



Emergency Remote Learning to On-Campus Learning: Student Perceptions of Post Pandemic Academic Transition

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) compelled educational institutions across the globe to adopt crisis pedagogy of remote learning with breathtakingly fast transition from on-campus to off-campus learning. This was a temporary shift and now educational institutions are transitioning back from virtual to brick-and-mortar classroom. How this transition has affected students, in particular international students, are yet to be fully known. The present paper discusses student perceptions of one such academic transition. The study was conducted among seventy-two international students at two non-university higher education institute (NUHEI) in Sydney, Australia. The student perceptions of post pandemic learning experience resulted from transition to on-campus (face-to-face) teaching was assessed through an online (web-based) survey which mainly consists of open-ended questions. Survey data were collected through convenience sampling. The open-ended questions were analyzed using the technique of thematic analysis which reveals two themes - Challenge and Concern. The result of the present study shows that international students have experienced a variety of challenges such as financial, work-life balance and psychological & emotional. They are equally concerned about issues such as delays & long travel time, long study hours and health. These factors have impacted their learning and overall academic experience. The result of the present study also shows that students have mixed perception regarding the transition from fully online class to fully face-to-face class and some students supports the idea of blended learning. The outcome of this study would be helpful for academic advising and counselling.

Keywords: International student experience, learning experience, online-offline transition, post covid pedagogy, student transition

1. Introduction

Recently, world has witnessed an unprecedented situation because of the coronavirus disease (COVID 19) pandemic which affected every sphere of human life. The pandemic caused 6,985,278 deaths (World Health Organization, n.d.), caused economic downturn three times more than Global financial crisis of 2008 (Parker, 2020) and triggered the largest global

economic crisis in more than a century (The World Bank, 2022). According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) about 147 million children missed more than half of their in-person schooling because of the pandemic (Mizunoya et al., 2022). It is estimated that between February 2020 and March 2022, globally education was disturbed because of full and/or partial closure of educational institutes for about 41 weeks on average (Srivastava et al., 2022).

Globally, higher education institutes (HEIs) faced challenges in many fronts during the pandemic time. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report identified four major areas: (a) higher education administration and management, (b) teaching and learning, (c) research and (d) internationalization (UNESCO, 2022). The salient impacts were institution finance, especially where reliance is on international student's fees, digital divide, field work & collaboration and lock downs & international boarder closure (UNESCO, 2022). Globally, this led the conveyor belt of an educational process to almost a halt. To put the process on track, educational institutions across the globe were compelled to adopt crisis pedagogy of remote learning with breathtakingly fast transition from in campus, brick-and-mortar classroom to virtual, off-campus classroom (Khanal, 2021).

With COVID 19 abated and HEIs transitioning back from off campus learning to on campus learning; government, regulatory bodies and HEIs are making changes to the policies which were implemented during COVID 19 time as a temporary measures to ease out the impacts of the pandemic. For instance, Australian government re-introduce fortnightly working hour requirements for international students which was relaxed throughout the pandemic and temporarily removed in January 2022 (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2023). With the change in policy, international students studying at Australian HEIs no longer have liberty to do full online class and have restriction on work hours. With transition to on-campus learning, international students studying at Australian HEIs are no longer allowed to work for more than 40 hours fortnightly and no longer allowed to do fully online class. It is expected that this will have some financial implications on international students & they have to make several adjustments. Financial stress is more likely to disrupt the lives of international students as they will have limited work rights (Wilson et al., 2023).

The transition from fully online to face-to-face learning has created new challenges for international students (Zhao & Xue, 2023). How international students are coping with the challenges and how they perceived this transition is not fully known. There is still much to learn about international student experience of this academic transition. Many studies dealings with domestic and international student experience of academic transition during COVID 19 from on-campus learning to off-campus learning has been published. On the other hand, to the best of the authors' knowledge, studies on international students' experience of academic transition from off-campus to on-campus learning is very limited and that related to international student studying at Australian non university higher education institute (NUHEI) is scant. This is the impetus behind the present study which primarily explored students' perceptions of academic transition from off-campus to on-campus learning and aimed at fulfilling the research gap on understanding international students experience and perceptions of academic transition from off-campus to on-campus learning.

2. Methodology

To understand international students' perception of the academic transition from off-campus to on-campus learning, this study adopted qualitative methodology with inductive approach

supported by interpretivism philosophy. Survey strategy was employed to collect data. Data were collected approximately in two weeks period during first and second week of August 2023.

2.1 Participants

Seventy-two international students from seven different countries took part in the survey. Most of the students were studying postgraduate course at the time of the survey which was conducted at two NUHEIs in Sydney, Australia. It was assumed that each participant would be honest in recording their response and the participants were the representative of the learner's population who were enrolled in various courses at Australian NUHEIs.

2.2 Instruments for data collection

Survey data were collected through web-based survey using convenience sampling. For the present study convenience sampling was selected based on the factors such as ease of access, geographical proximity and existing contact within the target population. The web-based online questionnaires are considered suitable to minimize the condition for social desirable bias as it allows the respondents to answer the questions anonymously without any social pressure (Pattanaphanchai, 2019). In addition, web-based survey is cost effective, time efficient, less prone to data error than other mode of survey such as telephone or mailed questionnaire which largely requires manual data entry and allows fast data collection and analysis. During the designing phase of online survey, guidelines as described in Tanner (2018) and Regmi et al. (2016) were adopted.

The survey consisted of 19 questions designed under two specific sections to solicit information on demographics and experience. The survey questions were presented in a sequential page. This design allows participants to focus on one specific section before moving to the another section. This strategy would help in preventing sequential multitasking which is generally reported in self-administered web survey disturbing the response process and affecting the data quality when respondent gets distracted while switching over different browser (Baier & Fuchs, 2020). For each of the participant, the order of the questionnaire was random. This was done to minimize the chances of response bias.

2.3 Survey administration

The survey was administered online in Microsoft Teams platform and data were collected through convenience sampling between August 6 and August 18, 2023. To collect the data, present authors visited two NUHEIs in Sydney area. Initially, students were briefed about the content of the survey, purpose of the survey, who were conducting the survey, the estimated time required to complete the survey and whom to be contacted for any further questions. This briefing is in line with the code of ethics and practices established by American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). These information are particularly needed so that the prospective participants can make informed choices about whether or not to consent to participate in the survey. This allowed present authors to address ethical issues such as persuasion and pressure concerning online survey. After the initial briefing, participants were provided the QR code to access Informed Consent page (first page of the survey). While administering the survey other ethical issues such as privacy, confidentiality, data management and right to withdraw or omission of items were ensured through the proper setting of the online survey administration tool. In addition, each of the participants were asked to read and give consent (electronically) to take part in the survey through Informed Consent which was set as the first page of the survey. Survey was designed in a such a way that participants can only access the survey questions if they agreed to participate. The similar strategy of setting first

page of the online survey as information page, with participants required to provide consent before accessing the survey questions has been recommended by Mohan (2014) .

2.4 Data analysis

Survey data were stored in Microsoft Teams database which offers reliable and convenient data management and ensure the integrity of the collected survey data. In a recent study, suitability of the similar platform for online survey administration has been reported by Khanal (2021). In the present study, both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were employed. For quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics was employed whereas qualitative data were analysed using the techniques of thematic analysis as described in Braun & Clarke (2006), which involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and producing the summary. To achieve the objective of analysing students experience and perceptions of academic transition, thematic analysis was considered suitable as thematic analysis is particularly useful when analysing human experiences, perceptions and factors underpinning human attitudes and actions (Saunders et al., 2019).

3. Results and Discussion

The survey data were grouped into two sections as demographic survey and experiential survey and analysis were carried out. Demographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and experiential data were analyzed using thematic analysis (also refer to Section 2.4). The results of those analyses are presented in the subsequent sections.

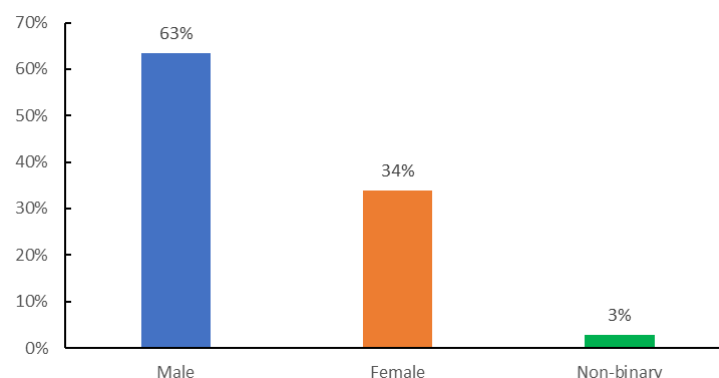
3.1. Demographic Survey

To describe the characteristics of international students taking part in the survey, four demographic variables were identified. The variables identified were gender, age, country of origin and education.

3.1.1. Gender

Figure 1 shows the gender of international students who took part in the survey. As shown in the Figure 1, majority of the participants are male which is about 63% of the total participants. The second largest gender that took part in the survey is female students which is about 34% of total participants followed by 3% non-binary students.

Figure 1: Participant's gender



The results also indicate that female participants are less willing to participate in research study such as online survey than the male participants. This observation, however, does not

corroborate with the recent research (for example, Wu et al., 2022) which reported low response rate for male participants than the female participants in online survey. This difference could have been resulted from the context under which male and female participants were making their decision and value action in online environment. This needs further investigation.

3.1.2. Age

In the survey, international students were asked to identify the age group they belong to, and the result of that response is presented in Figure 2. The process of identifying oneself to a particular age group or age categorization can inform and provide a meaningful social, psychology and biological identity which is fundamental to how we define and see ourselves and how we deal with stimuli from the world around us more effectively (Swift et al., 2018).

In this study, three age groups are identified. The age ranging from 18-24 years is identified as first age group, age ranging from 25-35 years is identified as second age group and age ranging from 35- 44 years is identified as third age group. Students belonging to the first age group are defined as young students, those belonging to the second age group are defined as middle-aged students and those belonging to the third age group are defined as mature students.

Figure 2: Participant's age

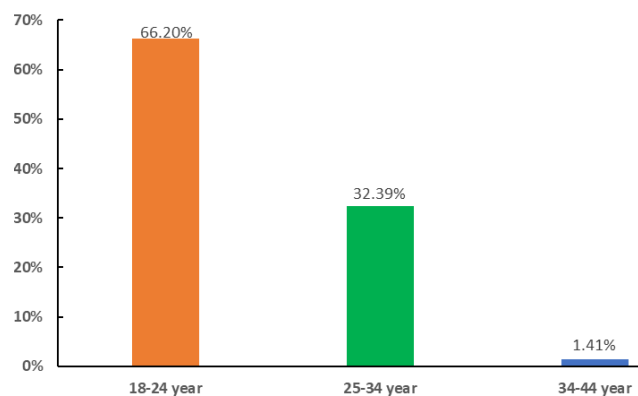
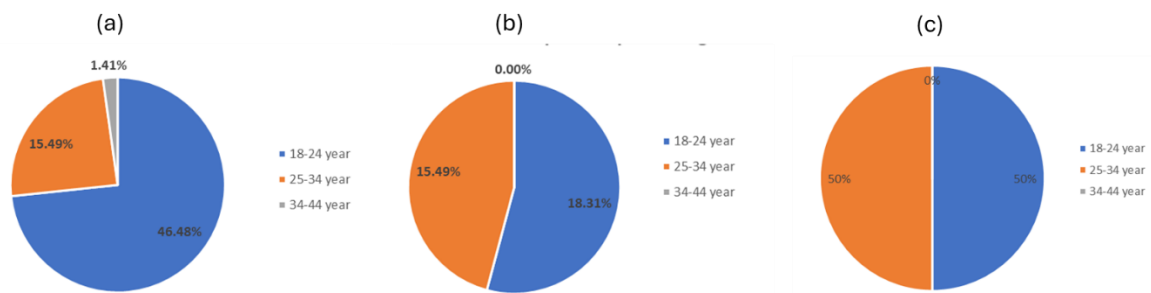


Figure 2 results show that 66.20% of students are young students, 32.39% are middle-aged students and 1.41% are mature students. To further understand these age groups, gender-wise compositions are plotted. Figure 3 presents the result of gender-wise composition. It is seen in Figure 3 that all mature students are male students and large proportion of young students are male whereas half of the non-binary students are young students, and another half are middle-aged students. Proportion of young female students are about 18.3% and that of middle-aged students are about 15.5%. These results clearly shows that large number of students who participated in the survey were young male student whereas the number of mature male students who took part in the survey was the least among all age group and gender.

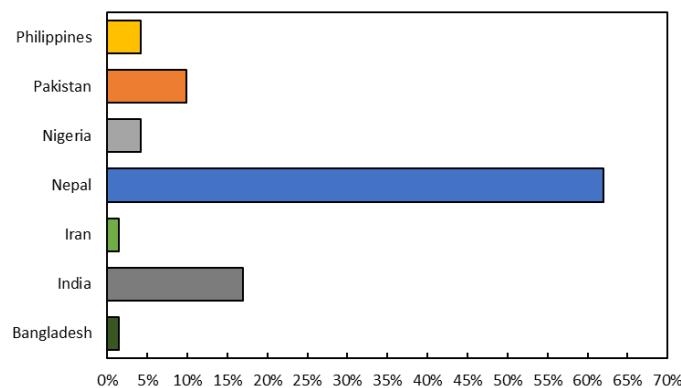
Figure 3: Proportion of participants as per the age group. (a) male, (b) female, (c) non-binary



3.1.3. Country of origin

Figure 4 shows the country-wise distribution of international students who took part in the survey. These students represent seven countries and are from four different geographical locations: East Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and West Africa. In total 90% students are from South Asia of which 62% are from Nepal, 17% from India, 10% from Pakistan and 1% from Bangladesh. About 4% students are from East Asia (Philippines) and West Africa (Nigeria) whereas 1% students are from West Asia (Iran). This result suggests that South Asia is the major international market for HEIs in NSW, Australia. According to Australian Government, Department of Education, the number of international students studying in NSW for the January-September 2023 period was 288,547 of which Nepal has second largest share (16%) of international students after the China (25% share) and India has third largest share (12%) of international students Education (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023). This trend is reflected in Figure 4 which shows that Nepal has largest share of international students followed by India. The figure also shows the diversity of international students currently studying at HEIs in NSW (Sydney area), Australia.

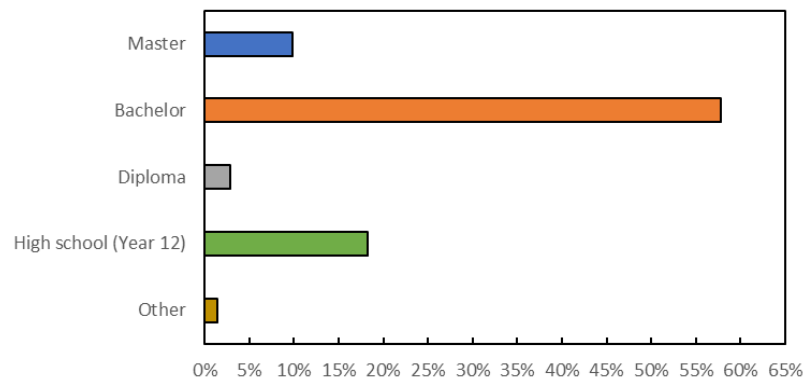
Figure 4: Participant's country of origin



3.1.4. Education

In the survey, international students were asked to provide the name of the highest educational qualification they possess, and the result of their response is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Participant's highest qualification



It is evident from the Figure 5 that about 60% of the respondent have bachelor's degree as their highest educational qualification at the time of the survey followed by 18% students with high school certificate, 10% with master's degree, 3% with diploma and 1% with other qualification. This result when viewed in conjunction with the result of Figure 2, it becomes clear that most of the young students who took part in the survey are currently pursuing master degree course at Australian HEIs in NSW and some middle-aged students are doing second master degree course. It is interesting to note that some portions of young students are coming straight to Australia to do their bachelor degree after completing high school certificate examination in their country of origin. These students generally belong to the lower age range of young student age group (18-24 years). It is to be noted that about 10% of students chose not to provide any response to this question.

3.2. Experiential Survey

To understand international students' perceptions, experience, and opinions about the academic transition from off-campus learning to on-campus learning, twelve open ended questions were asked. Students' responses were analyzed using the technique of thematic analysis (also refer to Section 2.4). Thematic analysis reveals two main themes: Challenge and Concern, which are summarized and presented in the subsequent sections along with other relevant results.

3.2.1. Challenge

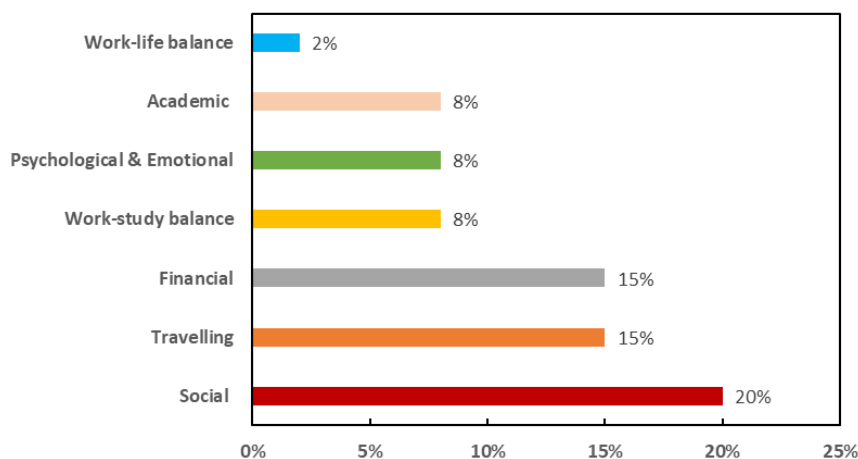
For this study, we define "Challenge" as the situation that is difficult, new or complex that tests someone's ability (mental, physical, emotional), skills and resources and is contextual. This definition of challenge agrees with the definition suggested by Horikoshi (2023) and we also consider challenge from the context of well-being and optimal functioning (Horikoshi, 2023). Our thematic analysis reveals social, financial, travelling, academic, work-study balance, psychological & emotional and work-life balance as seven types of challenges that international students faced during the transition period from off-campus to on-campus learning. Result of those analysis are summarized in Figure 6.

It is evident from Figure 6 that out of seven identified types, social challenge is considered as the main challenge by 20% students, and it includes challenges such as language barrier, social interaction, making friends and networking. These challenges are common across international students whose first language is not English. During COVID 19, strict measures were in place which prevented social interaction and people gathering. With on-campus learning in effect, social interaction, people gathering, study circle, etc. are now a common part of the campus life. International students considered this a major challenge. For almost three

years they have not interacted openly with other students and whatever interactions they had were mainly in their native language with their close circle of friends.

“Travelling” and “Financial” challenges are both considered as second major challenge by 15% students. One of the biggest travelling challenges identified was reaching the campus on time as many students wrote that they live far from campus which is in central business district (CBD) in Sydney. This aspect of campus travelling was almost none while doing online class for about three years. For three years students have planned their study differently and now they need to re-plan and re-organize, which they see as a major challenge. This plan will have an impact on their finances and one of the financial challenges reported was related to travelling costs. Travelling by public transportation in Sydney is expensive. In addition, re-introduction of fortnightly working hour requirements for international students which was relaxed throughout the pandemic and temporarily removed in January 2022 by the Australian Government has created financial challenge for many international students as they must adjust their working hours which will ultimately affect their monthly income.

Figure 6: Challenges faced by international student during academic transition



Work-study balance and psychological & emotional challenges are identified as third major challenge by 8% of the international students. With on-campus learning and reduction in fortnightly working hours, international students are facing challenges in managing their finance as well as study, thus finding difficulty in striking the balance between work and study. Some student reported that they adjusted working hours to night shift which ultimately affected their study as they are not able to attend the morning classes and reach campus on time.

To cope up with financial challenge, some students reported that they work late night and during weekends and thus finding it quite a challenge to maintain healthy work-life balance. About 2% student considered work-life balance as a major challenge. Those students with small children are facing additional financial pressure of childcare cost. During online class, they did not have to make any such childcare arrangement. Now they are financially and emotionally challenged. This challenge is causing stress among this demographic. Stress can lead to psychological distress and lower level of functioning (Oduwaye et al., 2023) and ultimately affect them in their well-being. Some students reported having anxiety attack and emotional breakdown. About 8% students also considered academic as one of the major challenges. Some students are finding it a challenge in adjusting to the new normal of on-campus learning, change in assessment regime and associated pedagogy.

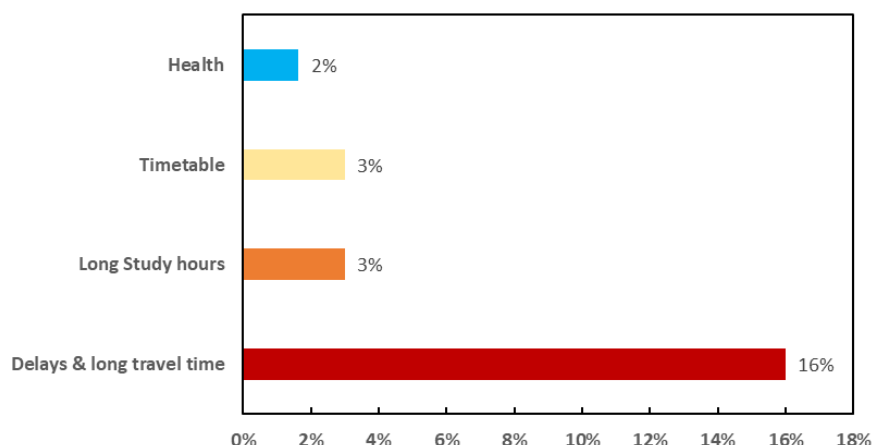
It is noteworthy that when these challenges are not addressed, international students may experience low life satisfaction and lose interest in their academic pursuits (Oduwaye et al., 2023). This may lead to high dropout rates. Therefore, understanding these challenges and planning to address them can improve international students' education, experience, and attrition.

3.2.2. Concern

For the purpose of this study we define “Concern” as a worried or nervous feeling about something, or something that makes once feel worried (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Four major concerns are revealed through the thematic analysis. The revealed concerns are delays & long travel time, long study hours, timetable, and health.

It is evident from the Figure 7 that 16% of international students are concerned about delays & long travel time. Students are concerned that they need to travel long distances to reach the campus, which is in CBD and in addition, they are particularly concerned about train delays. Recently, Sydneysiders have witnessed a series of train delays because of various reasons such as technical, management, workers, etc. This has been clearly reflected in the survey result.

Figure 7: Concern of international student during academic transition



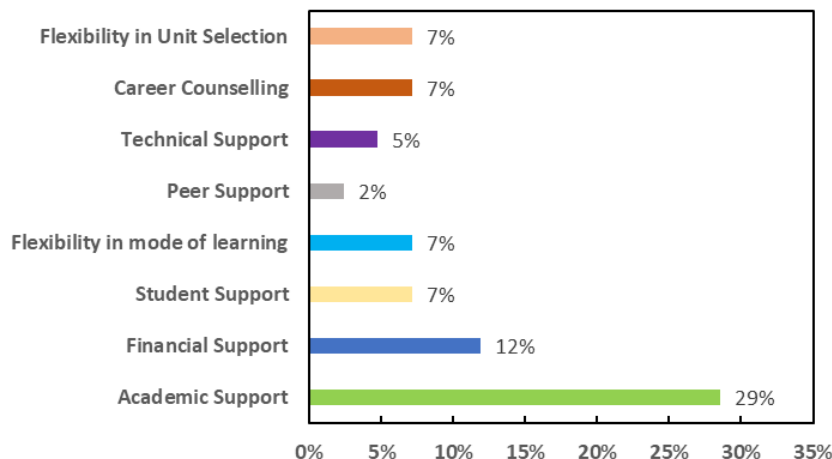
About 3% of students are concerned about long study hours and timetable. During off-campus learning students were taking class from their home at their convenience and comfort but with return to on-campus learning students need to attain timetabled class supervised by lecturer and/or tutor. Losing the comfort of home and convenience is one of the concern students expressed. Students also expressed concern about lack of flexibility in choosing class. For some students, this has direct implication on their work schedule, and they are concerned that they need to adjust their working hours, which will ultimately have negative impacts on their finances. It is interesting to know that about 2% of students are still concerned about their health as they will be exposed to a group of people while travelling in public transportation and attending class for longer hours (average class time is 3 hours for most of the NUHEIs). They are concerned that this may expose them to corona virus, and they may get COVID for second or third times.

3.2.3. Support

In the survey we also asked students about the kind of support they need most during academic transition. Our analysis reveals that students would like to see eight types of support

being provided to them during the period of academic transition. The eight supports identified are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Major support needed by international student during academic transition

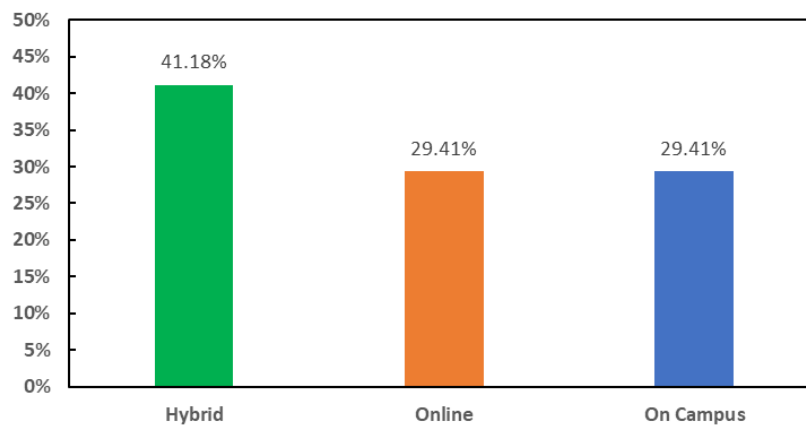


About 29% of students expressed that they need academic support which includes varieties of course related support such as support in assessment and examination writing, pedagogy, class & assessment management (no penalty for late submission and late attendance), course related communication, class/tutorial activities and LMS (Learning Management System) management. Likewise, 12% students expressed that they need financial support, especially when it comes to paying course fees. They would like to see some sort of flexibility in due date for paying course fees as they are facing financial challenges with limited working hours.

Flexibility in unit selection, flexibility in mode of learning, student support and career counselling are the four areas for each of which 7% students expressed that they need support during the period of academic transition from online to offline teaching. Flexibility in unit selection is the support students said they need to address the concern they expressed about timetable (also refer to Section 3.2.2). Similarly, students expressed that they need support regarding the flexibility in mode of learning to address the concern they expressed about long study hours (also refer to Section 3.2.2). In terms of student support, students expressed that besides fees related communication they need regular communication from student services regarding the academic progress, course enrolment, visa status and other student related matters. In the similar manner, in terms of career counselling support, students expressed that they need advice and support on job readiness, internship and job placement. Likewise, in terms of technical support, students expressed that they need support in setting devices and course related software, access to on-campus laptop services and 24x7 assistance. About 2% students expressed their views that they would like to see campus helping them to set a peer support group.

3.2.4. Preference

We also asked students about their preferred post pandemic mode of learning. Their responses are shown in Figure 9, which further helps to understand the nature of support they expressed in Section 3.2.3 regarding flexibility in mode of learning.

Figure 9: *International student's preferred mode of learning post pandemic*

For most students (41.18%) the preferred post pandemic mode of learning is hybrid. Whereas for 29.14% students, the preferred mode of learning is online. On the other hand, 29.14% of students preferred on campus learning. This result suggests that HEIs need a sustainable learning model that can mostly satisfy the international students need in post pandemic era and hybrid learning would be one of such models which incorporate features of both online and on campus learning and provides student autonomy.

4. Conclusion

The present work discussed the outcome of a survey study that was conducted primarily to understand perceptions, experience, and opinions of international students regarding post pandemic academic transition from off-campus learning to on-campus learning. The study was conducted among seventy-two international students at two non-university higher education institutes in NSW (Sydney area), Australia. Data were collected through self-completed questionnaires consisting of demographic and experiential questions. Demographic questions were analysed using descriptive statistics whereas experiential questions consisting of open-ended questions were analysed using the technique of thematic analysis. The result of demographic questions revealed that the participants are from seven countries representing four geographical locations and majority of the participants are young male students in the age group ranging from 18 to 24 years and currently pursuing master degree course. Thematic analysis revealed two main themes as challenge and concern that international students faced and experienced during the period of academic transition.

Further analysis revealed that international students faced seven types of challenges (Social, Financial, Travelling, Work-study balance, Psychological & Emotional, Academic and Work-life balance), they are worried about four types of concern (Delays & long travel time, Long Study hours, Timetable and Health), they seek eight types of support (Academic support, Financial support, Student support, Flexibility in mode of learning, Peer support, Technical support, Career Counselling and Flexibility in unit selection) and they preferred three types of learning (Hybrid Learning, Online Learning, On Campus Learning). Most of these results corroborate with the findings of a recent research by Zhao & Xue (2023). Interestingly, not all participants in the present study opposed the transition as reported in Zhao & Xue (2023). In the present study, about 29.41% student favoured on-campus learning. This difference could have been resulted from the difference in context under which these studies were carried out. Therefore, the effect of context on students' perception of academic transition would be further investigated.

The present study offers some implications for practice and research. Challenges, concerns and support identified in this study are worth considering while developing intervention and support program for international students. Addressing these challenges, NUHEIs can improve international students' experience, engagement, education, and attrition. Research has shown that if challenges and concerns are not addressed properly, international students may experience low life satisfaction, lose interest in their academic pursuits (Oduwaye et al., 2023) leading to high dropout rates.

This study shows low rate of survey response from female participants as compared to male participants. The gender influence on willingness to take part in online survey is not fully understood. This would be the area for further investigation. Now a days most of the surveys are online and web based. Therefore, the outcome of such investigation would help researchers to better design online surveys.

It is noteworthy that the present study is focused in Sydney area and conducted with small sample size, which was considered as a representative sample of large international students' population. Similar study with large sample size at different location is suggested to further understand international students' perceptions of academic transition from virtual classroom to brick-and-mortar classroom as experience, perceptions, challenges, and concerns are contextual. Therefore, the extension of the present work would be helpful to further understand international students' perception of academic transition from off-campus to on-campus learning in a much wider perspective.

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