware, confident and independent. This notion of empowerment is echoed, in part, in Mezirow's own view of the outcome of transformation as generating "reflective action as one moves towards a fuller realization of agency" (2000, p. 25). Brookfield (2012) and Cranton (2013) expand this notion by characterizing empowerment as moving beyond the individual and toward ideology critique and the transformation of society. This expanded view is not one found in Harvey and Knight's (1996) conceptualization of transformative learning, at least at the learner's level. At a more meta governmental and organizational level, Harvey and Knight (1996) call for an ideological critique of how quality in higher education is viewed and subsequently how quality assurance systems are structured and enacted. Their call suggests unveiling the oppressive characteristics of accountability-driven quality assurance practises that consider students as clients and learning as product. Moreover, they call for the development of organization-level agency in defining increasingly enhancement-oriented quality monitoring processes "which are preoccupied with the

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empowerment of the learner” (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 103). Yet another perspective that does not appear in the transformative definition of quality discourse is the beyond rational perspective from the integrated view of transformative learning theory, as seen in Table 12. It should be noted that mention was made in Chapter 2 of the potential for Brookfield’s critical perspective of transformative learning to serve as an area to examine cross-application of both discourses of transformation. Unfortunately, Brookfield’s work did not appear to meaningfully chart areas of complementarity beyond the congruities discussed above regarding characterizations of empowerment as moving beyond the individual and toward ideology critique.

Examining both discourses of transformation for areas of congruity and contradiction has proved to be revealing in that relatively equal amounts of congruity and contradiction emerge, but more particularly that the two discourses of transformation need not be mutually exclusive. As indicated by the PhD candidates when commenting on connections between the two discourses of transformation, an institutional stance where quality is defined *as transformative* will inevitably enable, if actioned at the program-level, a learning process that fosters paradigm shifts as characterized by the Transformative Learning Theory. This student view, combined with the reflection above regarding a cycle of transformation (whereby transformative indicators evidence transformation in student learning leading to programmatic change and action), indicate the significance of programmatic and curricular roles in fostering transformation. Considering the work of Kasworm and Bowles (2012) on fostering transformative learning in higher education settings, there exists a compelling overlap with Harvey and Knight (1996) regarding the types of programmatic, curricular, and instructional

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approaches as well as environmental conditions that best foster transformative learning. Both sets of authors offer reasonable inferences as to the influence of certain approaches or conditions on transformative learning, but no related research appears to exist. In fact, moving beyond descriptive inquiry, no scholarship was found to examine the impact of programmatic features on the transformative learning experience.

Heeding a call from Taylor and Snyder (2012) regarding studies that move beyond retrospective analysis and a call by Kasworm and Bowles (2012) to examine factors in the educational experience that foster transformation, a longitudinal investigation of the role and impact of programmatic, curricular and contextual factors on transformative learning seems justified. Studying the impact that a transformative learning experience may have on the learner, program and on society may further support the cause for a transformative institutional stance and alignment of such a stance across its structure of quality assurance and related actions at the faculty, program and instructor level. This research direction is likely one to shed further light on constructive connections between the broader discourse enabling transformation and the specific one describing how the process of transformation takes place.

Summary

This chapter undertook an explanation and discussion of study findings in relation to the research questions and as supported by current scholarship. With regards to aligning student learning experiences with contemporary conceptions of transformative learning, Cranton's (2013) representation of transformative perspectives was moderately helpful in delineating catalysts for transformation that go beyond the cognitive. However, was not robust enough to serve as a standalone framework to examine a more integrated set of transformative

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perspectives of learning. Student descriptions of their PhD learning experiences indicated a variety of influential factors such as intentional guidance and mentorship, meaningful social interactions, development of scholarly autonomy, and strategic opportunities for intellectual challenge.

Comparing both the PhD learning experiences and perceptions of quality shared by students with the descriptions of the same from governmental and institutional documents, it was clear that an alignment of intention exists with regards to transformative experiences and outcomes in the doctoral program. This is to say that the ideal transformative learning experiences sought by students are aligned with those intended by the institution. However, a gap exists between the ideal and intended experiences and the students lived experiences. A recommendation regarding the adoption of quality indicators to help institutions realign their practice with the intent of a transformative definition of quality was discussed.

Promise with respect to bridging the gap mentioned above was addressed via the examination of congruity between the discourses of institutional-level transformative notions of quality and student-level conceptions of transformative learning. While unstudied, there appears to be room for complementarity that would enable greater symmetry between the ideal doctoral learning experience and the lived experience.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

Stemming from an increased focus on quality in the field of higher education, this study sought to provide empirical evidence regarding student conceptualizations of their program learning experience where little scholarship currently exists. The transformative view of quality is becoming increasingly central to discussions related to institutional quality and the student experience in higher education. As such, are students in fact experiencing transformation of their scholarly and professional capacities, and even transformation of themselves as learners, as intended by the institution? Can a transformative definition of quality be associated with actual student transformation during the learning process? These were the underlying questions that drove the approach to, and eventual design of, this inquiry.

This chapter features an overview of the study and its contributions to scholarship, policy and practice. Subsequently, study limitations are outlined and future research directions are discussed. The chapter concludes with final thoughts regarding the topic areas and the research process.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the learning experiences of PhD candidates across a variety of doctoral programs. This was driven by the first research question: How do PhD candidates describe their learning experiences once they reach the dissertation-writing phase of their doctoral program? This was further extended to include a particular theory in adult learning via sub-question 1(a): How do these learning experiences align with contemporary conceptions of transformative learning?

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The study equally sought to understand PhD candidate perceptions of quality in higher education and investigated the extent to which these PhD candidates were living the intended transformation that postsecondary institutions are seeking to foster. This was posed in the second research question: How do PhD candidate learning experiences and perceptions of quality align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and by their academic program? This main question was broken down into two sub-questions that necessitated separate analyses. Question 2(a): How do PhD candidates characterize quality in the context of their degree? And, question 2(b): How is quality characterized in governmental and institutional-level documents? Examination of perspectives at both the institutional and student level sought to understand how the transformative notion of quality within an institution might be related to transformative learning within the student over the course of a PhD program. Lastly, two seminal discourses connected with transformation in higher education literature, namely Harvey and Green's (1993) conceptions of quality as transformation and Mezirow's (2000) revised Transformative Learning Theory, were analyzed in response to the third research question: What congruity and contradictions exist between the discourses of quality as transformation and transformative learning theory? The question was further supported by the student perspective in sub-question 3(a): How do PhD candidates perceive connections between both discourses? As well as by a critical analysis of literature as per sub-question 3(b): What bridges exist in the scholarly literature that may reconcile both discourses?

The study's focus on PhD candidates was important for two reasons. Firstly, PhD candidates provide a unique view across all levels of postsecondary education and are generally

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better at reflecting on their learning given their extensive experience (Cheng, 2014; Fenge, 2012). Secondly, because examination of learning experiences and perceptions of quality in higher education at the doctoral level are considerably understudied.

A social constructivist worldview underpinned the study by emphasizing how learners' view and reflect on lived experience and how their interpretations of, and social interactions in the context of, these experiences form meaning and transform their conceptual structures. Via a multiple case-study design, Seidman's (2013) three-stage interview protocol served as primary source of data from a sample of six PhD candidates across three faculties. Secondary data sources that enabled the examination of student perceptions, and institutional conceptions, of transformation and quality included field notes, a reflexivity journal and collected documents. Data analysis of the interview transcripts, field notes and journal entries followed Creswell's (2012) thematic development coding process. This process provided comprehensive descriptions of the themes within each case (within-case analysis), and a thematic analysis across all six cases to examine commonalities and differences (cross-case analysis). Using the collected documents, further content and thematic analysis was undertaken to gain an understanding of the institutional perspective of quality learning experiences and notions of transformation. The outcome of both the cross-case and document analyses were then examined for areas of alignment as per the second research question.

Study findings were presented for each of the respective analyses mentioned above in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 4 presented a comprehensive overview of themes from each within-case analysis. This was followed in Chapter 5 by the presentation of four dominant themes emerging across all six cases deriving from the cross-case analysis. Succinctly, the first

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dominant theme related to how guidance can serve as either a facilitating or inhibiting factor in the program experience. The second outlined the process of becoming an independent scholar. The third theme emphasized the importance of community when grappling with the intellectual challenges of the PhD journey. The fourth was associated with the transformative nature of learning in the context of the program. As the dominant themes and related subthemes unfolded and were subsequently described, it became evident that a multitude of interconnections between them existed. For instance, that strong guidance and community can facilitate phases in the learning process leading to transformation. In addition, that intentional guidance can foster independence while community can help ensure that independence does not translate to isolation.

Stemming from the analysis of 25 government and institutional documents focused on teaching and learning in higher education, Chapter 6 also outlined four dominant themes. The first theme, coined characteristics of quality, outlined the intent of quality assurance systems to work toward program improvement. The second was about indicators of quality and how these manifest in different ways. The third focused on the student learning experience highlighting the importance of guidance and community. The fourth spoke to the transformative outlook to learning and the development of skills as well as the role of intellectual challenge in learning. The analysis also provided evidence that while the intention toward a transformative view of quality is present; it has yet to be fully actioned in practice. In essence, the leap from principle to practice may still be taking place.

In Chapter 7, findings were interpreted and discussed with reference to the research questions and relevant literature. Regarding PhD candidate learning experiences relevant to

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research question one; whether in whole or in part, each participant described experiences that aligned with transformative learning. Beyond the intellectual, the role of anxiety, emotion, culture shock, oppression and larger social issues played important roles in student transformation. Findings equally supported the notion that learners with greater exposure to formal education and a greater collection of learning experiences (for instance doctoral candidates) tend to be more aware of the varied contexts within which different learning processes can be used.

With respect to research question two, areas of alignment between institutional and student perspectives are numerous when it comes to ideal PhD learning experiences. Evidence emerged that the institutional intent is to provide the conditions for the same types of transformative experiences that students value and see as important in their doctoral training. However, a significant gap was noted between this ideal and the experience lived in many of the student cases examined in this study. An examination of congruity between the discourses of institutional-level transformative notions of quality and student-level conceptions of transformative learning, in regards to research question three, indicated room for complementarity that would enable greater symmetry between the ideal doctoral learning experience and the lived experience.

Contributions to Scholarship

Given the paucity of research in areas specific to PhD student transformation and graduate student perceptions of quality, and limited scholarship regarding comparisons between institutional and student perspectives of quality learning, this study contributes to scholarship in terms of theory and of methodology. With respect to theory, contributions

pertinent to the scholarly domains of transformative learning, student perspectives of quality and the discourse of student transformation in higher education are detailed below followed by a diagrammatic representation of the interconnections between emerging concepts. In addition, a description of this study's methodological contributions is outlined.

Transformative learning.

Few known studies examine student transformation at the doctoral level, for example Provident et al. (2015) and Stevens-Long, Shapiro and McClintock (2012). These studies have each focused on one program, both of which were non-traditional online and distance programs respectively. This study contributes a first examination of learning experiences in multiple research-oriented traditional PhD programs. The inclusion of perspectives from the Arts, Engineering and Education provide a first impression at how PhD learning experiences and catalysts for transformation are lived in each of these disciplines. This study equally contributes select case examples regarding experiences of isolation in programs aligned with the humanities and social sciences and collaborative experiences in the presence of stronger program-level communities in the sciences and engineering. The case examples may provide specific details about factors leading to doctoral student attrition and complement existing, predominantly survey-based, work.

Investigating student learning experiences and prospective transformation at the doctoral level finally allowed for a response to Taylor's (2007) call to examine learning and transformation in independent teaching and learning contexts that are characterized as less structured and less controlled by a formal instructor. Moving beyond the formal classroom

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context, this study's participants were exposed to informal and independent learning where they were expected to develop skills and undertake research work autonomously under the supervision of a doctoral supervisor and with the support of their academic program. This study's findings indicated a variety of influential factors in these learning contexts as instrumental in either facilitating or hindering transformative learning. These were principally identified as the nature of guidance received, the extent to which the learner was embedded in, or exposed to, a program-level or academic community and exposure to planned moments of intellectual challenge throughout the doctoral process.

Also with respect to the examination of transformative learning experiences, this study is one of few that move beyond Mezirow's original 10-steps of perspective transformation to use a broader range of perspectives associated with Transformative Learning Theory. In doing so, Cranton's (2013) cognitive, beyond rational and social action categorizations were used to characterize a broader representation of transformation as described in Chapter 7.

Unfortunately, given its recent emergence, it was not robust enough to serve as a standalone framework to examine a more integrated set of transformative perspectives of learning. In the context of this study's participants, beyond revealing that there were other catalysts to transformation than those in the cognitive realm, it was not particularly helpful in making sense of these transformative learning experiences. Presently, there appears to be a lack of empirical evidence to support Cranton's broad categorizations. More conceptual thought seems necessary with respect to each perspective in order to distinguish the nature of transformation within each. Questions that may help move the development of Cranton's categorizations forward might be: What are the distinguishing factors that lead to transformation in each

perspective? How does the interplay between these distinct factors contribute to a more holistic transformative learning experience?

Student perceptions of quality.

In the scholarly area of student perceptions of quality in postsecondary studies, this study responds to two distinct gaps. The first is with respect to the examination of student notions of quality in a North American institution. At present, the literature features studies predominantly from British, European and Australian contexts. Second, the understudied area of graduate student perspectives of quality – more specifically doctoral student perspectives. Given their extended experience as learners and their developed capacity as analytical and reflective thinkers, the perspective of students at this level should prove to be an insightful contribution to this area of scholarship.

Extending from the student perspective, the present study compares this perspective with that of the institution and its larger educational system. That is, comparing both the learning experiences and perceptions of quality shared by doctoral candidates with the descriptions of the same from governmental and institutional documents. This study indicates that the ideal transformative learning experiences sought by students align with those intended by the institution and the provincial higher education system. However, a gap exists between the ideal and intended experiences and the students' lived experiences. This finding complements discussions of misalignment between messaging and practice emerging from recent research such as Goff's (2015) investigation of gaps between institutional messaging and quality enhancement practises. Additionally, misalignments between ideal and lived doctoral

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program experiences are revealed via the critical comments shared by some PhD candidates.

These criticisms shed light on the characteristics of quality experiences related to themes such as supervisory guidance and the development of a sense of program-level community.

Discourses of transformation in higher education.

The conceptual framework used for this study provided a structure by which two separate discourses of transformation in higher education could each shed light on how institutions and academic programs may be practicing, or not, the transformative learning processes that they promote. As part of this study, a critical examination of areas of congruity and contradiction between these discourses was undertaken. This serves as a direct contribution to the larger research domain of transformation in higher education given that both scholarly spheres independently address the concepts of student transformation, yet lack critical comparison.

Bridging the macro sphere of the institutional notion of quality as transformation (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996) and the micro sphere of processes fostering transformative learning at the student level (Cranton, 2013; Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2017) has proved revealing. As institutions seek to enable and foster transformative learning experiences for their students as part of a renewed view of quality, they will consequently need a mechanism to determine whether transformative outcomes are necessarily achieved. Quality indicators at the institutional level that are grounded in the key tenets of Transformative Learning Theory may help evidence and further support the very “transformation” of program learning experiences. These quality indicators could ultimately breed a cycle of transformation

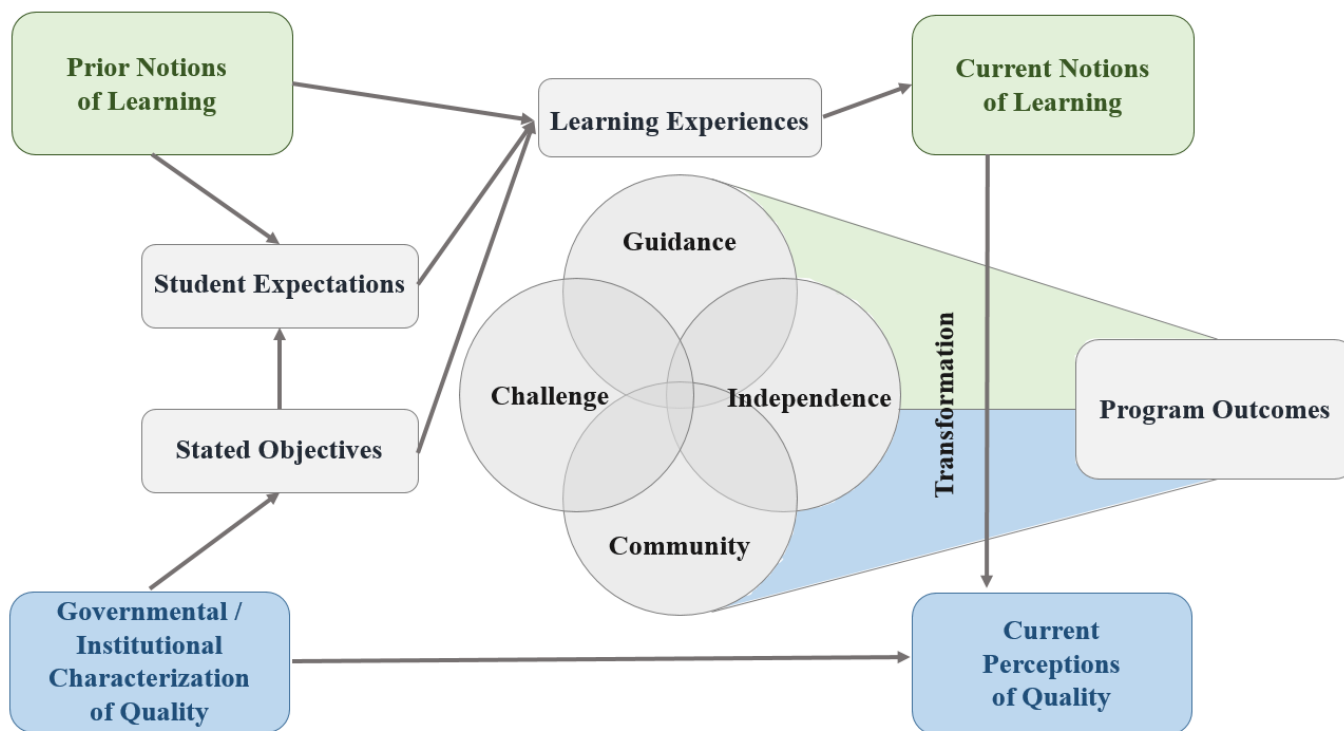
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whereby a renewal of indicators towards evidencing transformation in student learning could lead to programmatic change that finally leads to enhanced alignment between institutionally intended and student experienced transformation. Expansion of this idea is detailed in the upcoming section on future research directions.

Interconnections between emerging concepts.

The result of heeding various calls for expansion of current research in student learning and perceptions of quality and from examining the understudied doctoral population using two distinct discourses of transformation, a distinctive conceptualization of the PhD learning experience emerges in Figure 8. This representation of the doctoral learning journey illustrates the interconnections between the varied learning and quality-related concepts examined via this study's data sources.

Figure 8

Diagrammatic Representation of Doctoral Learning Journey

In this diagram, the doctoral learning journey moves from left to right. At the top left, the student's prior notions of learning, based largely on former learning experiences, are represented as influencing the student expectations of the doctoral learning experience and consequently the learning experience itself. At the bottom left, the characterization of quality by the government and the institution are linked to the stated program objectives that are subsequently interpreted by students and necessarily shape their expectations. Both the stated objectives and student expectations influence the nature of the student learning experience. Under the learning experiences heading in the diagram, the four interrelated concepts represent key experiences that have been found to be most influential for student transformation over the course of their PhD program. As mentioned earlier, several reoccurring

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learning experiences emerged as themes that were found to be, for the most part, connected. For example, intentional guidance can foster independence while community can help ensure that independence does not translate to isolation. In addition, challenge can be initiated via strategic guidance and by interactions with peers within the program and academic communities. These key experiences are indicated as factors leading to transformation and eventually to program outcomes. Intentional guidance can foster independence while community can help ensure that independence does not translate to isolation. In addition, challenge can be initiated via strategic guidance and by interactions with peers within the program and academic communities.

Methodological contributions.

This study contributed insights regarding research methodology in the investigation of both transformative learning and student perceptions of quality. While qualitative approaches are quite common in the study of transformative learning, few have utilized a multiple case design that has simultaneously enabled in-depth case examinations and the opportunity for comparisons across a purposefully selected group. Furthermore, no known studies in this area of scholarship have utilized a three-stage interview process, as proposed by Seidman (2013), to help illuminate past, present and projected experiences. A standout strength of this interview process has been the ability to deeply delve into the context of participant experiences all while progressively establishing trust. This has enabled ever richer discussions over the course of the interview series.

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With regards to student perceptions of quality, this study's multiple case design demonstrated how the complexity of capturing rich accounts of student learning experiences can leverage their perceptions of quality. Extending from the survey-based approaches that dominate current literature; this study's approach brought an unparalleled level of depth and concurrently offered a view of multiple disciplines. Also novel in this area of study was the integration of a parallel document analysis to offer an objective comparison of intended experiences reflecting quality to those perceived by students as ideal and those experienced. To date, scholarly examinations of perceived quality were limited to reflections on lived experience.

Implications for Policy

The findings of this research suggest several implications for policy that could help enhance institutional guidelines and processes, and refine expectations regarding the boundaries of practice. Given the gap identified between the institutional messaging regarding the promotion of a transformative definition of quality and the existing indicators of quality aimed at measuring outputs indicative of an exceptional definition of quality, a focus on a revision of indicators is called for. To help institutions like the one in this case study realign their practice with the intent of providing transformative experiences and outcomes, there is an evident need to define and adopt indicators of quality that clearly focus on the intended student transformation rather than those principally focused on ideas of excellence, rankings, outputs and surpassing standards.

As part of a greater emphasis on the transformative process and outcomes of the doctoral journey, the need to more explicitly and transparently integrate student voice in the

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institution's program evaluation and development processes was equally raised in the context of this study. The adoption of student representation on curriculum review committees and the provision for sharing pertinent aspects of a program's self-study report with students for comment and input (via a student association) may be simple inclusions to the formal program cyclical review process and related policies.

Lastly, the outcomes of this research suggest the importance of reflective checkpoints throughout PhD programs. Key moments to collectively take stock and reflect on facilitating and hindering factors within the PhD program experience should be consistently integrated in all doctoral programs. This study demonstrated that where these practices take place, even informally, less frustration and isolation were experienced. Bridging with the former point addressing integration of the student voice, perhaps a study group examining the utility and possible logistics of reflective checkpoints in doctoral programs, with graduate students as key informants, may help develop relevant and context-specific recommendations. More formally, the creation of such a study group could be composed of members of the central graduate student association, the institutional office of graduate studies, office of quality assurance and program development and with representation from graduate vice-deans and program directors.

Beyond the institutional level, the themes described above regarding revised indicators of quality, integration of the student voice and more formalized reflective checkpoints within the doctoral program could each be addressed in a future version of the Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance (OUCQA) guide to the provincial quality assurance framework. While the framework itself has consistently been revised every two years, on average, the guide

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supporting recommended policies and practices in quality assurance work does not appear to have been revised since 2010. A review of recent research on practices in quality assurance, cyclical evaluation and program development should be conducted, with particular emphasis on the development and use of indicators of quality and on student engagement in the varied processes of quality assurance. The results of such a review along with a scan of institutional practices across the province may serve to update and resource the OUCQA guide with practical examples of policies and initiatives that may inspire institutions to address issues related to quality indicators and the integration of the student voice in program evaluation and development.

Implications for Practice

At the level of practice, several implications are contingent on the adoption of suggested changes to policy and processes as described above. These include the actioning of opportunities for student input at the program level and the collective promotion of, and support with, greater student reflection regarding the factors that facilitate and hinder their learning experiences throughout the doctoral journey. As mentioned earlier, context-specific opportunities could be determined by a prospective multi-stakeholder institutional study group.

Additional implications for practice include increased knowledge about transformative learning and influential factors that help facilitate transformation. Both PhD students and supervisors would benefit from a greater understanding of the transformative learning process. More specifically, a better understanding of learning phases that lead to eventual transformation. For example, knowing that the experience of confronting a dilemma or period

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of cognitive dissonance is a natural part of the process, may help quell issues of confidence that could lead to the imposter syndrome. The findings emerging from this study indicated that transformation takes place at various points and in various ways along the doctoral program journey. This process was seen to be facilitated by specific factors such as reflective and intentional supervisory guidance, programs that foster a strong sense of community, and planned moments of intellectual challenge. Perhaps a short guide or brochure promoting an abridged version of transformative learning and relevant catalysts pertinent to doctoral study may be helpful to both PhD students and supervisors. Given the influential factors mentioned above, an online resource tailored specifically to each of the above may also hold merit.

With regards to fostering a sense of community, some questions contained in the self-study report used as part of the cyclical program review process raise awareness of the importance of this factor. However, this study's findings indicated a gap between reflection during the review process and related actions within the program. It was clear from the study's participants that environments where people are present, where doors are open and where members of the program community collectively participate in events, initiatives or collaborations of any kind are more engaged in their overall program learning experience. This finding and consequent recommendation mirror one of the central recommendations of a 2011 report from the National Academy of Sciences jointly with the National Academy of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine. This report addresses issues of participation and engagement of undergraduate and graduate STEM students. Ensuring that provisions are in place for social interactions and community building is a recommended outcome of this research that involves the commitment and participation of all members of the program community.

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In reviewing the study findings, Table 13 was created to compile draft recommendations that may help improve the doctoral learning experience. It should be noted that this compilation is not exhaustive and has not been validated by the stakeholders mentioned therein. The table serves merely as a collection of recommended ideas to be considered and refined. In the left most column, specific recommendations for program administrators and staff are presented. The centre column is directed at PhD student supervisors and the right most column to PhD students.

Table 13

Draft Recommendations for Improving the Doctoral Learning Experience

Stakeholder Recommendations		
Program	Supervisor	PhD Student
Include students in processes of program review and development.	Encourage students to participate in processes of program review and development.	Participate and share experiences in processes of program review and development.
Ensure a series of reflective checkpoints along each student's doctoral journey.	Encourage student reflection with respect to timelines, work habits, goals and action plans.	Complete reflective checkpoints following program milestones and develop action plans for each phase of the program.
Develop and offer training and resources with respect to supervisory guidance (if not already in place).	Occasionally update practices related to supervisory guidance such as drafting of expectations, and supporting students through key program milestones.	Share testimonials of supervisory experiences.
Aid in developing and distributing a brochure on factors that influence	Review and integrate pertinent transformative factors into supervisory guidance practises such as	Review and integrate pertinent transformative factors into work and study habits.

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transformative learning in the doctoral journey.	planned moments of intellectual challenge, reflection and discourse.	
Promote services that support autonomous student scholars such as library searching resources, methodological workshops, data visualization expertise and writing retreats.	Scaffold students in the development of autonomous research practises.	Take full advantage of supports and resources to develop skills as an emerging autonomous researcher.
Develop and action community building opportunities to encourage well-being and support engagement and growth.	Support student integration into the program and academic community. Be present in the department, when possible.	Be present in the department, when possible. Actively participate in program events and initiatives.

By following these action-oriented recommendations, learning across PhD programs may better foster student transformation. The outcomes of this research suggest that investing in supervisory resources, in community building and in the development of related policies and quality assurance practises will facilitate productive PhD learning experiences. However, ensuring that the quality indicators that frame the programs which foster the intended learning experiences is arguably of equal or greater importance. It is via this change that greater alignment will be established between the intended experiences and outcomes that the institution is seeking to foster and a meaningful transformative student learning experience.

Study Limitations

Irrespective of a study's research design, both strengths and limitations are inevitable features of the research process (Babbie, 2008). This study's strengths included its diverse participant sample, its multiple data collection methods and its three-stage interview format.

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These and other strengths are outlined in the data analysis section of Chapter 3 and in the section on methodological contributions presented earlier in this chapter. What follows is a summary of the principal limitations encountered in the design and administration of this study.

First, participants in this study were purposefully selected from a sub-population of prospective participants who volunteered to participate in the three-stage interview process that included a \$90 incentive. Given the voluntary nature of the recruitment process, the selected participants may have been particularly motivated to share experiences about their program, whether good or bad. It should also be noted that the resulting sample was not entirely representative of the doctoral student population within the institution. For example, only experiences from the three targeted faculties were captured. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that all programs within the same faculty provided similar PhD learning climates. While the intent of including cases from three faculties was to aid in representing experiences across varied disciplinary learning cultures, it consequently made it difficult to establish a clear benchmark in terms of expectations for student experiences and perceptions. Each program appeared to have distinct qualities embedded in their objectives, which made valid comparisons between individual cases particularly challenging.

Second, as a result of the case study approach where participant context is a key part of detailing and making sense of their experiences within the PhD program, it could not be guaranteed that all identifiers would be removed from the reported data. The limits of both privacy and confidentiality were discussed with each study participant. Narratives of each interview were reviewed by all participants to ensure the data was accurate and that they were

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comfortable with the representations of their experiences. Pseudonyms were equally used to reduce the prospect of identifying any of the study participants.

Third, as part of the second interview in the three-stage interview process, the concept of transformative learning was introduced by the researcher via a series of visual representations (Appendices I & J). This was introduced as a framework to question PhD candidates more directly about learning experiences that they deemed transformative. The concept was equally one that the researcher wanted participants to become familiar with, as they would be comparing it to a separate transformative discourse in the context of the third interview. There is concern, however, that introducing the concept may have led PhD candidates to inordinately represent their experiences in ways that more closely aligned with the discourse of transformation. This may not have been the case had the concept not been introduced.

Fourth, while the goal of adopting a multiple case approach was to enable comparisons across cases, the extent to which the findings in this study are broadly transferable is not known. Contexts that influence PhD student learning experiences can vary significantly across programs, institutions, geographies and cultures. However, as per the recommendations of scholars in qualitative research such as Merriam (2009) and Patton (2002), the study sought to use thick and rich descriptions of the participants, the data collection process and the study findings to aid with transferability.

Fifth, given that in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument; there will necessarily be limitations associated with the involvement of the researcher. Significant efforts

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were made to identify assumptions and beliefs about the research process and the area being researched, as highlighted at the outset of Chapter 3. Similarly, energy was invested to track researcher thinking and decisions taken over the duration of the study via the utilization of a reflex journal. However, even with these efforts in place, researcher views and experiences will still influence the research process, and inevitably did so in the context of this study.

Despite the limitations outlined above, this study provides valuable insights into the doctoral learning experience, the alignment of institutional and student perceptions of quality and the complementarity of discourses of transformation in higher education.

Areas for Future Research

Likely due to its exploratory nature, this study uncovered as many questions as it set out to answer. Stemming from the study's findings and proposed contributions, prospective research directions are grouped as extensions of study findings and as new areas of inquiry.

Extensions of study findings.

Heeding the continued call for longitudinal studies that seek to track transformative learning in progress, a possible extension of the current study, which focused predominantly on retrospective accounts of learning and transformation, would be to follow doctoral candidates from admission to graduation. A longitudinal case-study design would enable more accurate documentation of catalysts for transformation and contribute to the emerging work of Kasworm and Bowles (2012) on educational contexts that foster transformation. Integrating multiple cases as was done in the present study may also shed further light on disciplinary factors that may facilitate or hinder transformation over the duration of doctoral study. Overall,

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this type of design may enable the validation, rejection or refinement of the variables and interrelationships between influential factors that represent the doctoral learning journey as mapped out in Figure 8. As well, given a longitudinal focus, examining the PhD supervisor perspective may add yet another dimension to our understanding of doctoral learning experiences and factors influential to transformation.

The present study captured the perspectives and experiences of PhD candidates in the dissertation-writing phases of their respective programs. A year and a half after the participant interviews, three of the six candidates have successfully defended their dissertations and the other three are either making final revisions or awaiting defence. As such, this study focused on PhD students that have successfully navigated the doctoral journey and who have all reported experiencing transformative learning experiences. However, the participants in this study represent the average 66% of Canadian doctoral candidates that complete their degrees (Crago, 2004; Charbonneau, 2013). A phenomenological approach to a future inquiry could help to better understand the perceptions, perspectives and feelings of those students who do not complete their doctoral degree. Guiding questions might be: How might the experiences and perceptions of students who curtail their doctoral studies be different to those in the present study? In what ways did they experience evidence of transformation in their limited doctoral journeys? How might their view of quality be different or the same to the participants in this study given their PhD program experiences? In what ways does the presence of the factors shown to influence transformation, as presented in this study, relate to program persistence? Given the significant investment of governments and institutions in PhD programs and

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students, research addressing the questions above may help shed light on issues of doctoral attrition and possible opportunities to reduce these negative trends.

The success achieved using the multiple case study design in this study could help further expand on the initial contributions of both Provident et al. (2015) and Stevens-Long, Shapiro and McClintock (2012) by examining learning, transformation and quality in professional online and distance PhD programs. Rather than examine these concepts within only one program, it would be of interest to see if learning experiences and perceptions of quality are similar or different across geographical boundaries, cultures and disciplines. Given that there is increasing interest in online and distance graduate programs by both students and postsecondary institutions (Bowness, 2015); this type of inquiry may provide practical recommendations to maximize successful achievement of program outcomes.

New areas of inquiry.

One of the principal findings of this study is the gap between the intended transformative learning experience as set out by the institution and the lived learning experience from the perspective of students. To help institutions realign their practice with the intent of a transformative definition of quality, it was suggested that there is a need to define and adopt indicators of quality that clearly focus on the intended student transformation. Revised indicators could be based, in part, on the main phases of Transformative Learning Theory to refocus the outcomes of the PhD program experience squarely on student learning. While the above is predominantly a recommended change to policy related to institutional level quality assurance, should the recommendation be trialled, it would serve as fertile grounds for

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research examining areas of alignment. For instance, the alignment among 1- institutional intent and messaging, 2- quality assurance and program development practice, 3- curricular, instructional and supervisory practice, and 4- student lived experiences. Of additional pertinence, the impact of areas of alignment, and continued misalignment, on the student learning experience and their perceptions of quality. This direction of research would not only deliver important practical implications for institutions and departments in the context of program development work, it would extend this study's initial examination of complementarity between discourses of transformation in higher education.

Research in transformative learning has largely been focused on the transformation of the student based on self-reports; however, little scholarship examines the impact that a student's transformative learning experience may have on the program, institution or on larger society. For instance, how might a learner's more "inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 14) or worldview impact them and their surroundings? Might this type of individual transformation solicit stronger engagement and serve as catalyst for individual or collective social action as per Cranton's (2013) "social action" perspective? A narrative inquiry may shed light on the stories of student or graduate actions and how these have had an impact on their program, institution and/or broader surroundings. Investigations of this nature may further support the cause for a transformative institutional stance by determining if experiences of transformative learning in fact develop graduates with the aspired attributes.

Following up on the significant influence of social interactions and community throughout the PhD program learning experience, further study may be of interest. Given the

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constructive outcomes of program community cohorts identified by Provident et al. (2015) and Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock (2012), a comparison between academic programs featuring a full cohort structure (from admission to graduation) and those that do not may be a helpful extension to existing research. To examine how the cohort structure may facilitate community in doctoral programs, a mixed-method design using a sequential explanatory strategy could allow for qualitative results to aid in explaining and interpreting student self-reported views collected via survey across different program structures.

Overall, the findings of this study open fruitful areas of inquiry that could contribute to continued growth in the scholarly areas of transformative learning, perceptions of quality and doctoral student learning. Further, insights and contributions may equally extend to emerging scholarship in academic program development and higher education reform.

Concluding Thoughts

With all the developments taking place with regards to quality assurance and program development within institutions, some driven by government requirements and others by specific strategic enhancement orientations, little research exists to support the understanding of, and evolution in, this domain. A growing amount of strategic and practical experience is emerging; however, little has occurred in terms of documenting approaches being used or researching the effectiveness of approaches regarding quality assurance and subsequent program development. The need for this research has become increasingly pressing given the growing interest in learning outcomes and learning-centred approaches to curriculum and instruction. While principles of learning are increasingly promoted in institutional messaging, in particular concepts related to transformation, how are institutions ensuring that the

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experiences they seek to foster are genuinely being implemented and subsequently being lived? This study examined this issue via the collection of experiences and perceptions of six PhD candidates representing a diversity of disciplines, ages, and which included both sexes as well as domestic and international students. Given their extensive experience as learners and of the higher education system, PhD candidates were particularly well placed to inform scholarly gaps in student experiences of learning, transformation and perceptions of quality.

The principal factors that characterized the PhD candidate learning experiences emerged as the significance of intentional individualized guidance, becoming an independent scholar, the importance of social interactions and community, and the transformative nature of learning. Regarding the latter point, all PhD candidates described living, either in whole or in part, transformative learning experiences as part of their programs. They equally shared the importance of the aforementioned factors, in addition to the factor of challenge, as key catalysts in the transformative process that has fundamentally changed them as both scholars and as persons. In light of their learning, the overall sentiment shared by the study participants is reflected in a recent quotation by Brookfield. “Transformation is one of the most powerful words in the English language. When something is transformed, its component elements undergo a profound metamorphosis so that what emerges is fundamentally different from what went before” (Brookfield, 2012, p. 131).

With respect to the examination of institutional and student perspectives of quality, in terms of their intent and ideal, respectively, they both resonated with a transformative definition of quality. However, when investigating alignment between institutional intent and student experience, gaps began to emerge. Examination of governmental and institutional

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documents indicated a misalignment between systemic and institutional messaging oriented toward learning and transformation and indicators of quality that measured excellence, rankings, and outputs. To help reconcile the gaps and areas of misalignment, this study examined two distinct concepts of student transformation from different scholarly domains. Complementarity between the strengths of both discourses appeared to offer possible bridges between the macro-level institutional orientation toward fostering student transformation and the micro-level transformative learning experiences lived by students.

With evolving research in postsecondary quality and transformative learning, along with increasing demand for research in program development and higher education reform, the findings of this study align well with the timely impetus to better understand the impact of institutional structures and programmatic practices on student learning. As one of the study participant's remarked, "it's only when [a student] is purposefully challenged in the program [...] that a student can unlearn, relearn or change their perspective about something. This is when they've actually gotten value out of the program."

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Appendix A: Descriptive Summary of Selected Studies

Conceptualization			Methodology			
Study	Location	Framework	Research Design	Sample size	Targeted population	Data Analysis
Studies Examining Student Perceptions of Quality						
Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi and Leitner (2004)	Sweden and Austria	Harvey & Green’s (1993) conceptualizations of Quality	Mixed	29 (interviews) and 448 (survey)	Undergraduate students from Business Studies	Factor analysis
Jungblunt, Vukasovic and Stensaker (2015)	Germany, Poland, Norway, Latvia and Slovenia	Harvey & Green’s (1993) conceptualizations of Quality	Quantitative	6643 (survey)	Undergraduate students across disciplines	Univariate and bivariate statistics
Vieira (2002)	Portugal	Harvey & Knight’s (1996) conceptualization of quality as transformation	Quantitative	1356 (survey)	Mix of undergraduate students across disciplines and teachers	Descriptive statistics
Moses (1994)	Australia	Unknown	Mixed	407 (survey) and 122 (interviews)	Mix of undergraduate and masters level students and program administrators	Unknown
Cheng (2014)	United Kingdom	Harvey’s (2006) view of quality as transformation; and a multi-perspective view of Transformative	Qualitative	32 (interviews - 16 students and 16 supervisors)	Ph.D. students and supervisors from Education, Physics, and Engineering.	Content analysis

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		Learning (Such as Daloz, 1999; Freire, 2000; Janik, 2007; Mezirow, 2000)				
Studies Examining Transformative Learning in Graduate Studies						
Kumi-Yeboah and James (2014)	United States	Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2000)	Mixed-method	198 (survey) and 10 (interviews)	International graduate students from Asia from the Faculties of Arts & Sciences and Engineering	Descriptive statistics; Pearson's chi-square test; and content analysis
Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock (2012)	United States	A multi-perspective view of Transformative Learning (Such as Brookfield, 1999; Cranton, 2006; Daloz, 1999; Dirkx, 2000; Mezirow, 2000)	Qualitative	59 (semi-structured survey)	Graduates of a Ph.D. distance education program	Content analysis

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Appendix B: E-mail Sent to Program Level Graduate Student Association

Dear _____ Association Executive,

As part of the doctoral program in education under the supervision of Maurice Taylor, I am carrying out a study examining PhD student perceptions of transformation and quality in higher education and the extent to which their learning experiences align with the intended educational transformation promoted by the institution. To do so, I will be recruiting six PhD students (who are in the dissertation writing phase of their programs) across three faculties and offering them \$90 each in recognition of their time. As the Faculty of _____ falls within one of the faculties being studied, I am writing to request the possibility of you circulating a call for interested participants to fellow graduate students. Should there also be a suggested location to post this type of call, I would be happy to stop by with copies or post these myself with your permission.

I have attached the call for interested PhD participants to this e-mail. This study has received ethics approval by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board. Should you have any questions about this study or seek a copy of the consent forms, please feel free to contact me at this e-mail or by phone at (613)-562-5800 extension ____.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and help in supporting my doctoral work, I look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,
Jovan

Jovan Groen, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa

Appendix C: E-mail Sent as Call for Interested PhD Students

Dear fellow PhD student,

As part of a doctoral program in education, I am carrying out a study examining PhD student perceptions of transformation and quality and the extent to which their learning experiences align with the intended educational transformation promoted by the institution. To do so, I am recruiting PhD students **who are in the dissertation analysis and writing phase** of their programs.

I am inviting you to participate in the abovementioned research study which consists of three 45-60 minute interviews during September and October of 2017. As a token of appreciation for your time a modest stipend of **\$30 per interview** will be offered to you. Possible benefits to you include an opportunity to reflect on how you learn and the facilitating and hindering factors that allow you to get the most out of your current educational path. If interested in participating, please respond to the e-mail address below and I will be happy to send along an expression of interest form as part of the participant selection process and a copy of the consent form which contains greater detail about the study for your information.

This study has received ethics approval by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board. To participate or should you have any questions about this study, please contact me at this e-mail or by phone at (613)-562-5800 extension ____.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jovan Groen, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa

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Appendix D: Expression of Interest Form

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study entitled: *Perceptions of Transformation and Quality in Higher Education: A Case Study of PhD Student Experiences*. Please complete the following demographic information to aid with the participant selection process.

Name: _____

E-mail: _____

Program of study: _____

Faculty: _____

Gender: _____

Native language(s) (mother tongue): _____

Age Category: ☐ 25 and under ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ 46 and over.

Student status: ☐ Domestic ☐ International

Stage of development of the Ph.D. dissertation (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Dissertation proposal not yet defended
- ☐ Beginning data collection
- ☐ Finalizing data collection
- ☐ Data analysis
- ☐ Report writing
- ☐ Report revisions
- ☐ Waiting for defense

Thank you once again for your interest. Please return this completed expression of interest form to _____

Appendix E: Consent Form

Title of Study: Perceptions of Transformation and Quality in Higher Education: A Case Study of PhD Student Experiences

Principal Researcher – Jovan Groen, (613) 562-5800 ext. ____, _e-mail_

Supervisor – Dr. Maurice Taylor, (613) 562-5800 ext. ____, _e-mail_

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Jovan Groen, principal researcher, from the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. The purpose of the study is to examine PhD student perceptions of transformation and quality and the extent to which their perceptions align with the intended educational transformation promoted by their institution and academic program.

Participation: My participation is completely voluntary and will consist of three audio recorded interview sessions, each with an estimated duration of 60-90 minutes, and the review of an interview summary following each interview session to clarify or change any information.

Assessment of risks: My participation in this study entails no foreseeable risks. However, if I experience any discomfort, I have been assured that the researcher will make every effort to minimize this discomfort. I may decide to stop at any time.

Benefits: Participation in this study will offer me an opportunity to reflect on and discuss my perceptions of quality and transformation in the learning context. It may also allow me to reflect on how I learn and the facilitating and hindering factors that allow me to get the most out of my current educational path.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: I have been assured that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the purpose of the

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research study and subsequent publications and that my identity will be protected. To ensure confidentiality, a pseudonym will be used in any written text resulting from the research.

Conservation of data: The data collected during the interviews will be stored on a password and firewall protected drive on the researcher's personal computer kept in a locked office. Only the aforementioned researcher will have access to it. Data will be kept for five years after which by print and digital records will be permanently deleted.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions without consequence. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

Acceptance: I, _____ agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Jovan Groen, principal researcher, from the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the aforementioned researchers.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Tel.: (613) 562-5387, Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of this consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

Appendix F: Ethics Approval Notice

File Number: 04-17-13

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 05/03/2017



Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethics Approval Notice
Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Maurice	Taylor	Education / Education	Supervisor
Jovan	Groen	Others / Others	Student Researcher

File Number: 04-17-13

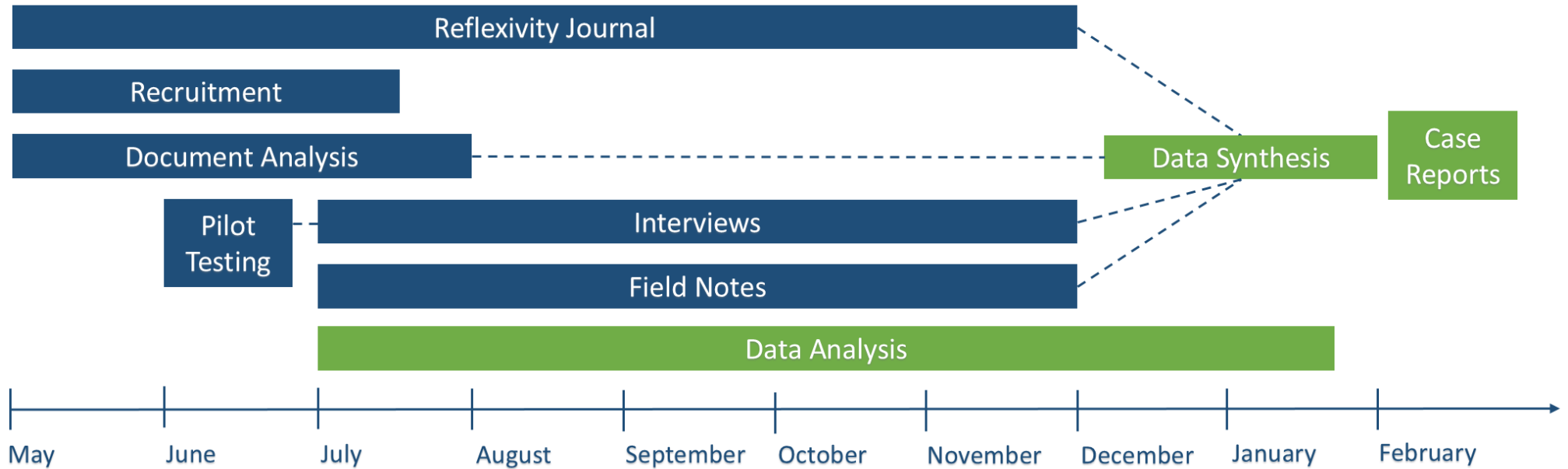
Type of Project: PhD Thesis

Title: Perceptions of Transformations and Quality in Higher Education: A Case Study of PhD Student Experiences

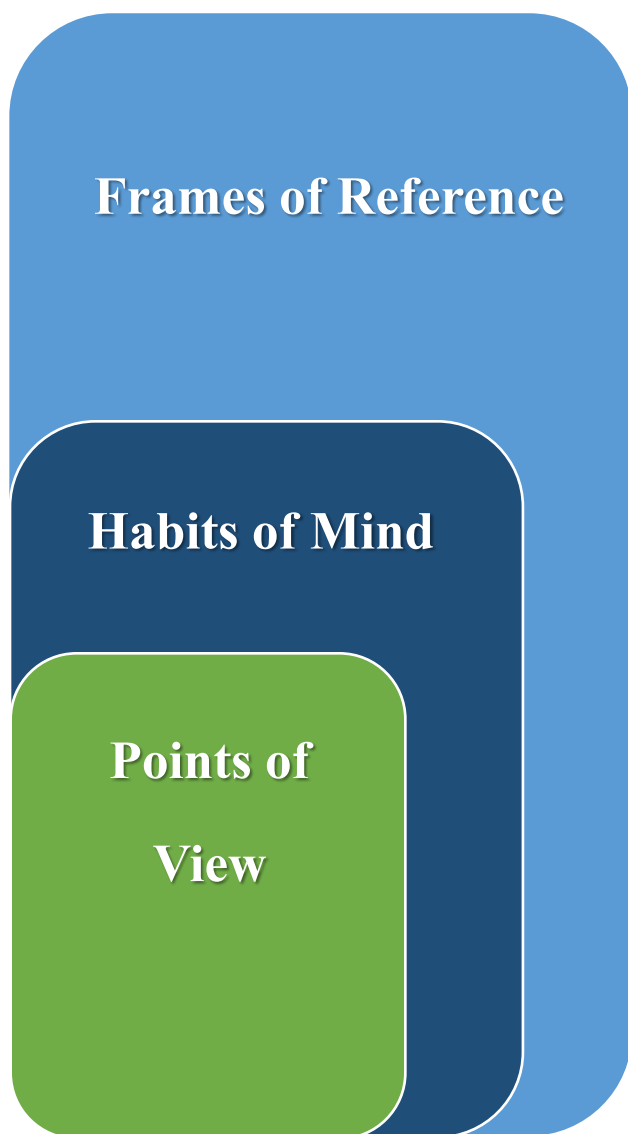
Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Approval Type
05/03/2017	05/02/2018	Approval

Special Conditions / Comments:
N/A

Appendix G: Data Collection and Analysis Timeline



Appendix H: Diagrammatic Representation of Transformative Learning



Frames of reference outline the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions and are largely the result of cultural assimilation and the idiosyncratic influences of primary caregivers.

i.e., Based on John's experience, teaching is the transmission of information.

Habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes. These codes may be cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological.

i.e., John believes that teaching consists of filling the minds of students with information. The more information the better. Students are responsible for capturing what is transmitted.

Points of view are comprised of clusters of meaning schemes or sets of immediate specific expectations, feelings, attitudes, and judgments. They are subject to continuing change as we reflect on either the content or process by which we solve problems and identify the need to modify assumptions.

i.e., John looks for his students to be listening attentively, taking notes, and be able to recite back to him, via tests and quizzes, the information shared in class.

Four Types of Learning

Transforming points of view

Transforming habits of mind

Elaborating existing frames of reference

Learning new frames of reference

Appendix I: Main Phases of Transformative Learning

1- Disorienting Dilemma

Learners confront their assumptions and beliefs and often experience a firm realization that something key to a one's functioning or understanding is not consistent with their beliefs

John invites a guest lecturer to his class who happens to have a significantly different approach to teaching. John notices a difference in the level of engagement and problem-solving in his students and questions his own teaching approach.

2- Critical Reflection

Reflection on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances

John reflects on his past experiences learning how to teach from viewing his own teachers. He feels that perhaps this experience doesn't align with what is best for his students and begins looking for information on teaching in higher education.

3- Critical discourse

Discussion with others about their new perspective to openly question and validate the evolution of their thinking

John invites his guest lecturer colleague for coffee to discuss his evolving reflections about teaching and learning. He also attends a workshop on teaching and shares his thinking with other attendees.

4- Reintegration

Determined set of actions related to the new found perspective, ensuring that a shift in beliefs and assumptions is not only observed but also lived

John begins piloting new learning activities in his class and tracking the outcome for the purposes of comparison. He also invites his colleague to observe his class and provide feedback.

Appendix J: Interview Guide

Inspired by and adapted from the principles listed by Turner (2010) and the works of Creswell (2012) and Seidman (2006) the following serves as a guide to prepare for and facilitate the interview process.

Preparation

- Recruit interview participants as per sampling procedure.
- Prepare agenda and interview questions for distribution to interviewees – revisions informed by pilot interviews.
- Identify location, date/time of interviews.
- Confirm participant attendance two days in advance of the interview and send interview questions.
- Set up interview location and audio recording tools.

Facilitation

Opening

- Establish rapport with the interviewee via introductions.
- Explain the purpose of the interview and how this relates to the objectives of the larger study. Share possible benefits to the participant in terms of what they might be able to take away from the experience.
- Review contents of the consent form, respond to any questions and confirm the interviewee's agreement to participate.
- Share a copy of the interview questions and the estimated duration of the interview.

Stage 1 Interview Questions - This session is intended to put the PhD student's past educational experiences in context and reveal how these experiences have evolved into their present contextual position. The initial interview focuses on collecting data associated with research question one.

1. Tell me about your learning experiences as a child and young adult.
 - a. What did learning look and feel like in school and in informal settings at home or elsewhere?
 - b. Looking back, what do you think the intended learning outcomes (knowledge,

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skills, abilities, attitudes, beliefs) for each stage (elementary, secondary, undergrad) of your schooling were?

2. How did these experiences shape your view of what learning is (before entering the PhD program)?
3. What has led you to enrol in the PhD program?
 - a. What program outcomes (of those marketed or promoted) interested you and attracted you to enrol?
 - b. What did you hope to learn in the program?
4. What have you experienced as a PhD student/candidate?
 - a. What does learning look and feel like in the PhD program? Is it what you thought it would be?
 - i. Do you see learning as something happening in small increments, by significant moments/events/catalysts, or both?
 - b. Describe an example of a particular instance (or instances) of learning.
 - c. What are the outcomes of your learning thus far (in terms of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, beliefs, or other)? What do you anticipate the outcomes will be at the end of the degree?

Stage 2 Interview Questions - This session is intended to examine the PhD student's present experiences and information related to their current program of study. The 2nd stage interview focuses on collecting data associated with research questions one and two.

1. How is your PhD program structured?
 - a. What does it entail?
 - b. What, in your view, are the objectives of the PhD program? Are there any differences between your view and the program's stated objectives? If so, what are these and why do you think there are differences?
2. Following an overview of Transformative Learning Theory by the interviewer using the diagram in Appendix H, and an introduction of the main phases of transformation to the interviewee using the diagram in Appendix I, the following questions will be posed:
 - a. Do you feel that your learning experiences in the PhD program align with the

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- broad conceptions of transformative learning? If so, in what way? If not, why?
- b. Have you transformed any habits of mind and/or points of view? If so, how would you describe these transformations?
 - c. What transformations do you seek to experience by the end of the program?
 - d. Does the theory change your view of what learning is? If so, in what way? If not, why?
3. How has your view of learning changed as a result of your experiences within the PhD program?
 - a. How would you describe the intended student learning experience of the PhD program?
 4. Given what you have said about your learning experiences before beginning the PhD program and given what you have said about your learning experiences within the PhD program:
 - a. What is learning to you? What does “effective” learning look like? What, if any, are its stages?
 - b. Do you see learning as transformative and/or developmental in nature? If so, in what way?
 - c. How would you characterize the notion of quality in learning?

Stage 3 Interview Questions - This session is intended to bring the interviewee’s past and present experiences together by having them reflect on the meaning they associate with their experiences and consequently their perceptions regarding the notions of transformation and quality in higher education. The 3rd stage interview focuses on collecting data associated with research questions two and three.

1. What characterizes a quality PhD student learning experience in the context of your doctoral program?
 - a. What experiences do students need to have in order to deem their journey one of excellent quality?
2. In a broader sense, how would you characterize your institution’s notion of quality in education?

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- a. What about the student experience is valued and emphasized by the institution?
3. Following an overview of the five definitions of quality in higher education proposed by Harvey and Green (1993) by the interviewer using Table 1, the following questions will be posed:
 - a. Which do you feel best represents the institution's intent?
 - b. How is this similar or different than your perception of quality?
4. Notwithstanding your definition of quality, to what extent do you see "quality as transformation" as relevant to doctoral education?
5. What congruity and/or contradictions to you feel exist between how your institution promotes quality and your learning experience in the PhD program?
 - a. Do you feel you transformed as a learner in the way the institution intended you to? Why or why not?
6. What other thoughts regarding these topics would you like to share?

Closing

- Summarize the principal items mentioned during the interview.
- Confirm accuracy of the summary.
- Re-emphasize confidentiality and remind participant of written summary to be sent to them in the coming week for revision.
- Ask if interviewee has any final questions or comments.
- Thank the participant for their time and insight.

Follow-up

Provide interviewee with a narrative summary at least 1-week following each interview for verification of accuracy.

Appendix K: Content Analysis of Governmental and Institutional Documents

As part of an initial content analysis of documents, the table below outlines the frequency of use of the terms: learning, quality, transformation, enhancement, and program experience. Stems of these words (such as to learn, transform, enhance) were also included. The key terms listed above were selected for examination given that they were used in the interview questions and are the core concepts listed in, and examined by, this study's research questions. On the left side of table, the "document" column lists an abbreviated version of each document identifier and the "level" column lists the governmental or institutional level with which the document is associated. In the centre, the "type" column designates the purpose of the documents. On the right of the table, the "frequency" column refers to the frequency at which the key terms appear in the document and the "coverage" column presents the percentage of text within the document that includes the key terms. The coverage percentage was calculated using a function in NVivo that divides the amount of coded text (in this case with the key terms) by the total amount of text in the document. Documents in the table are listed in decreasing amount of key term coverage. For example, the institutional-level Office of Quality Assurance website text contained the greatest coverage of key terms at 1.69%. Conversely, the document containing the least amount of coverage of key terms across its text at 0.02% was the program description for the PhD in geography.

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Percentage of Documents Addressing Key Terms in Decreasing Order

Document	Level	Type	Frequency	Coverage (%)
Office of Quality Assurance Website	Institutional	Visioning	87	1.69
Universities Canada - QA Principles Website	National	Visioning	18	1.54
Cyclical Review Guide for Program LOs	Institutional	Procedural	149	1.04
OUCQA QA Framework and Guide	Provincial	Procedural	648	1.04
IQAP Document	Institutional	Procedural	236	0.62
Program Self-Evaluation Report Template	Institutional	Procedural	82	0.58
SMA - Public Summary	Institutional	Visioning	33	0.56
Faculty of Education Grad Studies Brochure	Faculty	Promotional	12	0.51
PhD in Linguistics - Program Description	Departmental	Promotional	2	0.51
CMEC - Ministerial Statement on QA	National	Visioning	48	0.48
uOttawa Strategic Plan - Vision 2020	Institutional	Visioning	29	0.46
PhD in Human Kinetics - Prog Eval Summary	Departmental	Procedural	8	0.45
Faculty of Arts - Strategic Plan	Faculty	Visioning	74	0.43
PhD in Education - Program Description	Departmental	Promotional	37	0.37
Faculty of Education - Annual Report	Faculty	Promotional	20	0.36
OUCQA – Grad Degree Level Expectations	Provincial	Procedural	7	0.25
PhD in Human Kinetics - Program Desc	Departmental	Promotional	1	0.10
PhD in Linguistics - Program Eval Summary	Departmental	Procedural	1	0.07
PhD in Geography - Program Description	Departmental	Promotional	6	0.02

Appendix L: Conceptions of Learning as Represented by Thomson (2017)**Table 2.1: Conceptions of Learning**

	Säljö (1979)	Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty (1993)	Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas (1996)	Purdie & Hattie (2002)	Tynjala (1997)	Van Rossum & Hamer (2010)
Surface approach	An increase in knowledge	Increasing one's knowledge	Increasing knowledge	Gaining information	Learning as an externally determined event/process	Increasing knowledge
	Memorising	Memorising and reproducing	Memorizing, reproducing and studying	Remembering, using and understanding information	Learning as a developmental process	Memorising
	Acquisition of facts, procedures etc. which could be retained and/or utilised in practice	Applying	A means to an end		Learning as student activity	Reproduction understanding/ application or Application foreseen
Deep Approach	Abstraction of meaning	Understanding	Understanding	Personal change	Learning as strategies/ styles/approaches	Understanding subject matter
	An interpretative process aimed at understanding reality	Seeing something in a different way	Seeing something in a different way		Learning as an externally determined event/process	Widening horizons
		Changing as a person	Personal fulfilment	A duty	Learning as a developmental process	Growing self-awareness
			A process not bound by time or context	A process not bound by time or context		
			Developing social competence	Social competence		
					Learning as student activity	

Thomson (2017) p. 35

