
Thesis

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Working on the margins of an educational organisation: the experiences of online tutors and their professional identity. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Study.

For the award of:

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)

2018
Abstract
This thesis explores the experiences of tutors who hold online roles within a higher education context and provides insight into some of the challenges associated with the role. Participants were recruited from a single educational organisation and held roles in blended and traditional educational settings as well as within online modules.

Online tutoring roles are dynamic as they strive to keep pace with the development of more sophisticated online learning environments and advancing technology; together with increased student expectations linked with twenty-four-hour access to online learning platforms. Whilst the literature related to student experiences of online learning is significant, the available evidence associated with online tutor experiences remains somewhat limited by comparison. Current studies have been identified that have explored the experiences of online tutors and the relationship the role has to perceived effects on professional identity. The study provides insight into this area of education and is valuable in terms of highlighting the current strengths and weaknesses of the online tutor role.

Given that professional identity within educational contexts is historically bounded by social constructs and human interaction as well as perceived status within the remit of professional roles, this qualitative study seeks to understand and interpret the experiences of online tutors and how this role impacts upon professional identity. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the methodology for this study as the phenomenon of experience was central to the research. Although the sample of six participants was small, and purposive, the intention was to examine in detail the factors that shape online tutor experiences. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study had a single-phase data collection and revealed the following master themes: 1: Making a difference: 2: Transitioning change: 3: Dynamic connections: 4: Sense of professional worth.
Data was further analysed according to IPA principles with sub-themes and associated concepts being supported with verbatim quotations from interview transcripts.

Research findings highlight challenges online tutors face and evaluates the type of strategies used to overcome these. These findings are framed in light of the difficulties associated with the delivery of online learning in terms of information and communication technology; the concept of the tutor role in general, and transitions that need to be made by educational organisations and tutors to support both students and tutors within the context of this environment. Analysis of the experiential data further explores impacts upon the online tutor role on professional identity and connections to the meta consequences for the learning process and tutor experience.

For educational practice, the findings of this thesis provide the basis for further development of virtual learning platforms, online learning materials and online tutor training and support.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the support and encouragement of my supervisor, Dr. Pete Bradshaw, to my co-supervisor Dr. Tania Dragovic, and her valuable comments, and to my husband whose tireless practical and emotional support through the last three years has been appreciated.

I am also grateful to the support of those who gave their time willingly to be interviewed and share their experiences with me. I hope that the work does justice to their experiences as communicated during interviews.

My sincere thanks are given to fellow researchers in the EdD cohort for their continued support through the past three years, without whose witty and informative interaction within our social media group I may have struggled to complete the research.

Finally my appreciation is given to members of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Research Group (IPARG), Birkbeck University of London for peer support and exchange of ideas and experiences of using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).
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Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction
This first chapter provides a general background to the research, sets out the research aims, and discusses the underpinning justification for the study. An initial exploration of relevant literature further supports the justification and aligns with the research aims and objectives. The exploration also shows how the research question has evolved. In addition, the chapter identifies key themes which form the basis of the literature review that follows in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature review
Chapter 2 explores the relevant and available literature and addresses key themes identified in Chapter 1. Professional identity is also contextualised within the educational background and there is exploration of how pedagogic issues relate to professional identity. The chapter also evaluates literature in connection with online technology and its relevance to the tutor role.

Chapter 3: Research methodology
This chapter provides an outline of the research methodology (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)) and explores the rationale for its choice within this research study. There is also discussion about the role of the researcher and philosophical positioning within the qualitative paradigm. In addition, other possible research methodologies are briefly explored and discussion about why they were rejected in favour of IPA presented. There is information about participant sampling and recruitment, together with ethical considerations for the study.

Development of the research methodology also included a focus group activity, and this is presented and evaluated within the chapter. Clarity is also afforded in terms of how IPA was applied in the context of the research.
Chapter 4: Findings
In this chapter an overview of how the analysis was carried out is provided and connected to methodological principles and other evidence. Interpretation of the data and identified themes, sub-themes and concepts are offered using extensive verbatim quotations using interpretation but not extant evidence (according to IPA principles).

Chapter 5: Discussion
Chapter 5 focusses on the evaluation and interpretations from Chapter 4 and evaluates further literature to support findings and also to explore meanings that can be drawn from them. The discussion also explores the limitations of the study and what further research could be undertaken to expand the research aims further.

Chapter 6: Contribution to knowledge
The final and concluding chapter discusses the contribution to knowledge the study has made and reflects on the research project as a journey. A summary section concludes the chapter.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Chapter overview
This initial chapter provides an overview on the background to the research and how I initially formulated the research question and sub-questions. It also presents a justification for the research identifying a gap in current knowledge of, and research on, the specific topic.

1.2: Reflection: background to the research
I am an educational consultant, course developer and work as an associate lecture (AL) and study adviser for the Open University (OU), as well as an associate academic and supervisor for other higher education institutions. I became interested in the experiences of other tutors who were also my colleagues, and how we all communicate with online learners specifically on modules with no face-to-face and limited synchronous online interaction.

This interest arose out of examination of my own practice because I established, by extensive reflection, that my professional behaviour is different when I interact with students online, compared with when I interact synchronously or face-to-face with students. I concluded that this mode of working affects my professional identity which is based on a preconstructed self-concept, attitudes, values and experience and is maintained by continually developing these facets. I strive to maintain my professional position within a changing educational landscape and I have found it difficult to understand the impacts that working online has upon my own professional identity.

Based on my experience I wanted to explore the experiences of, and challenges faced by other tutors who work online. Key aspects of my practice which differ between online and face-to-face contexts are language used, familiarity and assumptions related to knowledge acquisition and proactiveness of initial contacts, amount of online contact and general narratives.
I feel that my professional identity is influenced by developing a collaborative and interactive relationship with learners which impacts the delivery of educational materials and facilitation of learning. Beijjard et al. (2004) suggest that professional identity is not an acquisition but rather a tool for teachers to make sense of who they are; and this tool also allows them to explain and validate concepts and events to other people. So this is a dynamic and direct interactive process which has limitations when tutoring only online. According to Rex et al. (2002) identity is formed and reformed by narratives which we communicate to other people and that reflect our values, norms and professional structures; thus, allowing teachers to make sense of who they are within this dynamic context.

The impact of the online tutor role upon professional identity and the relationship I have with students is of great interest to me. I perceive that there are limitations in communication media, interaction with students, opportunity for development of a collaborative and interactive relationship and that these are restricted in scope. Therefore, I wanted to explore participants’ experiences to see whether the strategies I have developed within my own practice to overcome challenges are shared ones and also whether there is any effect on their professional identity. It is important to note that the research does not seek to explore comparisons between my experience and those of the participants but to investigate unique strategies that each participant may have developed within their practice and examine facets of professional identity connected with their online role.

The original research title was ‘Being an online-only tutor: Experiences and perceived effects on professional identity’; however as the research study began it became clear that many participants had dual roles and tutored in face to face, blended learning contexts as well as online. I felt this enriched the study as participants naturally drew comparisons across different roles. Therefore the research title was changed to reflect this and to encompass impact and significance of the online tutor role.
1.3: Justifying the research

Interpretation of professional identity is central to the research project, as it has connection to the process of online tutoring and associated skills, knowledge, organisational remits and cultures. It is also an element of the role that I wanted to explore in the context of being an online tutor. During the thesis the terms ‘teacher’, ‘tutor’, ‘educator’ and ‘practitioner’ will be interchangeable and reflect how these are used within literature. As a point of clarification, within the research ‘online tutoring’ means tutoring online unless otherwise stated.

Although there is a large body of research relating to student identity and learning processes within an online platform; research from the tutor perspective is currently difficult to source in any magnitude. Whilst literature on professional identity was also easy to locate, there was less ease in locating relevant literature for the professional identity of online tutors as this is still an emergent field, albeit rapidly developing. It is important to note here that my main literature was gathered between 2014 and 2017 with subsequent additions during the later stages of the thesis development. This correlates to the programme of study and additions/further literature were identified during stages of analysis and writing up of the thesis. Older literature was also sourced in order to demonstrate the development within online tutoring and highlight some of the historical determinants of professional identity and how these translate into current dynamic practice.

Research is being undertaken at an increasing rate to meet the need for problem resolution with regard to the challenges of online delivery. This is perhaps in part due to the swift development of online communication tools and their use together with online technology in a wider context, and its integration within learning environments and use within social and personal contexts (McGuigan and Golden, 2012). Therefore, my literature search was undertaken cross-discipline in order to carefully establish how advances have been developed and also to examine possible impacts upon on learning and the tutoring role. I also explored literature related to
student learning in order to identify any relevant evidence connected to online tutoring.

Additionally, my literature explorations included evidence from outside the United Kingdom and this is justified because online education is now a global provision and sharing research related to online tutoring and advances in online educational technology is imperative in order to understand the wider perspective.

These wide-ranging literature sources were required in order to extract even the smallest piece of relevant evidence that may have been concealed within an unrelated study or research field.

In order to further justify the research, I needed to seek assurances that similar work had not been undertaken, or that my research sought to merely take a different perspective on existing studies. This was an important element of the justification process because online learning is an expanding field and being adopted by universities globally at a rapid rate (McGuigan and Golden, 2012). Although there were few theses with similar topics, my initial search did identify two pertinent studies. The first was a PhD thesis (Inamorato dos Santos, 2010) which was an holistic exploration of how courses in Brazil are developed and delivered online, and although this covered many pedagogic discourses it was not similar to my own proposal in terms of experiential exploration and was concerned with the mechanics of course development and delivery. However this study did provide me with some useful evidence related to online delivery of educational material which is discussed later in the thesis (within the literature review, Chapter 2).

The second thesis identified (Baxter, 2011) was of more concern as it seemed to be similar in context to my own proposed study. Though, on closer reading it was found to be wholly concerned with professional learning linked to professional identity within a linguistics area of teaching which focused on the challenges of text-based interaction for language
module delivery. In addition, the study concentrated on the complexities of equipping online teaching from an organisational perspective which encompassed change management; and the platform included modules where face-to-face interaction was also a feature. Nevertheless, this thesis did provide valuable insight into the concepts and constructs of professional identity, and also served as a springboard for further literature searches and contributed to evaluation within the literature review (Chapter 2), and the discussion (Chapter 5).

Online modules continue to become more popular within higher education programmes; Ananga and Biney (2017) suggest that this is largely due to the changing dynamics of technology and the growing number of students seeking a more flexible way of studying. My research participants were to be recruited from a range of such modules in order to focus on the associated experiences and challenges. This also meant that participants would have online tutoring experience in a range of subjects rather than experience focused on one module, so I made a decision that this would be more representative of the general challenges that online tutors face.

The concluding paragraphs of the thesis identify ongoing challenges for perceptual balance within online teaching that does seem to support the need for further research in this area given its rapid evolution; this is discussed in some detail in Chapter 6. My background evaluation explored the learning process briefly and the connections between online learning and online tutoring.

1.4: Initial exploration
Thinking about the learning process
Petty (2009) outlines assumptions about the learning process which are that students need a blended experience in order to fully transition through each stage of learning and gain a holistic knowledge of the topic under study. However, an alternative view put forward by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), and one which still has currency, suggests that more learning is undertaken within an online environment than within a face-to-face one, and this facilitates ease
of access, better use of resources (for both learning providers, tutors and students) and also quicker completion time frames. Therefore it can be suggested that the learning process itself is connected to the mode of delivery, the tutor role, limitations of the online learning environment and how delivery is perceived by students (Morrison, 2012); which is why it has relevance to this study.

**Considering the online learning environment**
According to Morrison (2012), in addition to subject specific expertise, a portfolio of additional skills is required of tutors in order for them to facilitate positive learning and communicate high quality, in depth field knowledge within the online environment. Communication is largely by email and this also requires tutors to add a new dimension to their teaching role which could become arduous in terms of workload; it could also result in students becoming dependent rather than independent learners as noted by McGuigan and Golden (2012). The rationale behind this is suggested to be that students may use email frequently and in an ad hoc manner, which does not replicate contact within a traditional face-to-face environment where contact with tutors would largely be confined to set tutorial or lecture times (ibid).

**The role of information technology**
Holmberg (1995) discusses information technology (IT) development within education as initially a means to support delivery methods within distance learning which was largely via correspondence. The purpose of introducing IT to the delivery was to address challenges related to the separation between tutors and students in terms of distance and time. In other words, it added a new dimension through which consistency of contact could be introduced. As technological methods advanced, student participation increased, and this led to improved outcomes within distance learning programmes as noted by Kler (2014). Therefore eLearning was a product of this IT development and its use within distance learning delivery; this development is dynamic and the systems and applications used within online
educational delivery are updated and enhanced in line with technological advances (Kirkwood and Price, 2014).

**The online learning model**

Morrison (2012) suggests that the current online learning model was initially widely adopted to deal with increasing attrition rates within traditional learning environments and to offer a way for students to overcome barriers to study such as family, work and to a degree, financial commitments. Demographic issues were also largely negated as students undertaking an online programme can generally do so from anywhere in the world (Bernard et al, 2014). So, although the positives for introducing online learning have addressed many challenges, for example reduced fees associated with studying online, and reduction in staffing costs as online tutors are generally employed on a module by module basis. These considerations have direct impacts on the role of an online tutor (Morrison, 2012). However, the introduction of this method of delivery has presented a further set of barriers which relate directly to the design and delivery of learning activities to which tutors must deliver effectively (McGuigan and Golden, 2012).

The development of IT within online learning will be discussed further in the literature review (chapter 2).

**Exploring teaching practice**

Shawer’s view of learning (2010) is based on active learning through communication together with experiential interaction and takes the position that good teaching practice occurs where it is informed by a teacher’s ability to translate theory and principles into classroom practice. So we can suggest that learners are receivers, and actively learn by using received information to interact with others via communication and experience; this view is representative of a learner-centred curriculum model (Lanes, 2010). This model focusses on how students learn best and prioritises their needs over other factors within the learning environment which includes taking account of learning style preferences (kinaesthetic, verbal/aural, written, visual and reflective/active). Additionally, the model advocates meeting needs of
students by maintaining their attention and motivation through the creation of an appropriate learning environment via which delivery of teaching activities can take place effectively.

In view of this model, it is suggested that online learning has inherent limitations as noted in previous discussion points, the main challenge tutors face is meeting student-centred criteria. One reason for this is the requirement for tutors to have knowledge and experience of a diverse range of teaching methods and tools to effectively deliver online modules and facilitate positive study outcomes for students (Blumberg. 2009). We can surmise therefore that the learning process is directly connected to the efficacy of tutor delivery.

Peterson (2012) points out that the needs of students are dynamic and tend to reflect changing technological advances and access to education. Maintaining pace with changing needs of students is also a significant factor in the design and delivery of online learning materials, and how the tutor role is carried out, whilst staying within a student-centred model of delivery (ibid). It would appear there is a wide acceptance that learning is an inductive and interactive process which is dependent upon the quality of communication and facilities available as well as the learning experience itself; therefore this is directly connected to the online tutor role and position within the learning experience (Sharples, 2006). This is further supported by O’Connor (2008) who suggests that teachers’ identities are complex and ‘socially situated within lived experiences’ (p.126) and guides professional and emotional decisions. O’Connor comments that these identities have ‘philosophical and axiological dimensions’ (p.127) which aligns well with the inclusion of exploration of professional identity within the research question and the chosen methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

**Final thoughts**

This initial background exploration provided me with reassurance that there was a justifiable need for my own research study and from this I could formulate relevant and comprehensive literature searches.
1.5: Chapter summary

This chapter has been a brief introduction to the background of the research and my interests which provide the initial framework for development of a research question. It has also provided justification for the research and identified the key areas which the following literature review will explore. The research aims identified below are explored within the literature review which follows in Chapter 2 are:

1: Learning, including delivery of online learning; tutors, perceptions and connection to professional identity. This encompasses the process of learning and different contexts; evidence linked to tutor perception of their identity and how this aligns with facilitation of learning.

2: Professional identity constructs and perceived impacts on this, within an online tutor role. Given that professional identity may be viewed as a separate topic, the literature review makes strong connections between how professional identity is perceived, maintained and communicated within an online tutor role.

3: Perceived limitations and scope of working online within an educational context together with exploration of the perceived advantages.

4: Tutor-student relationships, their development, collaboration and perceived influences related to online module delivery.

5: Perception of role, role context and working within the changing educational landscapes of online module delivery.

Figure one seeks to simplify the research aims and associate concepts covered within this initial chapter and demonstrate how a cycle develops. This is an important theme running through the research as the role of online tutors is to facilitate positive learning outcomes for students within the eLearning educational delivery setting.
In addition to the main themes above connections to online tutoring and professional identity will be highlighted throughout the literature review in Chapter 2.
2.0: Literature review

2.1: Chapter overview
The concepts and theoretical frameworks for the research project are explored within this literature review and provide a background to the study and reveal research questions to be investigated during data analysis cycles and evaluation. The chapter will also contextualise the literature within the online learning model of delivery.

For reiteration the main research aims identified at the end of the previous chapter are: delivery of online learning, online tutoring and connection to professional identity, its constructs and how it is maintained and communicated within the role: limitations and scope of the online tutor role, working online within an educational context: and tutor-student relationships. To fully explore and contextualise relevant concepts I have explored several disciplines to establish shared values, beliefs, constructs and strategies associated with professional identity and pedagogic issues which, when applied to an educational context, have significant relevance.

I will now explore how professional identity is interpreted within the educational context and also look at professional identity as a concept, so explore its constructs and meaning. Further consideration will be given to the pedagogic issues and how these may impact upon the online tutor role and professional identity. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the literature related to online technology and the changing landscape of the online modes of delivery.

The literature review informed the scope and focus of the study and literature was gathered up to the point of interview and data collection. Following that stage of the study new literature was sourced for the discussion chapter.
2.2: Interpreting professional identity in the educational context

It is important to explore how professional identity in the educational context is interpreted first, before moving on to the other themes because online tutors have an existing professional identity prior to entering an online role; and it is these existing constructs which form the basis for how online tutors interpret the role.

The educational context refers to the environment within which learning takes place and this refers to the physical aspect which could be a classroom or virtual learning platform, the curriculum itself, goals of learning and the perceptions of tutors and students (Basit, 2010). Therefore, it can be defined as an holistic term encompassing everything to do with teaching and learning and the systems involved with delivery and receiving of education (Mavor et al. 2017). Educational context refers to the online platform and associated tools such as the university student areas, module site areas, forums, emails, text messaging and virtual live session media (O'Hare, 2011).

The relationship between professional identity and online tutoring

The interpretation of professional identity, and its dynamic nature, is central to the research project, as is its connection to the process of online tutoring and its associated skills, knowledge, organisational remits and cultures. Tutoring itself can also be viewed as a dynamic concept (O'Hare, 2011) related to how the role of tutoring is perceived in terms of professionality or context. This review begins the process of exploring literature associated with these concepts and seeks to identify key questions relevant to the project and highlight key areas for discussion and focus during the analysis phase.

The concept of professional identity can be used or applied differently depending on the domain of educational delivery which it relates to, and how those who ‘teach’ define their interpretation of professional self-image (Knowles, 1992). Goodson (1991) argues that self-image is conceptual, in other words constructed, and influenced by the way people develop as
educational professionals and therefore how they perform their role. Accordingly, it could be suggested that professional identity can influence attitudes to delivery of education and educational change (Nias, 1989). The social construct of self-image is also described as being inter-subjective and ongoing; in other words, it is a continual process of self-interpretation against a backdrop of experience and reality (Mead, 1934; Erikson, 1968; Gee, 2001). Canrinus et al. (2012) suggest that changing factors such as levels of job satisfaction, motivation, commitment and self-efficacy contribute to shifting perceptions of self-image and subsequent interpretation, so this will be translated into tutoring practice (Mavor et al., 2017).

2.3: Professional identity as a concept
It is useful in the first instance, to highlight a problem within much of the research around professional identity which often confuses the concepts of self and identity (Beijaard et al., 2004; O’Hare, 2011); and this was something I was mindful of when interviewing participants as the research focuses on professional identity as a framework and basis for dialogue within the professional setting in this case, online tutoring. Professional identity in this context can be described as an inter-subjective and ongoing process of self-experience and reality (Gee, 2001); it is also role dependent with associated expectations of role and knowledge within an integrated continuum which will be discussed further within this review. The concept of self is more associated with perception of one’s own character or individuality outside the professional context; and although has relevance to socially constructed identities, the connection to professional identity is somewhat undetermined (Fuller et al., 2013).

McCarthy (2001) points out that plurality of identities within and educational setting exist and are context specific and dynamic. This implies that workplace landscapes shapes identity as it impacts upon the entire construct through influence, demands and limitations in addition to being related to life stories, experiences and a sense of self. This sense of self does have connections to self-concept but arguably only subconsciously (ibid).
The notion of multiple selves

Roberts (2000) supports the notion of multiple selves within the professional educational context and suggests that it is evidence that professional identity is linked to conformity and uniformity which can only be successfully achieved through active participation with peers (Weng, 2017). This does not appear to be wholly commensurate with the professional identity of online tutors who are not instrumental actors in the online teaching scenario but rather in a type of free fall with boundaries often ill-defined or not standardised (ibid). From these perspectives we can say that agency is an important factor and professional identity implies person and context (Feiman-Nesmer and Flodne, 1986; Kerby, 1991); moreover, research suggests that it is learned through interaction, accessing identity sources (social capita) and is linked to common understanding and shared views (Balatti et al., 2004: Weng, 2017).

Professional identity and role

Expanding on these points, professional identity can be related to, or associated with a number of concepts. These are an individual’s role at any given point in time, the importance of reflective practice and self-evaluation and the influence and expectation of others, which include peers, superiors and students (Dyer and Taylor, 2011). Society also constructs an image of what an educator should be in terms of professional conduct and even with regard to personality but as Tickle (1999, 2000) suggests this construct needs to take account of personal experience, background and practice remits which connects to the work of McCarthy (2001) cited earlier.

Emphasis on the integration of different facets of professional identity makes identifying a single common element challenging as well as trying to assess the extent of each facet in terms of influence and importance. Exploring this notion further evidence suggests that professional identity is also set against a background of varying objectives and differing problems that educators encounter on a daily basis (Dowling, 2011).

Because teaching and learning are socially situated practices and embedded in emotional experience as well as professional ones
(Hargreaves, 1998, Zemylas, 2003), the question of how individuals negotiate their role and associated aspects of professional identity is dichotomous and requires detailed understanding of how to respond professionally to a range of educational situations (ibid). Mead (1934) suggested that this type of behaviour is emergent and as previously discussed, dependent on social and emotional interactions, therefore it is constructivist in nature. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) suggest that it is not only the caring and nurturing aspects of a teacher’s role but political views and personal values that ultimately shape professional actions and provide justification for engagement in their work; hence impact on professional identity (Adams, 2013).

Academic identity as a single facet of professional identity can be said to relate to teaching and research activities which are grounded in subject expertise, or are discipline based (Deem, 2004). The discipline-based cultures are consequently primary sources of identity, subject expertise and relate to knowledge, tasks, role performance and standards (Becher, 1989).

**Shifts and changes in professional identity development**

Having considered various facets of academic practice for individuals it seems a natural progression from the main themes, to move on to consider how this relates to academic disciplines or different branches of academic knowledge within educational contexts (Krishnan, 2009, Adams, 2013).

Academic disciplines share common values and professional boundaries which allow individual autonomy, the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2006) and also the transmission of knowledge to others (Kuh and Whitt, 1988); this status could be described as symbolic in nature as it may define someone who inhabits a specific role at any given point in time (ibid); therefore, it may not be definitive over the length of a career for example (Patton and Parker, 2017). This is significant when considering experiences of tutors who work online and within blended...
contexts as this role shift may cause conflicts of identity when transitioning from one delivery method to another (Allen and Seamen, 2007: Ross et al, 2014). There appears to be strong connections between peer groups and groups sharing common aims and these relationships or communities of practice are evident within tutor peer groups (Wenger, 1998: Patton and Parker, 2017).

From the above points it can be surmised that how individuals engage with their environment affects, impacts and shapes the learning process, subsequent actions and engagement. This suggests that an individual’s perceived place within the world or their identity is contextual and dependent upon how they interact with others. Therefore, existing and functioning within a framework such as a community of practice, promotes acceptance, demonstrates equitable intent and facilitates progression or alignment (van Manen and Barley, 1984).

Wenger (1998) describes these concepts as ‘modes of belonging’, with associated shared practices which Reeve et al. (2002) describes as being a reflection of collective. From Reeve et al.’s discussion it is suggested that shared common ground influences subsequent learning and practice in general terms. So, it would seem that communities are important within the constructs of learning because they allow identification with groups and afford the ability to rely on assumptions of similar knowledge bases and experience, resulting in a collaborative bond and suggested enhanced learning progression through both individual and shared goals and developing strategies to meet these challenges (Patton and Parker, 2017). Therefore, students’ experience may reflect variability, and teachers’ experience and training could also influence their experience of communication, interaction and therefore learning, in either a negative or positive way; in turn these possible effects may have an impact on professional identity and its continued development, being an interdependent process (Biggs, 2003: Wiles, 2012). Likewise, the research suggests that communities of practice are also important in reinforcing professional identity as it relates not only to how professionals view
themselves but how they fit in with groups of their peers who share the same values, attitudes, professional beliefs and behaviour (Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt et al., 2006; Ashforth et al., 2007).

Bunderson (2001) argues that professional identity not only affects how one behaves within the workplace but that the role also guides professional behaviour, and this applies to all models and modes of delivery (Whitchurch, 2008). This suggests that there is a strong link between professional identity and the role a person undertakes, and this is relevant to the online tutoring role because it highlights the interplay and fluidity between the need to belong to a community of practice and the changing nature of the online tutor role (Wiles, 2012: Patton and Parker, 2017).

These positions underpin the question of whether inductive and interactive processes can be effectively delivered online and as Wiles (2012) suggests, professional identity is not easily categorised because of its dynamic nature and contextualisation within a changing educational landscape, including face to face and blended models of delivery in addition to the online only mode (Beijaard et al, 2004). This continual shifting can lead to instability in terms of professional identity and being certain of one’s role as an online tutor (Bunderson, 2001: Wiles, 2012).

**Challenges to professional identity within the online environment**

According to Ross et al. (2014), online education can have a negative impact on tutor identity as well as the tutor-student relationship; the rationale supporting this is that there can be a devaluing of professional identity and a diminishing of tutor morale and motivation in favour of a ‘market-driven’ learning environment (ibid). Within a traditional face to face environment there is a much clearer role definition with regard to function and moreover there are usually prescribed boundaries (Clarke et al, 2013); in addition there are professional networks which can be easily accessed and utilised to inform professional identity and maintain levels of motivation and morale (Henkel, 2007).
In support of this position White and Weight (2000) describe computer mediated communication as challenging because of uncertainties and ambiguities which are liable to occur in the absence of visual and audio cues, and this may also affect a tutor’s ability to determine their professional identity within the online learning context. This can result in an altered perception and ascribed assumptive meanings attached to communications which may be incorrect, misinterpreted or based on metaphors. Moreover, it is also suggested that within the online learning environment there is a lack of consistency with regard to how tutors and students behave; therefore, online communication needs to be efficient, focused and disciplined to ensure effectiveness and a measure of standardisation (Boyle et al., 2001).

Bach et al. (2007) conclude that the online learning tutor is often a facilitator and without the professional presence that face-to-face interaction provides, their role can be acutely compromised. It is also concluded that one of the main challenges is to address the distorted significance of each online interaction by establishing a proactive early positive feedback loop, but this is dependent upon student motivation to interact which is not always the case as noted by Ross et al (2014).

As discussed, communities of practice are important within the constructs of social learning because they allow identification with peer groups and the ability to rely on assumptions of similar knowledge bases and experience, resulting in a collaborative bond and suggested enhanced learning progression through both individual and shared goals and this can be linked to a professional identity ‘framework’ (Patton and Parker, 2017). However, critics of Wenger’s communities of practice suggest that it is a simplistic view, can foster power relations struggles within its members and can be a platform where disagreements and conflict can become overwhelming (Handley et al., 2006; Yanow, 2004; Roberts, 2006). This seems to suggest that the online tutor role may be poorly defined within educational organisations (Bach et al, 2007).
Professional socialisation and communities of practice

Professional socialisation appears to be significant in influencing and shaping professional identity (Evenson, 2009) and this connects to the previous discussion points about the constructs of social learning because research has highlighted the importance of the social and professional bond in the shaping of professional identity. Professional socialisation can be defined as the internalisation of the values, norms, roles and skills of a specific cultural group (ibid), and more recent research has supported this view suggesting that professional socialisation allows individuals to develop a concept of being a professional and thereby they are then able to differentiate themselves from other groups (Adams et al., 2006: Mackey 2007). This places value on peer interaction (Stryker, 1987) and suggests that it is an important route to development of professional identity which is largely dependent upon the interplay between an individual and their professional environment so that role construction and professional understanding can be intrinsically bound with those of others. This is suggested by Lave and Wenger (1990) and Davis (2006) to be instrumental in the cycle of developing and maintaining communities of practice (Webber, 2016).

Importantly, professional identity can be linked to external perception of a profession, in other words how a profession is viewed by others (Wenger, 2006). Therefore, negative perceptions or interactions with others can result in a poor professional self-image and a lack of professional confidence. Given that professional identity is in part dependent upon social constructs this would seem to highlight the importance of external perception or their role and what this role involves, for online tutors. This is a significant consideration when looking at the experiences of online tutors as the benchmarks and frameworks for clear professional identity conceptualisation are not always apparent (Turner, 2011: Webber, 2016).

2.4: Pedagogic issues

Pedagogic issues are important facets of professional identity and connect to ways of communicating and generalised role conception (Beijaard, 1995). According to Oser (1992) the pedagogic part of educational delivery
influences student learning experiences but this can only be effectively acted out when educators are aware of norms and values involved in their interactions with students (Damon, 1992: Sun and Chen, 2016). Online interaction with students removes many of the important characteristics of direct face-to-face engagement so pedagogic aspects of professional identity conceptualisation in these instances could be arguably diminished (Garrison and Anderson, 2003: Cornelius and MacDonald, 2008).

**Framing professional identity**

Professional identity is bounded by professional knowledge and in turn is influenced by the context of delivery, in other words the ecology of the setting in which learning is facilitated (Adams et al., 2006: Lingard et al., 2002); this is related to how professionals prepare themselves for roles, how they interpret boundaries of their profession and how they interact with other professionals in their field (Whitchurch, 2010).

According to Erikson (1968) professional identity can be framed within the context of social identity and is a systematic way of evaluating, identifying and organising the perception of self; so, in terms of interaction this influences how people differentiate themselves from other professional groups. What this relates to is creating a realistic view of a profession; in this context online tutoring and to achieve this Niemi (1997) suggests that all available alternatives and comparisons with other professionals must first be explored and made so that professional identity can be formed.

Historically educational delivery has been situational (Beijaard et al., 2004), in other words isolated from any other interests or universal values; but within a virtual learning environment the situation is dynamic, fluid and does not ‘fit’ with traditional models of ‘classroom’ ecology. The developing culture within a particular or specific setting would normally reflect professional peers, community and student expectations and prescriptive curricula (Dulee and Aikenhead, 1992). Therefore, if these characteristics are removed, the culture could be difficult to develop or control in terms of meeting student community and professional expectations. These cultures are important to
how professional identity is perceived by individuals and therefore can directly impact upon role and workplace relationships (Reynolds, 1996).

A particular setting within an educational context would be subject to the principles and processes of organisational culture which can be defined as the rites and formalities of an organisation, in other words the way an organisation ‘does’ things (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006). Each organisation will have a culture that is dependent on traditions and processes developed historically and within any organisational culture the climate of the organisation or the status of it at any one time, will impact interactions and any workforce as a whole (Mullins, 2016). Within the educational context which has a discipline-based culture, the climate will accordingly affect professional identity constructs, for example shifting work patterns, new policies and changing roles and professional learning or continued professional development. The relationship of these constructs sits closely together with the construct of professional identity dynamics which are based on the notion that professional identities are constantly changing which reveals further elements of the conceptual framework of professional learning (Heron, 2001).

Therefore, we could argue that this is a cyclical process (Akkerman, 2011); and one in which there is interdependency between professional identity, professional agency, and professional learning (Eteläpelto et al., 2014).

Figure 2 seeks to show how professional identity is framed within the online tutor role and context.
2.5: **Online technology**

The use of online technologies in higher education continues to grow and be adopted by more educational organisations (Aimard and McCullough, 2006; Bache et al., 2007; Baxter, 2011; McKnight et al, 2016). For example, within the Open University there are several policies which ALs must adhere to which relate to computing practice and although supporting in terms of providing information to ALs, the policies require increasing levels of computing ability in order to comply; and these policies are reviewed frequently to keep up with advances within technology and also upgrading of various online platforms used for the delivery of online learning programmes (Open University, 2016). This has a consequential impact on teaching practice and the relationship between teaching practice and self-image of teaching professionals, who seek to keep pace with these changes (Lim and Khine, 2006). Research suggests that educators already embracing the student-centred approach to educational delivery were more readily accepting of new technologies and therefore have a much more positive experience of online teaching (Judson, 2006: Henderson et al, 2017). Conversely, Judson further suggests that
those with a teacher-centred and traditional pedagogic approach generally struggle far more with integration of online technology into their teaching practice and simply use technology to pass on information rather than use online environments for a collaborative educational experience (ibid).

**Considering some of the challenges**

The role of technology and associated eLearning in current higher education contexts continues to be significant and growing in importance as its adoption and adaptation is rolled out across universities and other educational providers (Alghantani, 2011). However as Robertson and Al-Zahrani (2012) and Muflih and Jawarneh (2011) point out, current educational paradigms often experience difficulties in meeting the challenges of rapidly developing IT systems and processes. Lareki, de Morentin and Amenabar (2010) suggest that careful integration into higher education programmes should ensure minimal resistance to change and effective implementation of new tutor and student practices. This includes access to and adequate provision for training on, and use of systems and processes (Onsman, 2011).

MacFarlane (2016) suggests that online tuition is gaining ground in universities globally but there is a lack of standardisation of form and format which prevents the delivery mode from reaching its full potential (ibid). This potential cannot yet be determined because of the dynamic nature of IT development within online learning (ibid). Stenbom, Jansson and Hulkko (2016) argue that the online tutor needs to structure sessions and facilitate and encourage independent inquiry but they point out that this requires significant effort to promote discourse within an online platform as well as encouraging engagement. Further research highlights key emotional challenges for both students and tutors within online platforms when problem solving is unsuccessful and this can lead to frustration and a lack of ability to apply knowledge and skills effectively within the online platform (Stenbom, Cleveland-Innes & Hrastinski, 2016). However the potential for developing strategies to meet some of these challenges continue to be explored for example, from the perspective of online tutors’ reflection on tutoring practices linked to strategies and techniques such as visible recognition (for example
badges) which all appear to have growing success (Jovanovic & Devedzic, 2015).

Robinson and Hullinger (2008) argue that online learning allows students more flexibility in the learning process and technology facilitates stimulation because it utilises a variety of multimedia applications and new technological processes to meet the high expectations of educational providers, tutors and students. However Swanson et al (2015) point out that this digital literacy and flexibility often has a disadvantage of loss of written and verbal skills. Therefore these areas need to be addressed in order for the development to move forward in a positive way and take account of shortfalls in development of areas which lag behind IT development in terms programme design (Naidu, 2011).

**Transitioning into online tutoring**

Support for transition into online teaching does exist, and many institutions require participation in formal training and online pedagogical development programmes (Gibbs and Coffey, 2004). These professional development strategies have been shown to positively impact levels of student centeredness (Postareff et al., 2007); however, there is yet little evidence to substantially support changes in teaching behaviour within online learning environments and this is largely attributed to individuals retaining underlying conceptions of teaching and learning, although the body of evidence in this regard is growing as identified by Baxter (2011) and Sun and Chen (2016).

Accordingly, within online practice there is often inconsistency of delivery which needs to be addressed in order to standardise student experiences and ensure pedagogic quality assurance (also as noted in the previous section) (Swanson et al, 2015); inconsistency as discussed earlier can influence professional identity in terms of confidence and motivation.

A clear interpretation of teaching online remains challenging because there is, as yet no robust definition or conceptualisation of the values, norms, roles and professional identity of an online tutor which represent the core of the
thesis. To define what it means to teach online, key factors are dependent upon the organisation and context and how each organisation supports staff to use the technologies of online learning (JISC, 2004). The drive for greater online engagement within education is also linked with social, economic and educational factors which includes the requirement for greater student retention and the ability to offer unlimited access to modules, for example by students abroad (Alghantani, 2011). This connects back to organisational culture, change management within the educational organisational and all associated relevant policies which underpin and drive recruitment of students and also module design (Browne, 2010).

Organisational considerations

According to McKenna (2012), any organisation can be defined as a collection of individuals organised into groups and subgroups; each of these are interdependent and interact with each other. Groups and subgroups share common goals although they may have different skills; this compartmentalisation allows an organisation to function with maximum efficacy and meet its goal criteria (Hucynski, 1991).

The collective goals (which include its values and beliefs) of organisations take priority over those of individual members; therefore, in the case of online tutors, subscribing to the collective goals of the university will be an expectation of the role. The impact of unforeseen factors connected with this organisational structure is commonly attributed to advancing technology (McKenna, 2012); the rate of change is exponential and requires organisations using technology as a main mode of delivery, to become and remain competitive. This is relevant to all universities and educational organisations who provide online learning because they must keep up with technological advancement but at the same time deal with challenges it may bring such as training, operational conflicts and delivery of quality learning via virtual platforms (MacGuigan and Golden, 2012) and importantly the level of resistance to change which can influence efficacy and meeting objectives (Braithwaite, 2006).
Organisational culture and the online tutor role
Within any educational organisation a dominant culture will be evident (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and every employee will be part of this overriding culture which reflects the core values and overall identity of the organisation. All employees will be expected to work towards achievement of the organisation’s objectives and observe and fulfil any mission statements in place. Subcultures naturally form within an educational organisation which reflect common aims of various departments and faculties; but according to Pinae-Cunha (2009), for a strong organisational culture to exist or one in which subcultures work cohesively and without conflicts, all staff have to align with the values and beliefs of the organisation. If this alignment is not evident then control must be exerted through rules, procedures and bureaucracy and according to Schultz (2015) managing the organisational conflicts within an educational organisation is central to enable strategic imperatives to be met.

Student cultures and managing expectations
By the same token, students will have their own culture sand sub cultures or groups, which develop alongside those of the online tutors and this can create a dichotomous situation because the two sets of cultures and sub cultures/groups will not necessarily align, and student cultures and sub cultures/groups are more likely to be diverse and dependent on what motivates them (Brock, 2010). Roufs (2016) describes this as how students relate to their learning institution, their tutor, and each other. However because of the ubiquitous use of technology, students no longer feel the need to come together physically because their relationships can continue within the many online platforms of social media as well as within café forums provided by universities and this means that students do not necessarily expect to develop a relationship with their online tutor. Therefore in many instances this interaction excludes the online- only tutor as they have no place within this cultural exchange and it supports the notion that the online tutor faces significant challenges in developing relationships with their students and because the traditional academic based culture and subcultures of students has changed, the reliance on this relationship by students has weakened (Jones, 2002).
If we consider the social aspect which highlights student expectation as well as the ability to engage with online platforms (for example Facebook, Twitter etc.) the need for flexibility when delivering online modules and supporting staff to deliver these is paramount in ensuring optimum student learning experiences (White et al., 2010). For many students, the new online technologies that have been incorporated into learning provide increased motivation for study because they can access learning materials and peers twenty-four hours a day and are not bounded by campus times or travel. Of course, this leads to boundaries between traditional learning and social networking to be somewhat blurred and teaching professionals often find it challenging to embrace this unbounded approach or reticent to do so because it also blurs the boundaries between work and non-work life (van Veen and Sleegers, 2006: Allen and Seaman, 2007). There are also questions associated with the challenges of learning how to use online technologies and institutional expectations that tutors will share the same enthusiasm for them as many students do (JISC, 2014). This highlights the contrast between pedagogic strategies and business rationales, with institutional expectations that teaching staff will be adequately equipped (for example information technology equipment) and confident inhabiting an online learning environment.

**Facilitating the acquisition within the online mode of delivery**

Being able to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge adequately within online learning modules is important, and research questions whether natural creativity will be diminished in this learning context (Baxter, 2004). Porter (2010) suggested that many tutors lacked confidence in using technology and were often poorly prepared when compared to the ability and confidence of students. Importantly, as Sheehy et al. (2009) point out, traditional pedagogies cannot be simply transferred to online platforms because different skills and competencies as well as new ways of conceptualising learning are required (Neiss, 2011: Heitink, et al, 2016).

Student experience within a virtual learning environment can be varied (Baxter, 2011); not all current learners embrace online platforms; some find it
challenging, isolating and in many cases prohibitive to achieving success whilst others embrace the lack of constraints on time when they can study and view it as a liberating experience which they can fit in around their other life commitments (Fitzgibbon and Prior (2006). Consideration of learning styles and preferences need to remain a key focus in the design and delivery of online modules and associated learning materials and activities (Peterson, 2012); and in this regard impact the online tutor role because of the additional pedagogic expectations and demands of module delivery in terms of time, motivation and commitment (Fitzgibbon and Prior, 2006, Sun and Chen, 2016).

**Flexibility and communication**

Given the increasing demand for flexibility, improved communication and technological skills within the online learning environment the role of online tutors continues to become more complex (Nunes et al., 2000: Baxter, 2011). According to Cornford and Pollock (2003) and Inamorato dos Santos (2010) most higher education institutes tend to include online learning activities within the main campus resource remit which can pose significant challenges for effective delivery of online material as traditionally prepared materials often cannot be translated easily onto a virtual platform; this aligns with the scope of the thesis in terms of online tuition. Therefore it is suggested that online tutors are often faced with trying to ‘make do’ and tutors have little consistency in their approach which results in cohorts having different learning experiences of the same material (Owens, 2011). This perceived problem has led to research interests focussing more on approaches and epistemologies such as constructivism and problem-based learning in order to try and standardise and maximise online learning environments (Nunes and McPherson, 2003). Jopling (2012) highlights some of the problems with online pedagogy and notes that tutors who are technologically competent and confident will be able to more easily facilitate a student’s online learning and this is more important if the student is has a high level of digital expertise. What we can draw from this is that if an online tutor has limited digital expertise then this could diminish positive experience for all concerned and be a significant challenge to professional identity.
Research also suggests that there is a direct connection between one-to-one online tutoring and one-to-many online tutoring (Price, et al., 2007; Martinovic, 2009), the latter presenting more challenges to adequate facilitation of learning and the need for continued redefinition of subject expertise and professional status.

**Connecting online learning and professional identity in the tutor role**

Hanson (2009) made a strong connection between online learning and the impact on professional identity and key points link to best practice which is dependent upon sharing knowledge and ideas with other practitioners which has already been discussed within the section on communities of practice, but it is worth reiterating the strong relationship that is evident within research. Hanson also suggests that examples of effective online practice should be more easily collated and accessible to enable practitioners to become familiar with technologies and make informed decisions about how to use them in online teaching activities. Feeling confident about using tools and implementing strategies used for online teaching connects to power, agency and communities of practice because it allows integration of skills and knowledge and effective communication and motivation as well as creating safe environments for participation and facilitation of positive student-practitioner relationships (Sharpe et al., 2009). Accessibility and familiarity facilitate professional confidence development and support a positive student-practitioner relationship (Curtis, et al., 2013).

The practicalities of online teaching may differ from the theoretical or conceptual ideas and require clear routines and organisation of activities with comprehensive preparation that often needs 'scripted' narrative for tutors to follow (Baxter, 2011). The clear instructional approaches lend themselves to highly focussed goals and objectives; however, delivery must be flexible and allow for interaction and participation on the part of students as well as providing appropriate learning challenges (Owens, 2011).

The nature of asynchronous and synchronous learning environments differs significantly in the type of support offered to students. This can be another
challenge of online tutoring because not all delivery offers real time interaction which in many regards offers simulation to a face-to-face learning situation with immediate interaction and clarification of meaning (Steeples et al., 2002). Salmon (2000) and Allen and Seaman (2007) note that synchronous interaction does provide a sense of immediacy with regard to contact and this increases motivation for both students and tutors.

**Exploring the challenges of interaction online**

Interaction is historically defined as a critical component of educational processes and indeed is highly valued within online learning and distance education in general (Holmberg, 1989). Evidence suggests it is the quality and effectiveness of this interaction within online education delivery which is in question because outcomes are subjected to diverse complex factors related to the amount of active participation and the quality of group discussion which is experienced within different contexts and module delivery (Marjanovic, 1999: MacDonald and Campbell, 2012).

In addition to these issues the anxiety experienced by many students and tutors about interacting within synchronous sessions arises from the immediacy of expected responses and the perceived negative aspects of delayed responses (McAllister et al., 2004). It seems to be difficult to clarify complex academic issues in the synchronous context and delays in replying to written messages which most online synchronous platforms have the capabilities for. This can present difficulties for tutors who may have to manage large student groups without any support by way of additional forum moderators or co-tutors. During face-to-face interactions these anxieties are diminished because of the physical nature of the group dynamics. Online interactions also challenge traditional models of social relationships, shared understanding and identity formation because participants can feel isolated and not attached to the group and tutor (MacDonald and Campbell, 2012).

Accordingly, there appears to be little or limited sense of belonging as people seek to make necessary connections and form appropriate relationships which serve to facilitate positive learning experiences. This is an important
social aspect of the learning experience and applies to students and tutors because playing an active role in synchronous interactions is critical for maintaining motivation (Burnett, 2003; Scartezini and Monereo, 2016). Moreover, Finkelstein (2006) suggests that these social relationships help to establish a strong online community and create a ‘safe’ learning environment; if these relationships are not nurtured or formed then participation may be impaired. According to Lizzio et al. (2010), a safe learning environment is one where there is mutual respect between tutor and student, for online contexts students must feel safe to engage in discussions which means a collaborative and non-judgemental approach needs to be used.

Complementing this discussion is the research by MacDonald and Campbell (2012) into activity design for online synchronous tuition within the Open University. Why this is of particular interest and relevance is because the research demonstrated a need for specifically designed online activities which were appropriate and easily adopted by staff who had to deliver them without the need for protracted prior training and, moreover, that by having suitably designed online activities (and therefore learning material), online tutors could prioritise their time more effectively and efficiently and focus much more on the needs of students. Gonzalez (2009) and Denis et al. (2004) suggest that even when activities are customized for online learning environments, the virtual environment requires mastery of many teaching competencies in order to effectively and confidently support learners undertaking online study. McKnight et al (2016) found in a multi method study that the success of any alteration of face to face or blended learning modes and established online delivery modes is determined by how well the technology enables teaching and learning, and not by the technology itself.

This mastery is gained through a rigorous programme of professional development, ongoing peer and self-evaluation of core competencies and lastly the transformation of the educational organisations when moving from traditional learning models to blended or wholly online ones. This model is known as the TOP triangle (technology, organisation and pedagogy) (Bates and Sangra, 2011). Bates (2011) explains the principles behind this triangle
which are that use of web tools such as blogs, wikis and clouds, together with engagement in social media networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and Instagram, allow educators to reach a much more diverse audience and also facilitate the development of different teaching styles. However, Bates does acknowledge that ‘digital literacy’ needs to be embedded within a subject or specific discipline otherwise the demands on tutors could be overwhelming.

**Comparing face to face, blended and online learning modes**

Researchers have been articulating distance/online learning theories for several decades and when comparing face to face, blended learning and online learning it is appropriate to explore some of these early theories to show how changes have evolved and what the current position is.

Lauzon (1992) for example suggested that early models of distance or online learning were more concerned with the overall principles of education rather than how students actually learned. Theories from this era include Keegan’s (1996) which looked at how the use of developing technology could help the student become more independent and take ownership of their learning experience. This theory emphasised the positive aspect of both students and tutors becoming free from the constraints of having to be in the same space and time in order to teach and learn. This highlights a freedom to select learning formats and combine these to provide the best possible learning opportunities and outcomes. We note here discussion about choices between face to face, blended and online modes of delivery because at that time, modules were often delivered by a variety of methods (Tebeaux, 1995).

Fast forward to current online learning and it is apparent that advances in technology means that wholly internet-based tutoring and learning removes these choices (Moore et al, 2010: Nyugen, 2015) This also has a potential to impair positive learning outcomes because it does not accommodate all learning style preferences and there are limited adaptations that can be made to improve this situation (Nyugen, 2015). Holmberg (1995) argued that for effective learning to take place via an online method that activities,
feedback and a careful and comprehensively organised system of delivery is imperative.

If we accept the premise that learning should be an active and interactive process rather than a passive one (Rae and Carswell, 2001); then students need to have an opportunity to construct their own learning which aligns with some of the theoretical positions related to advances in educational delivery.

Moving forward in time, Peters (2002) examined the effects of technology on distance and online education, and highlighted the need for tutor and student roles to be redefined in order to create more autonomy in terms of producing an environment where the tutor becomes more of a facilitator who guides and supports learning rather than teach. Furthermore the theory suggested that this autonomous change would promote motivation and an increased opportunity to develop learning material.

These theoretical views highlight some of the differences between traditional learning and online learning which currently tends to focus on student autonomy (McCutcheon et al, 2015: Nyugen, 2015); but acknowledges that the tutor role will need to continually change, adapt and evolve, to meet the idealistic objectives. In face to face environments the tutor controls the learning environment (De La Varre et al, 2011) and it is suggested that ultimately it is the tutor who causes learning to occur (ibid).

Face to face teaching could be described as a respected and recognised form of teaching and learning (Svinicki and McKeachie, 2013), and viewed globally as the most effective method of delivering higher education instruction (Lambert, 2012). This position is largely because it advocates and provides the means for students to be engaged in interactive learning which involves different styles and assessment processes including visual, audio, reading, written, and kinaesthetic modes (Ross et al, 2014). Some suggest this is the true learner-centred approach to teaching (Hestnes, 2012: Benton and Cashin, 2012).
Hestnes (2012) and Benton and Cashin (2012) also argued that both face to face and online learning have similar outcomes with regard to learning and student satisfaction, even taking account of different learning styles. Perhaps this could be attributed to students making personal choices about the way they learn and programme mode of delivery selected (ibid). However Solimeno et al, (2008) suggested that students who study online tend to develop better professional competencies which are usually only seen in small face to face groups rather than large face to face cohorts. The research puts forward innovative educational opportunities and the need to time manage learning strategies as a reason for this. They also suggest that students who decide to study online may have low anxiety levels well developed problem-solving skills. This is supported by research conducted by Wuensch et al in 2008 where pedagogical characteristics of the two modes were explored, revealing that another answer for the differences could be that when studying online students can pace their own study to a degree and it is more convenient so less stressful. However they did highlight disadvantages in that online study is not suited to all students and if they don’t possess the noted characteristics and skills their learning experience may not be as positive.

Blended learning therefore highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of the face to face and online delivery modes and is viewed as a hybrid with challenges of design and delivery of effective blended programmes (Jackson and Helms, 2008: Nyugen, 2015).

**Digital literacy**

Linking the notion of digital literacy and the importance of its mastery within online tutoring to professional identity may be viewed as irrelevant or at least as unimportant within the role; but understanding the connection might help us understand some of the reactions online tutors have when asked to adopt and adapt to new technologies which are assumed to be supportive and provide an enhanced experience for both students and tutors (Kirkwood and Price (2011). Goodson (2001) describes this as a conflicting difference
between educational innovation and a tutor’s professional identity. Moreover, Trede et al. (2012) argue that tutors learn about and make use of technology through their professional identity because they seek to take ownership of a new tool or process which leads to a sense of purpose, involvement and an enhanced sense of self. Ketalaar et al. (2012) explains this as the tutor positioning themselves in relation to the specific change, rather than simply accepting or rejecting it. In other words, if a tutor feels that the new technology or innovation aligns with their own self-concept, they are more likely to embrace it (Pierce et al., 2001).

According to Englund et al (2017), how tutors approach teaching when using technology is essential to the successful implementation and positive outcomes for higher education students. Their longitudinal study highlighted significant differences between novice and experienced tutors and their findings suggested that although novice tutors demonstrated a more rapid response to changes in IT systems and processes, the more experienced tutors found it much more challenging to change tutor-focused conceptions rooted in professional identity, and develop the skills to meet swift change. In support of this point, Price and Kirkwood (2014) suggest that although the use of technology is now widespread within teaching and learning, its effectiveness is still largely unknown, so ongoing research is needed to establish efficiency and usefulness from practitioners and students' perspectives.

Online or digital technologies are an integral part of university study, either in part or via totally online module delivery (Henderson et al, 2017). The potential for technology to be improved to enhance student learning focuses on ease of student use and accessibility. The survey conducted by Henderson et al, identified several digital benefits related to accessibility; but it also revealed that digital technologies were failing to transform the nature of online tutoring and learning. Their conclusion was that the idealistic enthusiasm for change needs to be adjusted to enable better understanding of the reality of what online tutoring and learning means in terms of skills, familiarity of use and time to keep up with changing systems.
The sense of agency (control and empowerment) is suggested by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) to be reinforced by a heightened cognisance or their own professional identity allowing them to shape their practice.

2.6: Chapter summary
This chapter has explored some of the relevant literature related to professional identity and tutoring within an online context. Within the chapter connections were made to the concepts of the research project and emerging sub-questions for consideration within the discussion phase (Chapter 5). The literature review reflects discussion from the introduction (Chapter 1) and also provides a basis for Chapter 3. In addition, reflection on the literature has identified gaps in the current knowledge base with regard to online tutoring and its perceived effects on professional identity which are specifically how the online tutor role is supported, variations in appropriate skills training, use of online communication tools and associated competency, communication of the online tutor role to students and associated expectations, together with how factors such as organisational culture and prioritisation of online mode of delivery impacts upon the online tutor role and impacts upon professional identity constructs. My research aims to fill these gaps by interpretation of online tutor experiences and associated practice.
Chapter 3: Research methodology

3.1: Chapter overview

When discussing the rationale underpinning methodological choice, consideration must also be given to the epistemological and ontological positions underpinning the research and how these relate to the research aims, questions and choice of methodology.

For clarification at this juncture, the research aims rest on and include the following:

There is currently little research into the experiences of tutors who deliver online modules from the perspective of professional identity and the student-tutor relationship; there is however a large body of research from student perspectives. This study will add to the existing body of knowledge and will enable practice strategies to be developed for use in continued professional development activities, personal reflection and general skills development.

The research will also be of value to educational organisations in terms of identifying areas of module development which may benefit from review to maximise tutor-student interaction in a positive and productive way whilst retaining professional value for tutors.

Finally, the findings could inform other educational organisations who use online methods of tutor-student communication and assist with their own pedagogic development processes.

Moving forward

I will now go on to discuss methodological choice and its relationship to my ontological and epistemological position as the researcher and my role in the study. Consideration of alternative methodological approaches is discussed and the rationale and justification for selecting interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is explored, together with presenting a
short focus group study which helped to refine the methodology and prepare me, as the researcher for the main study.

Participant selection, recruitment and participation criteria are discussed, together with the associated ethical considerations including potential challenges and conflicts are debated. Data collection methods and explored fully and aligned with methodological principles.

**Selecting an appropriate methodology**

According to Clough and Nutbrown (2012) and Crotty (2005), methodology can be defined as a research design or strategy that is influential in the choice and use of data collection methods. From this definition it would seem that choice of methodology is strongly connected to philosophical position considerations, and theoretical frameworks, which when combined provide the definitive rationale as to why specific methods have been selected to address research questions.

It can be challenging to identify the most appropriate approach to use and, as Finlay (2006) suggests, researchers can engage in a process known as mapping methodology to ensure congruence between all elements (research aims and questions, epistemological and ontological position of the researcher, theoretical frameworks and chosen methods of data collection and analysis). This will be covered later in the section.

For this study the research required an approach that enabled understanding of the lived experiences of tutors who deliver online modules and their perceptions of impacts upon professional identity associated with these roles. These aims are best met through listening and talking to participants rather than through any type of objective measurement or observation. Within this section there will be consideration and discussion of philosophical positions and qualitative methodologies in order to justify the choice of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the selected approach.
3.2: Reflection: my position as the researcher

A researcher’s choice of inquiry paradigm will influence and guide the way in which they think and act throughout the research process (Norton, 1999). So, we can suggest that paradigms or world views that relate to or indicate a distinct ontological and epistemological position with regard to methodologies guide the research process as a whole (Sandelewski and Barrosa, 2006).

**Ontological and epistemological position**

My ontological position as one of relative idealism, with participatory leanings. This is due to my belief that as human beings we enhance our understanding of the world through personal experiences, and this can sometimes create a subjective ‘reality’ (Blaikie, 2010; Bryman, 2012). From this position I argue that a reality can be studied in a systematic way exploring socio-cultural and professional influences that may shape the way that reality is experienced.

My epistemological position is one of interpretivism because I believe that my presence in the world has an impact on it and consequently the way we can ‘know’ or have knowledge about it (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013). In relation to this study I claim that meanings are created by the participants whilst engaging with their online roles and interpreting what these mean in terms of their professional identity. Furthermore, I consider that it is not possible to gain sufficient understanding of the experiences of tutors who deliver online modules and how this may impact their professional identity, if I am isolated or detached from them and their experiences.

Interpretivism is concerned with the way in which people makes sense of their everyday experiences and attribute meaning to these (Crotty, 2005). In addition, interpretivists generally adopt the view that meanings are not only constructed and negotiated but they are also contextual, being influenced by the characteristics of individuals in the world they interact with (Shaw, 2000). Although I understand this to mean that objectivity and value-free research would be impossible, it lends itself to openness and transparency (Smith,
I also believe that human behaviour can only be effectively studied through the mediation of meaning and human interaction, using exploration and immersion together with the study participants; this is in contrast to the stance of positivism which suggests that the world is not affected by the researcher because it exists independently and the facts and values within it are varied, allowing objectivity and value free enquiry through direct observations and rule-based regularities (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013).

Through engagement in dialogue with participants and taking account of my own understandings, experiences and assumptions; the way I have interpreted their experiences will have been influenced and, from this, created knowledge which is an interpretation of those experiences and not a representation of perceived reality (van Manen, 2007).

Relative idealism can be described as a variation of idealism because it suggests that reality can only be known through socially constructed meanings, and therefore takes the view that there is no single shared reality but a sequence of different social constructions. My position does not seem to fit into the ontological position of realism because this suggests that an external reality exists independently of our own beliefs or understanding of that particular reality (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013) thus holding the belief that my presence within the world, and actions upon it have an effect on its ‘being’, I cannot relate to an independent existence of the world which would not be subject to influences through social constructions. I have described myself as an interpretivist as this suggests that both the researcher and the social world impact each other; and that findings are influenced by the researcher's perspectives and values because they are imprecise.

The above reflective considerations informed how the methodology was decided upon and applied. The aims of the study were to understand the experiences of online tutors and the perceived impacts the role has upon their professional identity. These aims influenced my decision to use IPA because its flexibility allows unique interaction with participants (Smith and Osborn, 2008).
3.3: Role of the researcher

In taking on an interpretivist stance I acknowledge that I am working in the research context and am integral to it. I also recognise that my personal experiences, values and assumptions have impacted the outcomes of the study as already mentioned. In contrast to positivist research where objectivity has to be maintained, within interpretivist approaches subjectivity and bias due to researcher position is accepted (Finlay, 2006). It could be argued that knowledge generated through interpretivist research is co-constructed between the researcher and research participants through interpretation and re-interpretation, each interaction and interpretation building and developing understanding (Conroy, 2003). The research uses, rather than eliminates, the consequential influences and views them as valuable instruments through which knowledge and meanings emerge (ibid.).

Whilst acknowledging the usefulness of these influences, researcher reflexivity is important to ensure critical self-awareness of the research process within an interpretivist approach. The notion of phenomenological reduction or conceptual cognition in order to achieve a specific perspective on a phenomenon, could be applied here because I am aiming at suspension of judgement to focus on analysis of experience (Creswell, 2007; Shaw and Holland, 2014). Through transparency and explicitness of all research processes the reader will be able to make informed decisions about the credibility and trustworthiness of the study and its outcomes (Yardley, 2008: Shaw, 2010). Reflexivity can be viewed as a route for prejudices to permeate the research (King et al., 2008); a reflexive research journal was kept through the study so that potential influences, assumptions, values and experiences could be documented to identify any possible pre-understandings or influences which may be perceived as prejudice; and thus, be addressed accordingly and maintain transparency.

Being an insider researcher

Mercer (2007) highlights some of the advantages and challenges of being an insider research. Obvious advantages include being a member of a specific group, in this study the group of ALs of which I was a member. Griffith (1998)
suggests that prior entry to such groups allows the insider research to have familiarity with the associated practices, values and professional strategies; whereas a non-member of the group would have little or no prior knowledge of these facets. Many researchers suggest that the continuum associated with insider research can produce rich data and deeper insight into a research study than originally assumed to be more of a dichotomy and predisposing to researcher bias, coercion and imbalance of power relations (Bulmer, 1992: Anderson and Jones, 2000: Carter, 2004).

The use of IPA limited the possibility of the research processes and findings being affected by my insider status because of the principles of the researcher attempting to understand the experiences of others rather than evaluating the experiences from a subjective position (Smith, 2009). Additionally, my professional position in the group as just one of the ALs meant that I occupied a position lower or at the same level as the research participants within the organisational hierarchy. Had I occupied a position above participants on the organisational hierarchy then the possible effects on the research may have been different (Mullings, 1999: Anderson and Jones, 2000).

3.4: Interprettative phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
According to Ball (2011) research issues within education should transcend paradigmatic conflicts and he suggests that all research paradigms lag behind new educational landscapes. Bassey (2007) supports this view as he links educational research with practice. Educational research has historically been restricted to traditional paradigms (Taylor and Medina, 2013); and design my methodological choice of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provided creative scope to fully explore experiences and therefore seems to fit with the notion of unrestricted interpretation. Rhetorical assumptions of qualitative approaches are embedded in an informal and naturalistic research language which is inductive, detailed and experiential. As my study centred on this experiential context within unfettered research question parameters, it seemed a more appropriate methodological paradigm than that of quantitative approaches.
which are formative, objective, deductive, and convey cause and effect rather than contextual meaning (Creswell, 2013).

**Exploring the phenomenological approach**

The phenomenological approach in general terms is concerned with the phenomena of human experience (Husserl, 1931; Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1985; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Creswell, 2013) and focuses on small sample sizes, identifies patterns and relationships between meanings. IPA acknowledges the importance of inter subjectivity in phenomenological research and therefore has a strong commitment to ideographic analysis and inductive participant led research processes (Gee, 2011). In addition, IPA is well suited to exploration of identity and although historically it has been associated with research concerning major life transitions, particularly within the field of psychology; it is emerging as a key approach where any identity schema is being explored in association with experience (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is a qualitative research approach which is concerned with the exploration and understanding of the lived experience of a specific phenomenon or simply put an interpretative endeavour (Smith, 2004). IPA is considered to be a methodology in its own right and not solely an instrument for analysing data.

**Informing IPA**

IPA is informed by hermeneutics and within this the research has a dual role which situated me as the researcher, not only as an interpreter of participant experiences but also as a participant because I have attempted to make sense of the participant’s experience (Smith, 1996). IPA is a relatively new methodology, emerging in the 1990s and being largely associated within the field of health psychology (Smith, 2004). However, IPA is being used across many other disciplines where researchers want to understand an individual’s lived experience of a specific phenomenon (Brocki and Weardon, 2006). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) suggest that people are continually engaged in interpreting the events, people and objects in their lives; or as Taylor (1985) describes this as people being ‘self-interpreting’ beings. I feel that the
methodological approach was congruent with the aims of this study, my own philosophy as an educator and my position within the interpretivist paradigm. IPA is strongly influenced by phenomenology because it has a focus on understanding the ‘cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being’ (Finlay, 2006, p15). According to Finlay (2006) phenomenology can be described as a philosophy as well as a research approach and allows deep exploration of how phenomena are perceived in our consciousness and also what the character and meaning of such phenomena might be. IPA is an inductive approach which is concerned with understanding how an individual perceives their own experience; in other words, an account of the experience rather than a focus on causal explanations or relationships. This method allows ideas and themes to emerge from personal accounts and does not impose predetermined theoretical concepts which permits the researcher greater scope in exploration (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

In essence, an IPA study is about exploring the individuals’ lived experience, which van Manen (1990 and 2007) regards as tapping into the unique nature of each human situation. Van Manen (2014) also discusses the phenomenology of practice which he suggests lies at the foundation of everything that makes us human; and he further links this to the work of Patocka (1998), Husserl (1931) and Heidegger (1962) where they relate the primacy of practice to situational experience of ‘personal beings in space’ (Patocka, 1998, p97). This connects strongly with the philosophical position of the researcher in terms of exploring the lived experiences of others and associated meanings as it is termed by van Manen (1990, 2007) as giving meaning to event or experience which can only be achieved through reflection.

Husserl’s position (1931) was somewhat different, developing phenomenology as an eidetic or vividly experienced method, so being concerned with how things seem to individuals within their own experience. Husserl suggested that each individual experience was unique because every person will perceive and describe experiences in a different way, even if they share similarities. Heidegger (1962) developed this method so that
existential philosophy and hermeneutics were seen to be concerned with the ontological question of existence. This can be translated as the attitudes an individual has and their language which enable them to mediate or connect to their experiences of the world; and how other people comprehend this.

The next section discusses how these influences and phenomenological principles related to IPA.

**IPA as a dynamic approach and the influences of phenomenology**

The approach is dynamic (Smith, 2011), and the researcher plays an active role alongside the participant with an aim of trying to understand the participant’s life world (Dahlberg et al, 2008). This resonates with general phenomenological principles as discussed in earlier sections. The IPA researcher attempts to put themselves into the position of the participant although this can never be fully possible; then through interpretative activity and processes make the meaning of the participant’s experience meaningful and comprehensible by translating it (interpretation) (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

The values and personal experiences of the researcher are considered to be essential in the interpretation of the participant’s experience (Smith, 2011) and this process is known as a double hermeneutic because participants are trying to make sense of their world, whilst the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

It seemed logical for me to explore the phenomenological roots of IPA in order to fully appreciate the nuances of its principles and these are rooted in hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism (Smith et al., 2009). This further justified the methodological choice for the study.

The philosophy of phenomenology was developed by Husserl in the 1900s and later philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer (1985), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Satre (2007/1943) extended Husserl’s work to represent the
focus of an individual’s life world and lived experience; that is the meaning of a phenomenon as it is experienced. Phenomenology has influenced qualitative research as it has provided a pathway for exploration and understanding of an individual’s experiences and how they experience their everyday world (Holloway, 2005, van Manen, 2007).

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that Husserlian phenomenology has been influential in the development of IPA because of its exploration of consciousness and the lived experience but that is not to say IPA is fully harmonious with all Husserlian principles because IPA considers that a researcher’s values and beliefs are essential in being able to understand individual’s experiences (ibid).

Furthermore, Heidegger suggested that consciousness is not separate from human existence (Dowling, 2007) and this concurs with the belief that human experiences are subject to interpretation, and influenced by context, culture and language. So it can be suggested that Heidegger took an existential focus and was concerned with how an individual viewed themselves in relation to others (sense of space, time and embodiment etc.) (Finlay, 2005).

This focus, in contrast to that of Husserl, can be described as understanding of meaning and an individuals’ reality rather than an explanation of consciousness. Heidegger emphasises the importance of the cultural and social background which is suggested to provide a basis from which we can understand and be in the world, and it is also an explanation for the need for reflexivity in this approach. In contrast Smith (2007) suggests that we might not always be aware of preconceptions and until we are actively engaged in a process of interpretation and understanding, preconceptions are unlikely to emerge. This act of reflexivity, which is a necessary component of qualitative research, brings with it rich contextual perspectives of both the researcher position in relation to the data, and the data itself (ibid.). Bourdieu (1998:395) suggests that this is the ‘precondition of genuine rigor’, and that methodological and theoretical techniques within research are implements for
use in order to identify and explore crucial aspects of data, rather than an inflexible process to be followed blindly.

Interestingly, Gadamer’s work (1985) raised the concept of the hermeneutic circle which is described as a process by which an individual reaches an understanding of a phenomenon. He argues that interpretation is undertaken from the perspective of a researcher’s position or baseline and that this encompasses existing prejudices and preconceptions which are in turn, influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they exist. The hermeneutic circle concept is evident within IPA through the iterative approach to data analysis, and this allows the researcher to identify new ways of thinking about a phenomenon which are non-linear (Smith et al., 2009).

This leads us to the influences of Merleau-Ponty on the development and emergence of IPA which are evident in the focus of understanding an individual’s lived experience in relation to space, time and human relations as they are experienced (Dowling, 2007).

Satre has been acknowledged as a significant influence in the development of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) because of the focus on the realisation of the true self; in other words, a process of becoming rather than being as promoted by Heidegger.

In addition to the influences of phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA is influenced by symbolic interactionism (SI), which according to Blumer (1998) is the process by which humans interact with each other and is dependent upon the premise that humans are social beings and our interactions are dependent upon social relationships and meanings we attribute to situations and objects. From this we can say that according to the SI perspective nothing in the world has intrinsic meaning, so it is created from interaction (Blumer, 1998; Bluff, 2005: Crotty, 2005). The important consideration here is that an individual’s relationship with their environment and the reciprocal nature of this relationship is linked to perception.
IPA and educational research

In today’s research arena IPA is viewed as appropriate to use when people experience similar events and need to have their unique voices heard or tell their own story (Alase, 2017). This means they can articulate their unique experiences without any distortions or boundaries of definitive research questions (Smith et al, 2009); this makes it a good approach for use in educational research where traditional phenomenological approaches might prevent the freedom to express unique experiences in total (Creswell, 2013).

Noon’s study on the appropriateness of IPA as a methodology for educational research (2018) suggests that IPA is concerned with the texture and depth of personal experience and therefore is dependent on rich narratives generated by the interview/data collection process. (Wedlock, 2016). Noon (2018) also argues that because of the flexibility of IPA guidelines and processes it can be easily adapted by researchers to meet their research objectives (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). For this reason it is appealing to educational researchers and recognises the uniqueness of subjective experience and is consequently useful for exploring originality and innovation (Bush, Harris and Parker, 2016). The open approach of IPA interviews also facilitates original research direction (Eatough and Smith, 2008: Noon, 2018) because it allows an holistic exploration which is data driven rather than theory driven (Griffiths, 2009).

Denovan and Macaskill’s study into the analysis of stress in the first year of undergraduate study (2013) suggests that use of a purposive homogenous sample ensures the topic is relevant and explored in sufficient depth. In line with qualitative analysis principles, it is known as a subjective process (Golsworthy and Coyle, 2011) because IPA recognises that the researcher’s personal perspective is relative to the research topic being presented and facilitates transparency and clarify for readers. In educational research this is an essential process when considering research in an educational context or setting (Devovan and Macaskill, 2013); and allows for individual experiences to be explored thus expanding the methodological scope within this field and permits a more focused perspective on the research topic (ibid).
Jeong and Othman’s research used IPA to study language and literacy skills (2016) and highlighted some important perspectives related to using IPA within educational research. According to Jeong and Othman (2013), educational research in general has historically been influenced by postmodernists such as Foucault (1972), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Wilson, (1997) to name a few. Their perspective is that the research is co-constructed by participants and researchers; in other words looking at interactional processes of teaching and learning including competencies and academic literacies. IPA by contrast explores individual experiences (Wagstaff et al, 2014) and observes the three main principles of IPA which are firstly to value the participants perspectives on their individual experiences; secondly to examine each unique experience and from these emergent themes respond to the research question; thirdly to interpret rather than describe which is in line with the double hermeneutic concept (Smith et al, 2009: Jeong and Othman, 2013).

IPA recognises that the body of the research is independent from the researcher (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005), so this gives it objectivity in this regard; however it still suggests that the experiences of participants and how the researcher interprets these is subjective. This means that IPA emphasises the subjective nature of participants and how the researcher makes sense of meanings (Smith, 2004). IPA also encourages researchers to use their theoretical knowledge inductively when analysing data (ibid). Within educational research where lived experiences are being examined, IPA provides some sound methodological principles which the researcher can observe in order to help them conduct inductive processes and observe the double hermeneutic principle (Smith et al, 2009: Jeong and Othman, 2013).

In the next section I will be discussing participant sampling in IPA and this connects to points covered in this chapter with regard to methodological principles and research design.
3.5: Participant sampling in IPA

Smith et al. (2009) argue for a small sample size when conducting research using IPA; the justification of this is so that in depth analysis can take place and be sufficiently penetrant (Smith and Osborne, 2008). There is a lack of consensus within the literature on IPA sample sizes, for example Brocki and Wearden (2006) suggest a sample can be anywhere between 1 and 48; whilst Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) support the view that a smaller sample size is conducive with achievement of an in-depth study and production a research study which is of good quality. In support of the smaller sample size, Smith et al. (2009) suggest that no generalisations are required within IPA analysis and no data saturation has to be reached; however they do concur that there is no single answer to IPA research sample sizes but they do suggest that five or six participants is usually sufficient to meet the criteria for a robust and good quality IPA study; and for doctoral research it is suggested that at least five participants are used (Smith et al., 2009).

**Identifying and selecting participants**

The intention for this research study was that participants would be recruited from a homogenous group who tutored a range of OU online modules on which they were employed actively as ALs. However it transpired that several participants also held other tutoring roles across blended learning and traditional campus- based delivery routes. I felt that this would enrich the research data and that it would also be prohibitive to find participants whose only role was to tutor online because during the course of the study participants took on new roles or developed their employment portfolio to include a range of other activities. I also did not wish to exclude any participants purely on the basis of them being involved with a range of diverse tutoring roles.

I recruited and interviewed six participants and single interviews were conducted lasting between one hour and one hour thirty minutes. Participants were selected purposively as no direct comparator group was required in line with IPA methodology. It is suggested that purposive sampling can be subjective because researcher bias can impair
representativeness. It is useful for research focus (Siraj-Blackford, 2010) and in qualitative approaches researcher knowledge is used to enhance the study (Ritchie and Lewis, 2013). Consequently in IPA or any phenomenological approach researcher experience and knowledge can be used positively.

**The recruitment process**
Potential participants were initially approached by email or telephone, and this reiterated the voluntary nature of participation. In view of my position as a colleague, it was important not to recruit participants who felt obligation, but rather those who had a genuine interest in discussing their experiences with me. Therefore, to minimise the risk of coercion of possible feelings of obligation, the initial and informal contact was followed up by the following strategies.

1: An initial informal email was sent to each participant outlining the study and asking if I could formally approach them with an invitation to participate.

2: Written information about the study was sent to each potential participant, together with a consent form. (Please see appendix 1 for an example participant information pack which includes the consent form). Participants had the option to decline the invitation. Participants were therefore fully informed about the study and the consequences of participation in terms of time and research dissemination. There was no time limit for return of the consent form but as each one was received the participant was contacted by telephone or email to arrange an interview.

The initial informal contact identified participants who confirmed they were willing to participate so return of consent forms was speedy. The participant information pack included informed consent documentation and coverage of the voluntary status of the project and will also clarified my own position as an AL and OU employee so that issues of perceived obligation and power relations were avoided as far as
possible, and to promote openness and transparency. The pack also
covered the aims and objectives of the project and detailed the
structure, data collection methods, dissemination and all other project
protocols.

3: Interviews were arranged with participants and taking into account
their preferred times of contact and these were conducted by
telephone using two forms of recording to ensure data capture.

Data Collection
1: It was a single-phase data collection with no re-interview undertaken
as this was perceived as a potential risk to the original data capture.
However consent was gained for a possible follow up interview should
this have been necessary for any reason.

2: Transcription was undertaken using the HyperTranscribe software
package. Whilst this does not automatically transcribe, it is an
appropriate tool for listening to interviews and transcribing in short
sections. The software allows for replay of short segments of
recording and this aided familiarity with the data and also allowed side
notes to be written in the research journal. In addition, there is scope
within the software to identify ‘pauses’ or ‘silences’ which may be
relevant to the context of the study; this made the process easier for
me, as the researcher, to review transcripts at a later date if
clarification or further exploration was necessary.

In order to protect the anonymity of participants each was assigned a
pseudonym and correlating identities were known only to me.
I made hard copies of the transcribed interviews in order that I could
continue to read them throughout the study without being beholden to
the computer versions. These scripts were only identifiable via the
pseudonym coding. They were kept in a locked cupboard at all times
when not in use.
Analysis was undertaken in accordance with IPA principles which is word-by-word and line-by-line transcriptions and interpretation with immediate analysis through each individual transcript. Comparisons were not drawn between data until the final individual analysis was completed (Smith, et al., 2009).

Further discussion on the analytical processes can be seen in Chapter 4.

3.6: Ethical considerations
Within the relevant literature a consensus emerges with regard to accepted and appropriate ethical guidelines; these relate to respecting and protecting the rights of participants and therefore confirm that research should not be undertaken at the expense of participants' physical or psychological wellbeing (Yates, 2004; Denscombe, 2003; Green and Thorogood, 2004).

From the literature the main concerns identified for research ethics relate to formal ethical approval, acknowledging and limiting issues of power relationships, protecting participants from harm, gaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, refraining from research deception, general data protection and dissemination of results.

3.7: Reflection: potential ethical barriers and conflicts
As the instrument of the research myself, I was in a position of where I could potentially influence participants because all participants were colleagues and known to me in a professional capacity. Issues of perceived coercion and power therefore needed to be fully addressed and taken into account in the methodological approach. To mitigate this, participants were fully versed in the ethos, essence and possible outcomes of the research in order to make informed consent regarding participation. In addition, participants were made aware of possible implications future applications of the research dissemination (as outlined in 2 above). As the researcher I tried to ensure that the vision was a shared one, with participants being included and their exchanges valued.
I was also aware that boundaries had to be maintained between my role as a colleague of the participants and that of a researcher; this was essential so that there was no inadvertent exploitation of my professional relationship with participants which might mean they felt obligated to divulge information they did not want to (McNamee and Bridges, 2002). This professional relationship also had the potential to influence interview responses, as participants may have believed that I was only seeking accounts of positive experiences. To minimise this potential risk I carefully explained the purpose of the research study prior to interview (with information already provided to participants within the invitation to participate and with the consent to participate form). I was careful to communicate to each participant that I was interested in hearing about all aspects of their experiences of online tutoring and any perceived impacts upon on their professional identity they felt might exist. Therefore, I encouraged participants to talk freely and openly and assured them of confidentiality and anonymity within the written thesis.

**Consideration of vulnerability**

The participants were not considered to be a vulnerable group but according to Iphofen (2009) research where participants are being asked to reflect on experience has the potential to increase the risk of anxiety and stress and has the potential to cause psychological discomfort because the reflective nature of explorations may be viewed as intrusive. Macfarlane (2009) discusses clarity between the researcher and participants as being a key instrument in ensuring there is no deception about the study, its purpose and the methods used for data collection and analysis. Participants were also asked if they wished to review transcripts prior to data analysis and they were also informed that the research findings would be made available to them on completion if requested. As far as possible I observed the key ethical principles set out by Hammersley and Traianou (2012) which are minimising harm, respecting autonomy, protecting privacy, offering reciprocity, and equitability.
3.8: Ethical frameworks

Within the ethical frameworks of the project (observing the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011 and 2018) and British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014) principles) I ensured the following:

- Appropriateness of all research processes
- All issues of informed consent were addressed
- The project was purposeful in terms of objectives, methodology and methods
- The project conformed to relevant legislative requirements such as the Data Protection Act, 2018 which encompasses disclosure and dissemination of information, in addition to the protection of data (gov.uk, 2018).

Stutchbury and Fox (2009) developed a model based on Seedhouse's (1998) original ethical grid; this was based on Moral Theory, layered and originally designed for use in Healthcare research. The streamlined version by Stutchbury and Fox (ibid) outlines four clear layers that require consideration when developing and deciding on research methodology. These layers are firstly the outer layer which requires the researcher to think about contextual consequences of the research study, so for this study the context would be education. Secondly, the consequential layer relates to the possible significance the research actions might have on groups or individuals; in this case the participants and also wider contextual community when research findings are disseminated. The third, deontological, layer is concerned with minimisation of harm or risk of potential harm whereby researchers are asked to consider how they are doing things which in this research includes communication and transparency. Lastly the core rationale layer covers issues of respect and autonomy for the individual.

Having used the grid as a research tool I am confident that possible significant issues for the research were identified and that the appropriate decisions were made. This formed a framework for ethical analysis of the data which is covered in chapter 5.
3.9: Consideration of other approaches

The primary focus of the research was to understand how others experience online tutoring so in effect seeking to understand online tutoring through the experiences of tutors. With this in mind consideration was afforded to other approaches and these were related to IPA in terms of appropriateness and congruence with the proposed study. I have explored some of the realistic alternative methodologies and acknowledge that there could have been other possibilities but they were ones which I felt did not align with the aims and objectives of the research study.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) was considered because it is a systematic and flexible process through which qualitative data can be gathered and analysed, leading to the construction of a theory which is embedded in the data itself (Charmaz, 2013). A key feature of the GT process is constant comparative analysis (Cutcliffe, 2000). Since the 1960’s GT has been placed within the constructivist or interpretivist approach as it has developed to encompass many notions; one cannot construct without interpreting and therefore they are inextricably linked.

IPA is often compared with GT but it is argued that IPA differs because its focus is on an individual’s experience and psychological word rather than on social process (Smith et al., 2009). GT is concerned with generating a conceptual framework or theoretical account of a social phenomenon whereas IPA seeks to provide rich detailed accounts of individual experiences (Willig, 2013). GT requires much larger amounts of data than IPA although both approaches use similar methods of data collection. The aim of GT to generate theoretical concepts drives data analysis until saturation is reached (Stanley, 2006); whilst the focus of IPA is on much smaller sample groups in order to develop a deeper understanding of phenomena and the latter was more congruent with my study aims, rather than theory generation.

Although the eventual outcome of an IPA study may be the development of
theory, it is not a predetermined aim; however, for a GT study theoretical generation is the primary aim (Smith, et al., 2009).

**Dimensional analysis**

Dimensional analysis (DA) is an alternative method of generating GT which was conceived in order to overcome impedance of articulation and communication by researchers (Schatzman, 1991). DA is based on a natural analysis which people generally use to interpret experiences or phenomena; this cognitive process being learned through socialisation which allows individuals to develop a framework for analysing experiences or phenomena. The reason I considered this as a possible methodology is that it provides more flexibility than GT as a primary process. I have also used the methodology before and therefore had some experience of applying it and familiarity with it.

DA is largely an oral tradition with considerable overlap with GT because they are both informed by symbolic interactionism (SI) and interactionist social process (Bowers and Schatzman, 2008). By oral tradition is meant that there are few texts devoted to the ‘teaching’ or description of DA; the conveyance relying heavily on researcher to researcher interaction, or simply by ‘word of mouth. Schatzman embedded DA within symbolic interactionism by ‘conceptualizing the construct of dimentionality’ (Kools et al., 1996). This process gives the researcher scope to address complex phenomena by its attributes, context, processes and meaning through interpretation or analysis of the component parts. It also allows the researcher to address the research question through interaction with the data, and to elicit meanings from data interactions. Although this flexibility of interacting with data was convincing it still did not align totally with my research intentions and did not compare favourably with the overarching principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Schatzman and Strauss (1973) suggest that in order for every nuance to be derived from the data, and meaning revealed, the researcher must remain close to the data, which supports points made by Blumer and Mead (1998) which suggest that the researcher must become close to the people being
studied and become immersed in the data. Again, this process seemed to fulfil some of my research aims but not all because data immersion in this context is not concerned with understanding participant experience but rather understanding the data nuances. Although this strategy allows free access into the research problem and a perspective to be taken on both the data collected, and those properties already substantively known by the researcher, it does not allow complete flexibility to explore experiences as IPA does.

Kools (1996) confirms that the philosophical foundation of DA is rooted in SI and further, that links with interactionist roots remain despite DA having been transformed and moving away from the multi coding procedures of traditional GT. However, there is still a need to work towards a conceptual and possibly theoretical framework which was not my research aim.

**Action research**

Action research (AR) was considered as it is a qualitative methodology and a very popular approach to use within an educational context because of its connection to active practice (McNiff, 2013).

According to Carr and Kemmis (1986) the cyclical practitioner process is both qualitative and reflexive and conveys the narrative of a project in order to demonstrate knowledge gained, disseminate this knowledge and be able to influence practice and that of others (McNiff, 2013). Whilst acknowledging the appropriateness of AR within educational research as outlined by McNiff, the aims of AR are not congruent to the research question because although influences on practice may be an outcome of the research, it is not a primary aim. In contrast IPA does not place constraints on the researcher to produce strategies related to practice development (Smith et al., 2009). In addition to this justification, although I have direct experience of online tutoring myself and can be considered to be an insider researcher, I was not seeking to develop a collaborative set of tutoring strategies which I feel would be the priority of this approach, rather than gaining direct experiential insight into individual participant experiences.
Narrative analysis
Narrative analysis was a further consideration and this methodology does share some common ground with IPA because it explores how individuals ascribe meaning to their experiences; and narratives are important for communication of connections between events and meanings related to experience (Smith, 2009). However, IPA has a focus on the narrative of a specific experience itself and not the sequence of narratives that make up the ‘whole’ (Willig, 2013). Although narrative analysis was considered to be a good alternative to IPA it was felt that IPA offered a more appropriate methodological choice because it allows in depth exploration of how experiences are constructed and communicated; and the experiential element is the focus of the study.

Thematic analysis
Thematic analysis is an analytical tool rather than a methodology per se; and themes are also used within IPA; therefore on consideration thematic analysis does not appear significantly different to IPA (Willig, 2013); and it is a commonly used approach for qualitative data analysis providing a sound organisational framework within which themes and patterns can be identified (Braun and Clark, 2006). Perhaps all qualitative analysis as thematic but most thematic analysis of data is usually more superficial than that of IPA (although it does depend on what the researcher is looking at and overall complexities) (Clarke and Braun, 2017). However, IPA requires a deeper level of interpretation than thematic analysis (Smith et al., 2009) and I considered that it was more suited to the deep level of insight needed for this study being a methodology and interpretative tool in its own right so providing a complete approach and a clear methodological framework for the study.

Discourse analysis
Both IPA and discourse analysis are concerned with qualitative analysis of language, but IPA focuses on connecting language to thoughts, beliefs, attitude, motivations and consequential behaviour (Smith, 2011). Discourse analysis has a primary focus which is the function of language within social construction of reality and so relates to achieving social objectives within a
specific context in which the individual is situated (Ballinger and Cheek, 2006). Even though I have some relativist affiliation with regard to my personal philosophical position I believe that there is a strong link between what an individual vocalises, thinks and feels and consequently although discourses can inform about personal experiences I feel that they did not relate fully to the subjective experiences that my study was exploring, so this was considered a less appropriate methodology.

### 3.10: Limitations of IPA

As previously stated, IPA is still a relatively new approach, especially within the field of educational research but is becoming more popular within this discipline and several recent studies have demonstrated this effectively. For example

Because the approach has its origins within health psychology, specifically the illness experience, it is difficult to locate a large body of evidence within educational research to draw on which specifically relates to the research topic which adds further justification to the diversity of methodological evidence used within this thesis.

However, IPA has been widely used to explore issues of identity (Smith and Osborn, 2008) and this has confirmed that its underpinning principles and flexibility is a useful and appropriate methodology for exploring the experiences of lecturers working with online module delivery.

Giorgi (2010) claims that IPA practices are not scientifically sound and cites a lack of replicability and lack of perceptiveness within the approach, but Smith (2010) argues this viewpoint seems to be a misinterpretation of the criteria of IPA, and there are sound guidelines in place for good IPA practice, albeit that effective use of the approach is dependent on the skills of the researcher.

Perhaps one of the most significant limitations within a doctoral programme is the length of time needed to fully analyse data (Smith and Osborn, 2008) which therefore requires motivation and commitment on the part of the
researcher to make sure that data is gathered as early in the programme as possible to allow for the protracted processes of analysis.

Pringle et al. (2011) argue that because IPA sample groups are homogenous transferability of findings is difficult but as Smith et al. (2009) suggest, if the study is carried out rigorously and enough detail provided then there is transferability to other contexts (Yardley, 2008; Given, 2008; Shaw, 2010). Therefore, the theoretical orientation of IPA is that the primary goal for researchers using this methodology is to investigate how participants make sense of their experiences. IPA synthesises notions from phenomenology and hermeneutics which results in a prescriptive method; prescriptive because the concern is with how phenomena appear, allowing them to be expressed without constraint (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). Furthermore, the ideographic nature of IPA allows a depth of analysis of individual cases in contexts which are unique to them, which also allows flexibility whilst observing prescriptive IPA principles.

Charlick et al. (2016) highlight concerns over small sample sizes, transferability of findings and representativeness related to IPA; and further suggest that this can lead to challenges when IPA studies are submitted for publication. However Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) offer a different perspective which is that with fewer participants, an IPA study allows data to be examined at a greater depth. Noon (2018) concludes that when using IPA in educational research the aim should not be to transfer findings to all contexts but reveal perception and understanding of a specific group within their own setting. Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest that IPA ought to be viewed in terms of the theoretical; in other words seeking to identify associations between the findings, extant literature and experiences. In other words an IPA study should not seek to produce empirical generalisability (ibid). Noon (2018) goes on to suggest that we should not interpret this to mean that an IPA Study should not make general claims but that it needs to justify and support these through exploration and evaluation of similar studies.
3.11: Refining the methodology: lessons from initial explorations

As noted in the previous section, IPA is still a relatively new approach within educational research and more aligned with psychology and health. I was keen to use IPA because having reflected on my own experience as an online tutor and considered how this has affected my professional identity, I sought to understand the experiences of other tutors in a similar context. Having never undertaken an IPA study before, reassurance that the methodology was appropriate and that I had interpreted it correctly in respect of the proposed study I conducted a focus group in order to ‘test’ my research questions and methodology. The focus group process is outlined in the next sections and findings informed the methodological approach used in the study.

3.11.1: Background to the focus group activity

A key aspect of conducting a focus group is to collect data of interest to the researcher and the research project (Krueger and Casey, 2015). The reason for situating discussion relating to the initial study at this point in the thesis is because the study relates to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology and underpins how it was applied within the main research project. It was important for me to understand the position of the research study within the principles and application of IPA. Therefore I felt that piloting the research question and proposed interview questions to a group of IPA researchers would assist my understanding of IPA and be more confident in its application.

The specific objective of this activity was therefore to develop an emphasis which encompasses the research project intentions and embody its aims; the focus group study was used to test IPA within the online educational context in which it would be employed.

According to Krueger and Casey, (2015) the use of focus groups within educational research is growing but at a much slower pace than in other disciplines such as health, business or politics. It is useful within an
educational research context because it yields a collective view rather than individual perspectives. Hyden and Bulow (2003) outline the contrived nature of focus group research but discuss this in terms of being both a strength and weakness of the process because although the groups generally meet in unnatural settings and are focussed in their intention. They tend to give way to insights that might otherwise not be revealed. Focus group research is an economical process and can give way to large amounts of relevant data in a short period of time. For this study these considerations were paramount as IPA data analysis is noted as being time-consuming and the overall programme of the EdD award is relatively short. Research suggests that focus groups can be useful for triangulating with other forms of research methods (Morgan, 1988: Langer, 2007: Krueger and Casey, 2015). This supports the connection between the initial study and IPA methodology used in the research project although it is acknowledged that the two studies are related but not dependent upon each other.

Questions in focus groups are generally open but carefully predetermined and sequenced and, as noted by Krueger and Casey (2015), these forms of questions can support decision making which in the main study was critical to appropriate progression within participant interview and the ensuing data analysis.

Critics of focus groups have a propensity to highlight intellectualisation of subject matter (Zaltman, 2003: Langer, 2007); they also draw attention to the lack of emotion and the freedom to express opinions within the group. There is also a criticism that questions the dependability of the results in terms of the narrow scope or ‘focussed’ nature of interactions (ibid). A weakness with this argument is that it tends to ignore the valuable data that can be elicited from a homogenous group who engage in a focussed discussion which can assist with forward planning and generating information which, in this instance could help to improve the research process by highlighting strengths and weaknesses ahead of the methodology being used (Krueger and Casey, 2015).
3.11.2: Process

The focus group activity was chosen in order to present the research proposal to a homogenous group of peers who work with IPA on a regular basis and have all used it for major research projects. Participants were recruited from two separate IPA research groups of which I, as the researcher, was also a member. I chose to select participants from these groups as I have interacted with them during many groups discussions and was aware of their involvement in IPA and contributions to the development of the methodology across various disciplines. The initial participant invitation outlined the purpose of the group and context of the proposed research study.

The five recruited participants were located globally which meant that a face-to-face real-time interaction was not possible. Participants were selected based on their knowledge of IPA and experience of using it within research projects. Two participants also taught IPA within higher education institutes, therefore I felt confident that the range of knowledge and experience amongst the group was sufficient to provide robust data for analysis. I decided against using a Delphi panel as I felt that this was too structured and although the forecasts are considered to be more accurate than other methods (Green, 2014). I was seeking a more fluid focus group experience. It was important for this initial exploration that the group interacted with each other in a manner similar to a forum within an online module so that ideas and comments could be exchanged freely; again here I felt that the Delphi method would not align with these aims. This was arranged via a closed social media discussion group and exchange of emails amongst the members and the moderator (me). This had the advantage of not having to transcribe the discussions as the email and message exchanges were automatically tagged and saved. Although effective this process was protracted in that discussions were spread over many weeks, although in ‘real time’ this would have been approximately two to three hours of interaction. This was easy to determine by logging time spent by members engaging in the forum and online.
Powell et al. (1996:499) define a focus group as ‘a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research’; and traditionally focus groups are conducted in a face-to-face manner, led by a moderator who facilitates discussion and keeps participants focused on the specific topic (Fontana and Frey, 1993; Frey and Fontana, 2005: Greenbaum 1998). However, with advancing technology and the ability to communicate with participants across great distances, it has been found that online groups often out-perform their face-to-face counterparts in both the quantity and the variety of creative ideas produced (Valacich et al., 1994: Hennink and Leavy, 2014).

Criticisms of this growing use of online and social media participation for focus group engagement highlight the lack of nuances such as responding to non-verbal cues (Debus, 2007); but when these platforms are used respectfully, and the questions are focussed, they can be a credible research tool (Hennink and Leavy, 2014). This aligns with the intention of the initial study which was to inform the application of IPA methodology (Smith et al, 2009).

In this specific context online interaction was the most viable proposition due to time constraints and the nature of the initial study aims; although it was challenging in terms of moderating exchanges between participants and correlating the email transcripts; but the experience of the participants was considered important to the overall research study.

Existing research also suggests that conducting focus groups online can reduce costs and remove constraints associated with timing and location (Sandelowski, 2001). The visual anonymity and psychological distance of the internet can often stimulate group participation and encourage self-disclosure, particularly for individuals who might otherwise hesitate to participate in a traditional face-to-face group (Valacich et al. 1994). Online group communication can reduce divergence from tasks (Straus 1997), but it
can also lead to a less supportive communication; which was noted and moderated for carefully.

Each member of the focus group was presented with the full research proposal and a brief summary of the proposed research timetable; perceived research challenges were outlined for consideration within the educational context and this was particularly relevant as IPA is not yet a popular choice for educational researchers. The overarching aim was to allow participants to interact with each other and the moderator via email which would allow free flow of discussion and not impose the usual time and venue constraints on participants. The differences in time zones was also a consideration which had to be handled carefully as response emails needed to be sent in a timely manner.

This activity did not conform to the usual format of focus group activities in that, according to Wilkinson (1998), most focus groups use the group as the unit of analysis. This approach utilised a form of micro-interlocutor analysis so that individual responses could be taken into account, as well as considering consensus amongst group members relating to key questions (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

A challenge of adopting this approach was that micro-interlocutor analysis also examines non-verbal responses in detail but as the activity was online and groups members were remote from each other this was not possible. Therefore, the approach was adapted in terms of applying the framework to written responses. Supporters of the approach suggest that it is rigorous in its application as it goes beyond analysis of verbal interactions to encompass a more holistic approach to focus group data analysis (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2008).

Crabtree et al. (1993) note that consensus in focus group data might be more to do with group dynamics rather than providing detailed information about each member’s view; it was important not to limit the scope of the activity in this way. In this micro-interlocutor approach verbatim statements as well as
consensus views provide a comprehensive and accurate representation of focus group data related to emergent themes.

To facilitate this process a matrix was used (see Table 1 in the next section) into which information about consensus and dissension was recorded; it is important to note at this point that this was not a quantitative interpretation but a tool to enable inferences to be drawn from the overall group perspective and apply the outcomes to inform the main research methodology and process. This matrix is also useful for establishing criteria on which to examine the data in more depth (Markee, 2000).

3.11.3: Discussion and analysis of findings
The email interactions continued for several weeks and the group was then brought to a close with a caveat that the moderator could revisit group members if there were any clarifications needed on email content; this was in fact not necessary although contact is maintained with group members within the research group platforms.

The questions posed to the group participants were intended to elicit an in-depth discussion and these were outlined within an email once each member had accepted the invitation to become part of the focus group. The consent to participation also included sharing of email contact addresses and social media permissions so that a range of discussion content could be gleaned. As the moderator I set up alerts to all activity for the group so that I could collect and respond to each interaction and also monitor interaction between group members.

Questions were formulated from my concerns about using IPA and also to establish whether I had interpreted the methodology correctly. One of my main concerns was whether I would be able to conduct interviews which allowed participants the freedom to explore their experiences; or whether my approach would be influenced by previous methodologies I had used such as grounded theory. It was also important for me to gain a better understanding of sample sizes, and with hindsight I had underestimated the volume of data.
that an IPA interview would yield so this was a significant aspect of the focus group question set.

The questions posed to the focus group were as follows:
1: Does IPA fit with the proposed research study?
2: Does the research question convey the essence of the study?
3: Does the interview strategy align with IPA principles and approach?
4: Is the proposed sample size appropriate?

Group participants were also sent the initial draft interview questions (see Appendix 2).

Within the consensus matrix below (Table 1), each group member was assigned a number. The left-hand column reflects questions posed to the group and the matrix cells represent levels of consensus in line with the matrix key. Categorisation of responses in this way allows patterns of responses as well as correlation of verbatim statements with perceived nuances can be established (Sandelowski, 2001). Responses can then be individually examined and compared to other responses, so an holistic overview is gained as well as detailed insight into individual comments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Does IPA fit with the proposed research study?</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Does the research question convey the essence of the study?</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Does the interview strategy align with IPA principles and approach?</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Is the proposed sample size appropriate?</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Level of consensus matrix**

**Matrix key**

- **A**: Indicates agreement
- **D**: Indicates dissent
- **SE**: Indicates a significant statement or example was provided in agreement
- **SD**: Indicates a significant statement or example was provided in dissent
- **NR**: Indicates neither agreement nor dissent

Descriptive counts of categories provide useful information about consensus and dissent as well as response patterns. Contextualisation of counts can often result from this process; this complementary approach of a mixed analysis allows the researcher to fully explore all avenues of the data (Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie, 2003). Handing the data in this manner allows expansion and the free emergence of themes and within the qualitative paradigm serves to validate inferences drawn from consensus levels (Morse, 2003). Traditional analysis of focus group data on the other hand, seeks to generalise findings related to group perspectives which might be considered quantifiable due to the small sample size. Employing the alternative approach allows the researcher to explore all levels and facilitate an individual centred
rather than group centred analysis; whilst acknowledging group perspectives in the meta analytical phase. According to Krippendorff (2012) this combination of analytical processes strengthens findings.

All five of the focus groups members believed that IPA fitted well with the research study. This concurs with understanding of IPA as outlined by Smith et al. (2009) which suggests that as a methodology it is suited to exploration of identity and an appropriate approach where any identity schema is being explored in association with experience. According to Smith (2011) studies should have a clear focus which provides detail of the topic. Analysis should be both descriptive and interpretative and include thematic convergence and divergence in themes.

However, the blanket consensus for this question without significant agreement or dissent was a little concerning because the group dynamic may have been guided into an assumptive agreement. The transcripts were re-examined to look for patterns in phrases or single words which may indicate significant agreement or minor dissent (Stenner, 2014). This justified the use of an initial matrix in order to gain an overall feel for the data prior to detailed examination of it.

**Pre-emptive findings**
This phrase identifies a possible challenge because in the analysis it is important not to pre-empt or anticipate research findings. This reinforces IPA methodology literature with regard its idiographic nature requiring a detailed analysis to be conducted of one case or set of data before moving onto the next. This indicative process means that research questions are broadly constructed allowing for thematic emergence (Smith, 2004).

**Assumptions**
Again, here I ascertained from reanalysing the transcripts that there was embedded discussion relating to assumptions and this was specifically allied to concepts of identity. I was drawn back to the methodology literature of Fontana and Frey (2005) where the biases and motives of researchers which
are based on their own biographies and contextual experiences must be acknowledged within the research and positively applied so that participants are not influenced by these views. Smith (2004) also notes that these personal perspectives and backgrounds are essential to appropriate use of IPA within any research study.

**Expectations**

Expectations was mentioned at least once by each focus group member in response to question 1 and this related to my own expectations of what the research findings would be. I viewed this as a reiteration of proviso points about pre-empting the outcomes and challenging any assumptions I may have held prior to starting data analysis cycles. This second analysis was important because it led me to explore my interpretation of IPA, its application to my research study and how I eventually dealt with arising challenges.

Four out of the five focus group members found that the proposed interview strategy aligned with IPA principles but three did have a consensus of opinion that rather than follow a set procedure I used a matrix of phrases and prompts so that interviews could be free flowing rather than formatted; the redesigned matrix can be viewed in Appendix 3.

All participants felt that the research question or title conveys the essence of the study Two of the members had significant statements to make in agreement:

Member 1:

*The essence is certainly there and you have also left yourself a lot of scope for exploration......................remember though the main question may change.....you need to be flexible and set this aside for some time I would say.*
Member 4:

Says what you want to explore....straight forward....I really don't have much of a problem with this......but as [Member 1] says be flexible – things change and you might want to revisit this......emerging sub question can help with this.

This led to inclusion of more definitive identification of emerging themes within the literature review and this abstraction led to the development of super-ordinate themes in line with IPA process (Smith, 2009). Identification of emergent themes in this methodological context allows for focus on differences rather than similarities and thus assist with contextualisation within data analysis.

One member did have minor concerns about specific wording of some questions which they felt were too restrictive and frame bounded. Even though this did not fall in with the consensus it was something that I subsequently reviewed and addressed within the revised question matrix to allow for the much-needed flexibility and free flow of interaction. The IPA researcher adopts a somewhat insider researcher stance (Conrad, 1987) as well as standing alongside a participant to try and understand their personal perspective; hence, this dual stance should be both empathetic and questioning (Smith, 2004).

Member 2:

Found this question [What is your experience of tutoring online modules?] too general – need a more specific approach to lead people in. For example, when did you start teaching online… and then you can ask a question from the answer.

I think this is a really hard question to answer [How would you define your professional identity?] and there is no lead in........need to scaffold question more.....start off with, why were you attracted to working and teaching at a university......then take it from there. [This comment relates to 3:
Does the interview strategy align with IPA principles and approach? Within Table 1]

When considering how to construct an interview guide or framework, Smith and Osborn (2003) recommend initially exploring broad areas and then focussing more on the main themes later in the interview. They suggest that by adopting this approach researchers have time to establish a relationship or connection with participants so that they feel comfortable about speaking at length and in depth on a topic. Smith and Osborn (2003, p. 61) suggest that ‘Good interview technique therefore often involves a gentle nudge from the interviewer rather than being too explicit’.

All of the focus group members indicated dissent when questioned on sample size. Members 1, 2 and 3 had significant comments to make on this. I had originally identified 15 to 20 participants as my sample size. There were many comments on this particular issue, but the salient dissenting comments were:

Member 1:
Far too many ......could use IPA with just 1 or even use yourself...would be for experienced IPA researcher though and for doctoral study I would recommend a minimum of 5 to satisfy examiner requirements.

Member 2:
I see that [member 1] has suggested a minimum of 5 participants. This is still a huge amount of data and the programme is short when compared to say a PhD. I would suggest 3 as a maximum.

Member 3:
Sample size in IPA has no set boundaries but I think is guided by the amount of data you can reasonably handle in the time you have. Better to be conservative and make sure that the data
is fully analysed rather than take on too much. I would go with between 3 and 6.

IPA typically involves detailed analysis of verbatim accounts of a small number of participants (ten or less) through the use of semi-structured interviews (Larkin et al., 2006: Smith, 2004). Smith and Osborn (2003) maintain that small sample sizes ensure IPA researchers can explore each case affording it the necessary time, energy, and rigour required for this type of in-depth analysis).

After careful consideration, I decided to recruit six participants and, after one declined to participate, I had to recruit a further participant. This is still considered quite a large cohort of participants for an IPA study of this type, and within such a short research timeframe and could have proven difficult within the analysis phase of the study so extra time needed to be factored into the analysis cycles to accommodate the extra data.

3.11.4: Outcomes
Based on critical review of the transcribed and evaluated interview data from the focus group, a matrix was developed which identified key terms and phrases loosely based on the question framework initially provided to participants but one which would not inhibit the free flow of dialogue within an IPA interview. The matrix was therefore designed to be dynamic in terms of being able to insert individual participant comments as the interviews took place. Each participant’s matrix forms part of the data and final analysis. Although this matrix (appendix 3) is simply a graphical representation of original interview questions and prompts it is not in a specific order and was designed as a research tool to be used as a guide rather than in any structured format.

Changes made to the methodological approach following analysis of the focus group data were significant in terms of altering the questions from a set of structured sub-questions to a set of prompts which served to retain focus on the main issues but allowed unencumbered interaction during research
interviews - this aligns to the principles of IPA outlined by Smith (2010) and as discussed in the previous chapter. I was also able to refine my interview skills in terms of being more open.

3.12: Chapter summary
This chapter has provided an overview of IPA and justified its use for the research study. There has also been discussion about the appropriateness of other methodologies and why they were rejected in favour of IPA. Ethical considerations for the study have been outlined and strategies for overcoming challenges have been discussed. The final element of the chapter presented an overview of an initial study in the development of IPA appropriate for this research study and the findings from this developmental study informed and reinforced how the methodological principles were applied. Discussion of the analysis methodology and the quality and rigour can be found in chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Data analysis and findings

4.1: Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the data analysis process and aligns it with IPA research methodology principles. The findings are presented in levels of master themes, sub-themes and concepts using verbatim quotations to support interpretation. Each theme, sub-theme and concept are discussed fully and where applicable connections made between themes, sub-themes and concepts.

During the analysis some notable metaphors and ‘gems’ (Smith, 2011) were revealed and these include feeling like a ‘talking head’, sense of isolation, feelings of being on a ‘factory production line’, lack of confidence, professional vulnerability and feelings if being an ‘outsider’.

4.2: Data analysis process

The following section describes the data analysis process and stages of the research and seeks to communicate transparency and also highlight challenges I encountered during the analytical process which took several months.

4.2.1: Reflection: challenges of IPA data analysis

The presentation of data within the context of IPA, as with any phenomenological research, is a central element to be considered because this type of research promotes flexibility with regard to the data itself and the participants perception of the research study together with the multiple possibilities for the researcher’s perception of the data (Willig, 2013). This presented me with a significant challenge and one which at the start of the analysis phase I was unsure I could overcome. The reason for this initial loss of confidence was underpinned by the perceived lack of a formal framework that IPA offered to the researcher and although I had studied IPA from a theoretical perspective and engaged in IPA research groups for several...
years, the prospect of analysing data with such flexibility was rather daunting and at times confounding.

In addition I found it quite challenging to allow myself the freedom to interpret to the deep level required of IPA (Smith, 2009), and initially tended to err on the side of caution and explored the data conservatively. It took many rounds of data analysis and distillation to understand the hidden meanings within the data and to interpret these with fresh eyes each time. However this process was cathartic and allowed me to become fully immersed in the data and view each key word and phrase as having multiple meanings and connections.

4.2.2: The data analysis process
The data analysis phase of the study followed the recognised and accepted principles of IPA which is described as a hermeneutic experience and process (Smith et al., 2009: Smith, 2011). The aim of IPA data analysis is to capture the meanings communicated by participants and learn about their experiences maintaining integrity within the interpretation of data (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This emic (insider) and etic (interpretative outsider) approach enabled me to understand the participants’ narrative and situate their experiences at the centre of the account (Larkin et al., 2006). This process again presented me with substantial challenges to overcome as I wondered whether the meanings had in fact been adequately captured and communicated.

In order to complete this process verbatim quotations were used to illustrate interpretations, and these were in turn supported by my own sense of the data and theoretical notions (Holloway, 2005). This was enormously helpful in reiterating meanings and interpretations within the data analysis phases. In line with Smith et al.’s (2009) IPA principles I did not replay the interpretations to participants as it is generally felt that this might lead to constructed retrospective changes which do not reflect the original data. However, even though I felt this was a potential risk, participants were asked if they wished to review this, but all declined.
Given IPA is an inductive approach, no pre-conceived themes were used to analyse data; The overall process reflexive and interpretative following key stages of data analysis:

1: Initially a transcript was made from the audio recording of each participant's interview; an example extract of a transcription can be seen in appendix 4; however sensitive information and comments have been redacted to ensure confidentiality of data and to observe ethical integrity. The transcription extract shows how the interview was conducted and formed the basis for initial analysis as outlined in section 2 below.

2: After transcription the text was read many times and also read in conjunction with the audio recording to promote familiarity with the data and to ensure that the transcribed text was a true representation of the interview. Each transcribed interview was then analysed fully using an idiographic approach; this aligns with Smith et al., (2009) where IPA is confirmed as being concerned with the particular rather than the general. The main aim of this initial stage was to understand how each participant made sense of their own experience as an online tutor and how this experience connected to their professional identity. In addition to multiple readings; notes were made in the right-hand margin of key words, phrases or anything else that seemed to be significant. See Appendix 5 for an example of how these initial thoughts were recorded on a transcript.

Initial thoughts and feelings about each transcript were also recorded within a research journal and all participants were allocated a separate journal for this purpose. All notes and initial interpretations were then mapped onto a matrix which identified transcript locations. An example of this initial stage can be seen in appendix 6 (Sue: initial analysis) and this shows how interpretations were mapped. Initial mapping of interpretations changed over the data analysis and interpretative process until all transcripts had been fully analysed and explored; until
this point I did not know what the end sub themes and concepts would look like.

Creating these initial maps assisted me in the next stage of the research and helped to ensure that the important considerations of rigour, plausibility and evidence base were all taken into account and relevant principles observed (Smith, 2011).

2: The next stage was to group concepts together and focus themes into more specific interpretations. Smith et al (2009) talk about this process in terms of ‘abstraction’ (p. 96) where the researcher begins to identify patterns in the emergent themes; ‘subsumption’ (p. 97) where main or master themes take on a ‘super-ordinate status’ (p. 97), in other words become of importance so that related themes can be grouped; and ‘polarisation’ (p. 97) where the research focusses on differences rather than similarities in the data. These stages begin the process of exploration of data on deeper levels and teasing out key words and phrases. At the same time the emergent concepts need to be continually checked against transcripts for accuracy and to try and seek even deeper level analysis.

It was essential to make sure that deviation away from participant voices was not apparent. Identification and mapping of some verbatim quotations were then added to the matrix in a second layer analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This served as an additional cross check to support the emerging concepts, which at this time were still fluid.

3: Summaries of each participant’s experience were also written and according to Van Manen (2007), summarising in depth interviews can be useful for initial presentation of phenomenological data prior to evaluating themes (see example in Appendix 7: Interview summary for Sue). Using summaries was helpful in keeping a grounded sense of the data and each participant’s experience and these were also used
when examining each transcript to serve as a reminder of the overall interpretation of participant experiences.

4: The following stage looked at commonalities and divergences in themes; seeking any ‘gems’ (Smith, 2011) that were evident; a gem being the thing that stands out in a transcript and demands further exploration and analysis.

5: Themes were then analysed and relationships between them explored to identify any patterns. This was a time consuming and complicated task and I undertook this by laying out all second layer matrices, using colour coding and post it notes to identify patterns and commonalities and then documenting these first as notes, then as formal evaluation.

Patterned themes were then grouped as master (super ordinate) themes. All themes and concepts were entered into a table; these tables are presented within the findings section. The final phase of analysis consisted of the alignment of participant interviews with the thematic matrix. Smith et al (2009) discuss these latter stages as being ‘contextualisation’ (p. 98) or where connections are explored in a more diverse way, perhaps taking account in this study of participants background, why they entered online tutoring, teaching experience, expectations of their role and even any cultural or other relevant elements in the narratives.

6: In the findings section each master theme and associated concepts were analysed and discussed using evaluation from each participant’s matrices and supported with verbatim quotations. I returned to transcripts and interview recordings throughout the analysis of data to ensure my interpretations represented participant experiences as closely as possible. The written interpretation does not make reference to the ‘extant’ literature (Smith et al., 2009); contextualisation between the findings and existing literature is situated within the discussion (Chapter 5). Following this IPA principle
allowed me to maintain focus on participant experiences and explore these within a wider background using the data provided in interview responses.

4.3: Evaluation of quality and rigor

According to Yardley (2008) the principles by which qualitative research is evaluated include sensitivity to context, transparency of the research process, rigour and impact and significance relative to the research question. Smith et al., (2009) suggest that rigour within IPA refers to the meticulousness of the study and how it is carried out. Meticulous consideration was afforded to each aspect of the study from participant recruitment through to data analysis and interpretation. In line with IPA principles the use of extensive quotations demonstrates how themes reflect individual and shared experiences which are connected to credible arguments.

Contextual sensitivity is important within the IPA process and according to Smith et al., (2009) this starts with skilful and effective interviewing and a keen awareness to participant needs, together with their context of role. This was particularly relevant within the researcher/interviewee relationship which was one of colleagues and in which a power dynamic could have become a challenge and a risk to the credibility of data.

Transparency is demonstrated through detailed and correct documentation of each stage of the study providing and audit trail (Shaw, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). Maintaining a reflexive stance through the study ensured continual examination of researcher influence. IPA studies do not seek generalisability but can provide a degree of transferability and generate insight into experiences which might otherwise not be explored (Kuper et al., 2008).

4.4: Thematic overview

Following an inductive analysis, four master themes emerged from the data which aligns with the overarching research aims of studying the experiences
of online tutoring and associated perceptions of effects on professional identity; these themes were as noted below and discussed in detail within subsequent sections:

1: Making a difference
2: Transitioning change
3: Dynamic connections
4: Sense of professional worth

Table 2 below, indicates whether the master themes are present for each participant and this shows whether each theme is prevalent in more than half the sample. This is a rudimentary way of demonstrating recurrence and supports the analysis and findings discussed in subsequent sections of the chapter (Smith et al., 2009).

This table also served as a tool for revisiting the transcripts to make sure that no key words, phrases or comments had been missed and to confirm that my interpretation correlated to the data. The use of the table also allowed me to be sure that the master themes reflected all the data collected, transcribed and interpreted. According to Smith et al (2009) this is termed ‘numeration (p. 98) and is one tool to elicit the importance of themes, particularly if the interviews were unstructured, as in this particular research study. Names assigned to participants are pseudonyms for the purpose of the thesis.
Table 2: Identification of recurrent themes

Themes, sub-themes and concepts

The emergent themes, sub-themes and associated concepts reflect my understanding and interpretation of the experiences of the tutors interviewed and seeks to acknowledge each unique experience. I also sought to establish ‘function’ (Smith et al, 2009: p.98) within the transcripts and this meant ‘unlocking’ (p.98) further themes by examining how themes relate to one another in terms of meaning. The themes identified are those that, in my belief reflect individual and shared experiences, highlighting variances revealed in sub-themes and concepts. For example, whilst all the tutors interviewed felt that regular face-to-face contact with students was essential to facilitation of a positive and effective learning experience, there was notable variation on how they adapted to online roles. It is important to note that the inductive analysis resulted in construction of themes, participants did not all discuss at interview the concepts identified; therefore, the findings do not represent a solely shared view or experience of online tutoring; but concept headings do represent individual participants’ own words.

Master themes are those that I feel reflect aspects of participants’ experiences and are significant (first level). The sub-themes provide a greater level of detail of experiences (second level) and concepts echo the deeper level of participants experiences (third level). The dynamic nature of human experience means that although for the sake of this thesis themes
and concepts have to be organised into structured formats. There is often overlap of thematic and conceptual meaning which has been highlighted in the findings and discussion (Chapter 5).

In order to support analysis and interpretation of data direct quotations from interview transcripts are used throughout the chapter. These were selected as those which I felt appropriately reflected the concepts being discussed. According to Smith (2009) the use of literal quotations is a key feature of IPA and allows the reader an opportunity to evaluate the integrity of the interpretations.

I tried to prioritise key metaphors and 'gems' (Smith, 2011) and significant elements of the data whilst retaining the natural flow of the master themes and sub themes. The flow correlates to how participants articulated their own priorities (related to their role and role context) and also reveals the importance attached by participants to challenges, compromises and strategies developed to execute their role responsibilities as effectively as possible. Therefore my approach to the distillation of that data aimed at extracting the most important aspects and essential meanings through a process of detailed and in-depth interpretation.

4.4.1: Summary vignettes for participants

The following are vignettes for the participants to provide a brief background for each of them and assist in the reading of verbatim quotations which can then be contextualised to individuals.

John

John has been a tutor for approximately six years and tutors in both face-to-face and online contexts. Being trained within a traditional university setting himself and having spent most of his teaching career within this setting he prefers working face-to-face with students and colleagues. However having a keen interest in information technology and associated communication platforms as well as online learning, John is keen to experience online tutoring and expand his tutoring experience and knowledge, but as he is
employed full time within his main role within a traditional university campus and his work as an online tutor is supplementary and sporadic. John has a specific interest in information technology and considers himself to be an amateur expert in this area. He also has a stated core professional aim which is to impart and share knowledge with students and other professionals. John’s area of current subject expertise is mental healthcare and ethics.

**Lyn**

Lyn has a wide range of teaching experience extending to over 20 years, which includes university and college settings. She has considerable experience tutoring online modules. However, Lyn says that it is her teaching within a traditional university setting that allows her to tutor online as this fulfils her need for regular contact with students face-to-face. Lyn works across both delivery settings as she needs to maintain her teaching hours for financial reasons. Lyn’s subject area is social science and the area she enjoys most about her subject is the requirement to debate topics. However this can only be effective within a face to face environment by Lyn views online tutoring as a challenge to be overcome and promotes high levels of student engagement within online modules she tutors.

**Sue**

Sue has a background in local government and has extensive experience working within local housing departments and various allied social service roles. She has a degree level qualification but no formal teaching qualifications, although she is trying to work towards this aim. She has entered the online tutoring role within a health and social care faculty and this is her eighth year of tutoring including both face-to-face and online modules. Sue says she finds it difficult to align her usual day job role as a team leader with the role of online tutor as it conflicts with her professional values and principles. Sue’s personal circumstances means she is taking on additional online roles because she is having to cut down her full-time hours. She has pressing personal issues but needs to maintain financial security; therefore the online tutor role enables her to meet her personal needs but at the same time conflicts with her professional values.
Mandy
Mandy has a professional role within social services and has a full-time position managing a team. Her specialty is local housing but she has a keen interest in health and social care topics and is involved with voluntary groups which provides her with the knowledge to tutor modules associated with health and social care subjects. Mandy has no formal training within teaching and is therefore quite anxious about tutoring overall. Mandy started her role by tutoring a blended learning module and has since transitioned into an online role which suits her personal circumstances. She has been tutoring for approximately four years in total. Mandy works within social science and healthcare faculties and is currently committed to studying and achieving a higher education teaching qualification to enable her to continue her role as a tutor. This mandatory study requirement puts Mandy under a considerable amount of stress as her work already amounts to full time hours, but her dual roles are a personal necessity in order to maintain this full-time status and support her family financial commitments.

Jane
Jane has approximately 25 years teaching experience within face-to-face, blended and online teaching contexts. She has several degrees and holds a teaching qualification. Jane works within a science faculty and her preference is to work face-to-face with students. Despite this preference Jane recognises that if you do not hold a full-time position and rely on contracts for several roles, then you tend to take whatever work you are offered. She is pragmatic on this point and feels that any role within higher education should provide the same professional standing and positive experiences for both tutors and students.

Alan
Alan has approximately 30 years teaching experience and is approaching retirement. He has formal teaching qualifications as well as several degrees in a range of biological science subjects. He works within several faculties including science, health and social care and research. In addition Alan has considerable experience as a module developer and examiner. Although Alan’s preference is to work with students face-to-face he says he feels
equally at home within the online environment although he finds this more challenging with reduced job satisfaction levels.

4.5: Master theme 1: Making a difference

This theme is concerned with how participants overcome challenges related to general perceptions of their online roles and the relationship between professional aims, work role requirements (including reasons for working) and the types of strategies used to overcome various perceived challenges. It has a direct connection to all three subsequent themes and this connection will be explored within the interpretation and chapter 5 (discussion). The theme provides insight into overarching professional values and motivation.

The theme is divided into sub-themes and concepts as shown in Table 3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master theme 1: Making a difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-themes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1.1: Meeting professional challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2: Facilitating change</td>
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Table 3: Master theme 1: Making a difference

Sub-theme 1.1: Meeting professional challenges

All but two of the participants reported significant professional challenges when transitioning into online tutoring and within the role. The data revealed that experienced tutors felt that they had to dig deep in order to deal with
conflicts within their role and develop a range of diverse strategies in order to meet the challenges. Sub-theme 1.1 relates to the concepts of job satisfaction/means to an end (1.1.1) and making compromises (1.1.2).

**Concept 1.1.1: Job satisfaction/means to an end**

Within this concept there were several key sub-concepts and ‘gems’ which have been explored and interpreted. The data revealed several metaphors used by participants which have been interpreted to have significance and therefore have been prioritised in the analysis.

Job satisfaction was essential to participants in terms of maintaining motivation and simply feeling they are doing a good job. One of the main conflicts seemed to be that all tutors interviewed were in the role out of financial necessity or as a means to an end and the online role suited most because it was more flexible than a campus-based role or a role that required regular campus attendance. Therefore within the data conflicts between achieving job satisfaction and simply doing the job to get paid were evident and the transcripts revealed some interesting dilemmas that tutors struggle to overcome.

**Means to an end: factory production line**

All tutors interviewed confirmed that the online tutor role was one of several paid appointments and that there was recognition that the convenience of an online tutor role had to be carefully balanced against the perceived negative aspects. Distillation of the relevant data within this theme was completed in layers and repetitive revisiting of the transcripts and recordings to read and hear the nuances within each extract.

First of all I looked at the connections between job satisfaction and how tutors not only viewed their role but also exploring the purpose of them working as an online tutor. Sue is direct in her vocalisation of here but when we explore the quotation below a little deeper we can see that she is seeking to get more out of her online role but doesn’t really know how to achieve this.
Sue feels as though she is simply going through the motions and not really doing the job as well as she would like.

......I think I could get a lot more job satisfaction out of it than I do......when you are simply going through the same things again and again it's like a factory production line........adapting to online tutoring was really hard.......I think people move into this type of role....because it works for them and their life demands.... (Sue)

Importantly Sue feels her work is like a factory production line. This metaphor implies that her role is repetitive, limited and with little scope for original ideas and input; I felt this was both a metaphor and gem. Where Sue identifies the challenges of adapting to the role the connection to the lack of dynamic freedom and the monotony of repetition could have a significant relationship. Sue talks about the role working for people and life demands, so I feel she is really relating this to her personal circumstances and on listening again to the recording of this extract there is a real sense of resoluteness and acceptance; almost as though she has no choice but it is not the role that she envisages in her mind.

This led me to look again at what the other participants felt in terms of how they really viewed the role; were they too just going through the motions and to what degree did they feel the role served as a means to an end?

Alan had reservations about how appropriate current online module design was in terms of a tutor being able to effectively facilitate a positive learning experience:

........No matter how well you plan and prepare, there is insufficient time to communicate fully what you intend to.........it can be very frustrating.......we must limit our time online though....otherwise it all becomes rather unsatisfactory professionally...(Alan)
Alan has a wealth of tutoring experience but he still finds it difficult to navigate the online tutor role in terms of meeting his own expectations of what it should look and feel like. Importantly Alan is telling us that he plans and prepares for his online tutoring and has clear intentions of what he wants and needs, in order to communicate effectively with his students. However his frustration can be interpreted as a type of disappointment that he simply cannot get across the information he had planned. Alan goes on to comment on time spent online and this is about contracted obligation and working outside these parameters.

Alan highlights for us, a strong connection between maintaining professional satisfaction and being unprofessional in terms of working too much outside of the contracted remit. I would suggest that Alan is also talking about a means to an end here in terms of having an intention and not being able to deliver it fully; so it appears that Alan does just get through each session and module in the end to try and salvage some form of positive learning for his students, delivering what he can but with contractual and professional boundaries that he has to observe. Some of these boundaries also appear to be associated with how he feels professionally and this would seem to be significant in terms of Alan’s professional identity because it is connected with self-worth, feeling valued and acting in a professional manner.

I see a strong link between Sue’s metaphor and Alan’s points, even though they are at a deep interpretative level; this is because both Alan and Sue create a sense of getting through task-based activities, needing to push onward, forward. So in my mind I imagined a factory production line and its constant movement along in front of the workers; so if they miss their activity when the line is moving their tasks quota is incomplete. Then rereading Sue and Alan’s points I can better appreciate their points and feelings. It is also an extremely emotional challenge and conflict between professionalism and task-based activities. It almost brings to mind time and motion measurement and it struck me that this might be how Sue and Alan feel.
John, Lyn and Jane did provide glimpses of similar feelings within their interviews and transcripts but were reticent in terms of vocalising these to any great degree. John’s online tutoring is very much secondary to his main role and as we know from his vignette, he is interested in information technology and how it is utilised for learning. Therefore his view is pragmatic and he appears to have a more relaxed view:

…..if I can’t get it done…it doesn’t get done……I cover the required syllabus but I have to think about how many hours I am contracted to do …and there is the marking as well in this…so…..well…..let’s be blunt…I do work for money….not to say I don’t enjoy my work…. but still…(John)

There’s no anxiety in this for John and although his job is clearly one where he has to earn money. Unlike Sue he doesn’t feel like he is going through the motions, he seems in control and accepting that he can only do so much in the time allotted to him contractually. So can we interpret this as a more balanced view of the role, less frantic or panicked? I feel that perhaps because John does not rely on his online tutoring work for his main financial income he is more able to view the role more objectively and not feel pressured by it; thus approaching it from a much more relaxed position. Connecting this to the metaphor of a factory production line it is clear that the lack of anxiety is not overtly evident for John but perhaps at a subconscious level this outward expression of being in control excuses the tasks he cannot complete.

Lyn uses her face to face roles to fulfil her need for direct contact with students and peer interaction that she gains from teamwork and campus-based socialisation.

…..without doubt my online tutoring work supplements my income….wouldn’t work otherwise…………can be repetitive though and this is problematic…I’m used to thinking on my
feet…being challenged…..getting around this..mmmmm….I guess I think up different strategies to get through…(Lyn).

Therefore Lyn works as an online tutor because she wants to and *likes the different experience* it provides her with. Lyn does state that her role *supplements* her income from other roles and she also finds it challenging in terms of it being *repetitive*; but she also enjoys developing *strategies* to deal with this. This tells us that there are elements here where Lyn acknowledges the work can be monotonous and that she does it for the money but overcoming its inherent challenges negates the impact these have to some degree. Again here we are reminded of the factory production line metaphor where tasks are repetitive and monotonous. The ability to handle these challenges in a more balanced way could be linked to Lyn’s considerable teaching experience which she can call upon in order to deal with any problems or issues.

Finally Jane also has many years teaching experience and relies on her online work to supplement her other part time campus-based role.

…..you have to take work when it’s there….nature of online tutoring I suppose…..make the best of things…..(Jane)

A very brief extract here but some key interpretation because Jane is revealing an important factor in online tutoring and that is one of inconsistency of employment so you take the work when it is offered and get on with the task in hand. When Jane says *make the best of things* it implies that the work is not always welcomed or convenient but again it appears we are seeing a view that often it is a means to an end.

Interpretation of this concept seems to reveal an attraction to online tutoring roles because they fit in with other work and life commitments and despite the apparent challenges, tutors seem reluctant but accept the professional compromises in order to fulfil personal obligations. I also feel that at a much deeper level of interpretation when someone makes the best of things they
are really dealing with a challenge and creating the best possible outcome for an unpleasant situation or set of circumstances. It also suggests that Jane gets on with the tasks in hand but the outcome is not too promising.

These hidden meanings and inferences are important as they provide insight into the emotional feelings that underpin the outward professional veneer or surface layer. So this interpretation allows us to explore what is revealed when you peel back this surface layer.

The following quotation from Sue’s transcript supports previous views:

…you just complete the job as a means to an end……….we just have to get on with it….there is no choice if you want to remain in the job…. I don’t actually feel professional….. I need affinity……… so I feel I have done something useful.

(Sue)

Looking a little deeper into Sue’s quotation above, she talks about having no choice, getting on with it, and feeling useful. Although explicitly not using the term ‘job satisfaction’ we get a sense that Sue is not altogether content in her role but linking this back to her personal circumstances. Sue has a professional background in local government and has always worked as part of a team with plenty of face to face interaction with colleagues and clients. She appears to feel rather uncomfortable in her role as an online tutor but talks about it in terms of fitting in with her personal circumstances (means to an end).

Where Sue talks about completing the job, we can interpret this in many ways but for me the most significant impact of this statement lies in the interpretation that Sue feels she just has to get on with the job, whatever the consequences to her professional and emotional feelings. Later in the quotation she expands this and says she doesn’t feel professional and has a need for affinity. My interpretation of these two key words is that Sue is seeking fulfilment, enjoyment and a purpose in her professional teaching
because this enables her to feel *useful*. Feelings of usefulness in this context can be attributed to being compensated for professional input, in other words getting something back out of what you put in; Sue is not feeling this but is seeking it. She is resigned to just getting through the work but her dissatisfaction is clear.

If we consider Sue’s overall position and align it with her background it appears she feels more useful and compensated when working as part of a team, but on a personal level she is no longer able to continue full time in that role which may be causing a professional void or even resentment.

There is also an emotional aspect to Sue’s position because in some ways she has been forced into taking on more online roles in order to meet personal demands, and my interpretation here is that Sue is compromising her professional preferences in order to meet personal obligations which may be one of the reasons her dissatisfaction with the online role appears to be somewhat acute.

Mandy also felt that personal resources are easily exhausted which connects to ‘digging deep’ and getting on with the job as highlighted in the quotation below, and although she does not mention job satisfaction explicitly her worry is clear in terms of questioning whether she is really able to deliver online tutoring in terms of understanding how effective sharing her knowledge is. This is something Mandy is used to doing in her day job within a social service department and she relies heavily on this type of continual interaction and sharing ideas and knowledge. This seems to be a safe position for Mandy in terms of having team support and being in a comfort zone which her role as an online tutor does not provide. So here I think we get a sense that Mandy is dissatisfied with how she copes with the role and feels that she is unable to maintain *motivation* in the role.

…. *I think I've struggled this year in terms of digging deep.......and that worries me more because usually I'd be on it much quicker....but there is just not the time.... maybe it*
is because I don’t see myself as a teacher…….getting students to see what I actually mean is hard……..I have a strong belief in sharing knowledge but I am doing that less in the online environment…….I find it really hard to stay motivated in the role……..(Mandy).

Mandy talks about struggling and we know from Mandy’s background that she is fairly new to online tutoring and currently has no formal teaching qualifications; this could be interpreted as an expression of vulnerability and feelings of inadequacy within the online tutor role. Importantly Mandy says she doesn’t see herself as a teacher but has a strong belief in sharing knowledge. On listening back to the recording of this point there is real anxiety coming through from Mandy – almost a feeling of panic. So looking again at the apparent dissatisfaction Mandy expresses with her tutoring performance we can interpret this as self-doubt, lack of confidence and even feelings of being out of her depth.

So job satisfaction is all about feeling you have done a good job, and the above quotations show that although not always worded explicitly, the deeper meanings suggest that job satisfaction is often lacking within online tutor roles and further that having a sense of job satisfaction is connected to motivation and in turn how you deliver online modules and interact with students.

Thinking about how these extracts link we have a thread between feeling as though you are working on a factory production line, getting things done, compromising professional preferences and yet still seeking some deep and meaningful return for the efforts made. The conflict could be said to lie in the purpose tutors take on the online roles (financial or means to an end) and the professional vulnerability that lies just under the surface; so we see an antagonist push-pull conflict at play.
Coping with challenges of seeking job satisfaction

Here I tried to look at the challenges themselves and what these meant in terms of professional role, emotions and feelings. Job satisfaction was important to all participants but some tutors did not consider meeting professional challenges as an essential element of the role but rather accepted that challenges are simply part of working in an educational setting, so part of the job, as highlighted by Alan:

‘…..I am a university teacher…..context is irrelevant……challenges are there to be met…..’ (Alan)

Alan also had a rather pragmatic view about meeting challenges and I wondered if this was because he was close to retirement. He vocalised concerns for the new generation of tutors coming into the role as he felt that many would struggle without comprehensive experience of coping with change. It was interesting that Alan appears to be in conflict because in an earlier comment he communicates frustration at not being able to deliver online modules as effectively as he planned; yet here we see a resoluteness and categorial view that challenges are there to be met. It could be that Alan uses this as a type of defence mechanism, a kind of mantra so that he has the determination and self-belief to power through the challenges. This may also compensate him should he not be able to deliver on his planned activities. In other words he simply does the best he can.

‘…….Without a doubt unless you need to be experienced to be able to make this transition………….it's very difficult to get the same dimension as if you were...you know working with pairs or groups of students in a room. But I feel that one's prepared the work and it seems to be OK…’ (Alan)

Once again Alan presents rather conflicting viewpoints and suggests that being prepared will suffice, yet earlier we see that he suggests being prepared and planning ahead is not always enough to satisfy his own professional requirements. Trying to interpret the conflicts or variances here
is difficult but listening again to the voice recording it seems that Alan uses the conflict to convince himself, and this provides motivation to meet the challenges of the online tutor role, in other words justifying his approaches and behaviour. These conflicts are interesting because as the interview progressed I got a sense that Alan was analysing his role as he spoke and this may account for the reflective element and changes in attitude he seems to have vocalised. Perhaps until the interview Alan had not been in a position to consider some of the challenges of the role in terms of what they mean for him professionally and personally.

There was also evidence, from some participants, of reflection on previous work roles and comparing them to online tutoring; this comparison was discrete but evident.

…… when you’re working solely online….you get nothing back…and even what you do get back…I suppose there’s not that social interaction….what you would get [face-to-face] is someone trying to answer a question and what I really don’t get is how you develop a conversation online…. (Mandy)

Interestingly Mandy highlights several things here that are of significance. The first is her need for getting something back and not only does this connect to a previous concept related to job satisfaction but her own need as a tutor. She clearly finds this challenging and highlights her inability to resolve this; talking about developing conversations. This relates to online interaction with student but on a deeper level could connect to the conversation needed to help one resolve challenges of this nature. Understanding your role and being able to experience all the facets that it encompasses could be essential in being able to develop strategies for effective online tutoring.

The interpretative significance here is the connection to compensation and the need to make up for the lack of positive experiences within the online tutor role. It appears this need for compensation is perceived as a
recognition of loss and in the online tutoring context we can interpret this to be associated with the limitations of the role.

As already highlighted, Mandy’s background is not in teaching and she has no formal teaching qualifications or training. Therefore, her experience is grounded in collaborative contact and shared decision making and she finds it challenging to work online and not have this constant contact with peers and students..

… I think it’s all about my daytime professional... so I probably bring lots of that experience to the OU modules in terms of my teaching.. but I’m not a teacher, I’ve never been qualified as a teacher so I never see myself professionally in that sense......so first and foremost it’s about what have I got that I can share with people … (Mandy)

In the above extract Mandy seems to be excusing her lack of teaching experience and almost views the tutoring role as a one-way process; therefore, there seems to be an implied suggestion that job satisfaction is not an expectation. This is a very interesting quotation because it is worth reiterating the point made about not feeling like a teacher in a professional sense. Because Mandy has not been able to vocalise these feelings on a deeper level I feel that this ‘feeling’ is more of a challenge than actually fulfilling the tutorial duties. The significance of this is in the sense that this feeling somehow prevents Mandy from overcoming challenges within the role. Again this signifies a conflict because Mandy seeks compensatory rewards yet seems to imply that the lack of this is as somehow associated with her teaching status. Mandy seems to revisit this theme throughout her interview and even when the topic diverges she returns to this time and again. Perhaps this in itself is a compensatory mechanism and one which can be used to overcome some of the challenges of the online tutor role, and like Alan it becomes a mantra and self-supporting technique one might develop in any leadership role for example.
Jane also gives us a sense that some form of compensation within the role is important.

..........but you have to be really experienced to feel confident........knowing that students are getting it is important......(Jane)

Jane allies experience to confidence which we can interpret as having faith in one’s ability and in the online tutorial role it can also be aligned to leadership qualities again, because it is associated with feeling self-assured and being able to influence others in a positive way which is part of the professional tutoring role. It is also important to Jane that students are getting it and this links back to her professional ability and whether her approach is effective. Therefore we see a kind of reward system at play here where tutors impart or share their knowledge and experience but in return they need to get something back from the students and role in terms of assurances that they are having a positive impact.

Lyn has considerable teaching experience within different institutions but suggests that for her there can be little substitute for regular physical contact with students to facilitate positive learning and to reinforce her status as a teacher.

Institutions where it’s mostly face-to-face and its regular face-to-face...i.e... I'll be seeing students each week........... you build up far more of a relationship with your students...you get to know them individually......... so I think the face-to-face helps you to develop a more human relationship......... it doesn't feel like we're actually tutoring in online modules, more facilitation............... as a professional I think......engagement is extremely important and I get that from some of my other courses and roles...

(Lyn)
It seems that physical contact with students, and the ability to visually and audibly interact on a regular basis was connected to their role as a tutor and moreover is important. Without this connection many felt that the role was not a teaching one. This firmly links to a sense of job satisfaction because from the data I get a sense of seeking more from the role in order to fulfil personal professional requirements and perceptions of role.

Lyn talks about developing a more human relationship and this could be interpreted as a need for connection with students that leads to motivation, increased self-esteem and self-confidence. In other words the development of human relationships in this context could have a direct impact on the tutor’s wellbeing and ability to fulfil their tutorial duties. Lyn also draws attention to regular face to face contact with students as a means for individual and meaningful relationships to be fostered and this appears to be a central factor in feeling professional. The comparisons drawn between different roles and contexts suggests that one is supporting the other so perhaps because Lyn can develop these human relationships in her face to face roles it provides some recompense for the inability to achieve this within an online context.

Jane feels very strongly about this and seems to suggest that restrictions of online tutoring can negatively impact the learning experience.

… It is like a management role….I feel more like a moderator and script marker when there is no vocal or face-to-face interaction…it is very impersonal….it feels like we are admin staff…… students tend not to be interested when it is totally online…they don’t seem to think of us as tutors…I think it doesn’t look good for universities……with online you prepare [posts, activities] but if the students don’t understand it’s difficult………. Messages….. students….they seem to think we could even be students who have just done the course or something….is this teaching and learning?… (Jane)
Jane says a lot here and brings into play the reputation of the educational organisation so she is firmly connecting the challenges of her role with belonging to the institution. Jane asks a question of herself and the educational organisation.......is this teaching and learning.....At a deeper level it could be suggested that Jane is seeking answers from the educational organisation in terms of addressing the challenges of the role within the hierarchical structure and she is also reaffirming her status within the organisation rather than being an outsider.

Where Jane talks about being in a management role there appears to have resonance with previous points about the remoteness or detachment of the online tutor in terms of contact with students. If we interpret management in its basic form then it refers to interlocking functions of control, direction, organisation; all of which have an abstracted part to play in delivery of education in the online tutoring context. I feel this is a significant point because management also carries with it a status which connects with Jane’s point about feeling like an administrator or facilitator. Interestingly Jane goes on to highlight the problem of not being recognised as a tutor, perhaps even mistaken for a student. Therefore this need for formal recognition related to professional qualification, standing and role appears to be significant for online tutors to feel they have worth, value and can impact learning in a positive way. Maybe the titles ascribed by Jane (management, moderator, facilitator) provide some form of perceived recognition, albeit not ones that Jane prefers, or that are commensurate with her valued teaching qualifications and experience. At a deeper level interpretation I would suggest this could be a psychological compromise and sub-conscious strategy in order for Jane to assign value to her online role.

The conclusion I came to from exploring the extracts at a deeper level was that in fact that tutors strive for job satisfaction even at a sub-conscious level. If they do not get it from their online roles then they seek it via other means. This is significant because it suggests that job satisfaction is central to being a tutor and within the online learning environment it is often difficult
to achieve; therefore we see a range of compromises and strategies employed to fulfil this integral element of being an online tutor. The desire for job satisfaction often seems to be masked behind other challenges such as the need for professional recognition, feeling professional, making concessions and relationships with students. I interpret these challenges to be vehicles through which tutors vocalise their needs in terms of job satisfaction because they are unable to quantify or qualify job satisfaction as a separate entity. In other words again here we are seeing layers which when peeled back reveal a core issue to be addressed.

**Concept 1.1.2: Making compromises**

Making compromises within the online tutor role appeared to be something participants were prepared to do in order to meet professional challenges in general and also to maintain a sense of control. It is of significance because it is directly linked to 1.1.1 as it connects experiencing job satisfaction and it is also concerned with a making sure that the job is undertaken in the best way possible. Therefore participants generally felt that compromises were a major part of their role and in many instances’ participants recounting experience felt that unless compromises were made, role requirements could not possibly be met.

\[\text{\ldots in some ways I feel that it's difficult to really involve the student experience...their background...in the online session.. it's just too slow to try and get that to work within any sensible time frame … one thinks...what did I get out of that... and it's so much easier with a live session that you can think OK, let's stop now, let's just simply talk about this one protein enzyme and you can have quite a good session...and you can do that...very difficult to suddenly change flow and keep the students with you..} \text{(Alan)}\]

The way Alan copes with some challenges and makes compromises is highlighted in the above quotation. He has the confidence and experience to quickly evaluate what is happening within a forum or group discussion online.
and change tac, although he acknowledges that this is very difficult to do. He also brings into play the question of job satisfaction linked to working within online sessions. Alan, although pragmatic about the online role still seeks to gain something out of his work role and questions whether he is achieving this, even in part. Although there is some cross over here with previous interpretations Alan introduces some key terms which require deeper interpretation and reveal additional considerations.

**Dealing with compromise**

Interestingly Alan brings in two key elements here, the first is a student’s background and the second is trying to work within a sensible timeframe delivering online tuition. This is all about making real time decisions and compromises to try and make sure that tuition intentions are communicated in the best way possible within the limitations of time and knowledge of student backgrounds in terms of their knowledge and experience. Communication is an essential tool within an educational context as it is the means by which knowledge is transmitted or shared between tutor and student. Effective communication within a tutorial role enables learning and by this token must also be able to disable the learning process or significantly retard it. What the data reveals is therefore is a critical pathway in terms of effective communication and the learning process. Decisions made by Alan in an instant change not only the direction of approach but also the content. This recognition is shrouded in Alan’s quotation above but when he finishes off with stating that you need to *keep the students with you* and the difficulties of achieving this within an online context, we see clearly the underpinning professional strategies at work.

Mandy felt that the lack of online experience is concerning and says this makes her very anxious. Meeting professional challenges in this sense is therefore almost overwhelming for her.

...I haven’t ever done an online session even with another AL....I've done the training but the thought of going in and doing a session straight off and working with students is something that I’m not
confident about...the idea of the cluster group is really sound but I do think...and I am quite worried and anxious...and I think well how is this going to work?..... (Mandy)

Mandy’s anxiety is clear to see here and considering the text we can see that it is the online delivery platform that is at the heart of this anxiety, in other words the unknown. Mandy talks about having completed relevant training but only having facilitated one online session with a colleague. The lack of confidence expressed by Mandy demonstrates professional vulnerability. Interestingly there is an assumption that because you work within a pair or group of tutors, then effective delivery is assured. Where Mandy uses the term doing a session straight off, it gives us a sense of hurriedness, rushing, getting to the end of something. One interpretation of this could be that Mandy fears delivering an online session on her own prevents any deviation from a planned delivery, so no opportunity for dynamic development of session content. I wonder whether Mandy’s background (working as part of a team) and lack of teaching experience/qualifications adds to these assumptions. Clearly anxiety is allayed when Mandy works online as part of a team or cluster of tutors which may highlight the problem of inexperience with regard to online tutors taking on roles without considerable relevant experience and/or qualifications.

Mandy’s concerns and anxiety came through again later in the interview where she almost questions here professional ability to cope with the online role.

… and so it's the bit about...is it the online bit... or is the way as a tutor I'm using the online bit...or whether it's we as tutors who are using it....when I was thinking about the interview I was thinking...is it just me...is it just that I'm not technologically minded....or savvy enough...is this an age thing or something.... (Mandy)
The lack of confidence is clear within the above extract; Mandy hesitates and seems unable to articulate clearly, the points she seeks to make. On listening back to this extract on the recording her anxiety is once again audible. Mandy uses an interesting term, savvy, and this jumped out from the extract because it relates to being shrewd, practical, possessing the ability to make good or appropriate judgments. Rather than simply apply this to information technology as initial reading of the extract suggests I wondered if Mandy was referring to her overall professional ability and expressing an underlying general self-doubt, so not only lacking in confidence but questioning her teaching abilities. My interpretation of this is perhaps Mandy utilises her lack of technical knowledge and experience to explain the way she feels in terms of anxiety and lack of confidence associated with her role as an online tutor. So by attaching her anxieties to something tangible it excuses or justifies the way she feels inside and allows her to manage these emotions and continue with her role even though she often loses control emotionally and the self-doubt surfaces. For me this was one of the significant gems.

In these extracts there is a concerning differential between how participants view the online experience and approach professional challenges of tutoring online.

Lyn’s perspective is more hard-headed or possibly realistic from her point of view.

……I’m always conscious of thinking…am I writing [forum messages] this in a way they get it? I personally don’t like using forums and feel I’m forced to use them because it’s part of my job… (Lyn)

Lyn uses the term forced and it stands out as an expression of dissent because she is having to comply with a process which she views as going against her natural teaching approach. Lyn does have a considerable and wide-ranging experience within university teaching roles, but it does appear
that she is questioning her confidence in being able to ensure students understand her communication and the second part of the extract seems to imply she may feel being forced to communicate via forums is the reason why this may be the case. Again attaching the elements of self-doubt to something tangible, in Lyn’s case part of my job, it seems to negate the feelings of being forced into doing something and replaces them with something more acceptable associated with professional principles, so seeing these processes as simply part of the role. This reassignment or realigning of association is interesting but also significant as it highlights the sub conscious level of strategic compromise that online tutors develop in order to help them overcome challenges of their role.

John, on the other hand, views online working as being advantageous to students and meeting professional challenges is simply part of the process.

...I feel as a professional in that role that there are some advantages to this way of working....because of the way I work I can respond to students quite quickly... (John).

So we know that John is extremely interested in technology and how it fits in with online learning. He describes himself as techy in the extract below and perhaps this accounts for his rather relaxed approach and with confidence in his technological abilities feels that working online is a good thing for him. It appears to be effective and convenient and he is looking to further his own knowledge of how online learning and teaching work in current advancing technological landscapes.

Therefore John feels that he has the scope to respond swiftly to students, but he does acknowledge that there are compromises to be made as outlined in the next extract.

......the online route seems to be going down a road that is much more closed...so within the online environment as far as you can my preferences would be .......to find other ways of
communicating with students........so it's not a logistical challenge for me because I'm quite a 'techy' person...the only challenge for me is whether the people at the other end are able to use it [technology]... (John)

The term preferences used in John’s extract seems to indicate that he is not entirely happy with the development of online learning and he highlights a possible area of concern which is use of technology (discussed in master theme 2 section). Importantly John highlights a possible conflict within the online learning system of delivery and that is a disparity in ability between tutors and students which could lead to compromises being made within his online tutoring delivery. This is clearly a concern for John and thinking about this from a psychological stance it could be that John feels he works beyond the ability of students. Listening to the vocal tonality on the interview recording I sense a question over this final phrase as though John had suddenly come to realise a potential problem. Therefore the pragmatist view of dealing with things sensibly and realistically could be, in this context rather singular and we could interpret this to mean that the unknown potential issues would be significantly problematic for John.

Alan talks about having to be strict in terms of how he presents his teaching online. He also talks about having to script his activities which can be viewed as compromising his approach compared to when he is teaching face-to-face. This aligns with previous extracts from John and it serves as a reiteration or reinforcement of his professional stance. In the following extract he is discussing an online live session where students have only audio and whiteboard facility.

......I have to work to a much tighter script than I've ever done in face-to-face teaching....in face-to-face teaching I would set out the learning outcomes for the session but how we achieve those may well change in the session....we may do things in different ways depending what the students are bringing to it...so in
some ways I feel that it's difficult to really involve the student…

(Alan)

Importantly Alan reveals he works with a *script* and this is significant because it tells us that Alan works from a prepared narrative for his online sessions. Recalling Alan’s previous points about planning and preparation I see this as a noteworthy revelation because he goes on to say that the script for online sessions is much *tighter* than that for his face to face sessions. This implies limitations, restriction and constraints; and we can assume that Alan feels this pragmatic approach is necessary to navigate the challenges of online tutoring. Scripts or narratives are also associated with rehearsed delivery, so they are purposeful and generally time bounded to keep delivery on track and concise. By the very nature of scripted delivery it limits potential for student engagement yet Alan vocalises this as one of the key problems he has with online tutoring; therefore he highlights a professional conflict here but I wonder whether this is a sub-conscious conflict and one which has developed more out of necessity rather than preference.

Bringing these extracts and interpretations together the importance and relevance of how online tutors create and implement compromise in their roles is not only interesting but revealing. On one level you could say that compromising lowers standards and we see this is a possibility within some of the extracts above. On the other had we could interpret how tutor implement compromise within their online roles as an acceptance, finding the middle ground or even coming to terms with their own expectations and aspirations of and for their role and what is feasible in reality and within the boundaries of the role.

**Sub-theme 1.2: Facilitating change**

Facilitating change was expressed as a key part of the online tutor role and connected to developing and maintaining professional identity; and furthermore, is central to making a difference. The process of facilitating
change is one of transformation, challenging underlying assumptions about a situation and being prepared to develop and implement strategies to overcome resistance to change. The importance of student-centred tutoring was vocalised by most participants, although it was also suggested by many that being able to effectively facilitate change was often difficult. Sub-theme 1.2 relates to the following concepts: lack of spontaneity/immediacy (1.2.1), administrative tasks are time consuming, challenging and demotivation (1.2.2), and fostering potential (1.2.3).

**Concept 1.2.1: Fostering potential**

One of the main objectives for tutors seems to be fostering potential in students and many were passionate about this.

Linda is hopeful that some knowledge is imparted and this means hopeful that she can facilitate a degree of positive change where her students develop their knowledge and understanding:

...all you can hope for is that some knowledge is imparted.......but you don't get to see whether they understand..........you have to try and make it feel natural.......it doesn’t develop relationships....(Linda).

So Linda looks at several things here; the imparting of knowledge, building relationships with students and trying to make the online delivery mode feel natural. Using the term hope here is significant because there is a caution or a lack of confidence that any of these aims will be achieved. Yet there is an expectation and a desire for all of these to happen. We also see that Linda makes a strong connection between imparting knowledge, understanding and the development of relationships. Importantly she feels the need to observe this happening and this is a significant point because it suggests that the not knowing whether students have understood what is being taught interferes with the natural process of learning. Linda also suggests that the
online mode of delivery is unnatural and overall her extract feels loaded with uncertainty and the need for reassurance.

This is significant and a gem within the analysis because Linda needs to see the potential in her students, it needs to be something tangible for her. Factors such as relationships and a natural process of learning are important to Linda so that this can facilitate her own assurance that she in turn has facilitated development of student potential. There is a clear cycle here and it could almost be interpreted a reward system where the formulation and implementation of key strategies are rewarded in terms of professional and positively-valenced emotional satisfaction. So the more positive rewards that Linda experiences the more she strives to develop and this is where the hope factors into the equation because it signifies an optimistic expectation.

Jane also articulated a similar feeling:

".........sometimes seems unreal.....you don't know so you....I mean whether you are getting through.....we hope we are....kind of in the lap of the Gods though.......Jane"

In addition to using the term hope Jane also brings in a new dynamic which is unreality. Here Jane is implying that the whole experience of online delivery somehow feels lacking in realism, authenticity or even certainty if we interpret her later point about not knowing as doubt. You almost get the feeling that tutors are feeling their way around the modules, almost as if they are in the dark; they have aims, objectives, ideals, values and so on but they are unsure whether their voice is getting through.

Importantly here when Jane uses the term lap of the Gods she is really saying that everything is down to luck or events that are outside of her control. This sits nicely alongside her point about the unreality of the online tutor experience and that we could almost think of someone throwing plates in the air and hoping they land in the right places. In other words there is a
randomness or a state where no logic or pattern exists and this leads to unpredictability.

.... really I am in it to help people learn so I am always going outside my contracted role in terms of time etc....(John)

John has quite a positive overall view of online tutoring and situates the students' learning at the centre of his approach. This came through consistently during interview and the above extract demonstrates it well. It also connects to concept 4.2.2 (limitation of contractual role) because he talks about going outside his contracted role in terms of time in order to meet student needs and facilitate learning. Being *in it to help people learn* is significant because here John is identifying a professional aim and a goal to achieve. He also tells us that he goes beyond his contracted remit and this demonstrates commitment, motivation and a real desire to facilitate learning. Looking at this in abstract we can interpret this to mean that John values the transformative process and his strategies for facilitating this relate to putting in extra hours of work outside his contracted time. He uses the term *always*, tells us that this is a permanent or consistent process which he maintains even in the face of resistance which although is unknown can be assumed to connect to the contract and boundaries of specific modules.

...... *but we have to be mindful that the aim is for students to pass the course....so people need to have a wide range of knowledge...yeah...a bit you need to be led....*(John)

Interestingly John makes an important addendum and one which has a cautionary note because he brings into focus the aim of the online module which is for students to be academically successful. There appears to be a conflict here because on one hand John is suggesting that fostering potential is the main goal yet on the other hand he implies that there is a requirement to get students through courses successfully. Therefore if we
define potential as having or acquiring abilities that can be developed into something for the future, John’s latter point would suggest that there is an opposing process which perhaps has to give way to potential and concentrate on the here and now and getting students to immediate success. I feel this is pertinent given most modules within online learning have a relatively short duration so the scope for fostering potential may be idealistic.

……..isn’t our role to get students to achieve…….really hard sometimes…online I mean……..not sure why it’s so hard……..or feels that way…..too many restrictions….things like forums communication only….limited tutor groups contact and sessions…..feels like we’re always up against the clock……..(Lyn)

Importantly here Lyn articulates feelings of being time managed or at least sensing restrictions in this regard. These are feelings but are significant in terms of how Lyn views her role in terms of student achievement. Lyn feels that her role is facilitating student achievement and notes how hard it is for her. Interestingly she reflects a moment and considers why she feels it is so hard, reaching a conclusion that again it feels that way. This could be interpreted as a vulnerability and in some ways a lack of structure to her role because online interaction is of course not bounded by set lecture times or dedicated interaction periods. I feel Lyn then justifies her feelings by linking them to restrictions of the role and this is a significant point which connects to concept 1.12, making compromises and concept 1.2.3, lack of spontaneity/immediacy where we saw the perceived restrictions of the role as having a significant effect on how online only tutors perceive and carry out their role. I view this as a gem because emotions and feelings which influence perception and action can be powerful drivers and mediators.

At this juncture it is worth reiterating that in an educational context fostering potential could be viewed as a fundamental objective for tutors whether they tutor online or are campus based. This is an important part of professional
identity in the sense that it underpins values and principles which makes a
tutor who they are This connects well to concept 4.1.3, professional identity.

These points connect well to Jane’s view below because by being dynamic in
her approach Jane demonstrates that she wants students to learn by ‘doing’
and therefore changes activities to make sure this objective is met.

……..I want them to do stuff so I’ve changed the
activities…..(Jane)

We see a lot of confidence in Jane’s approach and there is almost a
defiance because she veers away from the prescriptive module activities in
order to promote student engagement and facilitate knowledge
development. This demonstrates a significant link between Jane’s
professional identity and her teaching approach because we can readily see
that she is unwilling to compromise on certain values and ideals of her
profession. It also demonstrates a high degree of competency and
confidence in her own ability.

Sue wants her students to view her as approachable and provides strong
routes for communication, ensuring their learning journey remains central to
her role.

…….I always say on forums…if you get into problems email or
text me…..(Sue)

Thinking more reflectively here it also seems that Sue is trying to
communicate her willingness to engage on a more knowledge-based level,
so the term problems would appear to relate to the teaching element. Sue is
also promoting personal contact and saying to her students that she is
available, willing and a real person who cares very much about student
experiences and importantly that she is competent in her role. This is an
open-door approach and is encouraging students to communicate. In many
ways this has a little bit of conflict with Sue’s earlier points about feeling she
is part of factory production line. However by reaching out in this way, Sue is perhaps trying to break that negative cycle and introduce some dynamic and unique strategies that help her navigate the role as well.

This whole section highlights some interesting conflicts which tutors face because they all have an almost innate sense of wanting to facilitate change for students; push them on; promote positive outcomes and share knowledge and experience. However we see that to effect change and maintain it, tutors have to think in a very diverse way and challenge their inner emotions and values as well as those associated with the online tutor role and boundaries of their contract terms. This is a complex mix of psychological and physical aspects of the online tutor role. We cannot fail to recognise the need to keep students at the centre of everything but I wonder if this is again an idealistic objective around which everything else emerges. These emergent elements are fluid and can swing between being positive and negative.

**Concept 1.2.2: Administrative tasks are time consuming, challenging and demotivating**

All tutors communicated during interview that the administrative tasks within online delivery were being onerous and challenging. These include pre-module scheduling and planning of moderation rotas, completing training updates, analytics for modules (for example attendance at online tutorials or participation in forums), referrals to university departments, and other administrative tasks that are felt to be outside the remit of a tutor role.

Tutors generally felt that the hours spent in preparation and completing specific administrative tasks ate into contracted hours and detracted from their main tutoring aims and objectives. Conflicts between doing a good job and trying not to exceed contracted hours were evident in participant accounts.
This is an important concept because it connects to the previous discussions where tutors struggle to compromise and maintain professionalism within the boundaries of their online role.

There appeared to be a strong feeling amongst participants that administrative tasks not directly connected to teaching were demotivating. Further that many tasks seemed to be unrelated to the job of tutoring and this led to participants feeling that they were moderators or administrators rather than tutors or educators because of the online mode of delivery, and this is a key point that directly relates to how professional identity is perceived.

There is also, as Alan highlights, the time needed to revise planned sessions and connects this onerous task with the interface used. Further there is a suggestion that if you are not experienced at creating and delivering presentations it may be even more of a challenge.

...I'm reasonably competent in presentations and I can use that as a background when doing face-to-face...but to get this to work...within the interface we have to use within the OU....I am putting in hours if not days....even just to revise a session I did the previous year....so it is incredibly time consuming...(Alan)

There is a real sense of frustration in Alan’s extract because he is highlighting the numerous changes and additions/amendments to module materials, activities and general tutor duties. I feel here is really saying that over the lifetime of a module which is quite brief, changes should be kept to a minimum and that there needs to be some consistency each trimester so that once you have tutored a module, your preparation should be minimal the next time you deliver it. Where he talks about an interface Alan is referring to the whole online platform in terms of operational processes and this is something that is updated and changes frequently so this is where he feels a lot of time is wasted and he simply wants to get on with the teaching.

It is clear from Jane’s extract below that she also finds learning to operate delivery systems is time consuming and extends beyond contracted hours.
This also connects to concept 4.2.2 where limitation of contractual role is discussed.

……. certainly to start with it took a lot of effort and time to learn how to use the online elements such as OU live - there’s always something different to learn for the IT system....for which we’re not paid...the other problem is my own internet...it suddenly dies and then I'm completely stuffed...and then I cannot contact any students or do any OU work...that’s my biggest fear with it.... (Jane)

Jane’s extract also highlights problems when there are system failures because she then cannot complete work waiting. This connects to concept 2.2.1 where connectivity issues are discussed. Interpreting Jane’s point about her biggest fear I suggest that because of the remote nature of the online tutor role, connectivity and access to stable IT systems becomes overwhelmingly stressful in terms of expectations and anxiety related to failure or interruptions. Jane also highlights the frequency of having to learn new things related to IT and implies that these are difficult to keep up with as things change quickly. Therefore although at face value Jane seems to be suggesting that IT systems are responsible for the way she feels, the deeper interpretation is that she isn’t really fulfilling her function as a tutor; again here we see the emotional side of the role coming to the fore.

……it is much more time consuming because there’s no handouts - you have to make all your slides and prepare for breakout rooms....so groups have different elements of a topic to discuss...all these materials have to be preloaded and handled separately.....then they have to swap round...try and get some kind of discussion going...very time consuming to set up....(Jane)

Although on the face of it, Jane is talking about delivery of an online live session, she highlights the time spent in preparation and loading files.
Although within a tutor’s remuneration there is always an element of payment for preparing sessions, many tutors interviewed spend far too much time on this and feel they have no choice as they do not have the skills or experience of use to become familiar enough with platforms. It could be that tutors feel these tasks are not part of their role.

Tutors appear to feel that they are assumed to have a twenty-four-hour presence online:

…..I now explicitly tell students that I am not on call and am not available 24 hours a day…..(Sue)

Because Sue feels the need to be explicit we can reason that her past experiences have been largely negative with regard to being perceived as on call. Therefore she feels the needs to reinforce boundaries and this could be as much for her sake as the students’. In other words she seems to be demonstrating the need to reinforce her role boundaries here.

The term ‘on call’ is significant because by definition the term means that an individual can be contacted to provide a professional service as required, even though they will not be formally on duty. None of this applies to a tutorial role, yet it seems that there is an expectation, an unwritten contract, something non-tangible.

Linda also has some reservations about the perception of being on call that appear to be associated with the online tutor role:

…….just because they are online at 3am……..do they not think about this……sometimes I cannot believe what is expected…..I know I can just ignore the demands or sarcastic comments….you know……I emailed you yesterday but haven’t had a reply yet…..yes at 3am…I replied at 10.34 and 6 seconds….that type of thin…..makes me mad……..(Linda)
Here we see clear frustration and exasperation from Linda and she states, interestingly *what is expected* so there is an implication here that she feels being on call is part of the online tutor role in terms of how it is communicated, or not communicated to students. In other words perhaps the role is insufficiently outlined for students so they have no formal boundaries and their expectations of the online tutor role have no controls. What the data reveals is the questions over what exactly the online tutor role is. The tutors appear to be quite confused and also frustrated that their role seems to be expanding into areas for which they are neither prepared, trained for or willing to undertake. There is a sense that the tutors just want to teach and concentrate on their students but the role is becoming more diversified as the online modules and courses encompass more complex properties commensurate with advances in technology.

**Concept 1.2.3: Lack of spontaneity/immediacy**

The lack of spontaneity and immediacy of online forum interaction was cited as one of the main barriers to facilitating change and in turn supporting positive learning. Although forum access allows access to study over a twenty-four-hour period, there are many times when a student requires an immediate response in order to understand a topic, receive guidance or an answer to a question. Several tutors suggested that even if they log on more than once a day the chances of establishing a real time connection are rare and often the essence of the question is lost, or the student has sought information elsewhere. This also connects strongly to concept 1.2.2.

Throughout Mandy’s interview concerns and anxieties were raised over many activities an online tutor has to undertake during their day-to-day role and in the extract below this comes through clearly. You can sense that Mandy is concerned about not being online when students post queries or failing to pick up on messages quickly enough. She highlights a possible concern for online module participation and that is when students log in and see little or no activity they may not participate; she further suggests that
once students see someone participation they may all engage at the same time.

..... or you log in and see there has been no activity and you think...well there’s been nobody here since I last logged on...it’s really disheartening... .... maybe it’s because we’re not all on it at one time....because it’s an immediate forum in the sense of technology ...... The other bit that worries me is whether students will participate because certainly looking at the forums...the lack of participation...so we go from that to almost the expectation that students will suddenly all engage
......(Mandy)

If we distil Mandy’s extract a little further there are a few significant terms she uses which reveal potential vulnerabilities. First of all Mandy talks about being disheartened and this disconsolation connects to lack of motivation, being discouraged and also being dissatisfied. Mandy also talks about being worried that when she logs on students are not there; this can be interpreted in many ways but listening to Mandy’s interview I get the sense that she feels that she keeps missing the students and would be much happier if there could be more synchronised online communication. She has an anticipation of student engagement so there is a kind of stressful situation here where Mandy feels that suddenly all the students will log in at one time and she may or may not be ‘there’.

Although John has a much more relaxed view of his role he still feels that spontaneity is important and the immediacy of communication has a significant impact on learning:

........it is so frustrating......if the student was online when you respond ....well you’d have a chance to talk in a virtual way........would be great and you could get a dialogue going......you’d know then whether they understand......Once you have logged off the moment has passed.....you never
know whether the student has understood or not….the emails get lost in the morass of chit chat….(John)

What John seems to be talking about is the here and now, in ‘being’ mode if you like. Only in that here and now moment can effective dialogue and communication provide the certainty that understanding has taken place. John suggests here that if the moment passes and the student reads the response at a later time it may not have the same impact or meaning for them; in other words the moment is lost.

This implies that immediacy and spontaneity are important but also that tutors are unable to meet these criteria within an online learning environment unless you just happen to be logged on when students post messages. John makes a strong statement about this below and it supports the points highlighted from Mandy’s extract.

……there’s nothing like being in the same room as people and being able to talk about things there and then…. (John)

The positives of 24-hour access are not underestimated as students working full time can access module material and forums at any time of the day or night but as Mandy points out (below) these students often become the silent participators or perhaps they can only engage late at night and therefore their messages are always out of date and they lack the opportunity to engage with others within a reasonable timeframe. This highlights the problem that one size does not fit all, and indeed similar problems can be experienced in any other learning delivery mode.

….they still look to you as a teacher and expect you to ask the question and immediately give the answer……it’s about providing information and answers for them and not about leadership…. (Mandy)
Mandy also highlights issues of student expectation but there is a connection here to tutor leadership and considering this at a deeper level it seems that providing immediate responses does not align with principles tutors would prefer which is guiding and facilitating through tutorial direction.

Some tutors did express concern that for specific subjects, spontaneity and immediacy can make a big difference in whether a student understands or grasps a concept or becomes completely lost and some vocalised concern that some students performance may ultimately suffer because of this.

...you can physically see whether they get what you're saying....it's very rare on online modules that I will get someone asking me about the topic......those that don't engage tend not to do as well in their studies as others who do engage. For me as a tutor....unless I can encourage debate they are not able to examine different perspectives within essays or course work which you need to do. (Lyn)

Although Lyn does not use the terms immediacy or spontaneity, her point about having debate does connect to this because what Lyn seems to be indicating is her need to evaluate what is happening in a group and be able to quickly adjust her approach to encourage engagement and also establish whether students understand the topic being covered. Lyn highlights her need to be face- to- face with students as she is clearly vocalising the merits from her perspective of having visual or physical real time contact with her students.

Here Lyn also appears to make a connection between engagement and study outcomes. Where Lyn talks about physically seeing whether students ‘get’ what you are saying she refers to real time interaction and clearly her response is a spontaneous one to the students’ interaction. This is a significant observation from the data because it aligns with previous discussion points related to sharing knowledge and facilitation of learning.
Where Lyn talks about engagement above, she refers to forum and general online activity engagement and her statements directly reflect her perceptions and experience of associated outcomes.

There is a clear sense from the data of always looking ahead and not being in the here and now; a sense of hurriedness, always pushing on, getting to the end of a module if you will.

There is also key issue around the provision of guidance which is seen in some of the participants extracts:

……I need to be able to provide direction to my students….it’s part of who I am as an educator……I want to be challenged…I want them to question……not always the chance to do this…..(Jane)

Jane seems to be a little frustrated that she cannot always fulfil her professional role in the sense that providing guidance is part of who she is as a teacher or part of her professional identity. She appears to be saying that there is a lack of opportunity to do this within the online tutor role.

Below John is a little clearer on his position:

…I guess some get it…..and they want my help but others just see it…well you mark my work....and I give them what they want and that’s it…..yeah.....some do ask me questions or you know.....(John).

John talks in general terms and focusses on some students expressing a need for guidance and others not. The comment related to marking work highlights the dissatisfaction John seems to have with this situation and he further suggests that he simply gives students what they want. When considering this in more depth there appears to be an acceptance that
there is no point in pushing the issue but conforming to student preferences is the best way forward. John goes further:

\[
\ldots\ldots\textit{when there are only a couple of students engaging I feel sorry for them} \ldots\ldots\textit{you aren’t the tutor you really want to be by helping people to learn} .\quad (\text{John})
\]

What I feel is being expressed here is perhaps complacency at the situation because although John is acknowledging that a few students want to be active participants in the learning process, the job of getting everyone to be motivated and share the same objectives is extremely challenging and it is best to simply accept the situation as it presents itself.

Linda seems to feel a similar frustration keenly but connects to the summative elements of a module as benchmarks or milestones for students rather than signifying the end of sections of the learning journey:

\[
\ldots\ldots\textit{it often doesn’t feel as though you are working with online students} \ldots\ldots\textit{they are just getting from one TMA to the other} .\quad ...
\]

Thinking about Linda’s point here what is evident is that there is no sense of \textit{working} with students, so again no connection to the learning process in terms of being able to share knowledge or the students’ study journey. So what Linda feels is a forward progression from the summative assignments without students’ wanting anything more from their tutor.

Sue’s extract below highlights this well but from a different perspective:

\[
\ldots\ldots\textit{I tend to work with what’s there rather than goes in a set plan} .\quad (\text{Sue})
\]

This would appear to be a very pragmatic view but also agreeing with John by almost seeing what each situation presents and working with it as a
unique entity rather than entering the situation with preconceived plans, strategies and objectives.

This master theme and its sub-concepts has revealed several significant points which relate to how online tutors make sense of their role in terms of experiencing job satisfaction in a role which is dynamic in the sense it has to keep pace with changes and additional role requirements which are not perceived as traditionally associated with tutoring. Tutors appear to find it very challenging to maintain motivation and foster potential in their students because of the extra duties that are associated with the role yet viewed as outside of the boundaries of their tutor remit. This leads to compromise which can result in psychological conflicts between professional values and the mechanics or processes of online tutor delivery. The lack of spontaneity or immediacy within the online platform seems to further challenge and undermine some of the efforts to make effective compromises and this in turn exacerbates professional vulnerability.

4.6: Master theme 2: Transitioning change

This theme explores the experiences of participants and how they transition change from blended support to online support. The theme covers a range of sub-themes and concepts which explore physical challenges as well as perceived limitations of role and how professional aims are met. The theme is divided into sub-themes and concepts as shown in Table 4 below.

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Table 4: Master theme 2: Transitioning change

Sub-theme 2.1: Limitations of the online tutoring role

It could be argued therefore that the online tutoring role appears to have inherent limitations, and the data reveals issues of limitation in the scope of the online tutorial role and restrictions in the mode of delivery as possible barriers to the full application of skills and the effective communication of experience; this links back to sub-theme 1.2 (facilitation of change). Sub-theme 2.1 relates to the following concepts: limited scope (of the online tutor role) (2.1.1), promoting inclusivity (2.1.2), and application of skills and experience (2.1.3).

Concept 2.1.1: Limited scope (of the online tutor role)

Some participants expressed concern that they experience limited scope with regard to communication strategies when teaching within an online module. The issues appear to be mainly that tutors feel they cannot communicate effectively within the forums and teaching is challenging over this medium. In addition many voiced frustrations at the restricted possibilities of using the real time online tutorials as effective use depends not only on tutor ability to manage and operate the system but also on students’ ability to engage fully with the system. From the data what seems to be happening is that students only listen and the ‘live’ sessions become more like lectures.

Limitation of the role: just a talking head

By comparing herself to a remote presenter (talking head) with no interaction, Jane draws attention to an important facet of online tutoring and a key limitation of the role.

…..*When I first starting doing this it felt like I was delivering a lecture and the students just sat back and listened and I just talked. And then I thought, hang on a minute...I don’t want to be just a talking head…*(Jane)
I felt this was a key sub-concept and links to previous concepts and sub-concepts as well as providing a strong connection to further themes and concepts. It would have been easy to overlook the phrase *just a talking head* as being a throw away comment but when I gave it much more thought and tried to interpret exactly what Jane mean here I could appreciate the importance of it as both a metaphor and gem. A talking head is traditionally related to television or media productions where you only see the head and shoulders of a presenter. They are talking at you, there is no interaction and they are detached from the reality of your own life. A modern interpretation of this phrase is more concerning and one which I feel Jane was intending to communicate; here the talking head is a persistent, idiotic and often despised person that simply never refrains from talking and treats everyone else as an inferior to them. I was quite shocked to explore these urban and traditional definitions and explanations of the phrase and when I looked again at Jane’s point I could suddenly appreciate her position in a much more intense way. Jane also came to a sudden realisation that this was not the person she *is* or wants to be perceived as.

The sense of disconnection that Jane describes here is palpable and her dissatisfaction at this sense of detachment is clear.

*...I'm pretty confident I can get that to work in any teaching situation with students sitting in a room because it doesn't take very long to get the one or two students who you know you can work with...the dynamics are there....and I would come away from a face-to-face session quite exhausted...but you know...we've actually achieved a number of things. With online sessions...sometimes I wonder quite what the students are making of this...or of me.......I don't know...*(Alan)*

Although in the above quotation Alan talks about dynamics and *exhaustion* associated with achievement; on further exploration the meaning seems to be connected with Jane’s earlier point about detachment and not really
understanding whether he has achieved the objectives of an online session. Aland talks about gaining a momentum when you have direct contact with students and he questions how students perceive him and the situation. The point about *dynamics* is also revealing because he is referring to a change within a group; a system where there is movement or fluidity or tangible opposing forces that force change within a group. Alan obviously feels this important energy cannot be replicated within an online group but that it is central to being effective as an online tutor.

Alan seems to be aligned with Jane’s feelings of being a *talking head* because he is identifying achievement as a core part of the role but something that is often eluded within the online learning medium, so perhaps Alan also feels that much of the time he is simply talking *at* his students rather than with them.

When Alan talks about coming away from a face-to-face tutorial feeling exhausted he links this to achievement as noted in the previous section, and from the extract there is a sense of professional satisfaction. He then questions what students make of the online delivery and from this there is a sense that there are few direct positive comparisons to the face-to-face role, for Alan. It can be suggested that the implication is the online role has restrictions or limitations.

> ...my feeling is at times it feels quite disconnected. I don't always feel that I am involved with students as though I would be if I had met them......(John)

John also talks about feeling *disconnected*, so feeling disengaged, detached, separated from his students. This again aligns to Jane’s point about feeling like a talking head because it provides a real sense of remoteness and a kind of two-dimensional situation.

From earlier extracts we know that John prefers to be in contact with his students on a regular basis and when he talks about online engagement he
says he feels disconnected, so dissociated, isolated, lacking a semblance of cohesiveness or sequence.

Alan brings us back to the question of face-to-face versus online delivery here because he talks about needing to get the same dimension and striving for this but the scope of the online tutor role prevents him from achieving his aim.

..... it’s very difficult to get the same dimension as if you were...you know working with pairs or groups of students in a room ........(Alan)

This reference to disconnection is also strongly connected to Jane’s metaphor of being a talking head. We can envisage the remoteness of the online tutor from students as being very like a television presenter yet without the visual aspect so hearing but not seeing, again, a two-dimensional process rather than a three dimensional one with depth.

**Concept 2.1.2: Promoting inclusivity**

The promotion of inclusivity was viewed as central to facilitation of positive learning but as the following quotations highlight, within the online delivery this is often challenging. However, some tutors develop unique strategies for encouraging inclusivity in terms of joining in on forum discussions and live sessions.

.....face-to-face I can see what’s going on in the room...I can see the blank faces...the light bulb moment..... ..... and it makes it far easier to know whether to go over something again in a different way ...(Jane)

**Striving for inclusivity**

Jane states that for her, visual and audio contact with students allows her to establish whether her students are engaged with activities, learning or
whether there are those that have become somewhat excluded. Jane notes that if she can 'see' this then she would automatically know to cover a topic in a different way and also this would lead to inclusion. Interestingly the blank faces comment conjures up an acute image in one’s mind of an immediate recognition of not understanding, a sense of needing guidance or clarification and a non-verbal communication which is extremely important to a tutor. Conversely when Jane talks about the light bulb moment she is telling us how easy it is to see when a student has understood. When I was interpreting this extract I listened again to the recording and visualised these two different reactions in my mind. This reaffirmed the importance on non-verbal cues and added clarity to some of the previous extracts where tutors have struggled to articulate some of the challenges they have with the online mode of delivery; a significant one being the inability to ‘see’ what is going on rather than ‘hear’; so again a lost dimension.

…. For some modules the basis for an online session might be very similar to what I would do in a face-to-face session although the way it is scheduled it doesn’t quite work out that way...but for some modules I am doing online tuition but the module might not have been designed to be an online module. So often the material or content doesn’t nicely fit into teaching online....but I’ve been able to develop that so it sort of works...there’s enough bits and pieces that I can create an online session …. (Alan)

The practicalities of inclusivity are important for Alan which is what the above extract expresses. Instead of using imperfect or inappropriate materials Alan creates and redesigns material for explicit use within the online platform.

….it’s getting over that awkward silence....that initial pause....and I found that if I just …give me a group and they understand what to do I say OK off you go…..turn the mic off and just sit there and it can be 2 minutes before anything happens...if I can get past that sort of ....... the awkward silence just doesn’t become
awkward to me...but it does take up session time...and then they start doing...and this was a big thing for me to get over....not being embarrassed by the silence and not being embarrassed by the fact that nobody was doing anything....just wait...I found it....it does happen eventually…(Jane)

In Jane’s extract above we some interesting strategies to promote inclusivity but this is quite a harsh strategy and one that not all online tutors would feel comfortable adopting. For Jane, inclusivity is important and takes priority over the strict session timings. I interpret this to be a strategy to overcome the blank face non-verbal cue Jane spoke of earlier because she appears to use the silence to force communication rather than continue with her session not knowing what the situation is with regard to student understanding. This clearly has some success for Jane as she talks about students starting to ‘do’ something, in other words start interacting with her and other students in the session.

.... I think it [mandatory participation] would make a difference to their experience; because they are more likely to do it. Whether it would make a difference to the quality of their learning I don't know...(John)

John talks about mandatory engagement in online activities as a way of ensuring inclusivity; in other words, you are forcing students to participate or face some kind of sanction. He believes it would make a positive difference to the students’ learning experiences, but interestingly he questions whether the quality of learning would be changed. I wondered here about John questioning the quality of learning but on reflection I can see that John is connecting mandatory or compulsory attendance and engagement with a lower level of learning. Perhaps students who are forced to engage might prepare ahead and therefore the dynamics of a session would be compromised. This is an interesting perception and of obvious concern to John but as he has no experience of mandatory engagement on modules he was not able to expand his feelings on this.
...I don’t know whether it’s about confidence...I don’t know whether we …… we never get an opportunity to break down the barriers (Linda)

What Linda highlights here for us is whether inclusivity can be connected to confidence levels rather than practical issues or preferences. Importantly Linda talks about the needs to be able to break down barriers to effective incisiveness and questions whether the online delivery of modules provides adequate opportunities for achieving this. The term barrier is an interesting one because in education we usually think of barriers in terms of limited access, shortcomings of the educational systems or even shortcomings of the teaching itself (extrinsic). Here though Linda seems to be referring to psychological barriers or intrinsic barriers where students are protecting themselves sub-consciously from being judged, not wishing to reveal their educational status, perhaps having problems with articulation or other personal reasons why they feel they cannot confidently engage. Linda feels there are few opportunities to break down these barriers in an online context and this appears to connect strongly with the limitations of the online platforms themselves and lack of real time communication between students and tutors.

**Concept 2.1.3: Application of skills and experience**

What most of the participants want to achieve is facilitation of learning through the application of their skills and experience within delivery of a module. Distillation of interpretation for this concept once again focused on peeling back layers of analysis to reveal deeper and hidden meanings.

Participants seemed to find this challenging when working solely online.

...but on social sciences... perhaps the very nature of social science is that you do need to debate issues so we are all fighting to retain the face-to-face elements...it might well be discipline specific.... For me as a tutor...unless I can encourage
debate they are not able to examine different perspectives within essays or course work which you need to do (Lyn)

Lyn tells us that debate is central to tutoring effectively and this is in turn, she believes, subject or discipline specific. Lyn connects this directly to outcomes in written work, so it seems her main concern is academic support through use of her experience and skills. Perhaps an important word in Lyn’s extract is encourage because here she is talking about giving support, motivating, stimulating development or even giving hope to students that they can achieve success. Lyn points out that she feels unless she is able to encourage students they are unable to fully grasp important concepts or view them from different perspectives, so my interpretation here is that Lyn sees this scenario as two dimensional instead of three, so there is a lack of depth which aligns with previous points from 2.1.2.

...when you have people coming through and you have absolutely no contact with them apart from marking TMAs [tutor marked assignments]......this is the way it seems to be going.....the other thing that I think is critically important is the informal thing....I used to set up a chat forum.....it worked really well.....but now this does not happen...........I don't feel I am able to use my skills, for example I had a recent student with low morale and who had come to study after a long time....she was doing quite poorly and I felt if only I had been able to have regular face-to-face contact I could have given her so much more support......this is a limitation of my role and also a limitation of my skill set....(Sue)

Sue is concerned with effective pastoral support and feels she is unable to use her skills effectively within online delivery systems. In the example she provides it would seem she associates the students’ poor performance with the lack of her being able to use her skills effectively. Breaking this down a little more it seems Sue feels the informal side of tutoring needs to run parallel to the formal side so one complements the other. In fact she sees
this as a critical pathway to effective learning and when we look at the part of the extract where she talks about a student with low morale we see Lyn connects to a lack of face to face interaction as a barrier to inclusivity and she also highlights her feelings that she was powerless to help the student because of this lack of opportunity. What Lyn seems to be saying here is that the online platform lacks holism and each element she refers to cannot act independently of one another; instead there is an intimate connection between them, so one part cannot be understood in isolation of all the other parts.

*I feel sorry for them [students]... and the way I work is to engage with the ones that want to engage and encourage them....otherwise, yeah it is just a paper exercise... ...and for me education is very much about still wanting to learn in the way they wish and I like people to find their own way and I'm there to guide them...and but then the other side of the equation is that they need to want to do it....I see myself as a partner...(John)*

In the above extract John demonstrates his willingness to apply his skills and share his knowledge but almost acquiesces to the limitations of the online environment and moreover suggests to us that students need to be proactive to take advantage of this. John makes it clear he is there to provide guidance and be a learning partner, but he sympathises in general terms for students trying to negotiate their way through the online experience. One interesting point here is the use of the word *partner.* So here we can interpret this to mean two people engaged together in the same activity. John is therefore seeking parity or equality with his students; he wants to communicate this and develop collaborative relationships to encourage and facilitate positive learning experiences. I felt that unlike Lyn, John’s attitude is that he doesn’t worry too much about the students that don’t actively want to engage but focusses on those who do and he says this is about students finding *their own way,* in other words they will learn when they want to learn. However John starts the extract by saying he feels *sorry* for students and I feel he is referring to all students because they
have to find the pathway and choose whether to go down it or not. This could be interpreted as a conflict because on the one hand John seems to advocate individual preference but on the other hand there is a sense that he is willing them all to select the path of engagement and learning but without his influence in this.

*Online module feedback and feedback where you have had face-to-face or some kind of live contact with students does differ...it shouldn't do really should it but when you know more about the student...you can just put a little bit more in can't you.....I know that all marking is supposed to be fair and professional but I think you're probably more likely to have a bit more warmth in there if you've actually met somebody and understand them...*(John)

Here John is quite open about the disparity he feels exists in his own support of online students. In this example he is discussing marking students work and he suggests that when you do not have face-to-face contact with students, the provision of feedback may be less comprehensive and personalised. Perhaps, for his online students, he is not applying his skills to marking fully or he may feel he is unable to because in order to do so, he first has to establish a face-to-face relationship with them.

I found this open stance a little disconcerting but on reflection I can see that what John is talking about here is relationships; he is really saying that although he should treat all students in the same manner he cannot help but feel more affinity with those who he has had direct contact with and who he knows something about. When he talks about feedback he refers to imparting and sharing his knowledge and experience to students and what is clear is that he feels he can do this more easily with students who he has developed a professional relationship with through face to face contact.
Therefore overall I sense that participants feel they inhabit a two-dimensional world when they tutor online. There is a perceived loss of dimension which is depth. Depth adds meaning to their role and how they apply their skills and communicate knowledge, so without this added dimension they struggle to meet the challenges of their role.

**Sub-theme 2: Information technology challenges**

Ever-changing IT can be challenging within the learning environment and particularly for tutors trying to play catch up with change that happens frequently. This is particularly noticeable for tutors who are perhaps appointed to modules only once per year, so they lack the consistency of use with regard to IT platforms, tools and importantly the confidence that familiarity of use brings. Sub-theme 2 relates to the following concepts: connectivity (2.2.1), promoting meaningful engagement (2.2.2) and prioritising learning (2.2.3).

Within this concept there were several key sub-concepts which have been explored and interpreted.

*Concept 2.2.1: Connectivity*

No matter how good a service provider package and local internet coverage are, we are all subject to connectivity problems from time to time. This can be due to power interruptions, problems with service provider delivery or device failures. Several tutors felt that the anxiety connectivity problems cause can be overwhelming and often prevents them from ‘doing a good job’. They extend this concern to student connectivity as well and express concerns when students use mobile telephones or computer systems that lack the capacity for full online interaction.

*Challenges*

Connectivity cannot be interpreted as anything else other than, you are connected or you are not. So I had to look at the hidden meanings in
participant interviews related to these issues and one of these issues is revealed as a skills gap. Jane expressed her concerns particularly well.

...with online you prepare your slides and narrative but if the students don't understand it's difficult to navigate......the other problem is my own internet...it suddenly dies and then I'm completely stuffed...and then I cannot contact any students or do any OU work...that's my biggest fear with it..... … but you have to be really experienced to feel confident and to start with .....(Jane)

The concerns about connectivity appear to cause some apprehension about whether online platforms detract from the process of learning. In the above extract Jane is highlighting several interesting points; the first is preparation for delivery on online material and I noted here that Jane talks about preparing a narrative which resonates with an earlier point Alan made. Again we are looking at a scripted overview which will by its nature lack spontaneity and carry with it, restrictions that are usually associated with podcasts. Jane then talks about students not being able to understand it and I interpret this to mean that because the slide presentation is uploaded as a fixed entity and the ‘narrator’ is following a script there is a challenge around how this can be navigated and resolved within an online context. Where Jane makes an association to internet connectivity here is because her internet accessibility is variable and she often experiences variations, sometimes losing connection altogether. Therefore getting back to the session after reconnecting is a challenge and further impairs effective facilitation of student understanding.

Jane then mixes things up a little and talks about not being able to contact students or complete her work if she cannot get online; moving on to saying this creates a fear. Listening back to the recording these points come all in a row as if Jane is trying to put forward lots of different reasons why connectivity might be an issue but right at the end she reveals that the real issue is experience of using information technology and being able to handle
failures in connection and the problems of navigating a complex online platform. So we could question whether the problem really is connectivity or familiarisation of use; we have already heard that some participants find the complexities of changing online platforms difficult to work with in terms of training and understanding how to use various tools, and Jane’s point highlights the anxiety that is often attached to the process of teaching online.

…..The other bit that worries me is whether students will participate because they don’t have the IT confidence
...(Mandy)

Mandy highlights the converse argument here and that is whether students have the ability to use online systems. Mandy questions whether a lack of engagement could be related to students not having confidence in their online skills. It is one thing to use social media and be able to interact well via email and smart devices but navigation of an online learning platform and using associated tools and technology which may be far removed from the normal social device use, could as Mandy suggests here result in a lack of participation.

Therefore the concept of connectivity I feel is a metaphor for inexperience and lack of confidence in the use of online learning technology and it appears that an easy justification is an internet connectivity problem.

Below Lyn also has a similar point to make.

….. some students aren’t able to participate because they don’t have confidence [in IT]...(Lyn)

Sue’s extract below was far more pragmatic because she acknowledges that everyone has to change to keep pace with technological advances; therefore, she seems to be saying that this is a responsibility for everyone involved with both learning and teaching.
...in the context of the virtual world, rules have to change and we need to start developing coping strategies to deal with that....(Sue)

However, when we interpret the phrase *coping strategies to deal with that*, what Sue is saying on the one hand is that everyone has to move with changes and update their knowledge and skills, yet she is also saying that you have to manage the change rather than embrace it. So in effect Sue is suggesting that developing tactics to help manage the challenges enables her to endure them. There is a conflict here because the first part of the extract is result; we have to move with the times; but the second part is saying, well actually I can’t move with the times but I can manage how I deal with change by developing strategies to help me cope. This is a compensatory measure which has a justification bound up in a pragmatic statement but the underlying vulnerability is clear.

The term *coping strategies* in Sue’s quotation implies that there are challenges and problems which need to be resolved. We can assume that Sue feels some form of action plan is required in the short and long term to meet the objectives of the online tutor role. This is an interesting point because Sue also seems to suggest that the *rules* are not static but dynamic and *have* to change.

**Concept 2.2.2: Promoting meaningful engagement**

Mandy expressed very well that the inability to interact with students in real-time can impair promotion of meaningful engagement, particularly highlighting the need to capture students’ engagement early on in a module. Mandy also talks about online conversations and expresses the difficulties she experiences with developing these and the connection between meaningful engagement and experience in use of online systems is evident.
Mandy talks about *connection* and the significance of this cannot be underestimated because it relates to relationship building and the importance of establishing and maintaining a professional and effective collaboration between student and tutor. The challenges outlined by Mandy of trying to achieve this within the online context seem insurmountable or continually out of reach. It seems the mechanics of developing this crucial relationship within the online learning context eludes Mandy and she seems to be asking a pertinent question here which how she can achieve success. Once again a sense of vulnerability and lack of confidence is revealed.

In the next extract Mandy discusses this further and draws our attention to the fact that once students engage they tend to engage with each other and not the tutor. Therefore, the tutor becomes an outsider which relates to role context (discussed in theme 4).

…….I think it’s to do with the engagement thing and how you get people interested in the subject... drawing them in....and I have noticed that sometimes the students come on forums and start having that conversation with each other and I think...yes!! that’s a good idea....but they don’t want to have the conversation with me... .... maybe it’s because we’re not all on it at one time....because it's an immediate forum in the sense of technology (Mandy)

We have heard similar comments from Mandy and other participants about engagement and the problems with technology in previous extracts but this one has a critical point about student engagement between each other and
not the tutor. There is clear enthusiasm and even excitement about the fact that when students engage with each other it is seen as very positive. Yet in the next part of the extract we see disappointment that there is no engagement with the tutor. This sets up a dilemma and conflict because once again we see a compromise because yes, the students are engaging online but not as intended and the tutor is excluded from this process. Again we see a justification in the form of excusing the exclusion by saying that perhaps the reason for these interactions is a chance encounter mediated by common login to the module. By this token Mandy appears to reassure herself that all is well and she can maintain her professional status and feel valued.

A further example of this perception was articulated by Jane:

```
........annoyingly when I am doing a live session students seem to use the chat facility to catch up on gossip and general chat.....so why can’t they engage with me.....after all I am the tutor......sometimes I feel I am wasting my time........(Jane).
```

Jane’s annoyance is clear and associated with the students’ apparent dissociation from the online session content and her as a tutor. She feels superfluous and frustrated that her efforts seem wasted. Her feelings of being compromised professionally are clear as she asks, ‘why me’. What was evident as I continued with interpretation of the data were the connections and threads between each concept and key points revealed by participants: moreover what I was seeing very clearly was a picture emerging of how all these points interlock.

**Concept 2.2.3: Prioritising learning**

For all tutors interviewed, positive learning experiences are a priority for them and many are concerned that the complexities of internet connectivity and various platforms, tools and general IT requirements, learning is no longer the main priority. Mandy’s extract below talks about opportunities for *doing*
things together and she is referring here to teaching and learning but where she finally states this cannot be done she is connecting back to her previous concerns about connectivity and being able to use the online systems competently in order to teach and learn.

\[\text{...and for me the bit about technology is sort of the same thing...there could be an opportunity there for us to be doing things... together...about running things...even using the live system to practice or chat together...but you can't do that} \]

\(\text{....(Mandy)}\)

The interesting point here is where Mandy talks about doing things together and she suggests that this is a priority and a way of working collaboratively ensuring relationship development and facilitation of effective and positive learning. There is a sense here that even though the technology is advanced, a lack of opportunity to use it fully or push its boundaries is not available or simply out of reach for online tutors.

Alan is quite direct about this and when he talks about the difficulties of being able to teach and involve students he connects this with the lack of ability to directly interact. We can assume here that learning will be in some way compromised.

\[\text{...you can't be as interactive and it's quite difficult to teach students...so in some ways I feel that it's difficult to really involve the students (Alan)}\]

Where Alan’s points connect to Mandy’s are within the feelings that involving students within online learning contexts is difficult. Alan talks about this as being quite difficult and he relates this directly to teaching and if we interpret this to mean attending to students’ needs or intervening so they learn specific things we can see how problematic it might feel if an online tutor perceives they cannot meet those needs or deliver key interventions.
The need to share knowledge is central to the learning process and Mandy’s interview extract below demonstrates that this is somewhat diminished within the online environment. Because she finds it more enjoyable to share knowledge in a face-to-face context it is therefore easier. Once again this implies that learning is somehow diminished within the online context.

"...for me it’s about a strong belief in the need to share knowledge and experience with people coming up through the system...but I feel that I’m doing it less with the online stuff to be completely honest....because I really enjoy that aspect of the face-to-face. That’s the context where I can talk all day...so if I’m in that environment it’s something I know well and I passionately believe in...so I’m away on that one...it’s harder to do in the online context (Mandy)."

We know from Mandy’s earlier extracts that she finds the whole online delivery mode and methods challenging. Interpreting her extract we see that she seeks a channel or vehicle for sharing knowledge and has a professional belief that this is a central element of her role. The comparisons Mandy draws between the online and face to face method of delivery highlights where she feels there is an imbalance and moreover she implies that the face to face environment is far more commensurate with her own comfort zone than teaching in a remote context. We can also suggest that where Mandy connects to her knowledge, experience and passion for teaching there is a sense of diminished confidence in her ability to replicate this within her role as an online tutor.

"I need to somehow get students to understand what I know.......(John)"

Here we see that John is seeking a way to help students share his knowledge and the term somehow indicates that he is still seeking and has
not yet found a suitable or effective way of achieving this within the online platform or mode of delivery.

………teaching is about being able to share knowledge and let students know about what I have experienced…. (Jane).

Jane reaffirms John’s sentiments here but there is a subtle difference because Jane seems to be categoric in her statement and links sharing knowledge firmly to teaching or attending to students’ needs, experience and feelings and intervening when necessary. Letting students know has a feel of recognition about it so here we see that Jane has a ‘need’ for students to recognise this knowledge and this goes beyond a simple imparting of knowledge but has an imperative quality about it or an essential obligation value. Therefore interpreting Jane’s point here I suggest that she feels an obligation to delivery this imperative, so Jane feels this is not only a moral issue but a dutiful one.
4.7:  Master theme 3: Dynamic connections

Within this theme participant experiences related to relationships, direct contact, professional responsibility and the tutor role are explored. Connections are also highlighted which relate to student expectation, perception of the tutor role and confidence in online study. The theme is divided into sub-themes and concepts as shown in Table 5 below.

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Table 5: Master theme 3: Dynamic connections

Sub-theme 3.1: Face-to-face contact with students is essential to facilitation of positive learning

The need for regular face-to-face contact with students was a consistent theme running through the data. Participants demonstrated concern that this has been diminished and that within online modules the opportunities for face-to-face are restricted to a limited number of live sessions using presentations and audio feeds. There was also concern that group tuition means that tutors are rarely able to develop a meaningful relationship with students. The key point seems to relate to positive learning here which participants suggest is dependent on face-to-face interaction. This sub-theme
relates to the following concepts: non-verbal cues (3.1.1), student expectations, perception and confidence (3.1.2), and communication of the tutor role and context (3.1.3).

Within this concept there were several key sub-concepts which have been explored and interpreted.

**Concept 3.1.1: Non-verbal cues**

Non-verbal cues are suggested to be essential for tutors to establish whether students have understood a topic, are remaining motivated or seem distant and may require additional support, explanation of a concept of topic; or whether they feel simply overwhelmed or out of their depth. This was expressed in several interview transcripts.

….. *Non-verbal cues are critical and in a face-to-face context you have these……you can see whether someone is comfortable with what they’re doing… whether they’re part of the group or not part of the group… I think the non-verbal stuff is just so important*…(Jane)

We saw a connecting extract earlier in the chapter about non-verbal cues but here rather than talking about skills and experience the tutors are vocalising this from a much more psychological perspective and talking in terms of belonging and being part of the group. The distillation of analysis required some diverse consideration and looking at the transcripts from a more abstracted perspective to try and engage with the psychology rather than the process.

Jane describes non-verbal cues as ‘critical’ so attaches significant importance to them. In the extract Jane brings in several key terms and highlights her feelings about students feeling comfortable in the learning environment. This is connected to feelings of psychological safety where a student doesn’t worry about asking questions and has a confidence in their status within the group. Teachers can ensure psychological safety by using active listening, using appropriate non-confrontational body language,
develop an open mindset and create a sense of shared identity. What Jane is suggesting is that this cannot be achieved within a remote learning platform.

........I just think those cues are so much harder to get when you're working solely online....you get nothing back...and even what you do get back...I suppose there's not that social interaction.... (Mandy)

The connection to social interaction in Mandy’s extract tells us that she feels a social interaction is important to the learning environment and links this to non-verbal cues. Mandy is looking at this from a different perspective to Jane but from both extracts we have psychological aspects of non-verbal cues and combined they seem to make a strong case for not excluding these from the learning environment.

Linda has a similar perspective on this as highlighted below:

.....with a face to face environment you build up far more of a relationship I think.................it is actually a two- way relationship........they [students] get to see you.....a bit more human if you like.......(Linda)

Linda goes further and uses the term human which is interesting because what Linda appears to be suggesting is that if there is visual contact between tutors and students it is more of a collaborative relationship and has the characteristics associate with interactions between people rather than remote interactions via an online medium. So again, a sense of belonging and a type of kinship or affiliation.

**Concept 3.1.2: Student expectations, perception and confidence**

Managing student expectations within an online platform can be challenging as participants seem to suggest. Perceptions of who the online tutor is, and their role is not always effectively communicated and often misunderstood. Many students lack confidence to engage fully within an online platform and
silent participation, whilst noted and often followed up is of concern to tutors because they wonder whether these students are getting as much from online learning as they would from face-to-face or blended.

**Perception and confidence: being invisible**

Jane talks of feeling ‘invisible’ and that the perception of students is unclear. Jane suggests that the Open University persona is a shield behind which tutors work and moreover she feels that this is detrimental to the overall image that any university that offers online study wants to project. Interpreting the meaning behind Jane’s extract it is clear that she has a sense of professional pride that is somewhat compromised by her position as an online tutor. She further seems to suggest that students have no interest or regard for online tutors.

…: I think it makes the courses invisible and we kind of hide behind this huge thing called the OU. Students also don’t seem to be interested when it is totally online…they don’t seem to think of us as tutors…I think it doesn’t look good for universities…(Jane)

The interesting point here is that Jane infers the responsibility for this lies with the university and relates student perception and expectation to how each university might be viewed externally. The lack of transparency Jane highlights can be interpreted to mean that the predetermined nature of online modules and courses leave no room for dynamics and therefore the unseen elements are those of the tutor and what their role is. In other words the top layer is the module material for example, the tangible element but subsequent layers which should have priority of importance are ignored or hidden.

… students who came back to me and said look I’m really struggling here….I would really like to have had the opportunity to provide extra support but at the end of the day I had to tell them to talk to student support in terms of your options and what they are..(Mandy)
Although Mandy’s extract links to concepts 4.2.2 (limitation of contractual role) and 4.1.2 (autonomy of role), here she discusses the lack of opportunity within the online learning environment to provide the type and amount of support that she would prefer. Mandy talks about extra support and she clearly feels that within a blended learning environment she is able to more easily provide this. There is a clear sense of frustration that Mandy feels her only option is to refer students to the study support team. The reluctance to refer students on to another department signifies a loss of control and a compromise of her position in terms of how students perceive her. This connects well to Jane’s point about feeling invisible; so being unable to be seen, passed over, not noticed.

**Concept 3.1.3: Communication of the tutor role and context**

The importance of being able to communicate the tutorial role came through strongly in the data and this also connects back to concept 3.1.2. Role context is often unclear to tutors, and if tutors are unclear on their role then it follows that they find it challenging to communicate it to students. Therefore, there is a sense of this being an important problem to be addressed.

…I think that students in online modules really do think you are a virtual teacher….I also think that students panic when they realise what’s expected of them and often resort to ranting on the virtual platform….not considering that you are actually a human being…..we just have to get on with it….there is no choice if you want to remain in the job…(Sue)

**The tutor role in context: feeling disconnected**

Sue’s extract above also connects to concept 3.1.2 (student expectations, perception and confidence). Here Sue highlights the challenges of communicating the tutor role and likens it to being a *virtual teacher*. I think what Sue means here is that they perceive that she is not a real person (this is supported by her comments about not being a human being) because
virtual teaching refers to asynchronous learning where students and tutors are logged onto a platform at the same time. It is concerning that in order to remain *in the job* Sue feels she has to put up with dissent from students who may misunderstand her role or underestimate the amount of work required to complete their studies. What Sue expresses here are concerns that tutors have no options and moreover that there are few constraints on students with regard to appropriate behaviour within online learning platforms.

*People feel that if there is a face-to-face element it is a proper course...well that's my experience... if it's just an online thing...yeah people don't necessarily view it in the same way.......I think...my feeling is at times it feels quite disconnected.* (John)

In John’s extract above he talks about the perceived validity of online courses and perhaps when discussing the differential view between online and face-to-face modules it explains why it feels disconnected at times for him. This would imply that it is more challenging to communicate tutor role and context to students who hold this view. Concerningly John suggests that online courses or modules are somehow inferior to face to face learning and he goes further to suggest that in his *experience* many students feel the same. The disconnection John talks about could be interpreted as a feeling of there being a lack of logical sequence, or even being separated from the reality of a situation. So here we can suggest this directly relates to the remote mode of online tutor delivery creating a type of broken ‘link’ between the student, tutor and module/course itself. The whole is unconnected with all of its summary parts.

*...but if you chase students too much it becomes harassment.......students also post negative things about tutors on social media and then we get mixed feedback...........the expectations from students is huge and I don’t feel students appreciate that these things [admin problems] are nothing to do with us......I feel pressured to get over negative student*
For Jane, the negative feedback, not only in the public domain but within the university online platform is a significant issue. She talks about having to attend to issues which are not within the tutor role remit and having to accept inappropriate behaviour from students which is personal. Here again we get a sense of disconnection from the tutor role and a strong feeling that students are disinterested or uninformed about what exactly the tutor role is. This supports Sue’s view which appears to highlight the need for clarity with regard to the tutor role and indeed, student responsibility for appropriate behaviour online.

…. students also question whether we are qualified…messages seem to think we could even be students who have just done the course or something…. (Jane)

Jane highlights once again the need for clarity over the tutor role and confirmation of professional standing which also connects to concept 4.1.1 (communicating competency and experience to students). This sense of disconnection is again clear; the students seemingly unable to understand the tutor role and moreover making incorrect assumptions which increases the ‘cycle’ of disconnection. I felt this cycle of disconnection is important and for me it is one of the gems within the analysis and one which is articulated in many guises through participant transcripts.

Sub-theme 3.2: Communities of practice

Most of the participants viewed peer and colleague interaction as essential to their role and development of strong communities of practice appears to underpin all facets of professionalism and feeling included within the university staff. Communities of practice and associated relevant literature were discussed in section 2.3 (professional identity as a concept). This sub-theme relates to the following concepts: sense of belonging (3.2.1),
consistency of contact (3.2.2), collaboration (3.2.3), and professional responsibility (3.2.4).

**Concept 3.2.1: Sense of belonging**

Participants vocalised the need for feeling as though they belong, and many felt they were outsiders, not considered part of the main university staff. This sense of belonging is central to effective tutoring as it establishes where they fit into the university hierarchy and also links back to student perception of what they exactly ‘do’.

… I love regional get togethers…..although…regional centres are going…I was close to a centre but I have moved so regional events are a long way away but I now have to pack the camper van and stay overnight. ….Something online would be good…not just before a new course starts…or a debrief…it would be better than nothing…..I really enjoy meeting people……but it doesn't bother me on a day to day basis…..having worked in an office context where bitchiness can really get you down…moving to working on my own, now for 12 years…I am quite happy with my own company…. (Jane)

Jane makes points about the importance of regional events because she sees peer interaction as an integral part of the tutor role. Given the closure of many regional centres Jane feels that this opportunity will become more limited and suggests that there should be something in its place. Jane’s last point which refers to her previous role seems to contradict her first statements, but it could also demonstrate an acceptance that the role has and is changing in ways that are not wholly acceptable, so she inserts a caveat to imply that it is inconsequential; however taken overall we can clearly see her preferences. We also get a real sense of comfort when Jane talks about get togethers as this communicates a social aspect, getting to know one’s colleagues and developing peer relationships which are of value to her professionally.
As a professional I think peer engagement is extremely important and I get that from some of my other courses and roles and because I work at [a] university up in the northwest and we have excellent support with peers and we socialise as well in natural ways; someone might do a lecture etc... so there is a natural range of peer engagement.... With the OU it is very different.....I don't get to know any of the tutors really....... If I was just tutoring online modules I don't think I would feel professionally that I was developing...in fact it would probably be more of a tick box exercise rather than developing your own teaching style and so on.... (Lyn)

Peer interaction on a regular basis is very important to Lyn and she draws comparisons with a traditional university teaching context. Lyn also seems to feel that if she were not teaching in traditional context she would not be able to cope with her online role because she needs peer interaction to maintain professional development and teaching approaches in general. I feel this is a significant point because professional development is central to, and connected with confidence, values and motivation within any teaching role and Lyn highlights these salient connections very well. This point also connects to concept 4.1.3 (professional identity).

interacting with other tutors just does not happen because you just complete the job as a means to an end.......you become more and more pragmatic and you tend to have a let’s just get on with it attitude.......being in a team....is critical in any role.........I do think something could be done.....but one of the problems is travelling so far to attend any OU events......centre closures will impact this even more....if you have people in the same locality you could meet up but where such massive distances are involved interacting with other tutors just does not happen..... ......normally in any other role you would be having regular team meetings...(Sue)
Once again, we see strength of feeling about peer interaction being an important element of the tutor role. Sue’s comment is robust in her vocalisation and criticism of the lack of opportunity to develop communities of practice; but she admits to being pragmatic and suggests that she views the role more and more as a ‘means to an end’. This also reflects Sue’s background where she works within teams and has regular interaction with team members.

...I have been to events at Milton Keynes but that’s only in one or two rooms. Going to an actual building does give me a sense of belonging in a way...(John)

The need for physical presence in terms of being in a university building with colleagues is central to John having a sense of belonging. This implies that he does not have that sense when tutoring online and that the diminishment of opportunities to engage in professional development events and peer interaction could have a negative impact on his role.

These points have significance because it is clear that having a sense of belonging and being part of something tangible is important to feelings of professionalism and knowing you are part of something larger, for example ‘the university’. I also get a sense that tutors perceive they don’t belong or have to fight to achieve this in a bid to fit in or cultivate positive feelings about their role and how they are viewed in turn by their peers.

**Concept 3.2.2: Consistency of contact**

Within online delivery the data seems to indicate that participants feel the consistency of contact is rather lacking and, in many instances, random. Without any mandatory requirements for engagement in forum and associated activities, participants have expressed feelings that they are simply forum moderators and script markers. Consistency of contact with students is also highlighted as a significant measure of how a student is progressing because from their forum responses or participation in online
activities participants say that they can often determine whether students require additional support. This is slightly different from earlier vocalisations related to interactions and relationship development because what tutors are talking about here is regular contact with both their students and peers/colleagues. This equitable or balanced scenario is enabling and so impacts all aspects of teaching and learning because it sets up boundaries and milestones within a module or course where there are known points of contact. Some students never engage or participate, and participants do express concern and wonder whether this is reflected in assignment and examination performance.

Tutors also feel that consistency of contact with other tutors and faculty staff is essential to the whole online ‘picture’. They also feel that communities of practice relate to their relationships with students as well as peers and colleagues because many tutors express the need for debate and sharing ideas which can only be done when a strong community has been established. In this instance the communities of practice have a wider dynamic than the one to one relationship tutors spoke of earlier. Groups have innate strength and depth because they share similar aims and objectives and so can work together towards achieving these. The group relationship develops a sense of unity and it is unique to each group, so individualises the group from others, yet enables a web of interlocking relationships to be formed

\[\text{\ldots isolation and the lack of interaction is connected to professional identity\ldots(Sue)}\]

Sue’s short statement above is significant because not only does it connect to concept 4.2.3 (professional identity) but she mentions isolation and, in this context, she is expressing feelings of being set apart, segregated from other university staff and being alone. In the situation of tutoring this could have negative impacts upon on her perception of role.

\[\text{\ldots..When you start I think it's important to have telephone support with a mentor...maybe good to get a bit more feedback}\]
on module forums...because we do them but we don’t get much feedback on them really do we.....we’re under the impression that they’re looked at occasionally by the powers that be...but you know it would be good to get feedback on things you do every day or maybe think about doing things differently...I think that would help particularly if you were in a probationary period or just wanted someone’s input...I think that would help...that would be a good way of doing is...have someone help and support you with your forum interaction…….John)

John’s extract above relates to a suggested alternative to regular professional development events and he is discussing mentoring as a standard ongoing process for all tutors. The professional relationship between mentor and mentee is a means for professional growth because it facilitates expansion of communication and interpersonal skills, allows for leadership qualities to be explored and expanded and is a means to increasing confidence and motivation. It is interesting that he feels tutor forums are almost pointless in terms of them being formally evaluated and does consider peer support to be extremely important and not just as an initial probationary process but an ongoing collaborative one throughout the lifetime of a tutor’s employment. What John seems to be saying here is that each forum should have a mentor in place in addition to each individual online tutor having a mentor. Therefore consistency would be assured across aspects of the online tutor role and provide a sense of ongoing support as well as a sense of belonging.

**Concept 3.2.3: Collaboration**

This links to concept 3.2.1 where consistency of contact was explored. Collaboration, as most participants suggested, is an essential element of developing communities of practice and delivering effective online tutoring. Collaboration is seen as a supportive mechanism but one which most participants feel is not strong enough within the online educational delivery system.
Collaboration is an important element of developing communities of practice and as Mandy outlines in the extract above, being able to engage in activities with other online tutors is important; she suggests that you can develop some peer relationships within online tutor forums, but she also suggests that the opportunities for doing this are somewhat limited. Moreover what collaboration means here is the establishment of an inclusive learning and teaching community which meet challenges and use skills, knowledge and experience to overcome these.

Alan views collaboration as being professionally useful but he suggests that practically, the online platform is not interactive enough for this to take place effectively. So what he seems to be saying is yes, a good idea but the infrastructure for it to happen is not quite there.

The ethos Jane talks about here relates to the organisational culture of the university and this is manifested in attitudes, values and principles of the community as a whole. Therefore, what Jane is suggesting is that the ethos of the online tutor community in terms of collaboration is different to that of a face-to-face environment and she finds it challenging to feel part of which is
where her comment about finding it hard enough to keep up to date with her subject currency comes into play.

..the real support is there but hidden.. ….it is important to share experiences…(Sue)

Sue recognises that support or opportunities to collaborate are there, but they are difficult to find because they are not made obvious enough. Sue seems to be saying that the support is not readily accessible and transparency and ease of access would facilitate a much more positive experience for tutors. Perhaps Sue feels that because you have to actively seek out the support and it is not readily offered this diminishes its value and in turn creates a negativity so you don’t feel as though you belong. For Sue, collaboration is clearly important to her role.

……. I don't get to know any of the tutors really, apart from one because I deliver training with one of the tutors so there is a connection of sorts…(Linda)

For Linda, clutching at any contact she has with another tutor seems to be important and this short extract above does highlight the importance attached to collaboration and also the feeling that it is hard to implement.

…..it's a question of ......particular things that the module team feels are important...then these should be provided to tutors...so you use that for that etc....if you are doing online tuition these should be provided....(Alan)

Although Alan’s point at first reading seems to connect more to the mechanics of online delivery he is making a clear separation between the module team and himself as a tutor which highlights a divide, a break in the relationship and we could interpret this to mean that he doesn’t feel as though he is part of the team but separate, outside that particular community.
Concept 3.2.4: Professional responsibility

Whilst participants had many negative feelings about online communications of practice and the associated concepts explored so far; there was a strong sense of professional responsibility in terms of the need to ‘do a good job’, making sure that they ‘dig deep’ to make the best of a situation they feel is flawed.

...we should all take a bit more responsibility for making that (online tutoring) work……we are all entering a virtual world now……the concept of a teacher anyway is totally changing…you know it’s not what it used to be…..(Sue)

Interestingly Sue suggests that tutors should take more responsibility for making the online tutor role effective and this suggests that she feels taking ownership of the role is central to being able to do a good job. Another interesting point she makes is that the concept of a teacher is changing, and this connects to the changing landscape of education in general where technology plays a much more central role in the learning process. However we do see a salient comment where Sue tells us it’s not what it used to be and this highlights a reluctance or lack of confidence to deal with change. This is in conflict with her earlier point about taking responsibility and ownership and my interpretation here is that this is a professional conflict that Sue is trying to deal with and come to terms with.

…I would have reservations about working solely online without using a face-to-face tutorial platform …(Jane)

As an alternative viewpoint, Jane suggests that responsibility is perhaps not with the tutors and moreover she would not be keen to undertake the role if she could not balance this with another role which was more traditional.

From interpretation of the concepts in this master theme it is clear that at the heart of the online tutor role is the desire and need to facilitate positive learning and for this to occur they all feel that regular face-to-face contact
with students is critical because the non-verbal cues within this type of interaction allows visual recognition of how students are developing their knowledge and understanding and interacting with their peers and the tutor. The data also reveals many challenges associated with how students perceive the online tutor role and the person 'behind' the role; the difficulties online tutors experience in communicating their role is constant. Moving on from facilitation of positive learning we also see that a sense of belonging is important for online tutors and this connects to how they communicate their role, confidence levels, motivation and how they view their professional responsibilities.

4.8: **Master theme 4: Sense of professional worth**

The final theme interprets participant experiences which relate to a sense of professional worth associated with job satisfaction and the importance of specific processes which alleviate feelings of professional vulnerability, autonomy and professional recognition. The theme is divided into sub-themes and concepts as shown in Table 6 below.

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**Table 6: Master theme 4: Sense of professional worth**
Sub-theme 4.1: Professional vulnerability

Some participants expressed feelings of professional vulnerability and this connects back to theme 4.1 because it encompasses all of the concepts of communicating competency and experience to students, role reinforcement and professional identity. This sub-theme relates to the following concepts: feeling undervalued and professional recognition, being viewed as a real person (4.1.1), (4.1.2) feeling undervalued and professional recognition, and limitation of contractual role (4.1.3)

Within this concept there were several key sub-concepts which have been explored and interpreted.

Concept 4.2.1: Being viewed as a real person

The facelessness of the online tutor role is central to many participants feeling as though they are not viewed as a real person, in other words there is a sense that they are perhaps a computer-generated responder, not really a tutor but someone who simply responds to emails. This appears to give many a sense that they are ineffective and often ignored. We have seen this perceived feeling in many guises through the chapter.

...you can be made to feel inferior if students don't know who you are,...(Jane)

In Jane’s extract we see once again how feelings of inferiority connect to being viewed as a real person and moreover students understanding who that person is. Felling inferior is a significant point because it signifies feelings of being lower in rank than students, lacking in status.

Feeling like a computer and feeling demotivated are John’s terms used to describe vulnerability in his role and it is quite a strong metaphor. He wants to be valued as a real person, a human being.

...I do sometimes get a bit irritated....if I feel that people are just not making the effort....this is the thing ...online you can get
quite irritated but if you speak to someone you often think OK I get it now... almost ....I feel like a computer ... .... I give the time that's needed and the time I can within reason. Coming into online tutoring you have to be flexible....if you have had years and years of nine to five the online learning environment could be quite a challenge.

(John)

John’s extract also talks about irritation and we can see the frustration expressed within as he tries to be recognised as a real person showing disgruntlement that people are not making the effort. Again, we see the feeling like a computer implies there is a sense of simply performing a sequence of operations, automation or acting according predetermined or prescriptive variables. Interestingly John suggests that if you have been used to a traditional work role you may find transitioning into online tutoring very challenging. The key significance here is in effort because John is suggesting that students show a lack of physical and mental activity commensurate with achievement. He also suggests that the online role can be challenging of you are not used to the ad hoc nature of engagement and delivery and this connects to things like boundaries, recognised milestones and benchmarks which appear to be absent in many ways form the online learning environment.

**Concept 4.1.2: Feeling undervalued and professional recognition**

Tutors who feel undervalued and also feel there is a lack of professional recognition find it difficult to stay motivated and they express concern that this will be reflected in their online tutoring role. The extract from Sue below highlight this well.

….I don’t feel appreciated..........however professional we are....if you are in a situation where you are feeling or being devalued…it all has an impact……if you are not going to be motivated by your employer….you are not going to have that energy to motivate other people…(Sue)
Interestingly Sue suggests that she is not motivated by her ‘employer’ and we get a sense here that this is central to how she carries out her tutorial duties. Using the term encompasses her feelings of being devalued, despite her remaining professional. The lack of energy she discusses related to motivating others (her students in this context) is a direct impact of feeling undervalued professionally.

**Concept 4.1.3: Limitation of contractual role**

Online modules are perceived to be limited in scope in terms of tutors being able to effectively deliver quality support within their contracted hours, allocated hours contact with students and the ability to develop the tutoring role autonomously. Many module elements are prescriptive as they are delivered to a module wide student cohort rather than smaller individual student groups. Tutors expressed feelings that this is very restrictive and that their activities and online sessions may come across as contrived.

There is also a strong feeling that as fiscal policies further restrict contracts and teaching hours are diminished that there is little room for delivery of preferred activities and discussions. Tutors do vocalise the difficulties of sticking to contracted hours but at the same time they suggest that they have to be firm in their resolve not to engage in work outside these contracted hours which would diminish their remuneration in terms of actual hours work to such an extent as to make the role unviable. The following extracts are examples of some vocalisations.

…..*there’s always something different to learn for the IT system....for which we’re not paid*…(Jane)

Jane makes a direct connection between organisational changes and remuneration. She obviously feels there is a significant discrepancy.

…..*We tend to be completely in the dark about students with no idea of their circumstances*…(Jane)
In the subsequent extract above Jane discusses the lack of information online tutors have with regard to their students. Profiles for students can be viewed but these are limited and provide little information about student circumstances. Compared to traditional tutor groups where there are face-to-face interactions and opportunities for consistent contact, Jane highlights the limitation of role perceived to be evident here. Operating under these restrictions is clearly challenging for Jane.

Alan shares similar feelings below but expresses them in a slightly different way:

......I've been doing this for years and I think I'm marginally getting a bit better.....but there's always though that in a sense it's contrived....because of time limitations..........I think at the end of the day if I want to make contact with students...it's a matter of a phone call...if I can be bothered...if I can fit the time in. ....(Alan)

Alan acknowledges change is slowly happening but does bring into play limitations of contracted time in the above extract. He feels that this means there is an artificial sense within his role. The last element is quite frank because he implies that there is a sense of demotivation and he will only make a concerted effort to contact students if he has time and can be bothered'.

This is concerning and demonstrates not only contractual limitations of role but connects back to concept 4.2.1 (feeling undervalued and professional recognition).

......adapting to online tutoring was really hard......I think people move into this type of role.....because it works for them and their life demands....(Sue)
For Sue, pragmatism is clearly evident because she acknowledges that adapting to the online tutor role is challenging but at the same time balances this with linking the role to suiting life demands. Therefore, we could consider that the role may attract people because it fits in with specific lifestyles or commitments, not because the role has parity of professional recognition and standing as a traditional tutor role; and this is worrying because we could then ask the question as to whether this impacts the quality of educational delivery and student experiences may be impacted.

**Sub-theme 4.2: Role reinforcement**

All participants felt that there is a need to reinforce their role and this is true in whatever environment you work in. The issue appears to be that many tutors do not fully understand what their role is as an online tutor and because it is always changing then it is difficult to reinforce it to others. This sub-theme relates to the following concepts: communicating competency and experience to students (4.2.1), autonomy of role (4.2.2), and professional identity (4.2.3).

Within this concept there were several key sub-concepts which have been explored and interpreted.

**Concept 4.2.1: Communicating competency and experience to students**

Participants feel that students are often confused by the online tutor role and in many instances are not aware that the tutor is professional qualified or competent. This is quite different to an earlier concept where tutors were discussing student perception of the tutor role; here we are exploring how tutor communicate their professionalism to students. Tutors have vocalised some of the challenges this brings, and many have strategies to try and address confusion but feel that there needs to be some standardisation and much more effective communication from faculties and university administration on this point.

"........it’s about providing information and answers for them and not about leadership..."(Mandy)
Leadership is an interesting term used in Mandy’s extract above because it can be defined as a process by which she guides students and facilitates progression of learning. We have met the point about leadership in previous example extracts but here Mandy is suggesting that the role is simply one of providing answers and not one of guidance or facilitation. By feeling she cannot provide direction within the online learning environment we read that she sees her role as simply proving information, so clarifying answers or validating material; this means that her professional capability and experience are not only failing to be effectively communicated but they are failing to be used.

.... To start with taking emails...I would just sign off Jane but now I sign off with my full name, qualifications and the courses I tutor....so I want to let students know who I am and what I know... I am still personal but certainly reiterating my professional standing by the fact that I am qualified to do this, even if you’re not seeing me in a classroom... ...and I just think it's reassuring for students that they can see someone has these qualifications and experience... I always put associate lecturer and not tutor... tutor is for me someone who works in a college of FE or something...not within a university. They need to see I am a real person who can do the job...you can be made to feel inferior if students don’t know who you are, how you are qualified and what you have done and do.... (Jane)

Jane feels that communicating competency and experience is central to her role and here points also link to concepts 4.2.1 (feeling undervalued and professional recognition) and 4.1.3 (professional identity). The strategies Jane employs to ensure she communicates competency and experience to students are formalisation in terms of using her title and qualifications. This changes the interactions between her and students from informal to formal but clearly Jane feels this is a necessary process in order to reassure students and also to maintain her professional standing. This is also
connected to how Jane feels professionally, her self-worth, self-confidence and reaffirming in isolation of her peer group that she is worthy of the title ‘tutor’.

...... I’m always quite keen to share what my background is...my background is ethics.....and there is a block on ethics in the course so that's an opportunity if they want to ask more so some take me up on that. Someone asked me for a reference this year because she wanted to do a PhD...so you know...it's nice...some people do see the tutor as a person...doing a job because they really want to do it....and really want to help people...(John)

In sharing his professional background, John is reinforcing and communicating to students that he is competent and has the experience to support their learning.

**Concept 4.2.2: Autonomy of role**

Professional educators are generally highly skilled and highly qualified people; therefore, in general they feel that they should have a degree of autonomy within their role. This links to concept 4.1.1 because it seems that some of the participants feel that their autonomy is limited or compromised as outlined in the following transcript extracts.

......with online courses I am either hidden behind the OU live platform or a tutor group forum...(Jane)

We meet the term hidden once again but here rather than being hidden behind the university as a meta organisation we see Jane sees herself as also hidden behind the delivery mode itself. There seem to be layers of concealment she feels so that we get a real sense of the depth of feeling here and it engenders quite an emotional response because I certainly feel that Jane seems to be at the bottom of several layers trying to fight her way
to the top and be ‘seen’. Jane does not feel that she is in an autonomous role so has no real identity and therefore carries little authority.

...you know if everything is online, you send in work by computer, get it back by computer....I guess it could almost be marked by computer as well....(John).

In John’s extract above he talks about the automation of online systems and the fact that there is no real control over what happens. His remark about work possibly being marked by computer indicates that he feels his role as an independent tutor is almost superfluous. Nothing about the role is within his control as a professional.

.... so getting all that balance right and working out what’s going on and how it will work is worrying....(Mandy)

As we have seen from many of Mandy’s extracts, she remains concerned and here she talks about balance and trying to work out ‘what is going on’. This indicates a lack of confidence in the autonomy of her role and also demonstrates a lack of clarity in what she should be doing. Again we meet the term balance and here I interpret this to mean evenness, remaining steady or constant; but Mandy has not and cannot find this middle ground.

**Concept 4.2.3: Professional identity**

Professional identity is addressed here as a separate concept, but professional identity is central to the tutor role as we have seen from previous quotations. How a tutor views themselves, their role and how they perceive they fit into the university staffing framework are all facets of professional identity. Most tutors have constructed their professional identity prior to entering the online tutor role but given it is a dynamic concept and is fluid, changing to align with those of delivery, tutoring contexts, values and experience, then it must be assumed to continue developing and be shaped by ongoing experiences.
Linda is definite about tutoring online and the connection to her professional identity:

…….hand on heart….if I just had to teach online without any contact with students on other modules or courses I’m not sure I would do it…..I feel more like a robot and demotivated….I love to teach because I love imparting knowledge……(Linda)

So Linda sees a distinct connection between who she is as a teacher and having direct contact with students. Where Linda says she feels more like a robot and demotivated, the deeper level of evaluation here seems to identify significant links between the perception of being a teacher and what this means and how the process of teaching is delivered and communicated. Being a robot implies automation, automatic action or function, carrying out a series of activities without any rational thought or deviation from a pre-set programme. In additionally and importantly, a robot is controlled by an external force so Linda’s metaphor here is significant in its meaning.

..in any role you need contact with people……..direct interaction allows some form of relationship to develop and that reaffirms my professional identity…….I need affinity with students so I feel I have done something useful. I am committed to supporting students, but I need to have contact with them…….(Sue)

There are several key points that Sue makes in the extract above; the first is reaffirmation of her professional identity, (encompassing her self-concept, attitudes, beliefs, values and experiences), as being firmly linked to direct interaction and the development of relationships. Further Sue discusses this in terms of commitment to supporting students and feeling useful. These are discrete connections but all central to her sense of professional identity which we can assume is formed but required ongoing reaffirmation through specific processes.
........I'm a university teacher.....I guess we construct it according to knowledge and experience......in a way I think I am still a university teacher and nothing has changed. I don't think context would alter that at all really. (Alan)

Alan provides us with a definition of his own professional identity and it is very clear. Interestingly though, he suggests that it is constructed according to knowledge and experience and by stating that context will not alter this he does imply that knowledge and experience must continue as a dynamic process in order to maintain this ‘identity’. So what is being expressed here is a view that previous experiences shape future professional identity or indeed that one professional identity gives way to another.

....I don't actually feel professional because I don't think within the online role there is any reinforcement of professional identity........there is a great deal of need for collaboration and interaction......having the days schools last year was important...what I find is that I always struggle with establishing student contact and developing a relationship with students which I think is a key part of professional identity....(Sue)

In the extract above from Sue there are a couple of important observations, the first is that Sue does not see herself as ‘professional’ within her online role because she perceives there is no reinforcement of professional identity. The concerning aspect of this is that Sue must therefore feel she has no professional identity within the role so here self-concept, attitudes, values and experience are of no consequence.

Later on in the extract she links professional identity firmly to her relationships with students and because these are difficult to establish within the online context Sue sees this as a challenge overall. One gets a sense from this of a tutor who feels displaced almost within the online environment and cannot make sense herself of the feelings she has. There is also a sense that Sue appears to be going around in circles, always seeking but never
finding and this could affect her professionally and emotionally because it could negatively impact the very core of her professional ‘being’

...I think for me it's more of the personal relationship. I see with all of my students as being their personal tutor but I do also see myself as something perhaps a little grandiose...as an educator...I do see myself as someone who educates as a concept I believe in education...as a lecturer...not something I have a real liking for although in some instances it is my job title...so yeah, educator...(John)

Although John gives himself a formal title he admits he feels uncomfortable with this. However, it is clear from the extract that by affording himself this formal title he is establishing and reaffirming his professional identity as it seems the only way he can retain control over the role and how it is communicated.

Overall the distillation of these concepts has revealed deep feelings amongst participants that they are vulnerable professionally, feel undervalued and in many ways experience a conflict with regard to their professional identity which for many was clear prior to undertaking the online tutor role. There appears to be discomfort around the lack of autonomy associated with the role and this exacerbates their sense of helplessness in being able to exert any real control over the situation.

4.9: Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the IPA analytical process linking it to methodological principles and aims. The findings section has interpreted themes, sub-themes and concepts identified from participant interviews and supported by meticulous evaluation of data. These are reiterated below in Table 7 below but to recap on the notable metaphors, perceptions and views of the participants, these included feelings of being viewed as a ‘talking head’, sense of isolation, feelings of being on a ‘factory production line’, lack
of confidence, professional vulnerability and feelings if being an ‘outsider’.
The next chapter will discuss each master theme and associated metaphors, perceptions and participant views in conjunction with further evidence that adds to the meaning and also seeks to establish how the analysis relates to the research aims. In addition to this interpretation and draw inferences from thematic and conceptual overviews.

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Table 7: Reiteration of sub-themes and concepts
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1: Chapter overview

The aim of this study was to develop an understanding of the experiences of online tutors, what it means to be an online tutor, and the perceived impacts upon on their professional identity (if any) associated with this role. The findings in Chapter 4 provide original insight into the way online tutors develop strategies to overcome many challenges of tutoring online. Professional identity and the perceived impacts upon associated with online tutoring on practice has been highlighted as significant in terms of strategic development, a sense of professional worth and is also connected to the effective delivery of quality teaching. No studies have previously explored or discussed these two facets of practice together and this is the first study to explore experiences of tutors in this context of education.

Profound sense of professional identity

For each of the participants there was a profound sense that professional identity is fundamental to what it means to be an effective online tutor and underpins how successful they perceive their roles to be. This has resonance with the vocalisations of participants as being representative of the embodiment of what it means to be an online tutor in relation to their practice (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008: Dall'Alba). Importantly, the use of IPA methodology allowed participants to freely express their unique experiences of online tutoring and explore the impacts upon these experiences have had on their professional identity and its ongoing development (Smith et al., 2009). The amount of data provided by participants during the study meant that a decision was made about what to discuss, this decision was based on the importance participants themselves attached to specific questions and discussion points; this means that it is likely some findings noted in the previous chapter may not be fully discussed in the sections that follow this overview, but I believe the discussions are representative of the main themes, sub-themes and concepts revealed within the research data; and moreover is representative of the foremost, and most noteworthy information from participant interviews.
There is a type of transformative process which occurs when transitioning from traditional face-to-face tutoring to online tutoring and this could be defined as an ontological process because the tutors’ experiences have in some ways shaped their ‘being’ in professional terms (Jarvis, 2010: Larkin et al., 2006).

**Metaphors**

In this research study metaphors were used frequently by participants and this allows for a connection to be made between their perceived reality and the actual reality of the educational context (Mahlios et al. 2010).

Historically educational research and theory have been defined deductively (Jensen, 2006); but more modern approaches are open to the perspective of multiple realities and the interpretation of learning and organisational structure. Schön (1983) classified metaphors as having generative value because they allow these new perspectives to come into existence. Jensen (2006) also argues that the analysis of narrative requires active participation between the research and participant in order to facilitate expression of unique experience and finding a shared meaning. Figure 2 Below demonstrates how the metaphor can be used to make connections between perceived and actual reality, together with the process by which it can lead to new understanding and intended meaning.

**Figure 3. The metaphorical paradigm (adapted from Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)**
Elliot (1984) suggested that metaphors have a central role to play in qualitative educational research because they stimulate imagination, arouse emotions and feelings, and can lead to change. In this context a metaphor is not an image but a concept which can help reveal other concepts. In other words by exploration of the underlying meaning the educational concepts can be revealed (Green et al, 2016). In this research study there have been several negative metaphors used by research participants, for example, talking head, factory production line, robot; but these have been used to express frustration and personal emotional feelings about a hidden concept so in fact can be viewed as having positive meanings (ibid).

However, as Ogden (2015) points out, these negative metaphoric concepts are not always without basis, for example a talking head style of tutoring can be described as a traditional method (ibid) and is often viewed as resistant to change even in light of new methods, advancing IT processes and strategies etc. So it is suggested that more effective methods of active teaching and learning are required in order to overcome the negative perceptions which are those of active teaching and learning (Baepler et al, 2014). Ogden (2015) describes active teaching and learning as a student centred one where tutors challenge student understanding and provide opportunities for engagement and response.

Freeman’s meta-analysis (2014) of tutoring in the context of maximising learning and performance revealed an interesting finding which was that if a student was being tutored in a traditional talking head fashion, they were one and a half times more likely to either fail the course or be in a low grading band, compared with students who were engaged in active teaching and learning.

As the research data revealed, this active teaching and learning process can be somewhat limited by the constraints of the online only method of delivery and tutoring.
Connection between online tutoring and professional identity
Themes were generated from the data and revealed the importance of understanding the connection between online tutoring and the perceived impacts upon professional identity. This led to a higher-level conception of the findings that reflected the unique experiences of participants. Themes, sub-themes and concepts identified within the findings chapter are emphasised in the discussion using italic text for clarity. It is important to point out that although each master theme, sub-themes and concepts are discussed under specific headings, there is considerable interrelation between all four master themes and this demonstrates connection between themes and also confirms that there is a strong relationship between the research questions and aims. Implications for education, practice, and recommendations for further research are discussed in chapter 6.

5.2: Making a difference
Research participants expressed a keen desire to overcome the challenges of transitioning from traditional classroom-based learning environments to an online environment. From the research data it was evident that making compromises (Alan) in order to meet these challenges, and also maintain a sense of professional control were perceived as essential (John) to developing a relationship with students; this was a consensus view among participants. To achieve this, participants described how they develop and implement a range of strategies which assist with overcoming these challenges, and also help them to deal with conflicts that may arise within their online role. For example, there was a feeling amongst the research participants that compromising might affect the quality of tutorial (Jane) delivery.

Influencing the learning environment
According to Garrison and Anderson (2003), tutors have significant influence in shaping the learning environment and the outcomes for learners with regard to achievement. O’Hare (2011) argues that in order to manage the learning environment tutors must have the appropriate pedagogic skills and
knowledge base and, furthermore, that effective management of the online learning environment is often weakened if tutors are inexperienced in working in this area because they may find it difficult to communicate legitimacy of the module as a whole or indeed, individual elements of the learning content. It is suggested that they may also experience similar problems when trying to communicate the validity of their tutorial role (ibid.) at the same time online tutors are required to promote critical thinking and self-direction in student learning (in other words active learning) (Stenbom, et al, 2016). This resonates with the research findings as all the research participants were in agreement that being ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of online tutoring leads to feelings that they cannot commit fully to an organisational ethos.

Adapting to the role
The general view of the research participants was that adapting to online tutoring (Sue) was difficult, particularly when coming from a position where their professional experience was grounded in traditional delivery modes (face-to-face or blended), or when the tutors were completely new to higher education and moving straight into the role of being an online tutor. Moreover she felt as though she was simply on a factory production line (Sue). This key metaphor highlights the depth of feeling related to simply going through the motions (Sue) and trying to get through tasks and activities almost blindly. This supports evidence from Anderson (2003) and O’Hare (2011) who advocate that effective online tutoring is underpinned by appropriate pedagogic skills acquisition through training, adequate support and experience; this may relieve the negative perceptions that tutors are unable to make a difference (Green at al, 2016). They also suggest that there is a need for considerable pedagogic experience prior to transitioning from a traditional tutoring role to an online one which would seem to indicate that having no prior experience within these modes would place a new tutor at a disadvantage (Alghamdi, 2013).

The need for job satisfaction also seemed to be important to the research participants and was an integral factor in how they dealt with a range of
challenges associated with their online role, and also how they interact with the role in terms of commitment, motivation and dedication. The overarching view from the data appeared to be that the degree of job satisfaction experienced is a measurement of *how well they do their job* (*Jane*) and also connects to the values and beliefs that make up professional identity constructs.

Within the online tutor role *digging deep* (*Mandy*) or tapping into as many professional resources as possible assists in negotiating the perceived challenges and helps maintain a sense of professional identity; the need for job satisfaction as a primary driver is strongly connected to motivation, because according to the research participants, it is this *need* that drives them on despite the *challenges* (*Alan*, *Mandy*). Hermans (2013) describes this as a reconstruction within the domain of the self and suggests that in the online learning environment, which is dynamic, there is a constant shift for transformational change.

Landsman (2001) investigated the connection between job satisfaction and occupational commitment and found that motivation is a significant factor in the level of job satisfaction experienced and this seems to align with some of the negative aspects of the role vocalised by participants in the research study as they often perform tasks simply because it is *part of their job* (*Mandy*, *Alan*, *Sue*) which they find frustrating. Changes in levels of motivation are also noted and related to interaction and context (Canrinus et al., 2012); which suggests, that in order to feel as though they are making a difference or facilitating the best possible experience for students, tutors need to maintain high levels of motivation in the execution of their professional role (Kelchtermans, 2009: Freeman, 2014).

**Motivation and professional identity**

The strong connection between motivation and professional identity is made by Carinus et al., (2012) in their study investigating relevant indicators associated with self-efficacy, job satisfaction and commitment. Their structural equation modelling revealed that by influencing these factors, a
sense of professional identity (Sue, Jane) could be strengthened, and this would in turn positively affect other aspects of a tutor’s role.

Thomas (2006) developed the ‘4P checklist’ which identifies that a good online tutor should demonstrate the qualities of positivity, proactiveness, patience and persistence; and Shepherd (2002) also notes that online tutors should be experts in their field and have excellent information technology skills. Additionally, Shepherd suggests that it is essential for online tutors to have a working and current familiarity with learning technologies. Smith (2005) adds that tutors working within this delivery mode, should participate in regular training programmes to ensure that all the requisites remain current. The issue for many online tutors is that restricted contract (John, Alan) terms and irregular allocation of work means that even though educational organisations may provide mandatory and optional continued professional development training, it is still the responsibility of the tutor to ensure that computer hardware software, internet connectivity and download/upload capabilities as well as their pedagogic skills and professional knowledge, are kept updated. Although they feel these are essential tools which enable them to do their job effectively (Lyn, Mandy, Alan), for many the inbuilt contractual remuneration and available ‘paid’ time does not cover the cost of being ready (Linda) each time new systems, processes and tutor requirements are updated (Sulcic and Sulcic, 2007: Nyugen, 2015).

The role of information technology
McLeod (2004) claims that the introduction of information communication technology within distance education (now known as e-learning), does not always address the issues around falling student retention, for which it was partly designed. In fact, some researchers suggest that the speed of e-learning emergence over the last few years can be likened to the dot.com success where enthusiasm overtook the reality of delivery of the ‘product’ (Mugania, 2004: Chang, 2004). Mugania (ibid.) suggests that technology should be viewed simply as a tool to aid teaching and learning; but that the learning materials themselves should be robust and high quality so they
stand alone and are not dependent upon technological tools. Aimard and McCullough (2006) argue that the emphasis has shifted from learning to information technology use and the shift needs to be reversed (Algahmdi, 2013). This resonates with the research findings which revealed strong feelings amongst participants that if you are not technically minded (Alan) you are at a disadvantage (Alan) within the online tutoring role and moreover that you need to be confident and competent (Alan) to adapt existing learning content if it was not originally designed for online use (Nyugen, 2015).

According to Denis et al., (2004), online tutors are employed specifically to support student learning, address any perceptions of isolation online learning may have, and to maintain student retention. In order to do this, tutors need to have direct and regular interaction with students; but the reality of online tutoring is that students are separate from tutors in time and space, so immediacy and consistency (Sue, Mandy, Lyn, Linda) are absent in non-real time online interaction.

Bork (2002) suggests that learning is an active process where each student plays a leading role. Bork calls this the tutorial learning paradigm and outlines key elements which are interactivity which are suggested to be adaptability, individualism and collaboration; all of which are stated as central to the learning process. Prensky (2002) argues that this model can only be effectively delivered online using information communication technology tools when both tutors and students are competent in using up to date systems and processes. However, as Moore et al (2010) suggest, research into comparisons between face to face and online contexts does not always reveal the micro problems but rather the overall meta ones; so the former can often be overlooked or misinterpreted to be of little consequence.

This supports the views expressed by research participants that highlighted conflicts between trying to meet administrative objectives and delivering high quality teaching. The perception amongst participants was that administrative tasks viewed as outside their role (John, Mandy, Jane) can be distracting and
lead to feelings that their role is not one of being an educator but of being an administrator or moderator (Alan, Jane). Some research participants used terms such as fear (Jane) and anxiety (Mandy) to describe how they feel when trying to meet both administrative and teaching objectives within the constraints of their limited contracted role. There was also a strong feeling that allied to this, students’ perception is often that the tutors are on call twenty-four hours a day (Sue) to deal with any problems they may have, not just related to study.

Although McPherson and Nunes (2004) seem to agree with these perceptions they also suggest that one of the challenges for online tutors is that they have to take on multiple roles which may be detached from the process of teaching; but they argue that fulfilling these multiple roles is essential in order to meet the requirements of e-learning modes and to be able to fully support online learners. The roles are administrative, social, technical and managerial; interestingly there is no teaching role listed but the meta role is called the pedagogic role.

Training and support

Smith (2005) tells us that appropriately and adequately trained tutors can improve the quality of e-learning, but this refers to the efficiency of delivery within the online platform rather than contributing to the positive learning experience of students. Smith also discusses tutors as forum moderators who are expected to provide technical support, use analytics to monitor and log student progress and retention, and collaborate with management to discuss any problems with internet communication systems. Again, the teaching element seems to be deposed as a priority and therefore the shift away from teaching and favouring the online systems element results in online tutors having to make compromises in order to foster potential in students. They also have to capture the attention of students within the online learning environment, when they may in fact lack the appropriate skills and time to do so.
Research undertaken by Sulcic and Sulcic (2007) demonstrates that increased online activity by tutors within module forums has a positive effect on student engagement and online activity but that this does not necessarily relate to a correlating positive effect on grade success. Sulcic and Sulcic’s research highlights the important role online tutors have in supporting e-learning delivery; but interestingly they suggest that selection of online tutors should be based not only on existing skills but have the propensity to develop those skills through regular specialist training programmes so that they can provide effective support for online learners as well as fulfilling the multiple roles mentioned earlier. Whilst the research data revealed that all participants are able to get by (Lyn, Mandy), it is clear that they have strong feelings that the online tutor role is in many ways compromised by the challenges (Alan, Mandy, John); and yet the prevailing objective is to ensure high quality teaching is delivered ensuring that students have a positive learning experience and are able to achieve their own aims.

James (2010) suggests that although there is an increased importance attached to the online tutor role in the enablement of learning institutions being able to respond effectively to the change in student needs within e-learning contexts there appears to be a discrepancy between the pedagogic reality and theoretical expectations demanded of the role.

Quartermain et al., (2012) refer to online tutors as the ‘human interface’ between a university and its students; but as Dodo-Balu (2017) points out, online tutors are often viewed as casual academics because of the sporadic nature of work allocation and limited contracts, so it is suggested they can become marginalised and deskilled. They also face uncertainties with regard to ongoing employment so are more likely to be expected to make compromises rather than be recruited into expensive ongoing specialist training programmes and permanent work roles. This evidence suggests that online tutors may not be perceived to share the same professional status as their permanently employed colleagues. This was described by research participants as a lack of a sense of belonging (John, Jane), being outsiders (Jane) and feeling that this impacted their professional identity because they
don’t seem to *fit in* (Lyn) and lack *connection* (Jane) to the formal academic hierarchy of the university.

5.3: Transitioning change

Transitioning from tutoring in a blended learning context to an online setting appeared to be a major challenge for participants interviewed; this was partially discussed in the previous section but here we examine the sub-themes and concepts from a different perspective.

**Barriers**

One of the key issues revealed in the research data is that participants were continually striving to keep up with advancing information technology systems, processes and techniques which they feel affects the quality of their tutoring and ability to use their pedagogic skills and experience effectively; in other words, they feel as though they are continually playing catch up.

The impact the learning environment and mode of delivery has on students has been well researched over the years; and correlations have been found between the learning environment and learning outcomes (Ramsden and Entwistle, 1981: Haertela et al., 1981: Swan et al., 2000). The learning and teaching environment have been transformed by web-based technology and whilst online learning can eliminate many barriers to undertaking study because of the convenience, flexibility and currency of learning material offered; Hara and Kling (2000) claim that it can also result in frustration, confusion, decreased interaction and lower motivation levels which apply to both students in a learning context, and online tutors delivering the module or course material.

A key metaphor was articulated by Jane as she suggested that she often felt like a *talking head* (Jane). As Freeman (2014) and Ogden (2015) point out, in order to overcome this traditional perception within the developing online mode of delivery, tutors have to manage transition and begin to influence the learning environment by developing suitable strategies and processes which ensure an active teaching and learning experience.
From the research study data, participants vocalised concerns that online learning platforms not only detract from the learning process (Mandy), but that tutors and students may lack the skills (John, Jane) to fully engage with information technology and web-based modes. There are differing evidential views on this as outlined by McConnell (2000), who suggests that online platforms can be limited and the mode inflexible; however, Ya Ni (n.d.) argues that the evidence is inconclusive because the online learning environment is dynamic and complex; varying in programme design, pedagogic competence, student capability, and the sustainability of information technology systems which all influence perceptions and outcomes. In other words, because it is still evolving and doing so at a very fast pace, it is difficult to draw any concrete conclusions as yet from the evidence available (Sun et al, 2016).

**Promoting meaningful engagement**

One main concern revealed by the research data is how online tutors promote meaningful engagement within this dynamic and complex mode of delivery; and participants suggest that engagement without the capacity to interact with students in real time is a difficult process. All participants felt that the connection with students is much harder (Lyn) when interaction is restricted to online, and further that the opportunity for the development of effective strategies to overcome this barrier is limited because they do not have the approved responsibility within their contract to spend time creating a range of strategies that may not be used again.

According to Nyugen (2015), the benefits of online learning for students outweigh the disadvantages for anyone else involved with the process per se, and moreover the benefits align with current student requirements; for example, lower cost of study in post-secondary education, the provision of quality education to anyone who has a broadband connection and removing constraints such as when study can be undertaken. Percy and Beaumont (2008) argue that though mainstream research suggests that for online tutors to be able to meet the needs of students, a reflective and adaptive approach
is required; this approach does not include a remit for online tutors to develop pedagogic skills allowing them to fulfil criteria related to student needs. As Gottschalk and McEachem (2010) suggest, it is usually left to the online tutors to develop pedagogic skills in their own time and in isolation of university support and so focussed and relevant skills development may not happen. According to Yamnill and McLean (2001) any professional development for online tutors has little value unless it can be transferred into effective performance.

Dodo-Balu (2017) found that online tutors using technology in a practical way within their educational context face a significant challenge which is ongoing, because *rules change* (Sue) frequently, and this relates to upgrading of systems, processes and tutorial requirements; subsequently, rather than relying on training or their own existing skills they develop *coping strategies* (Linda) to *deal with the challenge* (Linda).

The focus seems to be grounded in student achievement and ease of study within the online mode of learning, but often it would appear little account is taken of the online tutor role. Vlachopoulos (2008) suggests that because the online tutor role is still emerging, many tutors lack the pedagogic experience and are not only expected to deliver first class tutoring but often contribute to the development of learning material as modules and courses progress, to ‘iron out’ any noted issues. The facilitation of learning was highlighted by research participants as a primary challenge within the online learning mode of delivery; this was particularly relevant to frustration that they felt unable to support students adequately in terms of being able to make full use of their *experience and skills* (Jane, Linda, John). This echoes perceptions with regard to the metaphor of being a talking head because in order to manage the online learning environment tutors must first overcome this negative perception (Mahlios et al, 2010).

The overwhelming sense from participants was that poor student performance within online modules and programmes could be in part due to tutors being unable and ill-equipped to *break down barriers* (Jane, Mandy,
associated with remote learning; and also, because there was a lack of confidence that all students actually learn (Mandy, Alan, Lyn, Sue) effectively within this mode of delivery. O’Hare (2011) cites interaction and engagement as a potential significant problem for online tutors because part of the workload is trying to develop ways to ensure students engage with the learning material and to maintain that engagement. This changes the priorities for online tutors from ‘teaching’ to making sure students are online, logging into learning activities and maintaining study hours. Therefore, this makes it quite difficult to teach (Alan) and participants felt this shift away from teaching as a priority compromises student learning in some way. Jopling (2012) draws attention to the problem of diminished support for tutors as online infrastructures continue to develop; and further the ensuing technical issues detract and distract online tutors from focussing on the learning content and tuition (Legutko, 2007: Gabriel and Kaufield, 2008: Sun et al, 2016).

The sense that research participants were constantly drawing comparisons between their online tutoring experiences and experiences within blended or traditional face-to-face modes of delivery highlights the difficulties many have with transitioning into a virtual learning environment and indeed the constant comparisons made, identify areas where lack of confidence in professional ability and questioning values of professional identity appear to be in acute focus. The data also revealed a strong sense amongst participants of disconnection from students when tutoring online, and they also felt that promoting inclusivity was an ongoing challenge of the role. Within comparisons between online and blended or traditional modes of delivery drawn by research participants, issues were raised such as being able to see what is going on as one can do in a face-to-face context. This was described as being an imperative (John) in terms of establishing the learning needs of students and for gauging motivation levels and identifying any problem learners.
**Limitations of the online tutor role**

There was a clear perception amongst the research participants, that the online tutor role and online mode of delivery limits the role in terms of the effective application of skills, knowledge and experience. The term *dynamic* (*Alan, Jane, Sue*) was used many times in the data in the context of online tutoring linked to the limitation of *dimensions* (*Alan*), making it harder to achieve a sense of *professional satisfaction* (*Alan, Lyn, Linda*). John did not appear to have the same requirement for such a high degree of professional satisfaction as the other participants; however her was the only conflicting voice on this point. As Herrington and Reeves (2011) point out, universities place a high priority on positive student experiences, but it is also imperative that we start to understand how online tutors develop and execute their role because they have the potential to significantly impact the learning experience (Smith, 2005). From the research study findings, prioritisation of learning is an important element of the online tutor role and central to professional identity in terms of being able to *share and impart knowledge* (*Jane, Linda, John*).

The apparent conflict and challenges associated with change within the online learning environment can be, as suggested by Eilam and Shamir (2005) directly linked to professional identity and how online tutors view themselves in terms of being *valued* (*John, Sue, Mandy, Lyn*). Alan was not overly concerned with issues of being valued in the same way as the other participants, being rather pragmatic about the point as noted within his interview transcript. Eilam and Shamir’s research (2015) suggests that if change is perceived to be a threat to professional identity, it will be resisted; and further that many of the challenges can be interpreted as a fear of change because the outcome is viewed as having a possible effect on self-image and therefore alter the way they view themselves professionally (Kirkup and Kirkwood, 2005). This is interesting because the research study data revealed a sense of caution amongst participants with regard to change within the online tutor role and within the mode of delivery itself, for instance *always having to learn new skills* (*Jane, Linda, Lyn*) and having a *lack of confidence* (*Lyn, Linda*) with regard to IT developments were seen as
potential barriers to change (Schilling et al., 2012). If we accept this as a reasonable notion, it might facilitate clearer understanding of the responses by online tutors to technological change and adaptions to their role (Goodson, 2001).

5.4: Dynamic connections
Direct or face-to-face interaction between tutors and students, was identified within the data as a consistent theme and vocalised as a major concern amongst participants because of the inability within an online learning environment to develop meaningful relationships. It has in part already been discussed in the previous section in connection with transitioning change and drawing comparisons between online tutoring and face-to-face or blended modes of delivery. Therefore, within this section some cross over of discussion points will be evident.

Interacting with students
Anderson (2000) acknowledges that direct interaction with students is important and should not be eliminated from a learning environment, therefore in design of individual programmes the student to tutor interaction should be balanced with the student to content interaction and ability to have some control (Alan) over this as an online tutor. Much of the current research suggests that synchronous interaction produces a higher level of interaction (Price et al., 2007: Martinovic, 2009); and it is suggested that if this is not explored sufficiently and provided consistently within online modes of delivery to allow the appropriate pedagogic strategies and tools to be developed and used by online-only tutors, the outcome may be compromised (Wenger et al., 2005: Jopling, 2012).

One of the notable issues the research data revealed was that participants felt there was a strong connection between face-to-face contact with students and facilitation of a positive learning experience. Non-verbal cues appear to be central to this process allowing tutors to establish whether students are struggling with something Mandy, Jane) or simply not being part of the group
(Mandy, Jane). This also raises issue of inclusivity and students generally feeling comfortable with the whole online experience - there is a general acceptance within the literature, that everyone is comfortable with the online experience, but research suggests this is not the case, and we should not make this assumption (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000: Jopling, 2012: Dodo-Balu, 2017).

There was a consensus amongst the research participants that trying to maximise student engagement was a fundamental (Sue) and critical (Jane, Sue) part of their role. Haythornthwaite et al., (2000) support the notion that a lack of direct interaction can lead to feelings of both isolation (Lyn, Linda, John) and stress (Lyn, Linda, Mandy) for both students and tutors. Conversely, research looking at the advantages for students studying online points out that the benefits are considerable and include opportunities to engage with a wider student group, less psychological intimidation (feeling judged specifically) and the ability to have twenty-four hour access to study platforms; therefore, outweighing any disadvantages connected with the mechanics of delivery, or lack of direct contact (Ya Ni, n.d.: McConnell, 2000).

The lack of direct interaction changes perceptions of the tutor role from one of teacher to forum moderator, script marker (Jane, Mandy, John), or a non-person (Mandy), according to the views of the research participants. Schein (2010) discusses this in terms of organisational culture but it is relevant to student culture and sub-cultures which exist within online learning contexts because they form part of the complex nature of relationship between themselves and online tutors. Further research by Silver (2003) and Henkel (2010) suggests that student perceptions and expectations of what form their online study and associated tutor support will take, is influenced by emerging sub-cultures which are dynamic. These are said to have the ability to influence the perceived professional identity of online tutors because it becomes progressively more challenging to identify their role, reinforce it and communicate it to students (Henkel, 2010).
Communities of practice

Within the research study data, the development of strong communities of practice amongst peers and colleagues seems to underpin a strong sense of belonging (to the educational organisation) (Jane, Sue, Linda, Mandy) and also where they fit into the natural organisational hierarchy. This sense of belonging also provides tutors with a reassurance that they are developing their professional practice. Barab (2003) highlights the importance of being part of a community of practice as it provides and reinforces a sense of belonging, to support the development and maintenance of a stable professional identity, and feelings of wellbeing. The need to belong has been recognised and accepted as one of the five basic human needs (Glaser, 1986: Maslow 1987: Wenger, 1999: Patton and Parker, 2017). Northcote (2008) suggests that if online tutors have this sense of community of practice, or a strong sense of belonging, they will be more able to support students (Jane, Mandy) effectively and add value to potential learning opportunities.

The research study findings suggest that consistency of direct contact between online tutors and students is central to the development of collaborative relationships within which there are opportunities for tutors and students to work together (Linda) and also create an ethos of sharing (John). Research participants felt that this type of collaborative relationship is hard to develop within the online mode of delivery and Beethan (2005) supports this view by suggesting that when designing online learning materials, it is essential to provide the facility for students and tutors to develop this relationship and moreover that this will also allow online tutors to have more professional responsibility (Sue, Mandy) for making their role more effective, and allowing online tutors to take ownership of the role which includes having more control and decision making remits (Patton and Parker, 2017).

5.5: Sense of professional worth

Day (2002) claims that professional identity is related to how tutors respond to educational change and reforms, and responses are based on deductive reasoning in addition to personal views they may hold. Effectiveness of tutoring in relation to professional identity was the topic of a longitudinal study
conducted by Day et al., (2006) and findings revealed three possible dimensions which are relevant to online tutoring: a personal dimension (outside a tutor’s educational role), a professional dimension (within the educational context in which the tutor works encompassing the social and policy driven expectations of the employing organisation and the work role), and a situational dimension (the working environment or context itself). The study highlighted a need to maintain balance between all three dimensions in order for an online tutor to maximise effectiveness when ‘teaching’. This research supports participant views that professional identity is not just related to how they do their job but also how they view themselves and interact, outside and inside the educational context or environment.

Kelchtermans (2009) describes this as the emergence of multiple professional identities and argues that imbalance manifests itself in altered levels of motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness. Research participants highlighted this imbalance by talking about a lack of motivation (Lyn, Linda, Alan) and feelings of just getting the job done (Sue). They also gave a sense of feeling that their role had become task based rather than vocational with regard to the values and beliefs held aligned to their professional identity.

**Maintaining professional identity within the online role**

Although it is generally accepted that professional identity is dynamic (Beijaard et al., 2004), there is an argument which supports the view that people try and maintain routines and habits but that online tutors subconsciously trial new professional identities as they gain knowledge and experience in specific contexts (Sugrue, 2005). Professional identity can therefore be described as a descriptive concept related to a tutor’s occupational context and how they perceive themselves within the role (Neary, 2014). As far back as 1997, Larson argued that professional identity is in part based on a shared expertise which is supported by the infrastructure in which tutors’ work; and how professional identity is established and maintained depends on a shared sense of commonality amongst practitioners.
Within the online context Morrison (2012) argues that multiple roles online tutors undertake can be onerous because students tend to become overly dependent on tutors rather than developing self-reliance and independent responsibility for their learning. The research also suggests that online tutors routinely have little knowledge about students they support in terms of learning needs and competency related to information technology skills (McGuigan and Goulden, 2012). McWilliam (2005) talks about ‘unlearning’ established classroom pedagogies as a way of meeting the challenges of online tutoring and the problems associated with delivering effective online learning support; and as Baxter (2011) points out, the number of online higher education programmes and courses offered within the United Kingdom alone, is rising year on year; so, the problem is an immediate one and not one that can be dealt with in the future.

This resonates with concerns raised by participants in the research study who felt that they were detached from their students (Linda, Jane, Lyn) because of the lack of face-to-face or direct contact and the limited information on each student’s needs, study pathway and learning experience; moreover there was a strong feeling that rather than teaching or facilitating learning, their role was more one of a problem solver (Jane, Sue, Alan, John) with regard to students’ internet connectivity problems, how to access module resources and general administrative questions. This was also identified within the research data as participants feeling undervalued (Jane) and not having the enthusiasm or motivation to motivate others (Sue) because it was hard enough to motivate themselves; Vlachopoulos (2008) describes this as a facet of professional vulnerability and if tutors feel vulnerable their identity will be impacted. Stickler and Hampel (2007) suggest that this sense of vulnerability can be exacerbated because online tutors are also expected to accommodate students’ ‘digital’ habits and behaviour into their online tuition and this is a significant challenge given the wide scope and unknowns involved for the online tutor in this regard.
Balajithy et al., (2001) go further and suggest that online tutors should draw on student experiences and interests outside of the educational contexts (in terms of their digital habits and levels of expertise) and incorporate development of digital literacy amongst students alongside subject specific learning of the module or programme. This identifies the problematic scope of the online tutor in terms of how the role currently stands and suggests that the role is much more complex and diverse, therefore tutors should have the digital skills and associated training in addition to their subject specific expertise. Connecting this back to professional identity we can surmise that the complexity of the role impacts the way in which online tutors will be able to develop and maintain their professional identity as the uncertainty of what the role entails, together with the pace of change may not permit stabilisation of the associated identity constructs (Beijaard, 1995: Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005)

**Supporting online tutors**

Given the challenges discussed in the previous section, it would seem that within the online model of delivery robust processes for supporting online tutors would alleviate many of the issues and allow development of appropriate training. The notion of direct peer observation within an online tutoring context, has been researched by Walker (2015) as a strategy for validating the online tutor role and generic approach; and further for reinforcing professional identity as a concept within the dynamic online educational mode of delivery. This was raised by participants within the research data and permanent mentoring (John), together with more opportunities for peer engagement (Lyn, Mandy, Sue) and peer observation (Lyn, Mandy, Sue, John, Jane) would improve confidence (Alan, Sue, Mandy Lyn) and also allow for more collaboration (Alan, Jane, Linda, Sue).

Garrison and Anderson (2003) argue for a robust teaching presence within the online learning environment, but as they suggest, this is subject to the quality of the training available to online tutors in addition to the consistency of monitoring, support and facilitation of development of shared good practice. Research participants talked of needing affinity (Sue, Jane, Lyn)
with both students and their peers in order to reaffirm their role and also their professional identity. Having more comprehensive systems of peer engagement, observation and mentoring would provide the opportunity for teaching presence within the online model of delivery to be enhanced and online tutors would be able to have a sense that their role was transparent and reinforced (Maring et al., 2002).

Autonomy of role was another important concept revealed within the research data, and research participants felt that having a degree of autonomy within their role was central to being viewed as a professional and not hidden behind the organisational framework. Roca and Gagne (2008) discuss intrinsic motivation as being a key factor in tutor performance, flexibility within the role and vulnerability in terms of the desire to engage in new activities; and they also suggest that autonomy within the role connects with a willingness to adopt new technologies and ongoing professional purpose, in other words what they should be doing (Sue, Lyn).

5.6: Chapter summary
Each theme has been explored in terms of analysis of relevant literature. Interpretations of data from chapter 4 have been further analysed and inferences drawn in relation to the relevance of the data and findings and sub-themes and concepts discussed in an integrated manner to demonstrated strong connections. The chapter conceptualises the experiences of online tutors and the perceived effects on professional identity using current literature to reveal significant influences within the online learning environment.
Figure 4 above draws together the main themes and concepts from the findings and discussion and highlights key connections between the online tutoring role and professional identity. The key themes are not only highlighted but the connections are clear in terms of relationship and influence. For example, a tutor has existing professional identity constructs and allied to this is their professional knowledge and experience. When transitioning to an online tutor role there is a need to adapt, interact and collaborate with peers and students. Online tutors also need to understand the limitations of their role and meet the challenges of working within an online delivery platform and cope with advancing technology. The connection to professional identity is linked to personal aims (sharing knowledge, making a difference) and the relationship established with students and peers.
Chapter 6: Conclusion and contribution to knowledge

6.1 Chapter overview
The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of online tutors and the associated perceived impacts upon on professional identity. The study has met this aim through an in-depth analysis of participant experiences. This chapter discusses how the research project contributes to the current body of knowledge and it also explores the limitations of the research and how it might be expanded to further develop knowledge in the field of online tutoring and the perceived effects the role may have on professional identity.

There is also a reflective section within the chapter where the research journey is briefly examined, and strengths and weaknesses highlighted which connect to limitations of the research and how these can be addressed in future studies.

Finally, there will be a concluding section where inferences and outcomes are summarised.

6.2: Contribution to knowledge
This research study has revealed key areas for change within the online tutor role in terms of training, support and scope of the role. It has also highlighted challenges that online tutors face in this fast-paced emergent mode of learning delivery. In addition to the pedagogic challenges, consideration was given to factors associated with professional identity and how associated values, embedded professional beliefs, professional knowledge and subject expertise can be continually developed and maintained within the online tutor role. The research study has considered each of these issues through detailed examination of online tutor experiences and analysed the findings to reveal gaps in the current knowledge and also explored the current research related to the main concepts.

There is an opportunity provided by the research study findings to reappraise the online tutor role in order to create a sense of professional inclusivity and
address constraints created by the current ‘casual’ nature of the role; and in so doing this will promote higher levels of motivation and a self-development of the role. The connection between tutor motivation, a sense of worth, together with feeling part of the university have been strongly vocalised by the research participants and through the research data; and current evidence supports the need for an urgent review of the role. Despite some conflicts that the study has revealed through the research data, the sense of loyalty and commitment to supporting students shown by the participants is to be valued and fostered and could also be the basis for developing the online tutor role in line with pedagogic principles and professionalism.

The use of IPA within this type of educational research is also a contribution to current knowledge as it is still a novel methodology to use within educational research but it has demonstrated the value of exploring participant experiences in great depth and could be a useful tool for future research studies of this kind.

The research may be of benefit to educational organisations as we move towards more online delivery of higher education modules and programmes globally. This research could assist programme developers and influence practice so that the online tutor role can be developed in line with technological advancements.

Dissemination to a wide professional audience including online tutors would help them to reflect on their own practice in order for them to develop unique strategies which they could use to enhance their professional experience and also maintain the values associated with professional identity. The research will also help those who read it to understand the challenges online tutors face in the dynamic e-learning mode of delivery and this will be useful in developing tailor-made training programmes and effective support for online tutors.
Tools and guides could also be developed to form part of an online tutor induction and continued professional development programme and activities; these could be become part of a university wide resource bank.

Further dissemination opportunities are through journal publications and conference papers which will help distribute findings to a wider audience. It would also not be unreasonable to propose IPA workshops for educational researchers and use the research study as a basis for facilitating future research.

6.3: Reflection: final thoughts
The research study programme was brief in terms of timeframe, and this proved to be challenging, for me this was largely due to the choice of IPA as a methodology and I was aware from the outset that time management would be a significant factor. The important issue for me was not to cut corners on any aspect of the research as I viewed them all as equally valuable and with strong connections. There were however times when the brevity of the research programme coupled with the word restrictions seemed almost insurmountable in terms of doing the research justice; therefore, it was essential to organise my time effectively and appropriately. Overcoming self-doubt and questioning my research capabilities and competencies were also key challenges to overcome.

At this point I also feel the need to provide epistemological reflexivity which requires me as the researcher to critically consider assumptions I have made in relation to this study and the associated implications these assumptions may (or may not) have had for the study and findings. Willig (2013) suggests that the reflexive process requires researchers to ask several questions of themselves including whether the research design, research questions and analytical process in some way limited or constructed findings; whether the research questions could have been explored in a different way and what differences in understanding would this have yielded; whether the thesis has been influenced by my own professional values and beliefs and finally what I
As the discussion chapter is complete I am now able to address these questions. IPA in epistemological terms seeks to gain understanding of experience (Smith et al., 2009). We cannot access an individual’s experience directly and this is acknowledged; however, as a researcher I can engage with individuals and attempt to gain insight into their unique feelings, thoughts and beliefs. Smith’s (ibid.) idea of the double hermeneutic (the researcher trying to make sense of an individual making sense of their own experience) is significant because my aim was to understand the experiences of online tutors, how their role impacts upon their sense of professional identity, and to understand the meanings they attributed to their own experiences. There was no intention to eliminate biases that I may have brought to the research process but instead acknowledged these and recognised that they shaped the knowledge produced in a co-constructed manner. The aim was not to make any causal links between online tutoring and changes in professional identity but to provide the academic community with insight and understanding of the experiences of online tutors which is a perspective currently lacking in the available body of knowledge.

The provision of rich qualitative data was important to me as an educator and aligns with my original concerns grounded in my experience of online tutoring and a desire to explore the emerging role in an advancing educational landscape in terms of technology and its increased use. Bourdieu (1992) highlights critical reflection as an important process in the way in which knowledge develops and gains credibility. I believe that IPA facilitates a specific process for revealing significant aspects within the online tutor role and provides insight that allows further consideration to be given to the development of the role.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, I gave careful consideration to the use of IPA and why I felt it the most appropriate choice for this study. Other methodologies would have served equally well but would not have enabled me to explore the research questions in a manner which focussed on
understanding participants’ experiences. This is an important point as I believe the research questions did not demand exploration of other aspects of online tutoring. However, I do acknowledge that a different study may have encompassed comparisons with other types of tutorial roles, learner perspectives and perceptions of other academic staff. This would have potentially produced different insights and knowledge, but this thesis has produced (in my view) one type of knowledge which seeks to increase understanding of specific phenomenon. Smith (2011) suggests that IPA studies often have an existential focus and data analysis frequently leads to matters of identity and this resonates with the research study because although I was seeking to explore perceived impacts upon the online tutoring role had on professional identity; the analysis stage of the research confirmed that there was a much more significant association than I had first thought and became more apparent as the analysis developed. The ability to gain deep insights into each participant experience allowed for a great degree of reflection which I may not have had using other methodologies. It was also clear that as interviews progressed participants were engaging in reflection themselves and this is what IPA ‘allows’ in terms of letting the participant speak almost unencumbered to provide a unique and open response.

I am mindful, as noted that the final control and decisions over analysis were mine and another researcher may have made different decisions. I drew on literature which I felt helped me make sense of their experiences and I acknowledge that further data analysis is possible in this regard but for me the discussion reflects and captures what appeared to be the most significant aspects of participant experiences and offers a unique and insightful way of thinking about online tutor experiences and the perceived impacts upon on professional identity, which as mentioned within the chapter overview, has not been covered within literature to date.

The overlap between master themes, sub-themes and concepts were in many ways surprising to me and when analysing the research data, rather than excluding these connections I felt that reiteration would improve the
transparency and rigor of the research study and serve to highlight significant issues revealed within the data.

In terms of ethical considerations, the challenges mostly related to the fact that participants were colleagues and therefore overcoming potential issues around power relations were addressed prior to interview. Using IPA methodology assisted me in this endeavour because allowing participants to talk freely about their experiences meant that interviews were not steered in any particular direction and as the researcher I was not placed in a position of control over the interview conversation.

There was a further ethical consideration around the potential sensitivity of data because the participants were freely talking about their employing organisation and sometimes specific individuals. Care had to be taken when analysing the data in order to make sure that no specific faculty or individual was identified. Because participants were talking about their own unique experiences it was not within my remit as the research using IPA to prevent the free flow of the interviews. However, there were few instances where specific faculties and individuals were identified; in the main it occurred simply to identify a hierarchy or colleague’s role. To maintain the ethical integrity of the research study, these instances were not represented in the analysis.

6.4: Concluding section

Revisiting the research aims

In Chapter 1 the research aims were identified as follows:

1: Learning which included delivery of online learning; tutors, perceptions and connection to professional identity.

2: Professional identity constructs and perceived impacts upon within an online tutor role.
3: Perceived limitations and scope of working online within an educational context together with exploration of the perceived advantages.

4: Tutor-student relationships, their development, collaboration and perceived influences related to online module delivery.

5: Perception of role, role context and working within the changing educational landscapes of online module delivery.

The following discussion will highlight how the research has met these aims.

In order to be an effective online tutor there are many challenges to overcome which include transitioning from a face-to-face learning environment to an online one; dealing with advancing and changing technological landscape; this relates to research aim 5 where the study explored the impact advancing technology has upon the online tutor role.

Additionally online tutors face a considerable challenge associated with overcoming the lack of direct contact with students and peers and maintaining and developing professional identity which may have constructs grounded in traditional teaching and learning contexts. This relates to research aims 1 and 4 where the research sought to explore what it means to be an online tutor and also to understand the relationship between online learning and the online tutor role.

This study illustrates how the changing educational landscape influences a tutor role and their professional identity; conversely it illustrates how an online tutor can influence the quality of learning experiences based on levels of motivation and occupational commitment. The study suggests that there are many challenges to overcome in the transitioning online learning environment and that a balance between the provision of quality learning experiences and the provision of fully supported working conditions for online tutors is needed to ensure a positive feed forward development of this (still)
emerging learning format. This aligns with research aims 2 and 3 where consideration and exploration of connections between professional identity and the online tutor role were undertaken. Perceptions of the impacts and influence of the online tutor role on professional identity were reflected upon.

The existing body of knowledge tends to focus on student experiences and content design. This study provides insights into the experiences of online tutors and how they feel their professional identity is impacted through this role. It also highlights areas for possible future research to continue to understand the complexities of the online tutor role within the dynamic online learning delivery mode and also how the online tutor role could be developed to maximise use of expertise, motivation and maintain individual tutor’s sense of professional worth. This also connects to the design of online learning materials and suggests that there is an opportunity to synthesise this with the role of the online tutor.

Based on the research study and findings I would suggest that further research using IPA methodology, into the role of the online tutor within a wider context, perhaps looking specifically at learning material design and student perception of the online tutor role, could be valuable to the overall body of educational research. The research findings also identify possible research opportunities for collaborative research projects involving information technology designers, learning material authors and online tutors; bringing these interests together could provide the basis for a positive way forward within the changing educational landscape and result in the development of frameworks and tools for all involved with the design and delivery of online learning to use.

I propose that within the research study there are several opportunities for journal publication which include IPA as a viable and appropriate research methodology for educational research, for example in the Journal of Educational Research and the Educational Researcher. I also consider the findings related to use of information technology within the online tutor role to be of particular interest for publication within journals such as the Journal of
Information Technology Education (JITE). Elements of the research that highlight connections between professional identity and the online tutor role would suit publication in journals such as the Journal of Online Higher Education.

6.5 Chapter summary
This chapter has explored the contribution to knowledge the thesis makes and reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the research in order to make suggestions on how future studies might address the latter.

Dissemination has also been covered within this chapter and highlighting IPA as a possible methodology for use in a wider range of educational research and identifying it as a contribution to educational research as a novel methodological choice. Ethical considerations and challenges have been integrated into a reflective section and has also addressed the limitations of the research study. Through the chapter discussions the research outcomes have been clarified and evaluated.
References


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Appendices
Appendix 1 Participant information and consent form

Participant information sheet

Title of study:

Being an online-only tutor: Experiences and perceived effects on professional identity

Invitation to participate:

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being carried out, and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read through the following information carefully and talk to others about it if you wish. You have been invited to participate because you are involved with the delivery of online modules within a higher education learning environment

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of the research study is to explore experiences of higher education lecturers/tutors/academics who deliver online modules only in terms of how they perceive their professional identity within the confines of a virtual learning environment. This will include looking at differences in approaches between different modes of delivery where applicable and exploration of how the challenges of online roles are met.

Taking part:

It is entirely up to you whether you participate in the study, which will be described later in this document. You will then be asked to sign a consent form to show that you have agreed to take part. You will be free to withdraw
at any time, without giving a reason, and this would have no consequences for you.

**What taking part involves:**
The whole research study will probably take 36 months but your direct involvement will be approximately 2 hours. This will entail a telephone or SKYPE interview with the researcher, at a time convenient to you, and at no cost to you. The interview will be based on vocalization of your own experience and will be recorded via a digital voice recorder. It will last for approximately one and a half to two hours (15 minutes to go through the process and make sure you are happy to continue, 1 hour to 1 hour fifteen minutes for the actual interview, and 15 minutes to answer any questions and discuss what happens next).

The interview will then be transcribed and will be not have any identifiable components as a code will be assigned, so the identity of participants will only be known to the researcher. All information will be stored in a locked facility and computers and recorders will also be password protected.

You can review the transcript in order to conform that it is a true representation of what transpired during the interview and a second shorted interview may be necessary to explore further points with you at a later date.

The interviews will be analysed and compared in order to identify common themes and create a working framework of shared strategies and approaches that could help education providers develop online modules in the future.

You will be informed of the research findings when the study and analysis components. The interview data will be securely destroyed following the research study and compliance with university ethical requirements.

The research study has been reviewed by a university ethics committee to ensure that it conforms to strict requirements.
There will be no cost to participants other than providing approximately 2 hours of time with a possibility of a further shorter interview of no more than one-hour duration.

Contact details:  
**Researcher**: Sandie Bowden, contact details:  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXX email: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
University representative who can be contacted in the event that you have any concerns regarding the research:  
Dr Pete Bradshaw email: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The following is a diagrammatic representation of the study and participation, together with a reminder of key points:

![Diagram](image)

**Key points:**  
You can withdraw from the research study at any time

There will be no cost to you other than providing the researcher with approximately 2 hours of your time

You have point of contact so that any arising concerns or questions can be addressed
Your information will remain confidential and only the researcher will know who the data belongs to. The data will be securely destroyed following the research study and in accordance with ethical requirements.

You will have access to the research findings
Participant Consent Form

Title of the research study:

**Being an online-only tutor: Experiences and perceived effects on professional identity**

✧ I agree to take part in this research which is to look at the experiences of online tutoring and the perceived effects on professional identity

✧ The researcher has explained to my satisfaction the purpose of the study and the possible risks involved.

✧ I have had the procedure explained to me and I have also read the information sheet. I understand the procedures fully.

✧ I am aware that I will be required to participate in an interview by telephone or SKYPE which will be recorded.

✧ A second interview may be necessary part way through the study period.

✧ I understand that any confidential information will be seen only by the researcher and will not be revealed to anyone else, and further that I will be able to see transcription of the interview if desired and have access to the final research findings.
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the investigation at any time, in which case the interview data will be retained until the study is completed and then destroyed as described within the participant information sheet.

Participation, or non-participation will not have any consequences.

Name of participant (please print) ..........................................................

Signed ....................................................... Date ....................... 

Name of researcher (please print)........................................................

Signed ....................................................... Date ....................... 

Copy given to participant: yes/no
Appendix 2: Draft interview question schedule

- What is your experience of tutoring online-only modules?
- Do you also tutor modules with face-to-face or verbal interaction with students?
- Are there any challenges for you in delivery of online modules?
- How do these challenges compare with those of modules with face-to-face /verbal interaction? (may require prompt questions such as tutor/learner relationship etc.)
- What strategies have you developed to meet these challenges?
- Are these different to strategies you use in face-to-face interaction?
- How would you define your professional identity?
- Does tutoring online modules affect your professional identity? (if so how?)
- How do you remain professionally motivated when tutoring online modules? (prompt: peer engagement etc.)
Appendix 3: Interview question matrix

Being an online-only tutor: Experiences and perceived effects on professional identity

Preamble: go through the participant information elements which describe the study. Outline the interview process and advise that it can be stopped or paused at any time. The prompt points are dependent on participant responses and examples of what might be considered. Prompts will be unique to each participant but the examples are simply guides.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>Verbal interaction/OU Live, (Prompt: reassure it is their experience and they can be free to discuss any aspect at this point, what does it mean to be an online tutor to them)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe your experience of online tutoring</td>
<td>Comparison with face-to-face module tutoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe any challenges you have experienced in the delivery of online modules</td>
<td>Resolution of challenges (Prompt: can they give an example of challenges they face or have faced)</td>
<td>Comparison with face-to-face modules or those with verbal interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What professional strategies have you developed to meet challenges</td>
<td>What strategies would you like to develop</td>
<td>(Prompt: link back to challenges they have identified and ask them to recount again and consider what they did in a specific scenario)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your professional identity</td>
<td>As an online tutor (Prompt: may need to ask them to define what professional identity means to them and for them within their role)</td>
<td>Related to personal identity (Prompt: may need to consider both and in terms of things like professional socialisation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your experience how does online tutoring affect professional identity</td>
<td>How (Prompt: may need to reflect on an earlier response)</td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe how you remain motivated professionally when tutoring online modules</td>
<td>Lack of peer engagement (Prompt: consider motivation and professionality)</td>
<td>Lack of student motivation (Prompt: one examples of demotivation in the role?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any other elements of online tutoring you would like to describe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Appendix 4: Example transcription extract

Sandie: Can you tell me about your experience of tutoring online modules and whether you feel it has had any impact on your professional identity.

Sue: I think the key thing is isolation...I mean I’m experienced...I’ve been doing this for quite a while now...I think it's my eighth year...an adapting to online tutoring was really hard...my personal experience was.......I worked as a policy officer in local government and managed a lot of supportive housing projects so I was very used to being in a team which I think is critical in any role as you need contact with people...it's part of human life...so I think when I can into it I was also at that time having a lot of personal crises around aging parents, my father in law died, I got married again and all this has a big impact on your identity and I think people move into this type of role, online working... because it works for them and their life demands...which is why I did it.

Sandie: Can you expand a little more on your first point about isolation?

Sue: I think it's very difficult...when you go on the forums for XXXXXX...it's fine at the beginning of a course but then people get out of the habit...XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX xxxxxxxxxx so maybe we should all take a bit more responsibility for making that work. I do think that online tutoring is quite an isolated position...and I do find that the staff tutors are extremely supportive and if
I've got a problem...and other tutors have been extremely supportive because I think you looked after my forum when my father in law died so the real support is there but contact...it just doesn't happen and you know it's not necessarily about getting together and having a groan... I thinks it's more about being in contact with people...I mean it's nice to share experiences...I think as you get older you become more pragmatic and you tend to have a let's just get on with it attitude... but I do think isolation is really important and I think that it is connected to professional identity.

Sandie: So how would you define your professional identity and align this with your online tutoring experience?

Sue: To be honest...I don't perceive this role as a profession... because I think...for example having the day schools last year...what I find is that I always struggle with establishing student contact and developing a relationship with students which I think is a key part of professional identity....now what I'm finding is that xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx...when they moved the regional centres I was having groups of 15 or 16 and now it has reduced to one or two because students are having to travel further, so I find the people I meet in day schools I have more contact with them and more interaction so can build some sort of relationship and that reaffirms my professional identity. I think that is a critical part of ....if you're not having a face to face group....for example my forums on XXXX are abysmal in terms of student engagement.
Sandie: Can you expand on the last points a little more?

Sue: I have had an experience of online sessions where only one student has attended

I think it is part of the context of the world...we are all entering a virtual world now and I am actually finding this year...I've had texts from students...because I always say on the forums...if you get into problems email or text me...now I've had quite a number of messages but with apologies from students...sorry for bothering me...and I think I've given out the same messages to all groups over the years...but it seems to me we are moving into a virtual world and also students seem to be under so much pressure themselves...with work and family and study. The concept of a teacher anyway is totally changing...you know it's not what it used to be....

Sandie: Can you expand your point about professionalism a little more?

Sue: I worked really hard for my qualifications but at the end of the day I don't actually feel professional because I don't think within the online role there is any
reinforcement of professional identity think there is a great deal of need for collaboration and interaction...I don't feel I am able to use my skills...for example I had a recent student with low morale

XXXXXXX and who had come into study after long time...she was doing quite poorly and I felt if only I had been able to have regular face to face contact I could have given her so much more support

This is limitation of my role and also imitation of my skills set...I've been a manager as well as a teacher and I think I could get a lot more job satisfaction out of it than I do....I think one of the problems is that I used to do professional marketing which is dynamic but when you are simply going through the same things again and again it's like a factory production line. I have done a lot of group work with offenders, I managed a refuge...a lot of the work is thinking on your feet... and you're working with the group dynamic. I did the tutor moderators course and there were elements of using group work techniques in there but...because you don't work with groups in that context often within online modules you can't use the skills...also if you chase students too much it becomes harassment. Also...XX

I think I need affinity with the students so I feel I have done something useful. I'm very committed to supporting students but I need to have contact with them. I think when you have people who come
through and you have absolutely no contact with them apart from marking TMAs...this is just the way it seems to be going...the other thing that I thinks is critically important is the informal thing...when I first started I used to set up my own chat forum for people on there - who was getting married, who was going on holiday - just chat.... and it worked really well for a couple of courses but now people rarely engage. This all makes you feel a bit vulnerable in terms of maintaining a professional identity.

Of course students also post negative things about tutors on social media for example

and then we get mixed feedback about what's been happening on social media and when you put it in the context of the virtual world the rules have to change and we need to start developing coping strategies to deal with that.

Sandie: Do you have any specific strategies you use?

Sue: I do think something could be done....but one of the problems is travelling such long distances to attend any OU events.....so I don't know what's going to happen with these centre closures because that's going to impact this even more....the virtual answer would be good but
if you have people in the same locality as you could meet up but where such massive distances are involved interacting with other tutors just does not happen because you just complete the job as a means to an end...I was travelling 400 miles every ten days just to fulfil tutorial obligations so anything else goes out the window and is way outside the contract. You can't expect people to travel miles for support.

To be honest I've not done a lot of face to face teaching but when I did my teaching qualification we had to do this but I will say that face to face takes so much energy because you feel drained but have a lot of job satisfaction at the end. For me it's also about my style of teaching...I tend to work with what's there rather than goes in with issues a set plan...so if you are trying to motivate people you are using a lot of energy and if in turn you are not being motivated by your employer...you're not going to have that energy to motivate other people and that will affect the outcome. However professional we are... if you are in a situation where you are feeling or being devalued... it all has an impact. Overall....I had a student post on my forum XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXbecause she had 2 TMAs due on the same day and she was paying all this money....this was right at the beginning of the course so the expectations from students is huge and I don't feel they appreciate that these things are nothing to do with us... and I think well...now I've got to get over that negative message and continue working with this student who has just been horrid and ranted at me on
a public forum....[students as consumers]
I am now explicit and tell students I am not on call and I'm not available 24 hours a day...I think that students in online modules really do think you are a virtual teacher...I also think that students panic when they realise what is expected of them and often resort to ranting on the virtual platform...not considering that you are actually a human being. But we just have to get on with it...there is no choice if you want to remain in the job.

There should definitely be more formalised contact with STs or others...normally in any other role you would be having regular team meetings....the CDSA is only every two years so it isn't really effective as a tool for supporting you in the role or as a means for developing skills or strategies...it is always out of date. Informal or formal little things can make a huge difference.
Appendix 5: Example of initial thoughts noted on transcription

Sue: Can you tell me about your experience of tutoring online and whether you feel it has had any impact on your professional identity.

Sue: I think the key thing is isolation... I mean I've been doing this for quite a while now... I think it's my eighth year... an adapting to online tutoring was really hard... my personal experience was... I worked as a policy officer in local government and managed a lot of supportive housing projects so I was very used to being in a team... which I think is critical in any role as you need contact with people... it's part of human life... so I think when I can into it I was also at that time having a lot of personal crises around aging parents, my father in law died, I got married again and all this has a big impact on your identity and I think people move into this type of role... online working... because it works for them and their life demands... which is why I did it!

Sue: Can you expand a little more on your first point about isolation?

Sue: I think it's very difficult... when you go on the forums for it's fine at the beginning of a course but then people get out of the habit... so maybe we should all take a bit more responsibility for making that work. I do think that online tutoring is quite an isolated position... and I do find that supportive and if I've got a problem... and I have been extremely supportive because after my forum when my father in law died so the real support is there but...
**Appendix 6: Sue: interview analysis**

This is an example of the first interview analysis and each one was cross referenced with the next analytical layer, then compared across all participant interviews. The comments were the first evaluations of the raw data and were the consequence of initial hand-written notes on the transcript and deeper examination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main points</th>
<th>Location in transcript</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of isolation</strong></td>
<td>3, 4, 22, 27-30, 32, 56, 57, 73-75, 114, 115, 119, 155, 156</td>
<td>Sue comments on feeling a sense of isolation through the transcript and revisits this connection with professional identity and professional vulnerability. There is also a connection to professional motivation and motivating students. Note this for discussion and explore connections in the literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interaction with peers and students</td>
<td>3-5, 14, 23-29, 57, 58, 63, 98-102, 110, 129-131, 156-158</td>
<td>Change by having to learn new IT skills and adapting to changing platforms Coping strategies used to get around challenges and conflicts associated with adapting to online platforms and module delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing experiences and communities of practice</td>
<td>49, 50, 75-78, 88-91, 106-109, 123, 124, 139, 140, 146-151</td>
<td>Student expectations are high and often irrational and can out unreasonable demands on ALs Student perception of the AL role is not clarified and things like contracted hours are not taken into account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students under pressure</td>
<td>Low student morale</td>
<td>Students may not wish to be contacted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>within student expectations which is often that a tutor is available 24/7</td>
<td>Students are often under pressure to study, example if they are sponsored</td>
<td>Tutors have no control over virtual platforms and negative feedback from students is demotivating with little redress or ability to challenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Professional vulnerability**
Frustration
Pragmatism
AL role not professional and no reinforcement of professionalism
Lack of job satisfaction
Means to an end
Fulfilling obligations
Feeling devalued
Lack of respect from students
Lack of choice
Need to comply

19-21, 24-26, 30, 31, 38, 39, 70, 71, 102-104, 118-122, 126-131, 136-149, 150-152

Frustration and pragmatism linked to feelings of being devalued and not being viewed as professionals
Role often becomes a means to an end and fulfilling contractual obligations, this could be linked to contracted hours and lack of inclusivity in decision making processes
Perceived lack of respect from students
Lack of choice underpins need to comply

**Limitations of role**
Professional responsibility
Not able to use skills fully
Role is repetitive and prescriptive

19, 20, 74, 83, 84, 154

Conflict between a sense of professional responsibility to teach and support students and limitations on input within an online module.
Not able to use skills fully which could be linked to contracted hours and the prescriptive nature of modules. In
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not involved with decision making</th>
<th>face-to-face contexts there is flexibility for dynamic interaction ALs are not involved with decision making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **ALs as outsiders**          | **Lack of integration with other OU departments**  
|                               | **Lack of collaboration**  
|                               | **Lack of opportunity**  
|                               | 8, 9, 65, 66, 114-120, 151, 156, 158  
|                               | **Linked to role concept and role isolation, detachment from main OU staff** |
| **Professional identity**     | **Peer and student relationships**  
|                               | **Collaboration and communities of practice**  
|                               | **Support**  
|                               | **Lack of team dynamics**  
|                               | **Reaffirmation of professional identity through interaction**  
|                               | **Role concept**  
|                               | **Lack of affinity with students and colleagues**  
|                               | 12-14, 24-26, 33, 41-42, 46-48, 65, 66, 72, 102-104, 135, 141-142,  
|                               | **Connections between peer and student relationships, affirmation of professionalism and professional identity**  
|                               | **Team dynamics and communities of practice, possible connection to explore between maintaining professional identity** |
Appendix 7: Interview summary for Sue

Overall Sue has a negative view of online teaching and coming from a background in local government and social service contexts, she is not used to working alone. Even after eight years as an AL the role leaves her feeling demotivated, isolated and frustrated, particularly with strong feelings that she cannot utilise her skills and experience fully.

Sue does accept that the role suits her personal circumstances which previous roles did not, and this has established a paradox and at times conflict for her between professional principles and the need to work. Here Sue does not view herself as a professional educator unless she has regular face-to-face contact with students and input in decision making. Therefore, she perceives the online AL role as facilitative and supportive, but it is not perceived as professional.

Within the online role Sue tries to be creative and encourage contact with students to develop and maintain a relationship which she sees as fundamental to professional identity and professionalism. Sue feels this is the only way she can help students maximise their potential whilst at the same time trying to communicate a professional stance and thus also communicate a professional level of teaching. This also serves to help Sue minimise feelings of isolation, detachment and lack of professional motivation. Email and texts messages are routes that Sue uses but she feels that many students can view unsolicited contact from tutors outside the online module forum as harassment.

Sue feels that regular direct interaction with students and peers would help but that a positive and sustained outcome cannot be achieved by online forums only. Sue also suggests that there should be more interaction with other OU departments such as faculties, colleagues and administrative staff; and also, more inclusiveness in key decision-making processes.