

Study-Work-Life Balance: Challenges of International Students in Post Pandemic World

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ABSTRACT: Internationalization of education has become a global market, and international students are at the core of this market. Higher education institutions have turned their attention towards the well-being of international students and developing policies and support systems to address international students' challenges. In this context, the present study explores study-work-life balance (SWLB) challenges of international students studying at Australian non-university higher education institute (NUHEI). The present study was conducted with 128 international students studying at three different NUHEIs in Sydney, Australia. The student perceptions of post pandemic work-life balance were assessed through an online (web-based) survey mainly consisting of an open-ended question. Survey data were collected through purposive sampling. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques were used in the study. The socio-demographic profile of international students participating in the survey was obtained through quantitative analysis whereas qualitative analysis was performed for open ended questions using the technique of thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged from the analysis namely, family care & challenges, cost of living & allowable work hours and mental health & support. Analysis also revealed that international students are facing the challenge of managing educational commitments in the post-pandemic world. This research highlights a gap in the current support mechanisms with students facing increased financial hardships and mental health issues and advocates the need to establish a support system for students' overall wellbeing as challenges faced by international students are unique. The outcome of this study would be helpful to academic leaders in developing policy regarding student support, intervention and counselling.

KEYWORDS: academic support, higher education, international student, post pandemic study, work life balance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID) pandemic has significantly altered the landscape of global education and affected people from every walk of life. Education sector is one of the most effected sectors (Burki, 2020). Globally, conveyor belt of educational process was brought to halt for almost two years and institutions across the globe were compelled to adopt crisis pedagogy of remote learning (Khanal, 2021). From mid-2023, educational institutions started slow transition from crisis pedagogy to normal pedagogy of in-class teaching in a brick-and-mortar classroom. Now with pandemic fully abated and education institutions fully transitioned from online class to on-campus class, the effect of transition on students' life is being studied from different perspectives.

In a recent study, Wang and Lie (2024) reported multifaceted impacts of COVID-19 on international students such as financial, social and cultural challenges. They also reported increased mental health risk among international students. In a similar study, Zhao and Xue (2023) reported the four types of challenges (policy, infrastructure, academic and financial) faced by international students, particularly, Chinese students in British university in post pandemic era. Similarly, Arif and Whatley (2023) discussed about the challenges and opportunities in international higher education post pandemic landscape and highlighted that the post pandemic challenges faced by international students are yet to be fully known. Such conclusion on post pandemic challenges faced by international students has also been reported by Navitas (Chew et al., 2024), a largest non-university higher education provider in Australia. International students work-life balance is one of such challenges. Recently, Khanal and Royhan (2023) studied international students' perceptions of post pandemic academic transition and reported challenges and concerns of international students studying at Australian non university higher education institutes (NUHEIs). Work-life balance (WLB) was identified as one of the major challenges faced by international students.

In literature, work- life balance has been defined as a state where an individual manages real or potential conflicts between different demands on his/her time and energy in a way that satisfies his/her needs for well-being and self-fulfilment (Abbott, 2013). Originally, WLB emerged as a factor affecting employee health and well-being and more concerned with organizations. The idea latter slipped into other domain including academia. The increase research interest on the effect of WLB in academic lifestyle of college students, including international students has been reported by Mahony and Jeske (2019). As students juggles to maintain

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balance between the demands of their study, work and private/social life, the definition of WLB as originally put forward for organization has been expanded in literature to include academic and educational experiences of students and the new term Study-Work-Life Balance (SWLB) has been emerged (e.g., Martinez et al., 2013; Ong & Ramia, 2009). This definition not only captures the academic experience of students but also their part time work experience while trying to balance these demands to meet social or familial responsibilities. In the present study, we adopt this expanded definition of SWLB.

The present study draws on the work by Khanal and Royhan (2023) and investigates international students' study-work-life balance challenges and related issues in post pandemic era. Post pandemic challenges faced by international students have received less research attention and to the best of the author's knowledge, studies on post pandemic SWLB challenges of international students' studying at Australian NUHEIs is almost to none. This is the impetus behind the present study which adds new perspective to the literature on international higher education in the post pandemic era.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in the present study to understand international students' perception of post pandemic study-work-life balance was qualitative methodology with inductive approach which was further supported by interpretivism philosophy. Survey strategy was employed to collect data.

2.1 Participants

One hundred and twenty-eight international students enrolled in various undergraduate and postgraduate courses at three NUHEIs in Sydney took part in the survey. It is believed that each participant was honest in recording their responses and are true representative of the international students' population enrolled in various courses at Australian NUHEIs.

2.2 Instruments for data collection

In the present study, survey questionnaires were used as an instrument for data collection. As this study is focused on exploring post pandemic study-work-life balance issues and challenges faced by international students, it is important that students recruited for the study must be an adult international students who have witnessed or experienced study-work-life balance challenges and issues during pandemic period as an international student in Australia. Therefore, this study adopted purposive sampling strategy. Research data were collected over a two-month period in 2024 from October to November using web-based online questionnaires. 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). Similar approach in data collection has recently been reported by Khanal and Royhan (2023). There are various advantages associated with such data collection approach. The web-based survey is cost effective, time efficient (as it allows fast data collection), less prone to data error than other mode of survey such as telephone or mailed questionnaire which largely requires manual data entry. The procedure adopted by Khanal (2021) in designing online survey was adopted in this study. It is to note that before data collection commenced, ethics approval was obtained from APIC Research Ethics Committee.

2.3 Survey administration

The survey was administered online in Microsoft Teams platform. Before administering the survey, students at each of the three NUHEI were briefed about the survey, its content and purpose. This briefing is in line with the code of ethics and practices established by American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). These informations are particularly needed so that the participants can make informed choices about whether to consent to participate in the survey. This briefing also allowed researchers to address one of the important ethical issues concerning online survey- persuasion and pressure. The information shared during briefing was also made available online on Research Information & Informed Consent page. Survey 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 questions if they agreed to participate. The similar strategy of setting first page of the online survey as Information and Consent page with participants required to provide consent electronically before accessing the survey questions has been recommended by Mohan (2014) and adopted by other researcher (e.g., Khanal, 2020, 2021). In addition, other ethical issues such as privacy, confidentiality, right to withdraw or omission of items and data management were ensured through the proper setting of the online survey administration tool.

The survey consisted of self completed twenty questions of open and closed ended types. These questions were designed under two specific sections (demographic questions and experiential questions) and presented in a sequential manner. This design allows participants to focus on one specific section before moving to the another section. It was assumed that 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 sections (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.

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).

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2.4 Data analysis

In the present study, both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were employed. Demographic data were analysed quantitatively, 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 post pandemic study-work-life balance, thematic analysis is deemed suitable as thematic analysis is particularly useful when analysing human experiences, perceptions and factors underpinning human attitudes and actions (Saunders et al., 2023).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey data were grouped into two sections containing demographic questions and experiential questions. Quantitative analysis was performed on demographic data whereas qualitative thematic analysis was performed on qualitative experiential data. The results of those analysis are presented in the subsequent sections.

3.1. Socio-demographic profile

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

3.1.1. Gender

Figure 1 shows the gender representation of international students who took part in the survey. As shown in the Figure 1, majority of the participants are male which makes about 64% of the total participants. This number is almost double the number of female participants which is about 36%.

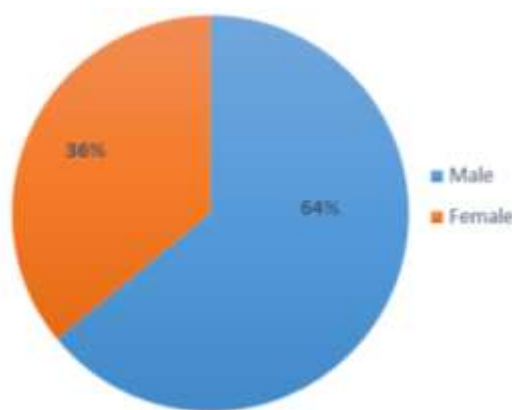


Figure 1: Participant's gender

This result indicates that the female participants are less willing to participate in research study such as online survey than the male participants. This result corroborates with the result of a recent study (Khanal & Royhan, 2023) where the number of male participants were almost double the number of female participants taking part in online survey. It is still not clear why female participants are less interested to take part in such online survey and how they value action in online environment. This needs further investigation.

3.1.2. Generational Cohort

In this study, three generational cohorts of international students have been identified based on their age group. This classification is based on Australian Bureau of Statistics definition of generational cohort (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Generation Z (commonly known as Gen Z) is defined by the age group 10-24 years, Millennials (also known as Gen Y) is defined by the age group 25-39 years and Generation X is defined by the age group 40-54 years. 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. This process of identifying oneself with a particular age group or age categorization can inform and provide a meaningful social, psychological 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 as cited in Khanal & Royhan, 2023).

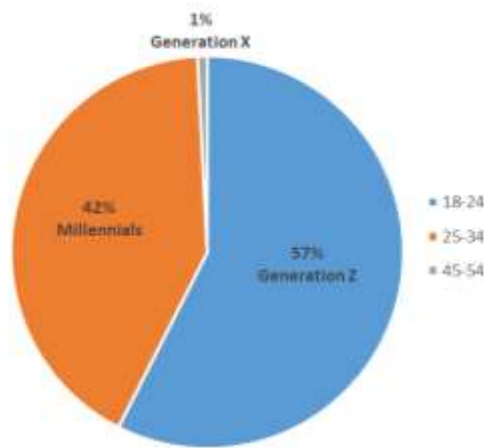


Figure 2: International Student Generational Cohort

It is evident from Figure 2 that 57% participants are Gen Z students, 42% are Millennials students and 1% are Gen Y students. To further understand the make-up of these cohorts, gender-wise compositions are plotted. Figure 3 presents gender-wise composition of the survey cohorts.

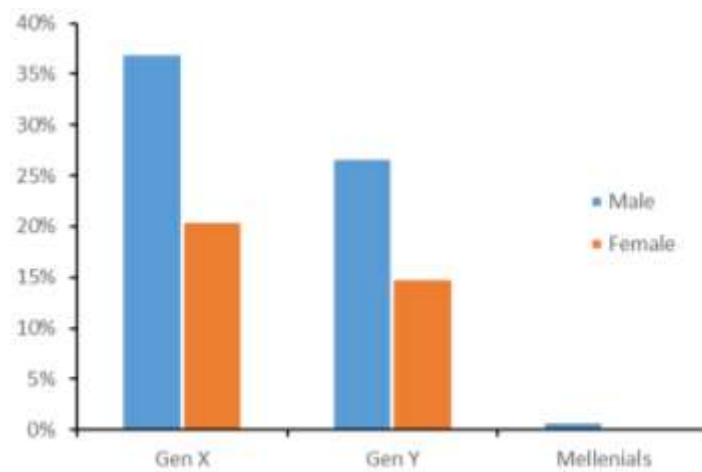


Figure 3: Generational cohort gender proportion

It is seen in Figure 3 that more than 35% of the participants are male from Gen Z cohort whereas 20% of the participants are female. Similarly, more than 25% of the participants are male from Gen Y cohort whereas 15% are the female. Only 1% of the participants are male from Millennials cohort and none are female. This result further explains the result of Figure 2 that many students who participated in the survey are male students and that from Gen Z have large participation rate whereas the number of Millennials male student who took part in the survey is the least among all generational cohort. It is to note that Gen Z are the first digitally native generation as they have grown up with technology, the internet, smartphones and are thus comfortable with technology. This could be the reason that large number of Gen Z students, including female Gen Z participated in the survey as compared to other female students from another generational cohort.

3.1.3. Diversity

Figure 4 shows the diversity of international students in terms of nationality, ethnicity and geographical location who took part in the survey. As seen in Figure 4, these students represent thirteen countries, six ethnic groups and are from six different geographical locations. It is evident from Figure 4a and 4b that more than 90% students are from Southern Asia of which 40% are from India, 36% from Nepal, 10% from Pakistan, 4% from Bangladesh and 1% from Sri Lanka. About 6% students are from Southern Eastern Asia of which 2% are from Philippines and Vietnam and 1% are from Malaysia and Indonesia. Similarly, 1% are from Northern America, Eastern Africa and Central America. In these regions, students are from Canada, Kenya and Mexico respectively. This result suggests that South Asia is the major international market for HEIs in NSW, Australia. Similar results have been recently reported by Khanal & Royhan (2023).

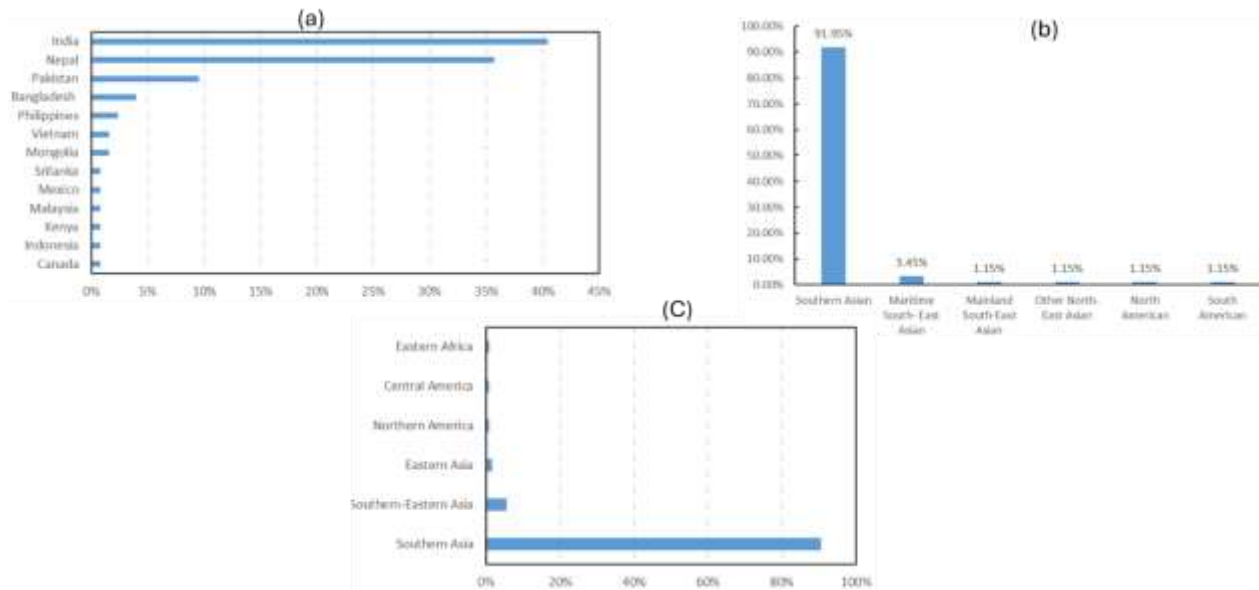


Figure 4: Diversity of international students: (a) nationality, (b) ethnicity, (c) geographical location

According to Australian Government, Department of Education data (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024), the number of international students studying in NSW for the January-September 2024 period was 824,951 of which students from India accounts for 16% of the total number followed by Nepal, which accounts for 7.75% of total number of international students. Thus, India and Nepal are the second and third largest exporters of international students in Australia. This trend is also reflected in Figure 4a. It is interesting to note that though China is the largest exporters of the international student (181,887 in January-September 2024) in Australia, none of the students participated in the survey were from China and their presence in NUHEIs in Sydney is almost none. This result suggests that Chinese students are not enrolling in any of the courses in these institutions. In addition, NUHEIs may not be the place of choice for higher education in Australia for Chinese students. This aspect of higher education needs attention from the research community and the NUHEIs.

Figure 4c shows geographical regions that the participants represent and majority of them are from Southern Asia. The second largest population of international students who participated in the survey were from Southern-Eastern Asia followed by Eastern Asia. It is interesting to note that students from the geographical region as far as America (northern and central) and Eastern Africa are taking part in the survey. This result suggests that Australia is becoming a hub for international students from all parts of the world and not from a specific geographical region such as Southern Asia.

3.1.4. Education

Figure 5 shows the result of survey on the question “What is your highest educational qualification?” and it is evident from the result that majority of the participants (65%) possess bachelor degree at the time of the survey followed by master degree which was reported by 18% students. In a similar manner, 11% of students reported to have a diploma, 3% reported to have a high school certificate. About 2% of students reported that they have a graduate diploma and similar percentage of students reported to have intermediate degree. It is interesting to note that 1% of students reported that they have a PhD degree.

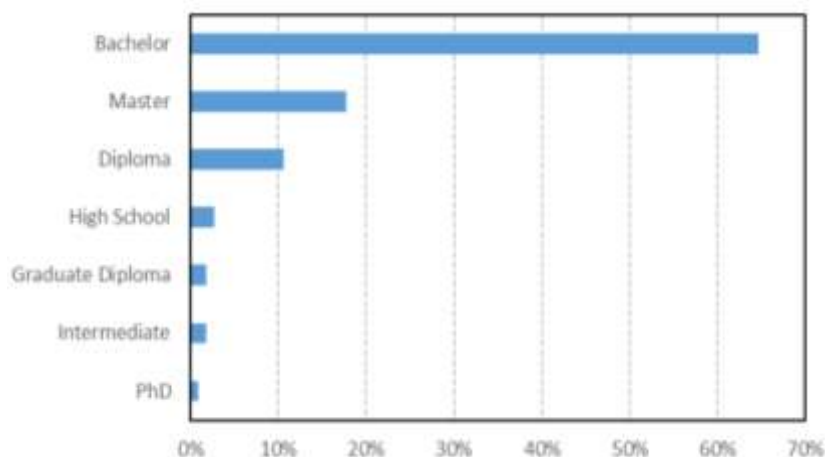


Figure 5: Participant's highest qualification

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It can be conjectured from the result of Figure 5 that majority of the international students who took part in the survey are currently pursuing graduate level courses such as master or graduate diploma at one of the three NUHEIs in Sydney. This result, when analyzed in connection with the result of Figure 2, it can be stated that majority of these students are Gen Z students followed by Gen Y.

3.2. Study-work-life balance

To understand international students' perceptions, experience, and opinions about study-work-life balance challenges and related issues, 11 open ended questions were asked with 1 being yes/no type. Students' responses to the open-ended question were analyzed using the technique of thematic analysis (also refer to Section 2.4). Results of thematic analysis along with other relevant quantitative results are summarized and presented in the subsequent sections.

3.2.1. Family care & challenges

To understand SWLB and related challenges, it is utmost important to ascertain whether international students have any family responsibility of those who are currently with them in Australia. Therefore, we asked international student whether they have any family with them in Australia to take care while they are a full-time international student. The result is presented in Figure 6.

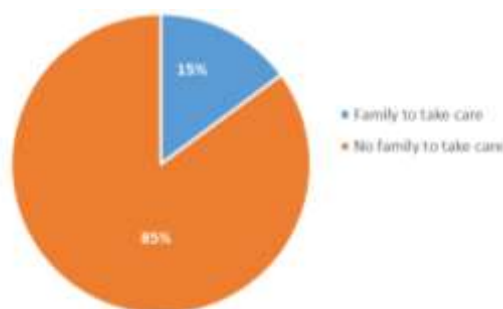


Figure 6: Participants and their family care

It is evident from Figure 6 that only a small portion (15%) of international students have the responsibility of taking care of their family while maintaining their full-time international student status. Majority (85%) of the international students do not have any family to take care in Australia. For this study, we consider those international students who do not have any family to take care in Australia as a single person. It is a well-known fact that the challenges faced by a family person are different than those of a single person as challenges are contextual and affect the well-being and optimal functioning of a person (Horikoshi, 2023). For this study, we adopted the definition of challenge as reported in Khanal and Royhan (2023) as the situation that is difficult, new or complex that tests someone's ability (mental, physical, emotional), skills and resources and is contextual.

We further asked 15% of those international students who reported to have family to take care about the challenges they are primarily facing while taking care of their family. Their responses are summarized in Figure 7 under eight different themes.

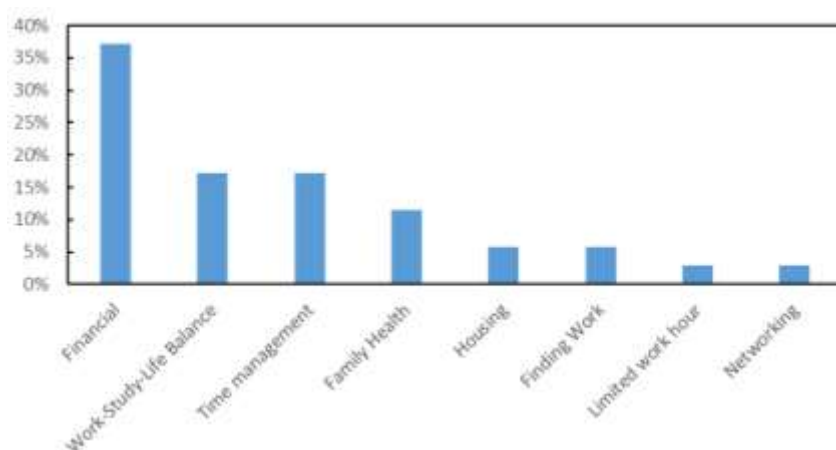


Figure 7: Challenges faced by the participants who have family to take care

As evident from Figure 7 that "Financial" challenge was reported as one of the main challenges. During COVID time, international students were doing online classes and not travelling to the campus and therefore, they were able to save their travel cost. Travelling by public transport in Sydney is costly. For instance, the average cost of public transport in the first quarter of year 2023 in Sydney was AUD50/week (The Guardian, 2025). It is noteworthy that Australia is among the countries in the world with

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most expensive public transport (The Guardian, 2025). The travelling cost increases when students travel with their family. In addition to travelling cost, inflation is also causing a financial burden on international students.

About 17% students reported “Work-study-life balance” (SWLB is the equivalent term we adopt in this study) and “Time management” as second major challenge. Following this is the “Family health” where 11% of students reported it as a challenge. One of the biggest factors contributing to this challenge is the health insurance that an international student needs to provide for family in addition to his/her own. About 6% students reported “Housing” and “Finding job” as another major challenge.

After the pandemic, Australian Government re-introduce fortnightly working hour requirements for international students which was relaxed throughout the pandemic and temporarily removed in January 2022. The effect of this policy change has been reflected in the survey where 3% student reported “Limited work hour” as one of the major challenges they are facing in post pandemic period. As international students are struggling with the “Time management” they reported that they are facing difficulty in managing their time between study, work and family and have little or no time for social and professional networking. This is reflected in survey as 3% students reported having challenge with “Networking”. In post pandemic learning, with the reduction in fortnightly working hours, some students reported that they adjusted their working hours to night shift and weekends. The arrangement in one hand gives some financial relief to the international students but in other hand affects their family life and study. As students are working late night, they are not able to attend morning classes and reach campus on time and maintain their focus on study. In overall, international students are finding difficulty in striking the right balance between work, study and personal life. This imbalance would result in stress. Oduwaye et al. (2023) reported that stress can lead to psychological distress and lower level of functioning and ultimately affect a person well-being and if not addressed one may experience low life satisfaction and lose interest in their academic pursuits. This will ultimately affect the attrition. Acknowledging, understanding and proper planning to address such challenges by education institutions can help international students to manage their SWLB challenges which ultimately enhance their learning experience and improves their attrition. Thus, a win-win situation for international students and higher education institutions can be achieved.

3.2.2. Cost of living and allowable working hours

To further understand international students’ views on SWLB we asked them their opinion about the cost of living and allowable working hours for international students. Their opinions are summarized and presented in Figure 8.

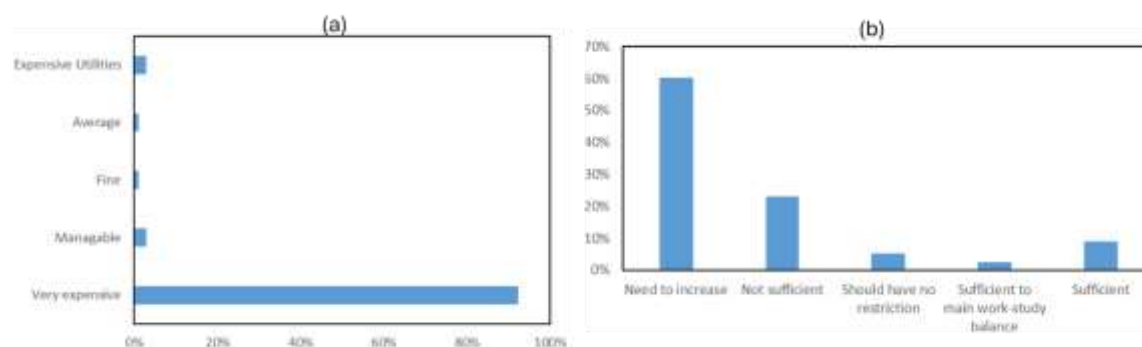


Figure 8: International student views on: (a) cost of living, (b) allowable working hours

It is evident from Figure 8(a) that the majority (92%) of the respondents opined that the cost of living in Sydney is very expensive. This result is as expected because Sydney is one of the most expensive cities in the world and with inflation living in Sydney is becoming difficult. Surprisingly, 1% of students opined that the cost of living is fine for them, whereas for 3% of the students, the cost of living in Sydney is manageable. In other hand, 3% student opined that the cost of living is high because the price of utilities such as electricity, gas, internet, etc. are high. For about 1% of students the cost of living is average (not so expensive not so cheap). Results presented in Figure 8(a) clearly show a difference of opinion about the cost of living in Sydney among international students.

We also asked international students about their views on allowable working hours for international students. Their views are summarized under five headings and presented in Figure 8(b). About 60% of students expressed their views that allowable working hours for international students need to be increased. At present, maintaining full time student status, international students in Australia are allowed to work 48 hours fortnightly. About 23% of students expressed their views that allowable working hours are not sufficient for international students, whereas 9% of students expressed their views that it is sufficient. In a similar manner, 5% of students expressed their views that there should be no work hours restriction for international students, and they should be allowed to work for unlimited hours as in pandemic time. On the other hand, 3% of students expressed their views that the allowable 48 hours fortnightly is sufficient for international students to maintain a work-study balance. This result also shows a difference of opinion about the allowable working hours among international students.

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3.2.3. Mental health and support

As part of healthy SWLB, factors contributing to anxiety and depression are essential to understand. Work-life balance is one of the important antecedent of students' mental health as it is the predictor of anxiety and depression (Sprung & Rogers, 2021). Therefore, we ask international students to express their views about factors leading to anxiety and depression in international students. Their views are presented as a summary in Figure 8.

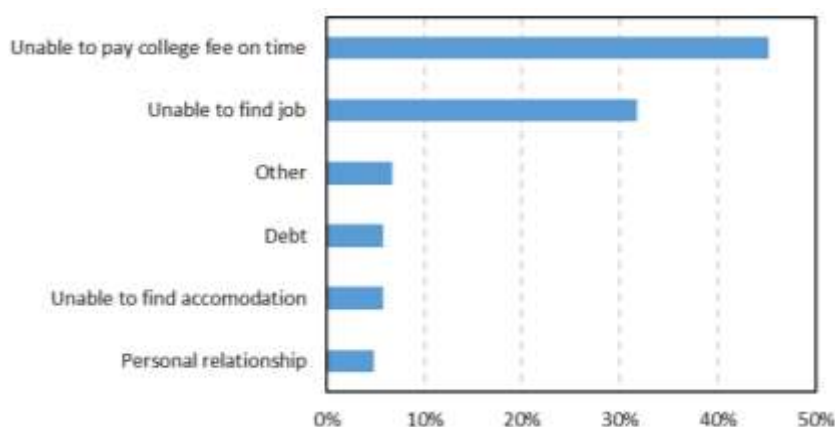


Figure 6: Reasons leading to depression and anxiety in international students

About 45% international students expressed their views that when student cannot pay their college fee on time, this leads to depression and anxiety. Following this, 32% expressed their views that not finding job is the second most reason leading to depression and anxiety in international students. In a similar manner, 6% students expressed their views that depression and anxiety is also caused by debt and not finding the accommodation. On the other hand, 5% expressed their views that personal relationship can lead to anxiety and depression, whereas 7% expressed their views that other reasons such as delays in visa processing, difficulty in finding jobs after graduation, unclear pathways for permanent residency can lead to anxiety and depression.

In the survey, participants also expressed their views regarding the support system and mechanism implemented by their respective academic institution to help them overcome the SWLB challenges and issue. In terms of student support, students expressed that student support provided by their institution is more focused on academic side and not sufficient to address the challenges of post pandemic learning. One of the major concerns expressed by the participant is the lack of mental health and student wellbeing support. Students expressed their views that there need to be a culturally sensitive and accessible resources for mental health including personalized counselling services addressing the mental and psychological issues encountered by the international students. Student also expressed their views that there needs to be on-campus work opportunities for the students.

4. CONCLUSION

This work draws on a recent study by Khanal and Royhan (2023) on post pandemic academic transition of international student and explored the SWLB challenges and issues of international students. This study employed survey design where responses were collected from a sample of 128 international students from three non-university higher education institutes in Sydney, Australia. Data were collected through purposive sampling using self-completed online questionnaires. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were employed to analyse the survey data. Open-ended questions were analysed using the technique of thematic analysis. The result of the present study revealed that the participants are from thirteen countries representing six geographical locations, six ethnic groups and three generational cohort. Most of the participants belongs to Generation Z. SWLB and its related challenges and issues were discussed under three main themes, namely, family care & challenges, cost of living & allowable work hour and mental health & support. Thematic analysis further revealed that the financial challenge was the main challenge faced by international students who have the responsibility of family care in Australia. Majority of international student opined that the cost of living as very expensive in Sydney and many opined that allowable working hour for international student need to be increased and expressed their views that one of the main reasons leading to anxiety and depression among international student is their inability to pay college fee on time. They also voiced for mental health and wellbeing support for international students.

The present study offers some implications for practice and research. Challenges, issues and support identified in this study are worth considering while developing intervention and support program for international students. Challenges identified in this study are multifaceted and need to be addressed with holistic approach. By addressing these challenges and ensuring that international students attain their personal and academic goals, HEIs can improve international students' overall academic experience and the attrition. If challenges and issues 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.

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As in previous research (Khanal & Royhan, 2023), this study also shows low rate of survey response from female participants as compared to male participants. As online and web-based surveys are becoming more convenient and popular in research, the effect of gender difference in response rate and gender influence on willingness to take part in survey using technology is worth investigating. The outcome would help researchers to better design online surveys.

It is noteworthy that the present study was conducted on one geographical region and included a sample of 128 international students from three NUHEIs in Sydney. Though the sample size considered in this study was small as compared to the number of international students studying at NUHEIs, we considered this as a representative sample based on the sampling strategy adopted in this study. As perceptions, challenges and issues are contextual, it is suggested that a similar study should be conducted with large international student sample from various higher education institutes operating at different geographical region in Australia. Such study will further enhance our understanding of international students' perceptions of post pandemic SWLB challenges and issues.

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