Understanding the Well-being of Graduate Students when Transitioning into Research

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Abstract

  This qualitative study explored issues affecting the well-being of graduate students during a critical period of transition into research within a research-intensive university in Montreal, Quebec. Data was collected through interviews with master's students who completed at least one year of study. The impacts brought by the Covid-19 pandemic were examined to better understand the challenges encountered during the last year. The overarching research question that led this study was: What challenges do master's students in education programs identify as impacting their well-being (physical, mental, emotional, social) and their ability to do research? The data were analyzed using a constant comparison approach and key themes emerged from this process. Themes correspond to challenges that master's students encountered during three transition phases in the program.

  The first theme was "Building a sense of community." This theme demonstrated that students seek connections with both their peers and professors and the substantial contribution community has to student well-being and academic success. The "Meeting thesis milestones" theme showed the thesis-related challenges for the novice researcher and the mental health challenges that arose when transitioning into and engaging in thesis work. The third theme was "Balancing multiple responsibilities," which includes managing academic life and life beyond the academy. This theme indicated the ways in which academic demands can intrude into aspects of personal life and significantly contribute to poor mental and health wellness. Together these themes reveal the critical stressors in the journey of master's students from entry into the program to thesis work.

  The findings from this research suggest that building community among peers and professors for academic and socio-emotional support, clear expectations of thesis timelines, developing confidence and independence as a researcher, and more individualized support systems on campus are essential to the well-being of master's students during their transition into research. This significant contribution of this study lies in that it is one of the few that explores a particular period of adjustment into thesis work that is challenging yet significant to the well-being of master's students who are emerging researchers.

Résumé

Cette étude qualitative examine les défis qui ont un effet sur le bien-être des étudiants diplômés pendant une période critique de transition vers la recherche dans une université à forte intensité de recherche à Montréal, Québec. Les données ont été recueillies dans le cadre d'entrevues avec des étudiants qui faisaient une maîtrise et qui ont complété au moins une année d'études. Les impacts apportés par la pandémie de Covid-19 ont été examinés pour mieux comprendre les défis rencontrés au cours de la dernière année. La question de recherche globale pour cette étude est: Quels défis les étudiants à la maîtrise dans les programmes d'éducation identifient-ils comme ayant un impact sur leur bien-être (physique, mental, émotionnel, social) et leur capacité à faire de la recherche? Les données ont été analysées en utilisant une approche de comparaison et des thèmes clés ont émergé de ce processus. Les thèmes correspondent à des défis rencontrés par les étudiants à la maîtrise au cours des trois phases de transition du programme.

Le premier thème était « Construire un sens de la communauté ». Ce thème a démontré que les étudiants recherchent des liens avec leurs pairs et leurs professeurs et la contribution substantielle de la communauté au bien-être et à la réussite scolaire des étudiants. Le thème « Rencontrer les jalons de la thèse » a montré les défis liés à la thèse pour le chercheur novice et les défis de santé mentale qui se sont posés lors de la transition et de l'engagement dans un travail de thèse. Le troisième thème était « Équilibrer les responsabilités multiples », qui comprend la gestion de la vie universitaire et de la vie au-delà de l'académie. Ce thème a indiqué les façons dont les exigences académiques peuvent s'inclure dans des aspects de la vie personnelle et contribuer significativement à la santé aussi. En conclusion, ces thèmes révèlent les facteurs de stress critiques dans le parcours des étudiants à la maîtrise vers le programme au travail de thèse.

Les résultats de cette recherche suggèrent que construire une communauté parmi les pairs et les professeurs pour un soutien académique et socio-émotionnel, des attentes claires concernant les délais de thèse, le développement de la confiance et de l'indépendance en tant que chercheur et des systèmes de soutien plus individualisés au campus sont essentiels au bien-être des étudiants à la maîtrise lors de leur transition vers la recherche. Cette contribution significative de cette étude réside dans le fait qu'elle est l'une des rares études qui évaluent une période particulière d'ajustement dans le travail de thèse qui est difficile mais qui est important pour le bien-être des étudiants à la maîtrise qui sont des chercheurs émergents.

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Preface and Contribution of Authors

Mithura Sanmugalingam was the principal contributor to study design, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, writing and preparation of the thesis.

Dr. Stephen Peters, the candidate's supervisor was actively involved with the feedback on the chapters and decision made regarding the research study and the completion of this thesis.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Within the last few years, a significant increase in feelings of depression and loneliness has led to burnout and suicidal thoughts among graduate students (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017). Recent research from Harvard University reported that nearly 18% of graduate students experience severe symptoms of depression and 11% report suicidal ideation (Barreira et al., 2020). These statistics demand urgency, especially since much of the current research and funding focuses on undergraduate students (Laidlaw et al., 2016; Stallman et al., 2018). Further, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of mental health problems have been increasing (Gruber, 2020; Woolston, 2020). These effects are being felt worldwide and immediate attention is required to understand the emergent challenges that graduate students are now experiencing.

Given connections between major life transitions and several health disorders (Bennik et al., 2013; Monroe, 1983; Moustafa et al., 2020; Salleh, 2008), the first year of graduate school is a period of high risk for developing psychological problems. Graduate school demands that students balance work and life and endure multiple challenges within the research and university setting (Grady et al., 2014). Many master's students are also working full-time in their professional careers and may have unique challenges with the multiple roles and responsibilities they hold. Transition is a period of adaptation, growth and development and has a major impact on retention which makes a study on transition into graduate school of particular importance (Wingate & King's College London, 2007). In addition, students undergo changes in their learning as they engage in complex ideas at depth and use newly acquired research skills. For these reasons a study on transition into graduate school is pertinent and can provide insight into the challenges students face.

Moreover, the majority of master's students are engaged in serious research for the first time and may not be well-equipped to handle the challenges during this period of adaptation. This is particularly true of new research stream graduate. This is a unique sub-category not often enough understood and appreciated on their own terms. In order to study new research stream graduate students, I focus on an education master's program where the students tend to come from professional undergraduate degrees. Students from such programs often have limited opportunities to engage in research or develop research skills. However, research participation prior to graduate school has been noted to be key to academic preparedness for research at the master's level (Huss et al., 2002). Further, motivation to engage in research for education

master's students often go beyond scholarly value and come from the potential contribution research can have in their practice. This is an under researched group of students that have their own set of unique challenges. For these reasons, education is a great discipline to study this process of transitioning into research and may inform other graduate programs in other professional focused faculties such as Law, Nursing and Engineering.

This past year, master's students have experienced a more profound challenge as the world was faced with the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2020, Montreal, Quebec had undergone lockdown which may have exacerbated the feelings of loneliness that many master's students experience during their thesis work. Further, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about challenges for first-year master's students to navigate, including financial burdens, difficulty completing research or degree on time, and increasing demands within their multiple roles (Jaramillo & Stephenson, 2020; Wang, 2020).

Although several quantitative studies have shown the increase in mental health challenges, engaging with the master's students themselves to hear about their lived experienced is essential to better understand the sources of stressors and specific types of challenges in well-being that students face during this unique period of transition.

Purpose of the Study

My interest in higher education and well-being has brought me to propose this interview-based study, in which I explored the experiences of master's students during their transition into research. The term transition here is defined as change that takes place over time and often involves an adjustment period. This will be discussed in further detail in the review found in the following chapter. My research further aimed to identify common challenges of well-being among master's thesis students in the faculty of education within the university of study. By engaging in inquiry with master's thesis students in the faculty and asking them to reflect on their experiences, I wanted to better understand the challenges they faced during their transition into research and their overall well-being during this phase. In addition, I aimed to understand the pandemic-specific determinants of well-being and the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the transition experience of master's thesis students.

Although several studies have identified the prevalence of mental health issues among university students (Wilcox & Nordstokke, 2019), few studies have examined the well-being of

master's students during the critical period of transition from undergraduate coursework or professional work into research. By understanding master's students' lived experiences and hearing from them about what they found would have improved their experience, I hope that my research can contribute to developing resources to better support the transition for upcoming master's students and bring new perspectives to understanding well-being at the graduate level. While this research took place in Quebec, the findings will provide recommendations on graduate student mental health support across Canada and internationally. I believe that the results can contribute to ensuring that new researchers can continue to thrive in challenging environments.

My overarching question framing this study:

> What challenges do master's students in education programs identify as impacting their well-being (physical, mental, emotional, social) and their ability to do research?

To explore my objectives, I investigated the following sub-questions:

1) How do master's students in education graduate programs describe their well-being?
2) How do master's students in education graduate programs describe the challenges during their transition from coursework into research?
3) How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the well-being of master's students in education and their ability to do research?
4) What do key stakeholders in the faculty of education think about master's student's well-being and the impact it has on their ability to do research?

Situating Myself in the Research

Knowledge, I understand to be, socially constructed. There are multiple ways of knowing, therefore, knowledge in this lens can be considered subjective. By listening and understanding the individual experiences of graduate students through their eyes, I adopted an interpretivist approach to this study. My research explored the subjective experiences of master's students when they transitioned into the research field. I aimed to understand how they interact with the environment and how the environment interacts with them.

In order to situate myself in this study, I wanted to provide my background and how it has led me to explore the well-being of master's thesis students and their transition into research.

As a second-year master's student in the Faculty of Education at McGill University, I have my own experiences to draw upon. In addition to my experience as a master's education student, I was also working within a branch of student services at McGill. Both of these experiences have influenced my project.

My journey as a student moving through different institutions have contributed to my interest in educational transition. Transitioning through every milestone has been memorable and often associated with emotions. From CEGEP to university and now to graduate school, each of these changes in the educational setting and academic levels had its own set of challenges. I noticed that during my post-secondary transitions, my friends and I had an adjustment period in our academics and routine. For myself, this transition period was a challenge in terms of academic performance during the first term/semester. Once I became familiar with the environment and structure, I began to do better, and this was a common pattern. In particular, I felt a major shift when moving into graduate school after completing my bachelor's degree in education. One aspect was the structural differences of the education program in graduate school. Majority of the classes were in the evening to accommodate the schedules of students who were also teaching or working during the day. The other aspect was the style of instruction and teaching by the professors. My courses mainly consisted of critical thinking and reflection and very little lecturing. The classes consisted of students coming from all different countries, backgrounds, and education. One of the most drastic shifts occurred when I had completed all my coursework and began working on my thesis. The schedule had shifted once again, yet this time there was much more flexibility that I was not familiar with. My own experiences moving through various levels of education have contributed to my curiosity and interest for educational transitions. In particular, the last few years of educational transition within higher education have been pivotal periods in my life as I transitioned into adulthood at the same time.

My initial interest in well-being within higher education stemmed from my experience working within Student Services at McGill. In my position, for the last five years, I managed a team of student facilitators to provide workshops on leadership topics on campus. An important process of the team was for the student facilitators to attend meetings and retreats throughout the year to help the team bond and build teamwork skills as the workshops involved co-facilitation. I was always interested in understanding the reasons for why students joined groups, teams, and organizations. Given their busy schedule and academic demands, what made students contribute

their time and commitment to a group? Through casual conversations with the team and anonymous feedback over the years, I learned that along with building leadership skills, the most prominent reason was to have a balance in their academic life and to create friendships. Further, for many members, these aspects contributed to their well-being. Although the team was designed for undergraduate students, we occasionally received interest from graduate students and when I searched for such opportunities for graduate students, it was very limited. As a graduate student myself, I was curious to understand the types of support that graduate students were interested in and how it has contributed to their wellness.

My own experiences with transitioning into my master's program have further influenced my interest in the educational transition of novice researchers (master's thesis students) and their well-being. There were several moving parts in my life as I entered graduate school. In addition to working within student services at the university, I took on my first teaching position at a high school. As a new teacher, during the first month, I encountered challenges with developing a routine for the students and a routine for myself. My days were long especially since I lived further off-campus. I typically enjoy keeping myself busy, however, this time it was especially challenging to manage everything. Through conversations in the classroom with my colleagues, I realized that this challenge was common and almost "normal" for graduate students. Many of my colleagues were parents, teachers, and master's students at the same time. They often expressed feelings of stress, of being overwhelmed, and were overall exhausted. As I was reflecting on my own experiences in the thesis program and that of my peers, I was fascinated with the complex lives of master's students and curious to understand how student well-being evolved as they transitioned into the program.

It was conversations in my research methods course that led me to realize that there was an additional transition period that seemed to bring about a widespread feeling of anxiety among thesis students, this was the transition into research. Listening to the concerns of my peers, I myself, began to feel more anxious about pursuing a thesis. Learning about research paradigms and different methods in quantitative and qualitative research is quite a shift from the traditional education courses that I was used to. Many of my colleagues, especially those who came from a teaching background, expressed difficulties grasping the concepts in the course and applying it to their own research. Further, there was a general feeling of stress during this course due to the volume and pace, there was little time to pause and reflect on the information given. While this

course provided an opportunity for students to start thinking about their research, I found that students felt overwhelmed and unprepared to do their thesis. A few students were even reconsidering their decision to do a thesis. Ultimately, my personal experiences and conversations with students made me interested in the stories of master's thesis students to further understand about what specific wellness challenges are students faced in their complex lives during this critical period of transition and how it has contributed or not to their ability to do research.

As I started this study, my personal experiences as both a master's student and my involvement with student services had impacted my thinking. As a researcher, I was aware of the importance of acknowledging and being aware of my personal assumptions and the influence they have on my research. I developed strategies to ensure I was critical and reflexive as I conceptualized this study and the ideas that emerged from the data which will be discussed in depth in the methodology chapter.

Summary

This chapter provides a background to the proposed study including preliminary information, the purpose of this study, research questions, and my personal stance within this research. The following chapters will provide a discussion on relevant literature, the methodology, the emergent themes and findings and discussion of findings. The final chapter will focus on key findings and the implications of this study.

Chapter Two: Conceptual Context/ Literature Review

This chapter explores the recent literature and the pivotal work relevant to this study. I start by discussing the importance of literature reviews. Firstly, I draw on existing definitions and conceptualizations of well-being in the context of higher education. After this, I explore the literature on educational transition and well-being in higher education. Then I explore what is currently being said about new researchers at the master's level and further about education graduate students doing research in a master's program. I also examine literature on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on graduate student mental health. I conclude by discussing the gap in the literature on this topic and how my study addresses this gap. Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research, it was difficult to anticipate what I would find from the research. Instead of using a theoretical lens to frame my work, I explored existing literature to conceptualize and make sense of what currently exists and any gaps that exist. This preliminary process of exploring existing theories and empirical research will provide the basis for my *conceptual context* of what is going on as individuals embark on research programs for the first time (Maxwell, 2005). As I articulate a conceptual context, I will be critically examining the contributions and limitations of current work in the field.

Significance of Literature Review for this Study

The literature review chapter is important for this study to develop an understanding of the work that currently exists and to critically analyze and identify gaps in the body of work surrounding my topic. Significant research requires a good understanding of previous work as well as the strengths and limitations and their implications (Boote & Beile, 2005). Lagemann & Shulman (1999) calls this "generativity," which is being able to build on prior research and identifies this as a key component to building scholarship and thereby integrity of the work. Conducting a literature review provided an initial lens and rationale for my study. Although a comprehensive literature review is necessary to present the relevance of the proposed study, I have set parameters to have a balance of how much literature is being presented. By setting boundaries, the researcher can avoid imposing a lens from prior work which may limit what can be revealed (Butler-Kisber, 2010). These parameters are educational transition in higher education, master's students, master's thesis students, graduate students, mental health, well-being, Covid-19 and graduate students. Taking this approach to the literature review, the goal is

to allow room for new understandings to emerge while gaining a conceptual context for thinking about educational transitions and well-being.

Understanding Well-being

Well-being is a broad concept that has been debated over the years. In the past, two main branches of understanding well-being were popular: the hedonic tradition, which focuses on constructs such as happiness, pleasure, low negative effect, positive effect, and satisfaction with life and the eudaimonic tradition, which focuses on the meaning and an individual's potential, highlighting personal strength and human development (Disabato et al., 2015; Huta, 2015; McMahan & Estes, 2011). More recently, most researchers agree that well-being is a multidimensional construct. According to (Dodge et al., 2012), "well-being has been defined as the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced" (p. 230). In other words, every time a person encounters a challenge, there is an imbalance between the resource pool and the set of challenges an individual faces. In order to go back to equilibrium the person is "forced to adapt their resources to meet this challenge" (Dodge et al., 2012). The resource pool here refers to the skills or set of resources that an individual has to cope with the challenges. The term "challenge" was initially referred to as "life event" in earlier literature and changed to be more encompassing. In this research, *challenge* and *stressor* are used interchangeably and it refers to the obstacle or threat that impact an individual's state of equilibrium or balance. This definition of well-being can be usefully applied to the context of educational transition in which there are multiple factors/challenges (psychological, social, emotional, and physical) that impact the stability of the resource pool. Ultimately, the negotiations made are the trade-offs required in order to return to equilibrium. In this study I draw on Dodge et al. as a framework for understanding well-being that allows me to explore master's students' own subjective interpretations and understandings of well-being.

Educational Transition and Well-being in Higher Education

Transition into graduate study and more specifically into graduate research has often been overlooked in literature on educational transitions (McPherson et al., 2017; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). There seems to be the assumption that the same level of skills and abilities developed from undergraduate education is adequate to be successful in graduate programs.

Therefore, a significant transition is not recognized when starting graduate studies. Transition from preschool into elementary (Harrison & Murray, 2015; Shoshani & Aviv, 2012) and from elementary to high school (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Mahmud, 2020; Shoshani & Slone, 2013) have been well studied. Research on higher education transitions has widely focused on first year undergraduate programs as a critical and unique shift for students (Briggs et al., 2012; Wrench et al., 2013). The existing studies on graduate study mainly examine the well-being of PhD students and common challenges such as student-supervisor relationship, work-life balance, and career development (Evans et al., 2018; Nagy et al., 2019). Recent research suggests that PhD students are at a risk for developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and psychological conditions (Barreira et al., 2020; Levecque et al., 2017). However, little has been explored about master's students as emerging researchers and their well-being when transitioning into research. A few studies have revealed the challenges for master's students including time management, balancing multiple academic responsibilities, and poor relationship with faculty staff and professors (Sato et al., 2017). The existing research resonates with my experience, I also have noticed students grapple with the transition from undergraduate coursework to a research program. However, more research is needed to understand the complexities associated with the critical period of adjustment into research for thesis students.

Despite the emerging body of work on academic transitions, the term transition within educational research has been described and understood in various ways. In general, transition consists of change and takes place over time. Historically, transition was considered to be in stages, or distinct moments in time occurring in a linear fashion, often consisting of a beginning and an end (Kralik et al., 2006). More recently, transition is described as a continuum that is subject to change over time and may consist of adaptation. Examples include "developmental, personal, relational, situation, societal or environmental change, but not all change engages transition" (Kralik et al., 2006, p. 320). For Dodge et al. (2012), transition is a change that involves a disturbance from equilibrium before returning to a state of balance. First-year students in graduate programs undergo changes in multiple aspects of their academic and personal life. However, much of the existing literature has explored academic life changes and life changes outside of the university as separate factors. Due to varying experiences, prior education, life circumstances, and responsibilities, understanding master's students' realities requires a multidimensional approach. Considering the link between life events or changes and

well-being (Bennik et al., 2013; Moustafa et al., 2019), transition to graduate study is a critical period for experiencing distress and developing mental health disorders. During the first year of graduate school, students have an adjustment period where they experience discomfort which can be followed by mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety, and feelings of frustration (Wu & Hammond, 2011).

Positive transitioning seems also to involve a successful identity shift (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2005). Many master's students begin to undergo shifts in both personal and academic lives as they begin their journey in graduate school. Along with academic responsibilities other aspects include parental roles, families, ongoing careers as well as university-based teaching and researching assistantships. Within faculties of education, a large number of students are also teachers or principals and usually have workload in addition to school hours. The unique complexities involved when transitioning to graduate school are evident in the multiple identities among graduate students. Stuck betwixt and between personal responsibilities and academic demands, master's students are often negotiating these aspects and experiencing an imbalance in identity formation. Identity has shown to be a crucial component of a learner (Tobbell et al., 2010) and more specifically for academic success in higher education (Briggs et al., 2012). Transition involves a shift in identity that learners create for themselves as students in higher education or as they change levels in education (Briggs et al., 2012).

Master's Students

Students attending graduate school vary drastically in their prior knowledge and experiences. Many students are mature status, international students, or have taken major gaps in their education before returning. Students experience a shift in learning and adapting to the pedagogy of graduate studies in addition to life changes. Unique and specialized support is required to understand the needs of master's students. International students may experience a shift in culture and further limited language proficiency can be challenging both for rigorous research and for social connections (Zhou et al., 2011). A survey on UK PhD students shows that 80 percent of the international students found adapting to a new environment and learning method difficult (Coneyworth et al., 2019). Such stressors could be related to proficiency of language skills, financial constraints, personal safety in an unfamiliar environment,

accommodation, culture or specifically related to their chosen course/program (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Given connections between having confidence in one's own capabilities and well-being, master students' perception of academic preparedness is a key factor to consider in their educational transition (Willison & Gibson, 2011). Due to the independent nature of research and academic writing, students need support and research courses to gain key skills to feel confident in the program. A significant adjustment in academic learning, including "academic writing, reading strategies, effective use of statistics, and knowledge of discipline-specific concepts, and conducting research" (Willison & Gibson, 2011, p. 158), was common among students beginning graduate school (West, 2012). Further, a lack of preparation in undergraduate study was a common theme (Huss et al., 2002). Other research identified the stressors as mainly emotional, such as anxiety and fear, rather than intellectual (West, 2012). Similarly, a study on undergraduate education students' experience with research methods courses shows a general feeling of anxiety and stress, especially when it comes to learning quantitative methods such as statistics (Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2003; Papanastasiou & Zembylas, 2008). Students are less motivated to continue to engage in research when having negative experiences in their methods course (Monahan, 1994). Given the notable adjustment into PhD research writing, a similar or more severe experience can be foreseen when beginning graduate studies, as this is when students are often introduced to thesis writing.

Specific studies on education master's students are scarce. However, a few have focused on the unique challenges associated with becoming an educational researcher. Prior research has highlighted the importance of professional development as a key motivator for teachers pursuing graduate studies (Gray, 2013). A study of master's education students in western United States highlights the learning curve involved in transitioning from a teacher to a researcher (Moulding & Hadley, 2010). A common struggle among the master's students surveyed in Moulding and Hadley's (2010) research was the failure to adjust their "understanding of research as a search for information with the understanding of research as the production of new knowledge through active experimentation" (p. 49). The conflicting ideologies and roles of a teacher, who is focused on pedagogy and helping students, and a researcher, who takes an objective stance and practices reflexivity, is a drastic transition in perspectives as career educationalists (Labaree, 2003). Further, education master's students and other students coming from a professional degree

program are in a unique yet challenging position in which research involvement is not often a requirement during their undergraduate years. Whereas in science degree programs, research involvement is encouraged early on, and more opportunities are available to develop research skills, this is not usually the case for education students. A more in-depth understanding of teachers as researchers and their realities can be revealed from interviews.

Covid-19 and Graduate Student Mental Health

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, several surveys have been done on mental health of students in higher education. A majority of the research reveal a recent increase in prevalence of mental health issues (depressive disorder, anxiety) and suicidal ideation among graduate students (Chirikov et al., 2020; Kee, 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2021). A study conducted by the Toronto Science Policy Network (TPSN) with 45 different Canadian institutions has shown that 75 percent of graduate students (master's and PhD) across various disciplines reported a decline in their mental well-being compared to before the pandemic (Toronto Science Policy Network, 2020). For some, the pandemic had worsened their pre-existing mental health issues. Another survey conducted by the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU), using screening tools at nine research universities, reveals 32 percent of graduate and professional students have major depressive disorders and 39 percent of both undergraduate and graduate students have general anxiety disorder (Chirikov et al., 2020).

The pandemic has brought about unique challenges for graduate students while amplifying or revealing existing challenges. Given that society is in the midst of the pandemic, large-scale empirical data are useful to collect information on the types of mental health challenges graduate students are facing and to make a comparison with prior years. However, much more in-depth, qualitative evidence is needed to obtain a full picture of the stressors that contribute to student well-being and mental health during this time. A few studies of this nature have shown concerns among first-year PhD students with respect to adjustment to the virtual environment, funding availability (Nature Communications, 2021), and managing multiple demands (Kee, 2021). Similar stressors can be expected from first-year master's students. Qualitative research has also shown disparities in the impacts being felt, where international students and certain groups of populations are experiencing more profound effects on their well-being and ability to cope (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021; Zhang, 2021).

Within these studies, master's students are often grouped with PhD students into the category of "graduate students." Master's students are in a unique position in which they are adjusting to the research environment within the university and beginning to orient themselves to academia. Therefore, they may experience a different set of stressors compared to PhD students, and their transition into research needs special attention. The statistical data and quantitative research reviewed helps inform my research, but it also points to the need for new findings elicited through careful qualitative research, such as through the in-depth interviews on master's students' experience that I undertake in this research.

Summary

The literature review provided a lens for considering the master's students context. A review of the terms "well-being" and "transition" allowed me to examine the multiple meanings and approaches to these terms. The review helped to define "well-being" for the context of this study, as a "balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced" (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230). It is a broad concept that has been debated for years and therefore it is important to settle on the meaning of this term as it relates to the experiences of the master's students. The term challenge for this study includes what individuals themselves perceived to be barriers or impediments to their progress, their happiness, their sense of fulfillment or personal development as informed by the eudaimonic and hedonic traditions (Disabato et al., 2015; Huta, 2015; McMahan & Estes, 2011). I also examined literature on educational transition in higher education in order to understand the role of transition on well-being for a learner or student within academics. However, it is evident from the literature that understanding educational transition among master's students requires a holistic approach given the unique characteristic of each student. These aspects, together with Dodge et al's definition of well-being have informed my methodology and analysis. Further, literature on master's students and teachers pursuing a master's underscored the need for more research on well-being and thesis work. The following chapter describes the methodology used for this study and the analytical process through which I developed the themes that emerged from the data and conclusions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The goal of this chapter is to describe the methods and procedures for this qualitative study on the challenges that affect the well-being of master's students during the transition period into research. As I explain in the sections below, the most substantive ways that my research and analysis was inspired by grounded theory was through a process of memoing and iterative rounds of data analysis (Chun Tie et al., 2019). A grounded theory inspired approach allowed for a rich understanding of master's thesis students' lived experiences and provided a means for the ideas to emerge from the data that gave insight into the challenges faced during this critical adjustment period into thesis work. Components of the following chapter includes a restatement of my research questions, the design of my research, and the data collection methods, organization, interpretation, and management strategies I used. I will also describe the research setting, participant selection and ethical considerations of my research and the ways in which I account for the trustworthiness of the research.

Research Questions

The following is my overarching questions and sub-questions that I aimed to answer through this study: What challenges do master's students in education programs identify as impacting their well-being (physical, mental, emotional, social) and their ability to do research?

This overarching question was broken down into the following sub-questions:

- How do master's students in education graduate programs describe their well-being?
- How do master's students in education graduate programs describe the challenges they face during their transition from coursework into research?
- How do master's students in education graduate programs describe the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic as affecting their well-being and ability to do research?
- What do key stakeholders in the faculty of education think about master's student's well-being and the impact it has on their ability to do research?

My own experiences interacting and supporting students through my position at McGill University's Student Services and as myself a master's student has inspired the research questions. In addition, I was aware of the growing concerns around the increase in mental health

challenges among graduate and postgraduate students through recent research data and media sources.

Research Design

Setting. The context of the study is a Montreal university that is home to diverse students, including international students, with a focus on research. To ensure confidentiality, the university will be addressed using the pseudonym, "Acanthia University." The university has various programs in different disciplines including STEM and the social sciences and humanities. Further, graduate programs that consist of master's and postgraduate studies offer a range of options. Within the university's faculty of education, there are different departments with graduate programs that include various disciplines of research (clinical, project, etc.) and subject specific programs. This study explores the experiences within one specific department that is catered towards education, teaching, and administration and is not subject specific. As mentioned above, for confidentiality reasons, the department will be referred to using the following pseudonym: "Education Studies." Within this department there are three different master's programs and the majority of the master's students who attend these programs have either some form of prior teaching experience or have completed their bachelor's in education. However, there are students from other backgrounds that are not education related, making this department a unique case of study. Given that the master's students in the Education Studies department, are often new research stream graduate students, focusing on this specific department is an appropriate case for this study and research question.

Participant Selection

I employed purposeful sampling to select appropriate participants for the study. Patton's (2015) purposeful sampling was best suited for this research as it allowed for in-depth inquiry of "information-rich cases". I had planned to recruit and interview five master's thesis students with ideally a few male and female participants. The following inclusion criteria was used to identify appropriate participants who were interested in taking part of the study:

1. The master's student had to have completed at least two semesters and be studying within the education faculty and within the Education Studies department. By ensuring the completion of at least two semesters, the participants would be able to

better reflect on their experiences and will have undergone transition into the program, into coursework, and into their thesis program at the time of the interview. Since some time has elapsed since their transition into thesis, it has allowed the master's students to form thoughts and provide a more accurate retrospective sense of how their well-being was influenced and the challenges/stressors they encountered during their transition into research.

2. The master's student should not have had a prior relationship with me as the researcher. Since I recruited participants through referrals from individuals, I knew within Acanthia University, it was important that I ensured that there were no conflicts of interest.

3. The master's student had to be in a thesis or project option and either full-time or part-time. Both thesis and project option are research-focused, however students in the project option have more flexibility in the format of the final project and do not go through an examination process. I wanted to ensure both class of students were included in the selection process. To add, due to the responsibilities and diverse life situations of master's students when beginning their degree, several students opt to pursue their degree part-time or full-time and I wanted to represent the different and complex experiences of the students.

4. The master's student had to have additional responsibilities such as either teaching assistantship, personal life responsibilities, or working (part time/full time). This was to ensure that I was including students who can speak about their multiple roles and their transition into research. Although this was a criterion in the screening process, I realized that it was characteristic of the group of education students that I was recruiting from to have additional responsibilities. Therefore, I did not end up actively recruiting for those who had additional responsibilities.

To begin the recruitment process, I connected with the program coordinator within the education faculty of Acanthia university via email and provided a poster that I had requested to be sent out to their department of Education Studies. Initially, I did not receive any replies, so I decided to use the snowball method and I reached out to participants through referrals. This method is particularly useful when accessing a specific group of participants, which was the case

for my study (Naderifar et al., 2017). I provided my contact information and details of the pre-selection criteria and information about the study to my referrals. Students who were interested to participate would contact me. There were seven responses by email from potential participants. On the basis of the inclusion criteria mentioned above, the final number of master's thesis students interviewed was five. This was a reasonable number to be able to understand in depth each participant's challenges in relation to their own experiences and histories in a way that illuminates the journey of transitioning into research.

After the participants had agreed to take part in the study, I approached two stakeholders who worked directly with master's students. The first stakeholder who had agreed to take part in the interview was a professor who has been supervising both master's and PhD students for over ten years. The second stakeholder held the role of a graduate program director and a professor who was supervising students. These individuals were able to provide their perspectives and more information and insight. This secondary data was used to confirm or disconfirm my analysis.

I interviewed five master's thesis students, three female, and two male. Four of them had completed two semesters of study and one of them completed three semesters. Table 1 below represents the background information and contextual information of the participants who were interviewed in this study. This also includes the pseudonym of the participant's choice which was determined from the onset of the interview. Although the information on the table was not analyzed, motivation to pursue graduate study and the degree of perceived challenges is influenced by past professional and personal experiences. Understanding how students' past experiences motivated them to pursue graduate studies allowed me, as the researcher to better contextualize the lived experiences of the students.

Table 1. Background Description of Participants

Participant	Status	Academic context	Motivation	Education/teaching work experience	Personal responsibilities and significant events during master's
Alice	International	Bachelors, Masters	Work qualifications, undecided PhD	5 years of teaching language online	Jobs
Sarah	Canadian	Bachelors	PhD	1 year of teaching at school and community centers	Jobs, pregnancy
M.J	International	Bachelors	Passionate topic	1 year of tutoring	Jobs
Emma	Canadian, Mature student	Bachelors	Passionate topic	1 year of daycare	Jobs, Mother
Aaron	Canadian	Bachelors	Passionate topic, PhD	Over 3 years of teaching experience	Jobs, Marriage

Data Collection

The study consisted of both primary and secondary data to explore the subjective experiences described by my participants. The primary data was semi-structured interviews with education thesis master's students about their everyday life as they engaged in research and their wellness. The secondary data included interviews with stakeholders and ongoing memos. These sources of data will be outlined in depth in the following sections, including the specific methods carried out to collect the data.

Interview Data. This study consisted primarily of semi-structured interviews that were conducted in two parts. The first part was a series of three interviews with each of the five master's students and the second part was a 60-minute interview with each stakeholder. It is important to consider the context of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic from March 2020 until the end of the second year for the master's students interviewed, April 2021, in which the situation was unlike any other major outbreaks. Due to the pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually to ensure the public health guidelines were being followed and to avoid the risks of contracting the virus. While the interviews were done virtually, safety and security precautions were taken to ensure that the setting was confidential and comfortable for the participants. The interviews were conducted over the web conferencing platform, Zoom, at a mutually agreed upon date and time. To ensure that the participants felt comfortable in the virtual

space, the video was kept off unless the participant wanted to turn it on. The interviews were recorded using a physical Sony ICD-UX570 digital voice recorder™ which was kept close to the computer's speakers to pick up the sound of voice clearly. After the interview, the files were immediately transferred to my computer in a password-protected file and deleted from the recorder. Further, I ensured to conduct the interview in a private room and that the participants had access to a safe and private area that they felt comfortable in. Conducting the interviews outside of the university allowed to create a neutral space where participants would feel more comfortable to speak on their experiences within the institution. Audio recording the interviews allowed me to refrain from taking detailed notes during the interview. Therefore, I was able to actively listen and internalize what the participants were saying, to be more mindful of the process (Granot & Greene, 2015), and to ask further questions where needed. These aspects were also essential to building a rapport and trust relationship with my participants.

The interviews with the master's students were conducted first and were guided by Seidman's (2006) three-part interview technique. Seidman's three-part interview technique involves a series of three semi-structured and open-ended interviews. The first interview aims to put the participants' experiences into context by asking them to describe their past experiences in light of the research topic. This includes understanding their background, life experiences, and surrounding factors that led up to their master's program. The second interview asks participants to "reconstruct the details of their experiences within the context in which it occurred" (Seidman, 2006, p. 17). This includes the details of the challenges they experienced in their journey as master's students as they transitioned into research and how it affected their well-being. The third interview is designed to connect the stories of the lived experiences and encouraged participants to explore the meanings of these experiences. With Seidman's approach, the experiences of individuals "…become meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them" (p. 16). When taken out of context, it's difficult to make sense of and explore deeper meanings of the experiences. In order to obtain a full picture of the realities of the master's student, it was important to understand their experiences within the context of their past lives and also within the university. This approach was appropriate to obtain at an in-depth perspective into the lives of the master's students. This structure allowed me to build a positive and trusting relationship overtime where the participants

felt comfortable to sharing their experiences. Given that this study includes questions to reflect on well-being, it was important to develop this relationship.

In preparation for the interviews, I contacted the five master's student participants by email to confirm the pre-selection criteria. Following this, I provided them with the consent form (Appendix A) and ensured that they had time to read and clarify any aspect of the interview. Once the students sent the signed consent form back, a mutual time and date were decided for each interview. At the time of the recruitment, it was a busy time for master's students in terms of completing final coursework or working on their own theses. As a master's student, I was able to empathize with this situation and offered flexibility in terms of interview times that were in the evenings. I scheduled interviews with at most two participants per week on different days to ensure that I could reflect on the interview and provide careful attention to each interview after they occurred. The day before the first interview, I sent my participants an email with a secured Zoom link and took additional steps to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and to protect their identities. I also provided instructions to not share the zoom link or the password to access the meeting, and I enabled the waiting room in order to manually allow the participants into the meeting. Once the participant joined the meeting, I locked the meeting to ensure that no intruders could attempt to join.

As mentioned above, the goal of the first interview was to ask questions that provided a background of the experiences leading up to the decision to pursue graduate thesis study. I prepared an open-ended interview protocol (Appendix B) to ensure that the questions weren't restricting the participant's thoughts while ensuring there was a general direction towards the goal of the interview. This first interview lasted 60 minutes for each of the five participants. I suggested to participants to tell me their story of how they arrived at their master's program, and this allowed me to conceptualize their experiences through their eyes. This method was useful as the participants were able to reflect and draw upon connections that they noticed as they spoke about their life events. I also asked questions regarding their transition into their undergraduate program and how they would describe their well-being during that time. Further, I asked about how they would describe their experience with teaching and/or research. These questions provided a basis while additional probing questions were asked based on the student's responses to find the deeper meanings of their experiences. I had a good understanding of the student's background experiences, prior experience with research and educational transitions, as well as

their well-being during these times. Once the interview was completed, I mentioned that if there were areas of the interview, they would like to be omitted from the data to email me to have them removed. It was important for me to ensure that my participants were comfortable with their interviews and with what they had shared. After I ended the meeting, I sent a follow-up email to thank them for their participation and provided them with the details and Zoom link for the next interview. The responses from the first interview had informed and shaped a few of the questions for the subsequent interviews.

The second interview was intended to obtain details of the participants' lived experiences in the present day (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). Before beginning with new questions, I ensured to clarify or confirm aspects that were unclear from the first interview. I asked students to reconstruct a typical day in their life and I elicited concrete details of various points of their thesis timelines. I started with questions that were more general, for example, asking students to describe the responsibilities they had on a daily basis, both personal and professional. Following this, I asked questions to understand their experience within the master's program and the university, including orientation session, coursework, relationships they had formed in the program, and thesis milestones. The master's students felt more comfortable by the second interview to share specific incidents and challenges they faced. Once the participants felt comfortable describing their well-being, I asked questions related to their experience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

For the third interview, students were asked to look back on their journey as a master's thesis student and their past stories to elicit their understanding of their experiences. Since the three interviews were spaced over about 4 to 7 days, it allowed for the participants to revisit their thoughts from prior interviews and to add or clarify during the following interview. For myself as a researcher, another objective of this interview was to ensure that there was proper closure with each of the participants. I completed the final interview by asking participants if there was anything else they would like to share or add regarding my study. I followed up with an email to thank my participants and provided them with a list of mental health resources that were available on campus.

The secondary data was collected through a single 60-minute session each with two key stakeholders. Similar to the primary participants, once the stakeholders had accepted to participate, I provided them with consent forms (Appendix C) and followed up with instructions

about the Zoom meeting after I received the signed consent forms. A mutual date and time were decided for the interviews by email communication. In order to prepare for the interview, I reviewed the recordings from the master's students and added questions based on their responses that would help to clarify or bring any new perspective to what was described. Questions were then listed in an interview protocol (Appendix D). The procedure during and after the interview with the stakeholders was carried out in the same way as the steps outlined above for interviews with the primary participants.

Reflective Memos. The reflective memos were written by me on an ongoing basis and served as part of the secondary data. Reflective memos are short statements written throughout the research process as a "way for researchers to dialogue with themselves about questions, issues, and intuitions as they arise, and to keep track of them" (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 30). They engage the researcher in reflexivity. Writing memos enabled me, as the researcher, to not only reflect but engage more deeply with the data and explore the meanings behind what is being said (Birks et al., 2008). Further, they allowed me to keep track of how I positioned myself within the study and to assess any biases or assumptions that influenced my interpretations. Memos served as a means to add credibility and transparency to the research by confirming ideas and perspectives. For instance, as both a master's student and a researcher, I was able to connect with the participants and empathize and make sense of their experiences more easily. I had moments of reflection of my own personal experiences as a master's student that naturally arose as I listened to my participants' stories, and the memos helped me become aware of these thoughts and the role they play in my interpretation of the conversations. The following memo shows an instance of where my personal memories and thoughts were present and could have implications for the way I perceived the participant's experiences:

> *Today, [the participant] described her struggles of living off-campus and being a teacher at the same time. She explained the challenges of keeping herself energized by the time she arrives at the class which takes place in the evenings. As she spoke about the physical exhaustion she experienced, I started to have my own memories of traveling to campus before the pandemic and the emotions I had at the time. I was able to connect with her*

emotions. How is this shared experience influencing the way I am interpreting her story?
And other participants' stories throughout the study? (Memo# 5, 12/25/2020).

Writing these memos right after each interview allowed me to record my immediate thoughts, emotions, and reactions. Throughout the study, the memos helped me to retain ideas that could have otherwise be lost (Glaser, 1978). Immediate thoughts and internal dialogues about questions and issues were recorded as they emerged over time (Butler-Kisber, 2010). In addition, as a researcher, it was a helpful way to make note of any decisions made and reasoning at the time. This was particularly useful to reflect on possible connections, similarities, or differences and take a critical lens on my interpretations when the data were analyzed (Birks et al., 2008). These memos were helpful during the analysis portion to recognize my assumptions and personal stance within the study. Although reflective memos weren't directly analyzed or presented as data in the following chapters, they were instrumental in guiding the analysis of the interview data.

Data Management

All the data collected were securely stored on my personal computer. The files containing the data were organized based on the type of data. This includes audio-recording of interviews, transcription of interviews, and reflective memos, and they were labelled in this manner. All the data for my study were collected between December 2020 and February 2021. The interviews were transcribed on an ongoing basis and stored in a secured manner.

The files were labelled with a naming system that I adopted to ensure that the files were organized, easily stored, and accessed. To ensure confidentiality, the files only contained the pseudonyms that were determined at the beginning of the interview. Further, I removed any identifiable information or coded them to preserve identity. For instance, the name of the university and department names needed to be coded to maintain confidentiality. All the files containing data that were stored on my laptop were secured and protected with a password. As mentioned earlier, the audio files were transferred safely to my laptop right after the interview and immediately deleted from the recorder. In addition, my laptop was stored in a locked cabinet to ensure the data was secure. These steps were essential to protect data and maintain confidentiality.

The interviews were transcribed using Transcribe Wreally©. This software ensured privacy protection of the files as it stored transcribed data only within the computer where the audio file resides and therefore it was safe to use. The features of the transcription program allowed me to control the speed of the audio and conduct a review to ensure that the text was represented verbatim. After the interview was transcribed, I re-read the script and made notes and questions on areas that I wanted to probe more or clarify in the next interview. The interviews were transcribed before the next interview and as soon as possible while it was clear in my mind. I listened to the interview after the transcription process to ensure that it was accurately transcribed and during this round, I created notations for nonverbal cues including sighs and laughs. I put these paralinguistic features in brackets within the text and pauses were put in ellipsis. By listening to the interviews a few times, I became closer and more familiar with the data. The following is an example of where paralinguistic was used during transcription:

> *Socially and mentally, it was hard...very, very hard for me. Not interacting with human beings for a long time is very hard. Sometimes you feel discouraged, you don't feel motivated to do anything because you are all alone... you are not seeing others suffering like you are suffering (laughs). (Int 3. with Sarah, 01/02/21)*

This excerpt shows the significance of including nonverbal cues as it impacts the meaning of the text. The participant takes pauses to express a difficult experience and by adding the ellipses, I am able to remember the emotions that the participant conveyed at the time. Being attentive to non-verbal communication has helped to obtain deeper meaning and representation of the participant's voice (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Both the master's students and the stakeholders' interview data were managed and transcribed through the same process described above.

The memos collected throughout the study were stored within one file in the form of a digital journal. I labelled each memo with the date and indicated the interview number and participant's pseudonym where necessary. The file was named reflective memos and stored in a password-protected folder similar to the other data collected.

Data Analysis

In this qualitative research, the methodological approach that I took was thematic analysis which originated from grounded theory (Glaser, 1978). The data from both interviews with the students and key stakeholders were analyzed using constant comparison inquiry, a key component in handling qualitative data in ground theory (Boeije, 2002). This method involves constantly utilizing "comparison" as a tool in the analysis process, in which coding, categorizing, and reflection can lead to tentative theoretical ideas (Boeije, 2002). The coding categories formed from the data have gone through an ongoing, iterative process of expanding and contracting based on clarification and additional reflection until a point of saturation was achieved (Butler-Kisber, 2010). The goal of using this method is to construct explanations and meanings that emerge from the data. Further, this method allows the researcher to make grounded interpretations and conceptualization by continuously engaging in reflexivity, which is an important component of trustworthiness (Butler-Kisber, 2010). I employed a constant comparison approach to avoid imposing a lens on the study and instead to remain open to exploring ideas and thoughts that emerge from the data itself. I wanted the student's voices of their experiences to represent the ideas and categories that formed.

Data analysis occurred from the onset of the interviews as I was listening to the stories of the participants and was making sense of them. The reflective memos served to keep a record of these thoughts throughout the study. I engaged in further analysis during the transcription process. Re-reading the interview data allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and more familiar with the text. The following describes the way in which I employed a constant comparison approach in my analysis through an iterative process of moving through the data. I initially organized the interview data using Microsoft word documents. I created a word file for each participant that included all three interviews. I used the comment function within Microsoft word to select chunks of excerpts during the coding process and coded for challenges/stressors and keywords that were in the excerpt. By keywords I do not mean a set of technical terms which I use to analyze the data, rather keywords represent key ideas that emerged from the data. Before beginning to code, I re-read the data a few times across the participants to obtain initial ideas and thoughts that emerged. I made notes using the comment boxes of my thinking and potential codes that could be used. During this re-read, I made a summary of the key themes and ideas that were prevalent for each master's students

experiences in a holistic perspective. For instance, "financial stress", "research methods course" and "isolation" are examples of codes that were used. I used words that were representative and present within the excerpts to accurately represent the voices of my participants during the coding process. While doing this, I began to notice similarities and differences across the experiences of the master's students.

Even without covid, I think it would be helpful to see others around me working to feel that I am not alone.	**Mithura Sanmugalingam** prior to C-19 peer support/ social connection challenge of thesis

Figure 1. Example of Assigning Codes and Keywords

(Int 2. with Sarah 12/29/20). *This figure illustrates the coding process of interview transcripts.*

At the end of this process, I still arrived at a large list of 83 codes that I grouped together in one file in an attempt to combine and reduce. However, I found that it was challenging to decide on general codes due to the multi-complex nature of a master's student's life. An instance of this includes the code "financial stress," which was connected to "social connections" and "sense of community," since working to support oneself financial meant that time was limited towards student life.

When I compared and contrasted the over-arching themes that emerged from the code names, I noticed that the challenges revealed were occurring at varying degrees that were influenced based on major transitions within the program (one reason for the high number of codes identified in the initial round of analysis). The three sequential transitions identified included entry and orientation into the program, transitioning into coursework, and transition into thesis work. Relating challenges to transition phases allowed me to see how specific challenges became increasingly or decreasingly intense over the first year of graduate study. For instance, master's students experienced profound "isolation" in the third phase, transition into course work, where they engaged in independent work compared to the first and second phases which consisted of coursework.

Therefore, from the larger "transition into a research program" that motivated my study, I decided to analyze the data in terms of these three constituents transition periods in order to more accurately assign codes that represented the context of the data and to provide a holistic

perspective of the participant's lived experiences. The three phases I labelled: "phase 1-Settling-in", "phase 2- Orienting to academia" and "phase 3- Getting ready for research". I also included the codes "prior to C-19" and "C-19" to provide important context to the data.

To deepen my analysis and help reduce the data, I decided to transfer indicative excerpts from the transcripts onto an Excel file and analyze the data between the codes, participants, and three-phases. Within the Excel workbook, I able to visualize the data in an organized manner and manage the data easily. I used keywords to identify my codes. The excel sheet contained headers labelled such as phase, keyword 1, keyword 2, participant pseudonym, and the indicative excerpt. I made use of the "sort" function on the headers to engage in further analysis in an effort to reduce the 83 keywords into manageable categories. These larger categories represented challenges. Analyzing data in this manner allowed me to collapse and contract codes more effectively and to move towards data saturation. I was able to reduce the codes and generate 14 major categories or themes that emerged from the data.

After I determined the broad categories, I added another column within the Excel workbook called "challenges" to represent these broad categories. I reviewed all the excerpts and assigned a category (or "challenge") based on the codes originally assigned to the indicative extract. In this process, I came up with rules of inclusion to determine, "what is required for a certain excerpt to fit in a particular category" (Butler-Kisber, 2011, p. 46). According to Butler-Kisber, these rules are derived from the "nuances contained in the excerpt" rather than the ideas of the researcher (2011, p. 46). By having the ability to compare across participants, phases, challenge categories, and keywords, I was able to find connections and repetition that otherwise would have been difficult reviewing the texts in isolated pieces. This helped to further solidify the rules of inclusion and reach consensus on the categories.

Table 2. Examples of Categories

Category (challenges)	Codes (keywords)	Example data excerpt
Social connection	Social connections Orientation session	"During the orientation I met a really good friend. So that's one thing that is really beneficial to me" (Int 1. with Alice, 01/04/21).
Managing multiple responsibilities	Multiple roles Personal and professional responsibilities	"My son was living with me, so I was cooking, preparing, a lot of housework, working and schoolwork. It's very demanding, I found it difficult in my first semester, it wasn't just studying, I had to adjust my other responsibilities" (Int 1. with Emma, 12/28/20).
Academic writing	Language barrier International student	"It's extremely difficult to do research as a second language learner, the language proficiency is one thing, the grammar and sentence structure might be okay, but it sounds different and not natural." (Int 3. with Alice, 01/10/21).
Thesis timeline	Thesis work Peer support	"It's important to hear about other people's timelines and what other people are doing including the challenges and success because it gives you a perspective" (Int 3. with Aaron, 01/13/21).

The larger categories in my study represented areas of challenges or stressors for master's students. After determining the challenges, I began to look for yet broader themes within these categories. I went back to the excerpts in the Excel sheet and sorted them based on the category to obtain an overview of the main conceptual ideas that were shared among the excerpts included in the category. By engaging in various iterative processes such as this, I consistently employed constant comparative method in order to exhaust all angles of the data that might reveal additional perspective to the analysis and to take a holistic approach when handling the data. At this stage of the analysis, I collapsed the categories further by making comparisons and finding connections. I initially arrived at four overarching themes that represented broad areas of challenge: "building a sense of community", "physical and mental well-being", "meeting thesis milestones", and "balancing multiple responsibilities". Although physical and mental well-being can be represented on their own as a challenge, I realized that it was integrated within the other three themes and would be taken out of context if it was presented as a stand-alone theme. This would make it difficult to analyze the deeper meanings behind the data. Finally, I ended up with

three conceptual themes called: "Building a sense of community", "Meeting thesis milestones", and "Balancing multiple responsibilities".

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were an essential component of this study. In order to conduct this study, I submitted an application to the Research Ethics Board at McGill University. My application was approved, and I was given a "Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans for Research". In addition to the ethics application approval, the informed consent forms (Appendix A & C) were an integral part of this study, and signed forms were obtained from the participants. I ensured that the participants understood all components of the form and that their involvement in the study was clear. As mentioned earlier, pseudonyms were assigned at the beginning of the interviews to protect the identity and maintain confidentiality of my participants. I carefully reviewed the data and removed the name of the department, building names, and other identifiable information. Given the sensitivity with discussions on well-being and Covid-19, I was attentive to signs of distress and was prepared to address this by either switching to a neutral topic, taking a short break, or allowing the participant alone to help participants regain control and comfort (Mitchell & Irvine, 2008). At the start and throughout the interview, I reminded my participants of the voluntary nature of their participation and that they can choose to answer or not any questions and stop the interview at any point. However, none of the participants choose to refrain or expressed distress.

Rigor in Qualitative Research

The quality of qualitative research depends on credibility and trustworthiness (Butler-Kisber 2010; Cope, 2013). Credibility is based on how accurately the participants' views and interpretations are represented. To achieve credibility, researchers often engage in various techniques including reflective memos. Being reflective and checking researcher's biases and conceptualization throughout the study can help to enhance credibility. Further, it is important to be transparent about data collection process and the data analysis and interpretive processes to persuade the reader of trustworthiness of the work (Butler-Kisber, 2010). In addition, the length of time in the field (interviews spread over sufficient time) and the use of triangulation among multiple sources of data (memos and interviews from different stakeholders) should serve to give

a comprehensive view of and an understanding of what is going on. Reflexivity and transparency are some of the key strategies that I have carried out in my study to establish credibility. I describe each below.

A central component to this study is research reflexivity and I ensured to take this into account in the design of the research. Researcher reflexivity allows the researcher to "understand how their own experiences and understanding of the world affect the research process" (Morrow, 2005, p. 253). I used reflective memos to account for these aspects and this allowed me to recognize any preconceived ideas and personal experiences that may have impacted my thought process and my interpretations. Doing reflections allowed me to be more aware and attentive to my approach and perspective during the interviews. For example, there was a memo about how I thought that the participant was afraid to say anything negative about the university. This thought emerged during the first interview of the three-part series where the participant mainly had positive comments to say regarding her experience with transitioning into the university. I attempted to probe by asking additional questions to encourage them to speak on their obstacles. I believe that this impression came from doing mental comparisons between the participants' experiences, and when one experience was significantly different, I assumed there must be more to uncover. The following represents this memo and the thought process.

> *During the first interview with [the participant], I noticed that she only had good things*
> *to say about her experience with transition into the university. Maybe she is afraid to*
> *share all of her experiences, or she is not yet comfortable since it is only the first*
> *interview. She refrained from going deeper into how she was feeling and avoided*
> *speaking about her emotions. She mainly commented using the phrases: "I felt good" or*
> *"it was okay". Whereas the other participants had a few common stressors and*
> *challenges during their entry into the university. I believe that I was subconsciously*
> *remembering the other participants' descriptions of their experiences and assumed there*
> *was something missing when in fact there might not have been. (Memo#10, 01/04/21)*

I began to reflect more on the connotations of the questions and avoided questions that may have room to lead the conversation in one direction. I also reduced the frequency of probes and ensured to provide ample time for the participant to reflect and respond as they feel

comfortable. Reflective writing and keeping track of decisions and assumptions made throughout the process have contributed to trustworthiness (Cope, 2013).

Another factor that contributed to trustworthiness of the work is the importance of being transparent about the data collection, analysis, and the interpretive processes (Butler-Kisber, 2010). I aimed to achieve this through providing detailed descriptions and explanations of the steps taken at each stage of the research. This includes the challenges and success during the analysis process. As I developed a close familiarity with the text, I developed more efficient strategies to analyze the text in a holistic manner that was more representative of the students' lived experiences. For instance, I recognized the need to analyze between and across categories and switched to using an Excel file to visualize this.

I believe that the structure of three-part interviews being spaced over time has also contributed to trustworthiness of my research. The time in between the interviews served as reflection period for both myself and my participants to clarify ideas and interpretations in an effort to move towards accuracy. In addition, I used triangulation through the following sources of data: student interviews, stakeholder interviews, and reflective memos. Triangulation is a process to check for validity where "the researcher searches for convergence among multiple and different sources of information" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.126). The stakeholder interviews were used to confirm or disconfirm ideas that emerged from the student interviews. As mentioned above, the reflective memos served to account for my biases and assumptions throughout the study and helped to check for the influence it may have on the data and my perspective. Another aspect of credibility is the degree to which the work is grounded and the plausibility of the explanations of the phenomena (Butler-Kisber, 2010). By showing adequate detail including accurately representing participants' thoughts and verbatim excerpts from the data, I believe it has contributed to the plausibility of the interpretations in this study.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a detailed description of the process and steps I took to conduct this research. This chapter began with an introduction, restatement of research questions, details of the research design including setting and participant selection. Following this, I discussed the data sources and methods for data collection, data management and data analysis. I also explored my key ethical considerations and the ways in which I attended to credibility of my study and

ultimately rigor in this qualitative study. The following chapter will be a discussion of the findings.

Chapter Four: Discussion of Findings

This chapter provides background information and insight into the participants' personal context followed by an explanation of the categories and themes that emerged from the data analysis of the participant interviews. I will discuss the findings through three phases that represent the journey of a master's student to address my overarching question and sub-questions.

The categories of challenges emerged from analysis of the three-part interviews (as discussed in Chapter 3) conducted with five master's students, the two interviews with two different stakeholders, and from my reflective memos gathered throughout the study. After going through the process of re-reading, labelling, categorizing, collapsing and expanding the major categories, I arrived at thirteen different areas of challenges. With further iteration using the constant comparison approach, I was able to further collapse these areas into three broader conceptual themes/challenges. The challenges will be discussed across each of the three phases in the transition of a master's student, which will provide insight into their state of well-being (mental, emotional, social, physical), and how it contributed or not to their ability to do research. It will also show how common difficulties and obstacles evolve over time. These themes/challenges were: 1) Building a Sense of Community; and 2) Meeting thesis milestones; and 3) Balancing multiple responsibilities/roles.

Master's students experience varying degrees of these challenges within their two-years of study as they transition from their pre-graduate student life to seeking admission and being admitted, as they orientate themselves to academia through coursework, and as they immerse themselves into their thesis work. These three stages will be called: 1) Settling-in/entry phase; 2) Orienting to academia; and 3) Thesis research preparation and entry phase. According to Seidman (2006), tentative interpretation happens throughout the process of data analysis, this includes studying, labeling, marking and categorizing excerpts of interest. These processes lay the ground for the last stage of this process in which the research interprets and generates meaning from the work and data. This chapter will provide my interpretations and explanations of meanings I have derived from my data.

Phase 1: Settling-in/Entry Phase

      This phase indicates the entry period into the graduate program, including orientation week and the first month of study.

Building a Sense of Community

      Concerns around community building and sense of belonging were prevalent in interviewees reflections of their settling in phase.

      Connecting with Students. The first week of master's study in particular, in which orientation sessions take place, was identified as one of the key periods to provide opportunities for social connections. During this time, students are settling in and adapting to the university environment, their department, and, for many, the city. Once the semester begins and becomes busy, there is less time available for students to attend on campus networking sessions or events organized by the student societies. The following excerpt describes a master's thesis student's experience during their first few weeks on transitioning into graduate school:

> *I was very anxious; I was expecting to go through that at the beginning as it was unknown territory and unknown place. Overall, the workshops and information sessions were pretty good, they helped me know where everything is, but I still didn't have a chance to discover the full campus. (Int 1. with Emma, 12/27/2021)*

      A few master's students had a similar, overall positive experience in terms of obtaining information at the orientation sessions and having a chance to connect with other students and the department. As mentioned by Emma, students going into an "unknown territory" do generally experience a sense of unsettlement during this phase.

      International students and Canadian students who are traveling to Montreal for study have to manage adapting to a new city and organizing their living situation in addition to connecting with their faculty.

> *I don't think I was very happy during the first month because everything was new to me. I was alone at the time, even though I knew some of my classmates, I was much older than them and they were non-thesis. I didn't know them when I arrived in Montreal, so we don't have a really good relationship, so it was kind of lonely living alone but it's okay, I thought it's common, so I tried to adjust my emotions, I did feel different after a week. (Int 1. with Alice, 01/04/2021)*

Similar to Alice, several master's students have decided to return to pursue graduate study at a later point in their lives and it appears to be a characteristic that many are mature students. This may make it more challenging for them to connect and find relatability with their peers. However, being able to connect with the cohort has been mentioned as essential to feeling a sense of belonging within the university and fundamental to peer support. Sarah in particular had a challenging time finding a sense of belonging as shown by the following excerpt:

> *The first few weeks of graduate school, I was stressed, I was worried, I was struggling because I couldn't find friends…I was worried if I would be able to feel a belonging to the society of students, and to the department. I felt kind of alienated, I don't know why but I think it was the prestigious feeling I got, and I didn't feel this way in my undergrad, I felt more included. (Int 1. with Sarah, 12/26/20)*

She felt "stressed" and "worried" about connecting with students and the department. She makes the comparison between her undergraduate experience and found a more difficult time with feeling included in her graduate study and describes it as a more "prestigious feeling". This may be influenced by preconceived ideas about graduate school and academia as being depicted as "prestigious" in society. On the other hand, there seems to be a competitive atmosphere within graduate school that is more evident during the later transition periods. The concern to be able to connect with peers and more specifically other thesis master's students has been shared among all my participants. This idea of connecting research track master's students was reiterated by one of the professors in the education department interviewed for this study:

> *I feel like there is every year, a cohort of people who start, who very clearly are in the thesis route but don't ever meet as a separate group of first-year students who are doing a thesis. (Int. with Professor Mia, 01/20/21).*

According to Professor Mia, the cohort meeting opportunities that are essential to peer support are missing for master's students in the thesis route. She speaks to the importance of shared experiences to building a sense of community that can be carried throughout the program.

Connecting with Faculty. In addition to connecting with their peers, students are eager to meet with the professors in the department. For those doing the thesis route, getting to know the professors in the program is a necessary step to finding a potential supervisor. Moreover,

some students are interested in the expertise of the professors and want to learn from their experiences through taking courses with them. Students also seek for socio-emotional support and encouragement from their professors as indicated by the following excerpt:

> *My professors were very positive and encouraged me to continue my studies so I find that's where I got support and they helped me despite sometimes I didn't believe in myself, I didn't feel I can do it, I had a lot of problems in life and a lot of failures. (Int 1. with Emma, 12/27/20)*

Emma points to the positive influence that professors can have on a master's students' ability to overcome challenging situations and their overall self-perception. Opportunities to connect with professors contributes to building a sense of community where students feel comfortable to seek support from their professors and build a rapport with them.

Another important aspect of sense of community is the connection students have with department coordinators. Although students in their undergrad may not typically interact with their program coordinators or directors often, this is not the case for master's students. More specifically, thesis students are often seeking support and guidance from department coordinators for thesis milestones, funding opportunities, and with issues concerning timelines/progress. A few students have described challenges associated with communication, as stated in the following excerpts:

> *What I found problematic was advising. I was trying to get in touch with my academic advisor, we met once but after that they never got back, and I found that discouraging. I felt very insecure, so I was still questioning whether I'm going to stay in the program or not. (Int 1. with Emma, 12/27/20)*

Emma felt "discouraged" and "insecure" when she failed at connecting with the coordinators, indicating the importance of building a network with academics for student well-being. Further, this appeared to foster her uncertainties with continuing in the program.

From the advisor's perspective, however, the first few weeks are a *particularly* busy period in time for program coordinators and advisors. The following excerpt indicates the various moving pieces during this time. The increased need on the students' side for mentorship and direction is in direct competition with advisors' increased responsibilities at this time:

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We also do a lot with admissions and so we have to provide guidance to faculty members for reviewing graduate applications. We also have to take those reviews and then determine who's actually accepted and this is a big process. After this, there is correspondence with students once they're accepted. (Int with Professor Ava, 02/17/21)

In addition to the responsibilities described in this excerpt, Ava, as the graduate program director was also managing program and course changes, producing information documents for students, and supporting with award competition among many other tasks. Although important information is being communicated continuously to the students and academic support being offered, there seems to be a need for more support as expressed by the master's students.

Meeting Thesis Milestones

My interviews showed that students are not so involved with thesis milestones until the end of the first semester and beginning of second. However, with student concerns that emerge at later periods, it appears that it might be beneficial to have more support on the thesis milestones early on. Students reflecting back on their experience felt that they were unsure on how to do their thesis and were looking for more support, as shown by the following excerpt:

There should be workshops or presentations on how to do your thesis and deadlines early on because even now I am unsure. (Int 1. with Emma, 12/27/20)

Emma also suggested to have information sessions on deadlines, and this was echoed by other master's students. Being aware of thesis timelines is crucial to plan out milestone deadlines that need to be met in order to graduate on time. Although these sessions were offered by the department, it appears to be difficult for students to conceptualize their two-year plan especially for emerging researchers who are engaging with writing an academic paper for their first time. As Professor Mia suggests in the following, there could be more opportunities for individualized support to better understand what is involved in a thesis paper and guidance on choosing the right courses:

I think it would be great if there was maybe more support for students within the faculty and department for what is a thesis and what are they getting into. Students sign up for these different courses that are part of the thesis, but they aren't really anything like it's just a number. (Int with Professor Mia, 01/20/21)

Professor Mia speaks to the disconnect between coursework and thesis work as students have the flexibility in the courses they take and don't necessarily seek support with choosing them. This is problematic as the courses are supposed to help students orient themselves to discipline specific knowledge and deeper understanding. For thesis students, exploring such courses can lead to a research question or topic of interest.

Towards the end of the first semester, deadlines for major funding agencies roll out. As shown in the following excerpt, this is a particularly challenging period for master's thesis students:

> *It's an overwhelming experience because a lot of them, it's their first time and doing research in our department, this isn't true for other departments, necessarily, but because our students tend to come from more professional degrees. They may have not had research experiences and so all of a sudden, they're being asked to write a research proposal for a scholarship, and they can only write it in their first year and so they have a ticking time bomb, and some give up because they feel too overwhelmed. (Int with Professor Ava, 02/17/21)*

Education master's thesis students usually come from professional teaching programs and are likely engaging with research for the first time, as Professor Ava states. Therefore, writing an application to major funding agencies can be a daunting process that students shy away from or don't feel confident in their research. Having access to funding can reduce a lot of financial stress and allow students to focus more of their time on their academics and connecting to the university student-life. Conversely, missing out on funding can have major implications for student success.

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

Master's students vary in their age, academic background, work experiences and experience in research which all impact their ability to transition into a new environment. Alice and Aaron are returning after years of teaching to pursue a master's thesis. In the following extracts, they both express emotional and mental challenges during the first few weeks of transition:

> *Sometimes I think the depression was overwhelming when I first came to Montreal, I tried to put aside my emotions. I threw away my emotions and focused on what I need to do. (Int 1. with Alice, 01/04/21)*

I don't think there would have been anything that could have prepared me adequately, especially having not been in school for more than seven years. It did feel like I was getting thrown in the deep end in the first week. It wasn't manageable. It was hard. It was stressful. It still is. It has been ever since. (Int 1. with Aaron, 01/06/21)

Similar to Alice and Aaron, feelings of "depression", "overwhelming" and "stress" were prevalent across the master's students as they entered graduate study. Aaron mentions that he is still experiencing hardship and stress while in his second year. Drawing upon Dodge et. al's definition of well-being (2012), Alice is showing forms of resilience and self-motivation as part of her set of resources that help her cope with her challenges in well-being. This appears to be common among master's students and perhaps even graduate students in general, there is a level of self-efficacy that supported their decision to pursue graduate study. However, as Dodge et al. (2012) mentions, there is a need for a balance. When entering a new environment such as academia and thesis work, there can be a tipping point before there is an adjustment to well-being.

Students have to make tough decisions during the entry phase and adjust to their new routine and schedule during the first few weeks. The following excerpts indicate the variations in the stage of their lives for the master's students:

My son was living with me, so I was cooking, preparing, a lot of housework, working and schoolwork. It's very demanding, I found it difficult in my first semester, it wasn't just studying, I had to adjust my other responsibilities. (Int 1. with Emma, 12/27/20)

We got married in like mid-September of last year which is few weeks after school started. So that was a whole thing that was happening right as school was starting. So that was a lot. (Int 1. with Aaron, 01/06/21)

Emma describes her daily responsibilities as a mother and a graduate student. She mentions that it was "very demanding", and she needed to "adjust her other responsibilities." This is the case for many master's students in the education department who are also parents or have personal responsibilities. For instance, Aaron was also at a different stage in his life and was newly married during the first few weeks of school. He described it as being "a lot" to manage. During the entry phase, master's students are often negotiating aspects of their personal

lives as they transition into the journey of graduate school, and this had negative impacts on their well-being.

Similarly, Sarah had also been newly married at the start of her graduate degree. She was working as a teacher full-time and involved with community work. However, once she started graduate school, she was unable to manage these aspects of her life which were fundamental to her well-being:

> *Once I entered my grad school with all of these jobs, I had to resign from many things. As I mentioned in my first interview…wow this is very reflecting. So, for example, the book club that I told you about, I resigned from that, and I was volunteering with refugee center in Montreal, I resigned from that too because I could not do volunteering as well. Yeah, even those were very essential parts of my well-being. (Int 1. with Sarah, 12/26/20)*

Sarah mentions that she had to resign from several positions/responsibilities including her volunteer work within the refugee center. Many other students have also spoke about having to shift around their priorities in order to manage the various roles they take on. For majority of the students who I have interviewed, having a full-time job and steady income was necessary and therefore they sacrificed aspects of student life. According to Sarah, volunteering and getting involved in the community was "essential" to "her well-being". Extracurricular activities and community involvement has been shown to positively impact student wellness which in return promotes academic success.

Phase 2: Orienting to Academia

The second phase is called "Orienting to Academia." This is the period where students begin to think critically about course material and engage in a research environment. Transitioning into this phase includes further opportunities to find a sense of belonging with the community, taking steps towards thesis milestones, and managing/taking on responsibilities.

Building a Sense of Community

During this phase, master's students are mainly involved with coursework and use classroom opportunities to create connections with their peers and professors. Thesis students have experienced obstacles to establish these connections during this period.

Connecting with Students. Students meet and develop friendships or acquaintances with peers through interactions in the classroom and on campus. This is a critical period for master's thesis students to seek those networks and find affinity groups. For M.J it was really in their second and third semester that they began to "fully integrate," as indicated by the following excerpt:

> *In my second and third semester, making a good number of friends was great and this was the period where I really started to fully integrate, not just into the university but the city of Montreal as a whole and I got to explore the city a lot more through events and just really feeling a part of a community. (Int 1. with M.J, 12/31/20)*

M.J is an international student who had moved into the city at the beginning of the semester. It appears that it was not until his second semester onwards that he felt "a part of the community," suggesting that the transition period of the "settling-in phase" may be longer for international students. Moreover, creating connections for international students seems to be especially of value as shown in the following excerpts:

> *I found it's really hard to catch up with my learning and so my strategy was to find classmates to be my study partner. Before I submit my homework, I always ask them to correct my work since they are good at English. My strategy is to find local people and to make friends with them and connect with them because it helps me a lot. (Int 2. with Alice, 01/07/21)*

> *I had an international student mentor/buddy which is a program I signed up for in the first year, and that was really fun. My social life mostly revolved around the university, and it was mostly my cohort in the same program since those are the people, I had classes with. (Int 2. with Aaron, 01/09/21)*

International students often expressed feeling disadvantaged compared to their peers and therefore found various avenues to seek connections that also served as strategy to obtain academic support through a mentorship relationship. On the other hand, Aaron explains that much of his social life came from the university and mostly his cohort. This excerpt emphasizes the importance cohort meetings to connect students within the first year and the need for programs that facilitate mentorship opportunities. It also emphasizes that there is a lack of interaction between departments as Aaron states in the following:

I was a little surprised that everyone that I knew and interacted with was just in my department. That was a shock, I sort of imagined grad school was more like making friends with people who weren't necessarily studying the same thing and have an exchange of knowledge. (Int 2. with Aaron, 01/09/21)

Aaron expresses his unrealized expectation of graduate school in which students would connect across various programs as a means of knowledge exchange. Opportunities for interdisciplinary exchange can enhance graduate students' experience in terms of the intellectual component of wellness. Such conversations can encourage an interdisciplinary approach to doing research and thinking that goes beyond the classroom and promotes intellectual fulfillment. It appears that during the first few months of graduate school students feel a sense of community and for some students it starts to dissipate as they become busy whereas other students find a sense of belonging in a physical space on campus:

It felt like there was a community of graduate students that was there during the first week of orientation, and then everyone goes into their laptops, and you never see anyone again. I go to bed super early, and I couldn't go to any gatherings. (Int 2. with Aaron, 01/09/21)

I liked the graduate student society building, I find it's a very nice place for the gathering and you feel like you belong somewhere like it's a little club. (Int 2. with Emma, 12/30/20).

Aaron is describing a common scenario for most master's students where they become consumed with their course work, multiple jobs, and personal responsibilities and struggle to manage all aspects of student-life. Master's students expressed the importance of social connection and also their lack of time to be able to commit to these activities. For Emma, she was able to maintain a sense of connection through the graduate student society building. This speaks to the importance of the physical spaces on campus that students rely on for social connections and shared experiences, including the library and the graduate building.

Community-Destructive Consequences of Discrimination. A few students have expressed feelings of discrimination and, as a result, had difficulties finding a sense of belonging

within the university. Sarah and Emma in particular had experienced forms of discrimination throughout the second phase as shown in the following excerpts:

> *Disappointed... sad... no friends, I felt like people think that people should be categorized, I felt that people were very proud of themselves, but I don't know for what. I was very disappointed actually… I don't know. One of my professors that I became very good friends with at some point, I wrote to her and said maybe I should quit, it was the end of my first semester. Actually, I went through racism, sexism, I went through a lot of issues at the university in my first year. (Int 2. with Sarah, 12/29/20).*

> *I felt that the connection was cold overall on campus… I remember one time I was going up the stairs in winter and I was carrying books and heavy things and was struggling but no one offered to help. I think how students interact with each other is a big deal to feel connected to the university. (Int 2. with Emma, 12/30/20)*

Sarah felt disappointed in her experience and sad that she had no friends. Further, she had contemplated "quitting" graduate school at the end of her first semester and reached out to her professor she had connected with during her undergrad. She explained that she went through discrimination in the form of racism and sexism. These aspects can be detrimental to mental well-being of a student and further bring about feelings of exclusion.

Emma is a mature student and she experienced forms of bullying during her undergraduate degree. She has a physical disability and although she received support from the university, she felt that the connection on campus was "cold". According to Emma, the way in which students interact with each other needs to improve to have a positive sense of community where students are open to supporting one another.

Connecting with Faculty. Even as students progress to this second phase, they are continuously looking to connect with professors throughout their first and second semesters. This is especially a concern for master's thesis students as they begin to search for potential supervisors. Moreover, networking with professors can also lead to potential research assistant or teaching assistant job opportunities. The majority of the students interviewed have experienced difficulties with connecting to their professors and this brought about feelings of disappointment, reduced motivation, and frustration, as shown in the following excerpts:

I was very sad because...(sigh) a lot of professors approached me at first. Creating relationships with professors and students was very important to me in my undergrad and in my graduate study but all of sudden when they know you are pregnant, the way they look at you, changes. Like I don't know if I have any words to describe it. Their eyes, you feel like a disappointment to them, and they stop being interested in your ideas, and in your project. (Int 2. with Sarah, 12/29/20)

Sarah mentioned that it was important for her to create relationships with her professors. However, she struggled to form this connection as she felt they were disappointed and lacked interest once they found out she was pregnant. Moreover, Sarah stated having trouble connecting to professors within the classroom. She felt that training might be needed to create a safe and inclusive space where students feel comfortable to speak up as shown by the excerpt below:

I think professors with all due respect, don't know how to deal with students with different experiences and backgrounds... they say multiculturalism, but I think training could help. Professor wise as well it would help me feel more comfortable in the class environment and go out of my bubble to speak. (Int 2. with Sarah, 12/29/20)

Alice describes a different set of concerns related to professor-student relationships. As an international student, she mentioned she often required additional support from her professors. However, she was worried about overwhelming them. The following excerpt describes her experience:

I always make appointments with my professors, and I think some professors would feel really frustrated with me because I always try to connect with them…it's just because I hope to have a connection with my professors and hope to have more guidance from them since sometimes, I don't understand the class content. They are nice to me, answer my questions and help me a lot... that's good, I think. I also try my best to improve my learning and understanding of different classes, that's my responsibility as a student. (Int 2. with Alice, 01/07/21)

One of the big challenges is finding opportunities to connect with professors since most of them are managing multiple responsibilities and have a limited time to allocate towards working with students. This is especially important during the 2nd-phase where students are taking courses and beginning to seek a potential supervisor. Alice and a few other students

suggested having workshops organized by different professors to have informal discussions about student well-being and as a way of checking-in with their students.

In addition, the pandemic had made the communication even more challenging given the barriers of the online environment and the circumstances brought by the pandemic as explained by Emma:

> *I sent out an email to one professor who is more specialized and sent several follow-ups, but they never got back to me and it's frustrating. This was even before the Covid-19 pandemic, and I am still having this issue with contacting professors. I don't know, maybe they aren't receiving the emails or something. (Int 2. With Emma, 12/30/20)*

Meeting Thesis Milestones

In their first semester, students are mainly concerned with completing coursework and there are no official thesis milestones that need to meet. However, students would need to begin thinking about potential supervisor(s), become familiar with research methodologies and academic writing, and apply for funding. Many students felt the pressure and stress towards the end of the semester when major deadlines approached. Aaron and a few other students reiterated their struggle to balance all these aspects:

> *By the end of the first month, assignment deadlines were starting to roll in and that was like a whole new level of stress. It's not even just keeping up with the readings and reading responses; like now, I've got to also do a paper on top of it and grant applications that I've also got to do on top of those. It kept being stressful. It was definitely always stressful. There was always something on my plate. (Int 2. with Aaron, 01/09/21)*

The workload in graduate courses compared to undergraduate courses vary and many students mentioned an overwhelming number of readings. Students would need to reorganize their way of studying to adapt in order to keep up to pace with their graduate courses while preparing for their thesis. Moreover, students experienced challenges with the research methods course. The following excerpts describe this:

> *I realized that the research methods courses were difficult for me to understand. At first, the teacher just assigned a lot of different articles and asked us to figure out what research paradigms it was, but it was very difficult to distinguish different articles. It was really hard to relate the research methods with my thesis research. I think there is a*

discrepancy between the research methods and the discipline of study and how to use the research methods in their thesis writing and that's the problem for students. (Int 2. With Alice, 01/07/21)

The introduction research methods course, I wish they told us to take this course in the first semester. Then maybe also doing the course in like two parts, one in the first semester and then one in the second semester so we can understand... because I have no idea what I took from that course. Yeah, I was more confused. I was lost, maybe the content of the course was heavy, and we needed to go into details but slowly, not all at once. (Int 2. with Sarah, 12/29/20)

Research Methods Courses. Alice's mentioning of the discrepancy between the research methods explored in the course and the use of the methods in her own research speaks to the obstacles associated with deciding on the right methodology for master's thesis work. Research methods courses, especially for education students who may not have prior experience with research, require a steep learning curve. Complex ideas such as research paradigms, while perhaps evident for an instructor, can take time to comprehend. Sarah's observation that the introduction to research course should be divided into two courses indicates the extent of induction into research practice students require, a problem that is compounded when students' introduction to research methods is deferred beyond their first semester.

A few other students found the research methods course to be a helpful foundation to understand the basics. Moreover, certain research methods courses were designed to allow opportunities for master's students to work on pieces of their thesis as a course assignment. M.J and Aaron had a positive learning experience and progress on their own research as a result of the course:

It was a slightly more laid-back approach, we learned different types of qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis and mixed methods. The goal of the methods course was to essentially work on the groundwork for your thesis and at the end, we had to submit a final project putting together our work during the semesters and even did a presentation on our research. It did give like a better idea of things to be mindful of when writing REB [ethics]applications like what I was going to do with data, what does permission look like, how do I plan to recruit participants and things that I would not have necessarily thought about while doing other courses. It helped with some of the basics. (Int 2. with M.J, 01/05/21)

So, this course was a lot of work, and I learned a lot of different things in the course, especially about doing a literature review, thinking about analysis, and different types of research methodologies. So, in that sense, it's great, but I don't feel like I'm 100% ready to do my thesis and I am hoping that my supervisors are going to be there to support me in that. I've also reached out to some people I know who finished their masters last year. (Int 2. with Aaron, 01/09/21)

Both master's students learned about key aspects of a master's thesis: literature review, analysis, ethics application and recruitment. However, there appears to be a lack of consistency across the introduction research courses taught and it varies based on the professor and the semester. This can be problematic as it puts certain students at a disadvantage in terms of their thesis preparation. Although Aaron feels satisfied with the course, he doesn't feel "100% ready" and has the expectation of receiving further support from his supervisor and his peers.

According to Professor Mia, allowing students to become familiar with thesis components and producing a proposal is important to frame their research early on:

I think what has been useful in the research courses is people, almost all people, have done some sort of a proposal which is good. So, they have a good idea of framing a proposal. In some cases, they've also done some sort of a literature review so that has been very helpful since they've already got lots of material. I think most of the research methods courses that are taught in our department really encourage people to like fine tune it to their own work, so I find at least people aren't totally like struggling and then trying to imagine what's this thesis going to be about. (Int with Professor Mia, 01/20/21)

By comparing across their experiences, students can benefit from support with their proposal early on through their graduate coursework. As professor Mia mentions, this helps them become comfortable with thesis writing and to have opportunities to "fine tune" their work.

Securing a Supervision. One of the first official thesis milestones includes securing a supervisor. Many students wait until the end of the first semester of courses to find the professor that fits best. Therefore, it can be beneficial to create positive relationships and meet with professors during their office hours to gauge whether they will be able to best support the research and are knowledgeable about the research methodology. However, some students confirm their supervisor only at the beginning of their second semester. Sarah in particular had

tried to connect with professors during her first semester and experienced difficulties as shown in the following excerpt:

> *People look at you as a big disappointment. They will think, oh why is she pregnant, she's young... and they start to point fingers at you without talking with you. I wanted to be pregnant. Especially in academia, in the university…when you see that a lot of professors are touched by your ideas and touched by the research you want to do, and then once they know you are pregnant, they are like okay, see you later, that kind of attitude. So, it's very sad. (Int 2. with Sarah, 12/29/20)*

As discussed above, issues connected to gender-based discriminations and the culture of academia were present in the data set. For Sarah, gender-based discrimination arose from being pregnant and young. She explains that within the research environment and university, she felt a sense of disappointment from the professors when she revealed that she was pregnant. With such experiences, master's students and especially women wanting to pursue research may have second thoughts and question their ability. It is important to foster a positive supervisor-student relationship and a supportive atmosphere to ensure a successful transition into thesis work.

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

In the second phase, students undergo a tough period balancing their multiple responsibilities and making decisions. Master's students are entering graduate school at various points in their lives, and aside from being a student they are also parents, teachers, full-time employees, research assistants and much more. Students are negotiating these aspects of their lives and it is a major challenge to balance fulfilling academic life and personal life. The following excerpts signify this challenge:

> *It's very crazy to raise a baby in all of this... and I am also new to this country, and I was working 2 full-time jobs. I was a teacher, I was a research assistant, I was newly married, and I was living in Laval and going to the Montréal area every fucking day…I stopped working as a research assistant [RA], in May but I was teaching...I took that difficult discussion to stop my RA position. (Int 2. with Sarah, 12/29/20)*

> *I needed my job to support myself and my son but when I started grad school it became harder, so I worked part-time and even this was stressful and tiring because it's on the*

computer. I also have to study and do academic work and writing on the computer, so I started to have problems with my neck. (Int 2. with Emma, 12/30/20)

Sarah expresses forms of mental and physical exhaustion as a result of trying to manage all her roles. Many international students like Sarah emphasized their financial struggles that begun from the time they arrived. These students seek multiple jobs to support themselves in addition to adapting to a new environment. Education master's students are unique in that many are continuing to work in the field as teachers or principals and cannot afford to leave their professional jobs. While at Acanthia University, courses are offered in the evening to accommodate professionals, many still undergo a lot of physical exhaustion from travelling between the school and university. To add, teachers would need to find the time for all other tasks including prep and correction and this can lead to an overload in stress and mental fatigue.

Emma is a Canadian student, and she is also a mother. She states that even working part time during graduate school was "stressful" and "tiring". She experienced physical discomfort with having to work on the computer. Thesis students spend hours on their computer or laptop and further this has been exacerbated with the pandemic as people are working from home and increasing their screen time. As Aaron articulates in the next passage, transitioning into graduate courses workload has been demanding:

In the first few weeks of classes, there was definitely a lot to figure out academically and figuring out the schedule. I feel like it just was long days. It was long and still is... I am up at 4:30 a.m. and working until 8:30 a.m. with basically just food breaks, four days a week. And then with other work on the weekend, it was a lot. It is a lot. (Int 2. with Aaron, 01/09/21)

Aaron also works as a teacher during the day and takes courses in the evening. A few other students have reiterated the challenge of having "long days" associated with education graduate programs. Students also have trouble with managing their time and adapting to a new schedule. This becomes more prevalent during the third phase where master's thesis students begin thesis work. Support programs for graduate students need to be catered to address these concerns of time management and fatigue.

In addition to managing personal responsibilities, many students expressed the desire to fulfill their responsibilities as a student. As shown in the following excerpts, students have an expectation in terms of intellectual wellness:

As a student I want to learn as much as I can because I paid a lot of tuition for my study, I hope that my tuition can be really worthwhile. Because compared to my classmates, they paid less than me and have more opportunities than me. In order to make my tuition worthwhile, I think learning as much as I can is important. (Int 2. with Alice, 01/07/21)

I really feel like it's in those courses that were outside of my discipline of education and about race and gender issues is where I really delved into topics that are interesting to me. I was able to manage the course load and to some extent, I think it kind of made my experience feel a little bit more fulfilling. (Int 2. with M.J, 01/05/21)

Alice explains that she wanted to make her tuition worthwhile and learn as much as possible. As an international student, she often mentioned feeling behind and at a disadvantage in comparison to her peers and this was an added stress. Throughout the interview, she mentioned wanting to take advantage of all opportunities and services that she could from her department and the university to make her academic experience a fulfilling one. M.J had also had a feeling of fulfillment through taking courses that were of interest to them. Intellectual wellness is an important aspect of graduate school as it plays a role in the overall well-being and motivation of the student. The structure of the courses is different in education master's program where students are often engaging in critical thinking and discussions compared to the traditional lecturing approach which can be found in many university courses.

Another major part of the university experience is student life. Although there are various involvement opportunities on campus and through the department, master's students often sacrifice this aspect of their lives when trying to manage their other responsibilities. As Sarah describes, this can impact the well-being of the student:

Getting involved in student life and in communities made me feel recognized [in undergrad], I was not a number, they knew my name, I felt more connected, and it helped with my wellness overall. In grad school, I was in another stage in life, so I stopped these things, and it affected my wellbeing negatively. One of my professors said that because I spent a lot of time with my jobs, I was not spending time to be involved with student life,

and maybe that's why I felt foreign to the university. I was too tired. (Int 2. with Sarah, 12/29/20)

For Sarah, getting involved on campus made her feel more connected. However, once she entered graduate school she was in another stage in life where her jobs and personal life had consumed most of her time and energy. She mentions that this affected her well-being negatively and she felt foreign from the university. With handling several professional/personal obligations and financial stress can lead to a poor student-life experience and issues with mental well-being as a result.

Beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic Challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about new challenges and amplified existing ones for graduate students in general. Master's thesis students had their own specific challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on student well-being, many have lost loved ones, forced to isolated, lost their job, to name a few. Some of the effects brought on by the pandemic are, at the time of writing, still being felt and may take a few years before reaching equilibrium. The following excerpts describe the experience of a few students during the time Montreal went into lockdown in March 2020:

It was… it was exhausting, and the first few weeks were scary. I remember when the university was closed, it felt apocalyptic, and obviously it wasn't but with everyone ravishing the grocery store it was stressful for sure. (Int 2. with Aaron, 01/09/21)

There is no reason for me to stay in Montreal because I live alone and every day I was home alone. I never went outside; everything was closed so it's really harmful to my mental health since I don't have any communication with people, and it gets you depressed very fast. Even though I know how to handle it and sometimes I listen to music or watch tv or do other things, it was not sustainable, so I needed to change my situation and the only thing was to move back with my family. (Int 2. with Alice, 01/07/21)

The way Aaron has depicted his sense of fear and stress was common. The other students interviewed had a similar experience brought by the level of uncertainty when the pandemic hit. Emma described it as being in "survival mode" and this was the sense across the city. Alice made the decision to move to her home country due to the depression she was feeling having to stay at home alone. She mentions that her coping mechanisms were not sustainable. Moreover, Alice relied on the interaction with her peers and professors for support and didn't find online communication as efficient. The master's students really began to find a sense of belonging

towards the end of the first semester and continued to build upon it during the second semester. However, with the Covid-19 lockdown, students had felt isolated and disconnected. Sarah, for example, experienced difficulties connecting with the university and towards the end of the first semester began to create friendships that she worried she would lose due to the pandemic:

> *Mentally, I was dying. I was able to make a relationship with 4-5 girls in the department, so I was very happy about that. I was so close to saying, okay I belong to this community, to the university and department but then Covid happened. (Int 2. with Sarah, 12/29/20)*

All the students agreed that not having to travel to the campus reduced a lot of the physical exhaustion they were facing. However, for some, this meant a further reduced time allocated to physical activity in their busy schedule, which could lead to further health issues. In terms of mental health, as Sarah mentioned it was extremely draining mentally. Master's students undergo a lot of challenges during their entry and coursework phases in trying to transition into the program and feel a sense of community. The fear of contracting the deadly novel coronavirus and the lack of physical presence of students on campus produced a lot of anxiety.

As the end of winter semester assignment deadlines started to roll in towards March and April, the pandemic added a layer of stress and led to increased procrastination for many. Master's students expressed that they were unable to concentrate on their coursework due to the fear and uncertainty brought upon by the pandemic. Students and professors were really concerned with basic needs, including health and safety, and many courses ended early and assignments were dropped as a result. During this time, the university offered many different types of support, including financial and other accommodations to reduce the level of anxiety and stress among the student body. In fall 2021, the university transitioned to remote learning which brought upon new opportunities and challenges. Master's students mainly had difficulties with communication and social connection when it came to online learning. As shown by the following excerpt, some students felt disconnected from their professors:

> *It would be nice to have professors available after class on Zoom as we would in person where we can go and speak to them after class. It felt cold and distant, I wish they were more available. Of course, I understand they are busy but some of them actually made*

time out of their own time to stay behind and it helps to create a connection. (Int 2. with Emma, 12/30/20)

Covid has added additional challenges in terms of isolation. Some people don't do well with remote teaching, some people are thrilled because they didn't want to come. (Int with Professor Ava, 02/17/21)

It is important to take into account that the university's courses were never designed for online learning. This semester was definitely a learning curve for everyone. However, Emma and a few other students pointed out the need for opportunities to connect both with professors and peers. Students also mentioned the valuable aspect of small talk in the classroom with colleagues for their well-being and the need to replicate this social interaction in the virtual environment. Moreover, there were issues of equity in terms of access, technology, and digital literacy that were common across universities as many students were international or in remote areas. Emma in particular mentioned having anxiety with having to learn how to use Zoom for a presentation and experienced internet connection issues. Members of the faculty also had difficulties according to Professor Ava and had a tough time adapting teaching, instruction, and assessments to online. Further, some students struggled to manage the time zone difference with online learning, and it had impacts on their health:

When I was staying in China, it was hard to catch up with activities in the university since we have a time difference. So, I always got up at midnight for some courses or meetings. I feel that it is really harmful to my health because I don't like sleeping in the daytime. I don't have enough sleep during the night, and I don't feel very healthy. (Int 2. with Alice, 01/07/21)

In addition to the challenges associated with online learning, master's students had to shift around their routine and schedule and undergo another transitioning period in the midst of their second phase of graduate school. The pandemic amplified and brought about new challenges associated with balancing multiple responsibilities. In the following excerpt professor Mia describes this issue:

I think there is a level of uncertainty for everybody and I'm sure for people who are finished their courses, it's even more difficult because as long as you're taking courses like you kind of have something to do like, log on. Our time is organized quite differently,

especially if you have small children and you have certain responsibilities that probably also intervene because you're trying to juggle, you know your own academic work and attend to children at home, and so on. (Int with Professor Mia, 01/20/21)

Master's students reiterated the trouble with trying to manage aspects of their professional and personal life. Many had lost their jobs and others picked up online work which shifted their routines. Moreover, some students had extra childcare responsibilities that they hadn't anticipated and couldn't work on their coursework or thesis. Having to constantly adapt in the middle of the pandemic has been emotionally and mentally taxing for the entire student body and faculty.

On the other hand, the research community had significant setbacks including changes in methodology to respect public health guidelines and delays in funding and ethics approvals. For the case of master's thesis students, these impacts were considerable given that it's their first time engaging with thesis work. In addition to the usual challenges associated with transitioning from coursework to thesis, master's thesis students had an added layer of uncertainty and confusion. Their supervisors were also learning as the pandemic was constantly evolving and changing the way research is being done. The impacts on thesis work will be discussed in further detail in the third and final phase of "Getting ready for research".

Phase 3: Getting Ready for Research

The third phase of transition is the shift from coursework to thesis work. Students have various stressors associated with meeting thesis milestones that impact their well-being and ability to do research. Being able to navigate the research environment is a completely new arena for master's students. Stressors and difficulties with finding a sense of belonging and managing multiples responsibilities were continuously evolving throughout the different phases. The nature and structure of thesis work bring about new concerns associated with well-being. In addition, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on thesis master's students were more significant and prevalent as they transitioned from coursework into independent research.

Building a Sense of Community

As students engaged in independent thesis work, it was one of the most difficult periods in terms of social connections.

Connecting with Students. Building social connections with peers and creating friendships is essential to a positive learning experience within graduate school, as shown from the voices of the students. As discussed above, opportunities to establish these relationships were mainly during the "settling in" and "course work" phases. Students who were unable to find a sense of belonging felt isolated during their thesis work. In addition, due to the circumstance brought by the pandemic, those who had connections struggled to maintain them within the virtual environment, and also felt isolated. The Covid-19 pandemic amplified and compounded issues of social connection, which were present even pre-Covid and due to isolating nature of independent thesis work. The following excerpts show the value of having a support network through peers during this critical period:

> *It was a weird transition going from having four classes a week to having no classes and figuring out when to do things and it was definitely a rough transition. Something that did help motivate me until, basically, before the pandemic was being able to do things like go to coffee shops and study with my study partner who is in the same program and is also my neighbor and we're really good friends. (Int 3. with M.J, 01/08/21)*

> *Socially and mentally, it was hard...very, very hard for me. Not interacting with human beings for a long time is very, very hard. Sometimes you feel discouraged, you don't feel motivated to do anything because you are all alone... you are not seeing others suffering like you are suffering (laughs). (Int 3. with Sarah, 01/02/21)*

These excerpts indicate that student motivation level was strongly influenced by the presence of peer support. Further M.J. talks about the physical spaces such as coffee shops that master's students rely on to build this community with their peers. However, when peer support was missing, it significantly impacted social and mental well-being, a reality that became more prevalent during the pandemic. Sarah describes the need to have shared emotions and challenges with her peers to feel a sense of community, especially during the isolated thesis work.

Throughout the interview, master's students had the tendency to make comparisons with their peers in terms of their ability, progress, and thesis milestones. The following excerpt signifies this tendency in master's thesis students:

> *It was definitely intimidating because he is someone who was working a lot faster than I was. He didn't need to do interviews for his research and do the ethics application for his topic, but I also had to remind myself that this is the big reason why he was so far ahead. (Int 3. with M.J, 01/08/21)*

The competitive nature of working in a research-intensive university was evident in the community. When there is a healthy balance of competition, it served as a motivator for some students, however, after a certain threshold, it became a stressor.

The importance of having a community throughout the third phase is emphasized by both professor participants, and the benefits to student wellness were evident through the voices of the students. Being able to compare timelines and routines with peers as well as share pitfalls and successes can help students feel reassured and on track. Aaron in particular spoke about the ways in which his supervisor has formed a sense of community among her supervisees and it serves as an example that can be beneficial to implement across programs:

> *One of my supervisors has a group of supervisees and we meet every month. It's just for us to share our projects and the challenges and successes. I think the goal is to just have a little bit of a sense of community. People often share grants, upcoming conferences, journals, and things. It's interesting, my supervisor kind of asked the group if we feel comfortable talking about this with each other because it can be competitive, but I think everyone had the mindset of working together and not feeling like it is competitive. A lot of it is, can be collaborative and it should be. She has fostered that sense of community among her supervisees, and I have gotten so much help from them. I help them when I can as well by giving advice or offering feedback. (Int 3. with Aaron, 01/13/21)*

Aaron's supervisor has organized a way for thesis students to stay connected as they work on their thesis and obtain peer support through monthly meetings. This has produced a positive and collaborative working environment in which there is a healthy level of "competitiveness". Moreover, Aaron states that this has helped to foster a sense of community. A peer support system is especially important during thesis work to reduce feelings of isolation and anxiety. The formation of such groups encourages sharing of resources, exchange of knowledge, and peer to peer feedback which can be beneficial to thesis work.

Connecting with Faculty. Master's students typically have their supervisors confirmed towards the end of the second semester and begin to work with them around this time. Another key piece to finding a sense of community throughout the third phase includes developing the student-supervisor relationship, which comes with its own challenges. The following shows the

complexities involved with thesis supervision, as explained by the graduate program director who handles such issues when they arise:

> *I think the supervision relationship is a huge stressor that has often come up. For thesis master's level there are concerns about who their supervisors should be and how do they find a supervisor. Then, once they find a supervisor, you know, setting expectations is always a challenge, and what happens when you set expectations and it still doesn't work out or what happens when your supervisor is not giving feedback. How do you handle that? So, there's a lot of that, supervision relationship is very tricky and dynamic. (Int with Professor Ava, 02/17/21)*

The supervision relationship is "tricky and dynamic" as Professor Ava explained. Students have mentioned that they are often unsure what they can expect of their supervisor. This speaks to the power dynamic that students perceive of their supervisors who are also professors. As Professor Ava mentions, having conversations about setting expectations and ongoing feedback about expectations is a challenge that students are not necessarily equipped to handle. These aspects have consequences for the well-being of the student and progress of their thesis. It is important to foster a positive and inclusive environment for emerging researchers to find a sense of belonging within academia and the research setting in the university. However, students are often under pressure to decide on a supervisor early due to the limited number of professors available who are taking on new students and their short timeline. The following excerpts exemplify the challenges that students encountered with their supervision relationship:

> *Unfortunately, she is supervising many students and has a lot of responsibilities, so she is stretched thin, so I have not been able to connect with her that much. We have contacted each other, we've done video chat, and emailed but I wish I could get more feedback and work with her more often. She has given me some good advice and showed me helpful articles and has expertise in the area which helped. I am so thankful for my supervisor, and she has given me opportunities and resources that I don't think I would have otherwise. (Int 3. with M.J, 01/08/21)*

> *Well, I think I need more support from my supervisor, I sent several parts of my literature review writing but recently since Covid-19 happened, I didn't receive feedback. She has too many PhDs, a lot of students, a lot of projects, and she has a family. So, I don't want to add to her burden, at the same time. (Int 3. with Alice, 01/10/21)*

Although students really value and appreciate the expertise and opportunities they obtain from their supervisors, they still felt the need for more support. As emerging researchers, master's thesis students see their connection to the supervisor as a mentorship through which they can acquire and develop research skills. However, students also perceive that their supervisors are overloaded with both professional and personal responsibilities and avoid seeking support as a result. This perception was amplified once the pandemic happened, and students had further communication challenges with their supervisors. The following excerpt from Professor Ava explains the realities of professors and coordinators during the Covid-19 pandemic:

> *Everything has been amplified in the Covid-19 pandemic. So, the workload has increased for everything and there is a lot of the same tasks. I'm finding that I am really struggling to keep up with everything. So, even feedback for students that are overdue, and I try to send them a little bit, so they have something to work on. Some of the initiatives that I've tried to do in the past have kind of been tabled like the international student initiatives and things like that just because of lack of time. My email response rate has reduced too. (Int. with Professor Ava, 02/17/21)*

According to Professor Ava, Covid has amplified a workload that was already a lot. Many of the stressors and issues discussed were present before the pandemic. The pandemic has added a magnifying lens and revealed such issues. Moreover, many stressors are also novel and pandemic specific. Professor Ava explains that it has been difficult to manage all the tasks and keep up with providing timely feedback. Further, she also explained the level of uncertainty there was which impacted planning and as graduate program director her responsibilities to keep the department informed on the changing situation are more urgent and time consuming.

As mentioned by Sarah in the following, master's students unlike PhD students require and have expectations for more support and guidance from their supervisor since it is their first time engaging with research:

> *I imagine a supervisor being very supportive, encouraging, reachable, and accessible. Saying, "you can, you can", but unfortunately this is not the reality at all. For example, after the ethics approval, I asked her what I should do, and she says it's online…but give me more examples. I never wrote this before...I mean my supervisor responds very quickly but is very harsh… I figure out everything by myself, which made the stress level triple. (Int 3. with Sarah, 01/02/21)*

Similar to Sarah, many students expected more guidance on thesis components as it was their first time doing research. This includes support on the ethics approval process which is quite complex and stressful as mentioned by the students. Moreover, this excerpt points to the emotional support and encouragement that students expect from their supervisors. When this support is not met, it can lead to further stress as Sarah explains and the inability to work effectively as a result. A balance is required for a positive student-supervisor relationship and more resources allocated to support professors who are taking on supervision.

Meeting Thesis Milestones

Many master's students are doing research for the first time and therefore they underwent several challenges with organizing their thesis work, academic writing, and with milestones in their thesis work. Obstacles in these areas have contributed to their mental wellness and their ability to work effectively. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic had severely compounded these challenges.

Mental health Challenges. A few students experienced mental health challenges during the third phase while working independently on their thesis. These challenges came from a combination of stressors including isolation, anxiety to meet deadlines, and financial issues. Aaron struggled to stay motivated and encountered an internal struggle as shown by the following excerpt:

> *I always feel like I am a little behind, but I think it's a personality thing like I tend to feel like I am not being as productive as I could be and that is something that I've been trying to deal with. So, I've always felt like I was behind with my thesis but when I talk to other people, I realize that's not true, and I am actually stably on track. (Int 3. with Aaron, 01/13/21)*

Aaron speaks to an internal battle of feeling not productive enough. This idea of "productivity shame" seems to be common among master's students during their thesis work where they continuously feel that more work can be done and feel guilty when engaging in "unproductive" activities. This is an important aspect to consider when it comes to the mental well-being of master's thesis students and their ability to work effectively on their thesis. Given the anxiety and stress that comes from being ashamed, it produces a vicous cycle of reduced motivation and reduced productivity as a result. It speaks to the need for more support and

guidance on developing a healthy routine and independence during this transition into thesis work.

Timelines and Scholarly Writing. After securing a supervisor, a thesis proposal is one of the first and most difficult tasks of the thesis milestones. Although some students have drafted a thesis proposal as part of their research methods course, for many their first year in their master's program is their first time writing a thesis proposal and ethics application. Many students struggled with academic writing and structuring their thesis. M.J. who is in their third year is still figuring out how to write a thesis:

> *I thought I was prepared… there is a lot of figuring things out on one's own when it comes to how to format a thesis and the language used when writing a thesis. Now I'm in my third year and have been working on this thesis for a very long while and I feel like I'm still learning how to do it. (Int 3. with M.J, 01/08/21)*

Similar to M.J, others expressed significant learning and adaptation that took place during this transition period into thesis writing. For education master's students, it is a steeper learning curve as they may not be used to reading articles at such a volume, and then understanding the writing conventions is a separate challenge. Moreover, there appears to an expectation that master's students have about thesis work that comes as a shock for certain students once they begin their writing. This is shown by the following excerpt:

> *Even though I usually suggest to people like here are some examples of master's theses that you should look at, see how long they are and what is involved. It appears to people like just a long paper. So, they kind of think, oh, I'm just going to put this all together, this isn't going to be such a big deal. And then suddenly, it is a big deal. (Int with Professor Mia, 01/20/21)*

There is a discrepancy between what students expect of a thesis and the reality of the work involved. This shock factor has implications for student well-being and ability to transition successfully into their thesis work. Since students work at their own pace and independently, students may easily perceive that one year is an ample amount of time to complete their thesis writing and therefore many only start to feel the pressure as the deadline approaches. According to Professor Mia, one key aspect is time management and working backward to plan timelines:

I don't know that the deadlines are posted well enough like I think people don't seem to often know exactly when they're going to have to submit, in order to graduate. I know the dates are there, but people don't think, oh, if I have to submit on February 15th then an examiner has to be reading it, four weeks before that, and my supervisor has to be reading it, you know, X number of weeks before that so I think it's kind of an issue of time management and anxiety related to meeting deadlines. (Int. with Professor Mia, 01/20/21)

The master's timeline and the administrative processes involved are complex and many students are often confused about what the deadlines mean. In addition to understanding the timelines, students don't have an accurate idea of what is involved in a thesis prior to entering into the program. As mentioned earlier, education master's students are unique in that majority don't have prior research experience to give them a sense of what to expect in their thesis. Taking a look at other student's theses within the discipline is a good approach to visualizing the end product and can help students set realistic expectations for themselves.

International students, moreover, are in a unique situation in that there is a language barrier for many. Being able to do research following the Canadian research convention is a transition that is challenging. Alice describes this struggle in the excerpt provided below:

It's extremely difficult to do research as a second language learner, language proficiency is one thing, the grammar, and sentence structure might be okay, but it sounds different and not natural. I felt like a robot arranging different words together. Another thing is that I don't know anything about the research conventions here. I need to adapt to the research environment in the Canadian context and change my direction of research. (Int 3. with Alice, 01/10/21)

Academic writing alone is distinctive and requires adaption, however with the added challenge of language and research conventions, international students have a tougher transition into thesis writing. Alice also mentioned the need for more support services and resources catered towards academic writing and the need to increase capacity.

Thesis Components. The major thesis components that master's thesis students experienced difficulties with include ethics approval, literature review, data collection and analysis, and transcription of interview data. The literature review is a long process that can be confusing, and students often don't have a clear idea of structuring according to the professors

interviewed. Furthermore, students have mentioned that they were required to provide a proposal before doing the ethics proposal and this was problematic in terms of the timeline as shown in the following excerpt:

The only frustrating thing about the process is that my advisor is expecting a big, annotated bibliography and a long proposal. 30 pages before doing the ethics application [REB] and then you have to wait for the REB which this year took about four months. It's a long time, I didn't have a lot of work that I could do and it's hard as a master's student to take a break. You don't feel like you have the time to take a break if you're trying to finish in two years. (Int 3. with Aaron, 01/13/21)

Many students struggled during the long wait time once they've submitted their ethics application. They felt a major void and were unclear on ways to progress on their thesis and given the pressure of a master's timeline, this led to significant stress. Furthermore, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this process took much longer for all researchers who were waiting for their ethics review. According to Professor Ava, the ethics application is a different genre and it's a challenging process as explained below:

The ethics application is a very different genre than anything else and it always takes longer than people think not just in the writing but also in getting the application back. There are always going to be revisions to do and that's always a challenge because you can't anticipate that. (Int. with Professor Ava, 02/17/21)

In addition, students have expressed difficulties associated with transcription and data analysis. In particular, education students mostly engage with qualitative data, and analyzing such data is a tedious and challenging process:

With manual transcription, there are times where I felt a little bit frustrated and thought like oh my gosh, I can't do this anymore, and I could only do it for short periods of time. It was the same for coding as well and that also took a while because I was figuring out what the themes were and keeping track of them and being consistent with codes, it was definitely a challenge that took so much time and brainpower to keep pushing on. (Int 3. with M.J, 01/08/21)

M.J. and other students have expressed the frustration that comes with transcribing hours of interview data manually. However, for M.J., they wanted to handle the interview data with

care and ensure the integrity of the participants' voices was preserved. This is an important part of a researcher's responsibility. M.J. also mentions the difficulty in keep track and being consistent with coding and this took a lot of energy and time. Coding is a process many students found challenging, including learning how to do data analysis based on the research questions and then organizing the ideas into writing. According to Professor Mia, data analysis is the most challenging component of a thesis:

> *The analysis is very difficult and mapping it out and what really is your research question here. I mean people can have a research question, but then their research question doesn't necessarily match with what they've collected in terms of data. So, that is problematic sometimes. (Int with Professor Mia, 01/20/21)*

With data analysis, it is a challenge when it comes to qualitative data, such as interviews where it is hard to anticipate what the data will show. Therefore, as Professor Mia explains, students often collect data that does not necessarily match their initial research question. More guidance is needed during the data analysis as students have expressed being stuck and frustrated when working with hours of data.

Thesis Related Stressors During the Covid-19 Pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic brought additional challenges that many did not anticipate. There was a lot of uncertainty in terms of conducting the research and many researchers had to change their study. For master's students, the pandemic occurred during the time when they were getting ready to submit ethics approval and finalizing their research project. The following excerpt show the challenges that students were facing:

> *The reality was setting in that I wasn't going to be able to do the thesis I intended to do, and it had to be thrown away. This is education research where I'm supposed to be going into schools or doing interventions can no longer happen. So, I think everyone was kind of in this boat of losing productivity, including myself. It was an emotionally taxing process; it was hard to make that decision and to throw out a lot of work. (Int 3. with Aaron, 01/13/21)*

This excerpt showcases the ways in which the pandemic had amplified feelings of financial stress and reduce productivity. In particular, a lot of education master's students who relied on access to schools in order to conduct their study had to make the tough decision to

either delay their research or modify their study. However, Aaron explained that he "couldn't just sit and wait and potentially pay for another semester of tuition," and the only option was to change the research, an emotionally draining task that many underwent in the midst of a pandemic. Furthermore, this would mean submitting a new ethics application and prolonging the wait time, contributing to further stress.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated stressors and issues of mental health for master's students. The following excerpts demonstrate key concerns brought by the pandemic:

The number one thing during the pandemic as far as working on my thesis was related to time management and mental health and being able to concentrate on work. There were a few things such as conflicts in the apartment which made things stressful at times and a few of my close friends were going through a hard time and being there for them. (Int 3. with M.J, 01/08/21)

It was so hard. I mean students were feeling isolated and lots of anxiety. We had several students request leaves for the pandemic. Some of them just felt their motivation plummeted. I think some of that effect is still being felt by many students. I think the well-being piece is really huge and from what I understand the services provided by the university are in high demand. (Int with Professor Ava, 02/17/21)

The excerpts exemplify the severe emotional stress among master's students as they struggled to manage their academics and the realities of life stressors during a time of a pandemic. For many, the pandemic magnified existing issues of time management and reduced motivation from working in isolation. However, others needed a break from academics due to the profound life issues during the pandemic. With the university services in demand, it speaks to the increase in mental health challenges for many students including isolation, anxiety, and lack of motivation.

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

Although there was much more flexibility in the schedule during the third phase, students struggled to manage time and set routines. Many students still held onto responsibilities and took on new roles including teaching assistant positions as they had more time to offer. On the other hand, the pandemic had made it tougher for some to handle their existing responsibilities. For Sarah, she expresses the challenges of being able to balance her multiple "identities" while working from home during the lockdown:

Before the baby, it was easier. Once the baby is asleep, I have time to work but I am also exhausted. If there was no Covid, I would definitely go and study in the library where it's calm and have a cup of tea. Sometimes if I am at home, I feel that I need to be the wife, the mom, the daughter but changing the place allows me to put the identity I want, so if I go to the library, I am a student. (Int 3. with Sarah, 01/02/21)

Especially as a mother, it was challenging for both Sarah and Emma to be able to manage the household and raise children while making time and having the energy to focus on writing. Both women like many others in their position are highly motivated and showed resilience even despite the challenges they were facing. Sarah speaks to the constant challenge of trying to balance her personal life and her academic life, which she tries to associate with physical spaces to make this distinction for herself. Further, once the pandemic started, she expressed feelings of guilt due to working from home as time management became even more difficult. This impacted her well-being and her ability to engage in productive work as a result.

The pandemic had increased complexities in the personal lives of the students. This includes more financial stress and anxiety about potentially losing their jobs. The following excerpt describes the challenges of balancing multiple factors including financial, academic, and personal life during the pandemic:

It's definitely difficult like losing a lot of money and then feeling stressed out and struggling financially and then going through interpersonal trauma. Then also going through a pandemic where just everything seems so hopeless and full of dread, and you can't concentrate on anything besides looking at the news and seeing all the way the world is just going to end as well as being away from my family for the longest time. So yeah, I guess just giving myself props for what I have managed to accomplish with considering all that, it's not normal times and I think it's important to acknowledge your work and be proud of what you have done. (Int 3. with M.J, 01/08/21)

M.J. expressed facing interpersonal trauma and feelings of dread during the peak of the pandemic. Moreover, many were worried about families that they were unable to visit due to the restrictions in place. All of these aspects have compounded the stressors that students were already facing during the transition into thesis work. However, M.J. closed their thought by acknowledging their accomplishment given these special circumstances. Many other students

have also expressed being proud of their work and the learning that took place during their thesis work.

In terms of intellectual wellness, students have mentioned that they have learned about academia and grown as a researcher with a set of new skills that they can bring to their future career or PhD program. The following excerpt shows the reflection that master's students had about their intellectual satisfaction:

> *Research is always at least a little bit overwhelming especially when you're still getting used to it but overall, now that I'm taking the time to reflect and look back at what I've done so far and what I'm continuing to do, I feel that I've grown a lot as a researcher. I'm pretty comfortable with it now and it's a skill that I can take with me to any occupation or whatever job I end up having in the future. (Int 3. with M.J, 01/08/21)*

> *I've learned a lot about academia, and how academia works. I also learned a lot about my topic. I think that it's really important for master's students especially because we're all on this precipice of are we going to go into a career or are we going to go into a PhD, and a master's in education especially don't necessarily lead to jobs. (Int 3. with Aaron, 01/13/21)*

According to M.J. and Aaron, it has been an overall positive learning experience and a stepping stone into their future endeavour. In particular for education master's students who are purely pursuing a thesis to further their passion for research or a topic.

As Emma mentions in the following excerpt, the pandemic has changed a lot, and the university will need to rethink the structures in place and support being offered to better support master's students wanting to pursue a thesis. Further she mentions the importance of being empathetic and taking into account the "human aspect" as shown below:

> *There is a lot of uncertainty, and we need to adapt and be flexible in this situation. The pandemic has changed a lot for me. They [university administrators] need to take into account the human aspect and not to cause more harm, we don't want to see more people with depression, anxiety, becoming more ill, and more suicides. We want them to be functioning and there is that big word "resilience" and you have both positive and negative factors. The university can be a positive factor by giving something to do in life as people lost jobs and it helps you focus your attention on something creative and worthwhile when doing research, you feel like you are worth something but if you don't*

have that and under pressure, can't focus, getting bad grades, it affects how you feel about yourself. (Int 3. with Emma, 01/03/21)

Emma explains that the university environment and pursuing a thesis can be a positive agent for many who have maybe lost a sense of purpose or feeling uncertain, it can allow students to be creative and feel "worthwhile when doing research" given that the stressors are reduced, and support is offered.

Summary

To summarize, this research revealed three key themes that represent challenges/stressors that were prevalent across three phases of transition in the master's program. By drawing upon constant comparison approach for the analysis of the data and using verbatim transcription, I arrived at themes that emerged from the data itself. These themes were "Building a Sense of Community", "Meeting Thesis Milestones" and "Balancing Multiple Responsibilities". These three themes encompass the challenges that had important implications for the well-being of master's students and their ability to transition into research. The following chapter will discuss the broader ideas and conclusions from these three themes, implications of this study, the limitations and strengths, future directions, and key recommendations for stakeholders.

Chapter Five: Conclusions, Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

The results from this study show that master's students experience challenges in their well-being when transitioning into research. Though varied and specific to the individual, these challenges coalesced around three main themes: "Building a sense of community," "Meeting thesis milestones," and "Balancing multiple responsibilities." The journey of a thesis master's student as shown through the voices of the students themselves is quite complex. It consists of several moving parts that need to be balanced to maintain overall well-being. Through presenting three key challenges over three different phases or significant transition periods, the data was able to showcase the interconnectedness and development of these challenges over time. In particular, education master's students are very likely to be engaging in research for the first time and a holistic approach to well-being is essential to obtain a "full picture" of the stressors involved and how to support students transitioning into thesis work. Although the findings are presented through three major categories, these challenges impact one another as shown through the excerpts.

Significant Findings

Building a Sense of Community

The theme of "Building a sense of community" includes categories of social connections with peers, sense of belonging to the campus environment, and connecting with professors. Several research papers have explored the significant role of peer support systems in student well-being and academic success among university students (Awang et al., 2014; Crisp et al., 2020). However, in this study, the education master's thesis students experienced powerful challenges in forming this system that is evidently vital to their well-being. Students were shown to be more comfortable seeking support from their peers over other resources due to the fact that the student providing the support may have experienced similar stressors and there is a factor of relatability (Brar et al., 2012). This is more challenging for master's students to achieve as they vary drastically in their age, research experience, and academic background and enter into the program at different stages in their lives. In particular, mature and international students experience a more challenging integration when it comes to finding a sense of belonging among their peers and the university culture. In addition, unlike undergraduate or PhD students, master's thesis students are diverse in their program trajectories and rarely have opportunities to meet as a

cohort. Many students were able to create solid support networks despite the program's structural challenges. However, this study reveals that those who were unable to establish social connections experienced mental health challenges including anxiety, depression, and isolation as they entered the thesis writing phase. These challenges stem from a lack of social connection and other factors including academic stress and personal. Due to the individualized nature of thesis writing and research, students do not have a point of reference to feel reassured and this produces a sense of fear and anxiety as students feel more isolated in their experience. Given that many education master's students may be engaged in research for the first time, the lack of peer support can have substantial impact on their well-being and sense of belonging within academia. Students have expressed this idea of "seeing others suffering like you are" where students feel more motivated when they are undergoing the challenge together and through shared experience. Moreover, students rely on peer support for knowledge exchange and academic support including academic writing. This study also revealed international students, in particular, create networks with other students as a strategy to overcome obstacles in language barrier and understanding the Canadian context. Students seek connection with peers as a means to find a sense of belonging through friendships, academic support, and socio-emotional support. At every rite of passage, students rely on this peer support system and this can be argued to be a set of resources, as explained by Dodge et al's (2012) definition of well-being to cope with challenges.

My research revealed that the master's thesis students experienced challenges in also connecting with their professors throughout all three phases of transition. Further, it was found that connection to professors was an essential part of building community. It was evident through my study that international students in particular relied on their connection with professors for additional help on course content and job opportunities. Master's thesis students value their connection to their professors, and often it comes from an admiration for their work in academia. As emerging researchers, thesis students seek a connection that is more of a mentorship to achieve their aspirations in research. This study reveals that master's thesis students experienced challenges in obtaining adequate support, including obtaining feedback and emotional support. It was shown that students perceive that their professors are often overwhelmed with their academic responsibilities and that a certain level of independence is expected of them from their supervisor. As a result, students are hesitant to seek support. However, thesis students have expectations to receive support in their thesis components (ethics application, data analysis, etc.)

and are often unclear what they can expect from their supervision relationship. These findings suggest that students need support with deciding on supervision that is best suited to their proposed study and with setting clear expectations in collaboration with the supervision. Students have the expectation of socio-emotional support from their professors especially their thesis supervisors during thesis work as a source of encouragement and motivation. This finding suggests that redistribution of responsibilities of an academic professor can alleviate workload and help foster a positive student-supervisor relationship where adequate support is met. Further, other strategies can be employed including supervisor organized meetings with all their supervisees on a regular basis to form a community for emerging researchers. These aspects have implications for reducing mental health challenges (isolation, anxiety) and promoting enriched thesis work through knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer feedback.

This study revealed a significant shift in well-being for master's students once they entered the thesis writing phase in which they experienced more profound challenges in mental health. The findings show isolation and anxiety were a result of the stressors experienced during their research and writing phase. The main stressors expressed in the study were related to thesis timelines, thesis components, thesis writing, and supervision support. In particular, when students engage in qualitative research, they feel isolated in their experience and struggle to find a routine, especially during the transcription and data analysis process. These components of research were expressed as mentally draining as they often spent long hours alone with the data. As mentioned earlier, having a social network is crucial for student well-being and my research revealed that thesis master's students were missing this which led to reduced motivation and procrastination during their thesis writing period. The findings suggest the need for cohort meetings organized from the entry into the program to build upon and create a sustainable support network for students throughout their thesis writing.

Meeting Thesis Milestones

Another key finding is that students experience a considerable level of anxiety and stress due to thesis timelines and meeting milestones. Part of the reason includes a discrepancy between what students expect of a thesis and the reality of the work involved. In addition, students have a challenging time creating deadlines, working backward, and organizing their thesis components over the second year where these milestones are met. Since a master's thesis

has specific graduation deadlines, there are several steps and time delays to account for including the submission process, securing an examiner, receiving revisions, and submission of the final thesis. Further, the study showed financial anxiety associated with fear of not meeting their graduation deadline which would mean another semester of tuition. Along with this another key aspect that was revealed in the study was issues with time management when moving to independent thesis work where students expressed feeling "less busy" all of sudden yet felt anxious having the flexibility they were not accustomed to. Further, this study reveals that certain thesis milestones contributed more strongly to stress and anxiety, in particular, the ethics application process and wait time led to periods of unproductivity. The Covid-19 pandemic had amplified this challenge with increased delays. All these factors contributed to stressors and negatively impacting well-being as students were not setting realistic expectations for themselves and experienced challenges they didn't anticipate. The literature on higher education and well-being supports this finding as the match or mismatch between student expectations and their experience in the program is critical to their sense of belonging, academic performance, and socio-emotional well-being (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018; Williamson et al., 2011).

Another key finding was the idea of productivity shame among master's students during their thesis work where they constantly felt more work can be done and felt guilty when engaging in "unproductive" activities. This is linked to students setting unrealistic goals and expectations for themselves and when they are not met, they engage in negative self-thoughts. This has implications for student well-being as it produces a cycle of reduced motivation and confidence in their work. Further due to the heavy workload that students often experience in a thesis program, students rarely have the opportunity to reflect on their practice as becoming researchers and their researcher identity. This has implications for supporting the development of confidence and ownership to help reduce factors that typically hinder productivity among master's students including imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and productivity shame.

This study reveals that master's students experience a significant learning curve and adaptation when transitioning into research. It often takes time to comprehend the complexities associated with research paradigms and conceptualizing methodologies and students felt that the coursework was too condensed. When students had to produce a proposal, they had challenges with applying the theories learned into their own research design and knowing how to operationalize abstract ideas. Further, it was found through the study that students perceived a

discrepancy between discipline-specific methods and the methods they learned. This led to stress and self-doubts as students worked on proposal writing and ethics applications. Another considerable learning curve for students involves the formatting and language used in scholarly work. Students expressed difficulties including writer's block which led to feelings of stress and anxiety about the approaching deadlines. However, this study has shown that challenges in academic writing were more profound for international students, and they struggled to adapt to the Canadian research conventions. The findings suggest that establishing mechanisms to foster community writing groups and thesis-specific support is central to reducing mental health challenges as master's students engage in their research journey.

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

This study reveals that as master's students enter into graduate study, they undergo difficulties with managing their academic life and their life outside, and this led to mental health challenges. Many master's students are at different points in their lives and decide to pursue a master's for a variety of reasons including passion/interest, career advancement, or pathway into PhD. However, through this study, it was evident that the academic demands had an impact on their personal life decisions. In particular, women who had dependents were shown to have a more challenging time with their identities and experienced severe stress when transitioning into graduate school. This was further amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic as students were betwixt and between their roles in the home and in the university. Many students relied on spaces within the campus to zone into their thesis work and with lockdown, they often procrastinated and felt less motivated. The study reveals that master's students have complex and interconnected challenges that have impacts on their well-being. In particular when it comes to managing academic demands, financial stress, and finding a sense of belonging within the university. Education master's students are unique in that many cannot afford to leave their teaching position and therefore endure the "long days" of teaching followed by coursework in the evenings. This led to mental and physical exhaustion and further for some students it was shown that they felt disconnected from the university as they rarely had time to get involved on campus. These factors have implications for prospective master's students coming from a professional degree program where the transition process is a critical period that has impacts on student well-being.

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Covid-19 Stressors and Amplifications

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on student well-being and ability to do research was also revealed through this study. It was shown that there were pandemic-specific stressors and other challenges were amplified due to the pandemic. There was a general sense of fear and anxiety brought by the uncertainties of this new deadly virus and students were in "survival mode" during the first month of lockdown in March 2020. Following this, students experienced feelings of depression and reduced motivation from not having in-person social interactions. Further, another shift in routine led to more difficulties with time management. Students felt even more distant from the university as the pandemic exacerbated issues with communication with their professors and peers as it was online. This study also revealed that many students were forced to change their research topic since they were no longer able to conduct fieldwork and others experienced massive delays in obtaining their ethics approval. These aspects had magnified the existing mental health challenges due to timeline restrictions and financial stressors. It was an emotionally taxing process for students when they had to change their research design or topic and a lot of important work was lost.

Key Recommendations

In light of the significant findings from this study, I present six key recommendations for stakeholders within the faculty of education including program directors and professors with supervisees:

1- Facilitating the formation of affinity groups. Cohort meetings from the beginning of the program to form thesis-specific peer support groups and regular check-ins throughout the duration of the program, and especially during specific thesis milestones.

2- Structured opportunities to connect with professors and coordinators of the department through informal sessions to foster a sense of community that goes beyond academics.

3- Individualized support and advising with planning for thesis milestones and strategies to doing a thesis (academic writing, literature review, ethics application, data analysis).

4- Support on-campus for balancing multiple responsibilities: one-on-one advising and workshops on specific challenges faced by master's students including prioritizing and managing demands. Leveraging and expanding spaces on campus (e.g., graduate

buildings) to better support the demands of graduate students and to increase peer support spaces.

5- Reconsideration of the thesis timeline based on the realities of master's students and transparency regarding the delays/length and expectations of the thesis program prior to applying to the program. This includes encouraging students to consult with prior theses or opportunities to speak with an upper-year student. One key recommendation here would be to support students with planning for productive work during the wait times that occur between milestones such as the ethics application to help reduce anxiety. Student and supervisor can be encouraged to create timelines in consultation with a program advisor to better understand the progression of the program and plan based on the individual needs of the student.

6- Supporting professors with ensuring a healthy balance of academic responsibilities to foster a positive student-supervisor relationship and experience.

Peer support systems and connections with professors are two main avenues that master's students try to seek for social-economic and academic support. The master's students experienced obstacles in these areas which have contributed to challenges in their mental health and wellness. Recommendation No. 1 and 2 address this issue by providing ways to build a sense of community and resource to support student well-being as students persevere through the transition periods and their isolated thesis work. In addition, a significant number of stressors were felt by the master's students due to the thesis milestones and timeline. This includes anxiety, financial stress, isolation, and productivity shame. Therefore recommendation No. 3 and 5 can be helpful to support students with planning and ensuring a closer match between expectations, both of which are detrimental to student well-being when absent. It is also important to acknowledge and be aware of the realities of a master's student's life outside the university as it has profound implications for student life within the university. Given the stressors associated with balancing multiple responsibilities as a thesis student, more support services on campus through advising and redesigning of spaces (recommendation No. 4) can be helpful to address these challenges. Lastly, the student-supervisor relationship is one that master's students value in terms of network, emotional support, motivation, and guidance. However, students experienced difficulties building this relationship which was especially

important during the thesis work phase. Recommendation No 6. can help to ensure that professors have more time to balance their supervisions and other academic responsibilities.

Implications of the Study

While well-being research in education has received attention in recent years, there still exist gaps in higher education. Little research has been done on graduate students and much of the existing research has mostly focused on quantitative and specific measurements of well-being such as stress. Whereas a holistic view of well-being is required to understand the multifaceted life of a master's student and their experiences. Further, most research within the field of graduate student education examines PhD students or groups master's students and PhD students into the same category. This is problematic as master's students' experiences as novice researchers are often overlooked and therefore a gap in understanding their unique challenges continues to exist. In particular, the transition period into research from coursework at the master's level has not been recognized as a significant shift. This study contributes to our collective understanding of the well-being of master's students during a critical period of transitioning into research through an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of the students themselves.

Given the implementation of orientation sessions, universities seem to be aware of the importance of a "sense of community" on campus whereas this study reveals what this means for master's thesis students and how they seek this connection. When students felt disconnected or a lack of belonging to the university and department, it impacted their well-being significantly once they transitioned into research. My research also revealed that both connections to peers and professors are essential to establishing a sense of community. Students seek support in terms of socio-emotional, academic, and mentorship aspects. When students enter their thesis work phase, their perceived sense of community was reduced, and they experienced severe isolation. This impacted their motivation and productivity in their work. My study has shown that building a sense of community for international and out-of-province students was perceived to be important from the onset of their program as they rely on support from the locals to navigate the city and their university challenges. The findings have implications for student services, student societies, and the faculties suggesting the importance of establishing structured opportunities to form affinity groups/cohort meetings and to connect with professors for thesis master's students.

In addition, my research revealed that students experienced significant shifts in mental health challenges during their transition into independent thesis work. When students' expectation of a thesis was not met, they experienced stress, self-doubt, and anxiety. Although the master's degree is a two-year program, students in this program typically begin to work on their thesis in their second year which gives about one-year for thesis work. Students struggled with conceptualizing and planning for independent work over the one year period and for many, it was their first time in both these areas. Contrary to prior studies, my study also revealed that students perceived a significant learning curve during their coursework and when they applied their learnt theories, research paradigms, methodologies in their own research. In addition, students felt steep learning involved with academic writing at the scholarly level including formatting a thesis, research conventions, and the language used. My study also found that international students in particular felt alienated to the research conventions and styles of writing and experienced a considerable level of anxiety with their academic writing. This finding suggests the need for more individualized support with planning for thesis milestones and standard programs to scaffold master's students through different research components with opportunities to reflect and build confidence as a researcher.

This study revealed that for master's students, both of these areas (life within and outside academics) are interconnected and strongly influence one another in a complex manner. When students made tough decisions with respect to their personal life and responsibilities, it was driven by academics which they perceived to be demanding and affecting their well-being negatively. Therefore, even though "managing multiple responsibilities" is recognized as a challenge in previous literature, the intricacies involved and the negotiations that students make in terms of their well-being during this transition is a key missing piece. These findings suggest the need to address master's students' challenges in a holistic perspective and better structure support initiatives to account for the unique life and academic demands of the students. This study also reveals new findings on the impacts of transitioning into research during the Covid-19 pandemic and the specific challenges and stressors that impacted the well-being of education master's thesis students.

Finally, this study contributes to bridging the gaps in the support offered and the current knowledge on the transition into graduate school. Given the benefits of descriptive and information rich lived-experience data, this research now adds to a more in-depth perspective on

the recent increase in mental health cases among graduate students. The findings can inform decision makers and policymakers and increase awareness among key stakeholders including supervisors. In addition, this research has identified key areas that may impact student resilience in long term research goals and their overall well-being.

Strengths and Limitations

As with all qualitative studies, this research project includes limitations associated with interview data, participant sampling, and bias. Additionally, restrictions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic also shaped what could be achieved. These limitations are discussed in turn below.

Interview Data

One of the limitations associated with using thematic analysis is that it is often criticized for the lack of consistency and coherence in determining themes because of its flexibility (Butler-Kisber, 2010). There are various ways of performing thematic analysis and ways to represent prevalence which doesn't provide a quantifiable measure. One strategy that I employed to counteract this was by doing several iterations of analysis including between and within the different key ideas before I arrived at the themes. Moreover, by being explicit about the theoretical lens that I am taking and using reflective memos throughout the study, helped to ensure that the themes were more accurately represented.

Participant Sample

This study was based on one education faculty within a university. Since the sample size is not very large and is specific to one department, it can be criticized in terms of the lack of saturation in the data and reliability. While this can be perceived as a weakness of the study, the nature of qualitative approach is to obtain an in-depth understanding (Dworkin, 2012) of the particularities of the discipline-specific experiences which otherwise would be difficult to obtain if the participant selections were randomized across disciplines. The specificity of the sample allows me to understand the experiences of new research stream graduate students.

The master's students who were interviewed were in the midst of their thesis writing phase and asked to reflect on their experience in the last year. A limitation to this approach is that the

student's perception of their experiences might be changed over time and their current experience could have impacted their reflection. However, using Seidman's three-part interviews has allowed participants to validate their experience over time and reconsider their previous interviews in the subsequent sessions. This allowed capturing a more accurate representation of their experiences. More specifically, the challenges during the critical period of transition from coursework to thesis work were captured through the reflections of the master's students' experiences.

Personal Biases

My own stance as a researcher and a master's student is another limitation to this study. As I began this research, I was undergoing similar experiences as my participants while doing my thesis. In Chapter One, I have described how I have situated myself in this study and the way in which my personal experiences as a student and as an employee within a student services branch of McGill University have contributed to my perspective and beliefs about transitioning into thesis within an education faculty. I have used reflective memos to closely examine my thinking process and to be reflexive about my biases and conceptualizations of the themes that emerged from the data. Although I carry assumptions and ideas based on my experiences doing a thesis program, being a master's student has allowed me to create a trusting relationship with my participants since I was a peer who can relate, empathize, and corroborate. I believe that this fostered a safe space for students to reveal serious challenges that otherwise would have been hidden if I held a different position or was an outsider. Further, since the interviews took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, this allowed for a different kind of insight that students felt comfortable sharing with their peers as it was a shared experience. These aspects served as a unique strength to this study in many ways as it brings about perspectives that otherwise would not have been shared in a similar manner if the relationship between interviewer and interviewee was between professor and student. Since I was accustomed to the context and setting, this allowed me to make better sense of their experiences and to ask the right probing questions.

Covid-19 Challenges

Due to the circumstances brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, in-person interviews were prohibited in Montreal, especially during the peak of lockdown. I initially planned to conduct the

study in person, however, due to the pandemic, the interviews were conducted through a web conferencing platform. One limitation to this approach is that it can be challenging to build a rapport and trusting environment over the virtual space. In-person interviews allow the researcher to recognize non-verbal cues and emotions easily compared to through a screen. As mentioned earlier, the structure of placing the interviews over time and having a series of three, facilitated this process of building a trusting relationship with the participants. Although there were challenges, conducting interviews online has made it accessible to students who were located internationally during the pandemic and to ensure their voices were represented as well.

Future Directions

Taking into consider the findings of this research and its limitations, future research may consider the following to obtain a more accurate understanding of the well-being of master's students when transitioning into research. In order to obtain a complete picture of the challenges in wellness faced by master's student, I would suggest future research integrate findings of graduate student well-being with an analysis of wellness services on campus and how they are accessed. In particular, what wellness support services are available to master's students? And what are the common challenges in well-being that master's thesis students seek support for? How do the students perceive the support and services being offered? Further, I would recommend future research examine the support available for thesis writing and research. Given that much master's level research takes place at a research-intensive university, how are students being supported to pursue a thesis program in education and other professional degree programs? How are international students supported in their unique challenges of being foreign to the Canadian research writing and conventions?

Another suggestion for future research is examining the experiences of master's thesis students across different disciplines to compare and contrast the challenges experienced. This would contribute to learning more about the distinct features within different disciplines and stressors involved. In addition, further studies could investigate other graduate programs with student populations who come from professional degree programs that have a master's thesis option including Nursing, Physiotherapy, and Occupational therapy. This would bring about perspectives on how the transition is perceived among students who may have limited prior experience in research due to the nature of the professional degree programs.

The impacts brought by the Covid-19 pandemic on graduate students' well-being as a whole needs to be further explored. I would suggest future research to closely investigate the state of mental health among master's students in the last year as they engage in research. Since the pandemic is ongoing and certain impacts may be long-lasting, a longitudinal study might be beneficial to understand master's thesis students' experiences within a global pandemic scenario.

As a final thought, it would be important to take a closer to examine how the experiences and challenges might differ across genders and specific populations. It was evident that women experienced specific challenges due to their multiple roles and identities and more research is needed to understand their transition into research and challenges in well-being. Similarly, other specific groups of population may have particular experiences and stressors during their transition into research that future research can focus upon. This would add to further understanding how societal and institutional factors can influence the experiences students face.

I discovered through my study and review of current research that there is limited research in transition into research or thesis programs. This means that there are a plethora of perspectives and directions to explore and build upon given the areas of gaps mentioned above.

Concluding Remarks

Adequately supporting new research students is an ever-shifting target. Especially in the field of education, where students enter into graduate work with a variety of different life experiences, life situations, and goals and objectives for their programs. The challenge for program administrators is complex and made all the more daunting considering the sacrifices students have made to pursue their studies. This thesis was an attempt to make that job slightly easier. While there is no magic formula for supporting graduate students, ongoing feedback and evaluation loops can I believe help us devise strategies effective for specific points in time. Students are experts in their own situations but may not be experts in the tasks that confront them. This thesis was an attempt to understand the experiences of graduate students who are new to research through their perspectives.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form for Master's students

Participant Informed Consent Form

Researcher:

> Mithura Sanmugalingam, Master's student in Educational Leadership, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University. Email: mithura.sanmugalingam@mail.mcgill.ca | Phone number: 514-999-3624

Supervisor:

> Stephen Peters, Professor, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University. Email: Stephen.peters@mcgill.ca

I am conducting a research study as part of my degree requirement, the goal of which is to understand the well-being of first-year Education master's students and their transition into a thesis program within a University in Montreal. I aim to conduct inquiry into the lived experiences of first-year master's students, through reflecting on their experiences. With the recent covid-19 pandemic, I will aim to understand the realities faced by graduate students. You are being contacted because you are a second-year master's student in an Education program. If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in three 45-60 minute audio-taped interviews through Zoom (online platform).

You are invited to participate in my study and understand the following:

- That I am about to participate in the study titled: **"Understanding the wellbeing of graduate students when transitioning into research"** which is being conducted by Mithura Sanmugalingam, a master's student in the Educational Leadership program at McGill University. The purpose of the study is to investigate into the participants lived experiences and wellbeing when transitioning into the Education thesis program.
- That my participation in this study will be conducted in a series of three interviews face-to-face through Zoom an online platform that is supported by McGill University.
- That interviews will only be audiotaped using a physical voice recorder to capture verbatim responses for study purposes and that I can refuse to answer any question at any time and have any portion of the interview deleted.
- That my participation in this study is voluntary and that my decision to stop participating or refusing to answer any question will not affect my relationship with the researcher.
- That my confidentiality will be preserved throughout the study. During our first meeting, a pseudonym will be assigned with my help and kept throughout the study. Further, any identifiable information will be removed or aggregated (changed) to protect my identity.
- That only the researcher who interviews me will have access to the code key, the consent forms and the audiotapes. These data and any information collected during the interview will be stored in a password protected computer and locked in a secure cabinet to ensure no one except for the researcher has access.
- That I will have the opportunity to review the transcribed data and request for any changes or deletions.

- That I may withdraw my participation from the study at any time for any reason and any data collected will be destroyed unless I indicate otherwise.
- That if I participate in the study, any personal data will not be available to the public or any third parties.
- That all findings attained from my participation will only be shared with my permission.
- That there are emotional risks. I may be asked to reflect on my experience and answer questions about my everyday feelings and to describe challenges. I may be asked to speak on my feelings and experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the questions may be personal or difficult to answer and I have the right to refuse to answer questions that make me feel uncomfortable. If I find myself feeling distress, the interview will pause for a break or stop, and I will be referred to the Student wellness Hub or to emergency services at a hospital that is most accessible as needed
- That there will be no direct benefit. My contribution will be helpful to better our understanding of the challenges and realities faced by graduate students wanting to pursue research.

Should you have any questions regarding the study, please feel free to contact me (Mithura Sanmugalingam) or my supervisor Dr. Stephen Peters.

For your reference, the contact info of the Research Ethics Board (REB) is as follows:
Tel: 514-398-6193
Address: James Admin Bldg. 845 Sherbrooke Street West, Rm 429, Montreal, QC H3A OG4

Student wellness Hub for access to doctor, counsellor or psychiatrist will be available through telehealth: 514-398-6017

Consent form

By signing this consent form, I have read the above description of the research and agree to participate in this research. I understand that the results will be used for research purposes only, that my identity will remain confidential and that I can withdraw from the research at any time. A copy of this consent form will be given to you and the researcher will keep a copy.

Participants' name: (please print) _____

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Master's students

Introduction for the master's students:

Good morning (afternoon) my name is Mithura Sanmugalingam. I would like to thank you for taking your time to participate in this research interview. Before starting the interview, I would like to discuss the consent form to ensure that the purpose and process of this research study is clear. I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences during your first year of master's study, specifically about the transition into your thesis and your wellbeing during this transition. There are no desirable or undesirable answers, and I would like for you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel. There are emotional risks to consider. There will be questions that are Covid-19 specific such as talking about your experience with research and your wellbeing during the pandemic. You might feel embarrassed to discuss problems you have experienced in graduate school. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you have the right to answer, ask to skip or stop the interview at any point if you feel uncomfortable or don't want to answer the question. If you do experience any form of distress, the interview will stop immediately, and you will be referred to a support service or health professional. I will be audio-recording the interview using a physical voice recorder if that is okay with you. I will be audio-recording for the purpose of having access to the details of what we discussed after the interview and for analyzing the responses. It will also allow me to actively listen during the interview instead of trying to write everything that was said in the interview. I only be voice-recording and will not be video-recording. You might feel concerned that things you say might get back to your supervisor. I assure you that all the information from the interview will remain confidential.

Interview questions for the master's student: Seidman 3-part interview

Interview one: Focused on Life History.
- Could you tell me a little bit about your background, in terms of education, how did you end up in this program?
    - *Try to form a timeline of education and life experiences until the point of starting their master's program.*
    - *Job experiences.*
    - *Personal and professional responsibilities.*
- In what ways were your neighborhood surroundings, family, friends and things like that apart of your experiences, or any alterative factors that influenced your path?
- (*If participant is a teacher*) Have you always wanted to be a teacher? Or what attracted you to the field of education?
- During undergrad, did you have any experience with research? A job or a course?
- How was your overall well-being during your undergrad? *(Explain what is meant by well-being: physical, mental, emotional, social)*
    - What support was available to students?

- How did you decide you wanted to do a thesis?
- Why do you want to do research? What is your motivation for wanting to pursue a master's thesis?

Interview two: The Detail of Experience.
- Could you describe a typical day during your first year of master's?
    o Prior to covid and during covid
    o Could you describe the responsibilities you have on a daily basis, personal and professional?
- What was your experience like during orientation or the first week of graduate school?
    o How did you feel during orientation and the first week?
- Describe your wellbeing during the first month of graduate school?
    o (Physical, mental, emotional, social)
- How would you describe your wellbeing during the transition into doing research?
- How did you feel towards the end of your first year of master's studies?
- Could you describe your experience with research method courses during the first year of master's studies?
- What were your responsibilities/tasks for your thesis during the first year of your master's?
- Could you describe how your experience was with finding a supervisor and deciding on a research topic? Applying for funding?
- How has your experience been like working with your supervisor?
- What challenges did you encounter during your first year of master's studies?
    o Before covid
- Has your experience changed during the Covid-19 pandemic? If so in what ways has the pandemic impacted, you?
- How did you feel overall during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Could you describe your experience with doing research during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How has it been with social aspects while doing your thesis? Did you feel satisfied and if you can explain?

Interview Three: Reflection on Meaning.
(May take only 10-30 minutes) – mainly to wrap up, ask final questions and make connections. Closing of the interviews.

Concluding remarks:
Thank you for participating in this interview, I really appreciate your time and contribution. If you have any questions about the study, feel free to email me. I will be contacting you for feedback on what you have said and if there were anything you would like to be changed or removed.

Appendix C: Stakeholder Informed Consent Form

Researcher:

Mithura Sanmugalingam, Master's student in Educational Leadership, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University. Email: mithura.sanmugalingam@mail.mcgill.ca | Phone number: 514-999-3624

Supervisor:

Stephen Peters, Professor, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University. Email: Stephen.peters@mcgill.ca

Title of project: "Understanding the wellbeing of graduate students when transitioning into research"

I am conducting a research study as part of my degree requirement, the goal of which is to understand the well-being of first-year Education master's students and their transition into a thesis program within a University in Montreal. I aim to conduct inquiry into the lived experiences of first-year master's students, through reflecting on their experiences. With the recent covid-19 pandemic, I will aim to understand the realities faced by graduate students. You are being contacted because you are a stakeholder in the Faculty of Education at the University where the master's students' study. If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a 45-60 minute audio-taped interviews. You will be able to choose the best date and time based on your availability. The interview will take place remotely through zoom which is data protected and supported by the University.

You are invited to participate in my study and understand the following:

- That the interview will be held remotely through zoom for 45-60 minutes.
- That interviews will only be audiotaped using a physical voice recorder to capture verbatim responses for study purposes and that I can refuse to answer any question at any time and have any portion of the interview deleted.
- That my participation in this study is voluntary and that my decision to stop participating or refusing to answer any question will not affect my relationship with the researcher.
- That my confidentiality will be preserved throughout the study. During our first meeting, a pseudonym will be assigned with my help and kept throughout the study. Further, any identifiable information will be removed or aggregated (changed) to protect my identity.
- That only the researcher who interviews me will have access to the code key, the consent forms and the audiotapes. These data and any information collected during the interview will be stored in a password protected computer and locked in a secure cabinet to ensure no one except for the researcher has access.
- That I will have the opportunity to review the transcribed data and request for any changes or deletions.
- That I may withdraw my participation from the study at any time for any reason and any data collected will be destroyed unless I indicate otherwise.

- That if I participate in the study, any personal data will not be available to the public or any third parties.
- That all findings attained from my participation will only be shared with my permission.
- That there are no predictable risk or discomfort for you as a participant in this study.
- That there will be no direct benefit. My contribution will be helpful to better our understanding of the challenges and realities faced by graduate students wanting to pursue research.

Should you have any questions regarding the study, please feel free to contact me (Mithura Sanmugalingam) or my supervisor Dr. Stephen Peters.

For your reference, the contact info of the Research Ethics Board (REB) is as follows:
Tel: 514-398-6193
Address: James Admin Bldg. 845 Sherbrooke Street West, Rm 429, Montreal, QC H3A OG4

Consent form

By signing this consent form, I have read the above description of the research and agree to participate in this research. I understand that the results will be used for research purposes only, that my identity will remain confidential and that I can withdraw from the research at any time. A copy of this consent form will be given to you and the researcher will keep a copy.

Participants' name: (please print) _____

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Protocol for Stakeholders

Introduction for stakeholders:

Good morning (afternoon) my name is Mithura Sanmugalingam. I would like to thank you for taking your time to participate in this research interview. Before starting the interview, I would like to discuss the consent form to ensure that the purpose and process of this research study is clear. I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences as a stakeholder who has worked with first year master's student in the Education Faculty. There are no desirable or undesirable answers and I would like for you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel. You participate in this research is completely voluntary and you have the right to answer, ask to skip or stop the interview at any point if you feel uncomfortable or don't want to answer the question. I will be audio-recording the interview using a physical voice recorder if that is okay with you. I will be audio-recording for the purpose of having access to the details of what we discussed after the interview and for analyzing the responses. It will also allow me to actively listen during the interview instead of trying to write everything that was said in the interview. I only be voice-recording and will not be video-recording. I assure you that all the information from the interview will remain confidential.

Interview questions (stakeholders):

- What has been your role within the University in the last year?
- What is a typical day working with graduate students in your position?
- Could you describe your experiences working with first-year master's students?
- What were the areas of support or questions students come to see you for?
- What was your overall impression of the readiness of first-year master's students?
- What were the challenges you noticed among master's students doing their thesis?
- What new challenges did you see arise among master's students since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What were the overall feelings you noticed among master's students during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What were the common concerns among master's students during the pandemic?

Concluding remarks:
Thank you for participating in this interview, I really appreciate your time and contribution. If you have any questions about the study, feel free to email me. I will be contacting you for feedback on what you have said and if there is anything you would like to be changed or removed.