Through a Gramscian Lens: Academic Experiences of the Implementation of Blended Learning Change Management Programmes in UK Post-1992 Universities

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Abstract

This research reveals the extent to which academics in post-1992 universities experience blended learning change programmes. The thesis focuses on how institutions encourage academics to adopt the preferred blended learning approach to teaching with technologies and investigates the extent to which academic staff are involved in initiating, designing, and implementing blended learning programmes within their respective post-1992 institutions. The study highlights academic perceptions of institutional expectations for blended learning and examines whether these expectations align with their pedagogical values and beliefs. The thesis further examines Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) relations of force regarding the relationship between institutions and academic staff. His theory focuses on the power imbalances and political and conceptual distinctions embedded within the tapestry of hegemony. As this study sought to understand the tensions between academics positioned as subaltern and post-1992 universities positioned as the dominant hegemonic narrative, it reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in these dynamics. The findings suggest that while there is a push towards adopting new blended learning pedagogical approaches, the underlying power structures and historical context create significant challenges alongside perceptions of academic resistance to blended learning change. Notably, resistance to technological change in twenty-first-century higher education, compounded by the pandemic, has led to a nuanced understanding of this notion of resistance. As such, while academic resistance to change may sometimes mean refusal to accept the change, this study, through Gramsci, draws out the complex nature of change, focusing not so much on academic resistance but on a type of resistance that endeavours to understand the conditions upon which blended learning change takes shape. The study finds that while academic resistance to blended learning change is perceived as a form of refusal, on closer inspection, there is a fine distinction between unwillingness to change verses challenging change. It is evident that participants value knowledge, information, and collaboration with their institutions. Therefore, the study finds that resistance is not a refusal but a call for more knowledge and information. A Gramscian perspective provides a unique and interesting perspective from which to understand these realities.

The impact of this study in contributing to the broader debate on blended learning is that academics and institutions may find ways to collaborate and, as such, work together to implement meaningful and transformational change. The impact on the existing body of knowledge when using Gramsci's hegemony is that the study can be replicated to enhance other blended learning research. In applying Gramsci's hegemony, the study revealed a much more nuanced understanding of the challenges and inequitable practices within higher education, which could be dismantled.

This research aims to inform academics, post-1992 institutions, policymakers and other educators in higher education about the contextual benefits and limitations that occur during the blended learning change process. The study implements an interpretivist paradigm within a qualitative methodology because there was an interest in the multiplicity of voices and participants' subjective realities during the process of blended learning change. The sample consisted of twenty-seven academics working in post-1992 universities across the UK. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews and coded using a thematic analysis.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Chapter one outlines the basis for undertaking this study and provides an overview of the structure. The first section introduces the research topic, aims of the study and research questions guiding the thesis. The next section provides a summary of key concepts applied to the research by explaining key words in the title. An explanation of key words highlights not only the complexities established in choosing words that best convey the study's intention, but also provides, as far as is reasonable, an explanation of what those terms mean within this study. The chapter establishes why the research focuses on the academic experience and the extent to which it makes a valuable contribution to the wider debates surrounding the implementation of blended learning in higher education.

1.1 RESEARCH TOPIC AND AIMS

Blended learning is increasingly recognised for its potential to transform higher education. It is leading the way and surpassing other approaches that embed the use of technologies for teaching and learning. Pressure on, in particular, UK post-1992 universities to address these global market demands and accommodate student expectations is leading the sector to implement blended learning strategies. Furthermore, governing bodies such as the Office for Students (2022) and Quality Assurance Agencies (QAA, 2022), to name a few, provide an expansive focus on institutional policy, quality and compliance in relation to blended learning in universities, especially since the pandemic.

Studies into the impact of blended learning are evolving, and much of the research focuses on the student experience or broader implementation strategies. However, there is less detailed understanding of academic perceptions of blended learning and its impact on the academic professional and lived experience of this expanding phenomenon. As such, this thesis aims to highlight the challenges faced by academics, and, thereby, stimulate further debate around the sustainability of successful blended learning implementation by post-1992 universities. Bokolo (2019) argues that research into blended learning is too often viewed in isolation of factors that play a significant role in successful change, such as balance of power between academics and institutions in knowledge production and educational practices. They point out that examining the complexity of the various interactions at play are necessary to advance the understanding of blended learning in higher education (Deng *et al.,* 2018; cited in Bokolo, 2019).

The study aims correspond with how institutional blended learning programmes empower academics by setting clear responsibilities. Friday *et al.* (2024) also recognises the importance of being prepared for change. Moreover, blended learning transformations paint a nuanced and complex picture and offer academics the 'freedom to own localised change processes, explore, experiment and let new ideas emerge' (Friday *et al.,* 2024, p. 31). As such, this thesis aims to improve current blended learning initiatives by revealing academic knowledge, understanding, expertise, and experience in blended learning change programmes. To achieve these aims, the research questions below firstly guide the study by focusing on the degree to which academics apply their notion of meaning to blended learning, secondly, the extent academics perceive their institutions as collaborative during the process of change, and finally, the level at which values surrounding teaching practices and institutional expectations are revealed. The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

1. What does the term blended learning mean to academic staff in UK post-1992 universities?
2. During the implementation programme, what role did the institution play in motivating academic staff to adopt blended learning strategies?
3. To what extent are academic staff involved in initiating, designing, and implementing blended learning programmes in their institution?
4. What are the institutional expectations of blended learning practice on academic staff?
5. To what extend do academic staff consider that their values and beliefs align with their institution's vision for blended learning?

1.2 KEY CONCEPTS: IMPLEMENTATION, CHANGE MANAGEMENT AND POST-1992 UNIVERSITIES

The study title uses the term *implementation* which occurs during a process of institutional embedding with change taking place usually over several years before reaching maturity (Rogers, 2003). The initial period of implementation (usually the first year) is notably the steepest 'learning curve' for academic practice to evolve through adoption building efficacy (Sutir, Hernandez, Grimes 2010; cited in Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich 2010, p. 433; Rogers, 2003; Ringstaff and Yocam, 1994). In the current climate and particularly since Covid-19, universities accelerated toward blended learning and digital infrastructures that combine concepts of face-to-face learning with mixed modes of instructional technology design (Cronje, 2020). It was not that blended learning did not happen prior to the pandemic; it was more that a new focus emerged. As such, the term *implementation* is used to denote the evolving process of change at a particularly unique time in which changes are initiated and develop over time and space.

The study title also uses the term *change management*. Increasing evidence highlights the effectiveness of well-established change management practices in supporting success rates across senior, mid-level, and frontline workers (Smith *et al.,* 2015). Smith *et al.* (2015) emphasises that understanding the correlation between the value captured from change initiatives and the insights and practices that lead to change has the potential to improve success rates. The study, therefore, contends that institutional blended learning change is a management process incorporating complex digital landscapes whose focus is student engagement while requiring academics to embrace a digitalised pedagogy of practice in teaching and learning. As such, the term *change management* is used to denote that the study does not only focus on implementation of blended learning, which could be an individual endeavour, but that academics experienced a management initiative with operational, administrative and institutional processes.

The study title refers to *academics*. The research refers to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as an official agency representing universities in the UK. Their definition for academic staff is 'professionals holding a contract for planning, directing and undertaking academic teaching and research within higher education' (HESA, 2022). This definition provides the basis upon which to capture the most relevant data for this study as it clearly distinguishes academic staff from other individuals working in UK higher education.

The study title refers to *post-1992 universities*. The literature confirms that UK post-1992 universities 'have done the heavy lifting in terms of overall student expansion - and in widening participation for students from working-class homes and ethnic minorities' (Scott, 2012; Thompson, 2019). The term widening participation is problematic since it categorises certain students as non-traditional (Baker, Brown and Fazey, 2006). In their study, Baker, Brown and Fazey (2006) contest the idea of the non-traditional student, arguing this represents the institution's inability to adapt to contemporary modern society, and therefore, has limitations. Nonetheless, within the UK university landscape, this narrative differentiates post-1992 universities from, for example, Russell Group and other universities in England (Russell Group, 2008). As such, there are clear distinctions between Russell Group and other universities verses post-1992 universities previously known as polytechnics (Purcell, Elias and Atfield, 2009; Penn, 2017). By contrast, Russell Groups are among 'the UK's most prestigious universities' (Cabinet Office, 2009; cited in Purcell, Elias and Atfield, 2009, p. 1) historically known for their research-intensive learning environments (Nurunnabi and Abdelhadi, 2019) still the emphasis today. The demographic of Russell Group data suggests students are overwhelmingly from affluent socioeconomic backgrounds (Purcell, Elias and Atfield, 2009) and, far less diverse in terms of global majority students and staff. In this case, the literature highlights that post-1992 universities tend to attract students based on vocational employability skills (Scott, 2012) while Russell Group universities tend to attract students based on internationally recognised research. Arguably though, these distinctions are best described as 'coarse cross-cultural…similarities and differences' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, p. 190; Schein, 2010). The investigation intends to draw out distinctions in expression, meaning and response particularly within post-1992 contexts in which blended learning change programmes occur and are experienced by academics.

The title refers to the study being investigated *through a Gramscian lens.* Inspired by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), this thesis captures academics' rich, lived, everyday work experiences of navigating digital literacy through blended learning digital practices. This exploration revealed that the values and beliefs ingrained in these practices are deeply culturally situated, offering a unique Gramscian lens to investigate these dynamic phenomena. Academic practices and identity formations inspire this work, particularly within post-1992 institutions. A Gramscian lens makes plausible an appreciation of the hidden narratives that shape and reframe pedagogies of practice, providing fresh insights and opportunities for innovation in higher education. The notion that education can be a tool for maintaining and challenging hegemonic norms resonates within the study's inclination toward social justice and equitable practice.

1.3 BLENDED LEARNING AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence is not the subject of this study. However, it would be remiss not to draw attention to the changing landscape in which artificial intelligence is now prominent in discussions around blended learning in higher education. Lee *et al.* (2024), and Park and Doo (2024), point out that while the pandemic accelerated the increased demand for blended learning in higher education, the unprecedented arrival of ChatGPT in November 2022 (Alshahrani, 2023) meant that artificial intelligence in higher education quickly became a global phenomenon.

According to the literature, blended learning represents an established approach to teaching and learning in higher education (Adel and Dayan, 2021; Bokolo, 2020; Cappelli and Smithies, 2021). However, while the literature highlights commonly agreed technical characteristics about what blended learning entails (i.e. face-to-face teaching combined with technologies), there needs to be more clarity about what blended learning means to individuals contextualised within the uniqueness of those university spaces (Smith and Hill, 2018; Aarts *et al.,* 2021; Ahlburg, 2020; Fedotova *et al.,* 2021). This thesis focuses on blended learning without discussions surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) but acknowledges the implications that AI continues to evolve within the blended learning landscape.

Nonetheless, blended learning, is a concept still in its developmental stages (Hrastinski, 2019). Its adaptability, a significant strength, comprises various pedagogical methods integrating distance, online, and face-to-face learning to enhance and facilitate learning across the curriculum (Cappelli and Smithies, 2021; Dziuban *et al.,* 2018). Hrytsak *et al.* (2023, p. 34) describe blended learning as a 'novel educational paradigm', suggesting this is a relatively new approach. AdvanceHE (2020) points out that the earliest reference to blended learning is from the late 1990s. While Rogers (2003, p. 12) reminds us that:

> '…an innovation is an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption. It matters little, so far as human behaviour is concerned whether the idea is objectively new or measured by the lapse of time since its first use or discovery'.

Rogers's statement above implies that the actual age of the innovation or its historical use is irrelevant when considering human behaviour. Therefore, understanding academic perceptions maybe crucial for successfully implementing blended learning into post-1992 contexts. Certainly, the exciting prospect of artificial intelligence as it pertains to blended learning would likely offer extraordinary insights. One might imagine the potential opportunities and challenges which would no doubt enhance the discussion. However, the discussion surrounding artificial intelligence extends beyond the scope of the research.

1.4 REGULATIONS AND THE OFFICE FOR STUDENTS

Recently, blended learning caught the attention of regulatory bodies such as the Office for Students (OfS, 2022) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2022). Both bodies recognise blended learning as the standard for best practice in higher education, acknowledging that it supports inclusion and graduate employability. The Office for Students (OfS, 2022) conducted a comprehensive review of the impact of blended learning on students at universities and colleges in England. Their findings highlight concerns about the quality of student experiences using technologies for learning. OfS (2022) also stressed the importance of ensuring that 'sound pedagogical principles inform the blended learning approach rather than factors such as student numbers'. The OfS (2022) regulations further indicated that, in relation to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) B1 compliance (high-quality experience) and B2 compliance (high-quality resources) are suited to the subject. OfS (2022) also emphasises that universities must demonstrate the success of their students beyond higher education, as digital literacy now represents an essential employability skill.

Since the nineties, definitions have varied depending on technologies integrated into teaching. Nevertheless, the variation in definitions presents a promising landscape for the future of blended learning. According to Bokolo (2019, pp. 2) blended learning is developing into the preferred pedagogy in higher education because it allows increased access to learners using connected devices and is said to create the most favourable experiences 'with some element of student control over time, place, and path'. Alongside regulations and other complex and competing social and economic conditions, this has meant technologies for teaching and learning in higher education prompted a shift by institutions to implement blended learning as best practice in the university landscape. Consistent with this, Standley (2023) reported that nearly one-third of 160 UK universities surveyed (28%) reported that blended learning is the primary teaching pedagogy in their institutions. The results are compared to a previous survey conducted before the pandemic in 2018, showing that only 4.1% of UK universities taught were using blended learning (Standley, 2023).

1.5 WHY THE RESEARCH FOCUSES ON ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Much of the research concerning blended learning focuses on student experience and the potential for increased engagement, which results in more favourable student outcomes. Sokout and Usagawa (2021,p. 105) and others point out that blended learning enables learners to 'stay motivated and increases their abilities within an interactive learning environment'. Huang, Matthews, Lodge (2022, pp. 1558), whose research explored the 'digital learning analytics' and 'assessment results' of students, amended their project to understand the academic experiences of institutional blended learning programmes. They point out that 'while the intention was not to focus on the challenges, problems and negative perceptions, the participants…overwhelmingly drew attention to…the impact on academic wellbeing' (Huang, Matthews, Lodge, 2022, pp. 1558). In a similar manner, while initially considering the focus for this study, the idea of student experience was contemplated. However, what swiftly became most intriguing was the paucity of data and interest in (at the time) academic experience. In a comparable way to Huang, Matthews, Lodge (2022), while perusing the myriad ideas surrounding technologies in higher education, endeavouring to narrow the research focus on blended learning was also an interest in the underlying 'ethic of care' (Huang, Matthews, Lodge, 2022, pp. 1588). They interpret the 'ethic of care' to 'future policymaking in establishing' a 'care-full' teaching and learning space (Huang, Matthews, Lodge (2022, pp. 1558). Likewise, the foundations of this thesis are based on the potential for blended learning to emulate an ethical pedagogy of practice, prompted by an interest in the experiences of academics, giving space to those distinct voices.

1.6 THE STUDY MAKES A UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION

Authors such as Selwyn (2022), Huang, Matthews and Lodge (2022), and others, continue to inform the debate about blended learning in higher education. To my knowledge, there are no studies directly focusing on blended learning in higher education through the lens of Antonio Gramsci, representing a clear gap in the literature. Most studies tend to be significantly weighted in favour of student experience and engagement, representing a contextual gap in which the research community could benefit from an increased understanding of the academic experience during blended learning implementation in post-1992 universities.

This thesis contributes to the wider debate for three primary reasons. Firstly, it employs Gramscian theory to critically evaluate blended learning as a hegemonic construct, revealing positions of power and authority (Filippini, 2017; Jubas, 2010; Jones, 2006). Notably, a growing body of work, such as that by Pizzolato and Holst (2017), promotes an understanding of Gramsci in relation to education. Pizzolato and Holst (2017) examine key concepts, viewing education through the lens of hegemony.

Similar to this study, Pagano (2017, p. xii) explores the relationship between 'culture, education, and politics,' which Gramsci sees as inextricably linked. This thesis highlights strong connections between blended learning and the associated political dimensions - tradition, values, and practices within culture, education, and politics, much like Pagano's (2017) work. Although Pagano's (2017) study does not focus on technology but rather education and political leadership, and as such, similarities can be drawn. Gramsci's philosophies uniquely reinforce a greater understanding of academic experience with equality during the process of implementing blended learning. This correlation with blended learning change means that experience and equality are also tightly interconnected. Delving into the concept of equality in the context of blended learning change programmes, Miller (1984, p.22) advocates for a 'rights-based standard of equality.' Considering Gramscian (1971) rights in this study necessitates a delicate balance between the academic desire for collaboration in the implementation process, and the freedom to develop blended learning practices independently. However, the study makes a unique contribution by utilising Gramscian theory and highlighting those political imbalances of power. The thesis investigates this by recognising the nuances fundamental to understanding Gramscian thinking, as its focus on the relationship between academics and institutions are compelling. As such, a Gramscian perspective opens the debate for the richness of those political discussions. The study draws attention to critically assessing educational reforms and their broader societal implications by examining these potential changes.

Secondly, the research is vital because it asks why this study might make a difference in this current debate, who might benefit, and whether something as seemingly innocuous as implementing blended learning can change something in society. The term used here (seemingly innocuous) was based on the researcher's introspection as it seemed that while blended learning may appear to be a simple, uncontroversial advancement in higher education, its significance and impact are formidable.

From the research perspective, those most likely to benefit are post-1992 universities implementing blended learning change because the study may assist leaders in considering factors relevant to academics. Also, as academic concerns, fears, interests and motivations offer a nuanced understanding of this complex landscape, the university might think about how best to facilitate buy-in from those stakeholders from the outset. Furthermore, academics may be more forthcoming in voicing ideas unique to their experiences as frontline workers with students. It is evident that post-1992 universities and academics stand to gain from this study because it highlights that meaningful collaborations between both can be foundational for long-lasting and transformational change.
As a result of the institution and academics working collaboratively, students benefit from a landscape richly layered with the tapestry of communications and quality resources upon entering their studies. Ultimately, the aim of universities and academics are for students to achieve successful outcomes during and beyond the university. The effects of blended learning change may include altering power dynamics within educational institutions, affecting access to education, and influencing broader social and cultural structures.

Thirdly, research into blended learning plays a crucial role in shaping educational policies at all levels - local, national, and global. An example is the position paper by Ossiannilsson (2019) for the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). Her study contributes to the ongoing discussion of blended learning by examining its development, implementation, and relationship with emerging trends outlined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), focusing on UNESCO's Sustainable Goals (SDG4) for education in 2030 (UNESCO, 2015a, 2015b). Ossiannilsson's (2017) UNESCO report on blended learning reaches a broad audience, including practitioners, policymakers, and educational leaders. Similarly, this thesis can support higher education institutions in refining their strategies, in addition to, integrating blended learning nationally, informing policymakers to develop more robust and supportive frameworks that facilitate adopting and scaling blended learning practices across various higher educational contexts. It also offers insights into the vision of a globally equitable higher education landscape.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gramsci (1971, p. 418) indicates his belief in acquiring knowledge ‘scientifically’, which he argues must be achieved by ‘explaining and justifying them in historical situations and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world’. Here, Gramsci’s (1971) discussion is about scientific scholarly inquiry. To further support the hegemonic underpinning framework with this study, Gramsci provides another unique insight that, one could argue, is fundamentally qualitative. Gramsci (1971, p. 418) maintains that knowledge cannot be authentically acquired ‘without feeling the elementary passions of the people’. In the text below, Gramsci (1971) informs us that knowledge derived from scholarly inquiry should come with an understanding of participants’ feelings and passions regarding their unique conceptions of the world. His view subscribes to those subjective qualities that allow us to humanise others.

This correlates with the previous acknowledgement surrounding the interest in academic experiences within an ‘ethic of care’ (Huang, Matthews, Lodge, 2022, pp. 1588). In the statement below, Gramsci (1971, p. 418) arguably reveals himself as an individual attuned to the subjective qualities of the human experience. He states:

> ‘De Man “studies” popular feelings: he does not feel with them to guide them and lead them into a catharsis of modern civilisation. His position is that of the scholarly student of folklore who is permanently afraid that modernity is going to destroy the object of his study. What one finds in his book is the pedantic reflection of what is, however, a real need: for popular feelings to be known and studied in a way in which they present themselves objectively and for them not to be considered something negligible and inert with the movement of history’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 418).

Taking Gramsci (1971) as a guiding influence, the aim of this thesis determines how and the extent to which academic staff adapt and make sense of these changes, referred to by some as 'adaptive sensemaking' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Bognar and Bar, 2000; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 46). Adaptive sensemaking subjectively happens through each person's meaning-making capacities and where values and beliefs are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Bognar and Bar, 2000; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 46; Burr, 2015). Correspondingly, Gramsci (1971, p. 418) also suggests that a scholarly error is in ‘believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned’. Harre (1995a) also recognises these meaning-making capacities as agentic and constituted in '…the way we represent ourselves as responsible for, or not responsible for, our behaviour' (cited in Burr, 2015, p. 168).

Furthermore, these change experiences can perpetually frame and re-frame what are described as 'relationship exchanges' continually 'negotiated and constructed' in higher education (Gergen, 2009a; cited in Burr, 2015, p. 161). According to Gramsci (2014, p. 249), relationship exchanges are hegemonic because they represent leadership as morally legitimate and, in doing so, seek to liquidate objections to change or otherwise subjugate 'antagonistic groups' through coercive measures.

The implementation of blended learning is tethered to the hegemonic power of institutions and the countervailing power of academics, which results in tensions that tie concepts relevant to theories of language, thought and differing perceptions of the world (Fodor, 2000). Investigations demonstrate that Gramsci's (1971) ideas are congruent with present-day concerns surrounding education and culture with scholars such as Pizzolato and Holst (2017) and others, who focus on Gramsci as a pedagogy of change, and for instance, Jubas (2010) who posits that Gramsci's hegemony inspires research frameworks that are inspirational and innovative.

As such, this study proposes that institutional implementation of blended learning can be researched through a Gramscian hegemonic gaze (Jubas, 2010; Filippini, 2017). Notably, research can offer various explanations for situations that seem difficult to comprehend. However, hegemonic research assists in redefining our experiences by offering new labels, shedding light on the broader characteristics of events and processes we previously considered unique to us (Brookfield, 1995, p.30). Brookfield's (1995, p.30) reflections involve notions of 'power' and 'hegemony'. He notes that critical reflections uncover hegemonic assumptions designed to make us think the event is in our best interest when, in fact, powerful actors are working against us (Brookfield, 1995, p.30). Therefore, this blended learning research imposes Gramsci's concepts of power and hegemony, highlighting an awareness of these connections (Brookfield, 1995, p. 15).

1.8 POSITION STATEMENT

There is a strong inclination towards blended learning in higher education. This interest was ignited in 2015 as a new career unfolded in academia. This transition represented a time of innovation, strongly emphasising that academics should leverage technology for curriculum content and design. The expectation to use technology to enhance student engagement was challenging yet exhilarating. Various resources were explored, starting with a free online iCloud software called *ThingLink***.** The *ThingLink* platform allows one to craft and deliver an interactive programme to students. When colleagues discovered the use of this tool, it quickly became a beacon of good practice within our department. As such, this unexpected recognition validated those early efforts, which deepened the fascination with blended learning.

As an early career academic in 2015, I initially perceived the expectation to integrate technology into student engagement as a natural and inevitable progression. Student engagement was going to be the focus of this study. However, discussions with academic peers soon revealed a growing apprehension among colleagues regarding this shift in practice and the evolving institutional expectations surrounding digital learning. At which point my focus pivoted from student engagement to the academic experience. Harding and Calabria (2025, p. 98) argue that 'positionalities are necessarily mobile, fluid, relationally, and contextually constituted,' challenging static understandings of identity and emotion. This fluidity is particularly evident in my engagement with technology, which oscillates between intrigue and frustration. I am deeply invested in exploring how digital tools can enhance learning experiences while shaping academic expertise - an evolving process that aligns, in part, with Harding and Calabria's (2025) notion of fluid identity. Yet, as my developing digital literacy is intellectually stimulated, it is equally, at times, emotionally taxing. Moralli (2024, p. 753) emphasises that researchers must critically examine their emerging 'emotionalities during fieldwork' as an intentional embodiment of reflexivity, anchored in their vulnerability. This perspective resonates with my own experience, as seemingly straightforward technological tasks have often escalated into prolonged troubleshooting, sometimes without resolution.

While conducting this research, I encountered significant challenges with digital tools. On one occasion, a Zoom interview failed to record. My chosen transcription platform, Otter.ai, also malfunctioned at a critical moment. During another interview the internet was unstable and had to be cancelled. Additionally, I had to navigate the complexities of NVivo by relying on YouTube tutorials and other online resources. In another instance, a single accidental keystroke on my laptop irreversibly altered the format of my Word document - an issue that remains an unresolved mystery to this day. Moralli (2024, pp.753) also describes this as ‘the fact of conducting research in often difficult contexts.’ Nonetheless, Paulas and Lester (2024, pp. 622) remind us to prioritise ‘reflexivity practices’ in qualitative inquiries, and Mortari (2015) emphasises that reflexive practice should be both a professional and private endeavour if one is to ensure that the ‘world is made meaningful…in the heuristic context of research work’ (Mortari, 2015, pp. 1).

Paulas and Lester (2024, p. 624) caution that 'too many times, integrating a digital tool or space into a research study is treated as unproblematic...' Insights from Paulas and Lester (2024), Moralli (2024) and others, challenge these often-overlooked assumptions positioning technologies as neutral. Moreover, this draws attention to the emotional and intellectual demands of digital engagement in the researcher's own experience, also mirrored in the experiences of other academics confronting these particular hardships during the process of blended learning change. Palaganas *et al.,* (2017, pp. 426) argue that through reflexivity, researchers acknowledge the changes brought about in themselves…as an iterative and powerful process'. Also shaped by the researcher's 'willingness and ability to account for the ways that personal and situational influences…' are present (Birnbaum, 2025, pp. 61). Pagas (2009, pp 266) describes this process as 'self-reflexivity', as an 'internal conversation' or the 'conscious turning of the individual towards himself…a process that includes both self-knowledge and self-monitoring.' As such, this understanding not only reinforces my interest in how academics navigate blended learning but highlights the unsettling and emotionally charged nature of these encounters, which parallel the challenges faced more broadly.

The emotional spectrum of working with technology is striking - one moment, it fosters exhilaration, and the next, it induces frustration and irrationality. The paradox lies in my simultaneous enjoyment of the potential in which technology may enhance the experience of teaching and learning alongside the emotional toll its unpredictability exacts. Moralli (2024, pp. 753) describes this as the context in which one's positionality and emotionality takes shape according to the 'episodes' we experience. This oscillation between enthusiasm and despair is not unique to my experience because reflexivity during research highlights the importance of acknowledging the emotional dimensions of academic work. Nevertheless, Munhall (2012) and Birnbaum (2025, pp. 61) point out that 'reflexivity' encompasses a researcher's ability and commitment to critically examine how personal biases and situational factors shape the processes and outcomes of knowledge production. Similarly, Olmos-Vega *et al*., (2023) suggest that reflexivity is conceived as rooted in a respect for the emotional and instinctive aspects of ourselves. It is part of how qualitative researchers acknowledge the combined potency of the personal, interpersonal and contextual factors that shape and drive the research process (Olmos-Vega *et al*., 2023). Moreover, it offers a critical framework for engaging with these affective dimensions, allowing researchers and educators to examine their positionality and lived experiences (Mortari, 2015; Watt, 2007).

1.9 OVERVIEW OF THESIS STRUCTURE

To summarise Chapter One, the focus was broadly to contextualise academic experiences of the technological, political and cultural changes impacting higher education. The literature reviewed in Chapter Two identifies some key relevant points in relation to addressing the widely held perception of academic resistance to technological change. The thesis contends there is limited context surrounding why resistance might occur and the chapter opens the debate drawing attention to power imbalances and relationship between academics and institutions. Chapter Three justifies the methodological approach outlining the position, design and methods using semi-structured interviews. For reasons argued in Chapter Three, an interpretivist paradigm was used, collecting data from multiple participants across several post-1992 universities in the UK. Chapter Three also outlines how participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling plus the saturation concept to identify the extent that data collected indicated the number of participants could be justified. Chapters Four and Five presents the findings and analysis summarising academic experiences of blended learning change programmes. Chapter Six concludes with a reflection on the thesis and offers recommendations. The following chapter, the literature review, starts with Why a Gramscian Approach? – It lays the groundwork for readers to follow the established roots of Gramscian thinking that correspond with the implementation of blended learning in higher education.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Galvan (2009), the literature should provide a comprehensive and up-to-date review of the topic. The thesis considers why blended learning is emerging as the predominant approach in higher education and that leadership in higher education is essential for driving blended learning change. It contends that exploring blended learning through a Gramscian lens navigates the study through rich discussions in which power and the everyday political landscape can be appreciated. Academics in post-1992 universities experiencing blended learning change provide the focus and context for this study.

2.1 WHY A GRAMSCIAN APPROACH?

This section raises the question of why Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) thinking may be relevant to the study, and in doing so, highlights Gramsci's interest in education and political reform. Prior studies have noted the importance of Gramsci, and as such, there is potential to expand the discussion as a vehicle for a new cultural context to be realised (Pizzolato and Holst, 2017). Moving forward, technology and blended learning within the context of implementation and change leads to emerging assumptions around change expectations and notions of resistance and political awareness.

Before his imprisonment, Gramsci often published in the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order) whose trademark slogan was: 'Educate yourselves because we will need all your intelligence. Rouse yourselves because we will need all your enthusiasm. Organize yourselves because we will need all your strength' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 76; Clarke, 1977, p. 54; Buttigieg, 2011, p.19). This slogan indicates Gramsci's resistance against the fascist ideology of his time (Schwarzmantel, 2015). He contended that education for the masses was deliberately narrowly focused, reinforcing divisions of class, wealth, and power (Schwarzmantel, 2015; Gramsci, 2007). While incarcerated as a political prisoner, Gramsci compiled his multiple constructions of knowledge through his Prison Notebooks, largely drawing from others such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Hegel, Stalin, and Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce to name only a few (Gramsci, 2014; Jubas, 2010; Jones, 2006). Although he is clearly influenced by these various thinkers (and there are many), Gramscian ideas around hegemony have an idiolect that can only uniquely be attributed to him. Gramsci manifests within the context of blended learning in higher education, as a proposal that the social and cultural mobilisations within higher education cannot be divorced from the omnipresence of political inquiry, whether historically or in modernity.

Apropos, the implementation of blended learning in higher education is predisposed to an exegesis of the Gramscian gaze, a perspective considered as embodying the relationship between the institution and experience of academics during the process of blended learning change.

As far as Gramsci was concerned inequalities were reflected in 'the myriad ways inequality manifests itself, on the varied landscapes of power it produces and the complex ways those landscapes are experienced by those inhabiting them' (Crehan, 2016, p. xi). Pizzolato and Holst (2017, p. 4), and others, draw from Gramsci's Prison Notebooks stating that pedagogy and adult education were significant in Gramsci's discussions around hegemonic ideologies (Carlucci, 2013; Ives, 2004; Hoare and Sperber, 2016). Jubas (2010) and others (Bellamy, Evans, and Hopkins, 2017; Weller and Van Gramberg, 2007; Waring, 2017; Lea and Stierer, 2011) join with Gramsci in considering workplaces as worthwhile sites for investigation. This sets the stage for an exploration of dialectically constructed ideas between hegemonic ruling relations and experience. Specifically, a Gramscian approach is concerned with learning and politics as 'inextricably related' (Giroux, 1999, p. 17). Gramsci may not have foreseen the various ways in which knowledge and power could be central to discourses surrounding technologies for teaching and learning, and clearly, blended learning is a contemporary construct. However, Gramsci recognises the political and educational significance of popular culture (Hoare and Sperber, 2016) and the formations of power in everyday life (Giroux, 1999; Jones, 2006; Crehan, 2016). According to Giroux, Gramsci redefines education as pedagogical practices of cultural and political struggles in which the institutional arrangement of capitalism reproduces social inequalities (Grossberg, 1977; cited in Giroux, 1999). It is plausible, therefore, to view education and its relationship with blended learning within the context of Gramsci's hegemonic ideology and moreover, that it is pertinent to a twenty-first century discourse.

One of the various ways this study attempts to unearth the relationship between the institution's blended learning implementation programme and the academic is where Gramsci's relations of force constitute the complexity of societal structures (Gramsci, 2020; Hoare and Sperber, 2016; Schwartzmantel, 2015). During this exploration, various questions emerged such as, why is the university a powerful hegemonic group? The question is legitimised by drawing out that hegemonic groups are instruments of the state, and further, that the state, and educational systems, according to Gramsci, work together acting as social, ethical, and moral postulations disseminated to educate and control the masses (Gramsci, 1971; Gramsci, 2014; Mayo, 2017).

Gramsci views educational establishments as instruments of the state, and as powerful as the state itself. As such, the university is viewed as a collaborator in the reproduction of culture and political power. To further this understanding of the university as a powerful instrument of the state, an examination of Gramsci's structures and superstructures were contemplated (Gramsci, 1996).

Gramsci conceptualised the university as a structure and superstructure within society, playing a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining cultural and ideological traditions (Gramsci; 2016; Gramsci, 2014; Gramsci, 2007; Gramsci, 1996; Gramsci, 1971). As a structure, the university acts as an institutional framework where professional and intellectual labour is organised, produced, and reproduced (Spivak, 2009; Gramsci, 1971). It serves as a foundational element in the societal infrastructure, contributing to the economic base by creating a skilled workforce and advancing knowledge and technology (Gramsci, 1996). Simultaneously, as a superstructure, the university functions as a critical site for producing and disseminating cultural and ideological norms (Gramsci, 1996; Gramsci, 1971). It is instrumental in shaping consciousness, values, and identities, aligning them with the prevailing hegemony. Selwyn (2011, p. 22) refers to the 'external imperatives' of technological change and the pressures of keeping up with modern contemporary society in this digital age. As such, universities participate in the cultural hegemonic process through curriculum, academic discourse, and institutional practices, reinforcing existing social relations, power structures, and class distinctions (Filippini, 2017; Gramsci, 2015). Also, Gramsci emphasised the role of intellectuals, produced within universities, in mediating between the base and superstructure, acting as agents of continuity or change (Cospito, 2021; Gramsci, 2020). Thus, the university is a dialectic entity that not only contributes to the material base of society through education and research but also plays a critical role in society's ideological and cultural reproduction, influencing both social structures and human consciousness (Gramsci, 2017; Pizzolato and Holst, 2017).

2.2 HEGEMONY: COMMON SENSE, CONSENT AND COERCION

Crehan (2016, p. 44) explains that the English translation of common sense derives from Gramsci's original text 'senso comune.' She argues there is a fundamental distinction between the two. She suggests that the English translation implies practical wisdom, tact, and the ability to handle daily life adeptly, carrying a positive charge. In contrast, 'senso comune' (Crehan, 2016, p. 44) is more impartial, denoting the collective beliefs and opinions presumed to be widely shared. The distinction between common sense and senso comune highlights the cultural loading of these concepts (Crehan, 2016, p. 44). As such, Crehan (2016) points out that the English understanding embodies a judgment of merit, implying a valued skill set. Whereas conversely, 'senso comune' suggests an activity relevant to the masses (Gramsci, 2014, p. 333). This reflects how language encodes cultural values and biases, potentially shaping our interpretation of intelligence and wisdom.

The assessment of what constitutes 'common sense' may be deeply subjective and culturally specific, rather than an objective measure of practical reasoning (Gramsci, 2014, p.333). Gramsci believed that everyone inherently practices philosophy through common sense. He argued that improving society does not require completely new ideas but transforming and critically analysing existing notions. Gramsci believed that politics connects everyday common sense with 'high-level philosophical thought', maintaining unity among the general population (Gramsci, 2014, p. 333). He proposed that people possess two levels of consciousness: one that is expressed through their actions and connects them with their work community and another that is a verbal or explicit consciousness (Gramsci, 2007). This latter consciousness aligns individuals with particular social groups as it influences their moral judgments and willpower, often leading to a conflicted state of mind that can result in a lack of action and a tendency towards moral and political inactivity (Gramsci, 2007). He states, '…but common sense in turn has been the agent of philistinism, it has mummified a justified reaction into a permanent attitude, into an intellectual laziness that is as degenerative and repulsive as the phenomenon it sought to combat' (Gramsci, 2007, p. 254).

The institution's dissemination of blended learning programmes represents normalised socially constructed views of technologies used for teaching (Bokolo, 2020). Adopting specific technologies, pedagogical approaches, and curricula in blended learning can reflect and reinforce the hegemonic culture of what constitutes common sense and good practice (Cappelli and Smithies, 2021). Understanding this socially constructed environment is crucial for academics and policymakers to ensure that blended learning environments promote inclusivity and resist perpetuating existing social inequalities (Thomas, 2009). Relating blended learning to the notion of a 'primary good' (Van Dijk, 2005, p. 135) is one way of understanding Gramsci's hegemonic common sense of blended

learning. Van Dijk (2005, p. 135) argues that 'primary goods' are perceived to be '…so essential for the survival and self-respect of individuals that they cannot be exchanged for other goods.' In other words, it is the notion that the blended learning approach, or any approach using technologies for teaching and learning, cannot be replaced by other approaches. For instance, traditional teaching without technology might be frowned upon in contemporary education. Although other approaches may exist alongside the predominant primary approach, it attains the special importance that blended learning must continually rise in 'productivity and power' (Van Dijk, 2005, p. 136). Moreover, that the primary good of blended learning is socially, politically, and morally constructed in education and life (Van Dijk, 2005). From Gramsci's perspective one could determine that blended learning is, indeed aligned to a particular moral judgement led, not only by the institution, but (in part) through social and legislative pressures.

Hegemony refers explicitly to a dominant social group. Furthermore, the dominant group is located within its own historical, economic, and political vantage point and the cultural context to which it applies. The vantage point referred to is a position that is systemically advantageous to some and pervasive throughout the university infrastructure. The hegemonic group functions to disseminate and eliminate certain attitudes and customs (Gramsci, 1971). Furthermore, it reproduces power and retains this through the legislation of state and governance. According to Gramsci, the hegemonic objective is to propagate its version of what is, or is not, ethically appropriate through the concept of law and, therefore, to moralise 'not just each person individually, but also an entire society of individuals' (Gramsci, 2007, p.158). He argues that the state, law, and education combine to achieve the highest possible degree of consent within society (Gramsci, 1971). The university, according to Gramsci, is perceived as an 'apparatus of government' (2014, p. 234). As such, this study provides a unique opportunity to make visible a system of ethical and cultural mores that embody the broader social and political contexts governing the working practices of academics through blended learning change programmes (Selwyn, 2011).

In his Prison Notebooks, Gramsci raises the question of 'how will educative pressure be applied to single individuals to obtain their consent and collaboration?' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 242). To answer this, Gramsci turns to his concept of 'social conformism' as a way of exerting collective pressure through customs, social morality, and common ways of thinking and acting (Gramsci, 1971, p. 342). These ideas underpin university discourses about the benefits of blended learning, which, Gramsci would argue, are contingent on historical truths that are difficult to oppose (Gramsci, 2014). For instance, blended learning creates unique opportunities for engagement and

collaboration, improving overall student outcomes. Gramsci's concepts of 'collective man' and 'social conformism' are that common sense is both an individual expression and socially connecting (Gramsci, 2014, p. 232). Therefore, the notion that blended learning improves student outcomes must be believed by the majority making this a commonly accepted, common-sense idea. As such, it becomes difficult to challenge this notion and subscribe to alternative views that steer away from blended learning as a primary pedagogical approach.

Gramsci's (1971, p. 348) ideas about 'common conceptions of the world' correspond with common-sense ideas about blended learning in higher education. Institutions tend to account for how individual actions depend on how many other individuals align themselves to the programme of change (Schelling, 1978; cited in Rogers, 2003). When a collective agreement is arrived at, Gramsci argues that it then becomes 'a popular conception of the world' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 348). When universities implement blended learning change, they expect eventual collective adoption to permeate the institution. Selwyn warns that 'common sense' ways of viewing technologies require careful consideration (Selwyn, 2012, pp. 84). He argues that blended learning teaching 'has different meanings and interpretations for various relevant social groups' (Pinch and Bijker, 1984; Bijker and Law, 1992; cited in Selwyn, 2012, pp. 84).

Gramsci's hegemony provokes the notion of common sense to raise consciousness for individuals to break out of what he defines as 'moral and intellectual passivity' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 323). Understanding Gramsci's concept of common sense is important because it draws attention to the objective of hegemony to function as an ethical state, promote cultural and moral ideologies, and serve the needs of the ruling group (Gramsci, 1971). Nonetheless, Gramsci argues that academics are by no means passive recipients but 'givers of active and direct consent' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 244), which we argue is relevant to blended learning programmes of change. Selwyn (2014 proposes that there should be sufficiently nuanced and complex understandings of educational technology for teaching and learning 'beset by exaggerated expectations over the capacity of the new technological approaches to change education for the better' (Selwyn, 2014, p. 7). A principle of blended learning is about how and in what ways technology is combined to enhance the student experience and outcomes. Gramsci (2014) and Selwyn's (2014) argument converge in that those institutions assume educational technology to be inherently beneficial, which is where common sense ideologies emerge. Selwyn adds that 'neither technological change nor educational change' should be accepted as common sense (Selwyn, 2011, p. 9). He argues that common sense ideologies can stifle the political and social debate required for democratic and collaborative processes between the institution and academic staff (Selwyn, 2014).

Other academic commentators also acknowledge the pervasiveness of hegemonic ideologies. For instance, Bourdieu captures the notion of those with more social capital perpetuating their ideologies onto the masses as 'common sense' (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 131). The common-sense narratives in these educational spaces become universally accepted discourses as 'subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, and the threat of violence. Coercion is 'the invisible background of systemic violence' (Zizek, 2009, p. 8; Bourdieu, 1992, p. 131), reinforcing the concept of common sense as ideologically linked to power (Selwyn, 2011; Gramsci, 1971). Therefore, consent gained through dominant discourses (i.e., blended learning change programmes) without careful consideration may only serve to silence the diversity of voices (i.e., race, gender, ethnicity, class) (Selwyn, 2011). As consent operates within culturally specific norms, this results in the 'common sense of the majority' (Selwyn, 2014, p. 22; Crehan, 2016; Jones, 2006).

As the research focuses on the impact of blended learning programmes on academic staff, Gramsci's proposition of change provides a lens through which the study can explore 'ethical improvement' not as a fact but as an idealistic conception of change (Gramsci, 1971, p. 359). There are nonetheless benefits to change as there is still widespread agreement that blended learning can lead to learning gain or benefit when implemented appropriately with skill and inclusion (Selwyn, 2017). Similarly, Van de Ven and Poole proposed that institutional change can result in conflict and synthesis, problem-solving, and organisational learning (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995; cited in Hickman, 2010).

Nevertheless, when viewing common sense in terms of its relationship to consent, it can be socially engineered (Selwyn, 2014). Selwyn discusses this as the 'cultural and social manufacturing of consent' (Freeden, 2003; cited in Selwyn, 2014, p. 23). Likewise, Gramsci (1971) suggests that common sense links culture and language. He argues that 'power is diffused throughout civil society and embodies the coercive apparatus of the state' (Simon, 1991, p. 28; cited in Jubas, 2010, pp. 227). Additionally, Fairclough (2015) argues that language formulates the basis for widely perceived common-sense understandings. Gramsci (2014, p. 244) describes this as consent through the 'multiplicity' and 'participation of members' such that 'collective consciousness' becomes a widely accepted narrative.

2.3 THE ACADEMIC SUBALTERN: MICROPOLITICAL AND INFRAPOLITICAL AGENCY

Gramsci's subaltern theory is a contested term with various conceptions and misconceptions about the subaltern or subordinate group. Both terms, subaltern, and subordinate, are used intermittently. However, there are debates about whether Gramsci used the term subordinate or whether this was a translation now commonly applied (Green, 2021). Green (2021, p. xxxvi) points out that the various terms Gramsci frequently used were '*subalterno, subalterne, subalterni'.* Although, using the term subordinate does indeed correlate with Gramsci's portrayal of those with less socioeconomic and political power.

To explain the meaning applied to the subaltern, Gramsci provides historical examples from his knowledge of Italian history and the French Revolution dating back to the thirteenth century. He starts from the premise that 'subaltern groups are always subject to the initiatives of the dominant groups even when they rebel and rise-up…' (Gramsci, 2021, p. 6). Importantly, this tells us that Gramsci characterises the group not as passive recipients of injustice but as those that resist authority, control, and tradition. The hegemonic group are indicative of a particular race that imposes codes of behavioural and psychological conduct onto the masses through their conception of civilisation. These social expectations position the dominant group in opposition to the cultural mores of subaltern groups. Nevertheless, subaltern groups are educated into the dominant way of thinking, behaving, and acting through meritocracy and cultural, political, and legislative structures (Gramsci, 2021).

There are numerous reasons for regarding academic staff as subalterns, as well as for applying this terminology. Namely, academics are a distinct group located within and occupying significant spaces in the university as educators. The university itself is hegemonically dominant, gaining consent through education and state law (Gramsci, 1971). Academic staff resisting the institution's change management programme would be commensurate with resisting the ethical and moral principles applied to its general concepts of blended learning approaches. Smith *et al.* (2015, p. 311) argue that 'preparing for resistance is normal and should be expected and prepared for no matter how minor'.

As such, change is often viewed differently by those involved, as the journey to change is 'neither smooth nor problem-free' (Schein, 2010, p. 300). Successful change is measured by the rate of blended learning adoption, which can be unpredictable (Rogers, 2003). However, the conversation may not necessarily focus on adoption since the current educational standard is largely centred around technology-enhanced learning. Thus, blended learning is a pedagogy implemented by post-1992 universities to keep up with the current demands. The response to implementing blended learning can be polemic, and it is essential to note that drawing out academic staff experiences of this change can prove insightful (King and Boyatt, 2014).

Nevertheless, Braidotti refers to Deleuze who teaches that through 'jurisprudence' one can play an active role in the 'mode of resisting these established protocols and concepts' (Braidotti, 2019, p. 128). As such, it may be the concept of jurisprudence that opens notions of rights in these changing blended learning landscapes by considering Hanafin's reference to 'micropolitics' (Hanafin, 2018; cited in Braidotti, 2019, p. 129; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 246). Both Hanafin and Braidotti suggest that the micropolitics of power are embedded within a concept that 'everything is political' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 246). Gramsci also subscribes to the notion that 'all men are political beings' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 265). As such, debates about educational technology need to be problematised, meaning that the impact of blended learning should not be oversimplified, but rather, grounded in the 'political analysis of education' to ensure it does not 'create the illusion that these issues are free from political substance' (Selwyn, 2014, p. 21).

The academic reality of blended learning pedagogies of practice, in relation to widespread universal institutional change are, 'entangled' and 'inseparable' from the micropolitical experience (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 249). Micropolitical concepts are indicative of individual experiences, that are nuanced and subjective. It is from this premise, Scott (1990, p. 183) suggests that resistance to prescribed blended learning approaches seem unobtrusive and invisible but sensibly marked by a 'prudent awareness of the balance of power'.

However, while micropolitics is a term which proposes that politics is found in everyday circumstances, the term 'infrapolitics' can be defined as political dissent in disguise, which maintains an outward expression of 'consent' (Scott, 1990, p. 17). He further argues that the 'infrapolitics of subordinate groups' who, because of fear, may not openly express their opinions, nonetheless operate within the domain of dissent (Scott, 1990, p. 19).

Simply put, micropolitics are individual experiences of the political landscape of rights, and infrapolitics are acts of dissent, often disguised as consent. It is through this lens that these potentially tacit academic experiences maybe revealed through Gramsci's subaltern theory. Therefore, subaltern academics can and do use their power for dissent, and therefore, have the power to refrain from consent. This also means that as academics are discerning of the institutional power imbalance, they use this knowledge advantageously, which Gramsci would argue positions them as political activists.

2.4 MISCONCEPTIONS OF RESISTANCE

The resistant worker has been historically positioned as a subversive whose self-concern collides with the welfare and prosperity of the institution (Waddell and Sohal, 1998). Furthermore, according to Schein (2010, p. 301) the perceived dysfunctional and difficult behaviours associated with resistance are not easily relinquished as they 'serve other positive functions' in the workplace. Broadly, resistance has been largely understood as 'the enemy of change, the foe which causes a change effort to be drawn out by factional dissent and in-fighting' (Waddell and Sohal, 1998, pp. 2). Therefore, organisations tend to respond by seeking to eliminate these disruptions, and to 'quash it early and sweep it aside to make way for the coming change' (Rowe and Boise, 1973, p. 151; Mooney, 1939; Urwick, 1947; cited in Waddell and Sohal, 1998, pp. 2).

A premise of this study is, that it is a misconception, that resistance to blended learning change ascribes only to negative connotations (Hultman, 1979, p. 54; Leigh, 1998; cited in Waddell and Sohal, 1998, pp. 2). Moreover, that resistance may be recognised as a legitimate response to the outcomes envisaged by management, differing from employees' understanding of how blended learning is practiced (Zaltman and Duncan, 1977, p. 62; cited in Waddell and Sohal, 1998, pp. 2). These differences cast doubt for academics who may choose to stand in opposition or voice their concerns (Ansoff, 1988; Grusky and Miller; Kotter *et al.,* 1986; cited in Waddell and Sohal, 1998, pp. 2). Waddell and Sohal (1998) put forward that resistance plays an important role in which educators critically challenge that change is inherently good, and can therefore, be a balancing factor toward greater stability for institutions. They further suggest that individuals 'do not resist change…they resist the uncertainties and potential outcomes that change can cause' (Waddell and Sohal, 1998, p. 3). Heidegger suggests that 'every human act is the act of making sense' (Wrathall, 2013, p. 392). As such, if resistance are acts of making sense a successful, more open reading of these expressions by institutions may offer new ways of perceiving resistance (Wrathall, 2013; Heidegger, 1977). Moreover, there may be substantially new ways of influencing blended learning pedagogies of practice.

It is argued that resistance may serve as an important warning to institutions as some suggest there is potential for creating even greater stability (Judson, 1966; cited in Waddell and Sohal, 1998, p. 3). Moreover, that higher education institutions (HEIs) reacting to eliminate resistance as they arise are 'akin to shooting the messenger who delivers bad news' (Waddell and Sohal, 1998, p. 3). Marx, for instance, views conflict embedded in social relations as constructive arguing that these 'social contradictions' (Carver, 1991, p. 56) although problematic, point us in a positive direction toward change and an ideology of rights (Miller, 1984). Although Marxist

ideologies are ‘a system of beliefs that distort reality’ (Miller, 1984, p. 45). Whereas Gramsci (1971) considers ideologies as systems that (re)produce and perpetuate powerful narratives.

There are challenges to maintaining stability while balancing planning and timing when implementing technologies (Waddell and Sohal, 1998, p. 3). This is the case when institutions implement blended learning. Therefore, it is important for institutions to avoid the dysfunction of other unfavourable aspects of change by ‘providing psychological safety’ (Schein, 1980, 2009b; cited in Schein, 2010, p. 301). This would mean reassuring academics that the implementation of blended learning will not culminate in a loss of identity (Howard and Mozejko 2015; Kopcha, 2012; Reid, 2014; Ertmer and Ottenbriet-Leftwich, 2013). Many institutions are aware that new technologies may be resisted throughout the blended learning process (Bell, 2004; Brown, 2013). As such, the practicalities for implementing this approach may not always be clear to those involved and questions typically raised include, ‘how will it work?’; ‘what are the consequences?’; or ‘what will its advantages and disadvantages be in my situation?’ (Rogers, 2003, p. 14). Risquez and Moore (2012) warn it is inadvisable to disregard opposition to technology implementation. But rather, develop a sensitivity towards the emotional context which could serve in generating ‘authentic conversations about important issues and arguably, underlie a more democratic process’ (Risquez and Moore, 2012, pp. 327).

2.5 THE ECOLOGY OF BLENDED LEARNING WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

It has been proposed by Hennessy *et al.,* (2021. p. 8) and others that 'any technology, including hardware, software and digital content, designed or appropriated for (any) educational purpose' is extant within the digital ecology of higher education. The digital ecology in which blended learning is implemented refers to the physical features and layout of an area. This ecological landscape is defined as 'the accessed set of contexts, comprised of configurations of activities, material resources and relationships, found in co-located physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning' (Barron, 2004, p. 6; Collier and Watulak, 2023, p. 243).

Notably, in his well-known work *The Technological Society*, Ellul (1964) advocates that technology is not simply about hard or software but primarily pertains to the rules of life and society. Likewise, in Gramsci's (1971) theory, hegemony distinctly emerges as a pivotal term, encapsulating those societal norms deeply embedded in 'civil society' and 'state mechanisms' (Gramsci, 2020, p. 24; Gramsci, 2015, p. 55). Gramsci persistently refers to hegemony as an expression of the 'ruling class' (Gramsci, 2020, p. 22). His argument is that these structures permeate society through legislative and educational structures, and as Gramsci also asserts, through structures and superstructures that are indivisible (Gramsci, 1975). This suggests that blended learning ideologies reinforce the reproduction of dominant hegemonic ideas and serve to represent the power of the dominant group as Gramsci sees it. As such, in view of this stance, the investigation determines the institution as an embodiment of hegemonic control because of the authority it has over academic knowledge, understanding and experience.

When applied to blended digital learning, ecology can refer to the arrangement of digital resources and physical spaces where learning takes place. This ecology might encompass a variety of elements, such as the design and layout of online learning platforms and tools, the physical arrangement of classroom spaces and resources, and the distribution of digital devices and technology across campus or among students. Vasileva *et al.* (2018, pp. 1) use the term smart campuses whereby universities are akin to cities as they embrace 'novel technologies and data-based solutions to improve their campuses' with 'smart' becoming a 'welcomed concept'. For instance, the digital ecology of blended learning includes a central online learning platform where students access course materials and engage with instructors, as well as physical learning spaces that are designed to facilitate collaboration and digital engagement.

Blended learning change that takes account of this can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the programme, as well as the experiences of students and faculty who participate in it. A well-designed digitalised campus can enhance the accessibility, usability, and effectiveness of digital learning resources, while also promoting engagement, community-building, and collaboration.

In line with Gramsci's notion of a counter-hegemonic struggle, technology perpetuates certain ideologies and power structures, potentially reinforcing the beliefs, and values imposed by those in positions of power and authority. Clark (2021, pp. 30) describes this as the 'pervasive neoliberal ideology' whereby old educational ideas do not necessarily reinforce change but are subsumed into existing structures. Gramsci (1994, p. 299) tends to view these structures with scepticism, suggesting the importance of being 'a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will'. In other words, acknowledging the boundaries and conflicts associated with blended learning, and being aware that any social or institutional change should inform political action for the greater good (Selwyn, 2011).

This multifaceted landscape means there are numerous approaches to teaching and learning to support better decision-making in the current and prospective educational landscape (Isaias, 2018). Furthermore, as technology continues to accelerate, unprecedented changes in the higher education sector continually emerge (Cycholl, 2015; cited in Isaias, 2018). Blended learning emerges powerfully within this constructed landscape as an idea that is largely accepted. However, Gramsci considers this kind of saturated knowledge as hegemonic because consent is obtained through the notion of common sense, such that blended learning becomes the normal and acceptable way to deliver practice. Selwyn (2011, p. 23) argues that Gramsci's analysis 'can be exercised not just through state force but also through various cultural means – thus drawing attention to the manufacturing of consent among the population at large so that the masses would regard their own assent as spontaneous'.

In their group concept mapping study, Stoyanov *et al.* (2010) asked participants to generate ideas around what they believed may be the impact of technology in education over the next twenty years. The study participants anticipated that immersive virtual reality environments would integrate into mainstream methodology and pedagogies of practice. The respondents conjectured that teaching and learning will predominantly occur through mobile technologies, synchronising documentation into cloud-based systems. They also surmised that the internet would become the primary study and research area.

Furthermore, they suggested an accelerated use of augmented reality with more dynamic and interactive learning experiences, revolutionising how knowledge is acquired and applied. The study suggested there would be more focus on strategic thinking, problem-solving, and the transformation of teachers into mediators (Stoyanov *et al.,* 2010). Fast forward ten years after Stoyanov *et al.*'s (2010) study, Grimaldi and Ball (2021, pp. 393) confirm this 'digital revolution' demonstrating digital technologies act as 'drivers of significant change'.

Similarly, Isaias (2018) suggests that technology will continue to foster enhanced cooperation between academic institutions and the business community, with an increasing desire to integrate learning into the workplace successfully. While the focus of this study is not artificial intelligence (AI), the insights from Seldon and Abidoye (2018) are pertinent to the discussion of technological evolution, as noted by Stoyanov *et al.* (2010). Seldon and Abidoye (2018) draw a compelling analogy from the car industry in 1886 to emphasise the transformative potential of AI in higher education. They assert:

> 'AI is coming. To understand the stage we are with its arrival, we can draw an analogy from the car industry in 1886. Karl Benz had just invented the internal combustion engine. People had no idea how the invention would take off, or that it would transform human life across the planet. The comparison is wrong though in one respect. AI is far more wide-ranging than the car and will carry humans much further' (Seldon and Abidoye, 2018, p. 105).

In response to their recommendations regarding artificial intelligence as it pertains to education, Seldon and Abidoye (2018, p. 301) convey that 'change is happening far quicker than the ability of governments and others to keep pace…' arguing there is a tendency to '…overestimate the impact of new technologies in the short term and underestimate it in the long term'. Other commentators, such as Lee *et al.* (2024) and Park and Doo (2024), refer to blended learning with the generative pre-trained transformer (ChatGPT). Lee *et al.(*2024) conducted a study with sixty-one undergraduate students from a university in Taiwan. They found that using ChatGPT in a blended learning environment enhanced skills such as 'self-regulation' and 'higher-order thinking skills.' Chen, Chen and Lin (2020) argue that while it may 'take time to examine the role of ChatGPT', which could take several years, it has strong potential to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of blended learning.

Chen, Chen and Lin (2020) also noted some challenges associated with artificial intelligence in blended learning, arguing that, despite enhancing student engagement, students need more 'flexibility and autonomy'. However, Lee *et al. (*2024) point out that the additional autonomy required students to self-regulate, which Chen, Chen and Lin (2020) highlight could be a concern for students whose ability to self-regulate was limited. This thesis does not delve into artificial intelligence; instead, it focuses on the academic experience of blended learning in higher education without this particular distinction. Therefore, a more detailed exploration of artificial intelligence applications, such as those highlighted by Seldon and Abidoye (2018), Lee *et al.* (2024), and Chen, Chen and Lin (2020) lies beyond the scope of this research.

However, as an approach to teaching in higher education, blended learning challenges our understanding since it is continuously evolving and shifting. Whalley *et al.* (2021, pp. 82) brings to the fore the idea of 'supercomplexity', a term they borrow from Barnett (2000; cited in Whalley *et al.,* 2021, pp. 82) as something that:

> '…lies within the consequences of a ubiquitously connected and pervasively proximate world that encapsulates the 4IR [fourth industrial revolution] – a world of entangled, complex processes where the greatest skill is that of making sense and discovering emergent meaning, in which truth, and therefore authority, is never static, never absolute, and not always true…We live in a world that's constantly changing, becoming more unstable each day, where changes big and small are becoming more unpredictable'.

The commentary above characterises Barnett's notion of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000; cited in Whalley *et al.,* 2021, pp. 82) such that blended learning also inhabits an ambiguous space with differing narratives and positions, from a variety of perspectives (Lossau, 2009). White (2020) emphasises that blended learning goes beyond integrating technologies as it extends into scholarly knowledge, the decision-making process, content, and developing relationships with students, which adds to academic credibility. As well as being diverse and ambiguous, the literature suggests that positions surrounding the use of 'blended learning' is highly contested with Oliver and Trigwell (2005, pp. 17) proposing the term '…should either be abandoned, or at least, radically reconceived'.

2.6 BLENDED LEARNING: PATCHWORK OF APPROACHES

It seems prudent to differentiate blended learning from various other terms relating to technologies for teaching and learning. The literature highlights the myriad approaches and suppositions surrounding technologies employed for teaching in higher education. Steele (2022) provides a definition and explains what those terms mean, which is particularly helpful to this study. Hybrid means that face-to-face and online learners are different groups of individuals either learning in one way or the other (Steele, 2022). Hybrid learning emphasises that academic staff deliver to two different sets of students: one group on-campus and the other online.
Whereas blended learning, the subject of this study, is representative of the same students learning both face-to-face and online (Steele, 2022).

The literature highlights numerous approaches to teaching with technologies, for instance, the term mobile learning is used by Al-Emran, Elsherif and Shaalan (2016), Bernackia, Greene and Crompton (2020), and others to denote that mobile learning encompasses not merely the educational activities facilitated by mobile devices, but also the multifaceted learning experiences that are conducted across various spaces through the use of portable devices. Additionally, Al-Samarraie, Shamsuddin, and Alzahrani (2020, p. 1) and others, suggest that the flipped classroom model '…requires students to take charge of their learning and decisions during pre-class, in-class, and post-class activities'. Also, Ayu's (2020) definition of e-learning, however, is vague and does not capture whether there is a difference between online learning and e-learning. Nonetheless, although their particular study used both terms in the research title, they focus on the term e-learning which they suggest involves the provision of information and resources using the internet or other online platform.

The reference here to hybrid learning provides an appropriate example of the various and competing definitions as there are many. Bennett, Knight, and Rowley (2020) suggest that hybrid learning involves technology blended into our physical world, making learning more interactive and engaging. At the same time, everyday devices connecting to the internet link real-world actions to online spaces, creating a digital reflection of our actions. As such, hybrid learning leads to experiences becoming more varied and interconnected.

This comparison helps to substantiate the complexity that exists within the field. The literature also highlights that, for instance, hybrid learning and blended learning tends to be ambiguously defined or otherwise used interchangeably which is problematic. Notably, there appears to be 'no single framework that defines all the elements…which allows universities to easily benchmark their organisation's capacity to deliver blended learning and the work required to achieve it' (Cappelli and Smithies, 2021, pp. 23). This tends to be the case when referring to other blended approaches for teaching and learning. Additionally, a complex evolving landscape of ongoing debates about what face-to-face and blended learning means continues to evolve (Aarts *et al.,* 2021; Fedotova *et al.,* 2021; Ahlburg, 2020). As such, the literature indicates variegated perspectives of practice, knowledge and understanding of the blended learning landscape.

Nonetheless, in this study, the term blended learning is used in its broadest sense, referring to teaching which combines face-to-face with the use of technology to enhance student learning and engagement, and therefore, closely aligns with Steele's definition (Steele, 2022). The paradox is that many of these approaches are characteristically similar. The similar characteristics are not wholly unique to one approach or the other. Although some traits, such as those applied to, for instance, flipped classroom, arguably suggest that specific approaches have principal drivers - that students control and 'take charge' of the learning (Al-Samarraie, Shamsuddin, and Alzahrani, 2020, p.1). Nevertheless, blended learning appears to be prominent in the higher education space. Perhaps this is because it subscribes to all of these ideas, or the academic community wants one terminology, one ring to rule them all, as it were. This is evidenced in the Office for Students (OfS, 2022, p. 6) where they state the following:

> 'We define blended learning as teaching and learning that combines in-person delivery and delivery in a digital environment. Blended learning is not a new concept, and its use, alongside fully remote, fully online, and other approaches, such as 'hybrid' or 'asynchronous' learning, precede the coronavirus pandemic. The rapid shift to online approaches to teaching and learning at a much larger scale than at any point in the past has led higher education providers to consider in larger numbers their longer-term plans for the deployment of blended learning. Our blended learning review signifies the importance of understanding how different approaches to blended learning may relate to our regulatory requirements for quality, as it is crucial for maintaining the standards of higher education'.

The research also acknowledges that individual perspectives may differ or overlap, thus enabling academic staff views to remain an inclusive factor in understanding the landscape. Additionally, academics must be at least partially proficient in online teaching (Philipsen *et al.*, 2019). Even so, the various definitions relating to blended learning ensure there is scope for the multiplicity of knowledge and understanding to be valued. Indeed, this may bring new knowledge to this field of inquiry.

2.7 LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Leadership in higher education is essential for driving change and fostering innovation, particularly when combining technologies for teaching and learning. Successfully implementing blended learning requires a strategic, sustained approach. The effectiveness of a leadership model hinges on the vision, commitment, and adaptability of institutional leaders. Consequently, leadership style is frequently linked to vision (Antonopoulou, 2021). Elo and Uljens (2024) argue that achieving effectiveness occurs through results and performance. Likewise, Sarrico, Rosa and Carvalho (2022) argue that effective leadership in higher education relies on understanding market conditions relevant to the competition while promoting excellence within the institution. Strategic planning involves setting clear, achievable objectives, allocating resources efficiently, and establishing timelines for implementing blended learning. Leaders in higher education who effectively strategise seek to strike the balance with the diverse needs of the student and academic population, ensuring that blended learning initiatives are inclusive and accessible for all. In their review, the Office for Students (OfS, 2022) emphasise that strategic leadership is a crucial marker for quality. There are numerous considerations regarding the strategic approach to implementing blended learning mentioned above. Antonopoulou (2021) suggests this requires mentoring, using expertise and digital knowledge to improve efficiency and aligning plans with the existing digital culture.

While leadership vision must align with the university's mission and goals, it should be communicated effectively to all stakeholders, including faculty, students, administrative and academic staff. Importantly, Buller (2015, p. 125) reminds us that 'leaders with strategic foresight don't assume they have all the answers'. As such, influential leaders in higher education employ strategies to navigate these challenges. Using motivational strategies involves engaging stakeholders at all levels, including external partners, and paying attention to the cultural context of the institution.

Buller (2015, p. 42) also warns that leaders in higher education can sometimes be too focused on the vision and overlook 'the very things that give people a sense of engaging in a cause that's part of the higher purpose'. Gramsci (1971) posited that cultural hegemony is maintained through shared vision and values. Leaders in higher education might cultivate a vision for blended learning that aligns with the institution's mission and goals. A shared vision for change means leaders in higher education can influence institutional culture. However, while Gramsci (2020) primarily analysed hegemony in the context of struggle and the perpetuation of social inequalities, the mechanisms of hegemony, such as building consensus, influencing cultural norms, and promoting a shared vision, can also be harnessed for positive purposes. Gramsci (2014) acknowledged that this meant the substitution of one hegemonic power imbalance with another. Nevertheless, leaders in higher education have the potential to reinforce innovation, inclusivity, and educational excellence.

Implementing blended learning involves significant change but is also met with resistance. Leaders should create opportunities for dialogue, address concerns transparently, and involve stakeholders in the decision-making process. Elo and Uljens (2024) suggest that this leadership model highlights regard for collaborative change. By building this support, leaders help mitigate resistance and foster a sense of ownership and commitment to the blended learning initiative. This approach empowers stakeholders, making them feel integral to the process and more likely to embrace the change. Buchanan and Badham (1999) suggest that visionary leaders in higher education have the potential to enrich the landscape of willing change agents within the organisation.

Leaders should also stay abreast of emerging trends and best practices in blended learning, integrating new insights and technologies to enhance the learning experience. As such, Gramsci (2014) emphasised the role of intellectuals (as leaders) in shaping cultural and ideological norms. In higher education, leaders act as intellectuals guiding the institution towards embracing blended learning. Working in partnership with academics provides leaders with knowledge which can promote a culture of continuous learning. By providing intellectual and moral guidance, leaders have the potential to foster an environment that encourages exploration, critical thinking, and the adoption of best practices in teaching and learning.

2.8 LEADERSHIP POWER AND RIGHTS

Lanclos (2017), Phipps (2015, p. 51) and others argue that 'it takes leadership, not just good information or good intentions, to effect change'. Likewise, Tourish (2013, p. 12) suggests that how leaders influence others is an 'intrinsically fascinating question'. Their statement emphasises that leadership concerning blended learning change is likely to be a complex issue because '…leaders need to do the same things they have always done – demand compliance from those in less powerful positions.' Gramsci (1975) argues that leadership is an aspect of hegemony because it represents what he describes as 'transformism' or change, which absorbs allied and enemy forces into its agenda.

Furthermore, Jetten and Hornsley (2011) point out that as leaders tend to have 'greater status and power', they have more freedom 'to violate long-established norms' (cited in Tourish, 2013, p. 22). As such, universities do not always recognise the existing blended learning practice when implementing change since other considerations may take priority. In this climate, academics may be unable or unwilling to challenge leaders who violate their position. Similarly, Gramsci (1971) points out that democratic societies grant people the right to lead, vote, stand for elections, and are encouraged to believe they lead and govern themselves. However, they argue these rights represent an element of social deception (Eagleton, 1991; cited in Jones, 2006). Gramsci identified this as the perpetuation of authority, which only seeks to obscure those divisions between 'political authority and everyday life' (Jones, 2006, p. 48; Gramsci, 1971;).

Lanclos raises questions about which individual practice tends to be valued or whether this tends to be one kind of person (Lanclos, 2017). Because of this, Lanclos also challenges the reader to consider the structures of power, racism, sexism, and other pervasive discriminations within institutions (Lanclos, 2017). Importantly, Gramsci's (2014) gaze extends beyond the Italian hegemonic conditions and into other cultural contexts under imperialisms such as Algeria, Egypt, India, the African slave trade and more. He states, '...but today the flames of revolt are being fanned throughout the colonial world. This is the class struggle of the coloured peoples against their white exploiters and murderers' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 113).

While recognising the profound impact of racism, sexism, disability, and other forms of discrimination, this study focuses on the structural and pedagogical aspects of blended learning change programmes. Nevertheless, acknowledging the existence and significance of these issues is crucial. Yet, the narrowed scope of this research prefers to focus on the inequities of blended learning change within a pedagogical framework. This focus does not mean to diminish the importance of addressing these critical social issues. But rather, it reflects that future research could beneficially explore how blended learning programmes intersect with and seek to address issues of discrimination and inequality from these unique perspectives.

Moving forward, the literature suggests that academic staff encountering leadership challenges tend to be through the lens of their professional identities and disciplines in opposition to institutional expectations (Henkel, 2000; cited in Hanson, 2009). Schein (2010, p. 284) also points out that a common reason for implementing blended learning would be to streamline ‘efficiency and productivity’. However, this brings to bear its own complex set of issues, which include creating a common language, defining group boundaries, distributing power, developing trust and ‘explaining the unexplainable’ (Schein, 2010, p. 94). These conflicting situations and common conditions have a considerable impact on the leadership of change management (Howard and Mozejko, 2015; Reid, 2014; Ertmer and Ottenbriet-Leftwich, 2010; Risquez and Moore, 2012; Tondeur *et al.,* 2016).

In their article, Byrne-Davis *et al.* (2015, pp.1) argued that blended learning was 'becoming commonplace in society and education'. However, it is now widely agreed that blended learning is already commonplace. In their research, Andrews and Jones (2015) studied undergraduate use of blended devices. Specifically, they explored how and in what ways students spontaneously used blended devices in and outside the classroom to support their own learning. They further explained that universities were experiencing a 'technological transformation both in real and virtual terms, and this created a new digital landscape that students and university lecturers inhabit' (Andrews and Jones, 2015, p. 1). They use the term 'their spaces' borrowed from Green and Hannon, who explored young people's engagement with technologies, which required better understanding (Andrews and Jones, 2015, pp. 1). Universities embarking on technology change programmes continue to grapple with student demands by designing virtual and physical spaces tailored to personalised learning experiences (Green and Hannon, 2007; cited in Isaias, 2018). Moreover, they argue that these changes will become increasingly pervasive and interconnected with innovative technologies fostering better, more nuanced blended learning strategies (Redecker and Punie, 2013; cited in Isaias, 2018).

Although the study is not specifically about devices, blended learning involves hardware and software technologies. As such, the UK independent regulator and competition authority, the Office of Communications (OFCOM) reported that eighty percent of smartphone owners own tablet devices (Byrne-Davis *et al.,* 2015). This has led to theories that digital natives (students born in the eighties) absorb information differently (Prensky, 2001). However, these theories are widely debated in technology and education (Prensky, 2001; Margaryann, Littlejohn, Vojt, 2011; cited in Byrne-Davis *et al.,* 2015).

Certainly, widening participation should be a consideration that non-digital native undergraduates may be more likely to attend post-1992 universities. As such, blended learning may be experienced differently by students depending on their circumstances. Also, considering these known factors about the mature and non-traditional student bodies, blended learning implementation programmes should account for the differing experiences in higher education.

2.9 LEADERSHIP AND DIALECTICAL CHANGE

Hickman's dialectical change associated with Hegelian philosophy suggests 'contradictory values' both internal and external '…compete for domination and control' (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 51). Hickman (2010) also subscribes to Hegel's meaning when referring to dialectic theory as simultaneously negative and positive, suggesting there is likely to be 'a pathway of doubt, or more precisely of despair' (Beiser, 1993, p. 134). Gramsci (1971, p. 356) suggests that in so far as these contradictory values exist, they simultaneously represent 'equalities and inequalities' and render these situations as political concerns from which we must act. Gramsci also draws from the Hegelian dialectic of 'progress and becoming' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 357), which corresponds with the university's blended learning programme intended to focus on, among other things, changing behaviours and minimising resistance to increase its probability of success (Harrington, 2018). Gramsci argues that how progress encapsulates notions of 'more' and 'better' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 357) is fundamental to the university's motivation for blended learning change programmes to enhance the learning experience. Also, the notion of 'progress' suggests that the individual is in the process of 'becoming', which Gramsci then argues is 'idealistic' since everyone's experience of change is unique one from another (Gramsci, 1971, p. 359).

Dialectical change emerges as the extent to which others are persuaded to use blended learning, known as the 'persuasion stage' (Rogers, 2003, p.175). Rogers claims this process is 'affective' and intended to play on emotion for 'inducing attitude change' (Rogers, 2003, p.175). As such, Rogers's (2003, p. 175) 'persuasion stage' could correlate with Gramsci's 'conformism' as pressure applied to individuals to obtain their consent (Gramsci, 1971, p. 242). Rogers uses the term persuasion to focus on the psychological implications of blended learning change for adoption (2003). However, Gramsci (2011, p. 245) argues that persuasive elements exist within the concept of 'common sense' to denote the 'fear of going against widespread public opinion'. Although, it should be noted that Gramsci's notions of common sense are not singularly about fear but more broadly representing commonly accepted ideas in society (Schwarzmantel, 2015). Furthermore, it is the notion that these ideas may personify the 'with-us-or-against-us attitude' of technology change in higher education (Selwyn, 2011, pp. 713). Gramsci (1975, p. 242) goes onto describe these demands as 'collective pressure' which could be interpreted to mean that sufficiently large numbers of people feel the truth about a ‘new way of explaining their world, and how it might be transformed' (Gramsci 1975, p. 242; Crehan, 2016, p.40).

2.10 CHANGE MANAGEMENT AND LEWIN’S ‘LIFE SPACES’

‘The management of change (in universities) is perhaps the most daunting challenge facing senior managers in organisations today’ (McMurray 2001; cited in Brown, 2013, pp. 1). Successful implementation and planning are achieved through 'systematic, iterative processes' (Burke and Litwin, 1992; cited in Brown, 2013, pp. 1). Furthermore, universities operate within unpredictable and turbulent environments, sometimes fostering 'difference and disorder' (McMurray 2001; Stacey 1996; cited in Brown, 2013, pp.1). However, as mentioned earlier, a growing body of literature recognises the importance of building a shared vision (Brown, 2013; Marshall, 2010). Schein (2010, p. 301) refers to Lewin's 'unfreezing' regarded as motivating staff to make the required changes, overcoming inertia, and breaking down fixed mindsets (Smith 2014; Schein, 2010). Furthermore, academics should 'unlearn' and 'learn something new' (Schein, 2010, p. 301), highlighting the inevitable disequilibrium or period of confusion likely to be experienced (Smith *et al.,* 2014).

Change, or the implementation aspect of change, is also described as 'the totality of coexisting facts which are conceived as mutually interdependent' (Lewin, 1951, p. 240; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 9). Lewin, whose field theory examined individual and group behaviour, argued that what was conceived as mutually interdependent were 'life spaces such as family, work, church, and other groups' (Lewin, 1951, p. 240; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 9). He further argued that these life spaces embody a person's identity and can help explain their behaviour, whether positive or negative (Lewin, 1951; Hickman, 2010). Arguably, life space identities were often invisible to leaders, suggesting that although it is important to have a vision and set goals, it was equally important to recognise that 'human behaviour and social change' are filled with these 'invisible but powerful structures' in a person's life (Wheatley, 1992, p. 49). This means that the ability to drive change forward should be enriched with the various competing and complex ways that blended learning change impacts members in the workplace and beyond (Hickman, 2010; Wheatley, 1992; Lewin, 1951).

The following section discusses adoption and its relationship to diffusion. Diffusion is 'the process by which an innovation is adopted' (Surry and Farquhar, 1997). The term adoption embodies multiple definitions layered across various disciplines and may be extended beyond the scope of this study (Surry and Farquhar, 1997; Rogers, 2003). Rogers states it is a process occurring over time with five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. According to his theory, potential adopters should learn about, be persuaded, decide to adopt, and implement; then, either continue its use or reject it (Rogers, 2003; Surry and Farquhar, 1997).

2.11 ADOPTION AND DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION THEORY

Rogers highlights four overarching adoption categories: 'innovators, early adopters, late adopters, laggards' (2003, p.22). These categories are characteristic of individuals in a particular social system. There is, of course, a relationship between individual adopters within this social structure and the impact this has on the institution and individuals that work within it. As such, the nature of adoption takes on many forms and is significantly bound to 'diffusion', something he describes as the transference of ideas (Rogers, 2003, p. 19). As such, Lewin's (1951) exploration of life spaces and Rogers's (2003) adoption can assist with our appreciation of the academic experience during blended learning implementation and change.

Rogers (2003) suggests that devolving ideas are compounded by the degree to which beliefs, education, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are dissimilar. He also describes an alternative view as the degree to which individual beliefs are different from one another (Rogers, 2003). These abstractions have implications for the adoption and subsequent diffusion of technology programmes within institutions, and as such, there is a degree of uncertainty. The term diffusion refers to the act of dispersing or distributing something. A further definition by Rogers (2003) who originated the diffusion of innovation theory, coining the term early adopter, is defined below.

Diffusion of innovation theory has been widely accepted as a model used to increase technology adoption (Surry and Farquhar, 1997). They argue that diffusion is an investigation into the various facets that 'interact to facilitate or impede adoption of a specific product or practice among members of a particular group' (Surry and Farquhar, 1997, pp. 1; Rogers, 2003). Therefore, adoption need not only apply to the physical aspects of technology, but an approach like blended learning is equally viable as a form of adoption and diffusion within the study.

The theory suggests that blended learning play a substantial role in educational institutions (Surry and Farquhar, 1997). Surry and Farquhar (1997) and others argue that diffusion typically involves technologies at a level that is broad in scope, large scale, and creating potential for systemic change (Reigeluth, 1987; Mehlinger, 1995; cited in Surry and Farquhar, 1997) such as in the case of blended learning change programmes. Whereas small scale adoption looks at a specific set of potential adopters likely to adopt because the innovation may be specific to their environment within the institution (Burkman, 1987; Tessmer, 1990; Schneberger and Jost, 1994; cited in Surry and Farquhar, 1997).

Research suggests that shifts in teaching practices were less likely to occur if disparities between academic staff pedagogical beliefs and the institution's objectives differed (Ertmer *et al.,* 2012). Also, there is no guarantee that the practices of academic staff will change where blended learning programmes are implemented (Hermans *et al.,* 2008). Furthermore, barriers such as confidence, beliefs, and the value academic staff are likely to place on blended learning plays an important role in the adoption process (O'Mahony, 2003; Pelgrum, 2001; cited in Ertmer *et al.,* 2008). As such, blended learning integration is more likely to be given credence when academic pedagogical beliefs are central to the implementation process (Ertmer 2005; Lim and Chan 2007; Liu 2011; Sang *et al.* 2010a; cited in Tondeur *et al.,* 2016).

The literature suggests that the successful integration of blended learning in education depends on new innovations aligning with academic beliefs, as well as institutional objectives. Because Gramsci's (1996) hegemony is culturally contextual, the following section attempts to deconstruct the structures ingrained within these contexts.

2.12 CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF ADOPTION

Schein argues that 'cultural forces are powerful because they operate outside of our awareness' (2010, p. 7). This section raises the question about whether Gramsci's notion of culture be applied to contemporary social issues such as blended learning change programmes in higher education. Gramsci (2007, p. 321) explains culture as:

> '…the ensemble of social relations that determines a historically defined consciousness, and this consciousness indicates what is natural, and what is not, and human nature is contradictory because it is the ensemble of social relations. Since the ensemble of social relations is contradictory…one must therefore look at the technical relations of production, at a specific mode of production that, in order to be kept up and developed, requires a specific way of life and hence specific rules of conduct. One must be persuaded that not only is a certain apparatus objective and necessary but also a certain mode of behaviour, a certain education, a certain civilisation. In this objectivity and necessity, one can posit the universality of moral principle'.

In the quotation above, Gramsci views culture as the manifestation of social relations shaping collective consciousness. He posits that human nature is inherently contradictory and, therefore, a reflection of sociocultural interactions. To Gramsci, culture is not static; it is a dynamic process influenced by the prevailing mode of production, which dictates ways of living, behaviour, norms, and education systems. As such, blended learning change programmes align with Gramsci's understanding of particular cultural and material structures (i.e. technologies) and universally moral, for instance, collective value systems surrounding blended learning (Gramsci, 2007; Gramsci, 1996; Gramsci, 1975).

Schein further suggests that while we recognise cultural differences at 'ethnic or national levels' we tend to find them perplexing and incomprehensible at organisational level (Schein, 2010, p. 7). As such, Selwyn (2014, p. 161) suggests that academics should demonstrate 'more confidence in acknowledging the uncertainties…in posing awkward questions and to conduct research that addresses the messy realities of educational technology use in situ'. Blended learning often combines online digital media with traditional classroom methods, thereby requiring an understanding of cultural nuances at an organisational level.

In the context of blended learning, Selwyn (2014) implies that educators should confront and research the complex realities of educational technology within diverse cultural settings. He argues that blended learning is 'challenging' because integrating technology into education is 'messy' (Selwyn, 2014, p. 161). Schein adds that cultural contexts are difficult to define because it is often unclear about whether it applies to national, ethnic, occupational, organisational, or small groups (Schein, 2010). Pagano refers to Gramsci when he states, '…culture…is, in short, the transmission belt of all institutional systems' (Pagano, 2017, p. 49). In the cultural context in which blended learning implementation occurs, the objective would be for institutions to discern the various ways in which behavioural change transpires, and to plan for this (Rogers, 2003). However, behavioural changes are arguably unpredictable, and one of many reasons to draw from may be 'cultural relativism' which is 'subjective' and value-driven (Rogers, 2003, p. 441). Rogers also defines it as the 'viewpoint that each culture should be judged considering its own specific circumstances' (Rogers, 2003, p. 441) and thus indicates the specific and nuanced circumstances within the institutional landscape where blended learning occurs.

Schein also suggests that sometimes technologies are implemented in 'subtle, cumulative' and 'deliberate' ways specifically to change behaviour (2010, p. 284). Schein (2010, p. 3) illustrates this as culture being constantly 're-enacted and created by our interactions and shaped by our own behaviour'. It may be the case that changes were taking place pre-pandemic in these more subtle ways. Gramsci posits that, 'each individual participates in the culture of their society, in the maintenance, contestation or destruction' and further that this is constituted by their daily practice and thought (Hoare and Sperber, 2016, p. 28). Therefore, it would be reasonable to suggest that academics contribute in various and complex ways to blended learning that may not be institutionally driven. Gramsci also characterises culture, education, and politics as an 'expression of society' arguing that education is 'nourished by and within culture' which in turn, transforms cultural, institutional, and social systems (Pagano, 2017, p. 49).

Having large groups adopting common sense narratives about blended learning are fundamental distinctions with Gramsci's ideas helping us explain why social change exists through adoption, and adoption can exist through social collective pressure (Gramsci, 1971). While Gramsci (2014) is interested in the recycling of hegemonic conditions perpetuated by dominant social groups, he is also interested in those individual parochial narratives central to the focus of this study.

In this study, it has been debated that those in positions of power and those in subordinate groups simultaneously act to resist one another within a 'multiplicity of wills…welded together with a single aim' (Crehan, 2016, p. 40). This highlights that whilst the institution is positioned hegemonically, academics are also politically active in these spaces where resistance may occur.

2.13 PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC IDENTITIES AND CULTURE OF CARE

This research investigates academic experiences, attitudes, values, and pedagogies of practice teaching with blended learning technologies in mind (El-Hussein and Cronje, 2010). The focus considers determinants such as personal innovativeness, performance, effort, and expectations of academics in workplaces and working practices, whether inside or outside the classroom (Al-Emran, ElSherif, and Shaalan, 2016). According to Hanson, academics often define their professional identities relative to the discipline and institutional expectations (Henkel 2000; cited in Hanson, 2009).

Drawing on Osgood's examination of professional identities in early years education, she argues that early childhood professionals are framed within what she describes as an 'apolitical construct' (Osgood, 2012, p. 120). She adds that this comprises 'specialist knowledge, qualifications...the ability to meet high standards…and exercise high levels of autonomy' (Osgood, 2012, p. 120). Like Osgood, this study also contends that professionalism is culturally, historically, and politically situated (Osgood, 2012). While Osgood focuses on the changing socio-political and economic landscape of early years education and care, this study examines the changing socio-political landscape of academic pedagogies of practice concerning blended learning change programmes in higher education.

Harding and Calabria (2025) argue for a culture of care in these environments, emphasising the importance of relational ethics and emotional labour in professional identity construction. This perspective highlights the need for policies and practices supporting academic well-being while navigating institutional changes, including implementing blended learning. In the context of this study, adopting a culture of care would require recognising the emotional and ethical tensions academics face when aligning their professional identities with institutional expectations, particularly when digital transformations shape these expectations.

Professional identity constructions are complex, and Koller (2011) invites readers to examine how corporate mission statements influence these constructions by reinforcing the language and motivations for change. Blended learning change management programmes, often driven by corporate visions, reshape educational landscapes by promoting consistent narratives across the workforce and service users. However, Gramsci critiques' idealism' (Pizzolato and Holst, 2017, p. 61), describing it as naively simplistic (Gramsci, 1971, p. 422). Koller (2011) further notes that professionals construct their identities in alignment with the 'ideal' expectations communicated through these corporate mission statements. When considering the impact of organisational expectations, Harding and Calabria (2025) call for institutional cultures that value emotional well-being and ethical practices rather than merely adhering to performative ideals. They further suggest that emotional labour is shaped by the context in which it occurs. In light of this, a culture of care, as Harding and Calabria (2025) advocate, assists us in challenging idealised professional identities by recognising the complex emotional realities of the academic experience during the process of blended learning change programmes.

Harding and Calabria's (2025) emphasis on cultivating a culture of care provides a framework for understanding how academic perceptions of professional identity are influenced by the ever-increasing demand to improve digital capabilities. They argue that institutional practices could prioritise relational ethics and emotional well-being, particularly during blended learning change. This research examines the academic experience of blended learning. Although Harding and Calabria (2025, p. 195) discuss the 'emotional challenges' faced by oral history researchers, this study can draw valuable parallels with the academic context. They highlight the 'absence of opportunities for engaging in the time-consuming work of reflexivity, involving critical and supportive dialogue with others...,' a challenge that resonates with the experiences of academics navigating blended learning environments.

2.14 DIGITAL IDENTITIES AND CAPABILITIES

There appears to be a strong relationship between digital capabilities and the notion of 'teaching excellence' (Austen *et al.,* 2017, p. 13). This is consistent with Pho and Ham (2020) who contend that digital capability happens over time before individuals become proficient. In their Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) report Austen *et al.* (2017) suggest that although the guidelines for digital capabilities are purposely broad, there is still a need to recognise the complexities of this terminology. They argue that organisations should 'horizon-scan emerging technologies and new pedagogical ideas' to integrate the developing teaching practice within their institutions (Austen *et al.,* 2017, p. 3).

The Select Committee on Digital Skills appointed by the House of Lords published their report; *Make or Break: The UK's Digital Future* 'to consider and report on information and communication technology, competitiveness, and skills in the United Kingdom' (House of Lords, 2015, p. 2). In the report, the Committee state that 'teachers will have to adapt' to new methods for delivering education (House of Lords, 2015, p. 7). The statement implies compliance with this agenda. According to Gramsci, language such as this is biased and predisposed to the cultural context rooted in the hegemonic ideologies of political power (Crehan, 2016; Kreps, 2015). This report also reinforces Gramsci's argument about state and education working together to achieve the highest possible degree of consent. Gramsci, therefore, encourages an awareness of the dominance of language, the political connotations, and the limitations these common-sense terms possess (Mayo, 2015). The statement also presumes that academics are not already adapting to the educational landscape.

The Committee also uses the term 'digital capabilities' in support of their discussion that 'traditional methods' of teaching should be challenged (House of Lords, 2015, p. 7). However, they do not define traditional methods which is problematic because it either implies an absence of technology, that technology is utilised or somewhere in between, but this is not clarified, and therefore, left open to interpretation. Christodoulou (2014, p. 120) argues that access to education is a question of social justice and states 'the traditional forms of literate culture are precisely the most effective forms of political and social change'. As such, digital capabilities are widely and increasingly debated within the educational discourse, traditional methods should not be relegated to outmoded ideologies. Admittedly, the Committee does suggest a modifying approach. Nonetheless, this is still open to interpretation (House of Lords, 2015).

2.15 CORE TECHNOLOGIES AND TEACHING PRACTICES

Rogers (2003, p. 137) suggests that the 'innovation-development process often begins with recognition of a problem or need which stimulates research and development activities.' The issue though is that technology innovation in higher education creates uncertainty and barriers to change that Rogers describes as the 'system's norm' which is resistant to new ideas (Rogers, 2003, p. 26). Overall, there is a desire to better understand technologies for teaching and learning that continually re-shape academic knowledge of this landscape. Rajasingham refers to the social and technological changes as a paradigm shift, 'when a society or community accept and practice the change' (2010, pp. 1). Arguably, one could reflect on whether the pandemic constitutes a paradigm shift as a newly emerging paradigm or whether this has served to accelerate an already growing process of blended learning not so much emerging but rather, developing or maturing.

According to English and Bolton (2016, p.84) there are links between the emergence of new job roles and the establishment of 'the core technology'. Core technologies are well-known concepts in which technologies establish working standards that remove the 'specificity and contextuality' of innovative teaching practices in a bid to raise standards in the workplace (Murphy, Yff, & Shipman, 2000, pp. 17-40; cited in English and Bolton, 2016, p. 84). Taylor and Helfat (2009, pp. 718) apply the term 'organizational ambidexterity' to describe where one core technology replaces another during the transition or implementation process.

An example of this may be the transition of learning management systems (LMS) that absorb the market globally. Take for instance, an institution implementing Microsoft Teams to transition away from Moodle or from Zoom to Streams. In these circumstances academics may be required to navigate between various systems during the implementation process and this may have implications for practice and perceived levels of expertise. Taylor and Helfat (2009) argue that this continual rise of standards creates political hegemonies legitimising the marginalisation of some educational departments and job roles. English and Bolton (2016, p. 93) refer to the Bourdieusian example in which some hold power over others using 'legitimate force and coercion'. These issues create tensions between the 'social order' and 'individual rights' within the institution, resulting in inequalities becoming more, or less visible, depending on the context (Hickman, 2010, p. 47).

According to Schein (2010, p. 102) understanding an authority system requires sensitivity to the nuances of language, and the political and cultural context in the workplace. He suggests that 'manner and morals, politeness and tact' are not simply '…niceties…' but essential rules for how to keep from 'destroying' each other socially (Goffman, 1959, 1967; cited in Schein, p. 103). But what is equally evident is that management change requires strategies cognisant of the above, as well as being based on 'vision, mission, values and purpose' (Daft and Lane, 2002, p. 487; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 48). Moreover, academics may be expected to remain flexible, in addition to being 'repeat innovators' (Chakravarty, 1997, p. 80; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 49) in order that they keep up with constantly changing demands that blended learning pedagogies require.

Hickman (2010) argues that creativity and change are already built into institutions and that the implementation process symbolises the teleological ideal type. Hickman defines teleological broadly as a 'useful perspective for examining…technology solutions' (Hickman, 2010, p. 44). It apparently works 'when likeminded individuals or groups act together as a single entity' (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 44).

It is suggested that blended learning can support real-time collaborations and constitutes learning occurring 'in a highly displaced manner' (Isaias, 2018, pp. 402). Nevertheless, dislocation of learning has already arrived and Isaias also attributes this to, among other things, the changing physical design of classrooms (Isaias, 2018).

2.16 NEOLIBERALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON ACADEMICS

According to Taberna (2018, pp. 2) '…the neoliberal priority over education, academics would argue, is often to the exclusion of pedagogical matters.' Furthermore, Waring (2013) suggests that this represents a significant 'growing divide between an academic labour force and a neoliberal managerial elite.' (Waring, 2013; cited in Taberna, 2018, pp. 2). The complexities of academic life within neoliberal contexts are comprehensive as Harding and Calabria (2023, p. 95) draw attention to the need for academics to push back 'against the individualizing pressures of the neoliberal university.' They begin by discussing the notion of neoliberalism in relation to, for instance, increased workloads within limited time restrictions and 'a lack of support' (Harding and Calabria, 2025, p. 169). Additionally, they argue that the neoliberal focus on 'individual productivity' contribute to what may also be perceived as a '…hostile felt environment…' (Harding and Calabria, 2025, p. 169). Calabria, Harding and Meiklejohn (2023, p. 94) further argue that the 'neoliberalization' of UK universities mean that academics '…are subject to increasing scrutiny' suggesting that the marketisation of universities have impacted the academic workforce with, for instance, shifts from permanent to

increasingly casual, short-term contracts, resulting in a '…lack of contractual security…' (Harding and Meiklejohn (2023, p. 94)

In terms of blended learning and its relationship to technologies for teaching and learning, Harding and Calabria (2025) critically examine the influence of digital technologies on the temporal organisation of oral history research within a neoliberal framework. They argue that integrating digital tools has restructured how time is managed and perceived in this field. The authors suggest that while offering some advantages, digital technologies also impose new temporal demands on academic life (Harding and Calabria, 2025). However, this shift may pressure academics to produce results more quickly, potentially at the expense of depth and reflexivity in their work. Moreover, Harding and Calabria (2025) highlight that digitalisation of the university can potentially blur professional and personal time boundaries because of the pressure to be continually connected and responsive to these ever-increasing demands.

2.17 NEOLIBERALISM AND BLENDED LEARNING IN EDUCATION

In the presence of a neoliberal ideology in higher education, a characteristic of the university is to protect its economic advantage and marketability (Mayo, 2015). As such, universities suspended on-campus learning during the pandemic and were forced to quickly adopt online learning strategies. Although Gramsci does not explicitly use the term neoliberalism, his philosophies resemble those neoliberal characteristics (Mayo, 2015). Indeed, Gramsci uses the term 'vocational', and a reading of his work calls attention to inequalities in university education associated with the production of education for the masses (Gramsci, 1971, p. 26; Gramsci, 2014). In this sense, Gramsci's vocational discourse shares attributes with contested neoliberalism in higher education.

Mayo (2015) describes corporate educational relationships as hegemonic. The reason he suggests this, is because the institution is principally predisposed toward a capitalistic 'market driven approach', while also being biased toward largely accepted universally endorsed ideologies (Mayo, 2015, p. 13). It could be argued that this serves to conceal other perspectives. Gramsci suggests universal ideas serve to endorse acts of persuasion, and that the experience of being persuaded maybe subject to social coercive pressure which is problematic (Gramsci, 2014, p. 400). There may also be disagreement from academics about the inevitable success of blended learning, while not taking into consideration other factors such as social injustice, discrimination, and poverty to name a few. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that technology change can bring about new insights, values, beliefs, and assumptions that positively influence higher education (Buchan 2011; Keppell *et al.,* 2010; Brown, 2013; Schein, 2010).

Technology change management programmes are further challenged by Ng'ambi and Bozalek's term 'massification' (2013, pp. 531), this can also be described, in part, to 'large class teaching' (Hornsby and Osman, 2014, pp. 711). According to Morris (1964) in *The Robbins Report*, and others, large class teaching includes the increased enrolment of students under the demands of widening participation amongst under-represented groups (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997; Vignoles and Murray, 2016). The concept of Widening Participation is continuously evolving, creating challenges particularly for post-1992 institutions and further demands on academics to keep up with this ever-changing digital landscape (Vignoles and Murray, 2016). Widening access for students also means supporting and retaining those students once at university and technology has increasingly become central to this narrative with for instance the development of blended learning, increased access to online courses, enabling students to learn in any location of their choice (Vignoles and Murray, 2016).

Selwyn argues that technology change management programmes can be led toward those business objectives most likely to benefit higher education competitiveness in the global market. Further, that institutions are motivated by 'value-driven aspirations for the education of the near future' (Selwyn, 2011, p. 32). Mayo refers to Marx and Engels suggesting 'neoliberal concepts, involving a market driven approach, are hegemonic, in this sense, since they are articulated in such a way that renders the capitalist interests as purportedly the interests of all' (Mayo, 2015, p. 13). According to Talukder (2014, p. 1) it is generally accepted that technology and innovation 'substantially improves the performance of organizations…in the global economy'. From Gramsci's (1975, p. 235) viewpoint 'in order to achieve a new adaptation to the new mode of work, pressure is exerted over the whole social sphere, a puritan ideology develops which gives to the intrinsic brutal coercion the external form of persuasion and consent'. The statement by Gramsci reflects his theory of cultural hegemony and the role of ideology in maintaining the capitalist system. Gramsci argues that in response to changes in the modes of production, such as the shift to more industrialised work, the entire social realm is subjected to pressure to adapt. In other words, the institutionalisation of blended learning could be another way of perceiving the change. As such, blended learning change programmes could arguably fall within this category. This adaptation is not enforced merely through overt coercion but cultivated through an ideology that advocates for the institution's agenda. The blended learning ideology is presented as common sense and becomes internalised by the populace, securing their consent. In effect, the social control necessary for implementing blended learning change is achieved less through direct force and more through cultural means. This also means that academics may struggle to challenge the prevailing norms and values because these ideas are presented as legitimate and natural. This process also masks the underlying coercion and presents it as voluntary compliance, thus perpetuating the status quo without apparent force (Gramsci, 1975).

These ideas arguably indicate the presence of neoliberal ideology in higher education (Mayo, 2015). Mayo (2015, p. 1) draws from de Sousa Santos who defined neoliberalism as '…a type of capitalism that bases competitiveness on technological innovation coupled with low levels of social protection' (de Sousa Santos in Dale and Robertson, 2004, p. 151; cited in Mayo, 2015, p. 1). English and Bolton (2016) suggest that neoliberalism is indicated by '…strong property rights, free markets and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p. 5; cited in English and Bolton, 2016, p. 110).

The concept of neoliberalism is the promotion of private business practices which prioritises economic goals over all others (Beddoc, 2014; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006, 2013; Grimaldi, 2012; Navarro 2007; Reid, 2013; cited in Fraser and Taylor, 2016). These business ideologies suggest that educational institutions are increasingly concerned with economic growth over and above public welfare. Furthermore, the debate continues around whether blended learning in education equates to social welfare. Or preferably, how much money the institution is likely to generate (Giroux, 1999).

Interestingly, Gramsci (2007) pairs his concept of innovation with the idea of conservation - to preserve. He argues that since conservation exists within the fabric of innovation, 'it contains within itself all of the past that is worth developing and perpetuating' (2007, p. 253). Gramsci's concept of conservation and innovation involves maintaining core traditions while integrating new blended teaching and learning practices into the university context. Blended learning embodies this duality by combining traditional face-to-face instruction with digitally proficient pedagogical innovations. As such, while innovating with digital technologies to enhance learning, the historical value of education is still respected and maintained. Therefore, post-1992 universities remain relevant and responsive to student needs. Gramsci's (1999) interweaving of conservation with innovation reflects a strategy similar to neoliberalism in higher education, where market-driven approaches are adopted while upholding traditional institutional values. Neoliberal policies incorporate blended learning strategies as mentioned in previous sections, to stay competitive and meet market demands. Yet, they retain the prestige and standards of traditional education, ensuring the historical essence of higher education persists amidst this modernisation.

The advancement of neoliberalism is achieved by 'appealing to the freedom to choose and the logic of greed' (English, 2014; cited in English and Bolton, 2016, p. 110). Fraser and Taylor (2016, p. 4) argue that 'neoliberalism is rendered so normative that those who challenge it are likely to be cast as dissenters and troublemakers who unnecessarily, if not naively, interfere with the otherwise smooth (or uncontested) day to day operations.' It should also be noted that the marketisation of education means institutions are galvanised by the demands of '…fee paying student customers who expect satisfaction from their student experience…' (Hudson and Williams, 2016, p. 1). These demands also mean institutions have a responsibility toward ensuring student's legal rights under the Consumer Credit Act 2015 and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA, 2015) are adequately met making imbalances of power highly complex issues (d'Ambrosio and Ehrenberg, 2007). According to Williams (2016) institutions appear to be designing their ethos around the needs and demands of the student regarding how, and in what way technology is used for blending into the teaching and learning environment.

Arguably, post-1992 universities perpetuate a particular type of adult education known to be distinctly vocational. Furthermore, that vocational education was industry focused during the time Gramsci wrote about these ideas and this continues today particularly in post-1992 universities. Gramsci wrote extensively about the relationship between education and hegemonic neoliberal discourses (Gramsci, 1971; Mayo, 2015). His criticisms extend to what he describes as 'vocationalism' which he further defines as inequitable 'relations between education and class' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 24). The term vocationalism loosely described here, as the division of adult education to maintain the functions of the dominant social group (Gramsci, 1971). The business objectives of post-1992 universities are historically built upon the ideology of widening participation with a focus on producing industry ready graduates through 'vocational education' (Beer and Mulder, 2020; Rauner and Maclean, 2008). However, this also has implications for academic staff within this particularly unique cultural context.

The goal of academics is to promote social change through contested discourses (Bartunek and McKenzie, 2017), and to promote social change through the improvement and efficacy of education. Furthermore, the university is an expanding conception of knowledge in which the internet and technologies are becoming increasingly central to the debate (Raschke, 2003; Selwyn, 2011, 2013, 2014). Understandably, there is an imperative for institutions to maintain competitiveness within the marketplace and keep 'up to date with technology' (Selwyn, 2011, p. 23). In response, institutions tend to market within a consumerist model, with often a clear focus on the needs and demands of student satisfaction (Selwyn, 2014). Sadly, this focus may be too heavily weighted in favour of the student, overshadowing the academic contribution to this discourse (Williams, 2016).

2.18 TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM AND TRANSFORMATIONAL CLAIMS

While blended learning has the potential to enhance educational experiences, there is also the risk of being seduced by deterministic views of this pedagogy of practice, primarily driven by business models of education (Morrison, 2005b; cited in Mayes *et al.,* 2009). Technological determinism is the view that events are predetermined and reproduced. This theory implies that exposure to the institution's mode of delivery will undoubtedly enable students to gain, for instance, appropriate life-changing attributes (Cohen, 2010; Tirelli, 2014, p. 524 cited in Fraser and Taylor, 2016). Blended learning may not be life-changing for all students (Pollock and Cornford, 2005; cited in Mayes *et al.,* 2009). As such, the suggestion that blended learning acts as a formula for change may be misleading. Some students may not engage face-to-face or in the predicted ways online and, therefore, experience barriers to learning. It may be that the complexity of some students' life experiences (i.e., poverty, abuse) may hinder or otherwise limit these transformations from being realised.

A perspective taken from Rycroft and Kash (1999) suggests that changes attributed to technology tend to follow three fundamental modes: the standard pattern, the transition pattern, or the transformational pattern. A parallel between the transformational model (Rycroft and Kash, 1999) and transformational claims (Mayes *et al.,* 2009) is that both suggest significant changes. Although this idea applies to technology, they suggest that 'the transformation pattern is the most chaotic of the three' (Rycroft and Kash, 1999, p. 190). Rycroft and Kash (1999, p. 190) suggest that 'success is...associated with a general openness' with knowledge redefined and represents a 'break with the past'. However, the transformational pattern is the weakest path with the least success rates (Rycroft and Kash, 1999). However, successful results can lay the groundwork for opportunities to be realised (Rosenberg, 1982). Nonetheless, transformational claims tend not to acknowledge the complexities of the student life experience or how instrumental academic digital pedagogy might influence blended learning as an approach (Pollock and Cornford, 2005; cited in Mayes *et al.,* 2009).

Various definitions of technological determinism have been proposed in the educational landscape (Jeansonne, 1974; cited in Dusek, 2006). However, Dusek (2006) suggests that technological determinism or transformational claims (terms used interchangeably) involve the idea of predictability to some extent. Predictability suggests a causal relationship in which one can predict an effect (White, 1962; cited in Dusek, 2006). Technological determinism is problematic and presupposes that as technology in education develops, this, in turn, dictates societal change as a predictable facet.

The notion that determinism can predictably transform is a universal principle that does not allow for the nuanced ways in which academics experience institutionally driven blended learning programmes of change in education (Dusek, 2006). Likewise, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a non-government UK body monitoring quality in higher education, explicitly states that teaching excellence in higher education is one in which technological determinism should be avoided (Austen *et al.,* 2017). Therefore, as a contemporary concept, it is not appreciated positively, at least not within the context of this study. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the potential transformational benefits of blended learning hold true in certain circumstances and under certain conditions (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

Delving into the connections between technological determinism and Gramsci's philosophies, the study explores the influence of technology and culture on societal structures and power relations. From this perspective, one might consider transformational claims about blended learning and its potential to improve student engagement and outcomes. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) point out that with blended learning in education, the data shows the potential benefits for student outcomes. However, they also suggest that this is significantly determined by meaningful learning activities and tasks alongside 'front-end administration and development' falling into 'policy, planning, resources, scheduling, and support' (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, pp. 100).

According to Wrathall (2013, p. 392), Heidegger uses the term '*Technik*' defined as 'techno-think', a culturally constructed value system which he suggests is a state of mind 'in which everything, including human being, is treated as an endlessly exploitable resource for engineering and profit'. Heidegger's idea could relate to the context in which blended learning and neoliberalism are constructed, providing an ideology of social, political, and economic consumption about how capitalist societies and post-1992 institutions function. Therefore, although Heidegger's theory extends beyond the scope of this study, he touches upon the relationship between technology and this kind of human essence or experience (Wrathall, 2013). Gramsci's (1975, p. 232) comments provide some insight into his thoughts about technological innovations and their relationship to higher education:

> 'The art of printing, then, revolutionized the whole world of culture. Implicit in this study, then, is another one about the qualitative as well as quantitative (mass extension) changes that technical development of the organization of culture brought to the way of thinking…the academies and universities as vehicles [and organizations] of culture'.

Like Heidegger's techno-think (Wrathall, 2013), Gramsci's (2007, p. 245) 'common sense' is also a culturally constructed value system underpinning the reproduction of socially accepted norms. Crehan (2016, p.44) describes this phenomenon of Gramsci's common sense as 'plain wisdom'. She states:

> '…as human beings, we have a basic need to feel we understand the world in which we live. All of us, whoever we are and wherever we live, are continually engaged in the process of making sense of the everyday reality we confront' (Crehan, 2016, p.44).

Crehan's (2016) statement above correlates with the implementation of blended learning within university spaces as a mechanism of influence, shaping the sociocultural '…way of thinking' with universities as vehicles of social change (Gramsci, 1975, p. 232). Therefore, Gramsci would consider blended learning change programmes not simply as an approach to teaching and learning but as an opportunity to investigate the power relations and structures implemented to support the institution's internal and external obligations. A practical example offered by Zizek extends this debate, as he argues that transformational claims about technologies are that they 'fight

disease and prolong life' (2009, p. 69), and no rational individual would deny the truth of this statement. Zizek explains that this premise is at the heart of the 'university discourse…whose truth is…power' (2009, p. 69).

Nevertheless, he argues that the university represents a hegemonic neoliberal truth where meaning is in 'crisis' (Zizek, 2009, p. 70). Zizek's (2009) justification is between his first assertion, which is essentially a widely accepted truth that medical technologies help society prolong life. The second assertion is to question the truth of that statement. This idea means that truth may not apply to every situation and context. Specifically, can blended learning fight disease and prolong life, or does it transform all students' lives, ensuring they reach their full potential? In answer to this question, Gramsci and others recognise that hidden symbolisms lurk beneath blended learning ideologies, implying that life in every situation does not hold one truth. Similarly, Bourdieu considers symbolic power as that which should be discovered 'in places where it is least visible' and 'where it is most completely misrecognised' (1990, p. 163). As such, the study maintains that blended learning discourses represent deterministic inconspicuous claims that are not overtly conveyed, which is problematic.

Many principles concerning education and technology applied to both human (i.e., students, staff), and non-human factors (such as the technology itself) tend to overlap in significant ways. However, Bourdieu argues that these positions are inclined towards economic and capitalist gain, perpetuating inequalities in society (Bourdieu, 1991). As academics are skilful enough to align their pedagogies towards differentiated learning and it is this, which potentially undermines these agencies. Dusek (2006) argues that claims of technologies are overly simplistic and suggests ‘an unwarranted degree of agency to the technology itself’ (Selwyn and Facer, 2013, p. 153).

Likewise, Mezirow (1981) cited in Marrocco, Kazer and Neal-Boylan (2014) argue that technologies implemented in ways that are at odds with pedagogies are unhelpful. Selwyn suggests a more careful response, one in which care is taken to ‘not associate digital technology too readily with discourses of inevitable progress’ (Selwyn, 2014, p. 17; Raschke, 2003).

2.19 TEACHING AND LEARNING: THE PANDEMIC

When this study commenced in 2018 the pandemic had not occurred. However, it is now inconceivable to think about blended learning without considering the impact of the pandemic on a global international scale. Six months into lockdown and Aarts *et al.,* (2021, p. 4) hypothesise that Covid-19 created a 'new normal'. They conceptualise the pre-Covid era as the 'old common' using this concept of traditional on-campus experience to scrutinise progression to a 'new common with or without coronavirus' (Aarts *et al.,* 2021, p. 4). In terms of considering the degree of commonly shared ideas, Aarts *et al.* (2021, p. 4) argue that it is to be thought about in 'both an abstract metaphorical sense and in a real-life physical sense'. Being in Covid meant that during the pandemic universities were forced to manage the rapid flow of information (Meesters, 2021). This also meant that universities worldwide were suddenly forced to move traditional learning to online digital learning spaces (Colley, 2021; Meesters, 2021). As such, being in Covid brought about the unexpected new normal of teaching and learning in higher education experienced around the globe.

During the pandemic, some of the challenges for adacemic staff was delivering asynchronously (in real time) with different virtual software, oftentimes unstable internet access and the challenges of living and working at home alongside family members. This required massive adjustment to their educational style and the capacity to adopt new modes of online delivery literally overnight (Sulera, 2020). Additionally, Aarts *et al.* (2021) argues that the resulting crisis of Covid-19 revealed existing major deficiencies of diversity and inclusion in society. During Covid, the pandemic amplified pre-existing inequalities associated with race, gender, class privilege, migrant populations, sexuality, and disability, to name only a few (Gorska *et al.,* 2020; Van Dijk, 2005).

The 'new common' is a world in which we are experiencing a 'second deep transition' after the industrial revolution (Schot *et al.,* 2020; cited in Aarts *et al.,* 2021, p. 5). Their discussion takes account of the new common accelerating the digitalisation process that was already leading to a 'new educational normal' in higher education (Adams, 2021, p. 23). Again, Adams (2021, p. 23) refers to universities investing in 'software development' and 'instructional time' for academic staff being a benefit of the crisis. Whereas Louwerse *et al.* (2021, p. 138) suggest that a possible advantage would be the new 'digital reality' of online instruction.

This presents the study with an opportunity to explore academic staff experiences of blended learning within these contexts. The concept of the new common in higher education relates to blended learning and the emergence of the information gap with technologies suggested as widening rather than narrowing the gap (Van Dijk, 2005). Meesters (2021) argues that institutions are in positions of power as they can select, integrate, and embed

appropriate technologies that support academic staff transitioning to blended learning pedagogies of practice (Meesters, 2021). This also means institutions can drive the narrative towards ideologies that best suits their purpose.

Early research about blended learning previously focused on devices, as they play an important role in the changing technological landscape (Sharples, Taylor, & Vavoula, 2007; Lefoe *et al.,* 2009). Technologies such as smartphones, smart pads, tablets, laptops, and other mobile devices underly some aspects of discussions surrounding blended learning in higher education. For instance, mobile telephones were not created for educational purposes. But once they were created and mass adoption occurred, mobile telephones were in classrooms because students owned them, and this created a changing dynamic in those spaces. The new normal began to emerge. However, while devices are one aspect of the discussion, the paradox has mainly been how to embrace teaching and learning in the context of the learner experience and to improve students' learning potential (Traxler, 2010; Sepp and Alamki, 2003; Lai, 2019; Isaias, 2018; Rajasingham, 2011; Leem and Sung, 2019).

The pandemic emphasises the need to interrogate these ideas further. Additionally, Lai (2019) and others suggest that blended learning exemplifies a more personalised, flexible experience with, for example, platforms for social interaction to enhance learning opportunities (Sharples, 2002; Song and Kong, 2017; cited in Lai, 2019). Nevertheless, this study considers that blended learning combines face-to-face delivery and real-world contexts with claims that technologies improve learning behaviour and outcomes as a premise for institutional adoption (Lai, 2019; Byrne-Davis *et al.,* 2015).

This raises the question of whether the real-world context of the pandemic during Covid increased adoption. The answer is complex because while the pandemic increased the need to teach online, and was indeed a new normality for us all, the question remains whether this new normality could be described as increased adoption of blended learning, or whether it was simply increased time with everyone online. Notably, Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler (2005) highlighted that blended learning change programmes have altered fundamental aspects of work, including work-life balance, negatively impacting academics due to unfamiliarity within the changing learning environment (Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler, 2005). These discussions are still relevant nearly twenty years later.

At the time of their paper, Sepp and Alamki (2003) described blended learning as ‘an extreme form of flexible learning where the environment integrates with studies that take place on campus, at home or outside university facilities…independent of location and space’ (Sepp and Alamki, 2003, pp. 330 cited in Lefoe *et al.,* 2009, pp. 17). Although still a growing field, blended learning would no longer be considered extreme and it is clear that this statement emphasises that change has occurred over time. What this suggests is that the old normal, new normal paradigm is not necessarily easily delineated. This is because an event like the pandemic may propel us into a new normal. Whereas something like mobile phones emerged into focus, became apparent and over time, academic staff realised potential opportunities within those spaces for students to incorporate their learning experience. Various commentators recognise teaching and learning that can be experienced on the move, across space and time but also based on a value system deeply embedded within diverse cultural contexts (Maestri, 2016; Kohl, 2010; Vidal-Gonzales and Nahhass, 2017; Eppard *et al.,* 2019). Nonetheless, the increased presence and attention to blended learning in higher education coincides with lockdown and has accelerated the need for changing or developing an appropriate response to the altered circumstances.

It should be noted that blended learning is by no means an innovation in higher education in that it is not a new concept for teaching and learning. Nevertheless, hegemony, associated with Gramsci, opens opportunities to examine relations between the institutional approach to blended learning and academic staff. Using a Gramscian lens creates opportunities to analyse 'relations of force' and their associations between the institution and academic staff experience of technology change (Gramsci, 2014, p. 200). From this perspective, the study offers strong potential for new insights to interpret academic staff social and professional realities. According to Rogers (2003, p. 24) the social structures within a system of technological change are hierarchical ‘giving individuals in higher ranked positions the right to issue orders to individuals of lower rank’.

These are conditions in which some individuals are afforded ‘socially recognised power to impose a certain vision of the social world’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 106). This implies that blended learning change programmes may be influenced by those with the capital to exercise their vision onto these changes. A consequence of the institution implementing the blended learning change is that those in positions of power may shape the intended vision and focus. Although, this is not to suggest that those in positions of power are always representative of inequitable outcomes for others. But also, that notions of power do not simply reside with one group or another, it is nuanced and complex. Nonetheless, this shift, whether by those in positions of power, or others, accentuates a vision for change, and at least, an imagined new normality.

Rogers argues that while formal hierarchical structures exist in institutions, informal interpersonal networks also exist, and these informal social networks are influential (Rogers, 2003, p. 25). Although Rogers and Gramsci differ, they do have common ground. They are both explicit about individuals being impacted within the structure of social systems (Gramsci, 2020; Rogers, 2003). Roger's (2003) theory explores behaviours within the dynamics of power relative to adoption and diffusion, whereas Gramsci's theory exposes reproductions of hegemonic power, relative to political power and governance (Gramsci, 1971, Gramsci, 2014). Gramsci's ideas expand beyond top-down hierarchical constructions of power, by shifting his focus towards power relations (Guba and Lincoln, 2007; Denzin, 2008; cited in Jubas, 2010; Pizzolato and Holst, 2017). Whereas Rogers (2003) investigates positioning, incentives, principles of knowledge and the problems associated with adoption and diffusion. As such, an investigation into the implementation of blended learning programmes, is an opportunity to explore social hierarchies of power, in addition to relations between the institute and the academic experience of blended learning change programmes, in terms of what may be commonly recognised as normal.

The relations of force that Gramsci refers to is by no means a static event because the relationship is constantly shifting and repositioning, while the underlying ideologies around blended learning also continually evolve (Gramsci, 2020). One could argue that the new normal may sometimes violently change, while at other times subtly and quietly manifest over time, and space to the new normality that arrives surreptitiously. Gramsci (1971, p. 175) argues that change operates within 'various levels of relations of force', expressed in various ways from the 'content and nature of change…to the process by which change is implemented' (Smith *et al.,* 2014, p. 29). This potentially opens the space for new socially accepted norms to emerge. Gramsci's relations of forces are within the complexity of nuanced and politically diverse voices (Buttigieg and Green, 2021). Selwyn raises a pertinent question, 'How can we move beyond common-sense assumptions and exaggerated expectations, and instead, develop a more socially circumspect analysis of education and technology?' (2011, p. 32). Selwyn (2011) and others, emphasise that common sense assumptions tend to persistently reproduce existing ideologies rather than the change likely to foster new commonly understood ideas to emerge. Bonfim *et al.* (2018, pp. 233) and others, look beyond the change management process through various perspectives of social capital, also proposing that there are 'structural' and 'relational' dimensions to consider. They define these dimensions in terms of internal social capital and shared aspects of language (Bonfim *et al.,* 2018).

The notion of internal social capital could potentially lead to the hidden voice of change, in that a new normal is emerging out of view, one that cannot be immediately observed because it is subjective. Nevertheless, academics may perceive the university-academic relationship as 'a means of deriving greater power' through collaborative efforts. Whereas institutions may perceive academic participation as a means of achieving greater productivity and efficiency (Collon, 2003; Teicher, 1992 cited in Weller and Van Gramberg, 2007). However, although these positions may work well, they sometimes conversely result in conflict. Although Gramsci (2014) would argue that without this conflict there could be no new normality to emerge.

2.20 BLENDED LEARNING: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

According to Papilloud and Hahn (2008), technology and education are embedded within the cultural practices of every society. In this way, there are no traditional perspectives as these are culturally idiosyncratic. However, there appears to be a general international recognition of the importance of technology worldwide. According to Le, Koo and Sargent (2013, p. 120), 'the pace and intensity of social change in modern society are increasing, particularly through advances in modern technology'. Social change, therefore, is relevant to the concept of globalisation and the effect technology in education has on the economies, cultures, and international economies in Western and developing countries alike (Le, Koo, and Sargent, 2013).

Spring and Graham's (2017) research investigated some of the most cited articles on blended learning in higher education. They found similarities in practice and focus, suggesting that this could be an opportunity for collaboration and exchange in the area of research and practice among universities worldwide (Spring and Graham, 2017). Nikiforova (2021) and Hrytsak *et al.* (2023) provide some insights from Russia and Ukraine, respectively.

Like the UK context, Nikiforova (2021) points out that Russian higher education is influenced by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), explaining that blended learning practices should consider diverse interpretations. Hrytsak *et al.* (2023, pp. 34) note that following the pandemic, 'blended learning has emerged as the optimal approach for delivering educational services.' Perhaps more importantly, however, Hrytsak *et al.* (2023) suggest that blended learning has evolved as a viable option for facilitating higher education, considering their proximity to conflict zones in the present time.

They further suggest that emphasis should be on '…the intricate and time-consuming nature of implementing blended learning, necessitating thorough preparations within higher education institutions' (Bugaichuk, 2016; cited in Hrytsak *et al*. 2023, pp. 34). For instance, a successful collaborative design of blended learning was conducted in universities in Rome and Australia. The researchers used a theoretical framework known as the 'Trialogical Approach - TLA' (Sansone *et al.,* 2021). TLA was applied through several design principles with careful systematic analysis offering individual support to enhance critical thinking, information management and metacognition. However, the researchers note that the study was small scale '…and culturally bounded to a specific context' (Sansone *et al.* 2021). Nonetheless, Nikiforova (2021, pp. 3) reminds us that, time, financial resources, stable internet access, staff digital literacy and readiness to '…interact in the context of digital transformations' play a significant role in the success of their study, similar to resources needed in a UK context.

Far from blended learning being limited to a UK higher education, Vaughan *et al.* (2017) and others agree that universities globally are increasingly adopting blended learning approaches in higher education. However, regardless of context it appears that considerable support is required when blended learning is implemented (Muller *et al.,* 2021). Portillo and Serna (2020) refer to UNESCO who highlighted the importance of professional development for blended learning adoption. However, the study focuses on a West-European context where devices were more accessible and affordable. According to Ossiannilsson (2019, pp.541) 'blended learning is accepted cross the globe in line with technological developments and increased digitization'. More recently UNESCO's (2023) report on the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS, 2018) found that 87% of teachers in 12 participating countries across the globe believed that blended learning helped students work at levels suitable for their learning needs, and 78% experienced better student collaboration (Fraillon *et al.,* 2019; cited in UNESCO, 2023). The report found that the United States 2020 survey revealed one-third of educators strongly agreed that technology allowed students to learn more independently, at their own pace, and collaboratively with peers.

About half indicated that teachers extensively used technology for tasks that would have otherwise been difficult to implement (Gray and Lewis, 2021; cited UNESCO, 2023). Again, in Australia, a survey of teachers noted that technology made it easier to visualize concepts and allowed students to work at their own pace and ability level (Attard and Holmes, 2022; cited UNESCO, 2023). As such, there are numerous studies highlighting that blended learning in higher education has become increasingly prevalent internationally (Bokolo, 2019; Pham and Ho, 2020; Adel and Dayan, 2021; Wan, 2007; Ezer, 2006; Huang and Sharif, 2016).

CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

3.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the rationale and structure for the following sections - a qualitative methodology, research procedures, and justification for sampling, saturation concept, data collection, thematic analysis, positionality and ethical considerations guiding the research throughout. The methodology evidences the rigour implemented and the extent that the research would be considered trustworthy.

3.1 QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the implementation of blended learning and is framed within a qualitative methodology because it enabled the researcher to explore the subjective realities, actions, attitudes, and behaviours of academic staff in higher education. An interpretivist paradigm aligned with and facilitated the interpretation of those realities and lived experiences (O'Leary, 2017; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The research supports the notion that an interpretive paradigm corresponds well with those differing 'conceptions of social reality' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 5; Creswell, 2003). As such, using the qualitative methodology combined with an interpretivist paradigm contributed to the investigation's credibility.

The methodology is a 'set of theoretical constructs…deployed as a conceptual framework for solving the research problem' (Palaiologou, Needham and Male, 2016, p. 19). This methodology also frames the 'strategies and grounding for the conduct of a study' (O'Leary, 2014, p. 10; cited in Swain, 2017, p. 44). As such, the qualitative framework chosen was favourable because it supported the methods, procedures (i.e. semi-structured interviews) and philosophical tools used to guide the research (Punch and Oancea, 2014; cited in Swain, 2017). Qualitative research examines 'things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings of people' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). In this case, academic experiences of the implementation of blended learning programmes. Gramsci (1971, p. 446) notes that 'the activity of the scientist…is the first model of dialectical mediation between man and nature…which man puts himself into relation with nature by means of technology'. Gramsci (1971) posits that scholars create a special connection between individuals and naturally occurring events when they conduct research.

This process, helped by technology, is a crucial way humans understand and interact with the world around them. It is an essential step in learning more about naturally occurring phenomena and using this knowledge to change our relationship with those experiences. Therefore, Gramsci is suggesting that empirical inquiry is how we learn about and change the world, showing how vital technology and scientific studies are for our progress (Gramsci, 1971). Thus, the thesis investigated academic staff through their diverse knowledge formations while their institutions implement blended learning strategies for teaching in post-1992 universities as these were naturally occurring every day practices experienced by participants.

This study was framed within a qualitative methodology and chosen for its subjective framing of academic staff in higher education. It sought to interpret 'through the meandering of living culture' (Eldridge, 1996 cited in; Mus, 2013, pp. 132). Further, the research was able to frame the meaning of those experiences and interpret them through analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Some authors argue that framing the research and methodology can be somewhat unpredictable (Smith, 2002; Hetherington, 2013). Gleick (1987) asserts that methodology is chaotic and often disguised as orderly, 'one where order masquerades as chaos' (cited in Smith, 2002, pp. 518). Smith argues that order and chaos are not opposites but co-exist, entangled in one system of enquiry rather than many (Braidotti, 2013; Smith, 2002). It is a process of preparing many blurred lines of enquiry. The investigation demonstrated that there was indeed a case for acknowledging that changes in routine practice, one in which blended learning may disrupt, 'enables knowledge to emerge out of seeming chaos and for translation of that knowledge to be widely and reliably implemented' (Damschroder, 2020, pp. 1). In choosing the qualitative approach, the research was explicit that knowledge about blended learning attained from academic staff was distinctive, subjective, multiple, and, therefore, not intended to be generalised or replicated (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011).

Although the qualitative methodology was applied to this study, the potential for a quantitative or mixed methodology was reflected upon. However, quantitative methodologies do not align with the researcher's ontological position, as many unique and variable perspectives are valued. Similarly, Gramsci highlights the importance of a deep emotional and cultural bond between intellectuals and society. He suggests that scholars should not be detached observers but have a real, heartfelt connection to the community (Gramsci, 1971). This connection ensures that their work is relevant and meaningful to the people. Without this bond, the relationship between intellectuals and society becomes impersonal and bureaucratic, lacking substance and true understanding. In other words, for scholarly work to be truly impactful, it must be rooted in and driven by a genuine relationship

with the people observed and their collective spirit. As such, a quantitative methodology would have been incompatible with the research design.

Underlying assumptions about quantitative methodologies and 'the power of numbers and their ability to represent the world with vigour and accuracy' provide a strong case for quantitative studies (O'Leary, 2017, p. 134), especially regarding instances of technological adoption. Furthermore, quantitative research 'assumes the possibility of replication' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 200), strengthening the case for its reliability. It tends to rely on quantifiable numerical data, often tied to a set of assumptions related to realism and positivist paradigms (O'Leary, 2017). In this regard, positivist paradigms claim to provide the most transparent ideology of knowledge. However, where positivism may be less successful are the intangible qualities of human nature (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Arguably, while quantitative methodologies tend to be statistical and large-scale, they may be perceived as lacking depth (O'Leary, 2017). Nevertheless, this study does not seek to represent statistical utility such as the value of blended learning adoption or the integers of participants that do X or Y. Instead, the study explored the enmeshed socially, culturally, and politically constructed realities in which blended learning change programmes occurred.

Foundational to this study was the belief that there would be strength in the value of a qualitative approach and, further, that it aligns with the researcher's inclination toward participants' unique and idiosyncratic experiences of blended learning change (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011). Madison (2012, p. 21) recommends ‘starting where you are’ which brings researchers to the experiences in their lives ‘both past and present’, emphasising both ‘who you are as a unique individual will lead you to certain questions about the world and certain problems related to why things are the way they are’. As such, the chosen methodological approach capitalised on opportunities for understanding the complexity of academic staff teaching within the blended learning landscape (Torgerson, 2001; cited in Brooks, te Riele and Maguire, 2014). Furthermore, the methodology accommodated those unique insights allowing comparisons to be made with their institution's vision, mission, or ideologies.

According to Reid, Hart and Peters, qualitative inquiry reveals 'practical knowledge' increasing our understanding of the depth and richness of '...meanings…customs, symbols, and stories in diverse, historically contingent, cultural traditions' (2014, p. 15). This intention is consistent with Gramsci's writings, whereby he offers valuable insights and recommendations for conducting social research, suggesting a more integrated view of theory, methodology, and practice. He states, '...the science of folklore mostly consists of methodological studies on how to collect, select and classify such material, i.e. of the investigation of the practical precautions and empirical principles necessary for profitably carrying out a particular aspect of scholarship' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 360).

As such, the qualitative approach corresponds well with this study because it can contextualise those realities (Mus, 2013). Although it is important to highlight that researchers tend to choose methodologies grounded in their beliefs, there should be caution against developing limiting notions of one methodology verses another (O'Leary 2017). O'Leary argues that both qualitative and quantitative traditions use elements of words and numerals to analyse their datasets and to think otherwise is 'simply untrue and ludicrous' (O'Leary, 2017, p. 133). Moreover, both these methodologies can elicit deep and meaningful insights into the phenomena under enquiry. Nevertheless, and perhaps more importantly, Madison (2012, p. 21) urges researchers to ‘ask questions that only you can answer: What truly interests me?’ and ‘what is most disturbing to me about society?’ And remembering that ‘you may not always know exactly why you are being drawn in that direction’. Questions similar to these are explored in the positionality section, which sheds light on the researcher’s conception of the world.

3.2 RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Ethical approval for this study was successful after formally applying to the London Metropolitan University ethics committee. This approval was sought prior to recruiting research participants. At the time, the proposed participants were academic staff. The participants were required to have experience of blended learning change programmes, and for their experiences to be in UK post-1992 institutions. The study stayed true and did not deviate from this objective.

Following approval, a plan of action approaching participants for the study commenced. As participants from the same university school would likely be known, additional safeguards ensured those individuals did not feel obligated to participate. To mitigate this, invitations to those recruits were sent via the school email through the school administrator, making enquiries more broadly. The email indicated that if colleagues agreed to an initial fifteen-minute meeting, they would meet a known colleague. Using the school email meant potential recruits in the same workplace were less likely to feel obligated or uncomfortable about declining to participate. Potential participants were emailed explaining the purpose of the research and inviting them to an initial fifteen-minute meeting, enabling the researcher to explain the study. At that point, they could ask questions. Forty-one potential recruits across five universities were contacted. No further emails were sent where participants did not respond to the first or second email. When potential participants responded positively, the researcher organised informal telephone, Microsoft Teams or Zoom contact at a convenient time. An Excel spreadsheet was created to track the multitude of actions required to secure the commitment of each participant. This system required considerable time management, discipline, and emotional undertaking.

Madison (2012, p. 213) explores the notion of 'substantive – deep discipline', which she describes as 'you are disciplined because you have a guiding, inner purpose that motivates you to make certain choices over other choices. Enacting this purpose is a priority that not only demands certain sacrifices but also inspires them'. The initial fifteen-minute conversations aimed to establish the potential for recruitment, build trust, and, where appropriate, whether participants might use their network or agree on introductions to other potential recruits. Madison (2012, p. 39) explores the notion of 'mindful rapport'. She reminds us that 'mindful rapport' recognises 'feelings of comfort, accord and trust between the interviewer and interviewee' (Madison, 2012, p.39). The fifteen-minute informal conversations established 'feelings of being respected and being genuinely heard' before participants committed to the process. As mentioned previously, Gramsci (1971) submits that feelings are an

indispensable part of 'understanding to knowing…' and as such, the emotional intensity required for meeting and speaking with potential recruits was more demanding than anticipated.

During the initial fifteen-minute meeting, potential participants were furnished with a comprehensive outline of the study to ensure they were well-informed. However, the researcher was careful that these meetings should not run over the agreed fifteen minutes thereby respecting the potential recruit's time. Twenty-seven participants agreed during those meetings, and they were subsequently emailed consent forms clearly indicating their right to withdraw from the study at any time and reinforcing that they were not obligated to provide a reason for withdrawing. Madison (2012, p. 132) suggests the following:

> 'It is understood that the degree and breadth of informed consent required will depend on the nature of the project…furthermore, it is understood that the informed consent process is dynamic and continuous: the process should be initiated in the design and continue through implementation by way of dialogue and negotiation with those studied'.

Potential recruits were also informed that interviews would be one hour and take place via Zoom. The researcher utilised her business Zoom account allowing for encryption and security of data, which could be retrieved should devices be lost or corrupted. Potential recruits were also informed that interviews would be video and audio recorded unless they had objections. Furthermore, that the audio in Zoom was an additional software known as Otter.ai, a paid for premium account which had the ability to record and transcribe two plus participants at a time. This meant Zoom combined with Otter.ai to video record, audio record and transcribe. It could also identify individual comments made by representatives.

The transcriptions were by no means free from errors and these numerous anomalies in speech and vernacular were corrected by listening to the audio whilst reading transcripts. However, during initial agreements between the researcher and participant, they were again reminded about the freedom to withdraw at any time. Additionally, they were asked to return electronically signed consent forms by email. All participants were sent interview questions ahead of time. A maximum of twenty-nine participants agreed after the initial fifteen-minute meetings, and of those, twenty-seven participants were subsequently interviewed for the study.

3.3 PARTICIPANTS: JUSTIFICATION FOR SAMPLE SIZE

In the ethical agreement application to the university, the researcher proposed to recruit twenty-five academic participants for interviews across five post-1992 universities. However, in order to secure the required participants or more, forty-one participants were contacted. As such, the recruitment process eventually resulted in twenty-seven interviewees. According to Creswell (1998), this is an appropriate sample size and contends that small sample sizes are appropriate for qualitative studies. The sample recruited provided 'information-rich cases' about the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002, pp. 230; Morse, 1994). Although, according to Creswell (1998), the eventual sample size allowed the study to reach saturation, as will be described in the relevant section.

The study included academic staff from various socio-cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, age, gender and disciplines. Participants were either master's or doctoral degree qualified representing the norm for academics within the higher education sector. Participants were employed by or had previous experience working in post-1992 universities with experience of blended learning institutional change. As mentioned above, due to expediency, the researcher recruited the first five academic staff from her post-1992 institution, some of whom laid the groundwork for introductions to recruits from other universities which conveniently opened doors that might otherwise have been less accessible. Considering this, the researcher acted with care, reflecting on everyone's rights ethically, ensuring potential participants did not feel obligated or coerced to participate or introduce others to the study. Madison (2012, p. 5) notes that ethical responsibility denotes a 'compelling sense of duty and commitment based on principles of…wellbeing…and…a compassion for the suffering of living human beings.'

Table 1.0 below represents the twenty-seven respondent demographic characteristics. There are various disciplines within the following education-related branches typical of UK university departments: Business, Humanities, Natural and Applied Science, and Social Science. These branches act as umbrellas under which these disciplines are situated. Academics were recruited from within the social science branch to ensure a particular focus on recruits. Education represented the largest group, followed by sociology, then psychology. Accessing individuals required a negotiation process in the sense of a sampling technique known as snowballing, and establishing those relationships played a significant part in the recruitment. Flick (2023, p. 148) points out that 'willingness' to participate and finding participants are equally challenging. Through those helpful introductions, many participants kindly participated in the study.

The respondents were academics working in post-1992 universities with three to twenty-one years' experience in higher education. The group ranged from 31-65 years of age. Table 1.0 demonstrates to safeguard participant identities they were anonymised. Table 1.1 shows universities across the following regions: South-East England, South-West England, West Sussex, West Midlands, and South-East Scotland – represented as A-E. Likewise, the universities they work for are not named to safeguard participants' confidentiality. Please observe Table 1.0 and Table 1.1 below for the characteristics described.

Table 1.0 Respondent Characteristics – anonymised

	PSEUDONYMS	IDENTITY	DISCIPLINE	EXPERIENCE	GENDER	AGE RANGE	HIGHEST QUALIFICATION	ETHNICITY	CLASS	HEI
1	PARTICIPANT A	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER/ READER	EDUCATION	21 YEARS	FEMALE	46-50	PhD	WHITE BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	C
2	PARTICIPANT B	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER QUALITY	SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION	20 YEARS	MALE	56-60	MA	WHITE BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	C
3	PARTICIPANT C	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES	18 YEARS	FEMALE	51-55	PhD	BLACK CARIBBEAN	MIDDLE CLASS	C
4	PARTICIPANT D	ACADEMIC LECTURER COURSE LEADER	EDUCATION	18 YEARS	FEMALE	46-50	PhD	GREEK	MIDDLE CLASS	B
5	PARTICIPANT E	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION	16 YEARS	FEMALE	51-55	MA	WHITE BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	A
6	PARTICIPANT F	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EDUCATION	14 YEARS	FEMALE	51-55	MA STUDYING FOR PhD	WHITE BRITISH	WORKING CLASS	A
7	PARTICIPANT G	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES	13 YEARS	FEMALE	36-40	PhD	GREEK	MIDDLE CLASS	B
8	PARTICIPANT H	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	SOCIOLOGY	12 YEARS	FEMALE	51-55	EdD	WHITE BRITISH/IRISH	WORKING CLASS	A
9	PARTICIPANT I	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES	12 YEARS	FEMALE	51-55	PhD	WHITE BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	B
10	PARTICIPANT J	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES	10 YEARS	FEMALE	51-55	MA	WHITE BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	C
11	PARTICIPANT K	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EDUCATION	9 YEARS	FEMALE	31-35	MSc STUDYING FOR PhD	WHITE BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	D
12	PARTICIPANT L	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER COURSE LEADER	EDUCATION	8 YEARS	MALE	41-45	PhD	WHITE BRITISH	NON-IDENTIFY	B
13	PARTICIPANT M	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER/ RESEARCHER	EDUCATION	6 YEARS	MALE	36-40	PhD	WHITE BRITISH	NON-IDENTIFY	A
14	PARTICIPANT N	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER COURSE LEADER	SOCIOLOGY	6 YEARS	MALE	36-40	MA	WHITE BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	A
15	PARTICIPANT O	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EDUCATION STUDIES	6 YEARS	MALE	41-45	MA STUDYING FOR PhD	PAKISTANI BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	C
16	PARTICIPANT P	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EDUCATION	3 YEARS	MALE	61-65	PhD STUDYING FOR EdD	WHITE BRITISH (ANGLO-WELSH)	MIDDLE CLASS	B
17	PARTICIPANT Q	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EDUCATION	7 YEARS	FEMALE	30-35	MA STUDYING FOR PhD	WHITE BRITISH/IRISH	MIDDLE CLASS	D
18	PARTICIPANT R	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER TECHNOLOGY CHAMPION	EDUCATION	16 YEARS	FEMALE	60-65	MA	WHITE BRITISH/IRISH	MIDDLE CLASS	D

19	PARTICIPANT S	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER COURSE LEADER	EDUCATION STUDIES	18 YEARS	MALE	60-65	PhD	WHITE BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	E
20	PARTICIPANT T	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EDUCATION STUDIES	14 YEARS	MALE	55-60	MA	WHITE BRITISH	WORKING CLASS	C
21	PARTICIPANT U	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	EDUCATION	8 YEARS	FEMALE	60-65	MA	BLACK BRITISH	MIDDLE CLASS	B
22	PARTICIPANT V	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	BRITISH PERSIAN	15 YEARS	FEMALE	40-45	MA	ASIAN	MIDDLE CLASS	D
23	PARTICIPANT W	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	SOCIOLOGY	4 YEARS	FEMALE	35-40	MA	WHITE SCOTTISH	MIDDLE CLASS	E
24	PARTICIPANT X	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	SOCIOLOGY	18 YEARS	FEMALE	55-60	PhD	WHITE SCOTTISH	MIDDLE CLASS	E
25	PARTICIPANT Y	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	PSYCHOLOGY	24 YEARS	FEMALE	60-65	PhD	WHITE SCOTTISH	MIDDLE CLASS	E
26	PARTICIPANT Z	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	PSYCHOLOGY	17 YEARS	FMEALE	35-40	MA	BLACK SCOTTISH	MIDDLE CLASS	E
27	PARTICIPANT AA	ACADEMIC SNR LECTURER	PSYCHOLOGY	8 YEARS	FEMALE	30-35	PhD	WHITE IRISH	MIDDLE CLASS	D

Table 1.1 Universities by Region

No	UNIVERSITY BY REGION	A-E
1	South-East England	A
2	South-West England	B
3	West Sussex	C
4	West Midlands	D
5	South-East Scotland	E

3.4 SATURATION CONCEPT

Marshall *et al.* (2013) highlights three methods which justify sample sizes: recommendations from authors, cited samples used in other studies, and statistical evidence from the data. As this research was not quantitative, the second method of citing sample strategies from other qualitative studies justified the sample size for this study. In attempting to determine the sample size for their research, Multerud, Siersma and Guassora (2015) drew from Glaser and Strauss (1999), originators of the saturation concept. Saturation occurs when analysed data has elicited sufficiently repeated data from various participants (Multerud, Siersma and Guassora, 2015). Because the various categories of data information were ongoing, the researcher continually compared similarities and differences to ascertain when data saturation was likely achieved (Multerud, Siersma and Guassora, 2015; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006, pp. 60).

3.5 CRONBACH'S ALPHA, INFORMATION POWER AND SAMPLE SIZE JUSTIFICATION

Sample size recommendations from the literature using Cronbach's Alpha are broad. Nonetheless, whether using twenty or sixty-plus participants, Cronbach's Alpha demonstrated that data saturation was likely to occur with around twelve interviews (Multerud, Siersma and Guassora, 2015). As mentioned, twenty-seven recruits participated. Recruits doubled Cronbach's Alpha; the information elicited demonstrated that saturation was achieved. Additionally, data coding provided substantial evidence of saturation.

The research criteria maintained that the participants recruited had three-plus years' experience in higher education. An element of Cronbach's Alpha theory is that experts tend to agree more with each other (in their domain of expertise) than do novices…' (Romney, Batchelder, and Weller1989, p. 314; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006, pp. 74). Romney, Batchelder, and Weller found that small samples can provide accuracy of information 'within a particular cultural context, as long as participants possess a certain degree of expertise about the domain of inquiry' (1986, pp. 313; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, pp. 74). Therefore, the researcher investigated participants with at least three years teaching experience in higher education. Based on the evidence, this sets participants apart from others still in the early stages of their teaching careers.

One of the various methods for collecting primary data are interviews (Marshall *et al.,* 2013). The research method were semi-structured interviews, and according to saturation theory, it is, therefore, an appropriate method for establishing saturation and sample size for this study. Marshall *et al.* (2013) recommends the strategy used by Glaser and Strauss (1999), in which they transcribed and coded the first six interviews to highlight the initial themes of the study. Frequently transcribing and coding interviews was adopted during the research process. Marshall *et al.* (2013) suggested that Cronbach's Alpha should enable researchers to identify gaps and begin to assess at what stage data saturation is likely to have been achieved. This process was more challenging than anticipated because transcribing and coding the data was an emerging process, interviews were taking place at the same time, and a certain amount of mental fatigue was experienced during this process, including that limited time was a factor.

Reflecting on Gadamer's philosophy, Davey (2006) emphasises the transformative nature of understanding, where the interaction is between two individuals and within oneself. This process reveals a space of difference between our unexamined past beliefs and the possibilities for future understanding (Davey, 2006). In this case, we are understanding the data. Davey (2006) also points out that understanding and interpretation involve a dynamic interplay that challenges and reshapes our self-conceptions. Through dialogue, we confront our preconceptions and are opened to new insights, bridging the gap between who we have been and who we might become. This transformation occurred due to information shared during interviews with participants.

Davey's (2006) view of Gadamer's philosophy correlates with Gramsci's (2007) theory in that both see understanding as a dynamic and transformative process. Davey (2006) suggests that through dialogue, we interact with others and engage with our own internalised beliefs, challenging and potentially changing them. Similarly, Gramsci (2007) believes we can raise our consciousness by critically analysing the world, including empirical scholarly activity. For both thinkers, this is not a solitary process but one deeply social and influenced by historical and cultural contexts. They agree that through this interaction, we can evolve beyond our previous selves, essential for personal growth and societal change. However, as Davey (2006) presented, Gadamer's philosophy emphasises the troubling and challenging process of using Cronbach's Alpha to engage in the dynamic process that saturation requires.

Nevertheless, although the sample size was based on Cronbach's Alpha, the study applied the nuanced concept known as information power - a system developed by Cronbach in 1951 to measure information reliability by determining similar concepts and consistency (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011; Multerud, Siersma and Guassora, 2015). There are no definitive rules for sample size in qualitative inquiries (Marshall *et al.,* 2013; Multerud, Siersma and Guassora, 2015; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). However, Multerud, Siersma and Guassora (2015, pp. 1) applied the notion of 'information power' used as a core concept in establishing an estimated sample size for qualitative studies.

As mentioned above, information power is a constituent of Cronbach's Alpha (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). The information power model is based on aspects of 'intersubjectivity' (Mason, 2010; cited in Multerud, Siersma and Guassora, 2015, pp. 1) and 'internal validity' (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Kvale, 1996; cited in Multerud, Siersma and Guassora 2015, pp. 7) and based on many more complex and competing measurements of information. However, this study does not intend to suggest a complete and extensive use of Cronbach's Alpha. Nevertheless, some model characteristics determined the sample size and data saturation using information power as described by the authors mentioned above. Additionally, information power, as encapsulated in Cronbach's Alpha, has regard for the aim, sample, established theory, quality of interview dialogue and chosen analysis (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Morse, 1995; Sandelowski, 1995; cited in Multerud, Siersma and Guassora 2015, pp. 1). Cronbach's Alpha establishes the quality and consistency of information attained from the interviews, the extent to which that data might be presumed reliable, and the notion that validity was reliably achieved (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). Although guidance for sample sizes in qualitative studies varies, recommendations overlap substantially (Marshall *et al.,* 2013). Marshall *et al.* (2013) argue that Cronbach's Alpha is a conventional systematic formula used to determine the frequency and recurrence of information provided by individuals using, for instance, thematic analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Morse. 1995; Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009; cited in Marshall *et al.,* 2013, pp. 13).

3.6 CONVENIENCE AND SNOWBALL SAMPLING

The study combined convenience with snowball sampling, as the researcher requested participants to identify other individuals in their institution suitable for the study should they wish to. This meant that many suitable participants were recommended or directly introduced to the researcher. Snowball sampling is useful in qualitative studies as it uses existing participant social networks as a means of gaining access to other suitable participants. The post-1992 universities identified for this study were selected for the convenience of identifying participants in those institutions that indicated their wish to participate. Convenience sampling is sometimes referred to as opportunity sampling because of the convenience of accessing those participants for easy access (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

3.7 METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews as this method allowed participants to direct the interview process, develop rapport and trust, and provide rich, in-depth data. They also offer flexibility allowing interviewees to lead the inquiry yet structured enough to provide direction and keep the interview on track (O'Leary, 2017: Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Semi-structured interviews also provided a solid basis for allowing academic staff to express their views and lived experiences (O'Leary, 2017). The interviewing process included time for the interviewer to build rapport with the interviewee. This interviewing strategy reduced the stress participants might otherwise experience (Friesen, 2010). Friesen (2010, p. 130) suggests three essential factors, 'deportment, verbal communication and pace'. He argued that this involves how an interviewer presents with actions, eye contact, empathy, or manner of dress. Interviews offered participants a platform for talking freely, expressing 'candour, richness, depth, and honesty about their experiences' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 413). Additionally, there were opportunities to reflect on and discuss their day-to-day, natural working environments (Waring and Evans, 2015; El-Hussein and Cronje, 2010, pp. 93; Al-Emran, Elsherif and Shaalan, 2015; Barreh and Abas, 2015). The critical issues in the interview process were to determine academic staff experience of their institution implementing programmes for blended learning. Also, for instance, factors likely to determine challenges, barriers, or resistance. These dilemmas emerged from the inquiry.

The interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient for participants. Each participant had the same set of previously prepared questions. Their experiences were disclosed during the semi-structured interviews with questions surrounding their experience of blended learning change, allowing participants to discuss areas in greater depth (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews proved appropriate for this research because individuals could direct the conversation. Closed questions also provided other relevant demographic data about the participant's life and position (Creswell, 2013). The interview questions also laid the groundwork for understanding what academic staff would want the leadership of these change programmes to consider regarding obstacles encountered and pressures faced during the implementation of blended learning change (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Nevertheless, the limitations of semi-structured interviews include the potential risk of emotional distress, professional fear, confidentiality, and exposure. As such, the researcher remained mindful of mitigating any potential risk of harm (BERA, 2018, p. 19). Davey (2006, p.15) refers to the 'power of negative', which he argues has the potential to 'disrupt' and thereby expose one to differing possibilities involved in the emerging process of 'self-awareness'. The 'power of negative' is relevant to semi-structured interviews and 'problematised' by the imbalance of power between the interviewer and interviewee because he argues there is an 'in-between' space where these feelings occur (Davey, 2006, p.15). He maintains that the interview space is where individuals are likely to ‘experience feeling vulnerable' (Davey, 2006, p. 15).

3.8 SELECTED TOPICS FOR INTERVIEWING

Each interview began with an explanation of the study and its data usage, fostering a comfortable environment and encouraging a natural flow of conversation. I chose the interview topics to align with the aims, objectives and research questions. Bryman (2001) emphasises the importance of ensuring questions are relevant to the study while considering the participant's perspective and allowing participants to respond freely. I developed the interview scripts with open-ended questions focusing on blended learning, its role in their pedagogy, digital literacy confidence, access to training, and their experiences with institutional change (see below and in Appendix A). These topics allowed participants to share experiences while focusing on the research objectives.

	Question - Semi-Structured Interviews (See also Appendix A)
1	What does blended learning mean to you?
2	How was your academic knowledge, experience or role incorporated as part of your institution's blended learning strategy for change?
3	What is your understanding of the institution's vision and Follow-up question(s) - what do you think or feel about this vision for blended learning in your university?
4	Were you aware of policy changes – for instance, was there a launch, presentation, or other events during the change process, or was the blended learning approach informal and less directive? Follow-up question(s) - depending on which, please describe your understanding and thoughts around how you experienced this approach.
5	To what extent do you integrate blended learning into your methods for teaching and learning? Follow-up question(s) to what extent are your strategies influenced by your institution's approach, your own teaching methods, a mixture of both?
6	During your institution's blended learning change programme, what training and/or resources were made available to support any adjustments to your practice? NOTE: training or resources for adoption could include software (i.e., online platforms) or hardware (i.e., cameras) or other hardware equipment intended for this purpose.
7	Based on the way blended learning was implemented by your institution. What do you feel worked well or could have been done differently during the process of change?

3.9 CONSIDERATION OF OTHER DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Other data collection methods considered were focus groups and discussion groups while determining the best fit for this study. Ross suggested discussion groups are 'less structured and more open than traditional focus group techniques' (Ross, 2018, pp. 24). However, there are challenges to focus and group discussions using both these methods include dividing one's attention between respondents. Individuals may disagree. Some participants may dominate, which can be challenging to manage. Other individuals may try to speak, and the researcher would need to be skilful at managing this (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). An overall evaluation suggested semi-structured interviews were best suited as they offered the researcher an appropriate way of managing conversations one participant at a time, rather than several (Angouri and Marra, 2011).

The benefit of semi-structured interviews meant each participant had sufficient time to reflect on and discuss their day-to-day, natural working environments (Waring and Evans, 2015; El-Hussein and Cronje, 2010, pp. 93; Al-Emran, Elsherif and Shaalan, 2015; Barreh and Abas, 2015). Also, group discussion may not offer the privacy some participants may prefer.

3.10 METHOD OF ANALYSIS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This study made use of certain techniques and approaches commonly associated with thematic analysis (Palaiologou, Needham and Male, 2016, p. 181). Thematic analysis was developed by Glaser and Strauss as a way of developing theory through the process of firstly collecting and analysing the data. Glaser and Strauss's thematic analysis tends to be associated with positivist traditions (Atkins and Wallace, 2012). As this study is already theoretically inspired it uses qualitative data analysis as a system of inquiry, and as such, thematic analysis was used whereby the data was coded, themed, and analysed.

According to a definition provided by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 79) 'thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.' They and others further argue that it is not uncommon to read of 'themes emerging from the data', which can, at times, cause confusion because themes constructed from the data are not limited to only the thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 79; Singer and Hunter, 1999: 67). Braun and Clarke (2016) in a later paper reflect upon some of the misconceptions applied to their seminal paper (mentioned above) in 2006. They recognised a '...failure to fully articulate our qualitative values and assumptions in our 2006 paper…' (Braun and Clarke, 2019, pp. 592). I also fell into this category of not thoroughly scrutinising my own assumptions but thinking about emergent themes within a narrow

focus of 'deductive versus inductive coding' (Nowell *et al.,* 2017). As such, in the sections below, I unpack the thematic process followed that captured the themes constructed from the data.

The research was conducted within the context of the flexible, organic approach as indicated by these scholars (Braun and Clarke, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2019; Nowell *et al.,* 2017) through 'reflexive thematic analysis' described as a kind of 'qualitative sensibility' (Roseveare, 2023, pp. 143). My research followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis as this offered a clear and systematic six-phase framework for analysing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019). Their process begins with familiarisation, where the researcher immerses themselves in the data. Familiarising myself with the data took the form of reading and re-reading it to identify recurring patterns of meaning. The process involved coding the data. As such, I began coding and labelling the data, checking alignment with the research focus. The next phase involved generating themes by organising related codes into broader, meaningful categories. The themes were adjusted where necessary to accurately reflect the dataset. Once finalised, those themes were named. The final phase involved writing up the analysis, producing a narrative supported by illustrations from respondents.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather narrative-rich data through open-ended questions, encouraging participants to share their experiences in their own words. The research utilised an inductive approach aligning with the interpretive paradigm, emphasising that participant ideas are constructed rather than imposed by the researcher. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, which allowed themes to naturally emerge during the analysis. Ozuem, Willis and Howell (2021) also point out that Braun and Clarke regard qualitative thematic analysis as constructed, rather than discovered (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2016). Furthermore, Swain (2017) notes that inductive approaches aim to generate data for identifying recurring themes. As participants shared their experiences, follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings or deepen understanding, ensuring that respondent voices shaped the findings. O'Leary (2017, p. 330) supports this approach, highlighting that inductive methods 'let the raw data tell the story.' The absence of predetermined themes or theories allowed the study to be guided by participants' stories and lived experiences. The thematic analysis process involved coding words, sentences, phrases, or conceptual ideas, which were noted, colour-coded, and then organised into categories. Over time, these categories evolved into themes and subthemes, reflecting the nuanced experiences shared by participants. This systematic and iterative approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' narratives, providing authentic and context-rich information. In this study, the theory was used to interpret data. Van Manen (2014) provided a useful explanation for how themes were identified:

> ‘Analysing thematic meanings of a phenomenon is a complex and creative process of insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure. Grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing meaning that is driven by the epoche and the reduction. In exploring themes and insights, we can treat texts as sources of meaning at the level of the whole story; at the level of the separate paragraph; and at the level of the sentence, phrase, expression, or single word’ (van Manen, 1997; cited in van Manen, 2014, p. 320).

Van Manen (2014, p. 320) describes three ways to uncover themes mentioned in his statement above which are holistic reading, selective reading, and detailed reading. Holistic reading is where the researcher observes the whole text and considers how the main ideas within the text can be ‘captured as a whole’ (Van Manen, 2014, p. 320). Selective reading is where the text is read several times while highlighting certain phrases or statements. While detailed reading is where every sentence and phrase is scrutinised to try to draw out the meaning applied to participant’s experience captured through ‘thematic expressions, phrases, and narrative paragraphs’ (Van Manen, 2014, p. 320). This study dynamically made use of the combination of these approaches through thematic analysis. The sections below provide a detailed account of how the process unfolded.

The respondent audio recordings were transcribed and subsequently imported into NVivo for coding. The coding categories were developed in response to the collected data, following the guidance of Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), who note that Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), like NVivo, can support qualitative research processes. Before coding, transcriptions were initially through NVivo's 'Cases' system (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019, p. 146). Accordingly, I created separate cases for each transcribed interview. Researchers create cases in NVivo in various ways, depending on the type of data they analyse. In this study, I created cases while importing the transcribed interview files. During case creation, I utilised the 'Classifications' feature (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019, p. 145), which enabled me to input demographic information such as age range, qualifications, and years of experience. In NVivo, these are also referred to as 'Attributes' (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019, p. 150).

NVivo facilitates the coding process by allowing researchers to use digital tools similar to 'Post-it notes' or 'whiteboards' (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019, p. 77). To create the appropriate codes, I systematically identified recurring words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs within the interview data. Once identified, the data were highlighted, and an appropriate name was assigned to each code, accompanied by a unique colour for easy identification. This approach ensured that each code had a distinct name and colour. Additionally, each interview transcription was imported into NVivo as a separate case, with unique classification files for each interviewee.

This organisational structure facilitated the creation of codes that effectively captured recurring themes within the data. Over time, what emerged from the data was five overarching themes, top-down management, moral academic imperative, ideologically ambiguous and pedagogy with each main theme having subthemes where a direct correlation to a main theme could be found.

Nonetheless, I experienced a challenge with coding through NVivo because at the time, while I was familiar with NVivo for storing my reference list, importing journal articles and other documents, I had not yet used NVivo to create cases and to code. Because of this, I searched for YouTube videos to find explanations about how to use the systems inside NVivo. But this also had the effect of making me feel uncertain and overwhelmed about using the technology and wondered whether I was creating more work and using the time inefficiently. Therefore, I made the decision to move forward and complete the coding process fully manually. I then started re-reading the interview transcripts which I also had duplicated in my computer drive, an external hard drive and on Zoom. At this stage, I was keeping manual notes in the transcribed word documents and used a book to jot down ideas, create coloured mind-maps while deciding on themes as they emerged. However, as time progressed and the themes began to emerge, I found myself switching between manual coding and using NVivo to create new cases and update my initial coding system. According to Flick (2023, p. 388) 'coding is a process of labelling and categorizing data as a first step in the analysis.' They suggest this requires several steps 'initial' and 'focused' (Flick, 2023, p. 388) which is how themes arise because we are coding through and across material. I therefore continued with the system of switching between manually coding and NVivo to update my data in the coding system that was also evolving continually evolving.

3.11 CODING FOR THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The coding best suited to the study corresponds with the researcher's ontological and epistemological stance regarding her perception of reality and how knowledge can be achieved (Trede and Higgs, 2009; cited in Saldana, 2016). Saldana (2016, p. 70) highlights numerous coding methods such as 'Descriptive, Process, Initial, Verses, Evaluation, Dramaturgical, Domain, Taxonomy, Themeing the Data' to name a few. Saldana provides helpful research questions to identify corresponding factors, such as 'how does…what does it mean…? and what factors influence…?' (2016, p. 70). These questions are comparable to her research rationale in choosing a thematic analysis that aligns with this study's research questions. Additionally, the goal of this study is not to 'develop new theory' (Saldana, 2016, p. 71) but to reveal new knowledge and make a new and valid contribution to the current debate based on existing theory.

Coding is just one way of analysing qualitative data. The interview transcripts from this study were coded by taking words, sentences or phrases from interview transcripts and preparing them into coded themes (Saldana, 2016). This coding system involved a systematic process of building up categories while reducing the data into themes (O'Leary, 2017). The researcher explored the emergence of patterns that appeared more than twice in terms of 'similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence and causation' (Hatch, 2002; cited in Saldana, 2016, p. 7). Codification of the data also took account of 'paradoxes' and 'ambiguities' (O'Leary, 2017), revealing essential aspects of academic staff realities (Saldana, 2016, p. 7) during the blended learning change programme. Silverman also suggests writing a codebook which included the rationale for coding, the frequency distribution of codes, and the reliability of the coding process (Bauer, 2000; Marvasti, 2004; cited in Silverman, 2010). Jubas (2010, p. 232) points out that for Gramsci the central purpose of praxis is to build understanding of social relations and the ‘capacity to change them’ and ‘…research is one part of this process’.

Thematic analysis is a ‘widely used qualitative analytic’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 77). It provides compatibility within a qualitative approach and is ‘accessible and theoretically flexible’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 77). In addition to developing themes through the process of coding, the researcher chose Gramsci as a theoretical lens to analyse that data after recognising the emergence of themes. Using Gramscian theory to analyse data supports this research because he views every situation politically. His complex understanding of power relations and ability to explore relations hegemonically exposed the reproduction of cultural ideologies and individual activism (Gramsci, 1971).

3.12 VALIDITY

The validity of this research is demonstrated in the findings chapter, with clear examples of participants' ideas and knowledge about the subject of blended learning change. Validity means the research reflects the phenomena under investigation, representing participants' experiences, perspectives, and contexts. As such, a true representation of participants' experiences provided greater accuracy and trustworthiness to the study's findings. It also ensured that the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data were based on a solid foundation. Silverman (2010, p. 292) refers to 'respondent validation' whereby the researcher 'will try to validate the research findings by taking them back to the people you have studied to see whether they conform to their own experience'. Silverman (2010) suggests that if the researcher prioritises the respondent's experience, this method would be congruent with the study. Likewise, Flick (2023) points out that discussions around validity typically receive more attention in qualitative studies. He argues that what determines validity is whether researchers appropriately understand the findings from the data (Flick, 2023). Flick (2023, p. 493) uses a different term to Silverman (2010), suggesting numerous ways to realise validity, such as through 'communication validation'. There may be nuanced differences between Flick's (2023) and Silverman's (2010) terminology; however, researchers may use this terminology interchangeably. According to Flick (2023, p. 493), 'communication validation' is sometimes known as member check'. There is a variety of potential avenues to member check, and the one chosen in this study was to gain the 'interviewee's agreement with the contents of their statement obtained after the interview' (Flick, 2023, p. 493). As such, participants were sent a copy of their interview transcript for final agreement. Participants were, therefore, invited to highlight any aspect of their interview that I should remove.

In addition to the above, Coe *et al.* (2017, p. 44) introduce the concept of 'transfer claims', which they propose as a means to establish the strength and applicability of ‘interpretations’. These transfer claims can be applied in various ways, depending on the study and the type of claims one wishes to reinforce. Coe *et al.* (2017) identify several transfer claims, such as transfer across observers, transfer across participants, or transfer across instruments. However, as these extend beyond the scope of this discussion, the claim relevant to this study was 'transfer across contexts' (Coe *et al.,* 2017, p. 55). Coe *et al.* (2017) clarify that the transfer across contexts claim pertains to the context in which the research was conducted and the contexts to which we want to claim its applicability. In the case of this study, participants were selected from five post-1992 universities across the UK, illustrating the transfer of the study's findings across different institutional contexts.

The study demonstrates trustworthiness due to the rigorous process of member checks and the careful sampling of participants across diverse contexts, which largely identified similar experiences across the sector. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, as it is small-scale and not representative of a larger population. Despite these limitations, the study's trustworthiness and validity are key factors that enhance the credibility and potential impact of the research in the field of blended learning change.

3.13 POSITIONALITY

Unlike other components, this section is situated within a first-person account because I prefer to articulate my position in the research. Below is a diagram illustrating the experience of research in unpredictable environments and the implications for positionality.

Diagram 1.0 - research in unpredictable and uncertain conditions (created by Nakissa Campbell, 2024)

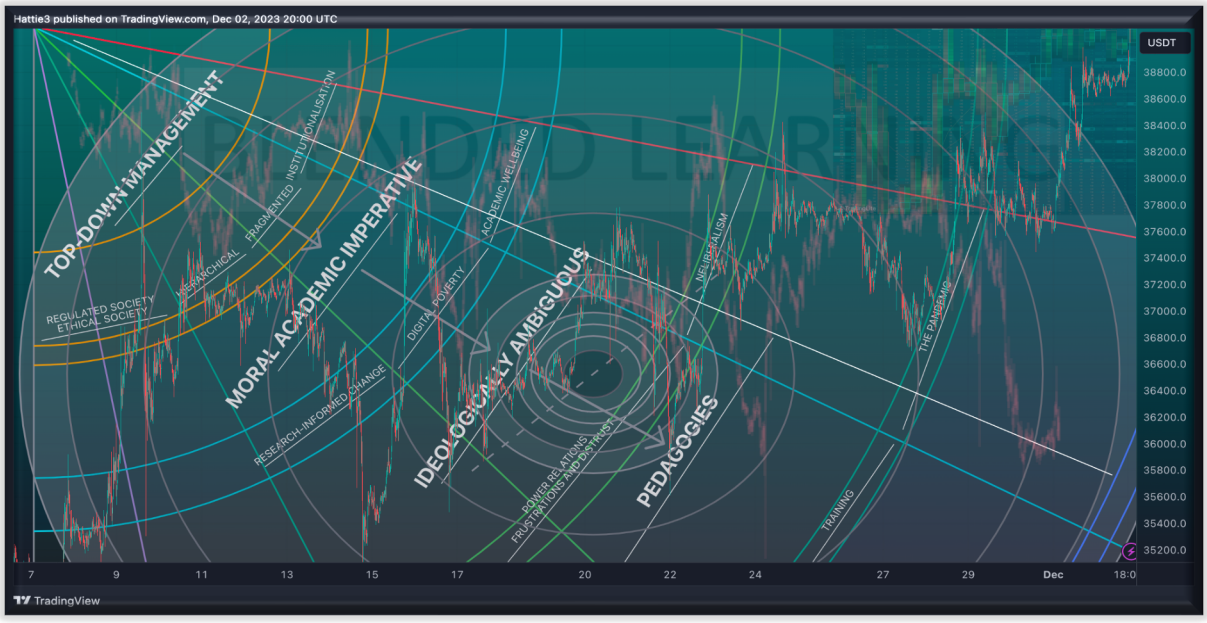

Diagram 1.0 above portrays the uncertain conditions of the research environment. The diagram represents four key themes and subthemes from the study, top-down management, moral academic imperative, ideologically ambiguous and pedagogies. The diagram's interconnected themes and subthemes symbolise the intricate and variable nature of academic research. The reason why this diagram is represented in this section, is because the lines, patterns, and chaotic environment signify the unpredictable research journey, mirroring the study's dynamic, ever-shifting nature. Navigating this maze parallels the research experience, where researcher positions must adapt and discover emerging patterns and ideas amidst academic turbulence. The diagram illustrates the intertwined relationship between these elements, emphasising how my experience is shaped by the constantly evolving and unpredictable landscape of academic inquiry. There is also a fluid positioning which exists within this shifting landscape.

According to Ashwin *et al.,* becoming an academic in higher education requires a complex 'repertoire of technical skills and understandings; positioning yourself within the larger community of practice' (2015, p. 42). These career aspirations are identity building, intersecting with attributes established with and by others in the community of teaching in higher education (Ashwin *et al.,* 2015). My academic identity developed over time emerging through early experiences of engaging with blended learning, whether consciously or unconsciously, which informs these interpretations and biases. During the consideration of positionality, one asks questions like, who am I in the muddy discovery process? As mentioned in the section above, Madison (2012, p. 21) suggests asking 'questions only the researcher can answer: What truly interests me?' She takes from the words of Alice Walker and urges researchers to consider 'what is the work my soul must have?' (Madison, 2012, p. 22). This is a powerful starting point from which to locate my positionality.

Merriam *et al.,* (2001) asks ‘what does it mean to be an insider or an outsider to a particular group under study?’ I am an academic, researching the experiences of other academics. Merriam *et al.,* (2001) argue that rather than positionality having fixed categories, insider and outsider positions are contextual, shifting, and layered, shaped by cultural, national, institutional, and personal experience. The authors emphasise the importance of positionality, power, and representation in navigating these dynamics, arguing that researchers may simultaneously occupy both insider and outsider roles depending on the research setting and relationships involved (Merriam *et al.,* 2001). The research process was both logistically and emotionally demanding, particularly in recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and managing the emotional toll of these interactions. The researcher’s position, is therefore, negotiated (Merriam *et al.,* 2001) and Birnbaum (2025, pp.62) describes this as ‘epistemic fluency’ which they suggest are the foundations for confronting problems ‘flexibly, creatively and in their full complexity’.

Several scholars characterise reflexivity in the research process as profoundly personal and emotionally intense (Mason-Bish, 2019; Watt, 2007; Patton, 2002). I considered the various ways in which to maintain an ‘ethic of care’ to ensure participants felt acknowledged, respected, and safe. Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2022) argue that without this, one can overlook the importance of wellbeing for self and others during the research process. I worked to build meaningful rapport, hoping to foster trust and encourage rich discussions, but nonetheless found myself unexpectedly drained. Pagas (2009) challenges us to become aware of one’s thought process through reflexivity and the bodily experience such as tiredness or emotional discomfort. The strain of emotional labour

manifests as stress from constantly navigating the disconnection between personal emotions and outward expressions in the workplace (Harding and Calabria, 2025; Mortari, 2015; Pagas, 2009). The intensity of these conversations left me overwhelmed, balancing my commitment to participants with the pressure to complete interviews efficiently. This tension was unsettling. Olmos-Vega *et al.,* (2023) suggest that through reflexivity one can account for these important contextual factors. Nonetheless, I struggled to reconcile my investment in participants' experiences, which was indeed genuine, with the practical constraints of collecting data. As Watts (2008) and Thwaites (2017, p. 5) argue, rapport-building can be 'manipulative and exploitative,' sometimes evoking feelings of 'insincerity and guilt' (cited in Harding & Calabria, 2025, p. 99).

Additionally, I grappled with these emotions, confronting the ethical complexities of research relationships in ways I had not anticipated. Harding and Calabria (2025, p. 44) draw on Hochschild (1983, p. 7) to describe how researchers 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain an outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.' Swain (2017) reinforces this by arguing that gaining deep reflexive awareness requires researchers to abandon fixed notions of meaning and acknowledge their entanglement in the research process. The focus, then, shifts to the co-construction of knowledge and critical awareness of the researcher's influence. Similarly, Palaiologou, Needham, and Male (2016) emphasise that reflexivity involves critical awareness of one's thoughts and actions throughout the research process, from design to data collection and interpretation. Similarly, Harding and Calabria (2025, p. 98) further argue that 'the relationality of the research process can engender feelings of epistemic responsibility for the researcher' - an experience that can be emotionally demanding and even burdensome. Indeed, I found myself navigating persistent uncertainty and ethical dilemmas that shaped my thinking throughout.

Another question which dominated my reflections was to ask why Antonio Gramsci, and what about his theory resonated with my position in relation to blended learning change? What are the assumptions I hold to be true about implementing blended learning change? Madison eloquently puts this as 'the activism stance...' which takes a clear position intervening on '…hegemonic practices and advocates in exposing material effects of marginalised locations while offering alternatives' (Fine, 1994; cited in Madison, 2012, p. 7). One of the most challenging yet rewarding aspects of research has been making sense of the diverse, often-contradictory theoretical relationships, the various empirical contributions to blended learning, and the capacity to stay with and continue this study.

When I initially discovered Antonio Gramsci, it was through notable authors such as Norman Fairclough's (2015) *Language and Power*, Davies and Elder's (2004) *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, and Selwyn's (2011) *Distrusting Educational Technology*. These readings led me to Crehan's (2016) *Gramsci's Common Sense* and Jones's (2006) *Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony*. However, none of these were original translations. As such, once my research commenced, I was compelled to engage with Gramsci's original work, which was challenging as his work was indecipherable and difficult understand. For one thing, there is a format found in some original translations, such as Buttigieg and Callari (1975) or Forgacs (2014), whereby Gramsci's noted concepts can be found at the back of their books, or in others, such as Hoare and Nowell-Smith (1971) as footnotes. Unless one knows this format, Gramsci's concepts can seem impenetrable because of the disjointed ordering of the texts.

Another barrier appeared once I understood how to navigate the translated texts by finding notes. Trying to read Gramsci's fragmented ideas was perplexing because joining the dots and understanding how an idea in one notebook relates to other notes was confusing. Hence, they are known as the *Prison Notebooks***.** However, piecing them together after starting to penetrate the code took several years. Knowing how and why one note relates to the other took time and effort as these connections emerged. Yet, I persisted with Gramsci's theory because notions of power through hegemonic constructs spoke to me in ways I could not always understand. I somehow discovered myself through Gramsci's articulations of the subaltern. Based on the inner workings of the subaltern, I saw myself as a subaltern, and my positionality was simultaneously at the centre of my chosen theory, both inside and outside. Kelly describes this as insider experiences bringing 'potential insights' that lead to 'the recycling of dominant assumptions' (Crossley and Vulliamy, 2006; cited in Kelly, 2014, pp. 247). Davey's (2006, p. 15) insights are helpful as he proposes 'an ontology of the in-between that attempts to articulate what occurs within the process of understanding'. He refers to this as the 'no man's land between isolated subjects' and the 'space which subjectivizes the participating individuals', which he goes on to suggest 'discloses the reality of alternative possibilities not presently my own but which might yet become my own' (Davey, 2006, p. 15).

Positionality is about researchers acknowledging their 'undeniable position' in the research process (Sword, 2012, p. 42 cited in; Thomas, 2016, p. 68). I interviewed participants from the professional community to which I also belonged, and as such, imagined some level of congruity with their experiences. There is considerable literature on positionality and the differing characteristics of the researcher and participants, alongside the various ways to be actively reflexive (Mason-Bish, 2019; Merriam *et al.,* 2001). Harding and Calabria (2025) suggest that a sense

of belonging within a research community ‘encompasses the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes, and norms...’ - all of which are too complex to be fully understood outside of relational and contextual factors, given the uniquely individual nature of experience. I found it challenging to articulate my sense of belonging with this community while remaining impartial because of my obvious connection with this world. Although Merriam *et al.,* (2023, pp. 411) remind us that our positionality rests on the assumption that a ‘culture is more than a monolithic entity to which one belongs or not.’ Mostly, I was keen to ensure that my professionalism as a researcher also reflected, what I consider to be a warm caring disposition, and further, that my warm caring character would not have difficulty in providing a sensitive space where discussions would be free-flowing. Moralli (2024) discusses this care as ‘moving beyond market logic and family network’, the importance of emotion intersection with one’s position, emphasising the ‘moment-to-moment decision making process’.

Mason-Bish (2019) discusses the complications of access when finding participants and while I thought hard about this, it was challenging when individuals did not respond or wish to participate. But like Mason-Bish (2019) it was still nonetheless a delicate balancing act. They also suggest that while reflexivity should be central to the research process, many early career researchers find this particularly troubling. My experience of the research process was equally challenging. Harding and Calabria (2025, p. 120) ‘examine the emotion work involved in negotiating the dynamic relationality of the interview exchange…’

Reflecting upon this demonstrates that 'learning always arises as a product of a social community of practice'. Our understanding of language, communication, culture, and various aspects of the social context is central (Amhag, 2016). Likewise, Pollard *et al.* (2008) also note that we are submerged in getting to know ourselves. This is different from analysing ourselves where there maybe potential for self-development, and an ‘untapped reservoir’ (Pollard *et al.,* 2008, p. 117).

Atkins and Wallace propose a continual process of reflecting on preconceived ideas (Atkins and Wallace, 2012). They believe 'we cannot separate values from our research, so the important thing is to acknowledge those values' (Atkins and Wallace, 2012, p. 2). As the research experience is identity-forming, the process draws attention to the interconnectedness of 'personal…professional or corporate' identities (Atkins and Wallace 2012, p. 2). These competing identities correspond with beliefs grounded in my own assumptions. Because of these recognised values, I found myself tending to embrace certain methodologies, paradigms, analyses, and modes of interpretation (Atkins and Wallace, 2012).

Much of what emerges from my research journey is a continually shifting focus in which there is an ebb and flow of my self-perception. Again, Davey (2006, p. 16) posits that 'the process of subjectivization does not just take place between two selves, but also places us between ourselves' and, therefore, 'opens a differential space between unquestioned past self-understanding and future potentialities.' In summary, Davey (2006) discusses the transformative nature of self-reflection and personal research. This process is not just about change but also the ongoing development and potential for future transformation that arises from self-interrogation.

There was also a sense of how much one can reveal about the personal transformative journey of researching '…of which we are also unaware' (Pollard *et al.,* 2008). Hence, the theoretical framework embodies 'intransitive' positions of power (Gohler, 2009, p. 36). My interest in the study dovetails with my threefold position.

1. I am interested in the deeper concerns elicited from participants, which is why the study supported an interpretive paradigm.
2. There was an interest in technologies, specifically and pedagogically, blended learning as an approach to teaching. Hence, my own developing digital pedagogy is understood as constructively shaped 'reflected in the complexity of interrelationships that the term pedagogy needs to embrace' (Waring and Evans, 2015, p. 27).
3. The perceived unequal relations between academic staff and the institution's blended learning change programme provided a context or reason to take a position.

There were explicit assumptions in my positionality that the balance between academics and the institution is unequal. Brookfield (1995, p. 2) points out that 'assumptions are taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that seems so obvious to us as not to need stating explicitly'. By using a Gramscian hegemonic lens, I was located paradoxically within the privilege of dominance while attempting to stand against perceptions of injustice. Madison suggests researchers should acknowledge their 'own power, privilege, and biases just as we denounce the power structures surrounding our subjects' (2012, p. 8).

This dominance was troubling because of the dialectic as an academic, a researcher, and a woman; the marginalised existence of my worldview holds various other competing and complex assumptions. For instance, as a woman, I am subaltern, not because there are privileged men in my workplace, but because I live in a patriarchal Western society whose legislation, education, jurisprudence, and moralities are located within the societal and institution structures designed for the progression and advancement of some men.

Brookfield (1995, p. 15) highlights these experiences: 'The subtle tenacity of hegemony lies in the fact that, over time, it becomes a deeply embedded part of the cultural air we breathe. We cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify those specific individuals actively conspiring to keep us silent and disenfranchised'. Or we may peel the layers of oppression away and discover that one of those people conspiring against us is ourselves. The notion that hegemony is part of our everyday life is also lodged inside the 'stock wisdom, and common-sense ways of seeing and ordering the world that many of us take for granted'. Brookfield (1995, p. 3) would argue that the hegemonic framing of this study rests on 'paradigmatic assumptions', for instance, 'that education always has a political dimension'. Moreover, he argues that paradigmatic assumptions are often only uncovered after a great deal of resistance, which takes a considerable amount of time and 'contrary evidence' to change them (Brookfield, 1995, p. 3). Although my research identity held these assumptions, they were explicitly articulated throughout the study, starting with the choice to apply a Gramscian theory and all other choices made throughout.

A strong bias held is the notion that some academics resist technologies for various complex reasons, including, among other things, adoption (Nissenbaum, 2005; Flanagan *et al.,* 2008 cited in; Hansson, 2017). This notion of resistance to blended learning occupied my experience of those informal, ordinary, everyday conversations with colleagues (Scott, 1990). For instance, various issues emerged, such as lack of training, support, and time poverty. There was a revealing statement made by one colleague about the perceived imposed technologies in their institution, which was, 'I am not resistant to it … it is resistant to me'. This statement remained with me, and I formulated the first research title, which has since changed several times due to the explicit bias being problematic. It became a strong indicator in formulating the biased position, still somehow actively lurking in the background, especially from the perspective of technologies and resistance. Importantly, the notion of resistance in this study was presented as a misconception (see chapter above) and explained within the context of a spectrum of values and potential concerns that might open dialogue for collaborative pedagogies to exist between academics and the institution.

However, notions of resistance are more associated with the complexities of blended learning and the sometimes-hidden political dissent that is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. How can we disagree with blended learning when it is part of the technological landscape and a socially constructed materially significant phenomenon? My position is that we simply cannot disagree with the air we breathe, although we can disagree with the pollution in the air. Higher education must move along with the twenty-first century, and blended learning is one of numerous ways in which it is trying to keep pace; it is now the air we breathe.

3.14 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study received approval from the School Research Ethics Committee and followed London Metropolitan University guidance on ethics and British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). The researcher explained the study transparently, so participants were able to provide informed consent to take part. Approaching participants meant providing information about the research, why their participation will benefit the study itself, and for what purpose the knowledge acquired would be used. This transparency ensured participants were fully informed about the study. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest informed consent is about participants being able to understand their rights in terms of what they agree to and why. Consent must be voluntary, meaning it should be given freely without coercion, threat or withholding of information. The data remained confidential and held to the highest regard. Participants were informed that once consent was given, they could withdraw without reason and at any time during the study (BERA, 2018). It was made clear before, during and again after interviews that names and institutions would be anonymised using codes. Also, there was clarification about the limitations of anonymity ensuring participants are aware, for instance, if other colleagues have knowledge of their part in the study which they had divulged. In accordance with the university and BERA (2018) ethical guidance, data was stored securely in the iCloud encrypted software NVivo, encrypted Zoom, Otter.ai and an external hard drive to minimise loss or theft.

This study was guided by the London Metropolitan University (LMU) principles to maintain 'high ethical standards…to enhance the quality of research…protect the rights and welfare of participants…minimise potential claims of negligence' and uphold these standards in consideration of the university's reputation (LMU Research Ethics Policy and Procedure, 2019). LMU's *Code of Good Research Practice* (2019) states that 'researchers should be honest in respect of their actions' and 'declare potential conflicts of interest' consistent with ethical approvals. This study held the spirit of these principles in the highest regard, applying them in ways considered 'ethical, justifiable and sound' (BERA, 2018, p. 1).

Before interviewing, the researcher reminded participants they were free to stop the discussion at any time. Also, that if participants felt distressed during the meeting for whatever reason, the interviewer would stop the process and check participants felt safe enough to proceed (Brooks, te Riele and Maguire, 2014). Bringing up potentially sensitive issues provoking emotional reactions was possible where participants felt strongly about the blended learning change which they did not agree with. For instance, if the interviewee felt strongly about an injustice because of blended learning (i.e., safeguarding, poverty). The researcher was mindful that interviewees would

have access to appropriate support should the need arise (Hanssen, 2017). However, none of the participants required this type of support.

3.15 CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

The researcher complied with the legal requirements of storage and personal data under the Data Protection Act 1998 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018), with participants fully informed as to how, why, and where their data was stored. According to BERA (2018, p. 6), 'educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons – including themselves – involved in or touched by the research they are undertaking'. As such, the researcher ensured participants gave voluntary informed consent by providing detailed information about the nature of the study. Palaiologou, Needham and Male (2016) suggest that the researcher should fully inform participants before the research starts and throughout the study. Likewise, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018, p. 92) suggest that the 'essence of confidentiality is how investigators keep faith with those who have helped them'. Participants discussed their experiences with the researcher, and she behaved ethically and responsibly, anonymising participants in the discussion and findings (BERA, 2018).

Online meetings were audio and video recorded using Zoom. Zoom has the functionality to secure meetings with encryption and has an additional function for passcodes. Zoom administrators can retrieve content in the event of lost or stolen devices. There are several layers to the security and protection of data. While in Zoom, video and audio data was encrypted using password keys for each interview. Encrypting ensured that no third party could access the meeting's private keys. Participants were offered telephone interviews as an alternative; however, all respondents were happy to participate as mentioned above.

To ensure data stored on the researcher's device cannot be permanently lost or stolen the following strategies applied:

- Data was saved on the device hard drive.
- Data was safely uploaded to NVivo (a passcode protected software),
- Data was saved onto passcode protected external hard drive.
- Passcodes handwritten and stored securely in a locked safe.
- Data stored in Zoom was encrypted and could not be accessed by other parties.
- Data stored in Otter.ai was also encrypted, stored in Zoom and could not be accessed by other parties.

3.16 RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

The researcher recognised her participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time, for any or no reason (BERA, 2018, p. 18). Participants were informed about their right to withdraw before the study, reminded again before and after interviews, and when invited to member check their transcripts. No participant experienced emotional distress or other discomforts during or after the interview. After the interviews and before data analysis commenced, participants were reminded again about their rights to withdraw. According to Oliver (2003), the data collected will still belong to the participants until the analysis begins. Likewise, according to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), participants had an opportunity to agree with the researcher to analyse data before the analysis commenced. Once analysis began, data ownership passed from the participant to the researcher. This information was made explicit to participants.

Additionally, if academics no longer wish to participate after reading their interview, they were reminded of their right to withdraw and, further, that the data provided would be destroyed. However, this did not apply to any of the participants. Participants were informed that once they approved their transcripts, they again gave consent, not just at the beginning of the study but up to the analysis of data. The researcher maintained a healthy level of communication with participants throughout the study so that if any issues arose, they could be resolved. No issues arose, and no concerns were raised. However, three participants asked for some interview content to be removed.

3.17 CONSENT

The principle of consent is applied to participants, and they were given access to information about the aims and objectives of the study. Additionally, participants had contact details for the researcher, London Metropolitan University, and her supervisors, in addition to information and advice about the freedom to withdraw. The nature of the study was discussed, and participants were provided with written consent forms, which they and the researcher signed as an indication of the agreement to participate in the study. The researcher provided participants with copies of their signed consent forms.

CHAPTER FOUR FINDINGS

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings from the study. The foundations of this research continue into the data analysis stage, with the interpretivist perspective playing a pivotal role in describing the context and making sense of the situation. The analysis focuses on understanding relational complexities between academics and their respective institutions as they experience blended learning change programmes. Thematic analysis was employed, which involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, providing a detailed and nuanced account of the interviews. The section below begins by drawing out the definitions participants attribute to blended learning, emphasising the significance of blended learning in relation to meanings applied. Following this section, the findings show the data collected and categorised under four primary themes that include, *Top-Down Management,* in which participants express how blended learning was administratively managed and established; *Moral Academic Imperative,* participants refer to their moral obligations and concerns using technologies for teaching and learning; *Ideologically Ambiguous,* implying the degree of uncertainty experienced by participants within the various landscapes and *Pedagogy,* the extent to which participants' pedagogical values are constructed within a blended learning approach. Each of these themes are explored in detail in the following sections, including relevant subthemes and illustrative quotes from participants.

4.1 BLENDED LEARNING: DEFINITION VS MEANING

Participant definitions of blended learning helped establish some common ideas. As such, the study finds that while acknowledging the importance of definitions, meaning-making capacities get to the heart of those contradictions. The research established that academics tend to consider characteristics in defining blended learning. However, the internal meanings applied to blended learning by academics are subjective and can involve how one perceives, experiences, and feels about blended learning as an approach to teaching. Participant definitions provided specific explanations for blended learning, while the meanings applied tended to be communicated through ideas, feelings and experience within various contexts. As such, divorce from meaning applied to blended learning, problematises this complex landscape.

The interviews commenced by asking respondents their definition of blended learning as follows: 'How would you define blended learning?' Allowing participants to reveal their own understanding created opportunities for individual expressions of this, and for the interviewer to not impose her own definition. Respondents highlighted that blended learning involved teaching and learning using technologies. Participant L, for instance, answered, '*...my understanding of blended learning is that students engage with some of their learning using technology…and it's this idea that some of their learning is on-campus and some online…and that's effectively, the blend within the blended learning*'. Participant L's response correlates with Benson, Anderson and Ooms, who indicate that blended learning involves various teaching methods 'with the use of technology to improve practices' (2011, pp. 143). Likewise, Participant G states, '… *it's face-to-face teaching with online resources like, for instance, Microsoft Teams*'. Oliver and Trigwell also highlight that a 'conceptually clearer position arises from descriptions of blended learning involving a mix between online and face-to-face teaching' (2005, pp.19). Participant L and Participant G's explanation of blended learning was confirmed by all participants including for instance Participant AA, Participant Z, Participant Y and Participant X to name a few. Hrastinski's notion of blended learning aligns with participant responses but found considerable ambiguity, making common understandings of blended learning problematic (Hrastinski, 2019). Likewise, Oliver and Trigwell (2005) further point out that misunderstandings make this landscape difficult to understand.

While participants defined blended learning as involving technologies, variations were evident when the interview question shifted from asking about definitions to exploring the meaning as respondents contemplated the personal significance they attributed to blended learning. Gramsci (2021) suggests that language shapes meaning, and as it evolves, new understandings emerge. This concept is applied to blended learning. For instance, the question was reframed as 'what does blended learning mean to you?' The answers were contextual. Participant M, for instance, shares the following:

> *'So, this is a really interesting question. So, for me personally, I see blended learning as the act of learning locally in your institution and in your classroom with your, sort of, localised teacher, but then using that knowledge, or using some of that experience to then use technology to make things happen, I guess. But if you're not in the classroom and learning online, that's also blended learning because sometimes you're in a classroom, sometimes you're not. And actually, quite often what we consider blended learning is simply the replacement of the classroom in the virtual but it's far more complex than this'.*

Participant M's statement demonstrates his understanding of a complex, layered environment with various meanings attached. Participant M and responses from other participants align with Oliver and Trigwell (2005, pp. 18), who state that 'blended learning means different things to different people, which illustrates its widely untapped potential'. For instance, Participant T, Participant H, and Participant E contemplated blended learning as imposed upon them. Referring to the institutional implementation, they were explicit about the various ways in which blended learning was an act of neoliberalism impacting them and the academic workforce.

Participant Q refers to blended learning and what it means to her is *'independence and innovation'*. Her [Participant Q] sentiment correlates with Talukdar (2014, pp.19), who considers factors such as 'perceived usefulness, personal innovativeness, prior experience, enjoyment with innovation have a stronger influence on an individual'. Again, as pointed out by Talukdar (2014), Participant P and Participant D reflected on prior experiences of blended learning. Participant P expressed that while he received blended learning training in previous institutions, particularly during induction, training was unavailable in his current post-1992 institution. Participant D also led a blended learning project at another post-1992 institution. However, she expressed that her skills, knowledge, and experience were not '*valued*' (as she perceived it) by her current post-1992 institution. Participant D also found it challenging to access blended learning training, which meant that both Participant P and Participant D relied on the goodwill of academic colleagues to help them understand the digital landscape. Participant Q reveals her *'frustration'* at management's '*failure to appreciate the broader context of blended learning*'.

Based on Gramsci's (2020) theory of cultural hegemony, management represents the hegemonic force with an imposed understanding of blended learning that may not appear to accommodate innovation or broader pedagogical contexts. Academics like Participant Q may see the potential for blended learning as innovative. However, Participant Q's experience suggests a struggle for intellectual and educational reform, which Gramsci (1971), Mayo (2017) and Fusaro (2017) argue are necessary to challenge the prevailing hegemony and create a more equitable and open-ended educational framework.

Some comparisons arose between Participant Q and Participant P's responses. Participant P expanded that support around blended learning was, in his experience, *'non-existent*' as he was unable to access blended learning training when starting his new role as a senior lecturer. He says, *'well, that's a problem, isn't it*?' However, he later upskilled through Microsoft training independently outside of his institution. Participant P further explains, *'my understanding of blended learning now is just a COVID influenced version of probably what the university has now adapted to*'. Participant P's explanation draws out a parallel with Colley, who's statement about blended learning programmes is 'like a lemonade out of lemons proposition' (2021, pp. 107). Participant P's response indicates that, based on his and the experience of other participants, there may be gaps in the institution's infrastructure surrounding the drive to encourage academics to develop this practice at the outset. Thus, it is sometimes at odds with academic practice which can influence how blended learning is experienced by various parties.

However, Participant B, Participant G, and Participant R's experiences were more favourable. Because Participant B's role also involves policy development, the institution's standpoint supports how he applies meaning to this approach. Participant G's postgraduate degree was in computer science, so her interest in blended learning was contextualised against her educational background in this specific area. Participant R's role also involved the standardisation of, for instance, the institution's learning management systems. She encourages academics to use existing resources available in Moodle to blend teaching and learning. According to Cappelli and Smithies (2021) an important next step for institutions is to establish the cultural and organisational constraints impacting adoption, and the existing knowledge and experience when implementing blended learning programmes.

There are diverse reasons why an institution may not invest fully in blended learning training despite the potential benefits of having trained staff. These reasons often stem from practical constraints, institutional priorities, or broader educational policies rather than a straightforward calculation of benefits (Bokolo, 2019a; Bokolo 2019b). However, Gramsci (1999) posits that training prepares individuals, not only in the practical aspects of the role itself but creates an active and informed workforce. He argues that the purpose of training does not always equate to genuine democracy or to serve the deeper interests of employees within the workplace (Gramsci, 1999). Training in blended learning requires significant resources, including time, money, and technology. Institutions facing budgetary constraints may prioritise other areas deemed more immediately critical, such as infrastructure or direct student support services (Bokolo, 2019; Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

The section emphasises how participants tend to define blended learning, in addition to the meaning they apply to this approach. What follows is an exploration of the main overarching top-down management theme. This main theme represents a model and style of communication as perceived by participants. Arising out of the main theme are three subthemes communicated by participants. These are hierarchical and vertical communications, fragmented change, and the institutionalisation of blended learning.

4.2 MAIN THEME TOP-DOWN MANAGEMENT COMPLIANCE

Participant M is explicit; he says, **'***…we have a real issue at our university…and we're very, top down. I guess you could say, we're very administratively, management led.* **'** Participant S and Participant T express similar sentiments, agreeing that administrative and management bodies predominantly influence the leadership of blended learning. Although Participant B believed blended learning was policy-driven, he saw this standardised process as constructive. Westoby (1988) points out that top-down management is discerned through how and why change occurs and sharing those differing realities. For instance, Participant G points out, *'before you do any change, make sure you know what is happening already, and then make the change…it doesn't seem like that's happening***'.** Participant G's statement refers to management developing a better understanding of the landscape before implementing blended learning change, which indicates this was not the case in her institution. Participant I, Participant F, and others agree, indicating that blended learning change tends to happen with minimal collaboration between them [academics] and the institution.

Participant J takes a slightly different perspective, referring to the changing technological landscape since the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Bokolo *et al.* (2020) suggest that more studies on blended learning should focus on institutional readiness, including policy change, cost-effectiveness, and an increasing commitment to flexible teaching strategies. Participant J explains that a '*strategic approach at the highest levels of management is crucial***'.** Taylor and Helfat (2009) also tell us that senior management provides a central focus for navigating technological transitions. When asked to explain how she understood strategic high-level thinking, Participant J responded, '*strategic high-level management thinking should, sort of reimagine what post-1992 universities should aspire to'***.**

When asked what she [Participant J] thought her university should aspire to, she responded, '*well, through communication and dialogue…it should involve us [academics]…but unfortunately, well, it doesn't really do that…this means that communication can often be unclear, like why are we doing it this way? And the response might be…well because we are…and that's unhelpful'***.**

Management-led strategies were seen as effective ways to introduce blended learning change programmes in post-1992 universities. Institutional directives often follow policies related to student satisfaction, compliance, and national higher education (HEI) policies such as the National Student Surveys (NSS). Gramsci's (2011) regulated society is mirrored in the education sector, where compliance ensures conformity to the established order. However, Lisewski (2004) suggests that the main challenge arising from blended learning are in the development of how learning technologies can be used differently. The NSS report highlights the growing demand for flexible and technology-enhanced learning catering to diverse needs and preferences (NSS, 2022). Notably, policies provide benchmarks for evaluating the efficacy of blended learning initiatives and identifying areas for refinement (QAA, 2022). For instance, the MacFarlane Report (1992, p. ix) recommended longer more considered approaches involving educational technologies for teaching and learning. Therefore, academics rightly perceive that institutions are concerned about student satisfaction, engagement, recruitment, and financial stability. According to Marshall (2010) universities are facing financial accountability associated with the pressures of rapid change in the current climate. Nonetheless, participants also felt their institution's focus on student satisfaction did not always consider existing academic expertise and experience as part of the change management process.

The findings demonstrate a narrative about blended learning change rooted in bureaucracy, and compliance measures. As such, management processes were largely conceptualised through systems of power with often unanticipated consequences but also with opportunities for open dialogue and innovation to occur. The institution's approach to blended learning and Gramsci's notion of bureaucracy represents systems designed to standardise complex activities. With blended learning, bureaucracy is cultivated within pedagogical processes, potentially reinforcing certain educational norms. This idea is similar to Gramsci's view of bureaucracies within the context of social control. He describes bureaucracy pessimistically as a kind of 'social' and 'relative passivity' (Gramsci, 2007, p. 296). Gramsci's passivity is not absolute but relative, meaning that a degree of consent must exist inside these structures. This top-down management theme is grounded in the complexity of managerial communication; whether to silence or make heard is an institutional strategy (Englestad, 2009). Participants view top-down strategies as separated from current academic knowledge, disorganised, excessively prioritising student job readiness, and influenced by student and external pressures at their (academic) own expense.

The disconnect between the strategic high-level thinking that Participant J advocates for and the reality of unclear communication could reflect Gramsci's concern with how hegemony is maintained and perpetuated (Gramsci, 1971; Jones, 2006). When Participant J cites that the usual response to questioning the status quo is *'because we are…and that's unhelpful*,' it mirrors Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony where practices continue just because they have always been done that way, not necessarily because they are the most effective or equitable.

Ertmer and Ottenbriet-Leftwich (2010) indicate that management should sustainably support educators in developing and using technology-related practices. Also, Westoby (1988) points out that, unlike industry models, universities are less likely to incorporate the diverse skills and knowledge in which change occurs. Westoby's (1988) study could be described as out of context, given its timeframe in the eighties. However, Buchanan and Badham (2020, p. 122) offer a more nuanced contemporary response using the term 'strategic ambiguity', which may be 'aspirational rather than realistic'. They further suggest that strategic action frequently occurs in the 'context of multiple, conflicting, and often unclearly defined goals' (Buchanan and Badham, 2020, p. 122). These uncertainties are comparable with Participant J's explanation of the need for strategic high-level thinking involving open communication with academics. The idea of 'strategic ambiguity' is consistent with Gramsci's notion of the 'transformative method' where he indicates that change occurs through conflict. He posits that these frequently contradictory conditions are inherently 'transformative' (Gramsci, 1980, p. 232). This means that blended learning change programmes are established within complex and unclear conditions required for meaningful change to occur.

Buchanan and Badham (2020) also argue that top-down management and formal policies play a crucial role in shaping the direction of blended learning approaches within universities. Participant B states: '*So blended learning wasn't actually recognised in our policy or procedures as a way of validating a programme…and so, so the use of technology has always been in the background... but now, it's now embedded in my institution's policy'*.

When asked why this change came about, Participant B answered, '*a few reasons really, the new blended learning OfS report, so that's compliance, and this came about due to the NSS data, and that came about, I think, because of COVID...the landscape is definitely changing'*. Like Participant B, other participants such as Participant E and Participant X referred to compliance measures specifically the national student survey. Participant E stated '*…in the HEI sector we must make sure students are getting what they want, we must maintain or increase percentage points in the NSS, and we must make sure we are complying with HEI policy'*.

Similarly, Participant X said, '…*well, I guess we're governed by the NSS data, I mean, if it's bad we get a ticking off about it, or at least it seems that way*.' Whereas Participant N felt he was out of touch with his institution's blended learning policy he says: '*I'm always worried about losing [the student's] attention through technology. But it means I don't think I'm in lockstep with where the institution is trying to go. So, no, I'm not fully aware of what the blended learning policy is, is expecting of us…it feels like I'm behind'.* Gramsci believed that policy should be about shaping cultural and social institutions, or, as he describes, 'civil society' (Gramsci, 2010, p. 10). His approach emphasised the importance of policy for transforming society. Therefore, from this perspective, Gramsci views policy as a necessary instrument for change (Adamson, 1980).

This section emphasised the significance of top-down management and the meaning participants apply to this model of change. Respondents were cognisant of the overarching policy and compliance measures regarded by their institution, and in particular, many spoke of the national student survey. What follows is an exploration of the subtheme of hierarchical and vertical communications. This theme represents a compelling model of communication experienced by participants and utilised by post-1992 universities.

4.3 SUB THEME HIERARCHICAL AND VERTICAL COMMUNICATIONS

Anderson and Brown (2010) question whether hierarchies improve the way individual's function arguing there is evidence of efficacy within these landscapes. They also state that hierarchies are neither good nor bad for organisations, depending on a host of factors (Anderson and Brown, 2010). Because of Participant B's dual role as both an academic and quality assurance officer, he pays particular attention to how blended learning is transmitted through policy. He points out that his institution's blended learning programme aligns with their aspirational objectives, '*for moving up the university league tables, increasing our NSS scores and metrics that are imposed externally on us…that make us look good'*. These metrics were referred to in the main theme above (top-down management), which tended to consider the power differentials, whereas they are also viewed by participants in terms of the direction that communication travels.

Although implementing blended learning change may be positive (i.e., adapting to the changing technological landscape and remaining competitive), there can still be resistance because of the increased pressure, stress, and uncertainty (Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999; McHugh, 1997). When asked whether he was involved in his institution's policy development, Participant B answered '*yes…I have some input for making sure it aligned with…or isn't in conflict with other compliance policy measures'***.** Because of Participant B's unique

position, he was optimistic about the change. His experience indicates that individuals are more optimistic about change when they access these various communication levels (Haugh and Laschinger, 1996; Luthan and Sommer, 1999). Jones *et al*. (2008) and others propose that the experience of hierarchical communications will differ depending on employee positions within organisations. Likewise, Participant M, Participant A and Participant X's roles as research-intensive academics correspond with their comfortable disposition around hierarchical communications. All three referred to the extent to which blended learning, or technologies for teaching and learning in higher education, overlapped with their research interests. They viewed vertical communications from the perspective of the potential to disseminate their research alongside the importance of research-informed teaching.

The varying degrees of optimism and acceptance among individuals, highlighted by their positions within the institution's hierarchy and their involvement in, for instance, policy development or research, reflect Gramsci's idea that consent to change is negotiated through cultural and ideological leadership rather than imposed by force (Gramsci, 2014). Those with access to hierarchical communication channels, like Participant B, and those whose roles align with new paradigms, like Participant M, Participant A, and Participant X, are more likely to see the benefits of change and contribute to its cultural acceptance. This dynamic illustrates Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, where the direction of change is influenced by those in positions of authority or with ideological alignment, facilitating a more consensual shift in practice and belief within the institution.

Participant E also refers to external influences. She states, *'so, the data nationally shows that students want a more blended learning approach. The recent QAA talks about blended learning to ensure degrees are fit for purpose*'. Additionally, Participant B's ideas correlate with Participant L, who comments, *'I think one of the things that motivates my university is employability, but I also think it's about student feedback, it's about outcomes, it's about NSS and module evaluation, and things like that*'. When asked why? Participant L answered, *'Well…to be honest, if an institution's policies are part of their obligation to be compliant, then, I mean, it sounds harsh, but if they [institution] don't have a choice, then neither do we [academics]…I guess that sense of collaboration becomes less important at times…*'

Gramsci (2014) argues that educational systems are mechanisms through which the dominant institution's ideology becomes the cultural norm. This statement highlights that blended learning in higher education is communicated vertically through these various channels and that this model is perpetuated inside the institution's infrastructure. Friebel and Raith (2004) point out that the flow of information is hierarchically structured in many institutions, which means that often academics are encouraged to follow a chain of command. In this case, Participant Q discusses how information about blended learning is communicated to academics by those in management positions. She says: '*They [middle management] often interpret it [blended learning] in quite black and white ways and think that they must do exactly what the executive board said'*.

When Participant Q was asked whether she felt there was room for her managers to interpret the information communicated to them she responded: *'...so, when we met with the board…the board said you can change it…there's some flexibility with interpreting the policy…you break it down and change it according to the context of our students*'. Participant Q noted some disparity between the directives given by upper management, how this is interpreted and communicated by middle management, and then implemented down and across her institution.

Similarly, Participant J indicated that communications about blended learning may need improvement. Participant J states, *'I don't think management are clear, because the messages are mixed, and people are confused'*. Participant J is not objecting to a system in which hierarchy is at play but rather that these downward transmissions can be somewhat opaque. Participant Q added, *'It's not that they're [managers] disagreeing; sometimes managers are just not communicating with each other about their interpretation of blended learning; one manager will say it means this, another will say it means that'*. When asked why this might be the case, Participant Q answered, *'because they're not really talking to each other…who knows, maybe they're also overworked, but that's what it looks like to me'*. Participant J and Participant Q's insights point to the complexities within hierarchical communication systems. Gramsci also recognises the challenges associated with establishing a unified cultural direction. Although Gramsci does not perceive these hierarchical states as incidental, they are by design.

A different perspective was raised when asked about how blended learning was communicated to him, Participant T proposes the idea of visibility. Boidy (2019, p.445) refers to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's (1994) concept of visibility in which he postulates that 'our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence'.

While talking about visibility, Participant T refers to '*empowerment*' and states:

> *'I think it's [blended learning communication] very visible. So, if, if I reinterpret that question in terms of, was I in any way supported or empowered by policy around my institution's blended learning strategy? I would say no, the opposite is true. So, as I understood it…it was top-down, no excuses, prescriptive, one size-fits-all'.*

While considering Participant T's statement, we refer to Neyland (2007) who posits that, 'making things visible would always also involve making things invisible.' The second part of Participant T's response was that he was not '*supported or empowered'* during his institution's blended learning programme. Therefore, while the blended learning programme was clearly communicated to him, another aspect was lacking where he says '*no, the opposite is true'*. But also, that the downward transmissions experienced by him were prescriptive.

Participant M also noted that the management system in his university prioritises the external impact of blended learning. He states:

> *'...on the last REF, it didn't count if the impact [of blended learning] was felt internally. It had to be external. So that's really shaping our management thinking'.*

This important insight brings additional clarity to the focus of hierarchy and downward transmission directly related to external pressures imposed onto the institution, and subsequently impacting on the academic experience of blended learning programmes. Participant E adds:

> *'I've worked in two post-92 universities and the NSS has achieved more prominence as a tool for measuring student satisfaction and shaping the sector…For both institutions, it was about making sure students are getting what they want, to maintain or increase percentage points in NSS, and making sure we comply with National HEI policy'.*

This section emphasises the significance of communication within a hierarchical and vertical landscape, and the meaning participants apply to this mode of disseminating information. Participants spoke of the information transmitted to them being sometimes unclear, the confusion about blended learning practice and the various layers of hierarchies externally imposed as well as the institutional infrastructures such as university executive boards and interpretation of policy. What follows is an exploration of the subtheme fragmented change. This theme represents a compelling model of change as reported by participants and frequently utilised by the post-1992 universities in the study.

4.4 SUB THEME FRAGMENTED CHANGE

McKendrick and Wade (2009) argue that 'repeated incremental technological change can be problematic', which they suggest can result in more harm than good. Fragmented change indicates a lack of coherence and continuity in the change process or that blended learning change tends to happen frequently. Participants express concerns regarding their institutions' responses to change, which often imply unsatisfactory planning and the perceived absence of long-term goals. This fragmented change can manifest as a need for more alignment between short-term actions and broader organisational objectives. Exploring change as fragmented highlights the need for improved institutional practices as it pertains to a distinct state of continuous adapting to the environment. Particularly in post-1992 universities, blended learning signifies an effort to modify the teaching and learning environment. As such, blended learning aims to alter this landscape within those evolving needs and expectations. Thus, academics must quickly grasp the dynamics of blended learning.

Many participants expressed that blended learning management strategies tend to be disjointed, including Participant D using the term *'fragmentary'* to describe her experience. She says, '*It's as if long term management strategies are really missing. It's kind of fragmentary.*' She further explains why, in her experience, fragmented change happens in her institution and states:

> *'Blended learning tends to be initiated without implementing them within a rational context. It's a more reactionary context…There is a certain degree of vagueness that just serves this vicious cycle of confusion'.*

Participant D's statement above is indicative of a predominant feeling in which nearly all participants across the various institutions held. For instance, Participant Z refers to '*rapid changes…*' and Participant AA refers to *'…chronic change…*' and Participant P mentioned *'…habitual…'* while Participant S describes the changes as '*incessant…*' Participant D refers to the need for a *'rational context'* and, in doing so, draws out the notion of irrationality. Furthermore, she connects this observation to a *'vicious cycle of confusion'*. Zhu and Yu (2010) regard 'rational' university management as academics clearly understanding the institution's goals, whereas Santarpia (2023, pp.17) highlights irrational beliefs in the workplace as experiencing the 'potential occurrence of events as intolerable.' As described by Participant D and others, the constant changes can be attributed to Gramsci's thinking around struggle and agency within higher education (Pizzolato and Holst, 2017). Giroux (1999, pp. 6) notes the importance of how culture shapes people's everyday lives in understanding the 'meaning, identity, social practices and institutional machineries of power'.

Rapid, chronic, and incessant changes can be viewed as attempts to keep up with the shifting technological and economic demands required to adapt and compete within the blended learning landscape. However, Participant D expanded that this leads to academics experiencing their institution as irrational. Nonetheless, from Gramsci's (1980, p. 151) unique perspective change occurs when 'men become conscious of fundamental conflicts and fight them out'.

Participant E argues that her university is reactive to external pressures such as the NSS data and states, *'…there's a problem because both institutions I worked in were reactive to this [NSS] data. What we need is a long-term meaningful plan that's relevant to our student demographic'*. Like Participant D, Participant E also refers to the importance of *'long-term'* planning. Rossi and Sengupta (2022) suggest that universities are forced to respond to stakeholder demands and increased competition with other universities. Furthermore, that universities need a greater degree of coordinated systems. It is evident that institutions employ blended learning as one of various competitive strategies which are important considerations (McKendrick and Wade, 2009).

Participant U reflects back to when she started with her university approximately five years previously where the result of *'not having an induction'* resulted in a substandard working experience, she also describes this as a *'dreadful culture'*. She continues *'…okay so at the time I was new, I was trying to navigate Moodle, trying to learn about Teams, trying to understand the systems, work the monitors when sometimes they didn't work and I didn't know at the time who to contact…I could barely keep my head above water when all this stuff is coming at me…you've got to learn about all this new technology with no support…and erm…that was a huge shock.'*
They argue that frequent change can bring about 'endogenous shock' which creates an uncertain fearful environment (McKendrick and Wade, 2009, pp. 619). Endogenous shock is a term used by the authors who argue 'that frequent technological change is more hazardous than commonly understood' (McKendrick and Wade, 2009, pp. 619). The notion of 'endogenous shock' is also reflected in participant P's response where he shares, *'I'd say our version of blended learning was a disaster…and if you analyse any disaster like a rail crash, then it's not one thing, it's, it's a number of things…it's entirely disempowering…and if you push back…you're, you're…seen as a luddite or militant when actually you're just showing intellect'.* Gramsci noted that Fordism was more than just a labour process; it was a social mechanism that shaped the entire cultural and social realm, influencing every aspect of individuals' lives, both within and outside the factory. He saw this fear as an attempt to create a new type of worker, one who was efficient and lived a lifestyle that complimented the institution's objectives (Gramsci, 1996).

Drawing from Gramsci, universities adopting reactive and fragmented strategies are similar to the workers in a Fordist system structured to respond to external demands (Gramsci, 2014). Gramsci would advocate for universities to engage in active reflection and critical self-assessment, akin to a cultural and educational counter-hegemony, where they develop strategies that not only respond to immediate pressures but also serve their intrinsic educational values and long-term vision (Filippini, 2017). This approach would align with resistance to Fordism's assembly line mentality, favouring a more thoughtful and less mechanistic model of educational development surrounding blended learning (Gramsci, 1996).

Participant S states that change in his institution is frequent and *'...very much a knee jerk thing all the time'*. Various authors indicate that frequent technological change tends to be the main way organisations 'adapt to intense competition and changing environments' (McKendrick and Wade, 2009; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Eisenhardt and Tabrizi, 1995; Teece et al., 1997). However, Participant A offers another insight where she discusses that her institution's blended learning programme seems *'divorced'* from the true focus of blended learning. She says: *'basically, I think my institution has this wrong. While they're thinking about blended learning, they're really focusing on access.'* Participant A was asked to expand and she explains:

> *'I think perhaps the digital literacy movement in the way it's going, is more towards inclusive pedagogy. So, we need to re-centre away from talking only about accessibility issues and obviously that's a big agenda because of digital poverty for many of our students. But blended learning isn't just about accessibility, granted it might be one aspect, but in the round it's an approach to teaching. It's important we don't conflate two separate issues. Personally, I think we are and that's a problem for sure.'*

This section emphasises fragmented change as incoherent and disjointed. Frequent incremental blended learning changes are criticised for potentially causing more harm than good, contributing to a cycle of confusion and fear within the academic environment. There is a call for more articulated coordinated systems focusing on technological change and digital literacies within an inclusive pedagogical approach. What follows is an exploration of the subtheme institutionalisation of blended learning. This theme represents a compelling model of blended learning change standardised within departments, schools, and institution wide.

4.5 SUB THEME INSTITUTIONALISATION OF BLENDED LEARNING

The preceding sections raised distinctions between top-down management, types of communication and the experience of fragmented and frequent change. This theme represents part four of top-down management. Applicants draw out their understanding of the institutionalisation of blended learning. Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2022) define institutionalisation as attempts to standardise blended learning across the university. This move towards blended learning is not just a pedagogical choice; it represents a broader shift in how educational institutions align themselves with the evolving digital landscape, mirroring trends seen in the corporate sector. Participant S parallels this tendency toward institutionalisation and his university's corporate endeavours, particularly in the context of technology usage for teaching and learning. He states:

> *'And I thought to myself, hang on a minute. Is this really part and parcel of me as a teacher? Or is this really part and parcel of Microsoft? Like, I know we signed up to this vision of standardising everything. But you could say, well, you know, they've chosen this vision of blended learning so we streamline, in some way, this system if you like, something we all follow. Or they've adopted Microsoft's vision. But, I mean, it would never have come from us…I'm quite sure our vision comes from businesses like Microsoft. So, if we've signed that contract with Amazon, or Microsoft, or whoever it is - it seems to be that they're the ones with the vision. And we're all just running along behind. Sounds quite sinister, doesn't it? Yeah, or maybe I'm just paranoid. I don't know. But that's what it looks like to me. In the end, maybe it doesn't matter whose idea it is'.*

Participant S points out the similarity between the institutionalisation of blended learning and his institution's adoption of their Microsoft licence. His comparison underscores a significant trend in leveraging the Microsoft suite of tools to standardise and improve operational efficiency. Gramsci (1971) suggests that universities sometimes serve the interests of business and industry leaders, shaping students to fit into the existing economic system. Participant U also referred to this form of standardisation as a *'one-size-fits-all approach'*, which, while important, she states, neglects the importance of *'accessibility…for neurodiverse students.'* On the other hand, Participant A states that too much emphasis is on accessibility at the expense of the blended learning within those relevant contexts.

Graham *et al.* (2013) and Moskal *et al.* (2013) indicate that the institutionalisation of blended learning should start with policies that outline a clear understanding of accessibility and educational materials to avoid these ambiguities. Indeed, Participant O and Participant V share their understanding of a clear shift in which blended learning has recently become a strong policy focus.

Participant O says, '*I remember when [Microsoft] Teams first arrived… there was a lot of talk about blending the learning, and I won't lie, people were scared…I mean they were really worried about the time it might take to understand it…*' Whereas Participant V was already familiar with Microsoft Teams before employment at her current post-1992, she shares, '*I was really excited about using [Microsoft] Teams, I could really see the benefit, I mean, I'd used it before…I mean I wasn't a super expert or anything but I embraced it straight away. But…and this is a big but by the way, it wasn't easy and the support wasn't always available but I persevered***.**' When asked whether Microsoft Teams standardised their blended learning approach, both confirmed that the introduction of this platform represented a clear pedagogical message to blend the learning and promote student engagement.

The institutionalisation of blended learning in higher education parallels Gramsci's (1971) critique of vocational education, as both perpetuate hegemonic norms. Gramsci saw vocational education as a tool for producing a compliant workforce aligned with the industrial needs of the dominant group rather than fostering critical and holistic thinkers (Gramsci, 1996). Similarly, the push for standardising blended learning indicates an effort to meet contemporary economic demands, emphasising technology and practical skills over traditional, broad-based education.

Blended learning is about using advanced tools and embracing a corporate model of efficiency, using a broadly standard approach. As mentioned above by respondents, this includes using learning management systems like Moodle or Microsoft to enhance the potential for blended learning. However, various software applications support this approach to teaching and learning. Adopting technology in education is not always driven by pedagogical needs or educational innovation but also by trends and models established in the business world (Davidovitch and Belichenko, 2016). This was recognised by Participant S where he questions whether the standardisation of blended learning is an institutional vision or otherwise based on the objectives of business partnerships with, for instance, Microsoft and Amazon. This correlates with Gramsci's concept of the 'integral state' which emphasises the 'interpenetration between civil society, the state apparatus, and the creation of infrastructure' (McCarthy, 2023, pp. 1). His theory is relevant to understanding the role of infrastructure, such that blended learning and learning management systems, for instance, emphasise shaping education through the institution's internal relations and processes (Gramsci, 1996).

In their effort to stay relevant and modern, post-1992 universities tend to adopt strategies and infrastructures proven to be successful in the corporate sector. As such, blended learning is 'rapidly changing teaching and learning in higher education' (Bokolo *et al.,* 2020, pp. 1). This statement indicates that post-1992 universities may not be leading the way in technological innovation. Nonetheless, McCarthy (2023) refers to Gramsci's philosophy on the physical networks associated with these infrastructures, such as learning management systems that support standard blended learning approaches to teaching. He further argues that these infrastructures are not simply ideas but 'commodities that literally provide the undergirding of modern societies' (McCarthy, 2023, p. 2). Participant M's position on the institutionalisation of blended learning is helpful, he says:

> *'So, for me, it is about working through our systems and finding what's best and most effective for the rest of the university to work through our particular way of doing blended learning. But, yeah, I have that position as someone to potentially influence and hopefully influence teaching and learning…and navigating all the cogs and mechanisms of bureaucracy that the university has put in place, to really, truly, make an impact in this area'.*

Alongside Participant S and others, Participant O and Participant V also discuss the role of Learning Management Systems (LMS) as an evolving institutional shift. Participant V perceives Moodle as a tool to sustain pre-existing standards across the university. Kastner (2020, pp.1) posits a shifting focus from traditional use of learning management systems with a stronger focus towards blended learning. Davidovitch and Belichenko (2016) state that using learning management systems (LMS) supports increased demands of the labour market and significantly raises staff knowledge, skills, and experience. Using a Gramscian lens broadens our understanding of LMS as an aspect of the integral state when considered in conjunction with the institutionalisation of blended learning (McCarthy, 2023). According to Gramsci existing internal relations inside the institution act as the state apparatus for rooting civil society within its own 'socio-technical reproduction – including the reproduction of relations of domination and inequality' (McCarthy, 2023, pp. 3). Indeed, this is a somewhat sceptical position. However, Participant U, Participant D and Participant P highlight that learning management systems require a more significant presence during induction. All three indicated that more support to navigate this technological landscape would have been helpful when first arriving at their institution.

Participant D says that learning management systems are the principal repository for students to access resources and the primary platform for creating blended learning resources. She further maintains that new staff need support to understand the central system underpinning the blended learning context. She posits that staff development around the institution's drive toward blended learning is left to chance rather than applied within a formal

structure. Taking the challenges into account, Gramsci would question whether these difficulties were an aspect of the developing landscape or by design. Participant D says:

> *'Okay. Because wait…the thing is, we're used to doing things like, present, I'm preparing presentations using PowerPoint. So maybe that's blended learning, right! But then we're talking about, how do we move from presenting using PowerPoints to potentially showing those PowerPoints via something like teams, or OneNote in an interactive way? I mean, I don't know how to do this. Some people upload their PowerPoints onto a YouTube channel. Others create or add something for students to do in class. I scan this code and do whatever. So, is this what you want me to do? You know, to me this, again, as an organisation, there needs to be some sort of consistency in terms of expectation'.*

This perspective aligns with the institutional goal of creating a cohesive and unified teaching approach. Moodle and similar LMS platforms are more than just educational tools; they represent the structured, consistent, and possibly corporatised way of delivering education. The standardisation brought about by such systems echoes the uniformity often seen in corporate technology strategies. Participant S's observations highlight a significant trend in higher education, such as converging educational methodologies with corporate practices.

Concerning institutional success, Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2020, pp. 1558) question that the implementation of blended learning becomes even more complex when applied at institutional level. They ask a pertinent question - 'how does one blend effectively?' Their answer emphasises that implementing a successful institution-wide blended learning programme requires 'alignment of student, lecturer and institutional goals' (Huang, Matthews, and Lodge, 2020, p. 1559). Nevertheless, Moskal *et al.* (2013) state that the institution's senior executives play a crucial role in supporting academic departments and other stakeholders in these initiatives.

This section discusses the institutionalisation of blended learning, which raised questions about the balance between educational innovation and the influence of corporate models on academic pedagogies of practice. While blended learning offers numerous benefits, standardising this practice reflects a broader trend of universities aligning more closely with business objectives, potentially at the cost of pedagogical leadership and innovation. What follows is an exploration of the second main theme of moral academic imperative.

This theme represents a compelling model for academic morality embedded within blended learning pedagogies of practice. Arising out of this main theme are three subthemes communicated by participants. These are research informed change, digital poverty, and academic wellbeing adapt or die.

4.6 MAIN THEME MORAL ACADEMIC IMPERATIVE

Staff values refer to beliefs and principles, including integrity, honesty, transparency, and ethical behaviour (Schein, 2010). Likewise, business values may also refer to ethical standards guiding the institution's commitment to delivering high-quality education (Hickman, 2010; Buchanan and Badham, 2020). As various participants referred to their ethical principles, moral values, or both, it represents a repeated theme, and the findings suggest that morality is one of numerous academic concerns associated with implementing blended learning. The study did not indicate a solid resistance to blended learning pedagogies. Indeed, academics are already using blended learning. Therefore, academic concerns were grounded in the efficacies shaping the realities for themselves and their students rather than being resistant to adoption. Jenkins indicates that efficacy is 'the many and varied ways in which humans, whether individually or collectively, attempt to achieve their objectives and to assist or obstruct others in the achievement of theirs' (2009, p. 140). Gramsci (2014) believed that the bourgeoisie established moral and intellectual leadership by influencing societal norms, values, and beliefs. This is achieved through institutions such as education, religion, and media. These dominant values become society's common-sense values, thus framing what is morally acceptable and what is not (Crehan, 2016; Baurain, 2011). This process helps maintain the status quo and prevents significant challenges to power as this is useful to institutions during blended learning change.

Institutions have a vested interest in promoting progress in society (Selwyn in 2011). Further, they are morally obligated to ensure that all students have access to a well-rounded and inclusive learning experience. In some cases, students at post-1992 universities may have limited access to devices, hardware and software, Wi-Fi, and data and in more extreme cases experiencing digital poverty (Van Dijk, 2005). This can create inequitable barriers to education for those students. One of various examples might be the need to address the challenges associated with digital poverty (Van Dijk, 2005). Post-1992 universities in particular demonstrate their commitment to the moral principles of a more inclusive, diverse, and resilient educational landscape. However, according to Humphreys (2023), faculty seldom associate university administration with a guiding moral compass.

The data indicates that some academics perceive the university as focusing on their business objectives. Although institutional expectations and academic values do have the potential to align, these may also be at odds.

Fullan (2011, p. 75) argues that ‘the moral imperative realized is absolutely crucial for whole system success in education’. Fullan (2011, p.4) further suggests that many teachers have a deeply moral commitment to ‘raising the bar…closing the gap’ and making a difference. Several participants expressed their moral or ethical values often clashed with the institution's blended learning programme. Participant T described blended learning as '...a kind of moral formation as well as an intellectual formation...' Participant H criticised institutional policies for '..drifting into unethical practices,' arguing that institutions were pressuring academics to use technologies as a shortcut, bypassing essential skills like reading and critical thinking - skills still valued by employers.
Participant E highlighted a 'moral contract' for academics to enhance their practice but noted that attempts to adapt blended learning faced resistance from management. She explained, 'We were given direct instructions on blended learning, but it wasn't working, and they [management] weren't listening. This [directive] led to local, under-the-radar changes driven by moral concerns for both academics and students.'

By integrating the concept of hegemony with the analysis of social morality, Gramsci (2014) provides a framework for understanding how moral and ethical norms are deeply embedded in society's economic structures through universities. In fact, Gramsci was clear about the function of hegemony as that of ‘the ethical state’ to raise the ethical consciousness of the population (Gramsci, 1971, p. 258). As such, the moral and ethical dimensions of power are realised, in simple terms, through those blended learning narratives in higher education.

Participant E’s response to the blended learning change programme in her institution demonstrates the countervailing power to actively resist that which she believes is inequitable. As such, there may be a correlation between Participant E’s academic moral imperative being politically active and resistant, and Gramsci’s subalternity which falls within the premise of political dissent. Participant E explains her phrase ‘moral academic imperative’. She states:

> *‘When I say moral academic imperative, I guess what I mean is…as academics, we are employed to look at the evidence pointing us in the direction that becomes I guess, moral stroke ethical. So, if we're being tasked by senior management to comply with a blended learning practice that is not ethical or sound according to the research, we've got this moral imperative to point that out, as opposed to being a workforce that goes up and says my boss has told me to, therefore, I must!’*

Like Participant E, Participant H indicates a moral dilemma with her ethical position. She states:

> *'I feel sometimes we're almost sort of forced to do things which are slightly unethical to get the students through. And that bothers me'.*

When asked what she considered to be unethical, Participant H answered: '*So, for instance, this could involve using technologies just so students don't have to read under the guise of it being blended learning, and therefore, good practice. How does that help students when they leave to find graduate jobs? The truth is, it doesn't, not really'*.

The relevance of ethical-political hegemony lies in its application to understanding how social changes can occur and how alternative visions of society can emerge. Although this may seem unlikely to be realised through blended learning change, as a social and instrumental construct, it represents an approach to teaching which permeates every aspect of society. For Gramsci the struggle for hegemony was also a struggle for the hearts and minds of the people, requiring both ethical leadership and political organisation to challenge and eventually replace the existing hegemonic order (Gramsci, 2014). In this case, it is not so much that blended learning is replacing an existing order but transforming the traditional landscape. This ideal represents blended learning change programmes as an intellectual and moral reform. Unlike their institutions, many respondents express their moral values surrounding blended learning but question whether the transformative claims are justified.

Davey (2006, p. 9) writes that 'the basic aim of education is to learn how to acquire wisdom in life'. Sternberg, Reznitskaya and Jarvin (2008, p. 49) focus on wisdom being more important than 'knowledge or intelligence', defined as 'the power of judging rightly' and in the context of learning, education, responsibility, and obligation. According to Participant P, the blended learning experience is shaped by ethical encounters with others. Participant P refers to the wisdom of teaching being central to caring about the student. He goes onto state that the idea of knowledge, education, experience, and blended learning are all *'part of that same conversation'*. This correlates with Barnett and Maxwell's, (2009, p. 3) concerns around the 'crisis of ever-increasing technological power in the absence of wisdom'. Nonetheless, Davey (2006, p. 9) suggests this 'rich vein of ethical thinking' facilitates learning and not simply the strategies used to enhance engagement through the implementation of blended learning. Participant P was asked to expand on his idea about the *'wisdom of teaching'* and its relationship to blended learning. He explains his unique moral position as follows:

> *'Theologian Paul Griffiths talks about… the gift of learning, which is something he got from Augustine. I really liked that because as a Catholic Theologian, his [Augustine] idea was that you are with your knowledge…and you're aware that it's transforming you anew, as well as you seeking to learn from it. So, it's kind of a moral formation as well as an intellectual formation… it's about academics seeing the moral formation of people as fundamental to the teaching purpose in their own teaching practice. For me, blended learning simply adds to that conversation'.*

This section discusses the moral academic imperative associated with the implementation of blended learning change programmes. The discussion extends to the idea that wisdom, responsibility, and ethical considerations should be at the heart of education, not simply technology for engagement. The notion of moral formation in teaching was highlighted that blended learning should enhance this aspect rather than detract from it. What follows is an exploration of the following theme research-informed change. This theme represents a compelling model for academic morality embedded within practice of research.

4.7 SUB THEME RESEARCH INFORMED CHANGE

The respondents do not object to implementing blended learning in their institutions, as they trust that research will help identify the best practices, inform decision-making, and ultimately improve student outcomes. The QAA (2022) recommend that academics in higher education engage in research as this helps them stay up to date with their subject discipline and incorporate research findings into their teaching. The response from this study shows that academics feel they have a responsibility to their students to provide the best possible education, which requires using the best available evidence to inform their teaching. Research-informed evidence leads to positive change in higher education. It is evident in student learning outcomes, retention rates, and more effective teaching strategies (QAA, 2022). The participants expressed appreciation for blended learning change programmes based on research.

With research-informed change, academics serve as modern day 'public intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 137) by synthesising research findings and best practices to inform their teaching strategies. Gramsci (2020, p. xlvi) has a broad view of intellectuals. Both 'organic' and 'public' intellectuals play an important role in 'civil society' (Gramsci, 2020; Apple, 2015). Blended learning, guided by the latest research, reflects a commitment to ethical and intellectual leadership that aligns with Gramsci's vision of transformative social change (Gramsci, 1980, p. 232). By incorporating research into their teaching, academics fulfil a dual role; they disseminate knowledge while embodying the progressive intellectual leadership Gramsci deemed necessary for cultural and educational advancement (Apple, 2015).

Participant D's term' *ethical integrity'* indicates that research-informed teaching is essential. Participant D's ethical integrity surrounding blended learning aligns with Gramsci's 'ethico-political' concept that individuals should be ethically and politically coherent in advocating for moral integrity and political action during change. Participant Z, Participant H, Participant P and Participant E were all explicit about being guided by research as an ethical blueprint underpinning blended learning change. Again, the participant's blended learning pedagogies are compatible with Gramsci (2014), who advocates for a unified, principled stance that fosters genuine social transformation rooted in deeply held ethical values.

In Participant D's blended learning approach, she works collaboratively with students to ensure that teaching content is always both practical and research informed. She states:

> *'Okay, so the way I've used blended learning in the past is with students as co-learners and co-curriculum developers…And so, the intention is for our teaching content to always be research informed, but at the same time for us to generate data to inform this process'.*

Additionally, Participant H described her university as more teaching than research-focused and viewed this as a '*dilemma*' since post-1992 universities are not known for being research-intensive. Like Participant H, Gramsci also experienced specific dilemmas with his thinking. One of Gramsci's central dilemmas is the challenge of achieving hegemony in a society where cultural and ideological control is predominantly controlled by those in positions of power (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971). In encountering those dilemmas, academics face the difficulties of developing a counter-hegemony to blended learning, which also involves navigating and transforming the power structures that marginalise them. It is a struggle to foster genuine democratic participation within a fundamentally unequal societal framework. For academics like Participant H, research-informed change is one way to engage in a counter-hegemonic blended learning position. However, academic dilemmas may arise if the institution controls that narrative using their research or chooses the research supporting the blended learning change.

However, Participant H also says, '*as a post-1992 [university] research isn't really what we're known for… it's not usually why students choose us, but we have other strengths we should play to and I'm not sure we do that well*'. She expresses frustration that her institution should share more guidance on the research supporting blended learning. She notes that change informed by research has credibility which is not apparent in her institution's blended learning strategies. Participant H's response indicates that the institution's research evidence for supporting the blended learning change would be appreciated. She explains:

> *'As a post-1992 university we're teaching-focused, not research-focused and that's…that's a big problem because we're stuck… What does the research say about blended learning practice? Our institution doesn't have a clue, or if they do, they haven't shared that with us'.*

Participant P and Participant Z regard research as a legitimate teaching practice, indicating that blended learning should still be justified by knowledge supporting this practice. Participant P speaks about the '*wisdom*' embedded within his teaching. He regards teaching theologically, from '*an intention of love and respect*' which he is adamant must be aligned with research to improve teaching practice and '*deeper understanding*'. Schein (2010, p. 149) notes this as 'the management of love' which denotes that Participant P's teaching style embodies a pedagogy of 'acceptance and intimacy' toward his students to ensure they feel 'accepted, respected and loved in the group'.

Participant P's ideology of wisdom also corresponds with Gramsci (1980), who challenges notions of wisdom from traditional views, enabling the development of more sophisticated understandings and contributing to the advancement of critical consciousness. As previously stated above, Participant P views his blended learning pedagogy as an aspect of his practice. Thus, the research he gravitates towards is theologically positioned. Brookfield (1995) raises that many academics spend considerable time grappling with the contradictions while continuously trying to work through these ethical dilemmas. Brookfield (1995, p. 194) states that 'dilemmas are a constant and pressing feature of teachers lives…few of us get through the day without some kind of dilemma that…has implicitly ethical dimensions.'

Badia, Segues and Soler-Campo (2022) describe research informed practice as central to professional development. They and others argue that 'it is widely accepted in professional and transformative views of teaching professionalism that educational research informs the teacher's knowledge base' (Badia, Segues and Soler-Campo, 2022, pp. 274; Gorard, and Siddiqui 2016; Ro 2020). Participant I drew attention to the benefits and drawbacks of blended learning. Although she and others recognise the potential of blended learning as a valuable and legitimate approach to education. She says:

> *'I think there needs to be a lot more research into why blended learning should be seen as equally valid to face to face and in-person learning, other than as something that just happens when face to face in-person learning can't or doesn't happen'.*

While Participant I indicates that her institution does indeed acknowledge blended learning research to inform practice she states: *'So, I mean, it's kind of like, where it suits, we'll use it.'.* Participant E regards academic research as deepening her pedagogy and as morally grounding. Participant E's perspective is congruent with both Baurain (2011) and Pizzolato and Holst's (2017) hegemonic ideologies. Baurain (2011, p. 162) states there is a need for a deepened pedagogy which exists because 'it is a moral and relational activity'.

Gramsci's moral commitment to inclusivity and relational engagement facilitates a collective learning process where knowledge is constructed socially, aligning with his vision of education as a tool for societal transformation (Pizzolato and Holst, 2017). This indicates that Participant E's perspective of blended learning change is, firstly, deeply rooted in her value associated with this approach, and secondly, it should be inclusive and socially constructed for the institution's change to be genuinely valued by her and other participants.

However, some participants like Participant N were more pragmatic in their responses. Participant N shares a concern that he does not make use of enough software providing additional learning environments. As a relatively new lecturer with three years' experience, Participant N views himself as an early career researcher. He points out that support from his institution would help him *'embed'* more software into the learning, thereby promoting a greater degree of student engagement. He describes himself as *'a fish out of water'*. Badia, Segues and Soler-Campo (2022, pp. 275) found that academic professionalisms are enhanced by opportunities to apply relevant research knowledge into their blended learning practice. Participant N states:

> *'So, I'd really like there to see some sort of engagement from people who know it, use it better and can share some research about the use of technology with me and then provide the ideas rather than me sort of guessing.'*

Like Participant N, Participant Z would also appreciate practical assistance seeking more input from her institution about beneficial ways to blend practice. She wants to understand how to generate ideas for incorporating a more informed blended learning approach in her practice. Participant Z states, '*honestly, I don't feel confident about blended learning at all. Maybe there are some ways I might be doing it. But if someone were to ask me, I'd probably have to admit that I don't feel like I am…*' When asked whether she had approached her line managers regarding support she says, '*honestly, and maybe I should, but no…maybe that's something I should take responsibility for…*' Participant Z was also concerned about the lack of time needed to apply a more blended learning approach into her teaching. She says:

> *'I'm really snowed under, I was kind of forced to take on this course leadership role, was given absolutely no training and I'm learning on the job…and I'm not really performing to the level I would like to…I'm just about keeping my head above water. So, if I were to do some research about blended learning…well, impossible for me, and worse, asking for support would mean carving out time to do whatever extra they might need for me to catch up…so I don't ask because just thinking about it makes me feel panicky'.*

Participant Z touches on feeling '…*panicky*'. Schein (2010) points out that group members may not reach out for support because they fear being perceived as incompetent, resulting in a loss of power, position, or identity. Gramsci (1971) denotes that cultural hegemony creates a sense of inevitability regarding social order. As such, by controlling the narrative and setting the terms of acceptance, institutions effectively use fear to maintain their power and suppress challenges to their notion of blended learning. Participant N was also asked, what could your institution do to help you with more information around blended the learning? He answered:

> '*Well, Moodle is there, I don't have to think too hard about how it works or why it works, and they are very clear about it being standard practice and used in a particular way. Now, I know that's a lot of research done about systems like Moodle, or Blackboard or whatever but I don't need to think about it just use it. Although, I think some of my colleagues are great at finding their own way and innovating. But I'm not one of those people, if you give me a system, I'll work with it. I think there's definitely a place for my university to think of the diverse needs of their staff. Or maybe, they should always focus on the main standard and those who want to innovate can. I don't know…'*

According to Connolly *et al.* (2021, pp. 83) ‘the necessity for teaching to be research informed, where research practice is supported, is critical to the development of teacher education and the teacher career trajectory’. This indicates that research significantly assists academics in identifying effective strategies, tools, and approaches, ensuring that blended learning is not just a technological addition but a pedagogical innovation. All respondents advocated for an understanding of blended learning based on research to deepen their knowledge and practice. However, there were differing views where some wanted the freedom to innovate, while others required a clear standardised directive that would not impact their busy work lives.

This section highlights that academics view their responsibility towards providing the highest quality education, basing their knowledge on the most reliable research evidence. Several participants reinforce the need for a deeper understanding and integration of evidence to support changes to their teaching practices. The discussion extends to the idea that wisdom, and ethical considerations underpin change related to research deepening their practice. Many wanted a clear standard approach to the blended learning change, with clarity around the research informing the change.

However, participants regard standardisation of blended learning with the freedom to innovate as preferential. This theme represents a compelling model for institutions to be clear about the research supporting their blended learning change. What follows is an exploration of the subtheme digital poverty.

4.8 SUB THEME DIGITAL POVERTY

Participant AA believes her university is indeed conscious of the difficulties some students face. Her university offers various forms of hard and software technology to students through grants and loans. Barber (2021) highlights that through research providers have managed the challenge of digital poverty. However, a lot more still needs to be done and White (2020, p. 55) describes this as the 'capitalist contradiction' whereby capitalism is the process of reproducing wealth while 'reproducing its opposite'. Participant N explains that some students have complicated home lives. He states:

> *'Yes, it does feel like the institution has an awareness about the challenges our students face, you know, sort of, not being able to afford devices. There have been various…I think schemes might be the right word…to provide technology to students through grants or loans. But to be honest, I don't think it's significant enough…some of our student's home lives are complicated. So, what I mean by that is, well, an iPad in a chaotic house is left to one side, there are other things to be done'.*

Digitalisation has transformed how students learn, and academics teach in education, using online learning platforms, digital textbooks, and virtual reality technologies. Blended learning has made education more accessible, flexible, and personalised, with students learning at their own pace and teachers providing more tailored support. Controversially, digital poverty refers to the lack of access to or ability to use digital technologies effectively, which can significantly impact students. Participant F also acknowledges students experiencing digital poverty in her institution. She points out:

> *'And I know that a lot of our students don't have this…their device is a phone. I know because they tell me. And they go to the library to do written work because they don't have a device that they can comfortably type on'.*

The effects of digital poverty are especially concerning for post-1992 universities whose students come from diverse backgrounds. Some students may need more financial resources to purchase the necessary digital devices and internet connectivity for their studies. Without access to these technologies, some students may struggle to participate in online learning, complete assignments, or access digital resources such as e-books and online journals. Participant H raised this as a moral concern, indicating that one of the institution's narratives for blended learning programmes was for students to read less, acquiring knowledge through increased online engagement. Participant H asks**:** '*How does that help students when they leave to find graduate jobs?'* As Gramsci's work draws from the Marxist tradition, he views education sceptically as reinforcing hegemonic power to the dominant group (Arora, 2015).

Participant Q's response below reinforces the diluted notion of learning in post-1992 universities, she says:

> *'And I think I raised this at a meeting. I was like, are we actually doing TEAL or what, because we'd have to change classrooms…and furniture…so there has to be like circular desks, and everybody has to have a laptop and it's very interactive'.*

Digital poverty, the lack of access to digital resources, mirrors Gramsci's view of cultural hegemony, which reinforces social and economic disparities, limiting educational opportunities and perpetuating the status quo where privileged groups maintain their advantage in accessing digital educational tools and resources (Gramsci, 1971, p. 258). Van Dijk (2005, p. 22) describes this as the digital divide, where social problems are associated with the 'material and mental resources' for inclusion.

Similarly, Participant N previously referred to students' complicated and chaotic home lives, which correlates with Van Dijk (2005, p. 35), who states, 'as with all other kinds of access, motivational access is primarily explained by particular resources people have or lack'. Misunderstanding approaches such as TEAL can also lead to underutilising available technological tools and missing innovative teaching and learning opportunities.
This misunderstanding can further widen the gap in digital literacy and readiness among educators and students (Van Dijk, 2005).Participant I and Participant AA share their experience of engaging with a well-known blended learning approach without clear consistent directives. Participant I state:

> *It's like, it means something. Yeah, those words mean things, it's an actual pedagogy with a holistic on-campus experience. And then I was like, so are we doing that? Or are we just vaguely engaging with the word, and the answer I got was like, yeah, we're just vaguely engaging with the word'.*

Participant Q also discusses how her institution uses TEAL to implement a blended learning programme. Unlike Participant L, she expresses concern that her institution employs the term without understanding its meaning:

> *'So, there are words that our institution uses, but don't necessarily learn what those words mean. So currently, we do TEAL…it's technology, enhanced active learning. But that's actually a specific pedagogy from MIT.'*

Participant U also acknowledges the challenge of digital barriers for some students' as she values fairness, transparency, and accessibility in teaching. She states:

> *'I always think fairness is at the top of my value list. I also feel that things should be very transparent. So, when I'm using technologies my first thought is that the learning should be accessible to all communities within the classroom. I also feel that at the heart of my delivery, there needs to be an understanding of an inclusive approach, so for instance, I check whether the technologies are accessible. I have an appreciation of the cultural capital that the trainees come with because they're not coming to us as empty vessels. We know they're coming with a range of different expertise and knowledge and I feel that sometimes we aren't fully aware of all that they bring. Although, the challenge comes where*

students cannot access the learning because there's a digital barrier and it's not always possible to help them through this'.

Van Dijk (2005, p.18) proposes that these mechanisms supporting the digital landscape can also foster 'social exclusion, exploitation and control'. It may also cause frustration among students and faculty, reducing motivation and participation. Van Dijk (2005, p. 27) notes that 'motivation should not be taken for granted' as it is located within the context of 'presence and absence' between the 'rise and fall of motivation' experienced throughout a person's life. Van Dijk (2005, p. 28) explains, 'the process appears to be composed of a complex series of backgrounds that is difficult to unravel'.

On the other hand, Participant V points out that some challenges related to digitalisation in education stem from a lack of good quality, blended curricula and not knowing the student learning communities well enough. She believes there is a need for more imaginative approaches to teaching and learning, as students can produce innovative work. She feels that the current focus is still on teaching the basics, such as writing assignments, creating mind maps and brainstorming, but exploring new approaches is necessary. She says:

'We don't know our student learning communities well enough in this digital imaginative age. I mean some of the things my students show me I think…like wow…I don't think we do that enough'.

Additionally, Participant L shares his institution's initiatives to enhance technology in learning, with a recent focus on TEAL (Technology-Enhanced Active Learning). TEAL is an instructional approach that combines technology and collaborative learning to create a more interactive and engaging learning environment. Research on TEAL has shown several potential benefits for students, including improved academic performance, increased engagement, and motivation, and enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The institution implemented blended learning methods in the past to improve the students' learning experiences. Participant L was optimistic about this initiative. He says:

'So, at the start of this academic year, we've had a real focus on the technology enhanced active learning. And that has featured in kind of development days and things like that. And then, if you went back a year ago, we had a real focus on [X] programme. It was different, but it still speaks to the blended learning stuff that we're talking about.'

Not understanding the approach to Technology Enhanced Active Learning (TEAL) and attempting its implementation in higher education presents several challenges. Without a clear grasp, educators may misunderstand the blended learning process, leading to superficial learning experiences for students rather than deep engagement. Hall refers to the digital divide in the context of Marx's capitalist production, which is both

socially expansive and, at the same time, socially limiting (Hall, 2021; Miller, 1984, p. 190). He notes a 'decomposition of traditional skills…increasingly passing over into the machine itself' (Hall, 2021, p. 106).

He further posits that this creates a superior class of workman, some of them scientifically educated' to 'look after…the machinery itself and repair it' (Hall, 2021, p. 106). This notion relates to the digital divide of post-1992 students, whereby participants raised concerns about, for instance, employability. Hall refers to this as 'modern industry' (Hall, 2021, p. 106). As such, while blended learning programmes may transform student skills to align with employability, it results in an uneven distribution of diluted skills, limiting post-1992 student access to 'the superior class of workman' (Hall, 2021, p. 106).

This section highlights the impact of digitalisation on digital poverty for students. While digitalisation has made learning accessible and personalised through online platforms and virtual technologies, the section also indicates the necessity of thoughtful blended learning integration in education to appropriately address the challenges concerning digital poverty. Digital poverty presents challenges, especially for post-1992 students from diverse backgrounds who may need more financial and material support such as digital devices and connectivity. What follows is an exploration of academic wellbeing during the blended learning change process.

4.9 SUB THEME ACADEMIC WELLBEING – ADAPT OR DIE

Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2022, pp.1557) emphasise the value of academics by developing blended learning policies that consider the impact on academic well-being. Participant AA said, '*I would describe myself as someone keen to adopt fairly early, but the problem is there are usually so many problems with changes that it's exhausting trying to figure it out.*' Similarly, Participant R expressed that even though she might be invested in the blended learning change initially, she found that the technologies for supporting her practice did not always immediately work. She says, '*I get that when implementing new technologies there's usually a process of troubleshooting. The problem is, this could take half a year to be resolved normally because they [institution] have either not put any support in place to allow for this or just left it to us to deal with'*. This demonstrates the importance of academics having the relevant tools to adapt and that staff morale and well-being are carefully considered (Muguti, 2022). Additionally Participant Y shares, '*yes, well no…I don't feel my wellbeing is considered…I'm just expected to adapt, and fast…this makes me feel stressed out mostly because my institution has an unrealistic understanding of how things work on the ground…*'

In response to the question about the development of blended learning policies, Participant T adds, *'I think this potentially depends on who's in the conversation or space…at its most conspiratorial…yeah, it's proper privatisation'*. Participant T expands by saying the implications of this are as follows:

> *'We are a labour workforce, we are simply not treated humanely'*, but as *'robots in a tightly wound regime…do we matter? Yeah, maybe, but the point is, are we, the workforce, a broken product, a commodity? So, in that kind of climate, there's no room to care about whether I'm struggling'*.

Graham *et al.* (2013) insists on the need to provide appropriate supportive structures through a lens that recognises the dangers of a 'careless climate' of change. As such, rather than fostering agency and innovation, it promotes cynicism. Stansfield (2011, pp. 1) warns that post-1992 universities are at 'an over-mature stage of their corporate life cycle'. He explains that this results in a 'self-justification' of their research activities that are symptomatic of complex hierarchical structures. Participant M touches on this he says, '*we have this sort of big lunking bureaucratic sort of entity…it's a shame…but in some ways this is creating barriers for academic staff who are just trying to survive rather than thrive'.* This statement also throws light on wellbeing and the need to adapt to the blended learning change programme.

The interviews draw out that academics view blended learning change as disruptive, stressful, and emotionally charged, with staff expressing inadequacy and concern for their well-being. However, Muguti (2022, pp. 2) states that disruption in one's industry can be an important and positive driver for change. However, he posits that the advent of technology means an accelerated competitive advantage for some institutions leaving others struggling to keep up with the demands (Muguti, 2022, pp. 2). Participant S considers the relationship with his institution in terms of their expectations. He says: *'so their [institution] expectations of the reality of getting to grips with technology are either pretty poor or they don't have the knowledge to even think about it, to be honest'*. Importantly though, the interviews highlight academics as keen to embrace technological change, it is the implementation process that seems problematic.

Pickel (2018, p. 169) states, 'In the face of change, individuals and institutions must adapt to survive. The alternative is, if not death, then certainly increasing irrelevance.' The title is a metaphor for staff well-being associated with pressures of adapting to blended learning change, meaning, adapt or become irrelevant. Gramsci's (2014) theory of cultural hegemony posits that the dominant class shapes societal norms to maintain its power and finds a compelling connection within the culture of continuous change in the context of Pickel's (2018, pp. 168) 'adapt or die' metaphor. Gramsci (1971) further indicates that adapting to change is about survival, which means challenging and reshaping the prevailing cultural hegemonies that define knowledge within the blended learning process. In view of this, academic wellbeing becomes a dynamic process where adaptation is crucial for challenging existing power structures, fostering a more inclusive and equitable blended learning environment.
The interviews demonstrate a strong association between well-being and the ability to adapt. Thus contrastingly, the inability to adapt means being left behind, which has grave implications for perceived relevance, professional identities, and job security. Participant N also previously shared his concern about keeping up with his institution's expectations to develop a blended learning pedagogy. Dino (2023, pp.1) refers to this as 'the culture of continuous improvement' in which he emphasises 'the trap of focusing on low-hanging fruit projects…' with the need 'for positive cultural change'.

Blended learning change can be initiated through various sources, whether within the organisation or through external influences. During the transition to blended learning, academics help build trust and support for the new approach. According to Muguti (2022), change occurs in various ways, from internal or external factors, and the journey for change requires buy-in to inspire action. Participant AA and Participant R enjoy the process of innovation in their teaching and both tended to embrace the blended learning changing in their institutions but it was not without challenges.

Participant S states, '*but you know, I can see major wins for everyone here, but right now, I think most of us just worry about the extra work, on top of the extra work…and that's incredibly hard for us. But often we're just seen as complaining about nothing.*' By involving all in the process and actively seeking input and feedback, they can experience ownership and investment in the change, leading to better outcomes for everyone involved. There are essential considerations regarding the moral good, wellbeing and ability to adapt in times of change. First, effective communication helps ensure that all have access to the tools and resources they need to succeed in a blended learning environment. Participant T and others indicated that although the institution invested in hardware to improve the teaching environment, and promote the use of blended learning, it did not always work, which he found stressful and demotivating. Second, there was a need to promote transparency and accountability in the change process.

Participant E points out that academic innovative practice is thriving within the institution. However, she says this is not always recognised by her institution. She says:

> *'I think there is always innovative grassroots practice and change. I believe this kind of change benefits universities immensely. But universities don't often recognise where this innovation comes from, but they do recognise when it's had an effect, and they [the institution] enjoy the successes.'*

Participant P positions his teaching style within an ethic of care towards his students. He uses Microsoft OneNote, part of the digital suite available as a software platform at his institution. Participant P shares, *'For instance, I mean, a good example is you know, I've learned how to use OneNote as a means of communication, documentation and of distribution of information to students.*' Participant P demonstrates an initiative to learn and develop his blended learning practice at a grassroots level; therefore, academics like Participant P demonstrate innovation without necessarily being motivated by the institution itself:

> *'So, you know, OneNote is a good example of the way that we've used blended learning. So, it functions as a platform, it functions as a place you can go to put stuff and talk to people and communicate information and set tasks and things. I was expecting to be taught it and that training never came. So, I went off and learned myself'.*

As a result of creating some blended learning guidance material, Participant R noted that some individuals are willing to experiment with new ideas and resources while others are more hesitant. Interestingly, she points out a shift in attitudes with more people beginning to adopt or change practice, recognising blended learning as valuable.

She explains:

> *'I devised a set of…sort of good practice guidance on blending the learning. I mean, there's always some people who will adopt and others who, who just feel utterly overwhelmed and then the rest are in between. You know, and when they discover they don't have to do it, they don't do it.'*

However, Participant R also recognises a shift in how technologies are embraced. She shared:

> *Now, people are trying a bit more to do that sort of thing, you know, to blend their learning. I would say, more people are, you know, there's a shift. But there're still some people left behind. And there are still some people who are adopting more than anybody else. But I think that the centre point has moved'.*

Arora (2015) reconstructs Gramsci's employability agenda as hegemonically framed within the concept of common sense. Arora (2015, pp. 636) also draws out that Gramsci views the rise of the employability agenda in higher education as the justification for 'repositioning and corporatisation of the sector'. Earlier, Hall was cited in support of Marx's capitalist production, the corporate 'machine' and the distribution of diluted skills to support 'the superior class of workman' (Hall, 2021, p. 106). This raises the question of blended learning change programmes and the pressures to adapt within the 'obviousness of common sense' (Crehan, 2016, p. 45) described as the 'normal or average understanding of the plain wisdom which is everyone's inheritance'. Gramsci (2007, p. 345) mentions this as the '…fear of going against widespread public opinion'

This section emphasised the challenges of adapting to blended learning change. Effective communication and understanding of the rationale for changes are crucial for gaining support among staff. Some participants highlight a fear of being dehumanised and overworked in an unsympathetic system. However, participants discuss the desire for active involvement in the change process, ensuring they feel valued. The overall message is that institutions must not only push for technological and educational advancements but also nurture their academic community, ensuring a supportive environment that facilitates personal well-being alongside professional growth. What follows is the theme ideologically ambiguous.

4.10 MAIN THEME IDEOLOGICALLY AMBIGUOUS

The relationship between the ideological ambiguity of blended learning is in Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where dominant ideologies shape the direction of educational practices. Schwartzmantel (2008, p. 25) denote the term ideology as 'totalistic' describing it as 'a broad range of views which cover the central aspects of how society should be organised'. Unlike Marx and Engels, Gramsci does not necessarily apply negative connotations to his concept of ideology (Hoare and Sperber, 2016). He intricately weaves ideology into the notion of common sense. Hoare and Sperber (2016, p. 92) quote from Gramsci who states it as 'a conception of the world manifest implicitly in art, the law, economic activity, and all manifestations of individual and collective life'. This also reflects Gramsci's view of the relationship between culture, power, and education (Gramsci, 1971, p.258). As such, ideologies are established through dominant narratives of cultural hegemony which '…exists in both progressive and reactionary forms' (Hoare and Sperber, 2016).

Therefore, in the context of blended learning, dominant pedagogical and technological ideologies shape both the approach and definitions applied to blended learning. Furthermore, because blended learning is contextualised in this study within the various landscapes they can be experienced as ambiguous and fluid. Therefore, although a clear unambiguous definition of blended learning may be desirable for some, the results show variations across contexts, individuals, in space and time. This theme intends to capture underlying values associated with blended learning. There are indeed some distinct and commonly agreed-upon definitions to what blended learning conveys. However, technology's shifting and rapidly changing nature means that distinct definitions associated with blended learning quickly become outmoded which is where ideological perspectives become useful. Ideologies encapsulate meaning as 'multi-conceptual constructs' whereby concepts are contained within the meaning of words offering 'alternative views' to arise (Schwartzmantel, 2008, p. 26). Thus, Gramsci deconstructs linguistic functions, of words and meaning, that maintain common-sense ideologies and continually shape society's norms and beliefs (Gramsci, 1971; Carlucci, 2017).

Ambiguity implies a degree of uncertainty or complexity regarding one's ideological position. In such cases, individuals or ideas may incorporate elements from multiple ideologies, making it challenging to categorise them neatly (Hrastinski, 2019; Cronje, 2020; Dziuban *et al.,* 2018). As such, ambiguity can result from evolving perspectives, conflicting values, or an attempt to maintain flexibility in one's beliefs. It often requires careful analysis to decipher the underlying principles or motivations, as they may not conform to conventional boundaries, fostering open-mindedness and adaptability. The interviews indicate that this shifting landscape is ambiguous because of the often-competing values attached to blended learning.

Hrastinski (2019) asserts that blended learning signals a shift away from traditional classroom settings, indicating that learning straddles physical and digital realms. Participant K and Participant AA share that while the practical application of blended learning is important, the values they attach make it open to diverse positions. For instance, Participant K says, *'blended learning isn't…shouldn't be bolted onto the learning…it needs a shifting purpose, one that's flexible…that can evolve with practice'.* While Participant AA believes that blended learning might not involve technologies but a completely different view of learning such as environmental learning and outdoor spaces like '*forest school learning'* she says, '*so why can't for instance forest school or hiking or camping not be blended learning?'* When asked about her definition earlier which was combining face-to-face learning with technologies she responded '*yes, but that's a definition that we all know applies to learning within the boundaries of the universities space, and not necessarily on-campus by the way because even if you're online, your kind of on-campus in a weird way*'. Participant AA's response represents a unique view compared to Participant M whose perspective on blended learning focused on bringing international students together to share culturally diverse experiences of teaching and learning.

Universities and academics subscribe to various ideologies that underpin those beliefs about how practice is understood and enacted. Schwartzmantel (2008, p. 111) regards those various beliefs as ways of adjusting to a 'different kind of society'. Although there is consensus that blended learning is a synergy of in-person and virtual instruction (Hrastinski, 2019; Cronje, 2020; Dziuban *et al.,* 2018), the degree and manner in which this integration occurs vary widely. Participant C values the importance of active engagement and the positive impact of blended learning on teaching and learning outcomes. She says, '*…so, you create the space…and from that digital space students then begin to see the importance of actively engaging in that digital side'.*

The statement reflects an ideology that values and supports active student participation. At the same time, there is agreement on the potential benefits of blending in-person and virtual learning, acknowledging those differing contexts. Additionally, Participant C's view reflects aspects of Gramsci's (2020) collective will (a key component of hegemony), whereby integrating traditional and digital spaces shapes learners' attitudes and outcomes akin to cultural leadership. Academics lead the blended learning spaces in this instance.

Participant R examined the agreed upon institutional language to draw on her reference of meaning. She reflects on her past discussions, noting that people have sometimes used *'blended learning, distance learning, and e-learning interchangeably, which has caused some confusion and blurred the lines of what blended learning means.*' Participant R's response indicates that these interchangeable terms are confusing, and states that the institution should agree specific policy-related definitions. Bokolo *et al.* (2020) also raises that more theoretical foundations are needed as policies related to blended learning expand. When asked whether she thought prescribing the language could be either limiting or ambiguous, Participant R answered, '*well, I hear what you're saying and yes, that could happen both ways. But if [university] decided on what the terms mean, then we'll all understand it better…singing from the same tune as it were'*. In support of her answer, Participant R refers to '*Diana Laurillard'* a prominent educational research academic who has significantly contributed to practice on methodologies surrounding pedagogy and digital learning environments. She says, '*so at one point, we began referring heavily to Laurillard and it worked really well…we were even encouraging staff to engage with her platform…but it wasn't sustained which is a shame'*. Gramsci's (1971) theory posits that ideas emerge as unsustainable when the hegemonic culture imposes ideas without alignment with local values. Educational trends such as Diane Laurillard's methodology were likely unsustainable because the institution needed to root this pedagogy in the organic cultures and practices of the educational community. Participant R's revelation indicates a disconnect between the official and practical ideologies.

Participant B provides a commonly agreed definition, this still represents an ideological position, he states, *'blended learning is used as a shorthand for engaging with online resources and technologies.*' Similarly, Participant D's definition adds '*…for students who are registered to attend on campus.*' The explanations above provide some distinctions of not only how academics perceive blended learning but the underlying beliefs attached to this approach which demonstrates agreement relating to specific contexts.

However, ideologically, the perceptions and values remain considerably diverse. Engelstad (2009, p. 222) states that widely accepted ideas can develop into a dominant 'culture of consumption.' Engelstad refers to this phenomenon as an 'aggregate effect,' where members interpret their experiences by repetition of ideas. Participant M's ideas advocate a cultural shift and goes beyond the surface level of the question acknowledging the intricacies of blended learning:

> *'For me, the question is what does blended learning add for students?... It must be something extra that perhaps couldn't be achieved just by sitting in a classroom…It's not about whether you're in the classroom or not in the classroom, it's about how technology is constructively and purposefully used to enhance the learning and engagement'.*

Participant R recognises there is no agreed definition of what constitutes blended learning:

> *'…and by that score, if you think about it, all learning through a university is blended learning, you know. But if you're going to then sort of take the title blended learning and want it to mean something specific, then I think…you're always going to run up against that fuzziness around the edges.'*

However, Participant V challenges the term blending learning, pointing out that it is confusing. She argues for a distinct difference between blended learning and blended teaching. She suggests that one is closely related to pedagogy (blended teaching) while the other should focus on the student experience (blended learning). Participant V's ideas align with Selwyn's 'pedagogic corrective' (2011, p. 89) as an ideological shift towards new understandings. Participant V explains:

> *'What that definition describes to me is blended teaching…rather than blended learning…I think this is where the confusion with the whole aspect of blended learning is… because blended teaching, that's about your pedagogy. And the learning aspect is about the practice. It's how you've put your pedagogy into practice for that learning to take place. So that's how I see it'.*

Participant Q says there needs to be more '*consistency*' about what blended learning is and what it is supposed to entail. Alkis and Temizel (2018) recommend that the strongest influence for sustained consistency is where employees feel motivated but also point out that motivations are complex. Whereas Dino (2023, pp. 6) notes that where there is no '…structured training then you can assume there is no stability'. Participant Q raises that different department heads have differing opinions on what constitutes blended learning and what approaches are acceptable. Dino (2023, pp. 6) proposes that if departments are taking different approaches '…with the same tasks in the same environment' the approach is unlikely to be sustained over time.

Participant Q advocates for university heads to reach a consensus before implementing the blended learning change programme. However, this response conflicts with previous insights that a hierarchical approach is unhelpful. Nonetheless, it does point towards collaborative discussions between various stakeholders. She indicates:

> *'And I think sometimes the communication about what blended learning is supposed to be, is like…well, one person was different to another. So, like, I asked the head of [X department] who told me one thing, what blended learning was, what we were doing, and what we were allowed to do. And then I was told a different thing from another head. And both were very like, this is what you have to do. And so yeah, there're arguments between different department heads, I guess, who also don't agree'.*

Hrastinski (2019, pp. 565) asks 'what constitutes blended learning and what does not?' However, the study indicates a need to recognise blended learning, in the various contexts, at a particular point in time, that it is fluid, evolving but requires a deep dive into the semantics and ideological values driving those involved. This is particularly the case where technologies are used to complement teaching. The extent to which these methods qualify as blended learning depends considerably on context, individuality, and group agreement. As noted above, one participant referred to environmental outdoor learning.

While there is a consensus on the potential benefits of blended learning integration, the implementation varies, reflecting a spectrum of beliefs and practices. Blended learning, therefore, cannot be pinned to a single ideology but rather is a pedagogical approach that evolves with practice and context. It straddles multiple ideologies, making it challenging to define uniformly across differing academic environments. This ambiguity is seen as both a strength, fostering adaptability and open-mindedness, and a challenge, as it complicates a clear understanding and application of blended learning. What follows is the subtheme power relations.

4.11 SUB THEME POWER RELATIONS

According to Gohler (2009, p. 27), the 'experiences of power are particularly complex'. Power is an embedded property, 'woven into the fabric of society and organisations' (Buchanan and Badham, 2020, p. 13). Heckscher and Donnellon (1994) and others share two power-related distinctions. First, the domination argument posits that individuals aim to control others. Second is the functional argument, which views power as a tool for individuals to reach and enforce collective decisions, not just a means for domination. These perspectives highlight power as a constant in human interactions. However, without recognising power dynamics, systems become prone to manipulation (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Buchanan and Badham, 2020; Gohler, 2009).

Gramsci postulated that power is not only coercive but also consensual, woven into the fabric of society through cultural and ideological means (Gramsci, 1971; Gramsci, 2014). Gramsci's theory indicates that hegemony is established and maintained not just by force or direct control but through the consent of the governed, achieved by the cultural and ideological leadership of the dominant group in society (Gramsci, 1971; Schwartzmantel, 2008; Haugaard, 2009).

While initially hesitating to use power, Participant E acknowledges that power is involved. Furthermore, she posits that *'power'* is also demonstrated at grassroots during blended learning change. Participant E explains:

> *'And then, there's a hierarchy and from this, there's a certain amount of, you know, compliance with that. So, I think maybe not in a power sense. Well, no, there is power. There's power from the bottom to take the way they implement blended learning and do it…or not do it…if that makes sense'.*

Participant G focuses her attention on individuals rather than institutional positions of power. She notes that those in control can determine the methods for implementing blended learning by dictating specific guidelines. She emphasises that individuals can choose to align with the new direction or continue following the previous approach. Participant E, however, focuses on power within a hierarchy, where lower-ranking individuals can accept or reject blended learning. Gohler (2009, p. 28) references this as 'power to…generally considered favourable'. Meanwhile, Participant G emphasises the role of power over others, which Gohler (2009, p. 28) indicates tends to produce 'negative results for those subjected to it, because it narrows their field of action'.

However, this also highlights the possibility of a shift in direction and the freedom to choose whether to follow new procedures or continue with previous ones. Participant G suggests:

> *'I have worked with [X University] for 17 years. And during this time, different people come in power every few years. Yes, so, whoever is in power are going to dictate how blended learning is achieved, as to what and how to do it. Or this was happening before, the people in power now want something different. And you are free to follow them in any way you want'.*

Scott (1990, p. 28) considers that power relations are on a continuum where individuals are subject to a 'larger system of domination'. Gramsci (2020, p. 38) distinguishes these power systems within 'relations of forces' on three fundamental levels he determines as 'production', the 'degree of homogeneity or self-consciousness' and 'relation of military forces.' Gramsci (2020, p. 46) advocates that power dynamics within these relations should be '…aimed at discovering their innermost strengths and weaknesses' and '…conducted within the ambit of the concept of hegemony'. Gramsci (1971) encourages looking beneath the obvious and recognising the complexities that shape, distort, and entwine within those interactions.

Participants' responses to blended learning and power demonstrate recognition of the differing, complicated and connected aspects of change programmes within those spaces (Gramsci, 2020; Hoare and Sperber, 2016; Hall. 2021). Contrastingly, Participant U discusses a successful blended learning approach she designed but indicates she was not formally recognised. She states:

> *'So, when the institution decided to take that on, and they saw the value…the success of this blended learning strategy became, like, important. The problem, I suppose…I wasn't exactly credited with the blended learning approach that I designed…I would have had so much to offer and share if I was asked. Honestly, I think that's what's missing'.*

Participant U's experience relates to Participant E's earlier statement that while institutions enjoy the academic innovation that occurs at the grassroots level, there may be missed opportunities to acknowledge and collaborate with those individuals. Participant K's statement also demonstrates the power available to institutions to operate a fair and inclusive system. It reflects a belief system that varies depending on the circumstances:

> *'I'm not sure it's a fair system. I think that if I'm being cynical about it, that sometimes the institution will incorporate or consider those things when it suits them. And sometimes they will not consider them if it doesn't suit them. But it needs to be a fair system that takes account of the context…I guess what I'm saying is…it needs to be inclusive'.*

Participant T on the other hand has doubts about the usefulness of regulations in higher education. He is dissatisfied with the blended learning structures at his institution. He believes those in authority frequently shift the blame to previous administrations or staff members they perceive as non-compliant. Participant T believes there should be better structures and accountability among those in positions of authority. Participant T says:

> *'I see degrees of regulation but the regulation around the higher education sector is not in the interests of what scientists describe as the archive purpose. So, in all honesty, especially in my institution, the structures for blended learning are not fit for purpose, hence why, the institution's approach to blended learning doesn't work. And consequently, what that means is that anybody trying to justify running one of these universities and having maybe half million-pound salaries a year can't blame the structures because that's where the power lies. So, they must blame the previous regime for messing it up. And/or the workforce for not being compliant enough about the modernisation'.*

Participant T's statement above points out that the structure within his institution upholds individual power of those who blame the workforce when systems are highlighted as inadequate. His idea correlates with Gramsci's notion of 'state…pointing to the…importance of relations of power inside both private civil society and public political society' (Hoare and Sperber, 2016, p. 56). Delving further into this, Gramsci (1971, p. 12) refers to universities as superstructures that are instruments of the state upholding systems of legislation, jurisprudence, and law. This means that because the university and government are collaborators, power wielded inside the university reinforces those political systems that are reproductions of its own cultural power. As blended learning is now a recent compliance measure and reported as such in the Office for Students (OfS, 2022)**,** students are recognised as customers, and as customers they are economically viable to the state. The OfS (2022) affords students a certain amount of collective power within the higher education landscape.

Blended learning environments are like other learning environments regarding language use, but notable differences exist. Participant P provides an alternative perspective as he highlights the significance of language and feedback conversations in blended learning environments. He believes open and collaborative communication is crucial to maintain integrity, encouraging active participation, and addressing misconceptions. Participant P stresses the importance of blended learning approaches by considering the impact of language. He maintains:

> *'I can see that in blended learning there is a language you could develop, you know, you would say things like - well, what I'm noticing is that…or most of you think this…or does anybody have anything they want to expand on…yes one could use that kind of language. Or here's something I noticed. Or I was expecting something but didn't notice this. Any comments about that? So, you're keeping the integrity intact and allowing individuals to say - well, actually, I thought that you didn't want us to say that, or I thought that was off limits, or I thought that it might be irrelevant, or I didn't even notice that or whatever. So that kind of feedback conversation then becomes really powerful. It can and should also be done in a blended environment.'*

Fairclough (2015, p. 232) recommends that language should '…serve as the basis for how teachers are trained to understand…and to make them conscious of how language is used in a range of contexts.' In view of this, Gramsci (2021, p. 75) proposes 'if it is true that every language contains elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it will also be true any person's language provides a measure of the greater or lesser complexity of that person's conception of the world.' Participant P's reference to the importance of language in *'...keeping the integrity intact…'* positions his response to the multilayering of 'cultural identity and belonging' (Madison, 2012, p.57). This notion indicates that teachers' understanding of language use across contexts enriches educational experiences. This includes blended learning, which integrates diverse methods and technologies to address the complexities of students' conceptions of the world.

The notion of language in blended learning highlights it as more than an approach to teaching and learning; it is a language form that, if utilised meaningfully, can transform student learning experiences. Participant H expresses scepticism regarding the pressure to adopt new technologies in education. She believes there is an expectation for educators to use the latest tools that claim to enhance student engagement:

> *'I'm gonna sound too cynical here, but they encourage us to use the next new thing, the next new technology that makes students engage more…and we're just trying to understand how it all works. Like, we're not really complaining. But we don't, we might struggle to get it working because it isn't working, it's troubleshooting or something. But they're like, shut up about it, don't complain. I think that's designed to shut us down… But we can't shut up because it's broken…'*

Scott (1990, p. 136) would describe Participant H's response as 'voice under domination'. Scott (1990, p. 136) further explains, 'most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory of these two polar opposites.' Participant T adds that there is the *'dehumanising'* and challenging experience of trying to teach a lesson using inadequate technology. He states:

> *'It's dehumanising to think okay, this is a frightening world. I mean, I sat alone with tech, the uni's hardware like cameras, microphones, smartboards, and equipment with software that isn't up to the task trying to teach a lesson. So, I think a lot of that alienation was invisible-ised or hidden by the workforce just trying to muddle through as best we could. Then there's that static sense of the student greater struggle without being somewhat invisible-ised in terms of the assumption that everybody's got, like broadband and could afford it and its stable. And I'm not being resistant, I cannot work the bloody thing'.*

In contrast, although Participant S initially had a negative perception of using Microsoft Teams for teaching, considering it an additional challenge leading to his reluctance to adopt it, he later became proficient:

> *'I knew some of my colleagues were teaching through bits of this thing called teams before COVID. And I just thought – oh dear me, you know that sounds like a right palaver. And it's something else I've got to get to grips with. So, I suppose my first reaction was oh, this is, you know, I'm reluctant to do this. But, hey, I use it all the time now'.*

This section emphasised the nuanced roles of power within the context of blended learning in higher education. Participants highlight the desire for fairness and accountability in institutional systems, which hints at cynicism towards the motivations of those in power and the efficiency of structures surrounding blended learning. The discussions also highlight that academics perceive those in power as dictating the direction of change. Participants advocate for integrity and collaborative dialogue as they reveal feelings of dehumanisation, alienation, and reluctance due to inadequate support and resources. Nonetheless, it was indicated that blended learning empowers others in the learning environment. The following section is an exploration of subtheme neoliberalism.

4.12 SUB THEME NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism originates from the traditional concept of liberalism, which advocates for individual rights to pursue personal growth while contributing to collective well-being (Schwartzmantel, 2008). Neoliberalism has evolved to prioritise 'contractual or market relations' as a social and political norm (Schwartzmantel, 2008, p. 59). Schwartzmantel notes that modern neoliberalism emphasises personal material and financial success, often undermining communal welfare (2008, p. 59). Mayo (2015) points out the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology in societal and educational spheres, noting its market-driven nature. He identifies the acronym TINA (There Is No Alternative) as central to the global neoliberal narrative (Mayo, 2015). Furthermore, Gramsci proposed the concept of hegemony as a countermeasure to challenge these accepted common-sense ideologies underpinning contemporary education (Gramsci, 1971). Importantly, there were no questions directly from the researcher initiating conversations regarding neoliberalism or corporate management. However, participants were compelled to move discussions in this direction.

Participant T's ideas revolve around neoliberalist insights in higher education relevant to blended learning. He suggests that viewing students as customers, treating universities as businesses competing in a market, and emphasising value for money have become ingrained within the sector. He points out:

> *'Giving this a sort of neoliberal heading is to suggest that you can trace the idea of viewing students as customers…as a sort of university business competing in a market around value for money. I guess these are all internalised by the sector, particularly in senior management. You know, trace it way back, certainly to Thatcherite era of privatisation. So it is within that framework that I see blended learning'.*

Mayo (2015, p. 2) points out that neoliberalism became a global ideology 'through Thatcherism …turning public goods into objects of consumption'. Blended learning is significant within the context of neoliberalism because regulatory bodies like the Office for Students (2022) emphasise the importance of universities improving their offerings to enhance graduate employability. Participant H confirms this:

> *'Blended learning is very much a key feature of neoliberalism because the messages coming down from the Office for Students tell us that if we don't raise our game, and if we don't provide degrees that get students into graduate jobs and get them in quickly, then ultimately, they could take away our degree awarding powers'.*

When asked how blended learning was relevant to graduate employment. Participant H responded, '*well, one of the core competencies for graduate employment is digital literacy, which is something industry asking for, and blended learning is something students ask, they're [students] now viewed as consumers…so, I guess the two go hand in hand'.*

Mayo (2015, p. 2) points out that under neoliberalism universities 'are encouraged to run as corporate identities.' Participant A also points out that some students face financial barriers, needing help to afford the necessary devices, further complicating the situation. It is also the case that marketisation of education means institutions are galvanised by the demands of '…fee paying student customers who expect satisfaction from their student experience…' (Hudson and Williams, 2016, p. 1). Participant A states: *'So, one of the key features of neoliberalism is the market force. So, you set up a market, you put institutions in competition with each other…and so that's where we are now'.* Importantly, Participant O also mentions OfS (2022) challenging universities to demonstrate that undergraduates can secure graduate employment. He states:

> *'…and as blended learning is…well…supposedly an employability skill…I guess then the university thinks there's a direct connection between that and getting our students into graduate jobs. But it's ridiculous, it's a one-dimensional way of seeing a very complex issue for students who might not even be able to afford devices.'*

These sentiments are reflected in Participant P's response noting students as *'economic units'* within the neoliberal perspective. These business ideologies suggest that educational institutions are increasingly concerned with economic growth over and above public welfare. Furthermore, the debate continues around whether technology in education is concerned with social welfare. Or preferably, how much money the institution is likely to generate (Giroux, 1999). Participant P emphasises educating teachers through a more holistic approach to education:

> *'I found that some of my assumptions about the value of students always had clashes with this kind of in-schools local authority approach. To me, it's kind of the neoliberal conception of students as economic units, you know, that I've always had a clash with…and none of that gets articulated really in the IT world. And it was all about the fact that if we're educating people who are going to work with children, and unless we're educating for love and joy…to be teachers motivated by affections, motivated by desires, motivated by money for the community, or whatever it is…then we are not educating them. We're educating them to become just technical teachers'.*

While Participant P uses the term '*economic units'*, Participant E uses the term *'factory outputs'* to describe the way students are systematically processed through the post-1992 system. She explains: '*…the reason for that is because it's increasingly feeling like the university is being run like a business with a profit margin. And all anyone seems to care about is that final column of figures.'*

According to English and Bolton (2016) neoliberalism is indicated by '…strong property rights, free markets and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p. 5; cited in English and Bolton, 2016, p. 110). The concept of neoliberalism is the promotion of private business practices which prioritises economic goals over all others (Beddoc, 2014; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006, 2013; Grimaldi, 2012; Navarro 2007; Reid, 2013; cited in Fraser and Taylor, 2016, p. 2). These demands also mean institutions have a responsibility toward ensuring student's legal rights under the Consumer Credit Act 2015 and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA, 2015) are adequately met making imbalances of power highly complex issues (d'Ambrosio and Ehrenberg, 2007).

This section emphasises concerns about the effects of neoliberalism in higher education. Neoliberalism prioritises market relations and personal success, often at the expense of the academic community. Participants view the institution's approach as an opportunity to increase marketability rather than an educational philosophy. From the participant's perspective, this translates to a business-like approach, with students viewed as customers and universities as service providers competing in the marketplace. The following section explores blended learning main theme pedagogies of practice.

4.13 MAIN THEME PEDAGOGY

Several participants, including Participant O, Participant E, and Participant F, described their pedagogy as '*social constructivist*'. How participants understand their pedagogy does not always (in their view) align with their institution. However, Participant F says there are times when she wants to have a '*clearer understanding'* and '*more support'* from her institution. While individual pedagogies can differ, some alignments with institutional pedagogy need focused attention. Nonetheless, Participant E believes there are some attempts to reconstruct the institution's policy-driven blended learning pedagogy more broadly. She adds:

> *'…but it tends to be presented as…these are our new strategies for teaching and learning…I think there needs to be some focus where development days gives us opportunities to discuss the institution's pedagogy in relation to how we feel this aligns with our own…I'm pretty sure that a lot of it will likely align, but usually, these conversations are left out of training days and most of us just feel frustrated by what's experienced as the new instruction'.*

Pedagogy refers to the methods, approaches, and strategies employed in teaching and learning (Beetham and Sharpe, 2013). Participant M also clarifies his position:

> *'Pedagogically, I have a blended learning approach that's fluid, so to me, because of how I view my own, say, design of my teaching, for me, it's all about engagement, what activities can I get students involved in, how do I get them to collaborate, discuss their ideas.'*

Through well-designed pedagogical approaches, academics enhance the quality of teaching intended to promote successful student outcomes. Participant M expands, saying *'…the technology side is only one element of blended learning, you still need the pedagogy to support it…when you understand your own pedagogy, it's, it's kind of intentional…like when you know what it is, it's because you thought long and hard about it'*. Blended learning pedagogy embodies values and beliefs that education should be adaptive to the needs of the modern learner, preparing them for a rapidly changing world (Waring and Evans, 2015). At the heart of blended learning is the shift towards student-centred learning. Likewise, Participant F's response describes her blended learning practice as *'…baked into my pedagogy and based around relationships and inclusive practice'.*

Blended learning allows students greater control over their learning process, including the pace, style, and path (Waring and Evans, 2015; Beetham and Sharpe, 2013). By its very nature, blended learning offers a more flexible approach to education whereby students learn best when actively engaged and responsible for their learning (Ellaway, 2013). This notion corresponds with Gramsci's Hegelian perspective on education (Gramsci, 1971). It reflects a pedagogical value that education should be inclusive and accessible, breaking down barriers to learning. Fusaro (2017, p. 67) points toward what he describes as Gramsci's 'pedagogical obsession' or determination to 'raise awareness in those around him', further noting the Hegelian influence on Gramsci's educational ideology.

In Gramscian pedagogy, education is a battleground for ideological struggle, aiming to challenge hegemonic structures. Gramsci's interest in factory councils and workers demonstrates his intentions toward raising collective awareness (Gramsci, 2014, p. 78). Similarly, pedagogy encompasses methods and approaches that empower learners to critically analyse and challenge dominant narratives, fostering consciousness and collective agency (Gramsci, 2014; Gramsci, 1971). Fusaro (2017, p. 68) refers to Hegel's 'in-itself and for itself', which correlates with Gramsci's critical self-consciousness, emphasising education as a means of resistance and transformative social change. Therefore, blended learning pedagogies of practice are more than just strategies but include deeply embedded value and beliefs about teaching and learning (Waring and Evans, 2015).

According to Waring and Evans (2015, p. 44), social constructivism emphasises 'collectively constructed views of learning'. As such, blended learning is not simply a combination of differing teaching styles but a shift in deeply rooted pedagogical values. Participant D describes her pedagogy as, '*not just to deliver, not just to…perform, but to be a teacher, this core places my pedagogy…my pedagogy operates or allows me to co-construct with my students…this is not felt here'*. Participant D's statement correlates with Selwyn's (2011, p. 130) notion that 'performativity' relates to issues around time, work overload and the need to maintain the digital skills to deliver through a blended learning approach. He points out the concern over accountability and its relationship to the fear of becoming irrelevant in the role, impacting perceived professionalism.

Ellaway (2013, p. 190) states that professionalism is based '…on its ability to support learners at different stages of their professional development'. Selwyn (2011, p. 131) refers to this as 'deskilling analyses.' Again, this concept relates to academics fearing their skill in developing blended learning practice may become insignificant. Participant O's response demonstrates his belief that learning is a '*social process'* in which constructed knowledge happens through interaction and engagement. Likewise, Gramsci (1971, p. 242) emphasises his concept of the 'collective man', also a social process, highlighting the significance of change occurring as part of a collective process.

On the one hand, Gramsci describes this as a dominant hegemonic tool. At the same time, the collective will of subalterns can be counter-hegemonic when, for instance, Gramsci discusses the importance of factory workers or 'workers democracy' to unite (Gramsci, 1971, p. 79). These ideas correspond with participant's co-constructed pedagogies that are multi-layered and complex, involving students and other collaborators such as colleagues and working in partnerships with their institutions during blended learning programmes.

Participant A also describes her blended learning approach as integrating digital tools to enhance the learning experience, making it more interactive, engaging, and relevant to the digital age. Blended learning highlights the importance of digital literacy in preparing students and academics for the modern world. Participant A mentions the challenges she experienced trying to align her *'digital skills'* with blended learning expectations. Beetham and Sharpe (2013) assert that in blended learning, educators actively rethink and re-articulate digital information and communication to create new and innovative forms of learning.

Participant A advocates for a shift in educational discussions from focusing on accessibility, essential due to issues like digital poverty affecting students, towards a more inclusive approach. She responds that pedagogy - the method and practice of teaching - should be the central concern, particularly how digital technologies are employed in teaching and developing digital competency. She emphasises the perspective of a *'poor university,'* which likely faces more significant challenges than elite institutions, highlighting that such universities need to be innovative and thoughtful in using blended learning as a focus for delivering and designing content. Participant A's notion of the *'poor university'* is situated within a much broader conversation. The statement alludes to the historical and cultural context in which post-1992 universities are located within the higher education landscape.

Brady (2020, p. 21) touches on this comparing post-1992 institutions to the traditional universities (i.e. Russell Group) as 'not so much different from and equal to, as different from and poorer'. Participant A explains this position:

> *'So, I think we need to re-centre away from talking only about accessibility issues. Obviously, that's a big agenda because of digital poverty for many of our students. You know, if we think more about inclusion, like what are we doing with digital technology and competency…we need to re-centre, I think, on pedagogy. What are we using our digital platform for as a poor university, not as an elite university, but as a poor university? We really need to think to our strengths as a post-1992 and play to those…kind of…remember what our purpose was an always has been instead of trying to compete with affluent universities…I mean we have our own strengths…'*

Interestingly, Gramsci (1971, p. 64) questions 'why the Popular University has remained the poor thing it is and has been unable to win the public's attention, respect and love…' Gramsci notes that there is no easy answer but points out, 'there are problems with the organization and with the criteria which inform the university'. Gramsci's (1971) thoughts tend to resonate with Participant A, who described the university as 'poor', and Brady (2020, p. 21), whose discussion draws attention to how post-1992 universities may be perceived as they refer to the institution's socioeconomic position within the HEI landscape.

This section considers blended learning in contemporary pedagogy and its role in facilitating what many participants describe as a social constructivist approach to education. Blended learning pedagogies are considered adaptive, inclusive, and attuned to the digital literacy needs of modern learners. However, it also presents challenges, such as maintaining digital skills and managing workloads, which can lead to professional fear relating to the skills required. The following section considers the importance of sub theme training.

4.14 SUB THEME TRAINING

Academic training is essential for successfully implementing blended learning programmes in higher education. Change can be difficult in any organisation, and universities are no exception. There may be resistance to adopting new teaching methods due to tradition, a preference for conventional lecture-based pedagogies, or a need for more awareness about the benefits of blended learning (Friday *et al.* 2024). Additionally, institutions may need more in-house expertise to provide adequate training in blended learning, and external training programmes can be costly. A potential gap exists in the practical know-how (Marshall, 2010; McMurray, 2001).
Institutions that lack this infrastructure may find it challenging to support blended learning initiatives, discouraging investment in certain types of training.

If the prevailing culture treats blended learning as an extension of existing traditional methods, there may be little motivation to invest in methods that promote innovative teaching methods (Ertmer and Ottenbriet-Leftwich, 2010). Training provides the necessary skills to navigate and effectively use Learning Management Systems (LMS), online assessment tools, and digital resources. Bokolo *et al.* (2019) confirm that academics perceive blended learning as applicable when provided with the necessary training.

Nevertheless, blended learning is not simply about technical know-how but about understanding how to integrate these tools into everyday teaching methods that enhance learning outcomes (Graham, 2014). Participant M states, *'I think that's a fundamental misunderstanding because the type of learning you do in a blended environment - the partly online and partly in classroom - it's developing very specific skillsets about how to combine different tools alongside these different sorts of ideas.'*

The pedagogical shift required for blended learning is significant. Su (2019) explains that blended learning pedagogies do not simply incorporate a change in strategy but a distinct change in teaching mindset. Participant M shared similar sentiments where he mentions that training tends to be outsourced to '*private companies'* that do not understand the needs of the academic workforce. Participant V, Participant Z, and Participant U share a common understanding about training that teaches how to use a product and training that supports a pedagogy of practice, such as how to embed the product into the design of the learning experience. Likewise, Participant Q says, *'it's not just about training that teaches you how to use a particular software or platform, blended learning is about, how would I design this so that the learning is both blended and engaging…'*

Traditional face-to-face teaching methods do not directly translate to online environments, and training helps academics redesign their course materials and teaching strategies to suit the blended format (Bokolo *et al.* 2019). However, Like Participant Q, Participant S shares '*…so for example, I've come away from training days feeling completely confused and anxious…okay, so I touch that button, and it does this, and I click here, and it does that…but…you get there, and none of it works, and students are staring at you thinking you're the issue and that's quite demotivating'*. Su (2019, pp. 2) also points out that blended learning is 'not a matter of transferring a portion of your current course online'. Blended learning is about balancing synchronous and asynchronous activities, understanding how students engage with online content, and adapting assessment methods to suit a more flexible learning environment (Nuruzzaman, 2016; Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal, 2004).

Participant Q describes blended learning as a *'hybrid'* approach to teaching and learning. She and nearly all participants expressed the sentiment that blended learning was a combination of these two strategies (i.e. asynchronous *and* synchronous) activities involving *'collaborative conversations and discussions*' with content designed to promote *'engagement and learning'***.**

Student participation takes different forms in a blended learning environment - from online discussions to interactive multimedia tasks. As such, academics need training to facilitate and encourage engagement in these settings, monitor student progress, and provide support and feedback in ways that resonate with digital learners. Training ensures that academics have a baseline of skills and knowledge, thereby maintaining quality standards across the institution. Graham (2014, pp. 28) maintains that training should facilitate the best elements of 'in-person and online learning' with 'ongoing technical and adequate pedagogical support while allowing academics the 'freedom to make pedagogical decisions'. Participant D and Participant W shared that in their previous post-1992 institutions, there was ongoing software expert, separate from IT support services, that would tailor the support to how the academic was trying to implement the technology. Participant D says, '*I didn't fully appreciate how supportive that was until I came to this institution where that kind of support doesn't exist…'*

Participant V highlights the need to investigate the effectiveness of available training and suggests that while training is made available, it is inadequate. she says:

> *'So, there's a whole load of elements in terms of training as well, like, what does successful training look like? I mean, it shouldn't be like, well okay, we've got a one-hour workshop on this, and so like, now you all know what to do get on with it. Seriously, we don't expect our students to learn that way. So why would they [institution] think we would know what to do after one session. It's ludicrous.'*

Bokolo *et al.* (2019, pp. 46) maintain that blended learning training is most successful 'when there is administrative support through the provision of professional development'. In their blended learning study around the experiences of academics, Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2022, pp. 1566) highlighted that 'academics frequently characterised the blended learning process as a series of hurdles with minimal support'.

Participant P notes that while he was not offered technology training, he took the initiative to learn independently and became proficient in the blended learning software known as OneNote:

> *'In terms of training and opportunities…I was not offered anything by my institution. I was just told to get on with it… So, I mean, now weirdly, I've now become an expert in OneNote. But that wasn't because I was offered training, that was off my own back'.*

This section points out that more than merely technical knowledge is required. It highlights the importance of sustained and continuous quality training focused on workforce needs and administrative support is required. However, there is an expressed concern over the adequacy of the training provided, highlighting a gap between available training and the actual needs of academics. The following section explores the sub theme pandemic in relation to blended learning in higher education.

4.15 SUB THEME PANDEMIC

Filippini (2017, p. 86) states that 'Gramsci's analysis perceives crisis as an exceptional, unique and in some ways definitive event. An event that can certainly not be foreseen – and the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed'. The onset of the pandemic necessitated an immediate and unprecedented shift to remote learning, as traditional in-person teaching became untenable due to health and safety concerns (Aarts *et al.* 2021). The pandemic emergency transition laid the groundwork for blended learning, which, at the time, meant being fully online. Educational institutions invested heavily in digital infrastructures, adopting platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Classroom, to name a few, which also required training for faculty to navigate these new tools (Brammer and Clark, 2020).

This rapid shift was crucial in maintaining the continuity of education during lockdowns (Brammer and Clark, 2020; Colley, 2021). However, it also revealed the potential of digital tools in enhancing learning experiences, thus setting the stage for adopting blended learning models. The pandemic has led to a reassessment of the role of technology in industries globally (Aarts *et al.* 2021; Ahlburg, 2020; Brammer and Clark, 2020; Colley, 2021). At the same time, by analysing the changes, many institutions recognised blended learning as a critical teaching strategy (Aarts *et al.* 2021; Nanath, Sajjad and Kaitheri, 2020). Gramsci's crisis of economy reflects periods when economic structures fail to meet societal needs (Gramsci, 2020, p. 35). The pandemic exacerbated economic inequalities and highlighted systemic inefficiencies, sparking a global economic crisis brought about by Covid-19 resulting in global unemployment, business closures, and supply chain disruptions (Whalley *et al.* 2021).
These disruptions mirror Gramsci's crisis, where the foundational economic systems highlight significant economic and social transformation (Filippini (2017, p. 90). The pandemic intensified economic disparities, pushing societies to restructure their economic foundations during this time. Conversely, the pandemic also opened opportunities to reach students needing access to learning due to geographical, financial, or personal constraints (Aarts *et al.* 2021, p. 30).

This section highlights a shift towards some of the benefits of blended learning in offering flexibility, accommodating different learning styles, and enabling a more personalised education. Additionally, the crisis pushed for a curriculum that is more adaptable and resilient to future disruptions. Participant R describes her proficiency in Moodle with her pre-existing advanced skills in Word and PowerPoint. During lockdown, she had to familiarise herself with Microsoft Teams and other Microsoft packages during the pandemic. As a result, Participant R's expertise in IT at the university became in high demand as more people sought software training:

> *'I'm an advanced Moodle user. But I had to get up to speed like everybody else with Microsoft Teams and other Microsoft packages. I was already an advanced Word and PowerPoint user. And in fact, I got more up to date with Word. So, I would say that during the pandemic something changed, I was now finding everybody wanted training on how to use all these things, you know, like, for example, PowerPoint, how to use the audio function…and make videos using PowerPoint. So suddenly, where people weren't that interested, my IT expertise was suddenly called upon'.*

Participant D reflects on her experience during the pandemic at a different institution, where there was easy access to practical assistance and discussions about integrating technology into teaching. Regular video meetings provided a space to explore possibilities. The institution also offered practical training workshops familiarising lecturers with technological tools. In retrospect, Participant D considers this support a *'valuable treasure'* only found in some institutions:

> *'Okay, so the period of the pandemic I was working in another post 92 institution. So, whenever you need to ask something practical, or to discuss the potential use of technology to integrate in your teaching, you could just immediately set up a meeting, and then you will have a video conversation for half an hour or an hour to explore the possibilities. And that was amazing. It was really opening the space to consider possibilities of technology, and it was taking away any barriers that I may have. There were regular training opportunities that you could register to attend and these were practical workshops…to have a taste of what certain technological tools could do. And, yeah, so I think in retrospect and comparing this to my current institution, I realise that was a treasure that not many institutions have'.*

The pandemic significantly impacted education, requiring a shift to remote and blended learning models. Brammer and Clark (2020) consider the impact on universities and the challenges to adjust. When asked about her pandemic experiences, Participant V answered, *'Moving online was challenging. I think some institutions did it really well because they were already using their blended learning approach. We weren't. I don't think we were as clued up as some universities.'* Filippini (2017, p. 90) refers to Gramsci's multiple meanings of 'crisis', which 'shows itself in many ways.' A crisis, such as the pandemic, is rightly presented as a 'complex process' considered by Gramsci as a 'process rather than an event' (Filippini, 2017, p. 91).

Participant M shares that some aspects of this change worked well within his institution. He says, *'So, I think, again, framing around the pandemic, I think what worked well is everyone did get on with it. I think there was a shared realisation of - this is the reality and almost it was kind of do or die'*. Brammer and Clark (2020, p. 455) point out that one of the benefits of adapting to was regular online meetings, giving staff opportunities to ask questions and reassuring them about how their university was 'adapting to the crisis'.

Whalley *et al*. (2021, p. 80) point out the disparities in the 'educational income gap' compounded by the pandemic. Participant F believes that during the lockdown, her university lacked information on student access to computers, which created significant obstacles for many. She states:

> *'Yes, I think it does. I know that the university at the point of lockdown had no idea how many students didn't have access to computer technology at home. It caused incredible barriers to access for a lot of students. '*

Participant J believes that exploring various methods to enhance learning is essential as an educator. While technology is not always the sole focus, blending learning has become a significant aspect of education. Post-COVID, the emphasis on blended learning has increased, focusing on evidence-based teaching and utilising technology to engage students and foster collaboration. Colley (2021, p. pp.105) noted that universities were eager to move back to traditional highly defined spaces but emphasise the importance of creating 'more dynamic and more creative spaces of learning'. Participant J states that the pandemic has shifted perspectives on blended learning:

> *'But part of being a teacher is always thinking about new ways to enhance the learning opportunities. I take it that it's not always with technology, but we're now blending the learning, I think in every way. So, looking at the evidence and research to inform our teaching, we're constantly thinking about how technology is supporting this. I mean, I've always worked like that. But in terms of where I am now and in higher education, and post COVID…I think it's emphasised blended learning in a way it hadn't done before, I mean, really, we weren't just teaching online, we were blending the learning, thinking about how to engage students, helping them to collaborate…I don't know…I do think it [the pandemic] changed the way we see blending learning now'.*

Participant S also observes a pattern of reacting to constant changes like COVID instead of having a clear plan despite the institution investing in computer equipment. Aarts *et al.* (2021) notes that the crisis revealed numerous shortcomings in higher education. Gramsci notes crisis as a 'process which shows itself in many ways, and in which causes and effects become intertwined and mutually entangled' (Filippini, 2017, p. 90). Participant S indicated that this resulted in a sub-standard IT infrastructure impacting the blended learning student experience. Nevertheless, they [academics] continue to navigate the situation and make do with the available resources. Participant S says:

> *'It just seems as though we're reacting to these constant changes to things like COVID and other things…but really…rather than a set plan...we're just reacting. For instance, we invested in loads of computer equipment during COVID…and it's all part of the plan for blending the learning…but mostly it [the computer equipment] doesn't really work. We're constantly teaching in rooms where the IT just isn't up to par…but I guess we muddle through'.*

Reflecting on the pandemic, Participant M hopes for progress in the next five to ten years. He emphasises the need to bridge the gap between blended learning with teaching and research.

> *'…I hope to see a little bit more happening over the next five years, certainly decade, and hopefully no other sort of global disasters will happen in that meantime, but I think yeah, now is the time to really look at the benefits and drawbacks of what happened over COVID…and then have a real sort of soul searching of where we have to make sure that we understand what we mean by blended learning and then convey that to students so they understand and can get the most out of it…So, one of the things that we have done is we've put a very square emphasis on blended learning now and we call it research enriched learning. So, there is a lot of emphasis now post COVID to ensure that research is talking to teaching staff and to try and break down the barriers between them'.*

The pandemic served as a powerful impetus for change in education, with varying degrees of success and challenge. The shared experiences highlight a universal scramble to adapt, revealing gaps in resources and preparedness, inspiring innovation, and reimagining teaching and learning methodologies. What follows is chapter five, the discussion.

CHAPTER FIVE DISCUSSION

5.0 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter demonstrates the development of the study over time, highlighting themes derived from respondents. This chapter presents a detailed discussion of those themes. Implementing blended learning programmes in higher education institutions has become a focal point of discussion and debate, particularly in the context of top-down management and compliance measures. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's (1971, p. 11) concept of the 'regulated' and 'ethical society' within his broader theory of cultural hegemony, this study explores the intricate dynamics of power and control that underpin these educational changes. The study delves into the resistance faced by top-down initiatives, the moral and ethical concerns of academics, and the broader socio-economic challenges such as digital poverty. By examining hierarchical communication structures and the ideological implications, the thesis provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities of blending traditional and digital learning environments. The accelerated adoption of blended learning during the pandemic has further highlighted the need for robust digital infrastructures and continuous support for academic staff. The interviews provide insights into the intersection of educational policy, institutional governance, and the lived experiences of academics during these change programmes.

5.1 MAIN THEME TOP-DOWN MANAGEMENT - COMPLIANCE AND THE 'REGULATED SOCIETY'

Gramsci introduced the concept of a 'regulated society' in his work on cultural hegemony and political theory (Gramsci, 2007, p. 11). The regulated society relates to the broader dynamics of power and control through legislation of which universities comprise. This concept also relates to the associated values, beliefs, and norms through compliance and other measures. Implementing blended learning programmes through top-down management structures sheds light on the complex control and power dynamics within educational establishments. The results indicate that top-down blended learning programmes were met with scepticism by academics, who experienced the regulations as sometimes restrictive. Implementing blended learning change programmes can cause resistance from participants. However, this depended on various factors, including how the programme was communicated and leadership.

The study found participants were concerned about their institutions being fearful of, for instance, dropping down league tables as one plausible explanation for a top-down approach. This concern is feasible when considering that educational establishments uphold judicial powers through compliance measures (Mayo, 2015; Gramsci, 1971). Although an essential part of the professional landscape, the study also found that participants considered compliance a potential barrier to collaborative working. Mayo refers to Gramsci, who highlights that 'the most traditional, legalistic-structural conceptualisation…is that of a large entity comprising legislative, executive and judicial powers' (Mayo, 2015, p. 30). This notion is also consistent with Gramsci's (1971) argument that hegemony combines to achieve the highest possible degree of consent within society through state, law, and education. As such, blended learning change programmes involve understanding those institutional barriers as instruments for reproducing non-negotiable societal norms (Garrison and Kanuka, 2014, pp. 102).

While participants express concerns about their institution's top-down blended learning strategies, HEI regulations dictate that 'non-compliance' will undoubtedly attract further scrutiny and 'enforcement action' against universities (OfS, 2022, p. 11). Gramsci would regard the university as the ‘nightwatchman’ which means it is not itself the state but constructed as a ‘…coercive organisation which will safeguard the development of the continually proliferating elements of regulated society’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 263). Likewise, Clegg (2009, p. 310) posits that HEI compliance measures develop alongside those management processes and associated narratives. As such, participants were sometimes frustrated by these measures and felt their institutions needed to take account of the context. Although institutions broadly understand its student demographic, it did not always recognise that depending on how the blended learning change was implemented, students were, at times, impacted negatively. Additionally, the institution’s focus may not always fully appreciate that some students may experience access issues while others did not. Also, there were underlying concerns around student poverty, parenting, disability, or other complex and competing challenges that academics were aware of as frontline workers not necessarily captured prior to implementing the programme.

Hodkinson (2017, p. 25) points out that the 'physical and social situations of users, on socio-economic conventions, regulations and cultural expectations' are a product of the everyday academic experience. Kaputa, Loucanova, and Tejerina-Gaite (2020, pp. 65) agree that the most significant resources for blended learning well above that of research include 'teachers, infrastructure, curriculum and administration'. The study found academics well-informed about regulations and controls imposed by governing bodies on blended learning programmes.

However, academics sometimes perceive governing bodies as limiting (Du Gay *et al.,* 1997; Hodkinson, 2017). Although these are not always perceived negatively, they can sometimes be problematic.

Garrison and Kanuka (2014) suggest that in the development of blended learning change programmes, there are two levels of policy planning - strategic and operational. Strategic planning embodies the aims, objectives, and other accessible assets. Operational strategies focus on the financial, human, and technical resources likely to support successful blended learning change programmes. Policy and governance inform UK higher education institutions (HEI) in the roadmap towards rapidly changing developments in blended learning (Bokolo *et al.,* 2020).

The experience of top-down management expressed by academics describes a 'particular set of power relations' established through hegemony (Mayo, 2017, p. 36; Mayo, 2015). Clark's (2021, p. 34) view of compliance measures suggest a 'continuing top-down grind of policy provision on a sector that has historically had a glacial disposition to change'. The study found that academics were cognisant of these broader educational drivers, some of whom were involved in policy development. Although many refer to their blended learning policy guidance as helpful to clarify the institution's strategies.

The study also found a generally held view by participants that the various compliance measures are perceived as overly bureaucratic, which unfortunately leaves academics feeling marginalised and unheard. Gramsci emphasises the role of bureaucracy in reinforcing hegemony within the broader context of social and economic inequality (Gramsci, 1971). He believed bureaucracies are part of the regulated society and serve as instruments of control that are also ideological and maintained coercively, like the police or military (Gramsci, 1996). Moreover, the university is a government mechanism whose function is to disseminate 'common conceptions of the world' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 234). This view corresponds with common-sense ideas about blended learning in higher education institutions (Gorard and Selwyn, 2005; Schelling, 1978; cited in Rogers, 2003, p. 349).

5.2 MAIN THEME TOP-DOWN MANAGEMENT - COMPLIANCE AND THE 'ETHICAL STATE'

Gramsci (1971, p. 236) attributes his understanding of the ethical state to Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel (1770-1831). Beiser (1993, p. 215) refers to Hegel's socio-economic and moral function of the ethical state. Likewise, Gramsci attributes his own understanding of the ethical and moral activity of the state to Hegel. Gramsci's institutional and state structures are foundational to the economic and social disparities in society (Gramsci, 1971). For Gramsci, 'education in its broader context is an essential feature of the ethical state' (Mayo, 2015, p. 151). As a regulator, the Office for Students (2022) is, therefore, integral to Gramsci's ethical state in higher education. Gramsci (1971, p. 258) points out that '…every State is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of population to a particular cultural and moral level.' He further suggests that these regulatory bodies are an 'apparatus of political and cultural hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971, p.258). Although Gramsci does make some distinctions between regulated society and the ethical state.

There are many overlapping and complex characteristics because it functions universally across HEIs as a 'morally unitary social organism' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 259). In other words, the NSS performs a moral function ensuring student voices are heard as a measure of good ethical practice. Importantly, Gramsci challenges the ethical state by comparing it, for instance, to the fascist state whose purpose was to educate its individuals to 'civil virtue' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 258).

Comparing this to the study, this section moves us to consider the NSS as an 'ethical intervention' which functions as a moral good protecting the rights of students and implementing standards (Gramsci, 1971, p. 262). In relation to the NSS as a function of the ethical state, the study found that participants responses were mixed when considering NSS standards. On the one hand, academics were clear that the student voice was important and must be heard. In fact, there were many discussions about student wellbeing, digital access and to not be disadvantaged by the blended learning change programmes initiated by their institutions. From this perspective, participants accepted NSS student feedback as influential in determining the direction their institutions might take.

However, the study found there was some scepticism about how the data is used. Despite doubts about their credibility, the NSS is an acknowledged standard for universities to assess student experience and research performance (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). Using metrics from the NSS is relevant to the context of blended learning programmes in higher education because participants state that their universities follow these external standards and regulations to ensure the quality of education (Canning, 2015). For instance, universities follow the Office for Students *Blended Learning and OfS Regulations*, which set regulatory requirements for blended learning in higher education. Underpinning these structural changes is a growing reliance on metrics to measure the quality of institutional performance (Waring, 2017). Gramsci (1971) would view this regulation as a concept of the ethical state and a form of ethical state control. The study found there are tensions between these external standards and the perceived prioritisation of student experience at the expense of their own. Gramsci's (2007) exploration of how the state's ethical concerns overshadow the workforce, highlights the complexities of institutional ethics in education. Importantly though, while the report does consider differing approaches to blended learning contextually, it also indicates the importance of 'high-quality academic experience with appropriate resources' as a measure of compliance (OfS, 2022, p. 2).

The report suggests that its interest in blended learning extends to the quality of student experience and states that universities must provide 'physical and digital learning resources that effectively meet the needs of students' (OfS, 2022, p. 12). According to Owston (2013), the success of blended learning is establishing early data collection procedures to monitor success and inform policy. Following these procedures also means the institution can rely on something other than anecdotal evidence about the direction that blended learning change programmes should take. On the other hand, Dean, Shubita and Claxton (2020) argue that because the information published in the annual report is predominantly descriptive, this has resulted in a largely uninformed analysis of the survey's results.

They further suggest there needs to be a more in-depth understanding with 'clear evidence of which aspects of the student experience affects their overall satisfaction and to what degree' (Dean, Shubita and Claxton, 2020, p. 3). The study found that many academics held positions of knowledge and authority, often shaping the discourse and direction of their respective fields. However, they felt equally marginalised, silenced, or excluded from internal structures and policy development illustrating how the ethical state may suppress those dissenting voices (Gramsci, 1971).

One of the most sensitive aspects of building a thriving blended learning campus is garnering support from academics who often have questions about quality, control, recognition, reward, and workload (Moskal *et al.,* 2013). Unfortunately, the study found academics often felt labelled as difficult, troublesome, or resistant to change if the process was questioned or challenged. Nonetheless, many participants suggested the institution could alleviate these concerns by including them in the development of blended learning policies and the process itself. While participants acknowledge the NSS as a valuable tool for understanding student concerns around blended learning programmes, there needs to be more acknowledgement around academic voices during this process.

The study finds that the NSS is a potent motivator providing universities with direct feedback and aims to provide market choice for prospective students, public accountability, and quality provision (Marsh and Cheung, 2008). It is not that participants disagreed with the metrics involved with the data, but how this was interpreted by the institution as often lacking context. The study also found that while good data was welcomed, data considered poor tended to be communicated through a culture of blame rather than context driven. Again, highlighting its role as an ethical state meaning that dissent represented a kind of moral dysfunction against individuals that spoke up.

The data highlights that metrics such as NSS measuring progress and success nudge academics to adopt blended learning, thereby optimising educational outcomes. Some authors suggest that the process of 'nudging' within organisations is an 'entrepreneurial approach to problem-solving…' (Buchanan and Badham, 2020, p. 123), persuading academics in this study to comply. Participants discuss the non-negotiable terms of compliance as either possessing greater or lesser authority. This dichotomy is constructively embedded within compliance measures to steer academics towards the desired action of blended learning practices.

The study finds that compliance pertains to how individuals adhere to those prescribed rules and regulations. The institutions, therefore, function on many complex levels. Nudging (one of many strategies) creates 'subtle interventions' as an alternative to imposing hard lines as it influences behaviours that align with institutional values (Buchanan and Badham, 2020, p.123).

However, Cannella, Perez and Lee (2016, p. 1) challenge the notion of quality, suggesting that it is a construct applied to regulations with 'unexamined values.' They further suggest that while quality can offer increased possibilities, 'others are constructing their own sites of power' (Cannella, Perez and Lee, 2016, p. 2). Nonetheless, several commentators suggest that blended learning change programmes are subject to inappropriate notions of quality and potentially misguided regulations (Wan, 2015; Cannella, Perez and Lee, 2016; Hodkinson). As such, the study found some academics were uncertain about the principles of quality, or at least how universities may interpret this to direct and shape their blended learning change programmes.

5.3 SUB THEME HIERARCHICAL AND VERTICAL COMMUNICATIONS

Thompson (1961, p. 486) suggests that '…hierarchy is a system of roles - of subordination and superordination'. Superordination and subordination refer to those in positions of authority to those who are not. Hierarchical means that superordinate individuals can monopolise and dominate communication channels. Participants communicated that they receive blended learning information through formal emails, intranet platforms, and virtual or in-person meetings. Unsurprisingly, digital platforms such as these (email, intranet) commonly function within those hierarchical structures. As such, participants largely accept these forms of communication as pragmatic. However, academics perceive vertical communications as 'downward transmissions' (Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011, p. 1518; Ahuja & Carley, 1999, p. 742), which correlates with participant perceptions that formal communications about blended learning change programmes are constraining.

Individuals fall within a 'system of rights and duties in a situation of interaction' (Thompson, 1961, p. 486). Moreover, those rights and duties are culturally embedded, with specific categories of people falling within the same hierarchical system. The data highlights that participants are sensitive to the cultural hierarchical landscape within their universities. During blended learning change programmes, they sometimes perceive themselves as disadvantaged or not afforded equitable rites of passage. There is a disparity between how participants feel about their rights being equitable during blended learning change programmes and the institution's objective for productivity.

Gramsci's hegemonic concept of Americanism refers to the cultural and ideological influence of the United States on the world, particularly in industrial and organisational practices (1971). There may be some correlation between hierarchical systems and Gramsci's concept of Americanism, which is synonymous with the Taylorism phenomena (Gramsci, 1996). The system of Taylorism maximises efficiency and productivity through strict hierarchical control of labour. Gramsci's insights suggest that Americanism is not just about control but also about cultural hegemony. Likewise, Clegg (2009, p.313) refers to Taylor's concepts on productivity, which laid the foundation for defining hierarchical systems within large institutions. There may be parallels in that productivity associated with blended learning change programmes involves efficiently allocating resources and leveraging technology integration to quickly achieve administrative goals with the least resistance (Clegg, 2009).
The study also finds that blended learning often involves hierarchical decision-making, mirroring Taylor's hierarchical approach (Gramsci, 2014). Recognising that effective change requires technological innovation and inclusive, collaborative decision-making is crucial, and this conflicts with the hierarchical communication systems used to implement blended learning.

In contrast, many commentators agree that complex social systems, such as universities, exhibit structures built around group-based social hierarchies. These arrangements, as indicated by various studies, tending to endure over time (Laumann *et al.,* 1971; Mousnier, 1973; Scott, 1990; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius et al., 2004; Thompson, 1961; Zaleznik, 1989). As such, most social systems maintain steady hierarchical connections involving superiors and subordinates, managers, and employees. This hierarchy prevails even in contemporary and postmodern organisations, where rankings of power and control mechanisms remain more pervasive than ever (Akella, 2003; Brown et al., 2010; Clegg *et al.,* 2006; Courpasson, 2000; Courpasson & Clegg, 2006; Parker, 2009).

Slater and Bennis (1964), Lee and Edmondson (2017) and others suggest that workplace democracy is one way of tackling the limitations of hierarchical structures because it can cultivate a culture of 'full and free communication regardless of rank or power'. Furthermore, such cultures contain shared values, rights, and responsibilities (Forcadell, 2005; Manville and Ober, 2003; Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011). The study further found that innovative practice associated with blended learning is already present in workplace practice. However, many participants expressed concern about the limitations of sharing practice in a prescriptive climate of blended learning change. Lui *et al.* (2009, pp. 1648) noted that 'organisations in today's rapidly changing world, need

employees to constantly share ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences freely'. Formal hierarchical processes such as this can unwittingly impact and stifle the sharing of best practices (Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011; Ahuja & Carley, 1999; Thompson, 1961). Fordacell (2005) further points out that formal hierarchical systems can hinder the democratic principles of trust and respect, which limits the potential untapped benefits of these change programmes.

As such, hierarchical systems can result in what Morrison and Milliken (2000, pp.707) define as 'organisational silence', making academics unwilling to share their blended learning innovations. Nonetheless, the study found that academics are willing to share their innovations with peers regardless of the hierarchical structures. However, this tends to happen informally and can go unnoticed by the institution. Rogers (2003) states that in a system of technological change, the social structures are hierarchical, granting individuals in positions of authority rights to direct the blended learning programmes.

Morley and Chen (1996) also suggest that hierarchical structures are not isolated or independent but intertwined and interdependent, existing across different realms of human experience. Individuals with socially recognised power can impose their understanding of how change shapes the intended vision and direction (Bourdieu, 1992). Raschke (2003, p. 3) described these hierarchies as the digitally constructed 'postmodern condition' of higher education, a phrase he borrowed from the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. He regards the postmodern university as a 'new knowledge space' – something bound up in our 'contemporary cultural understanding of space itself' (Raschke, 2003, p. 5).

This section emphasises communication channels and how academics perceive whether hierarchical structures operate under a system of rights and duties, perhaps in less crude terms than in previous decades, but ideologically. Institutions could effectively communicate their blended learning strategy to participants to alleviate concerns about the clarity of information regarding the change.

5.4 SUB THEME FRAGMENTED CHANGE

Managing change is a daunting challenge facing universities today (Brown, 2013). Various commentators agree that 'change in large complex organisations can operate at multiple levels: process, systems, and structures' (Marshall, 2011, pp. 23; McMurray, 2001; Brown, 2013). They suggest that process and systems change are driven by, amongst other things, technological innovations which can result in the institution undergoing a period of instability (Marshall, 2011). The study confirms that through the perspectives of participants, post-1992 universities are operating under conditions of rapid change. Nohria and Berkley (1994) explore this rapid change through the context of bureaucracy, an aspect of which, are the shifting positions of technology in higher education. Many participants referred to the persistent frequency of blended learning change as normalised by the institution, which they perceived as problematic and, in many cases, unreasonable. Gramsci refers to the 'perpetual conflict' and the bureaucracy within 'management personnel systems' as 'organs of political hegemony' (Gramsci, 2007, p.64). McMurray (2001, p. 74) suggests that many academics experience what he terms 'change fatigue' due to frequency in which it occurs.

Brown (2013) and Burke and Litwin (1992), suggest a growing body of literature highlights that technology use in higher education means an increased level of uncertainty. As such, Brown further argues that the reality for many academics is the experience of 'unpredictability…' (2013, pp. 1). Because of the rapidly changing conditions, participants often describe their university as reactionary, this caused some of them to regard blended learning change adversely. Likewise, Burke and Litwin (1992) and others agree that the environment within which organisations operate is, indeed, turbulent, and reactive (McMurray 2001; Stacey 1996). The study found that blended learning change programmes were perceived to be lacking a unified approach. There were suggestions by academics that the programmes tended to be dysfunctional because, for instance, the hardware did not always function easily, or software drew considerable bandwidth making it impossible for some students to easily participate, or IT solutions for troubleshooting were ineffective.

The IT concerns raised by academics draws attention to an offshoot of chaos theory which she argues represents that institutions tend to be '…non-linear, made up of interconnections and branching choices that produce unintended consequences…' which, is why the environment is experienced as unpredictable (Tetenbaum, 1998, p. 21; cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 49). Nonetheless, while undesirable and perceived negatively, the tensions and conflict within these situations may have the positive result of 'forcing issues into the open, stimulating wider debate, and leading to improved decision making' (Buchanan and Badham, 2020, p. 37).

In addition to the above, participants are concerned about frequent changes leaving insufficient time to reflect and embed them into those developing processes before new changes are introduced. These fragmented changes correlate with a concept known as 'vortical environments' first coined by Emery and Trist to denote frequent shifts in organisational change on the individual and interorganisational levels (Emery and Trist, 1973, cited in Hickman, 2010, p. 34; Bognar and Barr, 2000, p. 222; Miner, 2011). Vortical derives from the word vortex, which refers to a swirling, circular motion of fluid or air (Emery and Trist, 1973; cited in Hickman, 2010).

In the context of Emery and Trist's (1973) work, vortical environments signify spaces characterised by dynamic and turbulent changes (cited in Hickman, 2010). Emery and Trist (1973) introduced the idea of turbulent contexts, where expectations sometimes extend beyond the educator's immediate area of expertise such as learning new technologies or ways of teaching with them (cited in Hickman, 2010). As such, the concept of vortical environments helps draw attention to the complexity of frequent and fragmented changes experienced by participants. Because participants experience their institutions marked by rapid successive changes with high uncertainty, they suggest finding these changes difficult to navigate. The vortical concept referred to by Emery and Trist (1973) and others aligns with academics who experience these programmes as disruptive to their established teaching methods, often requiring quick adjustments to course materials and pedagogical strategies (cited in Hickman, 2010).

The study found that adapting to new digital tools and platforms can be time-consuming, leading to technological hurdles impacting academics and their students (Bokolo, 2019; Alshehri, 2017; Graham, 2013). Participants noted that frequent changes increase workloads, as they balance updating content, managing online interactions, and addressing individual needs, which adds considerable pressure.

According to Gramsci (1975, p. 235), 'in order to achieve a new adaptation to the new mode of work, pressure is exerted over the whole social sphere, a puritan ideology develops which gives to the intrinsic brutal coercion the external form of persuasion and consent.' Gramsci uses 'puritan ideology' to describe institutional change designed to influence individuals physically and psychologically (2014, p. 291). This ideology frames institutional change as a moral good, which is similarly reflected in blended learning programmes. Gill (1997, p. 250) argues that although modern education has moved away from older normative systems of meaning and morality (such as

religion, faith, folklore, and myth), morality remains embedded in the 'hidden curriculum' as an indicator of an institution's underlying values. This foundation makes it challenging to question blended learning change programmes, as their purpose is to impose this ideology on academics, ensuring they become practical components of the 'industrial machine' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 290). However, Noddings (2013) proposes embedding ethics of care as a fundamental component of blended learning programmes to foster trust and open dialogue between academics and institutions during periods of change. Building on this, Harding and Calabria (2025) advocate for a culture of care that emphasises relational ethics and emotional well-being. They argue that institutional policies should move beyond performance metrics and the pressures associated with productivity to prioritise the holistic well-being of educators (Harding and Calabria, 2025).

There are some parallels between Harding and Calabria's (2025) culture of care and the implementation of blended learning in which academics are considered within the context of relational ethics and emotional labour, thus countering the coercive ideological forces identified by Gramsci (2014). Furthermore, this approach aligns with Noddings' (2013) vision of care because it prioritises ethical relationships and empathetic communication, fostering more humane and supportive transitions during an institutional process of change. In this context, a culture of care encourages institutions to adopt practices that acknowledge the emotional and professional challenges faced by academics during blended learning change programmes. Moreover, it could foster ethical values, trust and collaboration between academics and institutional leadership.

Participants express that the experience of frequent change is dehumanising, and at times, isolating. Gramsci's industrial machine underlies his concept of 'animality and industrialism' which he describes as a 'mechanization' of the workforce (Gramsci, 1975, p. 235; Gramsci 2014). While participants appreciate opportunities to improve blended learning strategies, they felt that the frequency of changes undermined the legitimacy of these programmes. Additionally, the constant changes added an extra layer to their workload capacities, which they described as already overstretched, and this also led to distrust and suspicion. In their study, Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2021) also identified rapidly changing environments in higher education meant that academics often felt disconnected, sensing a gap between their needs and those of the institution.

5.5 SUB THEME INSTITUTIONALISATION OF BLENDED LEARNING

An aspect of blended learning is for universities to implement institutionally, meaning large scale, with attempts to standardise across the institution (Huang, Matthews, and Lodge, 2022). Nonetheless, Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2022) suggest the need to appreciate the value of academics to innovate and have agency during this process. However, Trowler points out that the 'study of the processes of teaching and learning in higher education, and the broader institutional context in which those processes take place' can demonstrate a context of 'exclusion' and 'lack of acknowledgement…within a staff corpus' (2014, pp. 43). Likewise, Steel and Hudson (2010) recognise the impact on academics, suggesting more support. Adamson and Sloan (2023) agree that academic challenges are still prevalent today, while institutions should remember they are materially crucial to blended learning programmes so that meaningful collaborations can be implemented.

The study found that the struggle to change pedagogies of practice during blended learning change programmes institutionally include unfamiliar or upgraded technologies, often at short notice, has been described by participants as isolating. The emergence of new technologies, updates in existing learning management systems, and software troubleshooting, to name a few, are often outside the immediate control of academics, leading to challenges in everyday practice. The study found that participants experience a sense in which they are not visible in the planning. Szekeres (2004) talks about the invisible worker in higher education. At the same time, Meyer (2002) suggests that what happens in universities might be better understood within broader changes impacting personal experience. Rossouw (2023) highlights that an individual in solitude may have a positive experience, while those experiencing isolation and loneliness may feel involuntarily disconnected.

While Heidegger and Gramsci's approach to technology and power are from different angles, there are points of convergence between their ideas. Both thinkers raise questions about the potential consequences of dominant forms of power. Heidegger warns against the potential loss of human essence and alienation resulting from technology's dominance, while Gramsci highlights the potential for domination and social inequality perpetuated by hegemonic culture. The study found that references to isolation and sometimes fear are experienced in the struggle to overcome technological challenges, not simply using technologies. Risquez and Moore (2013, pp. 327) suggest it is 'unwise' to ignore the emotional dimensions of organisational life during any change process.
They state that 'generating a vision of organisational change, no matter how technically complex, demands the appreciation and marshalling of human emotion and commitment' (Risquez and Moore, 2013, pp. 327).

The message to academics is that their universities are digital campuses equipped to deal with blended learning pedagogies. However, this study finds that academics struggle with various challenges, sometimes perceiving their institution as ill-equipped. Nonetheless, as the circumstances are complex, both may be true.

Notably, one participant captured the term 'invisibl-isation' while discussing his experience of the blended learning change programme (Participant T). According to the Collins Dictionary (2023), '-ization' on the end of a word changes it into 'the act, process or result of making or doing'. Also, the etymology of invisibl-isation derives from the word invisible, an adjective describing the quality of something, such as feeling unseen (Collins Dictionary, 2023). Nonetheless, in changing from an adjective to a noun, from invisible to invisibl-isation, the term takes on an active meaning. The participant expresses invisibl-isation in terms of being an active component of the institution's blended learning change programme. Therefore, in addition to feeling subjectively invisible, the participant describes a dynamic, impalpable part of the change with intentions to discount and overlook academics deliberately. Nonetheless, Polzer and Hammond (2008) argue that invisibl-isation is not always a deliberate intention to exclude certain groups but an effort to address complex issues. Trowler (2013) suggests that employment conditions are a significant factor relevant to identity concerning others perceived as more visible during the change.

Although one participant expresses the term, the data reveals a general feeling of being unseen or unheard during the blended learning change programme. In terms of the relational aspects of invisibility, it is '…between those who have the power to see, or choose not to see, and on the other hand, those who lack the power to demand to be seen' (Polzer and Hammond, 2008, pp. 421). As such, invisibl-isation also correlates with not being included in the blended learning implementation process, sometimes creating barriers to practice.

The essence of Participant T's term is not so much about his work as an academic per se but more about the process of blended learning change impacting and culminating in what he views as a hostile environment. When using the term, Participant T does, indeed, indicate that in his experience, 'invisibl-isation' is being done to him by his institution rather than the intangible feeling of being invisible. The study finds blended learning programmes are generally perceived as non-inclusive of academic input and experienced adversely. Positive experiences are vital for successful change, which depends on the substance of roles and work conditions. (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008).

Gramsci's 'relations of force' refers to the power dynamics within the institution (Gramsci, 2014, p. 205). Applying Gramsci's concept to participants feeling invisible signifies the unequal distribution of influence and recognition. As such, academics may need space to assert their expertise and pedagogical contributions in the digital landscape. Star and Strauss (1999, pp. 9) describe 'behind the scenes…invisible work', identifying that making work visible adds legitimacy and rescues 'the work from obscurity or other aspects of exploitation'. However, Polzer and Hammond suggest that relationships between actors and how the university functions tend to impose systems in its interests (Polzer and Hammond, 2008, pp. 421).

Additionally, Gramscian scholar Spivak makes an argument about oppression caused by the silencing of individuals. According to his analysis of Spivak, Riach (2017) refers to the notion that those in positions of power do not hear individuals. This notion of silencing does not imply subalterns do not have agency. On the contrary, according to Spivak's work, subalterns are active and agentic (Riach, 2017). The study found that blended learning programmes can amplify existing inequalities, benefiting some more than others. Gramsci's (2014) framework highlights the importance of recognising and addressing these disparities, advocating for a more equitable educational environment where all academics can participate fully and have their voices heard, ultimately enhancing the quality of education in the blended learning landscape.

5.6 MAIN THEME MORAL ACADEMIC IMPERATIVE

This section highlights the moral commitment and ethical values of academics in higher education. There are various strands surrounding moral theory, and according to the deontological branch of this philosophy, 'certain acts are seen as intrinsically right or wrong and certain moral obligations applied irrespective of the consequences' (Chappell, 1998; Freakley and Burgh, 2000; Alexander and Moore, 2012; cited in Brooks, te Riele and Maguire, 2014, p. 23). Reamer (2013) emphasises the moral responsibility of professionals to deliver services with competence and integrity. Many participants expressed concern about the unique challenges faced by post-1992 students, for instance, likely to experience digital poverty. To better understand participants' moral positioning on the blended learning change, deontology provides a good foundation for navigating this discussion.

Although one participant conceived the term moral academic imperative, others expressed a moral inclination within their practice. As far as academics were concerned, this moral discernment extended into and beyond the institution's blended learning change programme. Pollard *et al.* (2008, p. 116) refer to these moral inclinations as 'contributing to the development, within each of us, of a unique sense of self'. The study found that many participants were guided by their unique morality, influenced by their community of practice in various and complex ways. Moreover, a moral sense of self influences 'perspectives, strategies, and actions' (Rosenberg, 1989; Secord and Backman, 1964; cited in Pollard *et al.*, 2008, p. 116).

The study found that regarding the institution's approach to blending the learning, participants discern that their roles are 'vital in terms of scaffolding and structuring students learning' (Laurillard, 2014, p. 4; cited in Ashwin *et al.,* 2015, p. 142). While reflecting on those moral inclinations adapted to their teaching practices, the academics interviewed tended to '…also relate these to evidence to make sense of them' (Ashwin *et al.,* 2015, p. 48), meaning that those moral dispositions correlate with evidence-informed teaching practices such as literature, research, and collaborative student relationships. Smith and Hill (2019) point out that academics have existing blended learning skills and knowledge not typically leveraged during the change process. Because of oversights such as this, participants were largely cautious of their institution's implementation of blended learning, not as an objection to change per se, but because they felt the change tended to be capricious, impacting teaching and students sometimes adversely.

Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2021, p. 1567) found that what counted in the institution's blended learning model were 'timelines, deadlines, and technologies but not them as teachers concerned with, and caring for, students and their disciplinary learning'. The study found that participants frequently support students' emotional well-being, which they perceive as a moral obligation, sometimes at odds with blended learning programmes. Gill's (1997) ideas are particularly pertinent here as he discusses the contribution of technology to meaning and morality in higher education. Since participants expressed their moral concerns regarding blended learning change programmes in their respective universities, Gill (1997, p. 251) explains, '…the meaning and morality that are part of the hidden curriculum of universities owe a great deal to the dominance of technology'. He suggests we are approaching a new mode of 'technological morality' bound to the 'hidden' moral values of 'good and evil' (Gill, 1997, p. 252).

Gill (1997) draws from Ellul (1964), whose premise is that 'good and evil are synonyms for success and failure' (Ellul, 1964, p. 193). To unpack this, Gill (1997) suggests that every society must provide its members with standards for distinguishing right and wrong. These standards underpin hierarchical values by guiding participants through essential institutional objectives during the change process. The institution may perceive its goals as morally sound, as the basis for societal functioning (Gill, 1997; Ellul, 1964). For academics, blended learning involves technological morality, which underpins essential characteristics and demands for demonstrating efficiency, precision, preparedness, and exactitude in their pedagogies, in addition to 'competence and dedication' (Gill, 1997, p. 252). As such, the study finds there could be more clarification between the institution's moral objectives and the academic's moral imperative to address these tensions.

Many theorists, philosophers and activists influenced Gramsci, one of whom was Smith's (2022) paper, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Another influencer was Hegel, who reasoned that 'the gap between reason and sense' is positioned within a 'moral socio-economic sense' and drawn 'not from abstract moral reflections, but from the concrete relations of a living social order' (Beiser, 1993, p. 215). Smith (2022) explores the development of moral judgement and argues that sympathy guides behaviour. Morality is a sentiment that allows individuals to understand and share the feelings of others. As such, this confirms that emotional experiences impact academics (Kim, 2013). Kim (2013, p. 17) further suggests, 'for the most part, stability and instability coexist in people's moral judgment and reasoning, and these are always context-sensitive rather than context-independent'.

In this context, Gramsci found value in Smith's (2022) notion of sympathy by incorporating empathy and a sense of moral sentiment into his understanding of the existing power structures of hegemony. Schein (2010, p. 153) describes this as the 'degree of emotionality' based on universalistic or collectivist hegemonic structures interwoven into corporate value systems such as blended learning programmes. Corporate responsibility, therefore, correlates with Gramsci's 'collective will' in which there are 'obligations…customs, ways of thinking, acting and morality…' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 232).

Gramsci's (1971) concept of organic intellectuals also resonates with those same intellectuals or subalterns developing a deeper understanding of their experiences and aspirations. Gramsci incorporates the idea of sympathy and moral sentiment into his knowledge of cultural and political hegemony, emphasising the importance of building solidarity and appealing to common interests that challenge existing power structures. As many participants were research active, they were well-informed about the theoretical, social, political, and pedagogical landscape, with in-depth knowledge about the infrastructures in their respective institutions. The study finds that as well as being a politically motivated social group, the participants are active subalterns, viewing their identities as morally constructed.

5.7 SUB THEME RESEARCH INFORMED CHANGE

There is a connection between research-informed practice and academics feeling a moral obligation to develop their research knowledge providing the best possible education to students, fulfil ethical and professional responsibilities, and contribute to the broader academic community. Giroux (1992) adopts Gramsci's concept of intellectuals, which Cochran-Smith (2005, p. 1221) utilises to explain the role of teaching in higher education. Cochran-Smith (2005) explains firstly that the notion of intellectuals incorporates the importance of higher education as a vehicle for promoting social justice. However, often overlooked, she and others argue, are the marginalised voices of research-active academics (Cochran-Smith *et al.* 2008, p. 1221; Cochran-Smith, 2005, p. 15). They consider those voices as marginalised because academics are largely neglected during processes where change occurs. The study participants reported that they do indeed feel their voices were largely unheard during the blended learning programme.

Participants of this study are research-active academics, which they shared broadly shaped their practice. By integrating research findings into the design and implementation of blended learning environments, educators create practical, flexible, and personalised learning experiences that promote active engagement ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes. As such, research shapes how academics reflect on their teaching methods, as various commentators suggest that it offers potential for innovation and evaluation of educational practices (Cain, 2015b; La Velle and Flores, 2018). Many participants expressed a marked correlation between innovative teaching and research-informed change. According to Connelly *et al.* (2021), 'educational change and innovation must be evidence-informed and predicated on a robust research base'.

Kastner (2020, p. 3) points toward a 'need for a theoretical understanding of blended learning as related to practice in education'. Many participants expressed moral discomfort with the blended learning change programme, which they perceived as digitally and pedagogically inequitable for various reasons, from digital poverty to limited research informing the change. There is an apparent correlation between Gramsci's traditional intellectual and the participants in this study. Gramsci recognises the crucial role of intellectuals in shaping and disseminating dominant ideologies and cultural norms, maintaining power structures, and challenging existing power relations (Gramsci, 2014).

Various authors argue for research and its relationship to changing conditions (Zhu and Pan, 2017; Dexter and Seden, 2012). The correlation between academics and Gramsci's intellectual is evident in the responses of participants who express strong concerns about the blended learning programme needing more credible research objectives underpinning the change. The study found that academics perceive their voices as two-fold in this regard. Firstly, their actual voices, a space to express their knowledge and understanding, to question and challenge so that joint agreements can be arrived at, and secondly, their research or research in the field.

Recognising academics as research-active opens the possibility of exploring this group as 'public intellectuals' (Cochran-Smith, *et al.* 2008, p. 1221; Cochran-Smith, 2005, p. 15). Intellectuals, according to Gramsci, are subalterns (Gramsci, 2020). They often occupy influential positions in institutions such as the government, media, or academia (Gramsci, 2015). Gramsci believed subalterns develop collective will to challenge and transform the existing social order (Gramsci, 2014).

This collective will of individuals within subaltern groups become conscious of their shared interests, everyday struggles, and the need for solidarity (Gramsci, 2020), much like academics collaborating through research and practice in higher education. Academic research is an example of Gramsci's collective will since it is an avenue for understanding and developing shared values among this group. The study finds that shared values occur whether research is individual or collaborative. It is determined by understanding whether participants conducted research and how they shared knowledge or collaborated. In this group's community of practice, sharing research is expected, which they believe should be foundational to their institution's blended learning change programme.

5.8 SUB THEME DIGITAL POVERTY

This study identifies the potential for institutions and academics to collaboratively develop blended learning environments that could better address technological inequalities (such as digital poverty) specific to post-1992 universities. Thus, one aspect of this investigation highlights academic concerns surrounding (among other things) that a 'digital divide is far from closed' (Van Dijk, 2005, p. 2). Notably, that 'power is based on access to resources…' (Mesthrie *et al.,* 2013, p. 312). Moreover, participants found that absolute or relative exclusion negatively impacts socio-cultural resources and educational attainment (Van Dijk, 2005, p. 171). This problem indicates one of the numerous concerns raised by participants concerning the demographic of students attending post-1992 universities (but not all) vulnerable to digital poverty.

Heidegger's (1977, p.12) work concerning technology, highlights his perspectives on this kind of relationship to poverty and power. He says technology is a way and mode of revealing '…in the realm where, revealing and unconcealment take place…where…truth happens'. Heidegger's (1977) exploration of technology's role in revealing and concealing aligns with the concept of digital poverty because there may be limited access to resources, information, and socio-economic opportunities. As such, blended learning change programmes can represent a modern manifestation of these power imbalances. Participants perceive the changing landscape in terms of neoliberal education, capitalism, inclusion, morality, and other conflicts between their professional values, sometimes in conflict with their institution's blended learning programme. According to Clegg, Frederick Winslow Taylor's industrialised form of production was the 'first modern technology of power', representing poverty in higher education (2009, p. 312).

The study found that academics are acutely aware of the broader social and political landscape, especially relevant to digital poverty. The study reveals that blended learning is not simply technology and humans combined for teaching and learning purposes as it extends beyond an approach or mode of delivery. Heidegger (1977) reminds us that technology shapes our worldview, determines our way of thinking, and changes how we perceive ourselves. Gramsci describes this as a form of cultural, ideological, and moral conditioning (Gramsci, 2014). However, Heidegger also warns against the dangers of technological dominance leading to alienated relationships, as some participants referred to feelings of isolation during the blended learning change process (Heidegger, 1977).

The study found mixed responses about the extent to which their universities addressed digital poverty. Some universities offer bursaries or grants, while others invest in, for instance, laptops. Many are investing heavily to design what is now termed the digital campus. However, academics revealed that digital poverty was more than having devices. Some students could also not afford internet, or they may need more space to work privately at home, or they might be sharing devices with siblings. The thesis draws out that academics understand the challenges faced by students. While institutional programmes are often perceived as deterministic by participants, blended learning can increase student engagement and improve student outcomes, according to some suggestions. This notion tends to overplay or simplify the role of technologies, insufficiently considering the broader context in which blended learning is developed and used (Lindgren, 2017; Hodkinson, 2017). In reinforcing these ideals, blended learning change programmes are led by individuals expected to uphold the dominant values of the institution and act in ways that perpetuate the status quo, making it difficult for academics to challenge existing power structures. As such, the study found that blended learning change programmes are perceived to shape and disseminate the reproduction of dominant values at the expense of existing knowledge, skills, and expertise.

5.9 SUB THEME ACADEMIC WELL-BEING – ADAPT OR DIE

Huang, Matthews, and Lodge (2022) began their research focusing on blended learning and the experiences of academics by drawing on digital analytics and student data. The project was amended because they overwhelmingly found that academics were reporting about challenges such as 'inadequate structure, support and…the impact on academic well-being' (Huang, Matthews, and Lodge, 2022, pp. 1558). This study also found that participants experienced blended learning programmes as stress-inducing for various reasons such as workload, limited time, or isolation.

Participants suggested a culture of blame was cultivated as a form of punishment if students perceived the course as not adequately offering blended learning. However, the study also found a discrepancy with what was perceived as blended learning between participants and the institution. Likewise, there may be a gap between how students are defining this approach given the various ways blended learning can be designed and interpreted by practitioners. Ultimately, the implementation of blended learning should recognise that any initiative essential for wellbeing and flourishing in the workplace should start with acknowledging the inherent value of academics themselves (Herman *et al*., 2018).

Huang, Matthews, and Lodge further argue that institutions treat academics as 'tools in redesigning courses and ticking each production goal off' (2022, pp. 1568). They suggest there has been a shift from 'caring about the best possible blending outcomes to evaluating academic accountability' (Huang, Matthews, and Lodge, 2022, pp. 1568). Because of these accountability measures it was felt that the university tended to adopt a universal approach which was conceptualised as an opportunity to deliver high quality, twenty-first century curricula, explore new pedagogies and deliver exceptional educational value to students (Huang, Matthews, and Lodge, 2022, pp. 1563). Notably, the study found that academics expressed little resistance to the idea of blended learning as their investment in the programme tended to be driven by new understandings enhancing the student experience. In the main, participants enjoyed being able to incorporate changes into their teaching practices that help students learn better. However, while institutions perceive inclusion as occurring, the impact of isolation and other barriers must be considered (Adamson and Sloan, 2023).

The study found that participants tended to make every effort to consider the impact of blended learning on their students but felt that they were not afforded the same consideration in the process. Huang, Matthews, and Lodge argued that blended learning change programmes ‘created a climate that violated autonomy, privileging efficiency and outcomes over the needs and wellbeing of academics involved’ (2022, pp. 1568).

5.10 MAIN THEME IDEOLOGICALLY AMBIGUOUS

One could maintain that the university's implementation of blended learning evolves ideologically 'to fit the realities of a transformed society' (Schwartzmantel, 2008, p. 112: Selwyn, 2011). Blended learning programmes function ideologically driving change, sometimes but not always obviously. Although ideologies can be made explicit, they are equally implicitly actualised. It is Gramsci's (2011, p. 153) contention that ideological conditions can be regarded as what he calls 'structures and superstructures.' As such, the post-1992 is both structure and superstructure, an ideological instrument perpetuating and reproducing social ideals.

The study found that participants regarded blended learning change programmes as more than a pragmatic application of workplace practice. They considered the evolution and ecology of technological change and the broader implications. It can be inferred from Gramsci that there is a nuanced but largely unclear distinction between structures established and sustained through the economy and superstructures which function ideologically and prodigiously permeating education, law, and social expectation (Gramsci, 2007). In this study, ideology is thus 'a broad range of views which cover the central aspects of how society should be organised' (Schwartzmantel, 2008, p. 25). Schwartzmantel (2008, p. 26) also contends ideology is a certain vision of 'the good society', and therefore, the most desirable society shaped by the role of the hegemonic state.

The study reveals participants experienced their institution as either requiring more vision and commitment to change which they expressed tended to be perfunctory. Although structures and superstructures are not easily delineated as each system is scaffolded to support the other, Gramsci tells us they are ideologically inseparable (Gramsci, 2011, p. 153). Nonetheless, based on Gramsci's description of structures and superstructures the university is situated across both concepts because 'it is an object of property and hence of class division and struggle', it is an instrument materially of the social norms and expectations of its day, and it is an instrument of the State (Gramsci, 2007, p.153). Therefore, when discussing blended learning change programmes, the discourse includes the various ways in which technologies maintain the post-1992 landscape and rather than shape it, tending to reinforce repeated ideas and social mores which participants suggest are a source of frustration.

5.11 SUB THEME POWER RELATIONS

The study found there was a certain distrust of institutional governance surrounding blended learning change programmes. This distrust was partly due to academics feeling dissatisfied with what they viewed as unsatisfactory consultation before, during or after the change process. Probing further into the participants distrust the study finds it tends to be predicated upon the technologies used or encouraged, and systems that frame the change. This confirms that blended learning change programmes are far from neutral and that academics can be cynical about the changes due to a range of issues that occur (Selwyn, 2014; Hecksher and Donnellon, 1994). Paechter *et al.,* (2001, p. 4) suggests that power is held and exercised by dominant and other social groups, though not equally and this corresponds well with Gramsci's hegemonic theory (Clegg, 2009; Pizzolato and Holst, 2017; Mesthrie *et al.,* 2013). Morgan (2006, p. 179) states, 'the fact that technology has a major impact on power relations is an important reason why attempts to change technology often create major conflicts between managers and employees and between different groups within an organization'. Gramsci's view is positioned hegemonically against the broader educational and social context surrounding the need for a blended learning approach in higher education. The thesis corroborates this idea in that participants were oftentimes frustrated by the blended learning programmes especially when they felt excluded from the process.

As previously mentioned, the relationship between participants and the institution during the blended learning process could be regarded in Gramsci's (1971) theory as the subaltern and hegemony. For instance, participants experience the relationship between themselves and the institution, only in part due to the blended learning programme, as there are much wider issues at play, such as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism was a concept which several participants referred to as being problematic, nonetheless, there is a more in-depth discussion about this in the following section.

However, Gramsci would also refer to the condition between the institution and academics during the blended learning programme as being related to society in the 'Economic-Corporate Phase of the State' (1971, p. 237). Selwyn (2014) aptly addresses this same condition by unpacking some of the core values associated with blended learning programmes. He suggests there is an increased demand for educators to demonstrate entrepreneurial abilities in their teaching practices through various forms of technologies, and that this reinforces 'contemporary forms of capitalism' (Selwyn, 2014, p. 127).

The study found that participants regarded these continued demands with some suspicion, not in relation to the change, but to the motives of the establishment and the additional pressures to perform a type or professionalism not always aligning with their own values and beliefs.

Gramsci (1971, p. 200) encourages an analysis of this relationship which he terms 'relations of social force' and 'relations of political force'. He argues that the analysis of this relationship is based on two key principles. Firstly, that conflict between the academic and the institution already exists separately from the blended learning programme of change, and not a result of the implementation. Secondly, existing structures are foundational to new conditions and that 'superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions have matured within the framework of the old…' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 200). Governance is one of numerous examples representing the material conditions impacting the relations of social and political force referred to by Gramsci (2014). The research supports this notion in that blended learning change programmes experienced by individuals tended to be an aggregate of known technologies, upgraded platforms, or updating of existing learning management systems. Rogers (2003, p. 12) suggests that it does not matter whether the implementation is 'an idea, practice or object' perceived as new, what matters is the individual's reaction to it.

The study finds a correlation with the immediate tensions and frustrations felt by academics and the conjunctural phenomena within Gramsci's theory. This is encapsulated in participants responses regarding the broadly troublesome and disruptive experiences of technologies when, for instance, they do not work as intended. Participants suggest that regardless of the external pressures, the institution is not operating under a duty of care which results in frustration and distrust. According to Gramsci (2014) both the organic and conjunctural in relations of forces are subject to 'structural contradictions' as there is no correct way of operating or asserting any change, only effective ones determined contextually.

The study reveals that participants perceive the technological disruptions as unfavourable and inhospitable to their work conditions rather than a natural part of the blended learning change process. Smith *et al.* (2015, p.527) argue that when observed through deficit perceptions of the digital landscape, this can harness conflicting ideas about meanings behind the change. The study found that those individual meanings perceived by participants tend to suggest that they feel there is little concern about the difficulties they experience during these times.

Gramsci (2021) recognises political organisational power as not only a form of coercion but also intimidation. Buchanan and Badham (2020, p. 3) describe this as ‘power in action’ meaning that institutions coerce people using political strategies to achieve those ends. As part of his concept of cultural hegemony, Gramsci's theory of coercion emphasises how dominant groups such as the institution continue to maintain control (Gramsci, 1971; Gramsci, 2014). This means the conditions participants find themselves are deeply complex, requiring a broader understanding that any change process is influenced by factors both inside and outside the institution.

5.12 SUB THEME NEOLIBERALISM

The neoliberal discourse and marketisation of higher education are widely discussed in academia and the research landscape. As such, various commentators suggest that over previous decades there has been increasingly marketised regulation by neoliberal government policies impacting universities (Waring, 2017; Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007; Shore & Wright, 2004). They and others argue that ‘change has led to a transformation of academic departments into business units run by management teams focused on corporate targets, working within tight budgetary constraints’ (Waring, 2017, p. 540). The study corroborates this suggestion because participants mention that the university tends to seek business consultancy from technology firms rather than the internal knowledge base when implementing blended learning programmes.

The issues facing higher education in the UK can be traced back to the economic, social, and political shifts that marked the emergence of neoliberalism in the mid-1970s (Radice, 2013). Under the leadership of Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US, neoliberalism gained momentum. It spread worldwide, propelled by institutions like the IMF, World Bank, OECD, and the European Union in the 1990s (Newson , 2021). Neoliberalism's rise is anchored in four changes under capitalism: privatisation, deregulation, financialisation, and globalisation (Newson, 2021, pp.106). Despite the financial crisis and worldwide recession between 2007 and 2009 raising doubts about this trend, neoliberalism continues to be the prevailing global political ideology (Radice, 2013; Newson, 2021; Giroux, 2014; Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017).

The richness of data obtained from respondents evidenced a deep appreciation of blended learning change programmes situated within the wider historical political landscape. For instance, there were specific references to their universities as neoliberal, working with students as consumers and the need to stimulate greater financial advantage within the market. It was suggested that their institutions were motivated by economic competition, believing that blended learning will increase effectiveness and efficiency in the workplace (Van Dijk, 2005). Van Dijk (2005) suggests that the expectation is for employees to stay current and learn how to use various technologies supporting academics to blend the learning. Again, according to Van Dijk (2005, p. 165) this relates to the market of production, exchange, consumption, and labour.

For participants, there were various issues concerning the marketisation of blended learning in their university. However, the overarching sentiment arising from participant ideas around the neoliberal university was that of production. One participant put it this way '…our university has a bum on seats mentality' (Participant H). Clegg (2009, p. 317) states that this style of neoliberal production emulates Henry Ford's production line 'where products are delivered at a constant rate'. At that time, neoliberal production was perceived as the greatest productive power of contemporary society. Participants proposed that this underlying ideology still exists within the corporate structure of their institution. Although Gramsci did not use this term, neoliberalism is consistent with his thinking, as he emphasised the production of vocational education in shaping and reinforcing hegemonic ideologies. This also links to Gramsci's idea of education serving economic interests, mirroring Henry Ford's production line concept, reflecting neoliberal production-like principles in education (Gramsci, 2020).

The connection between marketisation and blended learning lies in their mutual alignment with efficiency, providing a good foundation for students. Nonetheless, participants believe these compromise the quality and equity of education as this shift can disadvantage students who, for instance, lack access to technology. Van Dijk (2005) refers to various complex phases culminating in material or physical access as necessary for developing the skills and ability to use technologies. Although students already use technology in their everyday lives, access to learning in higher education is complex, presenting uniquely different challenges to students. However, while participants see the benefits of a blended learning approach, they are equally concerned about the commercialisation risks of transforming higher education from a public good to a market commodity.

Hence, Gramsci's (2020) concept of the Popular University challenges the role of education in perpetuating these dominant hegemonic narratives. For instance, participants suggest that students' requesting a desire to read less was one of many marketing objectives, which they believe does not prepare students for the necessary industry skills, even in this technologically advanced age.

5.13 MAIN THEME PEDAGOGIES

In making sense of pedagogy, it is useful to note that the academic participants in this study, are educationally, socially, and politically motivated in their own research lives and practice. Waring and Evans (2015, p. 25) provide what they describe as a holistic concept of pedagogy:

> 'a teacher's understanding of and stance in relation to pedagogy is fundamental to informing how and where they position themselves as professionals and (re)frame their vision of education and its future, including the types of learning, learners and society that they want to promote'.

With reference to how blended learning practice pertains to pedagogy, it is often overlooked, misunderstood, and misconstrued (Waring and Evans, 2015). Furthermore, as pedagogy is still often described as 'the science of teaching', they rightly suggest this 'deserves to be discredited' (Waring and Evans, 2015, p. 27). There is a juxtaposition of Gramsci's (2020) theory with Waring and Evans (2015), who concur with Leah and Moon's (2008, p. 6) interpretation that pedagogy is a constantly evolving 'dynamic process'. The notion of a dynamic process captures the unfolding transformative internal evolution of pedagogy, encapsulating the 'interrelationships between policy, theory, knowledge, and rationale, all framed and informed by political and social agendas, cultures of practice and power relations' (Waring and Evans, 2015).

The study found that participants' interpretations of their pedagogies demonstrate an original sense of purpose around their professionalism in terms of making a democratic contribution to society. Participants generally considered theory-informed pedagogies necessary in countering tendencies toward notions such as technological determinism; the idea that technologies produce successful outcomes regardless of contextual factors. As such, the tendency is to challenge blended learning programmes that do not clearly draw out the distinction between practice and relevant research. The interviewees suggested that the value of research lies in the mechanisms supporting blended learning change programmes. Indeed, several participants provided an important distinction between how people learn, theories relevant to teaching, and how this aligns with blended learning as a pedagogical approach.

Bell asks a question pertinent to this study: 'what should be taught to whom, and with what pedagogical objective in mind?' (Bell, 2004, p. 243). Firstly, one might answer Bell's (2004) question by appreciating the tensions between academic staff and the institution during blended learning programmes because the change is pedagogical for both. Secondly, it is not only what should be taught but how it should be delivered, and therefore, the extent to which academics are actively involved and motivated within this process. But also, whether institutional and academic pedagogies align (Clark, 2021).

Importantly, the study found that participants identified with their pedagogies in unique and politically nuanced ways. More specifically, they did not tend to refer only to teaching practices but through the lens of rights, freedoms, collaborative and democratic practice. The study was able, therefore, to draw from Paulo Freire (1921-1997) who suggested that political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action. Waring and Evans (2015, p. 104) refers to 'participatory pedagogies' which considers 'social justice principles and ethical starting points' that are critically engaging and inclusive. This correlates with blended learning not simply as an approach, but as a pedagogy embedded within the cultural context of the university and the cultural mores and norms of society. Likewise, Gramsci establishes a meaningful connection between pedagogy and culture subjectively as the:

> '…discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations' (Gramsci, 2014, p. 57).

Participants' pedagogical ideas draw out some distinctions within the neoliberal university landscape motivated by market and consumer demands. There appears to be an association between the implementation of blended learning, the institutionalisation of blended learning and the duality of pedagogies (institutional and individual) in terms of where these tensions conjugate. This speaks to the invisibl-isation and isolation sometimes experienced during blended learning change by participants. Furthermore, it highlights the tensions between those uniquely diverse pedagogies and the challenges faced by the institution, which also should not be underestimated. However, Gramsci's (1970, p. 2014) relations of force is particularly compelling as he warns us to consider these tensions as a 'refractory reality', meaning there are multiple ways of perceiving these conditions, with various existing ideologies constantly shifting, changing, and expanding.

Nonetheless, Freire (1970) emphasises that leaders and people should be equal participants in understanding and changing their shared reality. Rather than a one-sided dynamic where leaders dictate, both parties engage in critical reflection and action together. This suggests that blended learning change programmes are best served through collegial practices. Additionally, collaborative processes lead to individuals participating symbiotically as active shapers of their world. Thus, pedagogical action becomes a genuine commitment to reshaping the circumstances. Ultimately, it highlights the importance of inclusive, participatory efforts in achieving meaningful progress through change. Applying Freire's (1970) ideology to the implementation of blended learning change programmes means that academic pedagogies are likely to flourish and likewise, Gramsci's (2014) ideology means that being open to the inestimable possibilities because they are idiosyncratic as well as being co-constructed.

5.14 SUB THEME TRAINING

The Office for Students (OfS, 2022) report took the view that the quality of digital skills among academic staff, in some instances, fell well below the expected standards. The panel highlighted that a 'lack of digital skills among staff leads to poor quality teaching methods' (OfS, 2022, p. 25). The panel also took the view that there were, at times, evidence of insufficient digital skills to deliver blended learning effectively. Nonetheless, the panel also reported significant efforts by teaching staff to upskill in digital teaching, both individually and led by teaching and learning enhancement teams (OfS, 2022, p. 25).

The implementation of blended learning tends to consist of the 'software infrastructure, hardware base, high-speed network, and wireless network, which can enhance the accessibility and flexibility of online and face-to-face learning' (Adel and Dayan, 2021, pp. 2; Basir *et al.,* 2010; Albusaidi, 2012; Spring *et al.,* 2016; Ghazal *et al.,* 2018; Bokolo *et al.,* 2020). The study found that academics experience a complexity of barriers relating to these technological layers, at times, impacting teaching. Participants express that institutions should provide ongoing training and support due to the issues likely to occur during integration and beyond, namely troubleshooting. Indeed, participants report having attended blended learning training provided by their institutions. However, they argue that training should consider the longer-term issues with adequate support for extended periods taking account of these issues. Participants' views of an appropriate length of time were contextual, dependent on the implemented changes, and determined only through meaningful collaborations with academic staff. According to Adamson and Sloan (2023, pp. 68), institutions should embed training that provides 'clarity and structure, outlining the institutional needs in relation to staff skills and training'.

Adel and Dayan (2021) report that the institution's blended learning objectives may not always be successful due to a misunderstanding around staff training needs. Wild *et al.* (2021) suggests that for academics to deliver effectively they should receive appropriate blended learning training. However, White (2020) argues that institutions must ensure that training such as this takes account of the social skills and technologies that enhance the 'professional space and boundaries…establish credibility', and 'manage the duality of belonging or not belonging to the academic space'. Additionally, it is suggested by White (2020) and others that this type of focus could be integrated into recruitment as well as staff training activities (White, 2020; Kastner, 2020).

Furthermore, Philipsen *et al.* (2019), and Oliver and Trigwell (2005, pp. 21) argue that institutions unwisely invested millions in online learning for decades and blended learning is now a 'compromise position' which they go onto suggest 'hides the politics of the situation'. What they mean by this is that because universities have become largely corporatised, training is usually aligned with a return on investment with more focus on production than academic experience.

There are significant adjustments, modifications, and innovations to be considered when implementing blended learning change programmes (Moskal, Dziuban and Hartman, 2013). As such, the study found that adjustments to blended learning into practice raised additional concerns about time poverty. Benson, Anderson and Ooms (2011) suggest that it takes time to develop solid blended learning programmes because of the amount of work and time needed to make these adjustments, which they further argue can be underestimated by institutions. Participants welcome training as a way of staying up to date with rapidly changing technologies and their digital pedagogies of practice. However, the study finds there is some disparity between academic's training needs and the institution's objectives. In their research, Dziuban *et al.* (2018, pp. 13) considered blended learning as it evolves into the 'new normal' in higher education. They further suggested that our educational future is 'about to change' (Dziuban et al., 2018, pp. 13). Little did they know that the pandemic was two years away from their published article, which would eventually mean that blended learning practices would be accelerated.

5.15 SUB THEME PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic was not the first of its kind to attack human life on a global scale. Aarts *et al.* (2021, p. 3) maintain that apart from World War I and II, 'there are relatively few obvious opponents.' They argue that we tend to deny the 'invisible assassinators' that have visited and left. According to El-Hussein and Cronje (2020), higher education is developing rapidly in today's information era, with universities going through a period of disruption compounded by the recent pandemic. Filippini (2017) notes that Gramsci's development as a political thinker, his alignment with socialist principles, and his initial endeavours as a writer and political figure coincided with the most severe crisis ever to hit the order of Italy's liberation. Likewise, Eringfield (2020, pp. 155) emphasises the pandemic crisis within a 'plurality of possibilities.' To explain this, he brings into focus the notion of the utopian and dystopian university as not a 'perfect world' but realistically working towards a 'better world' (Eringfield, 2020, p. 155).

Some commentators argue that online learning is not necessarily blended learning as current research and the findings suggest this perception no longer appears to be the dominant view (Garrison and Kanuka, 2005; Adel and Dayan, 2021; Pham and Ho, 2021). At least, not since the pandemic. Instead, blended learning is an approach to curriculum design where technology dynamically and instrumentally improves the learner experience (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005). Equally, and in support of this view, it would be wrong to suggest that academics went passively online during the pandemic or moved materials online, and students were left to direct their learning independently. On the contrary, the study found that academic interaction with students was central to the pandemic shift, in addition to adapting to various delivery modes while using software, hardware, and other technological products that enhance student experience, engagement and collaborative working (Bokolo, 2019). There is no doubt, as Eringfield (2020) points out, there were widespread fears for the future of universities. The study found that returning to being fully on campus after the extended lockdown caused some distress for participants. Again, Eringfield (2020, p. 148) comments that especially in times of crisis, an individual's hopes for the future tend to be located within expressions of fear and to 'point out the pitfalls'. This corresponds with participants who mention missed opportunities for institutions to implement changes learnt from the pandemic but have opted for the pre-existing traditional ways of delivering to students. The dilemmas for returning to campus did not immediately dissipate and some participants were concerned for obvious health reasons.

CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION

6.0 INTRODUCTION

The conclusion chapter synthesises the key findings from this study, reflecting on the implications of blended learning change, which draws attention to advancing our understanding of blended learning in higher education. The thesis emphasises the challenges experienced by academics during the change process. As such, the chapter starts by considering the pandemic and the extent to which impacted blended learning in a post-pandemic era. What follows are the complexities of power during the change process in that Gramsci (1971) provides a politically nuanced discussion with which to appreciate participant voices and expressions and the extent to which top-down blended learning programmes tend to dictate educational reforms. The chapter discusses the benefits and limitations of this study and considers future research and the implications of blended learning and artificial intelligence for further investigation.

6.1 BLENDED LEARNING INCENTIVES FOR CHANGE: POST-PANDEMIC

While integrating technology into teaching and learning is not new to higher education, various approaches, such as flipped and hybrid learning, gained momentum alongside blended learning. As a result, post-pandemic policy and compliance measures and many official reports now use the preferred term blended learning. The rapid implementation of blended learning during lockdown brought to light pre-existing inequalities. Due to the pandemic, these pre-existing inequalities were compounded by an accelerated shift to online teaching and learning, revealing opportunities and significant disparities in digital access among students and staff. Post-1992 undergraduates experienced a higher degree of digital poverty. As such, a significant challenge was the digital divide among students, affecting their access to technology and ability to engage with digital learning tools. Another significant challenge was the need for academics to improve their digital skills with, at that time, limited training.

Prior to the pandemic, resistance to new and developing technologies may have been a more prominent issue in the study. However, the forced lockdown led to a significant global psychological shift in higher education surrounding the use of technologies for teaching and learning. This shift suggests that the notion of resistance to technological change and the perceived reluctance of academics to adapt presents a significant opportunity for improvement. Understanding these notions of resistance within the context of challenging blended learning change is crucial. It could provide more insightful results, helping institutions better understand their positions and improve their strategies for working with academic staff.

6.2 THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP OF POWER IN BLENDED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION

The research adopted a hegemonic stance, positioning the institution as culturally hegemonic, described by Gramsci (1971) as the dominant group. Similarly, the study also positioned academics through the lens of Gramsci's subaltern; as subaltern, academics represent what Gramsci describes as the subordinate group (Gramsci, 2020). These two concepts represent opposing forces, which Gramsci also describes as embodying a complex relationship in which the dominant socio-economic hegemonic group seeks to maintain power. In contrast, the subaltern group seeks to disrupt this power. Through Gramsci's hegemony, the research emerges through a nuanced and politically thought-provoking lens. As such, clear dominant expectations and clear dissenting voices sometimes act in micropolitical defiance and, at other times, direct activism. In this conclusion, the extent to which the research focus regards academics experiencing the implementation of blended learning reveals a richly complex and compelling landscape.

6.3 TOP DOWN, NEOLIBERAL AND THE IMPACT ON ACADEMIC AUTONOMY

The study uses Gramsci's concept of hegemony to dissect the dominant ideologies influencing educational practices within post-1992 universities. The framework allows for intricate reflections around blended learning change, indicating broader hegemonic interests prioritising market-driven educational reforms. Participants referred to, for instance, their attitude towards what they perceived as the neoliberal university. Respondents perceived their institution's neoliberal focus as working against them by prioritising efficiency over quality and the well-being of students and staff. Participants questioned whether technological integration focused too heavily on increasing the institution's competitive edge.

Gramsci's theoretical lens provided an exploration of certain educational practices adopted or resisted within academic environments. As such, the research leverages Gramsci's theories of hegemony and the role of intellectuals in society to analyse power dynamics and cultural leadership within university spaces. It draws attention to hegemonic practices that influence educational policies and academic freedom. Participants expressed deep concerns about the potential erosion of academic freedom and integrity under the neoliberal agenda.

They further perceived the potential for reduced quality of standardised courses that might limit the depth of teaching and flexibility in curriculum design. These practices show that top-down strategies tend to reflect the institutionalisation of blended learning against the challenges of considering individual academic autonomy. This pressure is often compounded by a need for more input into the decision-making processes, leaving academics

feeling as though changes are imposed from above (top-down management), which can sometimes alienate them from the institution and its goals. This model can lead to a division between educators' professional judgments and the directions provided by the administration.

There is a correlation between top-down management and Gramsci's (1971) regulated and ethical society. Participants were conversant about top-down approaches whereby decisions are made predominantly at the administrative or institutional level without substantial input from academic staff in the blended learning programme. This management style reflects Gramsci's (2014) analysis of hegemonic practices, where power structures within universities dictate the terms and conditions of educational reforms. Top-down approaches result in prescribed blended learning and can potentially result in incongruity between academics and institutional pedagogies. These ideologies were said to correlate with Gramsci's relations of force because of the unequal distribution of influence and recognition experienced by academics during the change process.

6.4 THE NUANCES OF ACADEMIC RESISTANCE: COLLABORATION OVER REFUSAL

The literature reveals that universities tend to perceive resistance to blended learning negatively. However, the study exposes academic resistance as a form of protection. This protection highlights participant concerns about their integrity, identity, and the erosion of their professional expertise. Notably, academics experience blended learning change as disruptive to their existing pedagogies. Nonetheless, technological change can bring disruptions that are not necessarily negative. The study interrogates the notion of resistance, often perceived as a form of refusal. However, on closer investigation, while resistance is evident, participants reveal a fine distinction between opposing and unwillingness to change verses challenging the change. For most, more knowledge, information, and collaboration with their institutions were valued.

6.5 MORALITY AND ETHICAL PRACTICE

The study revealed that academics experience an overwhelming sense of ethical responsibility as they navigate the complexities of blended learning implemented by their institutions. It emphasises that adopting blended learning is not merely a logistical or technological upgrade but involves significant moral and ethical considerations. Academics are portrayed not just as educators but as moral agents whose decisions impact their students' educational and social development. The research exposed various moral dilemmas, such as pressures to conform to digital trends, personal ethical standards or the best interests of students as perceived by participants. As mentioned in previous chapters, Gramsci (2014) was concerned about the moral implications of societal norms and values.

Although the empirical data evidenced important ethical dilemmas articulated by academics, the literature suggests universities might also perceive themselves as ethically guided. The investigation concerns the potential for blended learning to reinforce or challenge existing educational hegemonies. This notion suggests that blended learning can be a tool for instigating educational and social reform. The study revealed the ethical pressures crucial to understanding the non-technical challenges of blended learning. By framing the discussion within a moral imperative, participants revealed the dilemmas and the potential for meaningful educational reform. However, implementing blended learning could be further analysed at the institutional and management level by examining how university policies and administrative decisions affect its criteria for ethical policy provision.

Further limitations are in defining ethical policy provisions regarding blended learning. Ethical and technological implementation is still a growing debate in education. Participants wanted their institutions to understand their moral concerns when implementing blended learning change. Moreover, these concerns might be considered in various ways, for instance, through research-informed change that guides programmes offering more substantial clarity across the department, school or, more broadly, the institution.

6.6 BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

The study provides valuable insights into how academics perceive the implementation of blended learning within their institutions. By focusing on the experiences and opinions of academic staff, the research sheds light on the practical and ideological challenges educators face, offering a nuanced understanding of blended learning strategies. Using Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony as a lens to examine the implementation of blended learning is a distinctive approach that enriches the academic dialogue about educational change. This theoretical framework allows for a deeper exploration of power dynamics, resistance, and consent within educational institutions, offering a unique perspective on how educational policies and practices can reproduce or challenge existing social structures.

The study contributes to the literature on change management within higher education by documenting how blended learning initiatives are deployed and managed. It offers practical insights into the strategies that can facilitate or hinder successful implementation, serving as a valuable resource for administrators and policymakers aiming to implement similar changes. By targeting post-1992 universities, the research addresses a segment of the higher education sector underrepresented in academic studies. These institutions have distinct characteristics and challenges, and the study focus fills the gap in research about how post-1992 universities adapt to and integrate technological changes in education. The study indirectly promotes more inclusive and equitable educational practices by highlighting the need for sensitivity to academics' diverse needs and backgrounds. Understanding the specific challenges experienced by academics in adapting to blended learning can lead to more supportive and inclusive implementation strategies. Participants demonstrated a greater degree of openness to change than was expected. While they found blended learning challenging, opportunities to collaborate with the blended learning programme could impart discussions and facilitate better alliances with the institution.

6.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study acknowledges the limitation of having a small and potentially non-representative sample size. This affects the ability to generalise the findings across the broader academic community involved in blended learning initiatives, particularly in post-1992 UK universities. To fully capture the diversity of experiences and perceptions among academics from various disciplines, career stages, and institutional types, a more diverse sample could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Although the findings represent participant voices, careful consideration was given to the researcher's bias, as this tends to be inherent in qualitative studies due to the subjectivity and interpretation of data. The subjective nature of the data collection could introduce biases based on the personal interpretations of both the interviewees and the researcher. As such, a limitation of the study is the researcher's position as an academic with pre-existing and similar experiences to participants. She also works in the post-1992 university space. Insights could also be gained from senior leaders, Deans, managers and programme coordinators to better understand the challenges associated with blended learning change from these alternative perspectives and experiences.

The study employs a cross-sectional design, capturing a snapshot of experiences and opinions. This design does not allow for observing changes over time or the evolution of attitudes as academics become more accustomed to, or resist blended learning practices. These limitations suggest further research involving more diverse samples and incorporating quantitative methods to complement the qualitative insights. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide a deeper understanding of how perceptions and practices evolve as blended learning becomes more ingrained in higher education settings and technology continues to evolve.

6.8 FUTURE WORK

The study opens opportunities for future research around blended learning change programmes. Notably, the future of blended learning in higher education is moving swiftly towards artificial intelligence. This change is described as swift since ChatGPT's unprecedented arrival in late 2022 was extraordinarily fast from its arrival to the public domain and as a tool used by university students. Although other artificial intelligence tools were already in this landscape, various reasons have made ChatGPT unmatched thus far. Firstly, its meteoric presence, being widely adopted, its versatility in handling many academic tasks, and its ability to generate human-like text has significantly enhanced learning experiences.

Additionally, ChatGPT's accessibility and ease of use have contributed to its rapid integration into educational settings, allowing students to anchor its capabilities to research and write essays, to name a few. This phenomenon highlights the potential of artificial intelligence to transform educational practices, making it a pivotal area for ongoing and future studies. It is fast, free, and evolving at lightning speed. As mentioned in Chapter Two, various commentators, such as Lee *et al.* (2024), conducted research into a blended learning environment and ChatGPT's potential for developing higher-order thinking skills in students. They found that this kind of knowledge construction was achievable using artificial intelligence. Alshahrani (2023) highlights its ability to personalise responses and navigate complex concepts to improve learning outcomes. A future study of artificial intelligence with blended learning would be fascinating when explored through a hegemonic Gramscian lens. As mentioned in previous chapters, exploring the socio-political and hegemonic implications of blended learning with artificial intelligence may assist in identifying limitations, addressing ethical concerns, and establishing crucial guidelines that promote effective and responsible use in this unique and expanding pedagogy of practice.

Lastly, but by no means least, the study also concludes that this thesis provides extensive data for policymakers and university administrators to consider the broader implications of blended learning beyond mere technological adoption. It advocates for policies sensitive to the socio-cultural dimensions of education that promote inclusivity, fairness, and academic freedom. Moreover, it stresses the need for ongoing research to monitor the impacts of blended learning on quality and equity in the higher education sector. Except now, future work should include the use of artificial intelligence with blended learning and the need for cautious implementation, critical thinking, and academic guidance to reduce potential risks (Alshahrani, 2023).

6.9 DISSEMINATION OF WORK

Outputs	Aims and Objectives	Outlets
Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles	Establish academic credibility, contribute to scholarly discourse, and engage with experts in the field.	British Journal of Educational Technology (BERA), Learning, Media and Technology, Race Ethnicity and Education, International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education
Book Publications	Provide a narrative of my thesis, reaching a broader academic and practitioner audience.	Routledge, Springer, Bloomsbury Academic, Palgrave Macmillan.
Conference Presentations	Network with scholars and enhance visibility.	British Educational Research Association (BERA), Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), European Conference on Educational Research (ECER)
Opinion Pieces	Reach a wider, non-academic audience, influence policy and public debate, and position myself as a thought leader on issues of technologies in HEI and systemic social and educational barriers.	Times Higher Education The Conversation Inside Higher Ed
Blog Posts or Professional Newsletters	Engage with educators directly, translating research findings into actionable insights.	BERA, Medium Blogging Platform, University teaching and learning newsletters
Podcast Interviews or Guest Appearances	Increase public engagement and make research accessible to a broader audience.	Target education-focused podcasts or create my own series through Spotify or Apple
Workshops and Webinars	Facilitate knowledge exchange with educators, policymakers, and practitioners, and promote practical applications of my research.	The Gramscian Society UK HERG
Policy Briefs	Inform educational policy discussions, particularly around technology, systemic injustice in higher education.	The Fabian Society
Social Media Engagement	Build a research community and network using platforms	Twitter (now X), LinkedIn, ResearchGate.
Collaborations and Special Issues	Collaborate with other scholars for special journal issues or edited volumes focused on Gramscian theory, power dynamics in education.	Sage Publications, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, Independent, SpringerOpen

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8.0 APPENDICES

Appendix A

Questions: semi-structured interviews

1. What does blended learning mean to you?
2. How was your academic knowledge, experience or role incorporated as part of your institution's blended learning strategy for change?
3. What is your understanding of the institution's vision and what do you think or feel about this vision for blended learning in your university?
4. Were you aware of policy changes, was there a launch, presentation, or other events during the change process, or was the blended learning approach informal and less directive? Depending on which, please describe your understanding and thoughts around how you experienced this approach.
5. To what extent do you integrate blended learning into your methods for teaching and learning?
   Follow-up questions: to what extent are your strategies influenced by - your institution's approach, your own teaching methods, a mixture of both?
6. During your institution's blended learning change programme, what training and/or resources were made available to support any adjustments to your practice?
   NOTE: training or resources for adoption could include software (i.e., online platforms) or hardware (i.e., cameras) or other hardware equipment intended for this purpose.
7. Based on the way blended learning was implemented by your institution. What do you feel worked well or could have been done differently during the process of change?