

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF OCCUPATIONAL BALANCE  
AMONG MATURE GRADUATE STUDENTS: AN INTERPRETATIVE  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Occupational balance is a multidimensional concept that describes balancing occupations in terms of obligatory and chosen activities that can impact wellbeing. While thoroughly explored among working adults, little is known about the experiences of occupational balance among adults who are not engaged in full-time work. **Purpose:** This study aimed to better understand the experiences of occupational balance from the unique perspective of mature graduate students during the writing stages of their Master's thesis. **Methods:** Informed by phenomenological approaches, this research involved eight semi-structured interviews with full-time Master's students who were also involved in other commitments (e.g., paid work). Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). **Findings:** Participants described feelings of overwhelm and loss of control within the unique context of graduate studies, which included experiencing challenges to engage in activities beyond their thesis, lack of structure within graduate studies, and high academic expectations. Participants also described negotiating conflicted feelings between various responsibilities and their desire to pursue restorative activities. Participants used a variety of strategies to achieve what they described as a sense of balance including: creating their own structures, engaging in concurrent occupations that met multiple needs to save time, and, for some, considering balance over the long term. **Conclusion:** Experiences of occupational *imbalance* are common among mature graduate students, manifesting as feelings of overwhelm, stress, and pressure. Students' strategies for addressing occupational imbalance can inform academic supports and advance theoretical understandings of occupational balance.

**Key words:** mature graduate students, occupational balance, wellbeing, interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Our days are shaped by occupations, which are often described as the activities that fill our days and provide a sense of meaning and purpose ("Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process—Fourth Edition," 2020). Occupations are key to our being as they allow us to feel a sense of meaning, help identify and express who we are, and allow us to contribute to our broader communities (Brown et al., 2013). Occupation is typically defined with a focus on “doing”; Wilcock (1998) expands ideas about occupation beyond “doing” to include being and becoming. She describes *doing* as being involved in activity and suggests that occupations are more complex than “doing”, and thus it is valuable to consider the other ways of exploring occupation. *Being* describes how one may reflect inwards and exist; this allows for one to ‘be in the moment’ which may help them to appreciate their surroundings, self, or circumstances. Later research by Hammell (2004) adds to these ideas by contributing the idea of belonging or connecting as another way of understanding occupation. *Belonging* refers to one’s sense of being included with others which can manifest in different ways. For example some may feel like they belong through social interactions, sports teams, work spaces, or through other forms of connection like shared life experiences, or relationships to name a few. *Becoming* refers to one’s ability to imagine themselves in the future and what that future may look like for them.

In mainstream media we often see the phrase ‘work-life-balance’, suggesting that we are to maintain an *ideal lifestyle*, doing activities like paid-work, along with other activities, typically referring to family life, home life, or one’s social life (Kelliher et al., 2019). Although these occupations can contribute to wellbeing (Irawanto et al., 2021), it can be challenging to uphold these standards, especially as our Western culture can

sometimes emphasize paid work over other occupations (Shulte, 2014; Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019). An article by CBC reports that the Canadian government has proposed a new legislation to promote the ‘right to disconnect’ from work as a means to support work-life-balance (Harris, 2021) indicating that balance is not only important individually, but also collectively, as this relates to our health and healthcare. The literature also supports this idea by providing evidence of the importance of disconnecting from one’s main occupation and to engage in other forms of occupations that may offer balance, and promote wellbeing (Backman, 2004; Håkansson et al., 2023; Wagman et al., 2011).

In recent years, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic and technological advancements have made remote work more common, there has been substantial blurring between personal life and obligatory activities such as work and school, making work-life balance more complex to negotiate (Harris, 2021). Academic literature suggests that blurring of the boundary between work and non-work activities can contribute to poor mental health outcomes as people are more susceptible to experiencing feelings of stress and burnout because they are engaging in activities that may offer them rest or relaxation less often, or amid distractions (Irawanto et al., 2021). Although many people appreciate and enjoy the flexibility of being able to work remotely, it can be challenging to implement boundaries or strategies that can support balance. It is also important to note that the blurring between professional and personal life is not always inherently negative (Lua et al., 2022) – as some people experience comfort in knowing that they are reachable while at work to handle family matters, for example.

While there has been much emphasis on how workers balance their activities with other aspects of their life (Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Wagman et al., 2011), there has

been less research on those who have other obligatory activities aside from, or in addition to, paid work. Within this group, graduate students, are also a population less explored. Graduate studies are commonly self-directed and require students to navigate many of their academic roles on their own, outside the structure offered by semester-long courses, along with other activities. As such, graduate students can provide additional insights into how a range of obligatory activities (but not necessarily paid work) can be done at different times and may blur into each other. Further, mature graduate students are defined in this research as those who have completed an undergraduate program and subsequently been away from the academic environment for at least two years. This population are particularly unique because it is possible that mature graduate students have more challenges to face as compared with other students as they often have different life circumstances as compared to those who have had a straight trajectory from undergraduate studies. I suggest that mature graduate students experience the ‘blurring of the lines’ between their personal lives and academic responsibilities that was described earlier in the context of full-time work. For example, mature graduate students often work from home, have irregular schedules, and navigate accommodating their other needs and obligations such as work, caregiving, volunteering or hobbies.

There is some evidence within Western cultures that a lack of balance between paid-work and other activities can have serious implications including poorer mental wellbeing (Kelliher et al., 2019). Past research focused on postsecondary student health has largely concentrated on the mental wellbeing of undergraduate students, especially as it relates to the transition to university (Plotner & May, 2019). However, research indicates that graduate students, in general, are more susceptible to experiencing challenges with mental

wellbeing as compared to undergraduate students because of their unique circumstances (Allen et al., 2021; Levecque et al., 2017). For example, research indicates that mature students often have the unique challenge of adding academic demands into an already full schedule including caring for themselves, family, and finances as a few examples which may impact their ability to maintain balance (Peters & Dally, 2013; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Graduate students who are writing their thesis often have very flexible schedules. Although flexible schedules offer the opportunity for people to facilitate a routine that works best for them, it can be challenging to attain a routine when there are several challenges including expectations of others and existing obligations outside of graduate school that may contribute to poorer wellbeing (Kelliher et al., 2019). It is important to better understand the unique experiences of balance and imbalance among mature graduate students as a first step in being able to support these students so that they can better succeed within graduate school, and then more broadly within society. Better understanding mature graduate students' experiences of balance and imbalance, may lead to insights about ways in which students can promote balance for themselves or how universities can support such balance.

So far, I have introduced the idea of balance broadly as it is understood in popular culture. Within the field of occupational science, there is ongoing research about a similar concept, *occupational balance*. Occupational balance is a broad concept that continues to be explored, primarily among working adults, and can be described as a complex, multidimensional and subjective experience (Eakman, 2016; Wagman et al., 2011). Generally, occupational balance is comprised of three key components:

- Feeling satisfaction with how time is spent (Backman, 2004; Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Wagman et al., 2011),
- Ability to engage in varied and meaningful occupations that meet physical, mental, social, and spiritual needs (Håkansson et al., 2006; Wagman et al., 2011), and
- Experiencing satisfaction about one's sense of choice and control over their occupations (Håkansson et al., 2006; Wagman et al., 2011).

The occupational balance literature provides some evidence of the benefits of occupational balance to living a personally satisfying life, especially as it relates to positive wellbeing, including feeling relief from stress (S. Park et al., 2021), and by providing chances to engage in diverse and meaningful occupations (Wagman et al., 2014). Conversely, individuals can face challenges, like experiences of depression and feeling lack of meaning within themselves (Eakman, 2016). Their findings describe specifically how people feel a stronger sense of balance when they are able to engage in occupations that are considered meaningful. Sometimes, individuals experience positive feelings when engaged in meaningful occupations (de Mello et al., 2020; Eakman, 2016), but meaningful occupations can also be tiring, and challenging yet still hold meaning. The possibility of challenges experienced as meaningful occupations is described well in the findings from Ludwig et al. (2007) where participants talked about how their roles as grandparents were sometimes challenging and tiring, but rewarding and meaningful. de Mello and colleagues (2020) also indicate that engaging in occupations that are meaningful reflect opportunities to have choice and control over occupational engagement and how time is spent – both of which are key components of occupational balance. Looking at experiences of balance among mature graduate students through the lens of occupational balance may support a more in-

depth understanding of students' occupations, and their lived experiences of navigating occupations alongside their thesis.

### **1.1 Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore the concept of occupational balance among mature graduate students enrolled in thesis-based programs at one Maritime Canadian university. As noted above, graduate students experience unique challenges related to their studies as compared to undergraduate students. *Mature* graduate students' experiences are less explored through research, and they experience unique challenges such as significant personal commitments like caregiving and family roles, or financial responsibilities as compared to their peers within graduate studies.

This research employed phenomenological methodologies (Neubauer et al., 2019) to explore the lived experiences of occupational balance and imbalance among mature graduate students. Data was collected from eight participants through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022). The research question that guided this study was: *What are the lived experiences of occupational balance or imbalance among mature graduate students during the thesis writing stages of their studies?* Then, to address the different aspects of this topic, this research had the following sub questions:

- a. *What meaning do graduate students place on occupations that promote balance during the writing stages of their thesis?*
- b. *What are mature graduate students' everyday lived experiences of balance or imbalance particularly related to their academic responsibilities?*
- c. *How do graduate students describe their wellbeing during times of balance or imbalance while writing their thesis?*

*d. What explicit and implicit ideas and experiences shape mature graduate students' perceptions about what it means to be a mature graduate student, particularly in terms of academic responsibilities?*

## **1.2 Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the focus of this study which is to explore the lived experiences of occupational balance and imbalance among mature graduate students. This chapter rooted this work in contemporary concerns about achieving work-life balance, and also began to position this research within the occupational science literature by identifying some gaps that this research seeks to address. These gaps include: lack of exploration of occupational balance among populations other than working adults; lack of exploration of mature graduate students' experiences; and little research to date about mature graduate students' experiences of occupational balance specifically. This chapter also introduced the challenges faced by graduate students, more broadly, and how they commonly experience a poorer sense of wellbeing compared with their colleagues within academia.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to identify and describe main concepts relevant to this research. Thus, I will review and synthesize key information identified in the literature on the topics of occupational balance, feelings of busyness, leisure experiences, and mature graduate students. This chapter will position this study within relevant academic literature and will identify gaps within the literature that can be addressed by this research.

### 2.1 Occupation and Occupational Balance

The field of occupational science is an interdisciplinary field focusing on the everyday occupations of individuals and groups, as well as the factors that impact them (Hocking, 2013). The meanings people associate with occupations are subjectively defined and are often culturally embedded (de Mello et al., 2020; Dubouloz et al., 2004). Again, occupation describes more than the “doing” of individuals, but also considers being, belonging, and becoming (Whalley Hammell, 2004).

Occupational balance is a concept about everyday doing, which describes the value of balancing various occupations including obligatory and chosen activities that occur throughout our days. The idea of ‘balance’ dates back to the 1920s and particularly to an article by Meyer (1922). Meyer’s work, which derived from occupational therapy research, describes balance in the context of everyday doing of humans and how they generally organize their days with the activities they *need* to do and the activities they *want* to do. In particular, his article proposes that time is organized by the domains of work, leisure, rest, and sleep. He suggested that it was important for these areas of life to be balanced to sustain overall wellbeing. Meyer’s work emerged in a capitalist context, during a time that paid work was especially valued (Wagman et al, 2011), with priority given to being busy with paid work to reflect productivity (Shulte, 2014). Within a Western context, the idea of



prioritizing work and productivity has remained a focus, presenting a challenge for many as people find it difficult to balance work with other activities like socializing, leisure, and family activities (Shulte, 2014). Liu et al. (2021) aimed to help address Wagman et al.'s (2014) noted gap about the occupational balance literature conducted primarily from a Western perspective. Their article proposes "...a Model of Occupational Harmony (MOHar)..." (p. 2) as a means to include a more Eastern perspective. The MOHar draws on four different Chinese philosophies to emulate the idea of harmony. In brief, these are: *Taiji* which describes the beginning of life; *Wuxing* which describes connection with nature elements and the changing cycles of life; *Dao* which describes the idea of being connected with self and nature; and *He* which describes one's relationship with others and self and how they feel about these connections. Liu et al.'s (2021) article provides an understanding of how occupational balance is conceptualized in relation to natural rhythms of life, broadening our current understandings of occupational balance by honing in on the ways in which we connect with ourselves and others.

Although much of the occupational balance literature refers to Meyer's work (Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Håkansson et al., 2006; Håkansson et al., 2023; Wagman et al., 2011; Wagman et al., 2012; Wilcock, 2006), researchers have deepened their understanding of 'balance' as more complex than Meyer had implied. Backman (2004) and Christiansen and Matuska (2006) introduce the complexity of the term occupational balance by noting the diversity of terms that are used to describe balance across key life domains, including lifestyle balance, work-life-balance, and occupational balance. In Table 1, I provide a brief overview of each of these terms and the key characteristics that describe them.

**Table 1**

*Brief overview differentiating terms related to balance within the Occupational Science literature*

<i>Term / Phrase</i>	<i>Key Characteristics</i>	<i>Source</i>
Occupational balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses different domains in life like self-care, leisure, and productivity</li> <li>• Describes occupations as subjectively defined by the doer</li> <li>• Describes how people organize their day in respect to time use</li> <li>• Describes the importance of engaging in activities that are meaningful to the doer</li> </ul>	Backman, 2004; Dür et al., 2015; Eklund et al., 2017; Håkansson et al., 2021; Wagman et al., 2011
Work-life-balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describes how people navigate their perceptions of success or conflict with balancing their paid work and their family and personal lives</li> </ul>	Backman, 2004
Lifestyle balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Connected to time-use:</u> describes the perceived stress and pressures people experience to engage in varied occupations which include paid-work and non-work activities</li> <li>• <u>Connected to role-strain:</u> describes the challenges people face when they feel like they cannot adequately engage in varied occupations</li> <li>• <u>Connected to fulfilling psychological needs:</u> describes engaging in occupations that promote meaning, sense of wellbeing, and motivation</li> <li>• <u>Connected to chronobiology:</u> describes the body's internal clock, and emphasizes the importance of rest and sleep as a means to support balance</li> </ul>	Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Eklund et al., 2017; Håkansson et al., 2021; Wagman et al., 2012

Table 1 reflects the dimensions and complexity of defining occupational balance. One of the key takeaways from this table is that when addressing balance, paid work is most commonly referred to as one's primary occupation as compared to engaging in school, providing caregiving or being engaged in another primary activity. The table also shows that time use is a key contributor to understanding balance. Although there are different

terms and phrases used to describe the idea of balance, it is not uncommon for these terms to be used synonymously (Wagman et al., 2011). In this research, I will refer to occupational balance for consistency and to avoid contributing to the conflation of these terms. Referring to Table 1 above, some of the other terms are specific in describing the particular areas of life that need to be balanced, such as paid work and family lives , or paid work and other activities like socializing. Therefore, drawing from the literature, I define occupational balance as a complex, multidimensional experience that reflects the subjective experiences of the individual (Eakman, 2016; Wagman et al., 2011), and is comprised of the following key components:

- Feeling satisfied with how one spends their time (e.g., Backman, 2004; Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Wagman et al., 2011),
- Engaging in varied and meaningful occupations that meet physical, mental, social, and spiritual needs (e.g., Hakansson et al., 2006; Wagman et al., 2011), and
- Experiencing satisfaction about the individual’s sense of choice and control over their occupational engagement (e.g., Häkansson et al., 2006; Wagman et al., 2011).

## **2.2 Conceptualization of Occupational Balance**

The following section provides further insight into these three components of occupational balance: satisfaction with time use and resource use, engagement with varied and meaningful occupation, and sense of choice and control over occupational engagement.

### ***2.2.1 Satisfaction with time use and resource use***

Time, both in terms of perception and how much time one has, is significant to experiencing occupational balance as time availability or scarcity can either promote or hinder one’s ability to engage in meaningful and varied occupations (Eklund et al., 2017). The way in which we understand time varies across cultures; one of the major critiques in

the occupational balance literature is that time is understood and measured through a Western lens, which can be a narrow way of understanding time use (Wagman et al., 2014). For example, in a capitalist culture it is common for people to understand time as closely tied with the clock where occupations have a distinct beginning and an end (Shulte, 2014). In other cultures, it can be common for people to be more flexible with their conceptualization of time and how their time is spent (Mraovic, 2021). For example, within different cultures, the pace of life may be different (Arman & Adair, 2012) compared to a Western culture where things are fast and it is a common experience for people to experience time pressure (Shulte, 2014). Planning, organizing, and managing one's time often differs across cultures (Arman & Adair, 2012; Mraovic, 2021), and may impact the way in which one feels satisfied with how their time is filled. For example, in Turkish cultures it is common for meetings in the workplace to be established in the moment, or day of as compared to in North America where meetings are often planned days or weeks in advance (Mraovic, 2021).

Time balance or time use has been explored within the occupational balance literature. Initially, time allocation was a commonly used way to understand occupational balance (Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Håkansson et al., 2006). Time diaries were a method of documenting people's time use across the different domains of life – generally work, leisure, and personal life (Christiansen & Matuska, 2006). However, one of the critiques of using this method to understand occupational balance is that it does not provide context about individuals' feelings or personal experiences of occupational engagement (Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Håkansson et al., 2006). Later research by Wagman et al. (2011) discusses that time use should be considered when conceptualizing occupational

balance because the time one has to engage in different occupations is important context. Everyone has different needs, schedules, and responsibilities; the awareness of how much literal time was available to them per day (i.e., 24 hours) and delegating time to various activities within that time frame was an important finding in their research. Their findings describe the importance of balancing time in terms of obligatory activities (meaning paid work, child-care) and non-obligatory activities (meaning their private lives, encompassing activities like leisure, household chores, family time, socialization). A key finding in a concept review of occupational balance (Wagman et al., 2012) was that spending equal amounts of time across the different occupational domains is not necessary to achieving balance; rather, people need to be aware and satisfied with how they allot their time with various occupations. Thus, while there are limitations to only looking at time use, allocation of time is one useful way for some people to describe their felt sense of balance in a day.

More recent research has shifted the conversation away from time use solely and incorporated the idea of resource use (e.g., Eklund et al., 2017; Häkansson et al., 2021; Wagman et al., 2011). Resource use refers to the subjective experience of an activity that can be perceived as energy giving (e.g., something that energizes or rebuilds a person's mental and physical wellbeing) or energy taking (e.g., an activity that can be perceived as tiring in any capacity (e.g., physically, emotionally, mentally)). Having adequate resources (e.g., time, money, energy) to promote activities that give energy is an important element of occupational balance. One example of this idea is when Wagman et al. (2011) specified the importance of engaging in both physically demanding activities and restful activities. Eklund et al.'s (2017) research about the relationship between daily patterns and occupational balance discuss the importance of knowing how to navigate personal

resources (e.g., time and energy to name a few examples) as a means to promote occupational balance. They emphasize not taking on too much, or conversely too little, and to consider the different demands and resources that are needed to engage in various occupations. Their findings showed that if someone took on too much and were involved in occupations outside of their capacity, then they would find it difficult to experience a sense of balance as they would be overextending themselves and their resources. Conversely, those who were involved in less and were not engaging in a variety of occupations, especially meaningful occupations, would also find it challenging to experience a sense of balance.

### ***2.2.2 Engagement with varied and meaningful occupations***

The second key component of occupational balance is an individual's engagement with varied and meaningful occupations. Meaningful occupations are subjective experiences that people engage in regularly; typically, for the occupation to be meaningful, the individual experiences positive feelings from the occupation (de Mello et al., 2020; Eakman, 2016). Variance is an important characteristic to achieving occupational balance. Eklund et al. (2017) describes varied occupations as a "harmonic mix" (p. 47), which illustrates that people's daily activities interact so that one can feel a sense of balance. They emphasized the value of engaging in both physically and mentally demanding activities as they can contribute to a sense of feeling balanced; this point is relevant and connects to prior research signifying engagement in various occupations that fulfill physical, mental, and social needs (Wagman et al., 2011) as well as connects to previous research about engaging in occupations that are energy giving (Häkansson et al., 2021). Occupational patterns for everyone are different, however the idea of variance in the type of occupations is an important characteristic to achieving occupational balance. Research by Wagman et

al. (2011) explores activity balance in terms of having harmony across one's work life and private life. Their findings determined that there are four key contributors to feeling a sense of balance: activity balance, time balance, balance in relation to others, and balance in body and mind. They describe these contributors as dimensions that are interrelated and complex. In brief, *activity balance* describes the balance between non-working activities, also referred to as one's personal time, working activities, and family life; *time balance* refers to the literal time within one day (i.e., 24 hours), and navigating how this time is spent; *balance in relation to others* describes social relationships and one's felt sense of being balanced with themselves and their social environment; and *balance in body and mind* refers to feeling a sense of balance with habits that promote healthier lifestyles like exercising, getting enough sleep, and eating a nutritious diet, to name a few.

Meaningful occupations, as described above, are subjective experiences where people are able to engage in occupations that are aligned with their personal interests and needs (Eklund et al., 2017; Häkansson et al., 2006). Eklund et al.'s (2017) findings described that one way of achieving engagement in meaningful occupations was to engage in occupations that offered the opportunity to take on different roles that allow individuals to fulfill different needs, such as that allow for them to feel a sense of meaning. For example, Ludwig et al. (2007) describes the idea of different roles of grandmothers who were able to engage in occupations like walking, reading, and sitting on their patios resting. Within their role as grandparent, they were able to spend time with their grandchildren and feel a sense of being able to contribute by supporting any care giving gaps that were present. They were also able to meet different needs like exercise, relaxation and connecting with others. The findings from Ludwig et al.'s (2007) study align with Eklund

et al.'s (2017) findings which provide insight into how people may experience and feel a sense of meaning when engaged in different roles as described above.

### ***2.2.3 Sense of choice and control over engagement with occupations***

Finally, the third component of occupational balance is the idea of choice and control over engagement in occupations. Häkansson et al. (2006) aimed to better understand everyday balance among women diagnosed with a stress disorder, which in their research is described as experiences of anxiety, depression, or burnout, as well as experiences of feeling overworked and fatigued. They gathered data through focus groups and found that context, such as one's personal circumstances (e.g., their stress-disorder, sense of self, or support systems) were key to promoting occupational balance, as context impacts one's choice to engage or not engage in occupations. For example, one of the key findings from their research was that participants found it challenging to prioritize their own needs and instead felt pressure to prioritize other's needs (e.g., family, work, or friends). As a result of prioritizing other's needs, their own needs were minimized which often resulted in occupational imbalance. During the focus groups, participants discussed possible strategies for occupational balance that could be incorporated into their everyday lives, including ways to re-gain control over occupational choices, such as placing boundaries and structure around the different areas of one's life. An example of this was creating boundaries around work and deciding to only work within the working hours, which contributed to one's sense of control. However, participants mentioned the challenge they faced when they felt like they had no sense of control over their occupations. Often, this happened when they felt they had a "duty and obligation" (Häkansson et al, 2006, p. 78) to engage in a particular occupation even though it did not have personal meaning or value. Another example of experiencing lack of control was when participants felt they



experienced overload, which is defined as too many occupations or too much of the same occupation, and this often happened within the context of work. Overall, their findings reported that when people were able to feel like they had more control over the level of participation and type of occupation within their occupational engagement, then they felt they were able to be more balanced, and then overall more satisfied with themselves and their sense of wellbeing. Wagman et al. (2011) provide an example of how their participants, who were working adults, felt that there were societal pressures to be a certain way and to manage life in a certain way. Participants discussed how these pressures impacted their choice and control over the activities in which they would (or would not) engage. Aligning with Håkansson et al.'s (2006) findings, Wagman et al. (2011) found that participants valued the explicit division between work life and personal life, and felt that these areas of life should not be controlled by one another. One of the key tools to supporting choice and control over occupational engagement was having access to support systems that help to foster autonomy. For example, some parents in this study talked about the unique demands they have as parents to care for their families, each other, and themselves. However, with the proper supports (e.g., childcare) they were able to exercise their choice to engage in other occupations that were personally meaningful to them, such as taking time for themselves, or spending time with others socially. The participants in this study spoke about how accessing the necessary resources to support their autonomy was key to them experiencing occupational balance as this allowed for them to 'be' for themselves which positively impacted their ability to show up to their other responsibilities and commitments.

#### **2.2.4 Occupational balance within academia**

There is some research about occupational balance among students broadly, and then more specifically graduate students. Notably, there is a surge in research on this topic since the COVID-19 pandemic (Guszkowska & Dabrowska-Zimakowska, 2023; Pekçetin et al., 2021; Robinson-Bert et al., 2021; Salar et al., 2022). I suggest that it is possible that researchers gained more interest in exploring this idea after people were forced to take a pause from their daily routines. The pandemic shifted many people's daily routines and impacted many people's wellbeing (Guszkowska & Dabrowska-Zimakowska, 2023). Guszkowska and Dabrowska-Zimakowska (2023) describe how people's access to public spaces were limited which impacted a lot of people's ability to engage in activities related to work, exercise, socializing, and engaging in leisure. Within the context of academia more broadly, there is notable research on occupational balance among academics, more specifically full-time paid academics, like professors and instructors (Cannizzo et al., 2016; Helvaci et al., 2017; Kinman, 2008; Kinman & Jones, 2008). These findings provide evidence on how academics are working too many hours which often impacts their personal time. Cannizzo et al. (2016) explored balance among academics by trying to understand how their time was being spent across three different areas: work, leisure, and caring hours. *Work* was defined as the hours one spent contributing to their work related tasks including teaching and research. *Leisure* was defined as "personal and other lifestyle pursuits such as hobbies, exercise, watching television, and so on" (p. 888). *Caring hours* described the time people spent caring for themselves and for their families (if relevant). Their findings reinforced the complexity of balance as participants involved in their study described how the three areas explored did not include everything that contributed to their sense of balance. Their findings also reiterated the challenges faced by academics in terms of work

time bleeding into other areas of their life, especially when pressing deadlines (like preparing for a conference or preparing for a publication) were of focus. In particular to graduate students, Rini and Provident (2024) identified three themes that described occupational therapy students' barriers to feeling a sense of occupational balance, these include: lack of time, feelings of guilt for not being able to complete all of their tasks, and experiences of stress and anxiety.

### ***2.2.5 Summary and gaps within the occupational balance literature***

This section provided a review of the theoretical literature on the conceptualization of occupational balance and synthesized key components of how occupational balance has been understood thus far. To put it concisely, given the review of the literature, the three key aspects of occupational balance include: satisfaction with time use and resource use/availability, engagement with varied and meaningful occupations, and a sense of choice and control to engage in desired occupations. After reviewing the literature, there are several gaps noted that require further exploration to better understand occupational balance. Key gaps presented in the literature include:

- Our understanding of occupational balance comes from a Western perspective with a capitalist lens, as most research has been conducted within Western societies (Wagman et al., 2014) which limits our understanding as more diverse perspective (culturally) is needed,
- Most of the occupational balance research has been conducted with female identifying participants (Eklund et al., 2017; Wagman et al., 2015) which also limits our understanding as this does not provide a diverse perspective,

- Occupational balance has historically been linked to the idea of time use (exclusively) rather than subjective perceptions of balance, which does not attend to subjective experience of balance (Häkansson et al., 2006; Wagman et al., 2011; notable exceptions include S. Park et al., 2021; Röschel et al., 2022),
- Occupational balance has been historically explored through the lens of workers, versus people who engage in another activity (i.e., school, caregiving) as a main occupation (Eakman et al., 2017; Wagman et al., 2014),
- There is lack of focus on natural fluctuation or rhythms of life (Christiansen & Matuska, 2006) as well as a heavy focus on doing rather than being, becoming, or belonging (Whalley Hammel, 2004). It may be important to understand how our environments and the natural engagement with both the patterns of, and unpredictability of life have potential to impact our experiences of occupational balance

Based on the review of the conceptualization of occupational balance, additional research is needed and therefore, this project aims to address some of these gaps by focussing on a population whose main occupation is not paid work, who experience a flexible schedule which may support better understanding on the lack of focus on natural fluctuation and rhythms of life.

Possibly related to the experiences of occupational imbalance is experiences of busyness, which may be because of the large amount of research rooted in a Western perspective. To further conceptualize this study, the following section will provide insight to the topic of busyness.

## **2.3 Busyness**

Briefly, occupational balance is informed by people's experience of having enough time and resources, the ability to engage in a variety of meaningful activities that meet different needs, and the satisfactory experience of having a sense of choice and control over engagement with occupations. Busyness, defined as "how crowded one perceives one's schedule to be" (Festini et al., 2019, p. 112) may be related to experiences of occupational balance. Thus, this section will briefly explore the topic of busyness and its relevancy to this research project.

### ***2.3.1 Overview of busyness***

The concept and experience of time is culturally-bound and thus I will be exploring the concept of balance within a Western context, where feelings of 'busyness' are prevalent (Festini et al., 2019). Within this context, people can experience high levels of busyness because their time is filled with various occupations like paid work and personal-related activities (Festini et al., 2019). Festini et al. (2019) define the idea of busyness to be "how crowded one perceives one's schedule to be" (p. 112). Others mirror this definition by describing busyness as a subjective experience with navigating activities that fill one's day (Gershuny, 2005). Gershuny (2005) also suggests that our experiences of busyness are tied to cultural norms that prioritize paid work while activities like family time, housekeeping, and leisure are less of a focus. It is possible that one person may feel busy as compared to another person even if they complete the same activities and tasks.

One occurrence that is commonly faced by people within a Western context that glorifies busyness is for people to boast about their busy schedules, which consequently can normalize the experience of busyness, suggesting that it is better to be more busy (Lua et al., 2022; Shulte, 2014). Kim et al. (2019) discuss that in order to be in the mindset of

busyness, one may experience one of the following three characteristics, and sometimes all. First, people experience busyness subjectively and this experience is based on how individual's personally feel about the value of their daily activities. For example, some people may see resting and reading a book on their lunch break to be unproductive versus spending that time to get in more paid-work related tasks. Second, busyness can be experienced as favourable by some people who may enjoy being busy, and therefore is not always an indicator of negative wellbeing. Finally, busyness has traditionally been viewed as positive in relation to paid work tasks.

It is possible that people prefer to be busy, and therefore it is not sufficient to suggest that busyness is wrong or inherently unhealthy. However, there is clear evidence on how feelings of busyness can impact wellbeing, especially if one is enduring frequent stress as a result of real or perceived feelings of busyness (Lua et al., 2022; Shulte, 2014). Lua et al.'s (2022) findings reveal that people who feel more pressure to be busy, often societal pressures, are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety and depression. Other findings report on how some people feel the pressure to be constantly available to their work which can lead to experiencing a sense of being time poor (Shulte, 2014; Strazdins & Loughrey, 2007). *Time poorness* describes not having enough time to engage in required or desired activities outside of paid work hours. It is important to note that this definition of time poorness is rooted in a culture that prioritizes paid work as one's main occupation, and therefore, does not reflect the wide range of human experiences (e.g., people who may experience time poorness for another reason, like chronic health challenges). Constant feelings of busyness and no time to rejuvenate can lead to the experience of an unbreakable stress cycle (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019). Much of the research on these ideas are situated

within a Western lens; in this context, busyness may be valued and experienced differently from other cultural contexts. Occupational balance and busyness seem closely intertwined and may reflect the culture of productivity being promoted, and therefore other experiences like socializing, leisure activities, physical activities, and sleep to name a few, may be neglected. The following section will discuss leisure experiences and their relevancy to this research project.

#### **2.4 Leisure-based occupations**

Leisure experiences can offer the opportunity to promote wellbeing, especially mental wellbeing, when they are regularly pursued (Brooks et al., 2019; Howell & Pierce, 2000; Mansfield et al., 2020). Leisure experiences often happen in one's free time and are freely chosen, enjoyable, intrinsically motivated, and meaningful engagements for the doer (Stebbins, 2005). Engaging in leisure can promote feelings of restoration, increase opportunities to socialize and connect with others, and help people to cope with stressors (Brooks et al., 2019; Caldwell, 2005). Unfortunately, leisure is often compromised because of other occupations that demand one's time (Reichwein & Gow, 2013; Shulte, 2014), such as graduate studies (Meurer et al., 2020). Regularly engaging in leisure can be therapeutic to individuals as leisure activities are, by definition, personally meaningful, and often promote social support and acceptance, increase confidence, self-efficacy, and self-determination (Caldwell, 2005; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). Since occupational balance promotes engagement in varied and meaningful occupations, and because leisure is defined as personally meaningful, engagement in leisure may promote occupational balance. Additionally, leisure occupations can offer the opportunity to cope with feelings of stress or overwhelmingness (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). Shulte (2014) emphasizes the reality of

how being time poor can impact one's leisure and free time, noting that it is imperative that people have time to rejuvenate from work stress to avoid negative impacts on wellbeing.

The literature about occupational imbalance and busyness identifies potential stresses including feeling overwhelmed and tired which can negatively impact wellbeing (Eakman, 2016). While it is widely known that physical activities and having enough sleep can positively impact wellbeing, literature on busyness (e.g., Gershuny, 2005; Festini et al., 2019) can help us to understand that it is a common experience for people to neglect activities like these, further impacting balance and wellbeing. Participating in leisure may contribute to one's sense of occupational balance as leisure tends to be an energy-giving activity. Prioritizing activities like work, and school while not engaging in activities like leisure may help us to understand occupational *imbalance*, which adds to the occupational science literature.

Now that I have established the conceptual and theoretical background guiding this study, I will provide insight to the study population as well as provide a rationale to why this population is relevant in helping us to better understand occupational balance.

## **2.5 Graduate Studies**

Graduate studies refers to a broad group of programs in academia leading to Master's or Doctoral degrees. One of the main reasons people may choose to pursue graduate studies is to advance their careers (e.g., Meurer et al., 2020; Shinke et al., 2001). In particular, Shinke et al. describe graduate programs as a means to "...prepare students to become scholars, leaders, and professionals who will be responsible for the advancement of knowledge and the continued functioning of society" (p. 342). Graduate studies can be considered a challenging time because many graduate students take on different roles within the academic context in addition to other roles they hold outside of academia



(Meurer et al., 2020; Ryan, 2008; Smith, 2004). For example, graduate students are often responsible for completing course work and research, as well as are involved in paid jobs on campus like research and teaching assistantships (Ryan, 2008; Smith, 2004). Outside of academics, students often try to maintain a personal life which sometimes includes additional part- or full-time work, caregiving responsibilities, and volunteer or leisure-related commitments (Meurer et al., 2020). Generally, being a graduate student can be time-consuming and busy, which can lead to experiences of stress and sometimes burnout (Gin et al., 2021; Levecque et al., 2017; Meurer et al., 2020; E. Park et al., 2021; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). Academic culture does not typically provide the title of “worker” to graduate students (i.e., although some student might receive scholarship funding, the role of being a graduate student is not socially constructed as an employee). Considering the occupational balance literature and the literature about graduate students, students are a relevant population to explore because not only are they a group whose focus is not paid work, but they also navigate a lot of activities like caregiving roles within their families, managing finances, and trying to be involved with hobbies and socialization.

The focus of this research is on mature graduate students who are pursuing a research-based Master’s degree, particularly at the writing stages of their thesis, and who identify as mature students. For this research, I have drawn on information related to graduate studies and mature students, from resources specific to students at Dalhousie University, the site of this research project. I have done this so that I can situate the research findings within a specific context, because it is well established that context impacts what we do, and thus will influence the experiences of occupational balance within this research.

The following sections will expand on thesis-based master's programs and mature graduate students.

### ***2.5.1 Thesis-based master's program***

At Dalhousie University, most thesis-based Master's programs are designed as two-year programs and require students to complete a research project under the supervision of a faculty supervisor (Dalhousie University, n.d.a). Typically, the first year of a student's program includes beginning their thesis and completing coursework. During this first year, the student's schedule is generally more structured by coursework commitments as compared to their second year. During their first year, students generally complete a research proposal (or equivalent) for their research project. The second year of their program is generally less structured and focuses on the completion of their research project. Specifically, this means collecting, analysing, and describing their data, and writing and defending their thesis.

### ***2.5.2 Mature graduate students***

Generally, mature students are defined within the context of undergraduate studies, and are defined as students who are over 21 years of age while pursuing an undergraduate degree (Dalhousie University, n.d.a.). Because this research focuses on graduate students, I have defined a mature student as someone who has completed their undergraduate studies, and has been away from the academic environment for at least two years. My rationale for defining mature graduate students as over 25 years old is meant to align with Shepherd and Nelson (2012), who describe mature students as adult learners, with the term "adults" referring to people who are over the age of 25 years. Previous research indicates that mature graduate students experience unique challenges related to balancing academics and non-academic activities including scheduling conflicts between school and family lives,

financial challenges, and experiences of little support from faculty within the university (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Other research indicates that people returning to graduate studies often have the unique challenge of balancing the reintegration to academia processes such as navigating new support systems within academia and trying to connect with peers who are often at different life stages (Peters & Dally, 2013; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Research also reports that mature graduate students are more likely to feel isolated and disconnected from academia for a few reasons including lack of time to engage in university-related social events (Mallman & Lee, 2017) and the lack of specific supports and resources on campus to aid in mature student wellbeing (Mackie & Bates, 2018). Mature graduate students also tend to have additional responsibilities beyond their studies, such as families, financial commitments such as mortgages, work, and managing their social lives (Mannay & Ward, 2022). A study completed by Baglow & Gair (2019) reviewed data from a local survey about social work students, 70% of whom were mature students in a master's program. These students identified finances and family responsibilities as their main challenges while in graduate school. Because of their families and school responsibilities, there is a lot of negotiation between responsibilities that can impact their wellbeing negatively without the proper supports such as adequate counselling services, available childcare or faculty support, to name a few. Consequently, mature graduate students have the unique experience of balancing various roles within their everyday lives. When considered in the light of how occupational balance is conceptualized in this study, graduate students' experiences can be understood as providing unique insight into context because their focus is not on paid work and typically spans several different

occupations, including part-time work, family commitments, volunteer roles, and their personal lives.

### ***2.5.3 Busyness of mature graduate students***

As noted earlier in this chapter, many mature students are responsible for negotiating how their time is spent tending to academic roles, family roles, possibly paid-work roles, and personal related tasks. Yusuf et al. (2020) report that there is a large potential for graduate students (in general) to experience a sense of busyness. Linking back to the literature above that discusses the challenges faced by students (e.g., Meurer et al., 2020; Peters & Dally, 2013; Ryan, 2008; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Smith, 2004) as they negotiate how their time is spent, it is possible that busy students are experiencing time poorness. Festini et al. (2019) link feelings of busyness to poorer mental wellbeing. There is literature about the experiences of graduate students broadly speaking, however there is a lack of qualitative accounts of the graduate student experience. Because of this, I drew on several blogs and discussion forums within the grey literature to better understand the free time experiences of graduate students, and identified three key themes within these sources. Table 2 reflects these findings, particularly illustrating the challenges mature graduate students face in having free time to engage in activities of their own choosing.

**Table 2**

*Summary of grey literature on the social lives of graduate students*

<i>Key themes</i>	<i>Individual experiences of graduate students expressed through blogs</i>
Feelings of loneliness and isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feelings of loneliness, especially during the pandemic where most activities shifted to online platforms (Charbel, 2021)</li><li>• Difficulty to finding time to socialize (Gormally, 2018)</li></ul>
Challenges of navigating individual workload and personal life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Challenging to find time to do other activities outside of the workload of graduate studies (e.g., reading, hiking, socialization; Gormally, 2018)</li><li>• Balancing academics and personal life was challenging, often leading to feelings of busyness (Hoyt, 2019)</li><li>• Establishing boundaries between academics and personal life was a difficult task (Wayne, 2013)</li></ul>
Experiences of busyness and poor mental wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Busyness often viewed as a “badge of honour”, but feeling and being busy was challenging and impacted their wellbeing (Koeng, 2019)</li><li>• Activities that provided restoration were neglected because of academic responsibilities which led to poor mental health experiences (Raver 2012)</li><li>• Feelings of busyness led to feeling there was lack of time to complete tasks or to socialize which led to fatigue and burnout (Repak, n.d.)</li></ul>

The findings from these blog posts relate to the occupational balance literature provided above in that they help to provide insight to the experiences of graduate students, and the possible challenges that they face. Through the literature review, we know that occupational balance among students has not commonly been explored, and with the evidence in these blog posts, students are describing times where they are unable to engage in all of the activities that they want to, to feel a sense of balance. This research will aim to

better explore the experiences of students and how their experiences are relevant in better understanding occupational balance.

## **2.6 Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to synthesize key topics relevant to this research project. This chapter provides information about occupational balance and imbalance, mature graduate students, feelings of busyness, and leisure occupations. Based on the review of this literature, the following insights have informed this research project:

- Occupational balance is a relevant concept to help us understand how people organize and experience their occupations. It is a multidimensional and complicated concept that can reflect one's sense of wellbeing. The relationship between occupational balance and experiences of busyness has not yet been explored among a population whose main occupation is not paid work, specifically mature graduate students.
- From the literature, we know that mature graduate students' time is often spread thinly navigating various demands including work, caregiving, finances, and academics (Meurer et al., 2020), which can impact wellbeing (Mackie & Bates, 2019). We do not know how these varied demands on their time and energy specifically impact their experiences of occupational balance.
- Mature graduate students writing their theses are in the unique position to provide insights into the experience of occupational balance and wellbeing as they are required to negotiate the different roles they hold all within the unstructured context of writing a thesis.

There is little research in the area of occupational balance within the context of graduate studies, particularly focussing on mature students. This research helps to address a gap in the literature by exploring the phenomenon of occupational balance within a context distinct from full-time paid employment. The literature also provides clear insight to how occupational *imbalance* can impact one's ability to engage in various and meaningful occupations (Eklund et al., 2020), which may impact wellbeing.

### **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH PARADIGM, METHODOLOGY, METHODS**

The aim of this research is to explore the lived experiences of occupational balance among mature graduate writing their thesis using phenomenology as the methodology. The research questions guiding this project is: *What are the lived experiences of occupational balance or imbalance among Nova Scotian mature graduate students during the thesis writing stages of their studies?* This research question was explored through the following sub questions:

- a. *What meaning do graduate students place on occupations that promote balance during the writing stages of their thesis?*
- b. *What are mature graduate students' everyday lived experiences of balance or imbalance particularly related to their academic responsibilities?*
- c. *How do graduate students describe their wellbeing during times of balance or imbalance while writing their thesis?*
- d. *What explicit and implicit ideas and experiences shape mature graduate students' perceptions about what it means to be a mature graduate student, particularly in terms of academic responsibilities?*

This phenomenological study is rooted social constructionism and engaged mature graduate students in individual interviews about their experiences of occupational balance during the writing stages of their theses. This chapter addresses the research paradigm, methodology, and methods in detail.

#### **3.1 Research Paradigm: Social Constructionism**

Research paradigms explain how researchers understand the way in which knowledge is constructed and represented (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pilarska, 2021). Research paradigms describes how the researcher's thinking and beliefs shape their



understanding, design, and interpretation of research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Pilarska, 2021). From a researcher's perspective, the research paradigm, also commonly referred to as one's worldview, is an important way of understanding how you position yourself within the research, as it informs your research practices and reflects your positionality – both of which shape your research project. My own worldview and research paradigm aligns with social constructionism.

Social constructionism describes how humans make sense of the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructionists view experiences and the meaning people place on experiences as subjective (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pilarska, 2021). Social constructionists view and understand knowledge as constructed through the interactions people have with one another, including the interactions between a researcher and research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, there are many possible realities of how something is experienced or understood (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The way in which a researcher with a social constructionist stance understands themselves within their research is shaped by their experiences of the world and how these experiences shape their understanding of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are many factors that contribute to an individual's experience with the world around them (e.g., society, culture; Pilarska, 2021). Crotty (1998, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018) proposes key assumptions about social constructionism. They say that the context in which participants exist matters to the researcher as context shapes interaction with the world; context describes cultural and social norms for the individual involved in the research. They also say that the idea of meaning is influenced by one's culture and setting. Therefore, the

researcher's and the participants' background will influence the meaning that they place on their experiences.

The social constructionist worldview impacts this entire study and is evident in different ways such as the development of the research project, the interactions between participants and the researcher, and more explicitly evident in the first sub question (i.e., *What meaning do graduate students place on occupations that promote balance during the writing stages of their thesis?*), and the last sub question (i.e., *What explicit and implicit ideas and experiences shape graduate students' perceptions about what it means to be a graduate student, particularly in terms of academic responsibilities?*). The aim of these sub questions are to hone in on the social constructions of mature graduate students' perceptions of their responsibilities and meanings they place on occupations and the academic context as students. In this research, social constructionism is evident through the research design, where the participants are invited to share their diverse lived experiences of occupational balance within the context of graduate studies.

### ***3.1.1 Researcher Positionality***

Within social constructionism, considering one's positionality is a critical step to the research process. Positionality encompasses a researcher's worldview, their assumptions about the world, their values, beliefs, and experiences, and the position they have adopted within the context of the research project (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Holmes, 2020). Researchers can position themselves within their research by reflecting on how they influence the project throughout the entire process, reflecting on how they see themselves within the world, and reflecting on the role of participants and how they interpret themselves and the identities of the research team (Holmes, 2020).

The way I articulate my positionality is complex and ever-changing as I develop as a researcher. I am currently pursuing a Master's thesis and have a background in Recreation and Leisure studies. I also am a strong advocate for mental health, particularly by advocating for the prioritization of leisure experiences to promote rejuvenation and help to alleviate stress. In terms of balance, this is a phenomenon that I sometimes struggle with, although I am always working towards achieving a stronger sense of balance that works for me. Since beginning graduate studies, the flexible schedule has made me realize that I personally need more structure to complete all of the tasks that I want and need to have done. However, being diligent with my schedule and mapping out the different tasks I want and need to complete on a weekly basis is a key strategy to supporting my personal experience of balance – although, I still sometimes struggle with consistency, which has led to imbalance at times for me. I also think that it is valuable to position myself as a white, able-bodied person, as these characteristics impact my role with this proposed research and the world more broadly, and the ways I relate to research participants. I also position myself as someone who is privileged in terms of the educational opportunities and financial security I have experienced which have helped manage challenges that I have or may face.

### ***3.1.2 Phenomenology***

The general purpose of phenomenology is for researchers to gain rich insight to a phenomenon through the perspective of the individual by hearing stories from participants about their experience of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology, initially explored by Edmund Husserl, is rooted in philosophy. Phenomenology strives to understand the meaning of a particular experience of a phenomenon; this is done by exploring the 'how' and 'what' of the experience (Neubauer

et al., 2019). Phenomenology as the chosen methodology for this work aligns well with my research paradigm of social constructionism because phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of a phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019), and social constructionism positions those lived experiences as being situated within a socially constructed context which impacts the meaning ascribed to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pilarska, 2021). Phenomenology has three main pillars which include phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2022). To be more specific, *phenomenology* describes the lived experience of a phenomena which focuses on the essence of the experience and describes the relationship of that experience of the individual. *Hermeneutics* represents interpretation of the experience which can reflect people's description of their experiences and how they make sense of their experience with the phenomena. *Idiography* is focused on the "particular" (p. 24) and aims to understand the phenomena by understanding the particular context, from the particular group of people. Creswell and Poth (2018) summarize key features to phenomenological studies. I have outlined these features in Table 3 and identified ways this research embodied these features.

**Table 3***Key features of phenomenological studies*

<b>Key Features</b> (Creswell & Poth, 2018)	<b>Ways this research echoed these features</b>
Key phenomenon explored	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Occupational balance/imbalance during grad school</li> </ul>
Address a key population who have experience with the phenomenon being explored; typically a study between 3 and 15 participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mature graduate students during the writing stages of their Master’s thesis</li> <li>Interviewed 8 participants</li> </ul>
‘ <i>Phenomenological Reflection</i> ’ which describes the notion of the researcher exploring their personal experience with the phenomenon. The idea is that the researcher cannot remove themselves from the research, but they can be aware of how their experience impacts the overall research experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Throughout the process I kept a reflexive journal that has documented my personal reflections, thoughts, questions, and ideas related to this project. I have also kept note of my personal experiences with occupational balance and imbalance.</li> <li>During conversations with my supervisors, we reflected on our own experiences and to the responses of participants’</li> </ul>
The method for this type of research generally is interviews to gain insight on the lived experience of a phenomenon.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eight interviews were conducted asking questions about individual’s experiences of occupational balance and imbalance with a focus on how they described their felt senses and emotions of these experiences.</li> <li>This research also asked questions about the participant’s understanding of what it means to be a graduate student. These questions helped to link to social constructionism which explores how people make sense of the world and their experiences based on social norms and assumptions.</li> </ul>
Uses a systematic data analysis to group key themes together and to help clearly organize the findings to describe the lived experience of the phenomenon under exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This research analyzed data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) following Smith et al.’s steps (2022). IPA provides clear guidelines on how to organize the data into different patterns and themes. I have detailed these steps in the Data Analysis section below. Additionally, this analysis aligns well with phenomenology as it gets at better understanding and interpreting the lived experience of the phenomenon of occupational balance.</li> </ul>
Share findings descriptively – at the end of one’s study, the researcher shares the findings by detailing the experiences of their participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This research has provided a brief overview (in Chapter 4) for each participant describing their individual contexts which relate and impact their experiences of occupational balance.</li> <li>The findings also use direct quotes (anonymously) from participants to add to the richness of the findings.</li> </ul>

## **3.2 Methods**

The following section describes the recruitment strategies, research participants, data collection, and data analysis.

### ***3.2.1 Recruitment Strategies***

After receiving ethics approval from Dalhousie University's Research Ethics Board (REB), I began recruitment in late fall 2022. I recruited participants by sharing a recruitment poster (Appendix B) through social media, direct contact (i.e., email) with graduate programs, and by displaying posters on the Dalhousie campus in areas frequented by graduate students (i.e., common study spaces like The Grad Pad in the Killam Library). As per the recommendation of Dalhousie Association of Graduate Studies (DAGS) I reached out to different graduate programs via email to share information about recruiting for this research project. Initially, I was able to recruit four participants through these strategies. In March 2023, I initiated another round of recruitment through the same strategies, but with minor adjustments made to the recruitment poster (Appendix C). I also updated the recruitment poster for clarity, because it was originally titled "*Are you a mature graduate student?*" and attracted some students who were not Master's students, and therefore ineligible to participate in this research. After adjusting the language to saying: "*Are you a mature master student?*", I was able to recruit four more participants for this project. Originally, the aim was to collect data from eight to ten participants as this sample size aligns well with phenomenology (Neubauer et al., 2019). After collecting data from eight participants, I decided to do another round of recruitment in attempt to meet my upper goal of ten participants, however, I received no further responses from eligible participants in response this final recruitment effort. Participants contacted me via email with their

interest in participating in the project. After reaching out, participants were provided with an information letter and consent form (Appendix E), as well as a brief overview of the project which included the inclusion criteria (Appendix D) for them to confirm their eligibility, as well as have opportunity to ask questions or be given further information about the study. Once they confirmed their eligibility, and reviewed the necessary documents, we scheduled a time to meet for the interview.

### ***3.2.2 Research Participants***

To be eligible to participate in this project the participants needed to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- enrolled in a thesis-based Master's program at Dalhousie University,
- engaged in the writing stages of their thesis. For this research I defined this stage to be after the individual has completed their research proposal (i.e., involves the times in which they are engaged in collecting data, analyzing, and writing their thesis),
- enrolled in their studies full-time,
- engaged in another regular commitment (e.g., paid-work, volunteering, caregiving, leisure engagement, etc.),
- identify as a mature student. For this research, mature student is defined as someone who has completed an undergraduate degree and has been away from the academic environment pursuing other endeavors for at least two years.

After meeting the above requirements, participants were engaged in an interview to talk about their experiences. The participants who were involved in this project were also

asked about demographic information during the interview. These questions can be found in the interview guide in Appendix A.

### ***3.2.3 Data Collection***

This research employed individual semi-structured interviews as they are often the preferred method in phenomenological studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as they allow for the researcher to have some questions prepared to guide the conversation, while still being responsive and flexible to the experiences of the participant (Gill et al., 2008). I offered participants the option of engaging in the interview either in-person at Dalhousie University, or online via Microsoft Teams. Interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes and were audio recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed. Two interviews took place in-person, on campus at Dalhousie University in Halifax, NS. Six interviews took place over Microsoft Teams. To thank participants for their time, each received a \$25 gift card for a grocery store of their preference. For the two in-person interviews, gift cards were given at the beginning of the interview. For the six virtual interviews, gift cards were sent to participants via mail following the interview.

The interview process followed the interview guide developed for this project that was based on key ideas from the literature including understanding occupational balance through the lens of being a complex, multidimensional concept (see Appendix A). The first two interviews were also considered pilot interviews, which meant that in addition to completing the interview using the interview guide, at the end of the interview I asked questions about the interview guide to gain insight about any suggestions participants may have had to increase clarity of the questions. These pilot questions can be found in Appendix A. These pilot interviews did not yield any changes to the interview guide, however supported me in better understanding and strategizing how to clarify concepts to



participants, especially if English was not their first language. Before beginning the interview, participants were asked to sign the consent form which was emailed back to me and uploaded to OneDrive. I then reviewed the consent process (referring to the consent form, found in Appendix A) with participants before beginning the interview. After this, I provided participants with an overview of occupational balance and my project more broadly (script found in Appendix A). Throughout the interview, I used language that was familiar to the participant (e.g., referring to feelings of busyness or balance, versus occupational balance or imbalance). Before starting the audio recording, I reassured participants that any identifying information would be removed from the data, and that they could end the interview at any time. Once I started the audio recording, I led the interview following the interview guide (Appendix A) which was broken down into three broader categories in terms of content area: content related questions, demographic questions, and concluding questions. Content related questions were related to participants' experiences of occupational balance and imbalance. Demographic questions were open ended and offered opportunity for participants to share details about how they would like to be described as a participant. Participants shared details like their age, pathway to graduate studies, and area of study. Finally, concluding questions offered the chance for participants to ask any remaining questions they had, for me to clarify anything that is unclear to them, or for them to share anything else that they want me to know. Throughout the interview, I used probing questions to better get at the lived experiences of occupational balance. Examples of probing questions used include:

- *How did that experience make you feel?*
- *Can you describe to me what you mean by feeling frustrated during that time?*

- *Can you tell me a little bit more about that experience?*

After the interview was completed, I thanked participants for their time and reinforced to them that anything we talked about would be kept confidential.

### 3.2.4 Data Analysis

To analyze this data I followed Smith et al.'s (2022) guidelines for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA process is iterative and requires flexibility and creativity when engaging with the data. Smith and colleagues propose seven steps to analysing the data using IPA; these serve as guidelines and are not definitive. I primarily carried out the analysis independently, although met frequently with my supervisors who helped to refine the analysis. I have summarized the steps using Smith et al.'s framework in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Steps for analyzing data using IPA (Smith et al., 2022)*

<b>Step 1</b>	<p><b>Starting with the first transcript:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describes when I began reading the transcripts to become familiar with the data</li> <li>• I began to organize the data to support further analysis; examples:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Transcribed data from the audio recording</li> <li>○ Mapped out the overall structure of the data</li> <li>○ Removed identifiable information</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Step 2</b>	<p><b>Exploratory noting:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Began making notes on the data               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ These were a combination of detailed notes (e.g., summaries of people's experiences; questions I had) as well as simple notes (e.g., key words, ideas or concepts; broad phrases summarizing the data)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• During this stage I focused on how the participant described their experiences, especially when they spoke about the meaning of their experiences               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ For example, if given the following scenario: Participant A talks about their relationship with their research supervisor describing it as supportive and meaningful. They describe how their supervisor accommodates their needs, encourages boundaries when it comes to their work and life, and how their supervisor doesn't add to stress in their life. An <i>exploratory note</i> may look like this: 'positive relationship with supervisor'</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The purpose of this step was to allow for me (the researcher) to interpret and better understand the data</li> </ul>

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<b>Step 3</b>	<p><b>Constructing experiential statements:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At this point, the data has grown a lot and I reviewed the transcript along with the notes I had made from the previous two steps.</li> <li>• The aim of this step is to focus on the exploratory notes. Through the exploratory notes I constructed experiential statements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Experiential statements are a concise summary to describe the data. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ (Using the same scenario above), an experiential statement may look like this: A positive relationship with one’s supervisor may promote wellbeing.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Step 4</b>	<p><b>Searching for connections across experiential statements:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During this stage, I began to review the statements and mapped them by looking at similarities which was done manually using flipchart paper</li> <li>• The purpose of this step is to look at the experiential statements and to begin to cluster them based on what you see or think to be fit (i.e., cluster based on similarities, or patterns). I initially did this step alone, and then consulted with my supervisors to discuss the connections and made adjustments accordingly.</li> </ul>
<b>Step 5</b>	<p><b>Naming the personal experiential themes (PETs):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The purpose of this step is to review the experiential statements and how you have clustered them in the previous step. The aim is to develop broader themes (known as PETs) for that individual participant.</li> <li>• Again, I did this step alone, and then connected with my supervisors to discuss the PETs and then made adjustments accordingly.</li> <li>• Some examples of PETs found within my data include: feelings of pressure; sense of wellbeing; navigating boundaries</li> </ul>
<b>Step 6</b>	<p><b>Continuing the individual analysis of other cases:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The previous five steps take place for one participant. After I completed those steps for an individual case, I moved on to the next participant and re-did the same process.</li> </ul>
<b>Step 7</b>	<p><b>Working with PETs to develop group experiential themes across cases:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once I finished analyzing the data using steps 1-5 as guidelines, it was time to develop broader themes for the overall data.</li> <li>• The purpose of this step was to discuss and determine the similarities and/or differences across the various participants experiences. This step was done with the support of my supervisors.</li> </ul>

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### **3.2.5 Data Storage**

All of the data collected for this project are stored on OneDrive through Dalhousie University. To support privacy and confidentiality, consent forms, audio recordings, and identifiable transcripts are stored in a separate file from one another on OneDrive, and are password protected. Anonymized transcripts have been stored in a separate file on

OneDrive, and myself and two supervisors have access to this file. Notes that were made manually on chart paper are stored securely at my home.

### **3.3 Rigour and Quality**

Cope (2014) describes five criteria to account for when producing qualitative research to ensure quality and rigour; these include credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity. These criteria reflect the trustworthiness of the research, which describes the efforts one exhibits in representing the research and knowledge ethically (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Credibility, which describes the reliability of the data, is achieved by conducting research with relevant methods and techniques to provide confidence in the study development and completion (Connelly, 2016; Cope, 2014). In this research, reliability is shown through the qualitative data methods and iterative analysis process which explored the phenomenon in this study. Dependability, which describes clarity and transparency of the research (Bradshaw et al., 2017), is shown through my thorough and thoughtful interviews with participants and conversations with supervisors about the research process and the data analysis steps. Confirmability, which describes the ability to present the data with full transparency (Connelly, 2016; Cope, 2014), was addressed by debriefing with supervisors, journaling about my reflections related to the participants, their data, and how to appropriately portray them. For example, it was important to present participants' lived experiences and the meaning they placed on these experiences. Reflective journaling provided further opportunity to ask questions about the data, offered a place to reflect, and to summarize key thoughts about the participants' experiences. The findings reflect these feelings by describing their experiences using their words. Transferability, which describes the ability to be able to provide the reader with enough information to decide if the findings are transferable to

another setting or study group (Cope, 2014), is shown through the rich description of the findings and the description of each participant which helps to add context to this study. Finally, authenticity, which describes the researchers' ability to convey participants' experiences, particularly their feelings and emotions (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Cope, 2014), is reflected through the iterative process of IPA which allowed for rich connection with the data during analysis and is then reflected in the findings.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this project was to explore the lived experiences of occupational balance and imbalance among mature graduate students engaged in the writing stage of their theses. To address the depth of this topic, this project asked questions about the *meaning* participants placed on promoting balance across the different aspects and commitments in their lives; about *everyday experiences* of balance or imbalance related to their academics; about how they *describe* their wellbeing during the writing stages of their theses; and, about the *implicit* and *explicit* expectations and norms that shape their experiences as a mature graduate student. The data in this phenomenological study was analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022). Data were gathered from eight participants who were enrolled in full-time Master's thesis programs and in the process of writing their theses.

This findings chapter will first include descriptions of each participant to provide context for the reader. Then, this chapter will describe the five main themes that describe the findings. Direct quotes are used to support and explain these themes.

### 4.1 The Participants

Research grounded in phenomenology aims to understand the lived experiences of a phenomenon from an ideographic perspective (Neubauer et al., 2019). Therefore, the unique experience of participants are pertinent to understanding the findings. Below, I have provided a brief summary of each participant's life circumstances to help contextualize these findings.

To protect participants' identities and support their privacy, I have provided general information that is relevant to their experiences, while not identifying their specific programs, workplaces, or other potentially identifying information. Participants came from

both urban and rural campuses of Dalhousie University. Data were gathered from participants enrolled in programs across faculties including the Faculty of Agriculture, Science, Health, Computer Science, and Arts and Social Sciences. All participants identify as women, and ranged in age between 25 and 30 years old. Four participants identified as international students, and four were domestic students. As a part of the inclusion criteria, participants needed to be engaged in another regular commitment aside from their studies (e.g., paid work, volunteering, etc.). Participants in this study described working for pay (both within the university and outside of the university), volunteering, and engaging in regular sport and exercise and connecting with family and friends as their commitments. Their paid work within the university included working within the library, as a research assistant, as a teaching assistant, or as a combination of these jobs. Outside of the university, participants described working at various retail locations, within non-profit organizations, or within government institutions.

#### ***4.1.1 Participant 1***

Participant 1 completed her undergraduate degree and then pursued a course-based Master's program. After completing these degrees, she pursued a paid job for about two years before returning to academia to pursue a research-based Master's to support her future career. While in graduate school, Participant 1 also holds a part-time paid job outside of the university. In addition to paid work and academics, Participant 1 described how she often aimed to spend time learning how to play an instrument, socialize with friends, and connect with family. However, she mentioned feelings of guilt and overwhelm during or sometimes after engaging in these activities as her thesis work is always on her mind.

#### ***4.1.2 Participant 2***

Participant 2 moved abroad for volunteer work after completing her undergraduate degree. When her volunteer opportunities were cut short by the Covid-19 pandemic, she returned home to Canada and decided pursue graduate studies. While working on her thesis full time, she volunteered weekly through a local organization. In addition to volunteering and academics, Participant 2 described how she spends her time engaged in hobbies, and other activities like making dinner, cleaning her home, and planning her wedding with her partner, with whom she lives. Overall, participant 2 describes feeling good about her current schedule and believes she experiences positive wellbeing.

#### ***4.1.3 Participant 3***

Participant 3 completed her undergraduate degree and then began a paid job, which she pursued for five years before returning to academia. She decided to return to school to pursue a research-based Master's in order to help advance her career. While enrolled in her program full-time, she had other commitments including volunteer work, part-time paid work (within the university and within the community), and sport. Participant 3 describes how a lot of her commitments overlap (e.g., travelling for sport while visiting family at that location), which she describes as allowing her to multitask. In addition to these different activities, she also described spending time communicating with family (through letters, phone calls, and in-person), spending time with her partner, and engaging in other tasks like meal prepping and cleaning. Participant 3 emphasized how she feels pulled in many different directions, but that each of these activities fulfill her, which makes her feel "happy and motivated". Planning her days and weeks, and the opportunity to multitask allows for her to do everything she wants to and needs to do, which she describes as promoting her wellbeing.



#### ***4.1.4 Participant 4***

In-between her undergraduate degree and Master's degree, Participant 4 spent a few years pursuing a paid job to gain work experience within her field before returning to academia to further her education to help advance her career. While pursuing her Master's full-time, she works part-time at the university. Participant 4 also described the importance of not working (both thesis and paid-work tasks) in the evening at home so that she can use her free time as she wants. She described how it's too difficult for her to function without a break. In the evenings and weekends she described prioritizing spending time with her husband, and spending time doing things around the house (e.g., small chores, cooking) to help her be focused for the next week. Participant 4 described how ensuring that her free time is used as a proper break for her to relax is important to her as it supports her wellbeing positively.

#### ***4.1.5 Participant 5***

Participant 5 finished her undergraduate degree and then began working in her field for a few years before returning to academia. She wanted to gain some hands-on experience before pursuing graduate studies, which she believes will support her to advancing her career. While working on her thesis, participant 5 worked part time both within and outside of the university. She also described how a lot of her time is spent connecting with family through phone calls. In her free time, she also enjoys watching Netflix and cooking. She also described the challenges she faces in navigating a flexible schedule without fixed deliverables, which negatively impacts her wellbeing.

#### ***4.1.6 Participant 6***

Participant 6 finished her undergraduate degree and then began working in her field for several years before returning to academia. She wanted to further her education through

graduate studies to support her future endeavours, as well as to “push” herself. During her thesis, she’s working a few different part-time jobs within the university and outside of the university. During the interview, Participant 6 focused on her mental health and how she often struggles to engage in “fun” activities that support her wellbeing. Often, feelings of overwhelm from her other responsibilities takes precedence. She described spending time with her partner and taking care of her dog as things that are important to her, but can sometimes be a challenge because her work tasks are always on her mind.

#### ***4.1.7 Participant 7***

Participant 7 completed her undergraduate degree and then immediately pursued a course-based Master’s program. After these degrees she spent a few years working within her field and to gain financial stability. She decided to go back to school to pursue a research-based Master’s to help her career. She also described the importance of being able to support herself financially through this degree, whereas she had family support in the previous two degrees. While doing her thesis, she also worked paid jobs within the university and outside of the university. In addition to these activities, she noted that an important part of her daily routine involves connecting with family, friends, and her partner, who all live abroad. Participant 7 described feeling overwhelmed a lot of the time, as she was on a strict timeline and needed to finish her thesis. However, she often found herself procrastinating as a result of feeling too overwhelmed with all of her responsibilities.

#### ***4.1.8 Participant 8***

Participant 8 completed her undergraduate degree and then worked for a few years before returning to further studies. She decided to return to academia to further her education. While writing her thesis, she worked part-time outside of the university, and regularly engaged in sport and exercise. She described being excited to pursue graduate

studies, but then once she began she encountered challenges that impacted her academics and personal time. Some of the struggles she encountered were financial and housing insecurity, and fractured friendships which she described as impacting her ability to focus on her thesis. However, she emphasized the support her partner – with whom she lives – gave her throughout her journey.

#### ***4.1.9 Summary of Participants***

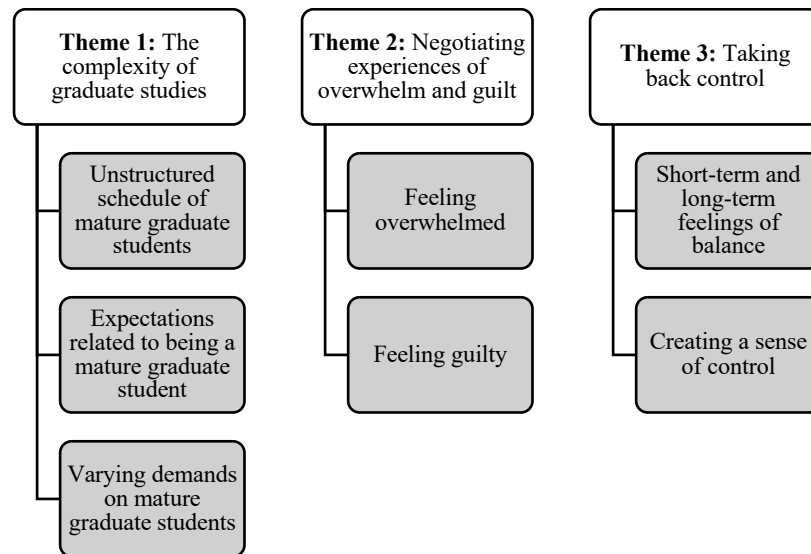
In summary, the participants in this research shared the experience of being mature graduate students at Dalhousie University, who were all involved in at least one other activity outside of academics. In this research there were four participants who were international students. A notable shared experience for these participants was that they often took time to connect virtually (phone calls, video calls) with family and friends who lived in different time zones. As a result, connecting with loved ones often meant carving out time in the day to accommodate the time change, which sometimes interfered with other commitments, especially work and school. Similarly, another participant who was not an international student, but lived in a different province from her family, described how she would spend time connecting with family. She did not describe this as interfering with other commitments, as she could connect in the evening, or once her other obligations were completed. The most common commitment among nearly all participants is that they pursued paid work in addition to graduate studies. Paid work was described as necessary during graduate studies as, funding, for those who had funding, would not sustain the cost of living. Finally, another notable shared experience for these participants was the desire to engage in restorative activities such as socializing, engaging in hobbies, and spending time with family, yet there was tension experienced when these activities were attempted.

Tasks related to graduate studies such as working on their thesis, were often a focus for students.

## 4.2 Findings

Through the IPA process, I was able to identify three main themes which will be described in this section. This chapter will use participants' quotes and descriptions of their lived experiences to support these findings. Again, the purpose of this research was to better understand the lived experiences of occupational balance among mature graduate students during the writing stages of their thesis. Figure 1 represents the key themes and sub-themes that make up the findings for this project.

**Figure 1.** *Themes outlining study findings*



### 4.2.1 Theme 1: The complexity of graduate studies

The findings are clear in presenting examples of the challenges and complexities of being a mature graduate student. Many participants described their experiences as difficult to navigate at times as they negotiated the different areas of their lives. Theme 1 describes the complexity of graduate students in terms of their unstructured schedules, expectations related to being mature graduate students, and varied demands.

### *Unstructured schedule of mature graduate students*

Every participant commented on the uniqueness of their schedules. There was a common thread for participants during the writing stages of their thesis which was the *unstructured* nature of this stage, without specific deadlines and deliverables related to their thesis progress which resulted in them often procrastinating, or finding it challenging to appropriately schedule in self-determined deadlines. Students who were engaged in paid work spoke about how their paid work often took precedence first over their other activities, and sometimes over their thesis. Some participants compared their experiences of writing a thesis to their experiences in course-based programs that were structured through classes and assignments. They described their course-based programs as easier to manage as their academic schedule was clear and explicit. Some participants described this time as flexible, which they enjoyed, as they had a lot of control to be able to plan their schedules. However, others found the flexibility of their schedule to be overwhelming despite having control over how their time is spent. For example, Participant 8 talked about how there are so many “pieces” to completing a thesis. They described how this can get “unwieldy” and “discouraging” when the process is not organized by set deadlines with clear guidelines. She describes the challenge she faced with the unstructured nature of writing a thesis:

“...I just felt like I had a lot of things to balance because all of the time where I was trying to organize myself, and my life, I should have been writing, I could have been researching, and doing my literature review.”

For context here, she is describing all of the time she spent just trying to plan and organize her time; she spoke about how in hindsight, she could have just spent that time working on her actual thesis. However, she struggled to begin the process of writing with her thesis

because there were no set deadlines guiding her progress. Similarly, Participant 5 described how she struggled with being organized during the writing stages of her thesis. She says:

“I found a sense of balance when I had fixed amount of deliverables, fixed amount of studies I had to do, and it was more organized during that time. I used to be more organized when it was all online and I made my regular day-to-day life more organized... and I do not have to worry about commute. And so when I had specific classes, it was more helpful, but when only doing your research or only working on your thesis, it is not so organized anymore.”.

Participant 5’s experience is reflecting how a flexible schedule, or unstructured schedule, can be challenging for some people, particularly because there are not externally reinforced deadlines related to their thesis.

In contrast, for some participants the flexibility offered during the writing stages of their thesis allowed for them to feel a sense of accomplishment when they were able to successfully meet self-set goals. Participant 3 embodied this experience by describing how she would incorporate different activities within her schedule at the same time. For example, she would exercise with others so that she could engage in physical activity and socialize. She would also bring her work to different locations which allowed her to travel and spend time with family, as well as engage in her competitive sport. She emphasized favouring the flexibility of her schedule during the writing stages of her thesis here:

“...Particularly once I finished my coursework that the kind of work and flexibility that I have from doing research and writing my thesis in my own time can meld with all these other parts of my life. So I can work in coffee shops and be doing all of my

writing in amongst my training schedule and where my partner and I want to be to visit friends and family, we can take our work remotely.”.

For Participant 2, the unstructured nature during the writing stages of her thesis was also favourable once she determined that working all of the time was not supportive to her thesis progress. She says:

“But I think I just kind of realized more that I was feeling burnt out from trying to do schoolwork as much as physically possible. And so I took a step back to try and work less. And then I kind of realized that, you know, no one was mad at me and saying I wasn’t doing enough, like I was still getting done what I needed to be doing. I was feeling pretty uninterested in school... I was having a harder time completing things, like, I kind of just would be staring at my laptop for an hour trying to start writing a paper. But now, I try to plan out my week, whatever things I need to get done and when I’m going to do them, and then also try to plan out doing other things than school, like signing up for a workout class, or having dinner with my friend.”.

This quote is describing her experiences of having a flexible schedule and the challenges she faced with navigating this. It is important to note that Participant 2’s experiences are different in that she described having financial security and therefore did not need to work throughout her graduate studies (i.e., she had more flexibility with choosing how her time was spent). When planning her weeks, she would assign 40 hours per week towards her thesis, which she describes as “treating [her] thesis like a full-time job”.

### ***Expectations related to being mature graduate students***

The experiences of participants were similar in that most people described feeling pressured to conform to social norms related to ‘*what it means to be a graduate student*’? Expectations related to these norms came from professors, supervisors, the university

culture generally, and peers. Several participants talked about how they experienced feelings of pressure, more specifically from peers and the academic culture of feeling pressure to attain publications, research-related opportunities and funding, about how their time was spent related to their thesis work. Participant 1 describes how, because she is a mature student, her supervisor explicitly expects more from her. She has been asked to complete more readings and other tasks for her supervisor as compared to her peers who are not considered mature students. As a result, she described how her time is not her own, and how she feels a lot of pressure. She says:

“...In two years, I have studied [the whole time] without any holiday. Because my supervisor gave me a lot of [work to do] during the holidays. So that holiday is not for me really... I have to study more, because he expects more.”.

She emphasized the pressure placed on her by her supervisor to be completing more work. This often led to frustration for her, especially because she felt she did not have control on how her time was spent and used. However, she also imposed pressure on herself to excel academically. She says:

“I’m a mature student, like I have [already] one Master [degree], and work [experience]. I feel like more pressured because if I don’t really meet the requirements, or get a low grade, then others, I feel like, ‘ok, I am so stupid’.”.

This quote, in particular, reflects the pressure she feels about being good enough for academia, despite already having two degrees and work experience.

Participants also expressed how they felt the need to always be working on their theses as a means to advance themselves and their work. Some of the social norms related to academic were more implicit, as described above where participants felt a sense of



pressure of how they *should* be accomplishing their work, which was by expending most resources (e.g., time, energy) towards their thesis work. These experiences largely reflect the academic environment which participants described as filled with “unspoken expectations”. Participant 4 described “feeling behind” within academia because of her status as a mature graduate student. Participant 4 talked a lot about how her age and life stage was more closely related to those in her lab who were pursuing a PhD, as compared to her colleagues also pursuing a Master’s. Therefore, she found herself often comparing herself to others in her lab, particularly those working on their PhDs. She described how she would feel guilty about not having a comparable curriculum vitae (CV) to those students, and about not working “as hard” as those students. When prompted about this, she described how she felt behind because she started her graduate studies a bit later in life. She said:

“The PhD students work more, you know, they have a lot of things going for them. ...more publications, and more work during the same time. But I did nothing. That kind of thing like that, you know, just keeps going on in my mind”.

Here she is describing not having the same number of publications, or teaching experience, and because of this she was feeling like she had not done anything, or accomplished very much. Because of this, she emphasized the pressure to have a fuller CV with more publications, teaching experience, and conference proceedings. She is comparing herself to others who share the same age as her, but who had not spent a period of time outside of academia, and therefore she felt inadequate because they had more academic related accomplishments.

A few participants described explicit expectations within academia. Participant 6 described how being a graduate student, in general, meant that "... there are inherently higher expectations of performance levels..." – which she further described as being noted by the university through their advertising and application processes. Participant 2 described how a few of her professors described clear expectations for graduate students during their studies – these conversations happened during her first year within their coursework. The expectations were both related to her coursework and related to graduate studies more broadly. One explicit expectation described to both Participant 2 and 8 was that they were to engage with their studies as a full-time job, working at least forty hours per week on their thesis work. For Participant 2, as touched on previously, once she had established boundaries that worked for her, she was able to achieve this expectation by scheduling her thesis work throughout the week, Monday through Friday.

Four participants in this research identify as international students. Two of these students talked about their unique and culturally-bound experiences of expectations. They emphasized the pressures they felt from their families which they described as culturally embedded, where prioritizing and attending to schoolwork is the norm for students. Participant 7 expanded on how these pressures manifested within her life. She said that her cultural norms shaped her work ethic, and understanding of 'how' one should engage with their studies. Initially, when coming to Canada and beginning graduate studies, she felt a lot of pressure to work hard on her studies and achieve excellent grades. The pressures she felt were related to her parents imposing these expectations on her, especially as they had supported her financially to come to Canada. Since arriving to Canada, however, feelings of pressure have shifted, and she has different contributors to her sense of pressure related

to completing her degree. Now, she needs to complete her thesis within the timeline of her visa to allow her to move forward with applying for a work visa. She also emphasized that one of the reasons she is pursuing graduate studies abroad is to better herself and her family by establishing herself in Canada. In doing so, she hopes to help her family financially, and maybe one day help them to relocate with her. However, she emphasized how her family instilled hard work within her, and so that helps her to be motivated and encourages her to “push through” her studies.

### ***Varying demands on mature graduate students***

All eight participants described having obligations beyond their thesis work and described how these obligations made them feel. Paid work was often described as an essential obligation as they needed the extra income to support themselves through graduate studies, as funding alone was not enough. In addition to paid work, participants described their personal time, although limited, and how activities in their personal time such as household chores, meal prepping, spending time with friends and family, pursuing a hobby, or socializing were often not as prioritized as their paid work and their thesis. Participants who were engaged in paid work within the context of the university, particularly as teaching assistants, described this job to be especially challenging because of the ebb and flow of busyness throughout the term, which sometimes felt too demanding for participants. For example, both Participant 6 and 7 explicitly described how when assignments or exams were ready to be marked they pushed their theses to “the back burner”, resulting in feelings of guilt. Participant 6 described busier times as “energy consuming” resulting in her not having enough “energy for [her] thesis during these times”.

Another challenge faced by participants was the limited time they felt they had to engage in activities outside of their paid-work or thesis including: socializing, physical

activity, spending time with family and their partner, engaging in hobbies, spending time doing household chores and related tasks like meal prepping, laundry, and tidying, and relaxing by reading, watching television, or spending time on social media. These activities were often described as sought after but not prioritized as compared to their thesis work or paid work. For example, Participant 8 describes a time while she was writing her thesis where she felt like she was not involved in any other activity but her thesis, she says:

“...There was a period of time where I was like, pumping out so much of my manuscript, I was really getting it out and it was going well. I would work at it from 8:30AM until 9PM. So at that point, I wouldn’t really go out and [do anything]. My partner would could the meals and doing the cleaning, I was not recharging [through] my social life or hobbies like exercise. I didn’t have time for my close friendships, I was hoping that they would sustain themselves despite the distance.”

In summary, there were various demands pulling on students’ time and energy. This sub-theme has introduced the various tasks taking up students’ time throughout their Master’s work, particularly during the writing stages. Being pulled in different directions often led to feelings of frustration, stress, and overwhelm. When students’ would engage in activities outside of their thesis or paid work, feelings of guilt were often brought up. Thus, the following theme will explore these nuances in more depth.

#### ***4.2.2 Theme 2: Negotiating experiences of overwhelm and guilt***

This theme describes different ways in which participants described feeling overwhelmed or stressed in relation to their experiences of navigating graduate studies and life. The focus of this theme is to describe participants’ experiences of feeling overwhelmed and guilty during the writing stages of graduate studies.

### *Feeling overwhelmed*

For the participants, feelings of overwhelm manifested in different ways and include: feelings of frustration and stress as well as feeling a lack of control and pressure in regards to participants' everyday experiences. More precisely, feelings of frustration transpired within graduate school and life circumstances by having lack of structure within one's schedule without set deliverables, and not enough time to complete thesis tasks. Feelings of frustration also occurred within oneself as several participants described feeling that if they were more disciplined that they could get everything they needed and wanted to get done. Participant 1 emphasized her feelings of overwhelm through not being able to control how her time was spent. She said:

“...time is not enough to work on your thesis [because of other responsibilities like work]. Everything in your life is controlled. It's hard.”.

To contextualize this quote, she was describing her feelings of overwhelm especially related to her time use. Her daily activities involved going to her lab for the morning, followed by going to a paid job in the afternoon. She highlighted how she always felt too tired or too stressed to work on her thesis in the evenings and on the weekends. Her days were long and spent engaging in thesis work and paid work, she described feeling unhappy because this would leave no time to do some of the activities she would like to do (e.g., learning to play a new instrument). Consequently, she would rarely take time to make a proper meal for herself as she didn't have the energy to do so. She further talked about her feelings of stress by saying she would “...hate Sunday evening...” because it meant that a new week would begin, and she would have to encounter another week of feeling at a near-constant state of overwhelm. Here, I have interpreted the lived experience of overwhelm as her not having enough energy and time to take care of herself fully. The anticipation of

the new week immediately brings on feelings of overwhelm for her, which would also bring on feelings of stress. Participant 5 described her experiences as almost mirroring this cycle; her description of these feelings are that she is "...never at a state of bliss.". For Participant 5 her responsibilities differed in that she worked paid jobs within and outside of the university. In addition, she emphasized prioritizing connecting with friends and family who live abroad. She described feeling the same type of overwhelm where she would not want to start another week as the build-up of tasks would daunt her. Although she would prioritize connecting with friends and family, this always had to take time during the day to accommodate for the time change, which conflicted with other responsibilities like work and her thesis. As a result she described feeling stressed and guilty when she wasn't able to accommodate all of these activities.

### ***Feeling guilty***

Participants described seeking out activities like socializing, engaging in a hobby, or spending time with their partner, which would make them feel "happy", "give them energy", and helped them to re-focus on their other tasks like thesis work and paid-work. However, despite expressing that they know and often feel the positive benefits of these activities, they reiterated the feelings of guilt they would experience by not spending that time to work on their thesis. There were three main ways participants lived with feelings of guilt. These included (1) continuing to work and deciding not to take time off at all, (2) planning to take time off and allow for a break, but continuing to work instead, and (3) taking time off and away from their work, however feeling constant guilt and for some people, anxiety about the time off, which would lead them to not being able to relax. Participants clearly described the tension between *wanting* to engage in activities unrelated to work or their thesis, but feeling like they could not because they *should* prioritize work

and thesis tasks. Participant 1 describes this when she talks about her weekends. She expressed how, although she feels guilty, she will always spend time on the weekend going out to the “pub to dance”, or going shopping. In the moments when she is doing these activities she feels “happy”, and “relieved”. These feelings are only momentary, after the activity is done, she talks about how she is filled with “regret” and “hurt”. These feelings are emphasized near the end of the weekend when she describes feeling “immature” for not working on her thesis or spending more time on her studies. Participant 6 talked about her experiences with her mental health challenges and the support that activities outside of her thesis and work would be to her, but how she would feel guilty engaging in these activities which would sometimes lead to overwhelm. She says:

“When I feel more stress, I think it definitely affects my mental health. I have anxiety, and it can be [hard] to deal with. Not doing fun activities like socializing with friends or hiking makes me feel like... um, like less of a full person, and more like... all I do is work! I feel guilty to do fun activities because there is no time, but I definitely notice a difference in my mental state when I do those things [i.e., what she describes as “fun activities], and when I am too overwhelmed I don’t do those things.”

Participant 8 emphasized feeling like her time was “pulled” in many different directions, and as much as she tried to ensure that she pursued physical activity everyday as this was important to her, she was only able to commit to this routine near the end of her thesis writing, particularly during the editing stage when things slowed down, rather than throughout.

#### ***4.2.3 Theme 3: Taking back control***

The findings describe participants' understanding and experiences of balance relevant to their personal lives within the context of graduate studies and being a mature graduate student. The idea of occupational balance in relation to timeframe differed for participants. For some people they described feeling a sense of balance short-term (i.e., day-to-day, week-to-week). For other participants, they described feeling a sense of balance long-term (i.e., month-to-month, year-to-year). The idea of feeling a sense of balance within different timelines also relates to another finding, which is the idea that participants created opportunities to regain a sense of control within their everyday lives through rebalancing. Therefore, this section will first expand on participants' experiences of short-term and long-term feelings of balance, followed by their experiences of creating a sense of control during graduate studies.

### ***Short-term and long-term feelings of balance***

Nearly all of the participants in this study worked towards achieving balance in some capacity; however, as previously described, they felt like achieving balance was a challenge. Many participants described wanting to achieve feelings of short-term balance, which for some meant they would work hard throughout the day and then rebalance in the evening by not working. For others, this was reflected in the way that they described their everyday involvement with activities. To illustrate, Participant 3 was highly involved with her community in different capacities. In addition to paid work and her thesis, she was an avid volunteer and pursued a competitive sport. She described being very satisfied with her life and her focus was primarily planning her day-to-day, week-to-week, or month-to-month schedules – at most. Although she acknowledged the support her education would provide for her with future paid work, that wasn't her focus. Her main priority was to feel grounded and connected with herself, family, and community, which meant that her focus



was *in the moment* versus long term. The flexibility of her schedule was something that she emphasized in allowing her the freedom to plan her day-to-day. In addition, she emphasized the importance of being engaged in a variety of activities. For her, it is crucial for one activity to not be the focus of her everyday as this does not allow for her to feel connected or balanced. She says:

“...And so my days are really interesting. [It] means that I’m not spending all of my time just on the computer doing one task. I can choose to go outside and [exercise], or I can move my location to do some computer work. So I’m doing all sorts of different things at once. And like, the variety I think comes from the task that I am doing and also from the location.”

This quote exemplifies her ability to control her day (which will be explored in more depth in a later sub-theme), and how she plans her day-to-day activities to achieve a sense of balance. Similarly, for Participant 2, it was important for her to free herself from experiences of burnout. As a result, she described taking control of her schedule, how she organizes her day, and to include key activities each week to help her feel balanced. Like Participant 3, Participant 2 chose to enroll in further education to support her future career, however, her focus is not after graduation but rather more in the moment. She talked a lot about making sure she is actively engaging in routine that involves at least 40 hours a week towards her thesis, with the remaining time in the week to pursue hobbies, volunteer, spend time with her fiancé, and to engage in self-care. Each of these participants describe their experiences as being rooted in routine and discipline. They both discussed the challenge of getting to this space, but describe how once they were able to achieve a general routine, they were able to feel a sense of balance and not feel so worried about the future.

For others, the experience of occupational balance in their lives was longer term than planning their day-to-day or week-to-week activities. There were a few examples of what occupational balance looked like for participants who felt a sense of balance that aligned with more long-term goals or needs. For example, Participant 7 discussed how she felt a lot of pressure to be financially stable and integrated to the working force to support her future in Canada. As a result, there were times where she described being very imbalanced in terms of her thesis work as her time was spent engaging in a full-time paid job. She felt that working was important to do for herself so that upon finishing her thesis she could have a foundation for herself and her family in the future. She described how her thesis was on a strict timeline because of her visa, and so she knew that all of her work would get done, but it meant that her priorities were her paid work to secure financial stability and to gain experience working within Canada. Once these things were established, she began to work on her thesis diligently, in a short amount of time, where most of her time was allotted to thesis writing. Participant 8's description of feeling a sense of balance was also very strongly tied to larger chunks of her time being devoted to the thing that she needed to prioritize in that season of her life. For example, she spent a few months trying to establish a living arrangement and financial stability – this did not allow for her to work on her thesis as much as she would like. Although she described this time as feeling overwhelming and imbalanced, when reflecting, she noted that it was important for her to prioritize these other pieces of her life so that she could better support her future self who would need these things (i.e., housing and finances) to support her thesis progress. Here is a quote depicting her experiences of prioritizing other pieces of her life:

“When I first moved [for graduate school], I moved with my partner and when we got here, we found out that the apartment we had gotten was infested with cockroaches and was absolutely moldy. This was very stressful because my studies were beginning, and now I had to deal with my apartment. Thankfully my studies were online at the time, which allowed for me to live in a friend's cottage further away from the university so I could prioritize school, and hope for another apartment to open up. This time was very stressful and unbalanced but allowing time to find an apartment and settle in helped me to get on the right track with my studies again.”

### ***Creating a sense of control***

So far, the findings provide insight to the experiences of mature graduate students during the writing stages of their thesis. In particular, the findings provide strong evidence of the challenges faced by participants, which include feelings of overwhelm, guilt, and stress. In spite of these challenges, participants strived to seek solutions to support their studies and wellbeing during the writing stages of their theses. This final finding will explore how students created a sense of control for themselves during this time.

One of the key ways in which students aimed to take control of their sense of balance was by implementing boundaries within their schedules. The unstructured schedule, or flexibility the writing stages have to offer, showed to be a challenge for many, as previously described. After feeling overwhelmed and close to burn-out, Participant 2 and 3 both described how it was imperative for them to establish boundaries that satisfied their different needs including thesis-related tasks and other tasks within their lives. Both participants described having positive and strong relationships with their supervisors. They both felt supported by their supervisors, and that their supervisors provided a safe space

for each of them to have conversations about how to navigate their studies. For Participant 3, she described how she set up a routine where she was able to regularly check-in with her supervisor; therefore, during times of busyness she felt confident to communicate with her supervisor about rearranging deadlines related to her thesis. She said that this helps to "...release herself of the stress...". This meant that she was able to keep what she describes as "balance" and she could continue to do activities like hobbies, spend time with her partner, travel, and engage in other tasks, like meal prepping and staying on top of chores. For Participant 2, it was important for her to have these moments of ease which she describes as "personal time" or "down time". This time often took place in the evenings and on the weekends and was primarily spent with her partner with whom she is planning their wedding.

Another strategy imposed by participants to gain a sense of control was to work on their thesis outside of their living space (i.e., at the library, a coffee shop, in the lab, or in a co-working space). They expressed how this would support them from getting distracted and would allow them to focus on their thesis work instead of engage in activities like watching television, tidying their homes, or talking with friends and family on the phone. Here are a few quotes that exemplify this experience among participants:

"I like to plan out my week, and work on my thesis in my working space on campus... I find this keeps me more accountable." (Participant 2)

"I started to come here [to the university], to work on my thesis... it helps me to be motivated. Like yesterday, I sat down at the library at 10AM and left at 11PM... yes that is a good day." (Participant 7)

“I can choose to go to a different location, and do some of my computer work at a coffee shop, or at a co-working space... I think this offers a lot of balance.”

(Participant 3)

For many, although sought after, engaging in activities that would provide feelings of relaxation or that were enjoyable was hard to achieve. For some, implementing boundaries supported these opportunities, however solidifying these boundaries was not easy for everyone.

#### **4.3 Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of my research which outlined three broader themes, with sub-themes organizing the findings. Participants’ perspectives of occupational balance varied. Overall, they experienced imbalance within the context of graduate studies, especially while writing their theses. Feelings of imbalance often reflected experiences of feeling guilty when they took time or planned to take time away from their studies. Occupational balance was conceptualized using both shorter and longer timeframes. Participants’ addressed feelings of overwhelm by implementing boundaries and structure to their everyday schedules.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The aim of this interpretive phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of occupational balance among mature graduate students during the writing stages of their Master's theses. The purpose of this chapter is to consider how the findings address the research questions and how they can be situated within and contribute to knowledge related to occupational balance. This chapter will also address the study strengths and limitations, relevant implications, and future recommendations.

### 5.1 Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of occupational balance among mature graduate students. This interpretive phenomenological research project involved eight semi-structured interviews and used IPA (Smith et al., 2022) to analyze the data. The main research guiding this project was: *What are the lived experiences of occupational balance among Nova Scotia mature graduate students?* This project also had four sub-questions supporting this research, and they include:

- a) *What meaning do graduate students place on occupations that promote balance during the writing stages of their thesis?*
- b) *What are mature graduate students' everyday lived experiences of balance or imbalance particularly related to their academic responsibilities?*
- c) *How do mature graduate students describe their wellbeing during times of balance or imbalance while writing their thesis?*
- d) *What explicit and implicit ideas and experiences shape mature graduate students' perceptions about what it means to be a mature graduate student, particularly in terms of academic responsibilities?*

## **5.2 Summary of the Findings**

The findings can be described by three main themes: (Theme 1) the complexity of graduate studies, (Theme 2) negotiating experiences of overwhelm and guilt, and (Theme 3) taking back control. This section will concisely touch on how these themes are related to extant literature on occupational balance.

### ***5.2.1 Theme 1: The complexity of graduate studies***

This theme represents participants' lived experiences of the challenges and complexities that come with being a mature graduate student particularly related to their flexible schedules, felt expectations, and varied demands. Within this theme, many of the key findings relate to participants' dissatisfaction with how their time was being used, particularly as there were many tasks to complete and little structure (especially as it related to graduate studies) to guide participants' progress. The literature review supporting this study provides key evidence about understanding occupational balance through the lens of time use, which focuses on how and where time is being spent (e.g., Backman, 2004; Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Wagman et al., 2011; Håkansson et al., 2020). The findings in the current study reinforce previous literature, and also provide insight into the complexities of time use and the expectations that impact time use for the mature graduate students in this study. Participants in this research emphasized pressures or expectations they felt related to their studies. Sometimes these expectations were explicit and from others like their supervisors, university deadlines, or visa-related deadlines; and sometimes these expectations were implicit and from themselves (e.g., feeling not good enough to be doing a Master's), from peers (e.g., comparing selves to others and their progress) or from university culture (e.g., feeling pressure to be working a lot to achieve more publications). These expectations and pressures often facilitated how students' were using their time.

They talked about how they would feel pressure to be working on their thesis all the time (i.e., negate their free time). In contrast, the literature specific to mature graduate students focuses on how these students have different responsibilities outside of academia (Meurer et al., 2020; Ryan, 2008; Smith, 2004). The findings in this research provide awareness about how responsibilities like paid work and one's thesis often took precedence over other activities like socializing, relaxing, or engaging in hobbies. It is possible, that because these students are situated within a Western context, they may feel pressure to be productive, which is a common experience imposed by the culture of busyness (Shulte, 2014; Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019). Again, linking back to the literature review which provided evidence on the challenges related to time use amongst graduate students such as navigating work, family, and school (e.g., Meurer et al., 2020; Peters & Dally, 2013; Ryan, 2008; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Smith, 2004) the findings in this research provide evidence that mature graduate students may be experiencing time poorness which describes how and when one feels they do not have enough time to pursue activities outside of their main obligations (Strazdins & Loughrey, 2007), which in this study was students' thesis, and primarily paid work.

### ***5.2.2 Theme 2: Negotiating experiences of overwhelm and guilt***

This theme summarized the lived experiences of overwhelm and guilt that participants felt while negotiating their studies and their personal lives. Again, participants were experiencing a lot of pressure to always be working, which meant they often did not prioritize activities they considered to be fun, leisurely, or relaxing because they would feel guilty to take time away from their thesis, especially. The literature review provided awareness about busyness and how busyness is portrayed and often experienced within a Western context (e.g., Gershuny, 2005; Lua et al., 2022; Shulte, 2014). Although feelings



of busyness are not limited to negative experiences (Kim et al., 2019), in this study, being busy with tasks related to paid work or thesis work were not described as preferable, or positive experiences. Often being busy translated into feeling overwhelmed with all of the tasks needed to complete. Feelings of overwhelm manifested differently, depending on the activity. For example, participants described feelings of overwhelm related to their paid work, although these experiences of overwhelm were a result of feeling pressure to produce a certain result, or were related to explicit deadlines. Feelings of overwhelm related to one's thesis were related more to the flexible structure of the thesis, or the strict timeline for some (e.g., those with student visa's or time-related funding). Despite feeling overwhelmed in different ways, both experiences of overwhelm contributed to participants to feeling stressed, anxious, and tired which again, often resulted in participants' not engaging in energy giving activities. Energy giving activities are described as any activity that one engages in that allows for them to feel rejuvenated and energized (Häkansson et al., 2021). Häkansson et al. (2021) suggest that when these activities are in balance then people are more likely to experience higher levels of satisfaction with their daily occupations. The current study supports this literature by reiterating the challenges faced when people are engaging activities that they experience as predominantly energy-taking (e.g., working and thesis writing) , rather than energy giving (e.g., spending time relaxing or with friends).

Related to energy-giving activities, participants described activities related to having fun, socializing, spending time outdoors in nature, spending time with loved ones, or engaged in a new hobby as activities that provided them energy. Many of these types of activities can be described as leisure-based occupations (Brooks et al., 2019). As described in the literature review, leisure experiences, which are freely chosen and personally

meaningful activities, can be opportunities that promote restoration and help to alleviate stress (Caldwell, 2005). However, the findings are clear in representing the challenges that these mature graduate students face with taking the time to engage in these activities. Although the participants in this study generally reported wanting to engage in leisure or activities that can be described as leisure, they would follow these statements with emphasis on the lack of time and energy they had to do so. I propose that one of the barriers these participants faced was related to time poorness and feelings of pressure related to busyness.

### ***5.2.3 Theme 3: Taking back control***

This theme described how participants experienced, felt, and reflected on occupational balance within different time frames. Some participants had longer term goals, but organized their schedule in smaller chunks and described their experiences of occupational balance in terms of their day-to-day, or week-to-week. Other participants organized themselves and described their experiences of occupational balance more long term, month-to-month, or year-to-year. The varied timeframes that participants referenced in describing their efforts to achieve balance can help us to deepen our understanding of occupational balance and further our conceptualization of this concept. In particular, the current study shows participants' attempt to create a sense of control in order to achieve balance. They created time-related boundaries (i.e., within the short-term, or long-term), perhaps to feel a sense of balance that aligned with the natural patterns and rhythms of their lives. One of the gaps in the literature review was the need to better understand individuals' context (Eklund et al., 2017; Wagman et al., 2014), which I suggested could be explored through understanding our natural engagement with both the patterns of, and unpredictability of life. I propose the current finding provides a glimpse into better

understanding occupational balance through our natural ebb and flows of life similar to the MOHar (Liu et al., 2021) which was described in the literature review; perhaps this is *why* participants created boundaries and described their experiences of occupational balance within varied timeframes.

There were other moments within the findings where participants described their experiences of aiming to create a sense of control as a means to support balance within their lives. Choice and control are key components to defining occupational balance (Häkansson et al., 2006; Wagman et al., 2011). One of the keyways in which some participants aimed to exert control over their time-use, especially as it relates to their thesis was to assign different spaces to different activities. For example, these participants would aim to work outside of their homes to allow balance between their personal tasks and thesis tasks. This strategy showed to be supportive to creating balance for participants. Collard (2020) asserts that environments or physical places can impede with one's sense of balance. If one is not provided with, or does not have access to the appropriate environment to support their various occupations, it can lead to feelings of occupational imbalance – which clearly are experiences found within the current study.

### **5.3 Addressing the research questions**

The analysis revealed several key insights that are relevant and clearly address the research questions. The questions aimed to better understand the *meaning* participants placed on promoting occupational balance, the *impact* occupational balance or imbalance has on their wellbeing, and the *pressures* of being a mature graduate student. The remaining of this discussion will focus on these insights from the analysis that address these research questions.

### ***5.3.1 Meaning participants placed on promoting occupational balance***

The meanings people associate with their occupations are subjectively experienced and culturally embedded (de Mello et al., 2020). Meaningful engagement in occupations is described by Kiepek et al. (2022) as contributing positively to one's wellbeing including support their sense of "...belonging, autonomy, continuity, self-esteem, enjoyment, stimulation, satisfaction, mastery, self-worth, quality of life, sense of purpose, fulfilment, happiness, mental health, physical health, and wellbeing" (p. 8). My research sought to better understand the meaning mature graduate students placed on occupations that promote their sense of balance. The findings infer that many participants in this research did not regularly engage in occupations that promoted their sense of balance. Although participants did not engage in many activities that helped them to feel balanced, they still placed high meaning on balance, but often found it challenging to achieve feelings of balance. Participants also described their work and thesis activities as meaningful, but that these activities often took precedence in their daily lives. The tension participants felt with negotiating how their time was spent with paid work, their thesis, and other activities reinforces the complexity of achieving a sense of balance. One of the ways in which occupational balance is defined, as described in the literature review, is being connected to role-strain (Christiansen & Matuska, 2006; Eklund et al., 2017). Role strain as described by Eklund et al. (2017) is the challenge people face when they feel they cannot adequately engage in varied occupations. In this research, participants wanted to engage in various occupations, and sometimes they achieved this; however, participants struggled with role strain, resulting in them not being able to engage in a variety of occupations that they see as meaningful (or feeling guilty even when they did participate in these occupations), thus resulting in feelings of occupational imbalance.

One of the key challenges faced by participants was that they felt a lot of pressure or feelings of overwhelm related to completing their thesis. Participants described how their time was often imposed by their workload related to their thesis or their paid jobs. Because they felt pressure to prioritize tasks related to these occupations, they often felt like they did not have choice or autonomy over their engagement with varied occupations. Occupational balance, as conceptualized in the literature, is comprised of three key pillars (i.e., satisfaction with time use and resources use, engagement with varied and meaningful occupation, and sense of choice and control over occupational engagement). Theoretically, participants placed high meaning on promoting a sense of balance and aimed to achieve each of these characteristics of balance, however found it very challenging as they were often dissatisfied with how their time was being spent which often resulted in them not engaging in a variety of occupations, and feeling like they have little sense of control or choice with their occupational engagement.

It is common for graduate students to pursue graduate studies to develop skills and gain an education to support their future careers (Shinke et al., 2001). As described by Meurer et al. (2020) and Ryan (2008), being a graduate student is challenging as many students are involved with other obligations outside of the university. In addition, the inclusion criteria for this study required that mature graduate students be actively involved in another obligation in addition to academics, and therefore participants in this study had multiple demands on their personal lives and academic lives. The findings in this research revealed that when participants' felt especially busy and overwhelmed their personal lives, work and studies were negatively impacted. Participants described how different areas of their lives were impacted such as their social and familial lives. This finding supports

previous research by Baglow and Gair (2019) who found that without the proper supports (e.g., perceived time, finances, wellbeing-related needs) students struggled to negotiate maintaining and upkeeping their academic and personal lives. Occupational balance may help us to better understand these issues, as the findings in this research infer that people have troubles in achieving occupational balance often because of pressures they feel towards their work and studies. The findings are clear in indicating that participants *wanted* to feel a sense of balance, the possible solutions to addressing the barriers they experienced should be further explored.

Being busy does not inherently negatively impact wellbeing. Lua et al. (2022) suggest that being busy is sometimes preferable and enjoyable to individuals, as they may see busyness as a way to complete all of the tasks that they want and need to. In this research, there were a few people who managed their busyness in a way that they were satisfied as they were able to manage their various demands, aligning with Lua et al.'s findings that busyness can be experienced as enjoyable and productive. Participant 3 in this research had several demands on her time and used strategies that worked for her to manage these demands while also describing feeling a strong sense of balance. She described being rooted in her communities, and emphasized the importance of being involved in a variety of occupations. One of the ways she was able to accommodate her occupations, as well as feel a sense of balance, was to multitask by engaging in multiple occupations at once. For example, she would incorporate her socialization and exercise activities into one (i.e., exercise with her friend) She described being intentional with her meal time, and sharing that time with her partner so that they could connect. It is important to note that the idea of busyness is socially constructed, meaning that describing oneself within a Western context

as “busy” can often suggest that they are a person who may be desirable as they make use of their time fully by being engaged in many different activities (Lua et al., 2022). However, if feelings of being chronically busy arise, then one may experience a lot of stress and this can lead to burnout (Nagoski & Nagosi, 2019). Within these findings, some participants did describe their feelings of busyness as being related to feeling imbalance and negatively impacting their wellbeing. Often, feelings of busyness were not a reflection of how involved one was with a variety of activities, but rather how one felt about their workload and not feeling like they had enough time to engage in other activities that may support their energy levels and promote wellbeing. One way participants tried to address feelings of busyness was to establish boundaries with their obligations, such as only working on their thesis during a certain time (throughout the week) and within a certain area (e.g., library). Linking these strategies back to the conceptualization of occupational balance, I suggest that one way participants regained a sense of choice over their occupational balance was by establishing boundaries with how their time was spent, which allowed for them to feel less overwhelmed and often promoted opportunities to engage in other activities like resting, connecting with others, and leisure. Establishing boundaries on how time is spent relates supports current literature about occupational balance being connected to time use (Häkansson et al., 2021; Wagman et al., 2011).

### ***5.3.2 Sense of wellbeing***

Wellbeing came up in the findings in several different ways. Graduate studies can be a stressful and overwhelming time for students (Meurer et al., 2020). There is already substantial research on how graduate studies can promote feelings of busyness which sometimes can lead to feelings of overwhelm, stress, or even burnout (Gin et al., 2021; Levecque et al., 2017; Meurer et al., 2020). Although the purpose of this project was not to

explicitly explore the wellbeing of graduate students, the findings reflected several insights regarding students' wellbeing. Overall, the participants reported that occupational imbalance and negative wellbeing are related. Some key contributors to poorer wellbeing, identified by the participants in this research, include: strained resources like finances, housing, and time; and not feeling like one has enough energy to engage in activities outside of thesis work, and sometimes thesis work itself. Another key contributor to impacting wellbeing was feeling a lack of connection with peers as they were often at different life stages compared to participants in this study. Findings from this research align with findings from Mannay and Ward (2022) , which suggested that mature graduate students are more likely to feel isolated or disconnected from others within the academic environment, especially socially (Mannay & Ward, 2022).

The analysis reflects participants wanting to feel a stronger sense of balance with the hope of experiencing more positive wellbeing. For many participants, although their schedules were more flexible during the writing stages of their thesis, they described feeling like they had less perceived control or autonomy over how their time was spent. To illustrate, a few participants discussed how they would always feel the need to be working on their thesis, even in their free time, otherwise they would feel a sense of guilt. The manifestation of guilt, sometimes anxiety, and stress seriously impacted participants' wellbeing poorly; they felt it was difficult to take control of their schedules, especially without set deliverables. Graduate studies offers a new sense of independence within the academic setting, and requires students to take more responsibility for their work and their studies as compared to when they are engaged in coursework (Mannay & Ward, 2022).



Occupational engagement with varied occupations, as well as occupations that offered rest was key to supporting occupational balance and contributing to participants wellbeing, which aligns well with previous findings by Bejerholm and Eklund (2007) who emphasized the importance of rest within balance.

## **5.5 Strengths and Limitations**

### ***5.5.1 Strengths***

This research makes significant contributions to understanding the concept of occupational balance, particularly with respect to understanding this concept through the perspective of a population whose main occupation is not paid work. Focussing on students, whose main occupation was their studies, provided deepened our understand of how people may experience (or not) a sense of balance when navigating a schedule that is more flexible and less structured by explicit deadlines related to their studies, within an academic context. This study addressed a gap identified by Eklund et al. (2017), who emphasized the need to understand individuals' context to broaden our knowledge of people's experiences of occupational balance. This qualitative project offers rich insight as it identified some of the contextual factors that may play a role in experiencing a sense of occupational balance. All participants were mature Master's students, were involved in another regular commitment (e.g., leisure, volunteer-work, paid-work), and had been removed from the academic environment for at least two years before returning to academia. Through in-depth interviews, I was able to gather information about their contexts and how these might impact their sense of balance. The findings in this research helped to address a gap in the literature regarding how our environments and the engagement with both the patterns of, and unpredictability of life, can impact our experiences of occupational balance. An example of this is when one participant described

her experiences of housing and financial insecurity—her description of these experiences provided context with her situation and how these experiences impacted her sense of occupational balance. Specifically, while she was navigating finding housing and seeing financial security, her energy went towards establishing these needs. Once these needs were established, she described feeling more able and confident to focus back on her thesis work. Another strength of this work is related to my use of a reflexive journal throughout the process. The purpose of this journal was to document key questions, thoughts, and ideas I had throughout the entire project. I especially used this tool during data collection and analysis to help organize the data and keep track of conversations with my supervisors about the analysis. This project included four international students who provide unique perspective considering the culturally bound nature of time and time use.

### ***5.5.2 Limitations***

Although this research has promising contributions to the occupational science literature, there are limitations to be recognized. The participants in this study were all women, and ranged in age between 25 and 30 which provides awareness to a homogeneous population in terms of age and gender identity where women have been the common population explored within the occupational balance literature. This project used convenience sampling and thus those who may be feeling most imbalanced may not have volunteered for this research, since they were likely experiencing time pressure. This project focused on the experiences of students who were currently writing their theses, meaning that this project focussed on the least structured time in most graduate programs. Future research may aim to look at other times during graduate studies where students may experience greater balance, which may further our understandings of balance broadly speaking. Language was another barrier within this project. Those who did not speak

English as their first language sometimes had difficulty in understanding questions asked in the interview; this may have impacted their answers or explanations of their experiences. In particular, for four participants English would not have been their language of choice when discussing this topic, and therefore they may have had to simplify their responses for ease of communication. Despite the language challenges, people were still able to communicate their experiences, although maybe not to the same depth. In these cases, I spent more time with these participants to ensure that they were able to share their experiences, and that they had adequate time to relay their experiences.

## **5.6 Study Implications**

This study contributes to the occupational science literature, and may serve as a support for universities, especially for graduate programs and faculties who support mature graduate students. The findings in this research also provide insight that may be supportive to both future supervisors and students.

### ***5.6.1 Implications for Occupational Science***

This research clearly represents findings that support how individuals are able to achieve a sense of balance by navigating the tension of thesis work, paid work, and personal tasks by implementing boundaries. The more recent occupational balance literature (Eklund et al., 2017; Håkansson et al., 2021) reinforces how feeling a sense of occupational balance means meeting various needs of the individual including their mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual components. The findings in this research suggest that balance can be experienced across different time frames, such as within a day, or across a week or month. This, which I would describe as a process of rebalancing (rather than solely experiencing feelings of balance or imbalance), is an idea that didn't come out in the literature while developing this study. I would consider this finding to deepen the

occupational science literature as it emphasizes the dynamic nature of occupational balance. The occupational science literature previously focuses on those who are not involved in paid work as their main occupation. This research expands on our understanding of experiences of balance, imbalance, and rebalancing amongst people when paid work is not the main focus of one's every day. Context, such as describing one's personal life circumstances and the different unique needs one experiences (e.g., caregiver, partner, newcomer, as some examples) is a key piece to understanding occupation (Eklund et al., 2017; Hocking, 2013). The findings of this research provides examples of how context, such as: holding part-time work, being an international student, or being involved in competitive sport, as some examples, is a relevant piece to understanding occupational balance among those whose main occupation is graduate studies. Contextualizing people's individual experiences is supportive to better understand the experiences of occupational balance. As occupational scientists continue to explore occupational balance, particularly through qualitative lens, I suggest it is valuable for them to expand on individual's unique lived experience.

### ***5.6.2 Implications for Postsecondary Institutions and Faculty***

Universities need to know the challenges that are faced by their students. It is crucial that universities are aware of the challenges that may be faced by students, in general, but especially graduate students, as current research provides evidence on how graduate students have less access to specific support on campuses (Mackie & Bates, 2019). Mature graduate students are a unique population who hold different roles (e.g., work, family commitments, social lives) and have to navigate these roles within their lives. This research describes the experiences of mature graduate students and suggests potential areas for supports to focus on such as tailored support from the university and faculty. For

example, a key finding in this research (that aligns with previous research, such as Mackie and Bates (2019) and Shepherd and Nelson, (2012)) was that students who did not have a supportive relationship with their supervisor where they could approach them to address different needs struggled with their academics (Mackie & Bates, 2019). In contrast, those who had a more supportive relationship with their supervisor felt more confident on their thesis progress. Some mature students were given more work than younger graduate students, or they felt more pressure from their supervisor as a result of their maturity. Knowledge about some of the challenges faced by their students could be supportive for future supervision. Another key finding in this project was that when participants felt comfortable and safe to approach their supervisors with their questions, concerns, and needs, then they would reach out to their supervisors. It may be supportive for supervisors to know this, and help for students to establish boundaries with their work and personal lives early on in their thesis journey. Perhaps one recommendation for universities would be to implement professional development programs for graduate students to learn about possible strategies to achieve balance within the context of graduate studies.

### **5.7 Future Research**

The rich findings in this analysis show that people experience occupational balance differently, and that when the mature graduate students in this research felt a stronger sense of balance, their wellbeing was positively impacted. Participants also described how feelings of balance allowed for them to experience activities outside of their thesis and work which supported socialization and relaxation. Future research may seek to better understand the impact of engaging in activities that offer a stronger sense of balance such as the role of restful activities, leisure, or socialization. This research explored occupational balance through the lens of mature graduate students which is helpful in better

understanding this concept outside of people whose main occupation is full time paid work. Going forward, more research is needed on this concept both from a qualitative perspective (to achieve stronger sense of lived experiences and people's contextual factors) as well as from the perspective of people whose primary occupation is not paid work, such as retired people or stay at home parents to better understand balance within a different context from paid work. This study had time constraints related to the timeline of a Master's thesis, and therefore was not able to pursue a multi-layered methodology. Future directions may find it supportive to gather data from participants in different ways. For example, in addition to the interview, perhaps provide opportunity for participants to engage in a survey or brief questionnaire detailing more specifically about their individual context. The findings in this work clearly linked a need for resources, particularly related to time, money, and energy. Future research should ask more questions directed at these areas to better understand participants experiences. This work found that occupational balance can be experienced through different notions of time, where people used different timeframes when conceptualizing the idea of balance within their lives that could relate to short or longer-term timeframes for re-establishing balance. Future research could further explore this way of understanding balance, which may vary across cultures; although this is connected to time, it is distinct from previous research that (e.g., Häkansson et al., 2006; Wagman et al., 2011) used time diaries to map out how time was spent day-to-day. Rather, this finding implies that people's sense of balance may fluctuate with the changing seasons in their lives where they prioritize certain areas or needs. People described their feelings of occupational balance and imbalance in relation to their sense of wellbeing. This research has limited findings on the experiences of international students, however these findings

provide understanding to the different challenges experienced by this population. For example, unique to international students is that they are on a timeframe related to their visa, which may impact their experiences of graduate studies broadly speaking, as well as their experiences of occupational balance within the context of graduate studies. Future research should hone in on more sub-groups (e.g., parents, or older adults as some examples) of mature graduate students to further our understanding of occupational balance within the context of graduate studies. The participants in this research also describe their challenges with societal pressures, particularly within the academic environment, which often caused them to become imbalanced as they would spend a lot of time working on their thesis projects, leaving little time to engage in other meaningful activities. Future research could explore this phenomenon in more depth, perhaps within academia, or more broadly to better understand the perceived social pressures that may impact sense of balance.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

The aim of this research was to explore the lived experiences of occupational balance among mature graduate students during the writing stages of their theses. Participants described their experiences of occupational balance within the context of graduate studies while also being engaged in another commitment such as paid-work, volunteering, caregiving, or leisure pursuit, to name a few examples. The findings in this research provide insights to the challenges faced by mature graduate students, particularly when navigating flexible schedules and how this can impact their sense of balance. This research provides insight to the concept occupational balance by qualitatively collecting data from participants who held the unique perspective of being a mature graduate student while engaged in other occupations. Participants in this research described often feeling overwhelmed when trying to navigate their studies and other occupations, which often led to feelings of guilt when participants were not engaged in their paid-occupations or thesis writing. One way students attempted to take control back and gain a stronger sense of balance was to implement boundaries on how their time was being spent, prioritized particular needs such as exercise, socialization, and proper meals, and by explicitly planning their schedules either in the short-term (day-to-day) or in the long-term (week-to-week). Overall, this research supported current conceptualizations of occupational balance that focuses on how time is spent, engagement in varied and meaningful occupations, and the ability to exercise choice and control. The findings in this research reflect that choice and control led to both feelings of overwhelm while navigating the flexibility of their schedules, and the ability to implement boundaries supported them to feel a sense of control. This research further identified that people use different timeframes to make sense of balance depending on their life circumstances.



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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for being willing to participate in my research project! Before we get into the interview, I just want to provide a little bit of context for the project, and detail your role as a participant.

First, let's start with the project! The whole purpose of my project is to get a better understanding of the experiences of occupational balance among mature graduate students. The concept of occupational balance may not be familiar. When I use this concept, I am talking about subjective experiences of your daily occupations – and by occupations, I'm referring to getting ready for your day, working, eating, or spending time with a friend, as some examples. Occupational balance describes how we spend our time across the different areas of life, including but not limited to paid-work, academics, rest, self-care, family time, and socializing. Occupational balance looks different for everyone! The purpose of this project is to gain insights into how mature graduate students are spending their time and how these experiences contribute to feelings of balance or imbalance. For example, for me occupational balance means that in general I feel comfortable with how my time is spent completing all of my daily occupations. This means that I have time to engage in my part-time paid work, my academics, taking care of myself, and some time for leisure. But to be transparent, my life is not always balanced, and when that happens, I sometimes can get overwhelmed. We likely all have times when we feel more balanced and less balanced, and I am interested in hearing about both.

Now let's talk about your experiences! Over the next hour or so – it may take as little as 30 minutes, or up to 75 minutes for this process – I will conduct an interview in English asking about your experiences of balance while enrolled in graduate studies. It is important that you that this is completely voluntary, and although I am appreciative of your willingness to participate, if at any time you are uncomfortable or wish to withdraw from participating, that is completely acceptable. I want this process to feel relaxed and comfortable for you, so please feel free to take a break at any moment, or to refrain from answering questions that you do not feel comfortable with.

In addition to the interview being audio-recorded, it is likely that I will be taking notes throughout the process. I want to assure you, that identifying information (e.g., names, places, or other relevant information) will be removed from the data as a means to protect your confidentiality. With your consent, I would welcome the opportunity to use direct quotes from this interview to be used in reports on this research; again, although these quotes will be your direct words, identifiable information will be removed.

Alright, if you are ready, we can get started!

**Content related questions – opportunity to talk directly about occupational balance, mental wellbeing, and daily occupations**

1. What does a typical day look like for you?
  - a. How does a typical day vary throughout the week?
2. Tell me a time when you may have experienced a sense of balance during graduate studies? Can you describe this in detail?
  - a. How did you know you were feeling balance during this time? Take me back to a time when you felt that way.
  - b. You mention feeling \_\_\_\_\_ during this time, can you tell me more about that?
  - c. You talk about \_\_\_\_\_ during this time, can you tell me more about that?
3. Tell me a time when you may have experienced a sense of imbalance during graduate studies? Can you describe this in detail?
  - a. How did you know you were feeling balance during this time? Take me back to a time when you felt that way.
  - b. You mention feeling \_\_\_\_\_ during this time, can you tell me more about that?
  - c. You talk about \_\_\_\_\_ during this time, can you tell me more about that?
4. What does feeling balanced look like for you?
  - a. Can you describe what you do to feel balanced?
  - b. Can you describe the different factors that may contribute to your experiences of balance?
5. What does feeling imbalance feel like for you?
  - a. Can you describe the different factors that may contribute to your experiences of imbalance?
  - b. Can you describe what you do when you feel unbalanced?
6. Can you describe to me what it means to you be a mature graduate student, and what is unique about being a mature student?
  - a. What are some of the challenges you experience that are unique to being a mature graduate student?
  - b. What are some factors or experiences that you have had that you feel help you in your graduate studies?
  - c. Can you describe different expectations that may contribute to your experiences as a mature graduate student?
7. How does your ability to balance activities during your graduate studies impact your wellbeing?
  - a. You mention feeling \_\_\_\_\_ during graduate studies, can you tell me more about this?

**Concluding questions – opportunity to provide space for participants to ask any remaining questions or provide the space for them to share any other thoughts.**

8. Would you like to add or share anything else?
9. Do you have any further questions for me?

After asking the final questions, I will indicate that the interview is complete.

I just want to thank you again, for taking time to be a part of this study. I really appreciate your participation. Just a reminder, that everything we have talked about will be confidential. If you have any questions or concerns that come up, please reach out to me either by phone or email.

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT POSTER

# ARE YOU A MATURE GRADUATE STUDENT

HAVE YOU TAKEN AT LEAST TWO YEARS OFF SINCE YOUR UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES?

WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

**You are invited to take part in a 60-75 minute research interview about your experiences with balancing everyday activities and academics.**

**Criteria:**

- ✓ Enrolled full-time in a thesis-based Masters program at Dalhousie
- ✓ Engaged in the writing stages of your thesis (i.e., completed proposal)
- ✓ Engaged in another commitment (e.g., paid-work, volunteering, leisure) regularly
- ✓ Identify as a mature graduate student

**PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED WILL RECEIVE A \$25 GIFT CARD AS THANKS FOR THEIR TIME**

**For more information or to participate, please contact:**  
**Brittany Bhatnagar,**  
**[etty@dal.ca](mailto:etty@dal.ca)**

 **DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY**

This research project was approved by Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board. File #2022-6327

## APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT POSTER, AMENDMENT



# ARE YOU A MATURE MASTER STUDENT

HAVE YOU TAKEN AT LEAST TWO YEARS  
OFF SINCE YOUR UNDERGRADUATE  
STUDIES?

WE WOULD LIKE TO  
HEAR FROM YOU!

**You are invited to take part in a  
60-75 minute research interview  
about your experiences with  
balancing everyday activities and  
academics.**

**Criteria:**

- ✓ Enrolled full-time in a thesis-based Masters program at Dalhousie
- ✓ Engaged in the writing stages of your thesis (i.e., completed proposal)
- ✓ Engaged in another commitment (e.g., paid-work, volunteering, leisure) regularly
- ✓ Identify as a mature graduate student

**PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED WILL  
RECEIVE A \$25 GIFT CARD AS THANKS  
FOR THEIR TIME**

**For more information or to  
participate, please contact:**

**Brittany Bhatnagar,  
ctty@dal.ca**

 **DALHOUSIE  
UNIVERSITY**

This research project was approved by Dalhousie  
University Research Ethics Board. File #2022-6327

## APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

My name is Brittany Bhatnagar, and I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by myself under the guidance of my supervisors Drs. Gallant and Lauckner at Dalhousie University. Choosing whether or not to take part in this research is entirely your choice. The information below provides a brief overview of the purpose and outline of this research study. Please ask as many questions as you like, you can email me at [ctty@dal.ca](mailto:ctty@dal.ca).

### *Purpose and Outline of the Research Study*

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of occupational balance or imbalance amongst mature graduate students. Occupational balance is a concept explored by occupational scientists to better understand the different activities people fill their day with, and how these varied activities impact their everyday wellbeing. Examples of the different types of activities someone may be required to balance while in graduate studies include: attending classes and completing assignments, paid employment, doing leisure activities, volunteering, or spending time with family, to name a few. Information will be gathered through an interview about your everyday activities as a graduate student. The information gathered will be used to better understand your experiences and to help identify shared and unique experiences about occupational balance during graduate studies.

Before moving forward with the study, I invite you to confirm that you meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Enrolled in a thesis-based Masters program at Dalhousie University
- Engaged in the writing stages of their thesis. For this research I define this stage to be after the individual has completed their research proposal (i.e., involves the times in which you collect data, analyze, and write your findings).
- Enrolled in their studies full-time
- Engaged in another regular commitment (e.g., paid-work, volunteering, caregiving, leisure engagement)
- Identify as a mature student. For this research, mature student is defined as someone who has completed an undergraduate degree and has been away from the academic environment pursuing other endeavors for at least 2 years.

## APPENDIX E: INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM



### CONSENT FORM

**Project title:** Exploring the lived experiences of occupational balance among mature graduate students: A phenomenological study

**Lead researcher:**

Brittany Bhatnagar, MSc (Occupational Science) Candidate  
School of Occupational Therapy, Dalhousie University  
Email: [b.bhatnagar@dal.ca](mailto:b.bhatnagar@dal.ca)

**Other researchers – Co-supervisors:**

Dr. Karen Gallant	Dr. Heidi Lauckner
School of Health and Human Performance, Dalhousie University	School of Occupational Therapy, Dalhousie University
Email: <a href="mailto:karen.gallant@dal.ca">karen.gallant@dal.ca</a>	Email: <a href="mailto:heidi.lauckner@dal.ca">heidi.lauckner@dal.ca</a>

**Introduction**

I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by myself, Brittany Bhatnagar, under the guidance of my supervisors Drs. Gallant and Lauckner at Dalhousie University. Choosing whether or not to take part in this research is entirely your choice. The information below tells you about what is involved in the research, what you will be asked to do and about any benefit, risk, inconvenience or discomfort that you may experience. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with Brittany Bhatnagar. Please ask as many questions as you like. If you have questions later, please contact Brittany by email at [b.bhatnagar@dal.ca](mailto:b.bhatnagar@dal.ca).

***Purpose and Outline of the Research Study***

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of occupational balance or imbalance amongst mature graduate students. Occupational balance is a concept explored by occupational scientists to better understand the different activities people fill their day with, and how these varied activities impact their everyday wellbeing. Examples of the different types of activities someone may be required to balance while in graduate studies include: attending classes and completing assignments, working, doing a leisure activity, volunteering, or spending time with family. Information will be gathered through an initial screening tool and through an interview about your everyday activities as a graduate student. The information gathered will be used to better understand your experiences and to help identify shared and unique experiences about occupational balance during graduate studies.

### **Who Can Take Part in the Research Study**

You can participate in this study if you consider yourself to be a mature student (i.e., coming back to academics since being away for at least 2 years); are a full-time student engaged in the writing stages of your Master's thesis at Dalhousie University, and are engaged in an additional regular commitment including but not limited to paid work, caregiving, leisure endeavor, or volunteering.

### **What You Will Be Asked to Do**

First, you will be asked to respond to an email that will ask you a few questions to determine your eligibility. If you decide to participate in this research further, you will be asked to attend one interview facilitated by me (Brittany Bhatnagar) on Dalhousie campus or virtually. The interview will last between 60 and 75 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your everyday activities, what these activities mean to you, and about your experiences with occupational balance. You do not have to answer questions if you do not want to, and you are free to end the interview at any point. The interview will be audio recorded so that the researcher can listen back to the information for the data analysis of this project. All of the data will be anonymized and therefore, you will not be linked back to the project through this project's findings.

### **Possible Benefits, Risks and Discomforts**

Participating in this study may not directly benefit you, but we might learn more about the concept of occupational balance which may benefit others. Participating in this study may also provide the opportunity for you to reflect on your personal experiences of occupational balance/imbalance and the role this plays in navigating graduate studies as a mature student.

The risks associated with this study are minimal. It is possible that some questions may make you feel uncomfortable, or that discussing these topics and experiences may remind you of difficult experiences you have had. Please know that you can choose not to participate at any time, or choose not to answer some of the questions during the interview.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr. Karen Gallant and Dr. Heidi Lauckner; it is possible that you may work with either of these individuals and feel uncomfortable to share information that you may not want them to know about. I want you to know that they will not have access to identifiable information, and therefore will only have access to data that has personal information removed.

### **Compensation / Reimbursement**

To thank you for your time, we will give you a gift card worth \$25.

### **How your information will be protected:**

Your participation in this research will be known only to the lead researcher (Brittany Bhatnagar) who will be in contact with you, and facilitating the interviews. After completing the interviews, the audio recordings will be uploaded to a password protected computer and saved to OneDrive. The lead researcher will create the transcripts, de-identifying you as a participant (i.e., use pseudonyms and general titles like 'studying in



social sciences’). The anonymized data will be analyzed primarily by the lead researcher with the support of her supervisors Drs. Gallant and Lauckner. All paper records, specifically signed consent forms, will be kept secure in a locked cabinet on Dalhousie University campus.

I will describe and share the findings in my thesis, presentations, a journal article, and an overview/summary of the findings. I will only report anonymized findings which means that you will not be identified in any way in these reports.

### **If You Decide to Stop Participating**

You are free to leave the interview at any time. If you decide to stop participating during the study, you can decide whether you want any of the information that you have provided up to that point to be removed or if you will allow for that information to be used. After participating in the study, you can decide up to one week if you want me to remove your data. After that time, it will become impossible for use to remove it because it will already be anonymized and in the initial stages of being analyzed.

### **How to Obtain Results**

I will provide you with a short description of the group results when the study is finished. No individual results will be provided. You can obtain these results by including your contact information at the end of the signature page below.

### **Questions**

I am happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about your participation in this research study. Please contact Brittany Bhatnagar (email: [ctty@dal.ca](mailto:ctty@dal.ca)) at any time with questions, comments, or concerns about this research project.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research ethics, Dalhousie University at 902-494-3421, or email: [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca) (reference REB file # 2022-6327).

## Signature Page

**Project Title:** Exploring the lived experiences of occupational balance among mature graduate students: A phenomenological study

**Lead Researcher:**

Brittany Bhatnagar, MSc (Occupational Science) Candidate  
School of Occupational Therapy, Dalhousie University  
Email: [b.bhatnagar@dal.ca](mailto:b.bhatnagar@dal.ca)

**Consent to Participate:**

I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I also understand that I have been asked to take part in a 60-75 minute interview that will occur virtually or at a location on Dalhousie University's campus that is acceptable to me, and that those interviews will be audio recorded. I understand that direct quotes of things I say may be used without identifying me. I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time until 1-week from my interview is complete.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Options (You can still participate in the research, if you select no):**

I agree that direct quotes from my interview may be used without identifying me Yes  
No

I agree that my demographic information gathered from the interview may be used without identifying me Yes No

I confirm that I have received a \$25 gift card as an honorarium payment for participating in this project. I understand that this honorarium is taxable income and it is my responsibility to claim it on my income tax as Dalhousie University is not required to issue a T4A for this payment. Yes No

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Option to receive research report:**

Would you like to receive a short report about the findings from this research? If so, please provide contact information (name and email address):

## APPENDIX F: EXAMPLE OF FLIP CHART FOR ANALYSIS

**Stressed/overwhelmed**

- overwhelmed with Charles bc she feels lack of support & wants that support more than her.
- overwhelmed withing deadlines & meetings related to academics
- Always feels stressed abt having enough resources like money and time to complete her thesis.
- she is stressed & overwhelmed for a new week to begin.
- feels overwhelmed with many directions her time is being pulled
- she is stressed & overwhelmed from the minute she wakes up.

**Structure**

- structure of her day makes her feel overwhelmed.
- structure of the thesis writing stage makes her feel overwhelmed bc navigating the responsibility (of thesis) = hard
- she feels too tired to keep going w/school & academics after finishing paid work.

**Time**

- she feels like she can only take time off (fully away) from academics when she's ill
- she feels no control over how her time is used
- she has no time to engage in hobbies, despite wanting to
- she does not have enough time to work on her thesis @ uni
- she feels busy navigating a lot of responsibilities (paid work & academics)

**Supervisor relationships**

- finds it challenging to communicate needs w/ supervisor
- has a strained relationship w/ supervisor
- feels a lot of pressure & expectation from supervisor bc she = mature student.

**Diagram:**

Time of resources can be a big stressor for her

These are related and can be supported

good but almost

social activities promote her wellbeing

she feels energy when she engages in social activities

she seeks out socialization