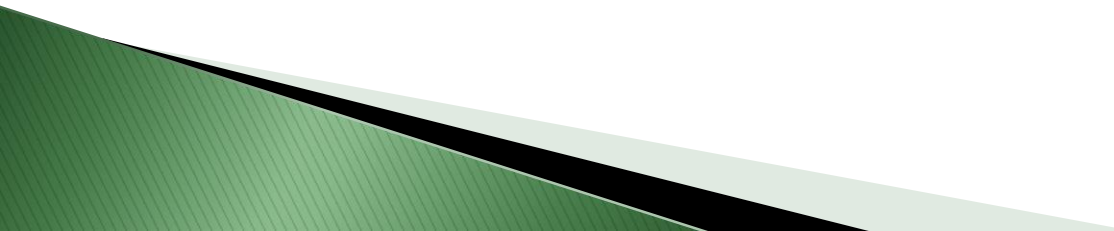# successfully managing the learning journey

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2012

- • managing the 'long haul', working with the frustrations, the journey,
   • coping with a supervisor and committee,
   • working towards and ensuring learning 'leaps' you make in your work as a research student and
- • how to manage being a student with all of the other responsibilities of life and develop emotional resilience -
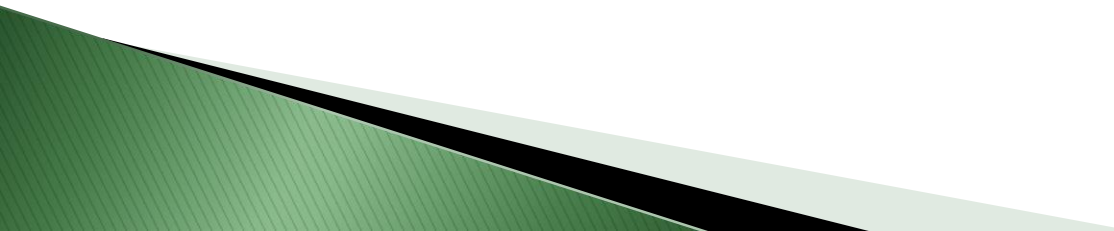
- We will look at some of the lessons learned from the **'doctoral learning journeys'** UK (2007-2010)
- 'parallel'(international) projects concerning ways of supporting empowering and recognising the learning 'leaps' research students make in their work, developing the literature review, and completing the dissertation; and

- the 'troublesome encounters' project on overcoming blocks in research and writing and encouraging wellbeing and emotional resilience, for masters and doctoral students.
- we will consider some of the differences between masters and doctoral work, and ways of building and sustaining successful learning communities.'

What are the challenges for you as a research student?
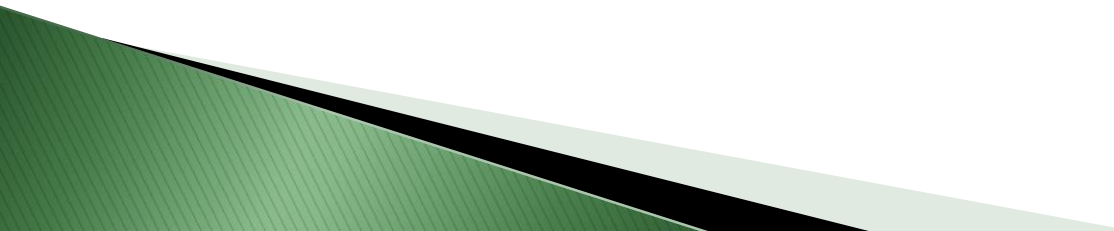
Others have mentioned

- Identity- part of institution-research team- and community
- Isolation
- Relationships with supervisor and committee- to make it productive
- Adaptability and flexibility- for overcoming difficulties
- Work life balance especially for part timers
- Finance

- Working at an intellectually challenging and fulfilling level
- Writing
- Presentations- Speaking in front of others
- Fear of Failure
- Looking ahead- next steps -in academia and skills and development achievements
- Being able to take criticism(developmental feedback)

- Postgraduate study engages students at a transitional moment in their learning and personal development
- Transitional and troublesome knowledge – about self as well as learning combine in many cases to affect wellbeing, ontological health
- A mix of issues about developing identity, and developing learning abilities
- And negotiating appropriate supervision support

- Achievement of the PhD has been seen to involve more than contribution to knowledge but a leap in terms of self articulation self affirmation and self development
- Postgraduates acknowledge their research achievements have
- raised their status
- Confidence, and awareness of ability to think, talk and make a contribution,
- social, status with friends and family and professionally
- the main issues are with the developing research and these affect
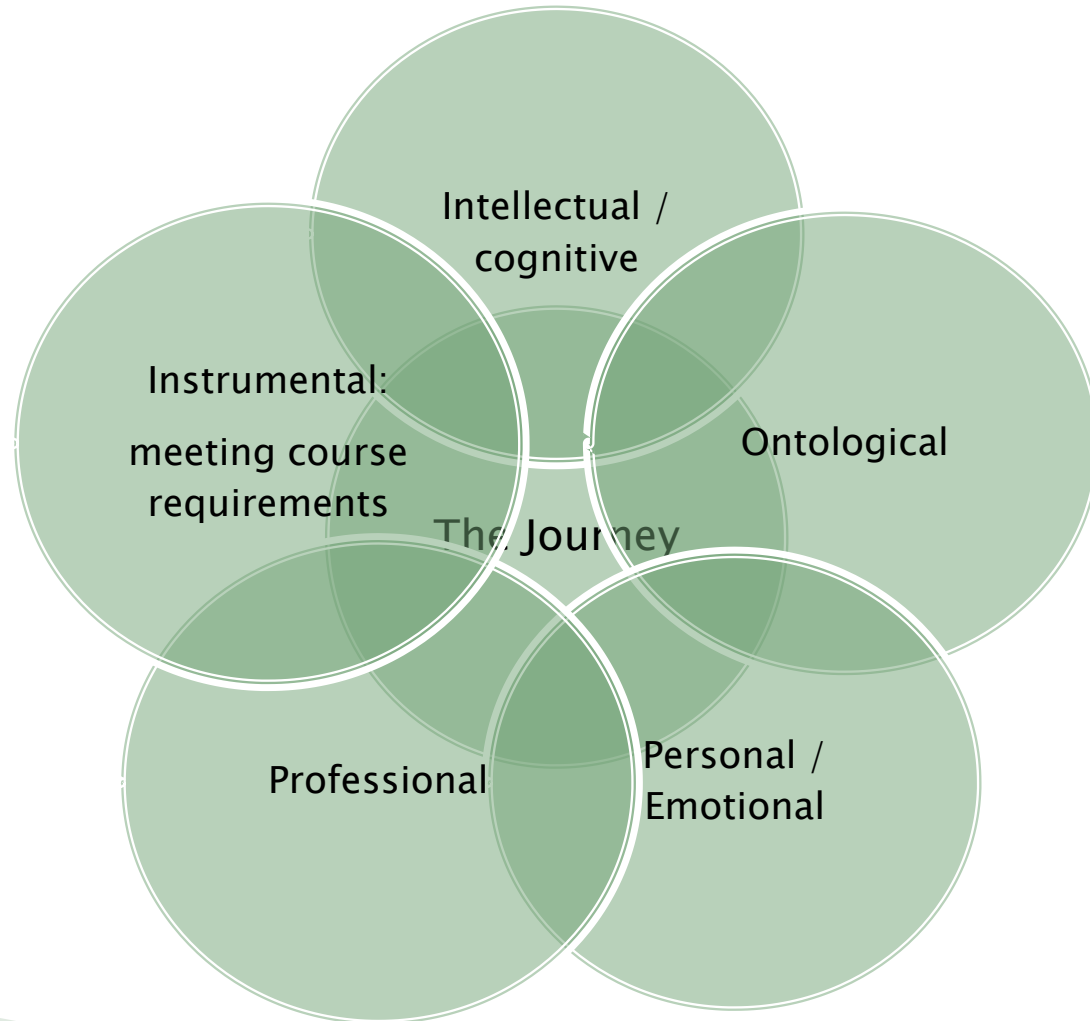 ◦ identity
  ◦ self worth
  ◦ the learned life journey

- For many research students the choice to undertake doctoral level study is a momentous life decision. Students are aware that it is likely to be a major time commitment and that this may impact on their personal, family and working lives.
- Doctorates can continue for some years and so require sustained motivation and momentum and can be costly and impact on work availability, requiring more ongoing financial sacrifice.
- It may also take up students' emotional resources and with all these challenges, participants reported that it is very important to enjoy the topic and to feel highly motivated in order to stay on course:

What has our research suggested helps success?

- Perseverence
- Right balance between ownership of the project and independence – and supportive challenging guidance
- Sound supervision which 'nudges' learning development and supports development of emotional resilience and ownership of the project and learning
- Recognition of link between ontology (being in the world – you as researcher) and epistemology (construction of knowledge, understanding of learning)
- Wellbeing and emotional resilience
- Community and friend support

Doctoral learning journeys: multi-dimensional

Intellectual / cognitive

Instrumental:
meeting course requirements

Ontological

The Journey

Professional

Personal / Emotional

Early work and DLJ

Wisker, Kiley, Robinson, Trafford & Leshem identified threshold concepts and conceptual thresholds at the research education level (EARLI 2007, QPR 2006, 2008, Threshold Concepts conferences 2006, 2008)
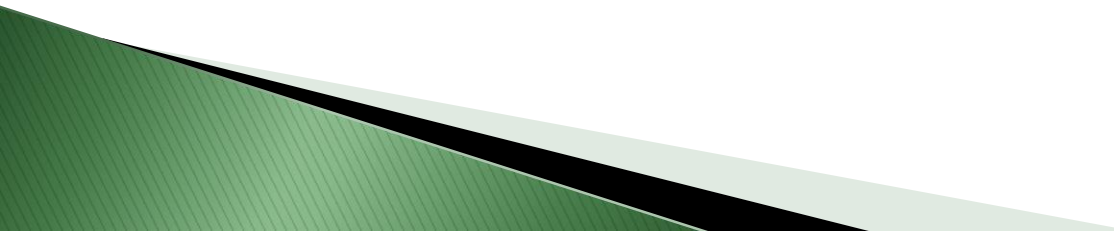
- **Doctoral learning journeys 2007-2010**
- Survey (350 doc students)
- Journalling and narrative interviews 30 down to 20 students over 3 yrs
- Interviewing 20 supervisors
- 11 examiners
- **Parallel project**
- Interviewing students , supervisors and examiners internationally

Research questions

- How do doctoral students signify their awareness of working conceptually?

- How do students' conceptual grasp and comments display crossing of subject-specific and generic doctoral thresholds?

- How do supervisors recognise students' conceptual grasp of research?

- What strategies and activities do supervisors use to encourage or 'nudge' conceptual grasp by doctoral students?

Conceptual Threshold Crossing in Doctoral Learning Journeys

- We developed the notion of conceptual threshold crossings to identify moments when postgraduate students make learning leaps and begin to work at a more conceptual critical and creative fashion-
- Developed from threshold concepts in the disciplines

Threshold concept

▸ The absolutely essential concepts for understanding how knowledge is constructed and the world is seen in a discipline

▸ 'Akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress….' (Meyer & Land, 2003)

Threshold concept & conceptual threshold crossing

Threshold concept

- *Transformative*
- *Irreversible*
- *Integrative*
- *Troublesome Knowledge*

Conceptual threshold crossing - 'learning leaps'

- *Ontological change*
- *Epistemological contribution*

Theoretical framework

▸ Conceptual threshold crossing is evidenced by :
 troublesome knowledge, movements on from stuck places through liminal spaces into new understanding – transformations (Meyer & Land).

▸ Ontological change – seeing the self and the world differently

▸ Epistemological contribution – making new contributions to understanding and meaning

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Ontology / Identity

- We argue that when a candidate's behaviour changes it suggests that they have crossed a particular conceptual threshold and that this indicates an ontological shift, a change in identity
- Behaviours
  1. Working conceptually, critically and creatively rather than just busily
  2. Production of an abstract and a conclusions chapter which deal with concepts not merely facts
  3. Being able to put forward an argument supported by evidence
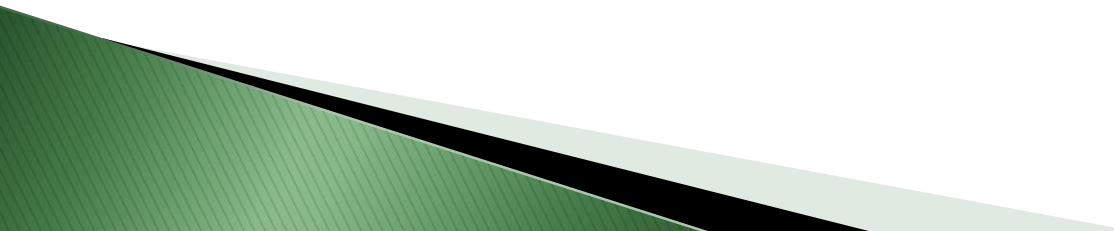
Taking ownership

'The balance in the relationship between us is tilting slightly as well because where I was prepared to be guided, going back to assignment one where you are at the beginning stage, the actual balance itself is quite, it's more of an equal partnership in the discussions now.

…So I'm coming with more and more ideas and more and more thoughts and more about, you know, can we meet quickly to discuss this as this has come up as opposed to waiting 'til the next session when we will sit and discuss.'
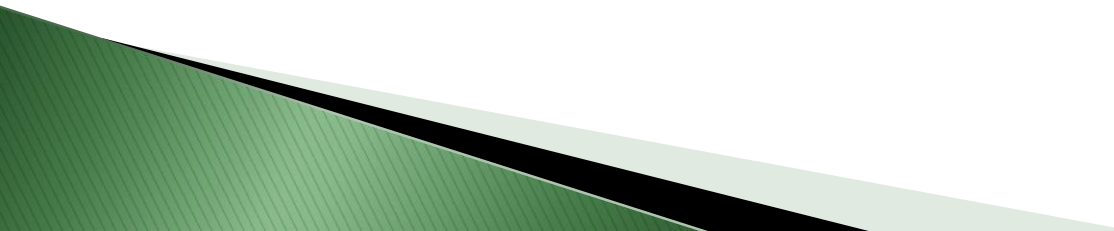
Becoming part of an Academic Community

'*A big learning experience for me has been that doing a doctorate is not a search for the truth but is really just taking part in a conversation. This doesn't stop me thinking that an 'expert' knows all of the answers and I suppose this is about confidence on my part... [But they don't have my experience] So how can they know everything? and what I have to offer is just as important as theirs, and I suppose that is also a learning experience in that when I sit with the 'learned' in a conference I feel confident in challenging them as I now see myself as a peer.*'

Please consider

- Have there been moments when you are aware that your thinking , your understanding, your discovery your expression and articulation (any of those) have reached a higher level –you've made a 'learning leap'???
- When was it?
- How did it feel?
- How did you know?

Threshold crossings – 'new ways of seeing' (students)

- Deeply understand the research process;
- See themselves as researcher / academic / contributing to professional field;
- See thesis as integrated whole;
- Own their research;
- Develop confidence with academic language & that of their discipline;
- Develop emotional resilience to deal with setbacks, solve problems, stuck places

Transformation

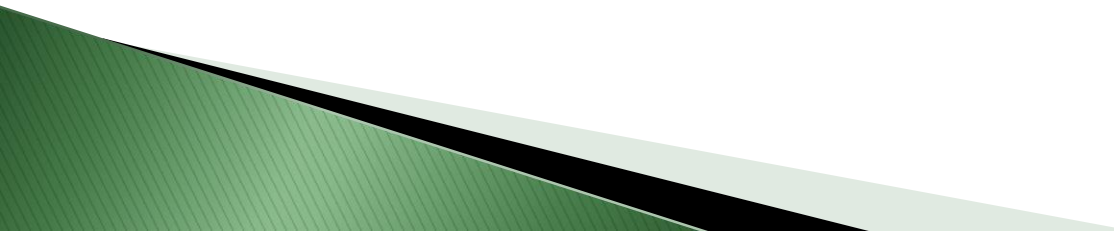▸ *'As time goes on and you start to, you almost develop this skin that is academic and this persona within yourself and as you… get the feedback that comes back and you're thinking about you're doing this the right way and so you begin to start, it's like watching a butterfly I suppose emerge from chrysalis pupa or pupa chrysalis and so on like that and so you begin to develop and I think as that goes on then you gain a certain amount of confidence.' (S3)*
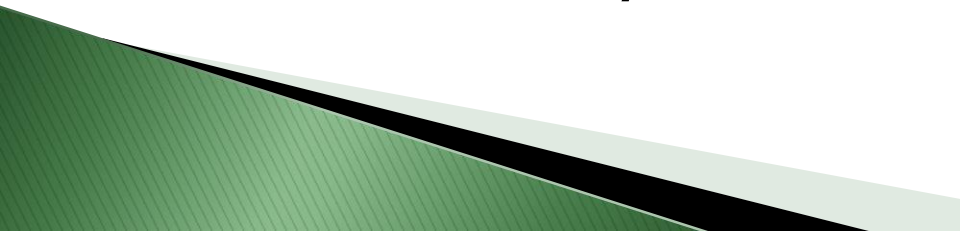
Integration

▸ *And then there are these wonderful moments where things just slot into place, but only after a long engagement and in depth knowledge …then suddenly all relates to each other, like my argument is revealing itself to me. Of course this isn't the case… I can't really explain what happens, but it does feel like the pieces of my puzzle physically move towards each other. (S10)*
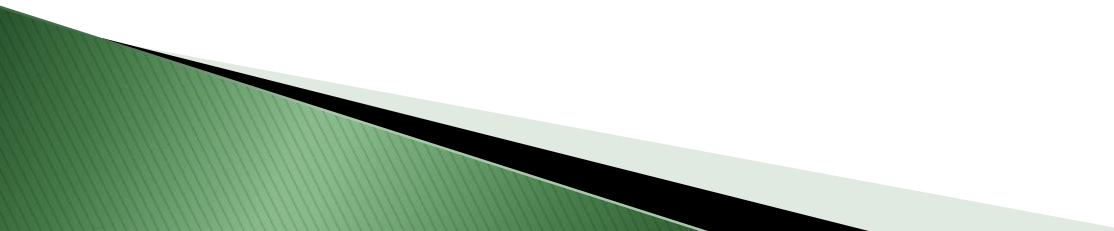
Identifying conceptual threshold crossings

- A stage when students develop project ownership
- New ideas
- Theoretical breakthrough-literature review
- Fieldwork breakthrough
- Breakthrough in accepting supervisors' guidance
- A gradual process
- A single process

Literature review

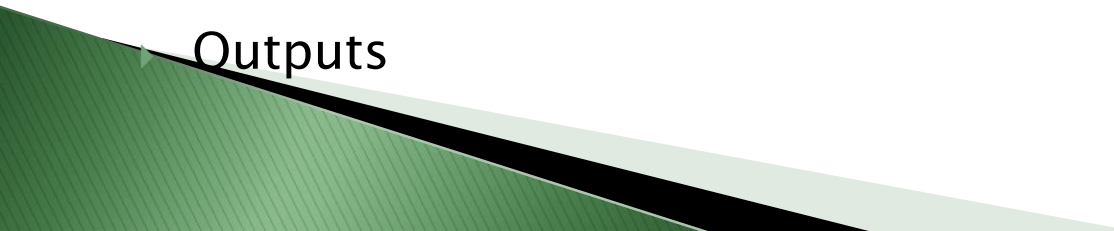- Our work with supervisors to support the development of the literature review/theoretical perspectives chapter – crucial moment for 'learning leap' conceptual threshold crossing
- Where students begin to see their own work in a dialogue with
- Theorists
- Others using similar/ same theories in critical practice
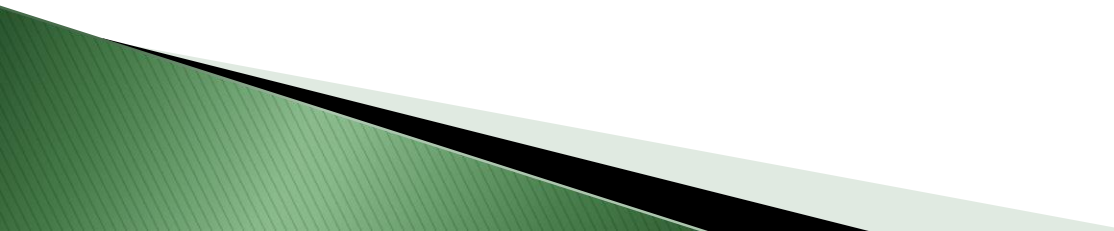- See how they contribute to the field

Stuck places

▸ *I think a couple of weeks ago I found that things have stopped. Partly because they actually had physically stopped and I haven't been able to get back to my PhD for a while but also mentally I found myself up against a brick wall and felt that, I think I was worried that I didn't have my conceptual framework or my analytical framework ready… I just felt that I was kind of stuck and it wasn't moving and it was all bitty, I'd done all these chunks of work but I couldn't really see how they fitted together and yeah so I reached quite a crisis point. (1st year student, Gender studies)*

- From stuck places – and the ontological elements on learning development
- We developed a project looking at supporting and enabling students to develop wellbeing and emotional resilience strategies

Troublesome Encounters

- Strategies to support the wellbeing of masters and doctoral students in education through their learning processes

- Higher Education Academy Escalate project 2010 – 2011

- Research Questions

- Research Design

- Rationale – Wellbeing in Higher Education

- Rationale – Troublesome Knowledge

- Examples

- Outputs

Research Questions

1. In what ways do encounters with troublesome knowledge impact on the wellbeing of masters' and doctoral students in Education?

2. What strategies can students employ to enhance their wellbeing, develop emotional resilience and enable a successful learning experience at this level?

3. What strategies can supervisors, programme leaders and others employ to enhance student wellbeing, develop emotional resilience and enable a successful learning experience (and achievement) at this level?
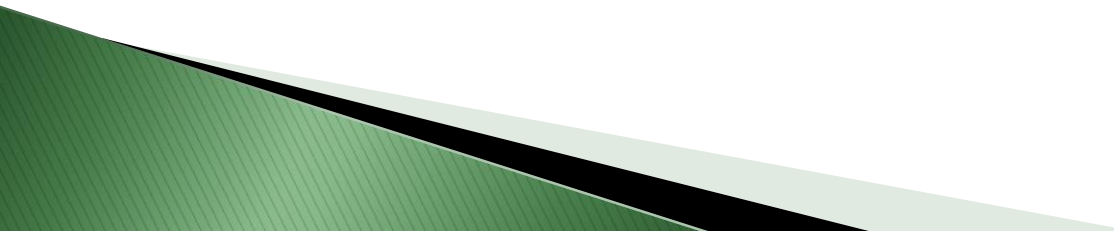
Research Design

- National survey of masters and doctoral students in Education (via vitae) – quantitative and qualitative data

- Focus groups (up to 8 participants) of masters / Doctoral students in each participating institution

- 8 interviews at each institution (24 in total)

- Ethical considerations – informed consent; balance of power; support; right to break / withdraw; comfort; confidentiality, anonymity, data protection; access to findings; collaborative; ownership; developmental; findings accessible; outputs useful; contribution

Wellbeing in Higher Education 1

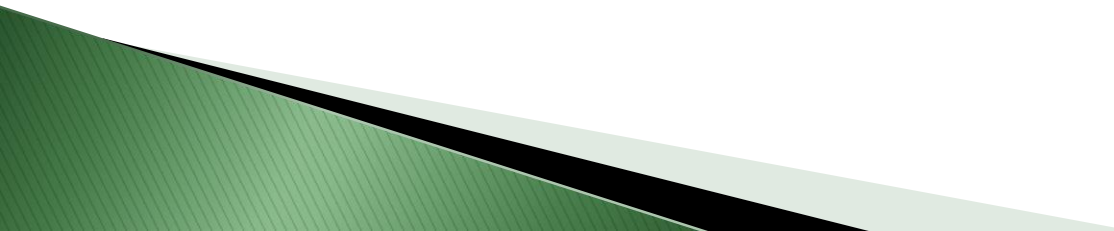- Concerns re mental health & wellbeing of students – Widening Participation; Disability Act; Duty of Care
- University can exacerbate stress related mental health problems – academic factors;
- teacher / student ratios; pastoral care; centralised services; student retention;
- Preventative ethos – Student Services;
- Wellbeing in the curriculum;
- Enabling, wellbeing friendly learning culture for all.

Wellbeing definitions
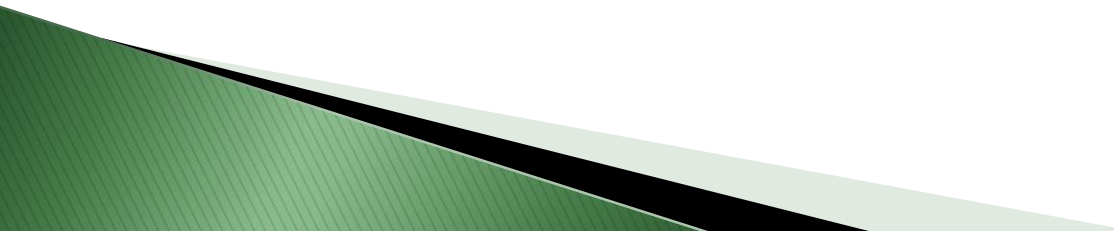
- Hedonic approach – 'happiness', the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain
- Eudaimonic approach – being all we can be, self-realisation, optimal functioning
- This last definition is helpful in terms of thinking about academic wellbeing – the ability to learn, engage, fulfill potential and contribute to learning community
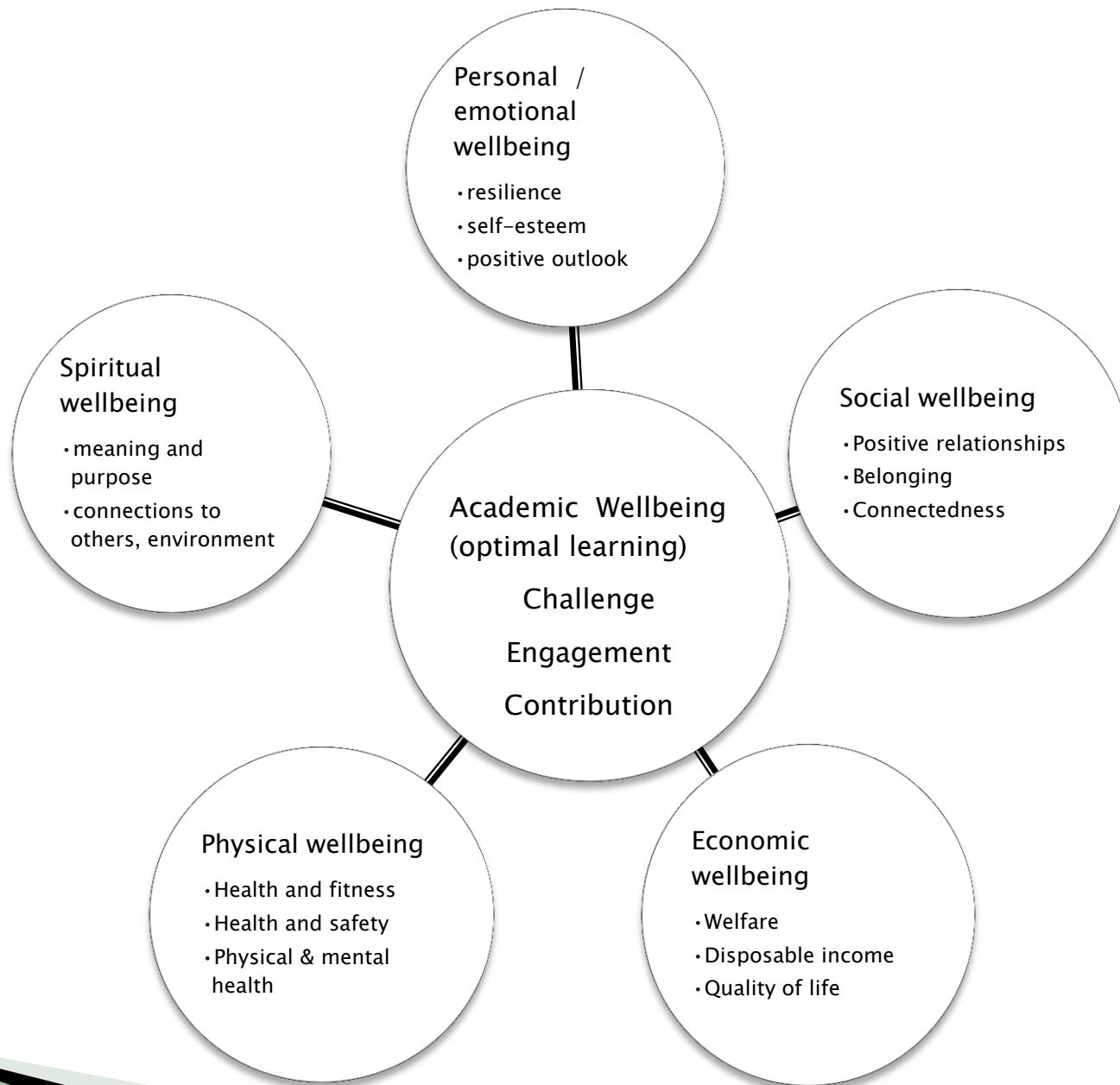
- –
- Our concern is ways in which we might understand the wellbeing issues , successful strategies and so help build emotional resilience among students to enable completion and success

- *…if you're not happy doing this, if you're not getting the fun out of it, if it becomes a drain on you, your emotions, your feelings, and your family time and everything else then it doesn't do you any favours.*

personal identity

- several reported an awareness that their decision might not be taken seriously by family and peers.
- This was more pronounced when students came from a non-academic background where the expectation was for them to earn a living rather than staying on at university
- general sense, however, of the doctorate being of an uncertain value in society and of academia as a career path not being seen as a solid profession.

identity

- *Early on I still felt as if I was a fraud; I still wasn't an academic that I was still just someone trying to fit into this world and this culture that I was peering through the window looking in at but wasn't really part of. I did feel like that at first but I think actually doing the EdD is helping me to get over that. I don't even worry about that anymore to be honest with you because I do feel that I'm doing research and I do feel the fact that I've got this far with the EdD does confirm that I'm doing important and rigorous research and that's really helped my confidence I suppose as well. So yeah I feel really positive and I'm really enjoying what I'm doing and I'm really enjoying the research and the writing.*

- For some students going into the doctorate, it can seem like a big leap from taught postgraduate or M-level research and the idea of doing a PhD can seem overwhelming. One student when asked what studying doctoral level meant to her stated that '*it means being clever if you see what I mean.*'

Getting there –

- Confidence in self (not 'shame')(Ingleton)
- Persistence and tenacity
- Focus
- *It means having the single mindedness, often the bloody mindedness in the face of all difficulties and they come from all sides, it comes at you from all sides. I mean you still have to live a life while earning no money and still being at school. It means putting up with an awful lot of disrespect from a lot of people because of what you do. It means being sort of discriminated against by people you never thought would discriminate against you because they just see you as a layabout, still a student, oh, god, when are you going to get a proper job, if I had a quid for every time I have heard that…*

- *...definitely a confidence thing. It becomes very enlarged when you do a PhD I think, because it's all down to you and I think I'm probably the sort of person who needed a bit of external validation and you're always used to being a good student. I still am but I really had to convince some people that I was and I wasn't used to that...*

- OVERWORK
- Respond to fear of failure by overworking – up to 16 hours per day. However, as this PhD student discovered, this proved to be counter-productive, affecting physical wellbeing through lack of sleep, exercise daylight and poor nutrition – became ill and is now careful to manage physical wellbeing. Taking breaks, doing something else and having time out to reflect were reported by students as helping to stimulate learning learning as well as contributing to safeguarding wellbeing.

- Becoming used to an academic culture where work is **challenged and critiqued** by colleague where and doctoral students need to **learn to justify and defend their decisions and work** can be unexpected at first and for some this can be an ongoing problem in cases where the student identifies closely with the work and therefore may tend to take the criticism personally:

- *They are making judgements about you and I think that's quite even though I say yea that's fine its ok I think sometimes I it does kind of you know I do feel upset by it as well I think because I just think oh I wish I just got to this time in my life when you know other people are looking at my work and dissecting it I've just had enough really you know there's a bit of that and there's another bit of me that's saying but you wanted to do this you have learnt a lot and it is valuable don't be defensive around feedback all those kind of head things you say to yourself but actually no its sometimes hard I do get anxious even when you know I'm going to send them a piece of data I get really anxious about it.*

- As students begin to develop this confidence as independent researchers, playing an active role in academic life, it is vital that they still feel they can turn to their supervisor(s) at any point for support, feedback and advice – a "safety net" which is there even when students are setting their own agenda:

- *In terms of what I want from them, what I want I s'pose to some extent is I still want sort of the cotton wool wrapped round me but at other times I want them to sort of cut the apron strings and say just go, go away and just do it but then you also know that the safety net is slowly, the holes in the safety net are getting bigger and bigger because you're being cut loose to go off and do your research. I s'pose the biggest single thing that I would want from them is encouragement, and positive criticism, would be the two things that I would want. If I write something and it is an absolute pile of mess, so be it but what I want to know is, well okay let's take it, how do we shape it, how do we actually rethink these ideas*
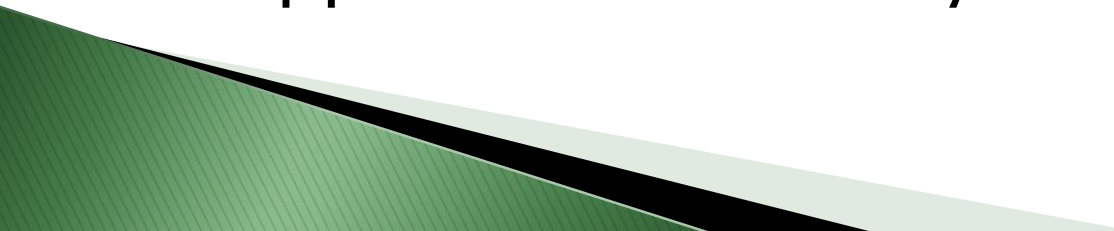
- fully engaged and committed to in-depth learning, independently applying scholarliness and rigour to their work:

- *Part of it has been horrible because there have been times when I've had to completely rip apart something that I thought was fantastic, turn it upside down, because certainly when I started this EdD I was looking at this as being, do the assignments, get the marks, get to the final stage yeah then I've got to defend it. Whereas I've now had to start thinking in terms of editorially, if I write something is it publishable, if it's not publishable why not.*

Pleased with the work and identity– later in the journey

- *I think it's the best decision I ever made through all the highs and the lows. I'm aware that, reasonably positive at the moment that the way the process has gone I'm expecting there to be a terrible dip and another high and then another dip and that's the way it is really and if I can survive it will be well worth it, and I intend to try.*

- **Advice from the ESCALATE Doctoral learning wellbeing project – Morris and Wisker 2010**

- Persistence and motivation
- Investment in self
- Identify whats good and build on it
- retain motivation to keep going and complete the doctorate.
- maintaining a good work / life / study balance
- allowing flexibility to deal with life issues as they arise;
- working and writing at a steady pace throughout to avoid last minute panics;
- realistic goal setting;
- careful planning;
- keeping in regular contact with supervisors and peers;
- remembering the huge investments of time, money and energy that have been made;
- focussing positively on achievements to date;
- remembering the original reasons for wanting to undertake a doctorate;
- visualising success and imagining future possibilities and opportunities which will open up once the doctorate is completed, for example teaching work and post-doctoral publications.

- The development of strategies, of emotional resilience, helps students to engage with and maintain their focus on their research
- To develop identities as successful postgraduate students and
- Avoid some of the negative issues of self worth and undermining the research projects lead to undermining of identity and self.
- Work/life study balance
- Supportive community – friends, family, peers

- *'A big learning experience for me has been that doing a doctorate is not a search for the truth but is really just taking part in a conversation. I suppose that is also a learning experience in that when I sit with the 'learned' in a conference I feel confident in challenging them as I now see myself as a peer.'* (from Wisker, Morris et. al, 2010)

I'd encourage anybody, doesn't matter where just go for it.