



FACULTY OF CULTURE & SOCIETY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

MASTER OF EDUCATION

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND
WELLBEING STRATEGIES IN NEW ZEALAND HIGHER EDUCATION:
A CASE STUDY OF AUT UNIVERSITY IN THE POST-COVID ERA
(2020-2026)**

Submitted By

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July 2026

Attestation of Authorship

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Abstract

This research emphasises analysing the international student demographic shift and wellbeing strategies in "AUT" for the higher education perspective in New Zealand. This research presented a background that illustrates that the number of international students significantly increased at AUT in the post-COVID period. Multiple recovery strategies were implemented by the University to attract international students towards higher study. These strategies included, the university implementing mental health assistance, student advisory services, social integration activities and financial support to ensure the wellbeing of the international students. The literature review emphatically revealed that universities experienced uneven recovery of student mobility, higher diversification and admissions from different countries and support services and wellbeing. The university also experienced a major transition in the international students' demography in terms of country of origin, enrolment number and level of study. However, mental health counselling services, flexible learning models and peer support and social integration programmes remain required to strengthen the wellbeing approach. "*Berry's Acculturation Theory*" helped in understanding the cultural parameters and norms international students adopt. "*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory*" helped in understanding the diverse needs of the international students.

This study incorporated AUT published data from "*Student Services and Administration (SSA)*" and annual reports to perform documentation analysis supported by thematic analysis.

The finding revealed that AUT experienced a significant transition in the population trends of the international students between 2020 and 2026. Uplifting travel restrictions and visa flexibility created the opportunity for international students from China, Japan, India, Vietnam and other countries to enrol for higher study. The university experienced growth in Asian students below the age of 25 years. International students enrolled in graduate, postgraduate and diploma programmes; with postgraduate degree programmes having the highest enrolment numbers. Findings also revealed that AUT also implements the "pastoral care of tertiary and international learner" framework, "Taha Wairua" initiative and "Tautoko" initiative. These remain quite effective to make the wellbeing strategies more versatile and result oriented. Additionally, the campus clinic and immunisation advisory centre provided phone counselling and vaccination, which addressed the health safety needs of the international students.

Finally, this research concluded that the demographic transition of the international students significantly enhanced international enrolment numbers and international student diversity at AUT. An effective wellbeing strategy remained the centre of attraction, which provided significant health facilities to international students subsequently eradicating any safety concerns that they may have had while pursuing higher education studies at AUT.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely influenced the educational sector, including universities and institutes worldwide. In New Zealand's educational sector, the pandemic completely disrupted international student mobility, changed the enrolment pattern and affected the student wellbeing. Universities and educational institutions experienced intense pressure to offer effective wellbeing support due to the rise in the number of international students after the pandemic in New Zealand. Change in the policies and admission strategies reshaped demographics and wellbeing of international students in the Post-Covid era. Being an international student from India, I was deeply interested in investigating the demographic shifts among international students and analysing the wellbeing strategies considering the case of “*Auckland University of Technology (AUT)*” in a post-pandemic period.

Research Background

International education is identified as the key driver that strengthens the economy and the higher education system in New Zealand. The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented disruption, which negatively influenced the education system. The pandemic forced the government to implement “*Disaster and Emergency Management Policy*” and keep the international borders closed, impose travel restrictions and instruct people to keep social isolation (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2020). This led to negative implications as the university experienced a substantial decline in the enrolment of international students between 2020 and 2022. In the post-COVID period, the situation became normal, which facilitated the government to reopen the border (Connell, 2025). This created the opportunity for the international students to visit New Zealand for higher studies. As a result, universities in New Zealand experienced a strong recovery in international education in the post-pandemic period.

As per the New Zealand government report on tertiary education, approximately 83,425 international students were enrolled in 2024 with a 21% rise compared to 2023 (Education New Zealand, 2025). In 2025, New Zealand also experienced that 92,580 international students enrolled for higher education, which is 11% higher compared to 2024 and 80% pre-covered peak (Education New Zealand, 2026). This also influenced AUT positively by increasing the number

of international students in the post-Covid era period. According to AUT University's annual report 2024, the university experienced 16% growth in the number of international students in the period between 2023 and 2024 (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2024). This indicates growth of international students was higher during post pandemic compared to pandemic and pre-pandemic levels. This demonstrates that the post-COVID period brought flexibility which facilitated the university to recover from the international enrolment. The New Zealand government also eased immigration regulations and restarted visa services for international students for higher studies. AUT also offers online Visa services, which provide access to international students regarding the education service for programme enrolment (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2023).

The recovery in the international student enrolment also brought demographic changes, including increasing enrolment in postgraduate programmes and higher admission from emerging source countries. During the post-pandemic period, this transition also shaped the expectations of international students regarding academic and wellbeing support. In response, AUT gave a major priority to the students' wellbeing and offered comprehensive support services for international students. These supportive approaches inevitably consisted of mental health assistance and counselling, peer support programmes and student advisory services (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2025). Additionally, the financial support and social integration activities can also be taken into consideration as a responsive approach in the post-pandemic period. These result-oriented approaches addressed the significant challenges, including academic stress, financial stress and mental health concerns among the international students. This research proactively analysed the severity components of demographic transition and wellbeing strategies implemented by AUT for international students during the post-pandemic period to strengthen the scope for future research.

Research Positioning

Previous research explored either the demographic transition or wellbeing strategies implemented for international students. These studies did not explicitly explore the problems faced by the universities to manage demographic shift and wellbeing strategies. This created the scope to conduct this research to address the areas which remain unexplored so far.

The first area is a drastic change in the international student demographics under the influence of the post-COVID recovery period. During this period, New Zealand experienced variation in students' age group, country of origins, study levels and enrolment pattern (Ibeka, 2025). This made it difficult for the AUT to understand the admission pattern and respond to the large, diverse student population in higher studies. It was quite challenging for the educational institutes to analyse the potential numbers of applications for international students and adjust the visa policies accordingly during post pandemic. However, the second challenge is the increasing mental health imbalance and psychological wellbeing issues during the post-pandemic era. Students coming from different countries faced anxiety, pressure, isolation and emotional difficulties (Officer et al., 2022). At the initial phase, it was quite challenging for the international students to understand the new cultural environments. Limited opportunities for financial support, academic pressure and future uncertainty significantly intensified the effect of mental health and psychological imbalance.

The third challenge is existing difficulties in accomplishing the wellbeing support needs of the international students. After COVID-19, the university experienced a tremendous rise in the enrolment number of international students from different cultural backgrounds (Times of India, 2024). Educational institutes experienced the huge complexities while offering inclusive, accessible and culturally balanced wellbeing services due to the large student population. A major shortcoming has been while meeting the expectations of international students in terms of accomplishing the social, academic, emotional and personal needs. However, international students coming from different countries face major difficulties in adopting a new culture and educational environment in New Zealand. International students had to face major difficulties such as language diversity and weak social connections, which created complexity in strengthening relationships with domestic students (Soong & Mu, 2026). This led to the negative implications as the international student started feeling excluded, which affected them psychologically. These are certain problems which influenced the student's recovery strategies, student's mobility, student's diversification, enrolment pattern and wellbeing strategies during the post pandemic era. These are certain problems which remained unaddressed in the previous studies and created the necessity to conduct this research with diverse empirical evidence.

Research aim and objectives

Research Aim

The aim of this research is to analyse the “*demographic shift and wellbeing strategies*” for international students in the “*higher education sector in New Zealand*”. For this purpose, the research considered the case study of “*Auckland University of Technology (AUT)*” during the post-COVID-19 era (2020 - 2026) to conduct the empirical research.

Research Objectives

RO1: To explore the changes in the international student population trends in the COVID to post-COVID period (2020-2026) experienced by AUT University

RO2: To evaluate the demographic changes of international students (such as changes in country of origin, enrolment levels, age profile, and level of study) experienced by AUT University after the COVID-19 period

RO3: To examine the institutional wellbeing strategies as the responses of AUT in meeting the needs of international students following the post-COVID era

Research Significance

This research emphasises conducting empirical research to explore the “*demographic shift and wellbeing strategies*” implemented by the “*Auckland University of Technology*” during the post-pandemic period. The study discussed the demographic changes faced by international students while pursuing higher studies at AUT. This significantly helped to develop knowledge and evidence regarding major transitions in “*country of origin, enrolment levels, level of study and age profile*” of the global students. Considering future perspectives, this might be useful to conduct research to analyse the positive and negative aspects of student demographic transition in educational sectors and the country's economy in the future (Ibeka, 2025). In contrast, the study also examined the efficiency of AUT's wellbeing strategies, analysing the “*student engagement, adjustment and retention*”. This study might enable the researcher to analyse the constructive approach of the wellbeing strategies and deeply investigate student support outcomes for enhancing the global student engagement (Ren, Sotardi & Brown, 2025). This can also be helpful to explore the supportive approaches for strengthening the student adjustment and retention by meeting their needs under the influence of a post-pandemic period.

Research Scope

The research centralises the entire focus on examining the international students' demographic shift and AUT to implement wellbeing strategies in the higher education sector. Identifying the enrolment patterns, global student diversity and different cultural backgrounds explored the demographic changes in AUT in New Zealand (Omisakin & Kularatne, 2023). Additionally, the study uncovered the multidimensional wellbeing approaches of AUT through student engagement initiatives, mental health support and policies, counselling support and others for international students. This indicates that the research showed the dependability of the case study of a single university to explore the demographic changes and wellbeing strategies of international students rather than the domestic ones. This is the scope of the research where the researcher gave a major priority to deeply analyse the demographic trends, health and wellbeing issues and strategies of the global students considering the post Covid-19 period.

Research Outline

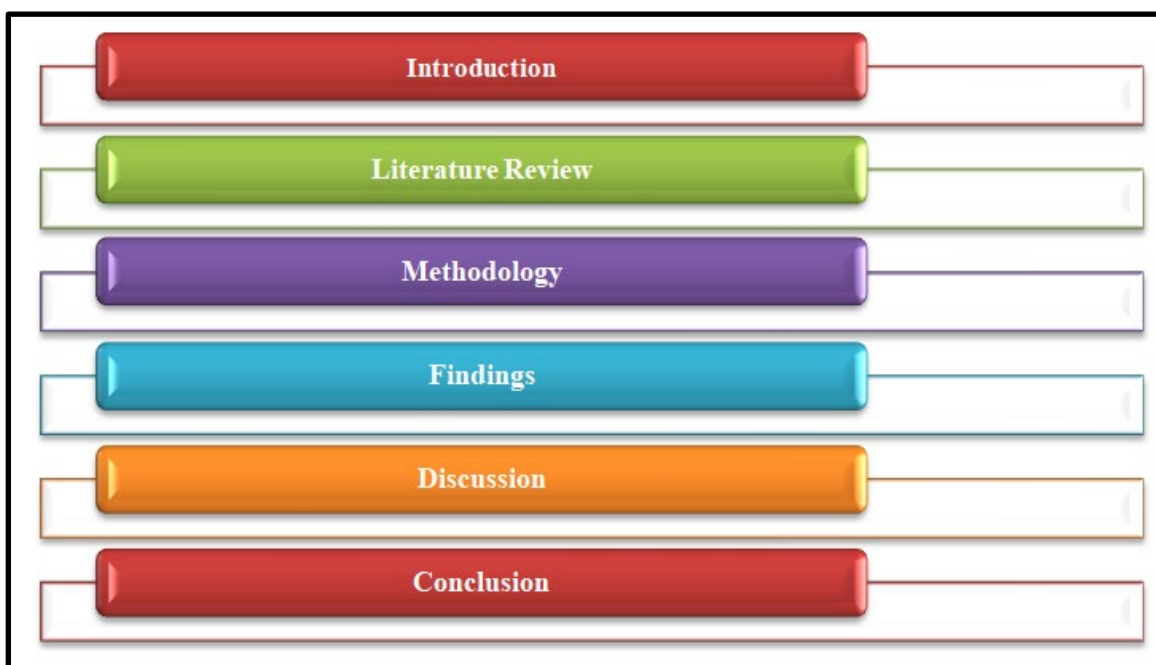


Figure 1.1: Research Outline

This research consisted of a stepwise approach by following the six chapters consistently. The research included “*Introduction*” as the first chapter, which introduced research topics by exploring “*aim, objective, research question, research background and problems*”. The second

chapter is "*Literature Review*", where the study presents literary contradictions incorporating the theoretical aspects. The study included "*Methodology*" as the third chapter, which evaluated different methods employed to commence this empirical research. This chapter discussed "*research philosophy, approach, design, data collection, analysis and others*". Finding is the fourth chapter where thematic analysis has been introduced to analyse the outcome of the research. "*Discussion*" is the fifth chapter where findings of the research have been compared with different studies and interpreted with literary evidence. The last chapter is "*Conclusion*", which summarises findings, assesses the link of research with the objective and provides recommendations for research improvement.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The literature highlights international student demographics and wellbeing strategies at universities in New Zealand and abroad. Internationalisation of higher education has become more prominent over the past two decades due to knowledge, economic competition and globalisation among universities. The number of international students has shifted globally to reflect the importance of cross-border education, both in economic and academic achievement. The recent shift to the global environment, mainly after COVID-19, has reshaped international students' priorities, flow and student experience. The COVID-19 era (2020-2026) and beyond has been marked as a transition from identifying international students' priority on economic contribution. For instance, countries like India and China continue to dominate in enrolment positions in the emerging market. Besides that, China and India remain the primary source countries for the international student's enrolment in New Zealand mainly in the post-Covid period. This literature review includes changes in international student populations, demographic behaviour, institutional and wellbeing strategies. The literature will include a conceptual foundation for understanding the link between demography and the wellbeing initiative. Apart from that, the study has analysed gaps in the existing literature.

The concept of demographic shifts and wellbeing strategies

Concept of demographic shift

Demographic shifts in higher education refer to changes in the characteristics, distribution and enrolment pattern of international student population in recent times. Weber and Van Mol (2023) found that students shifted to globalisation for international education depending on migration, economic conditions, and policy framework. Cairns and França (2022), noted that the COVID-19 pandemic is the critical turning point that changes the global students' mobility. The empirical evidence identified that New Zealand experienced a post-pandemic recovery in international student enrolment (Alwis, 2025). Zha and Wang (2025), argued on the other hand that India and China are the most dominant countries in recent years that have witnessed diversification. It is noted that more than a quarter of students in China shifted to the international universities that signals their demographic shift. Weber and Van Mol (2023)

claimed that visa policy, geopolitical tension and pandemic-related issues have created a new pattern of mobility.

The demographic changes are not only quantitative changes in the enrolment numbers but also changes in socioeconomic background, literacy and age. According to Ma et al., (2024), these demographic shifts are evidence of students' motivation for becoming more career oriented. The empirical evidence their study noted was that international students prioritise employability outcomes and institutional support. The study also found that the increase in mature students in postgraduate enrolment is the result of education focusing on skills-based and life-long learning.

Concept of wellbeing

Wellbeing strategies in higher education includes programme policies and practices that support the student's emotional, physical and mental health. Based on the view of Bersia et al., (2024), economic wellbeing is the most valid part for the international students for suitable living standards. International students understand their rights to work in selected areas and the rights of employees. On the contrary, Amoah and Mok, (2022) claimed that education is the most suitable factor for international students to achieve a good education outcome and access to support services. In this regard, they know the appropriate English language skills to undertake a planning study. This empirical study found that COVID-19 impacted international students' levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness due to social isolation. All the challenges faced by the students in the study contributed to their financial instability, travel, and limited access.

Dost, (2025) expressed that contemporary strategies in higher education are categorised into different areas such as community engagement, institutional support and social integration. Institutional academic support programmes, counselling service and financial assistance are part of the wellbeing of student needs. On the contrary, Amoah and Mok (2022) claimed that student wellbeing is of paramount concern in higher education in China. Student wellbeing impacts happiness and mental health that are closely tied with academic and learning success. However, the Jamshaid et al., (2023) argued that many students have also experienced some psychological distress during this time. Mental struggle impacts student concentration, academic success and performance (Jamshaid et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the critical dimension of a wellbeing strategy is social integration (Bersia et al., 2024). Amoah and Mok (2022) highlighted that students who engage more in local communities and cross-cultural relationships have high levels of wellbeing

and satisfaction. Various intercultural programmes, student clubs and peer-monitoring activities help to build a sense of belonging and reduce isolation (Nayak et al. 2026).

Focus on support service and wellbeing

The pandemic has been identified in student wellbeing, mainly in mental health. During the pandemic, international students experienced increased levels of anxiety, uncertainty and stress due to social isolation, financial problems and travel restrictions. The challenges important for implementing effective wellbeing support strategies. As stated by El Khodr et al., (2024), international students face challenges during the pandemic, such as financial complexity, isolation and uncertainty. The literature highlighted that these significant challenges increase students' anxiety, depression and stress. As a counter to challenges, the university in New Zealand has provided a current counselling service and wellbeing initiative (Sillifant, 2024). For instance, universities in New Zealand have introduced cultural initiative counselling programmes as a support service to address the diverse students' needs. Both the higher education institutions and the government had implemented the policies to strengthen New Zealand's attractiveness as a popular destination for international students. On the contrary, Dost (2025) stated that limited awareness and long waiting times among the students impacted the accessibility of the services. It is noted that the lack of a virtual support service does not meet the complex needs of international students. This has created different cultural stigmas around language and mental health barriers.

This theme aligns with the changed policies at universities and illustrates the importance of the concept of wellbeing to support the emotional, physical and mental health needs of international students in the post pandemic era.

Significant changes experienced by the international student population trends in the post-COVID period (2020-2026)

Uneven recovery for student mobility

Cairns and França (2022), found that COVID-19 had impacted international students' mobility. Based on the view of Nguyen et al., (2023), countries like New Zealand faced a huge fall in enrolment between 2020 and 2022. Countries like Australia and Canada also identified

significant drops in international enrolment. It is reported that Australia had seen a reduction in the arrival of international students and New Zealand had implemented strict border policies in the same period. This reduction is not only across all the countries, but also in the UK due to work opportunities and flexible visa policy. Strielkowski (2022) argued that global student enrolment mobility recovery is uneven because of policies and restrictions. Meanwhile, the recovery highlighted the improvement of the education system and revenue generation (Nguyen et al., 2023). The literature suggested that the recovery system is modified by policy responsiveness. New Zealand implemented a recovery system due to student-friendly immigration policies and hybrid learning options.

Diversification and source countries

The post-pandemic situation has shifted market diversification and consumption patterns. The traditional international education market has been dominated by students from India and China. As mentioned by Mihut et al., (2025), countries' major contributions have been reduced due to visa uncertainties, geopolitical consequences and competition from alternative destinations. The empirical evidence also elaborated that safety concerns have influenced students' choice of destination. In this regard, increasing political tension between Western countries and China has motivated students to select destinations like the United Arab Emirates and Singapore (Bamberger et al., 2025). Besides that, the author also stated that Indian students' diversification of choice is considered in countries like Germany and Ireland. Therefore, a diversified market creates both significant opportunities and challenges. Estébanez et al., (2023) claimed that a diversified education market reduces the dependency of the single market. However, the diversification also introduces new challenges like culture, service and language barriers.

Changes to the student hybrid learning model

The pandemic has shifted hybrid learning methods and digital learning systems as an alternative approach for international students. During this time, restrictions on travel in many places have led to the introduction of online education, which leads to borderless education. As per the view of Breslin et al., (2024), rapid online courses provide not only help and safety considerations but also joint degree programmes. Students prioritised online fast models that

allow them to transition from campus learning to online learning. Ma et al., (2024) highlighted that health and security is the most solid consideration for changing the motivation of students. As per the increasing concern about the quality of students' experience, international students often prioritise online learning due to limited communication and time zone challenges (Zhao & Xue, 2023).

Changing student motivation

The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted motivation and the decision-making process for international students such as India and China (Hari et al., 2023). As opined Al-Qadri et al., (2022), career opportunities and academic performance are significant areas for students' motivation. The students' motivation increased security, financial stability and immigration policies. It has been recorded that international students consider job prospects as a student's destination choice. In the context of New Zealand, policy changes such as the visa policy have been a central factor for pull. For instance, countries offer extended post-study work that has been in demand. Al-Qadri et al., (2022), highlighted that financial consideration is the most significant factor because pandemics increase the demand for payment option scholarships and part-time work opportunities. For instance, Khanna and Kim, (2021) stated that New Zealand has received a reputational advantage due to an effective pandemic management system. On the contrary, a strict border control and isolation process has reduced the attractiveness of the students' perception (Hari et al., 2023).

This theme highlights the significant travel restrictions, the shifts in motivation of international students to abroad, and the preferred modes of study that became available to them.

Demographic changes experienced by international students during the post-COVID period

Demographic change in the country of origin

In New Zealand, universities experienced enrolments of international students remaining continuously high above the OECD average across the years, despite a major drop in territorial students in the post-COVID era. According to Ibeka (2025), international students considered New Zealand a favourable destination for higher study even after Covid-19 due to the flexible

immigration policy of the university and Visa services. This attracted international students from Asian countries, mainly from China and India. A certain demographic change was also experienced through the shift of international students from Europe, North America, Oceania and South America into New Zealand for university enrolments. In contrast, Zayim-Kurtay et al., (2025) mentioned that the post-COVID situation brought lots of waivers on international travel and studies, which resulted in a substantial enhancement in the number of international students. International students started enrolling for higher studies in international destinations in 2022. The pandemic situation also created scope for study abroad destinations to gain popularity and set up new markets. This attracted students from the United States to select non-European destinations for higher study, such as New Zealand, Japan, Costa Rica and South Korea. However, Lin and Liu (2022) argued that universities in New Zealand remain a strong option for attracting international students despite the limited number of studies compared to the USA. This indicated that students from different countries of origin shifted to the universities in New Zealand for higher studies during the post-COVID period.

Demographic change in enrolment level

Certain demographic changes were also experienced by the universities in terms of enrolment of international students immediately after the COVID period. According to Di Pietro and Perez-Encinas (2025), existing disruptions in the international credit mobility during the pandemic negatively influenced the flow of international students. The number of international students from various international destinations, such as Spain, China and Japan, was low immediately after the post-pandemic situation. In 2022, multiple policy changes were made, and flexibility was offered for study abroad. Foreign students were allowed to re-enter New Zealand, which started increasing the number of enrolments since that period. On the other hand, a significant drop in the number of attendees was experienced by the universities in the last phase of 2021. Xu et al., (2025) found that only 5% attendance rate covered most students from Asian and Pacific ethnicities in the first phase of post-COVID across universities in New Zealand. This indicates that the student either left higher study or a lower enrolment occurred, which was below the national average. This represents a significant demographic change in the enrolment numbers at the university in the post-pandemic period.

Demographic change in the level of study

International students experienced a significant demographic shift considering the level of study in the post-pandemic situation. Mok et al., (2021) stated that New Zealand was among the fifth most popular destinations for higher education compared to the US, UK, Australia and Canada. In this case, undergraduate and graduate students gave major preferences to the US and UK to enrol in higher study compared to New Zealand. This significantly indicates the influence of the post-pandemic on international higher education and student mobility, which affected the demographic shift of international students in New Zealand. On the other hand, Ibeka (2025) mentioned that most of the international students enrolled in master and bachelor programmes. Postgraduate diploma and doctorate degree used to cover fewer international students in the universities in New Zealand. Zhu et al., (2024) argued that the initial phase post-COVID-19 affected the demographic shifts of the international students negatively due to lack of financial security. Health concerns and lack of awareness regarding the flexibility of universities visa policies also affected the demographical shifts. In 2022, the number of international students within this academic qualification level started increasing, which indicates a positive demographic shift. This indicates that significant demographic changes were experienced by international students in the post-pandemic period.

Overall, the demographic changes presented illustrate admission of international students from various countries of origins, enrolment level and their level of study as a background in developing an understanding of university context in New Zealand.

Strategies of institutional wellbeing for meeting the needs of international Students following the post-COVID era

Mental health and counselling services

International students were suffering from higher levels of anxiety, loneliness and financial stress, which affected their mental health during the post-COVID era. According to Stevenson, Gurung and Zagala (2024), the universities followed the government policy and instruction and implemented “*Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students*” as a mental health framework. This led to a positive implication as the university successfully expanded culturally sensitive counselling, offered telehealth support and crisis intervention services to the international students. The universal wellbeing model provided mental health

support to international students, considering six human dimensions, including “*Social, Physical, Intellectual, Cultural, Emotional and Spiritual*”. This significantly enabled the university to identify the source of the problem and implement counselling services to reduce anxiety, depression and loneliness among international students.

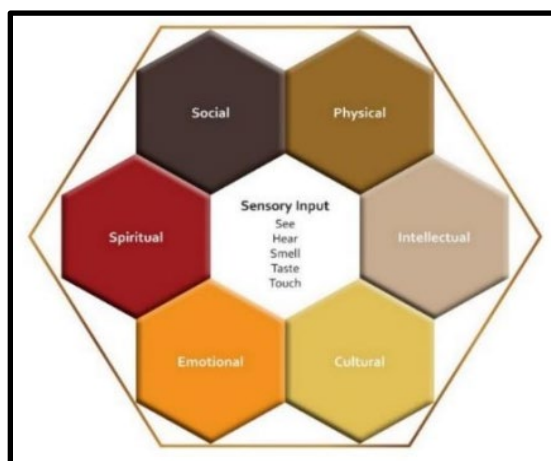


Figure 2.1: Six dimensions of the Universal Wellbeing Model

(Stevenson, Gurung & Zagala, 2024, p.12)

However, *Chen et al.*, (2025) stated that international students also received mental health support through counselling services and connections to the external specialist. This approach of the university indicates the preventive wellbeing system rather than the reactive one. This leaves a positive impact as this creates the foundation to recognise distress and psychological support for international students at an early stage due to migration stress and academic disruption in the post-COVID era.

Flexible and inclusive learning models and a holistic support service

During the COVID-19 era, online learning emerged as the new trend of education worldwide, which provided flexibility in learning without any presence on the university campus. According to Cameron, Fogarty-Perry and Piercy (2022), the universities implemented a hybrid, blended and flexible learning system during the post-pandemic situation. This was the strategic move by the universities as it put travel restrictions to attend university which saved travel cost and physical journey for international students. The universities started providing education through recorded lectures, online library access, blended learning and culture-responsive teaching. This led to positive implications as these are inclusive pedagogical practices that empowered students to manage academic pressure. This strategic move demonstrates the

integration of teaching services with evolving demographics after overcoming the restrictions of the pre-pandemic norms for institutional wellbeing.

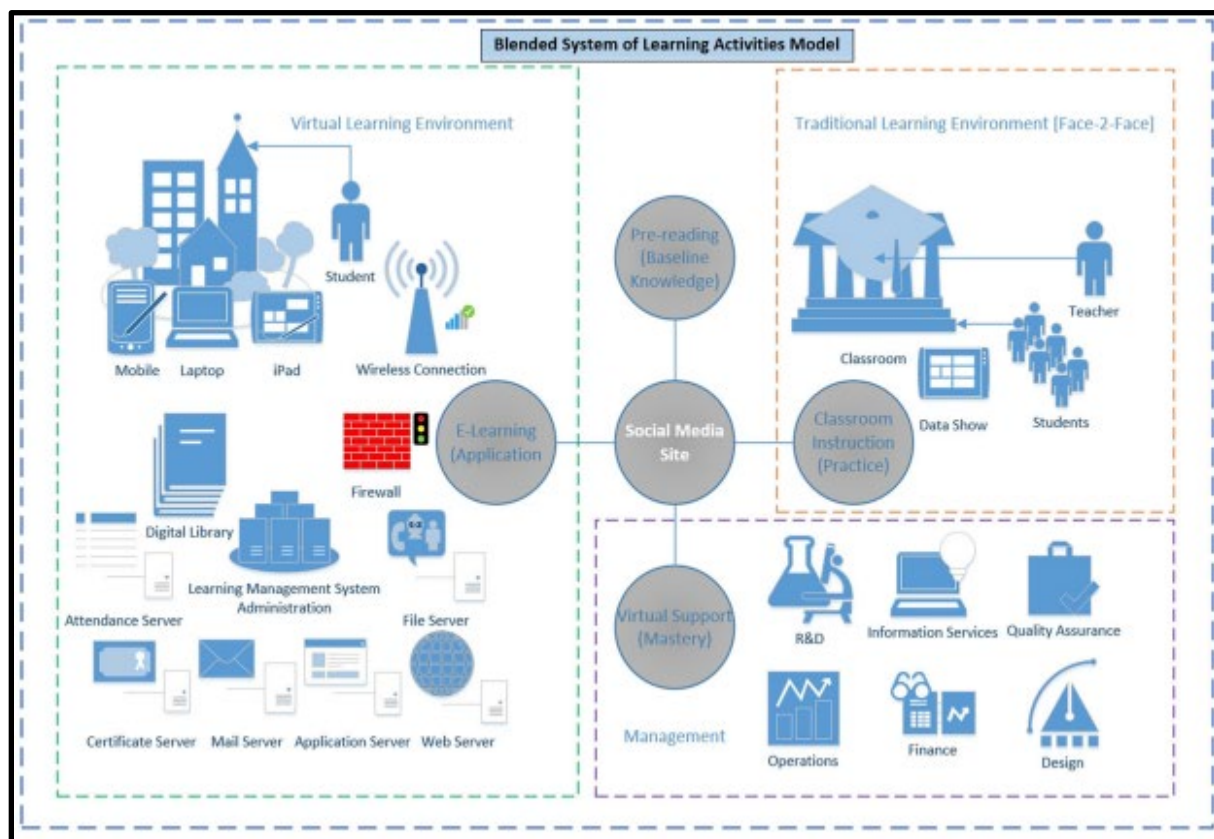


Figure 2.2: Blended learning system

(Adel & Dayan, 2021, p.8)

In another study, Russell et al., (2025) mentioned that financial stress was the major issue for international students due to restrictions on the work permissions of international students in New Zealand. The university provided financial relief through an international scholarship and provided food assistance through students' food banks. This covered education costs and food expenses for the international students to a certain extent. A holistic support system responded hard to eradicate the challenges, such as precarious migration conditions in the post-pandemic period.

Spronken-Smith et al., (2023) mentioned that academic disruption created academic stress and the need for career guidance for the international student's post-pandemic. Career readiness and immigration support is also introduced as part of the wellbeing strategies. This retained and engaged the international students after accommodating their every need through an institutional wellbeing strategy. However, Wong et al. (2023) found that Hyflex is considered a

hybrid and flexible learning model that integrates both face-to-face classroom and online environments which were major needs of learning after the pandemic. International students got the opportunity to join both online classrooms and face-to-face learning activities using internet connected portable devices, which shaped their learning experience in a new environment. Moreover, international students were also involved in synchronous communication with peers and teachers, which improved their psychological wellbeing. This learning model provided holistic support, which helped international students to balance stress related to academic learning and wellbeing.

Peer support and social integration programme

Peer support plays a crucial role in improving the wellbeing of international students. Cipolletta, Tedoldi and Tomaino (2024) stated that peer-to-peer intervention; tutoring and student-led communities enhanced the engagement level and accomplished emotional and psychological needs by reducing the isolation among the international students. These are the strategic institutional wellbeing approaches by the university which effectively helped to promote belonging, social connection and cultural adjustment post-COVID period. This resulted positively as international students got the opportunity to interact with the domestic students. This led to positive implications as continuous interaction enhanced engagement and reduced loneliness, which further strongly supported the transition towards academic and social life.

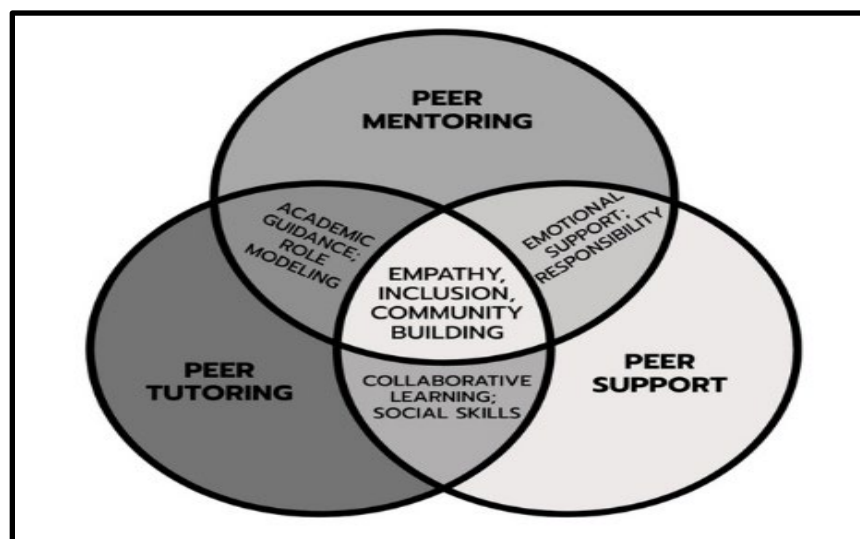


Figure 2.3: Peer-to-Peer Intervention

(Felső & Fehérvári, 2026, p.3)

On the contrary, Russell et al., (2025) mentioned that peer support groups and mentorship programs support institutional wellbeing strategies through offering emotional and practical support to international students. Domestic students also show support for international students that helps in managing culture and reducing social isolation. A peer mentorship programme creates opportunities for international students to connect with alumni and senior peers. However, Le, Sok & Heng (2024) argued that international students receive guidance from them to systematically accomplish the academic needs. The peer group also supports in gaining and accessing valuable resources and navigating financial challenges. This interpersonal network develops the student communities and sense of belonging, which supports the mental health of international students.

Overall, the institutional wellbeing strategies highlight that mental health services, flexible learning and peer support remain effective to identify and meet the needs of international students after Covid-19.

Efficiency of wellbeing strategies considering institutional indicators

Wellbeing strategies leave direct and indirect influence on the international students that supports their health and academic wellbeing.

Enhanced and responsive mental health and counselling services for safety needs

Pastoral care of international students is the systematic framework to provide the safeguard of students and promote emotional, social and personal development for wellbeing. As per the study of Stevenson, Gurung and Zagala (2024), the code of practice for pastoral care promoted strong safeguard parameters, institutional responsibility and a cultural integration framework. This resulted positively in restricting the negative demographic flow and supported student adjustment and retention. International students received sensitive counselling sessions with external specialists and got the opportunity to share issues such as stress and anxiety due to isolation, financial stress and loneliness. Expert advice and crisis intervention service developed a progressive environment through the development of the student community on both the online and offline campus, to promote interaction. This significantly satisfied the students and minimised the withdrawal rates due to a highly supportive support system and accountability mechanism. This remained quite effective for the international student to keep them safe mentally, financially and physically, supporting them in higher studies in New Zealand, which

enhances student engagement. On the contrary, Adams-Hutcheson and Zegwaard (2023) mentioned that the slow consistency of policy implementation across various departments reduces efficiency at a certain point in time. Additionally, this framework consists of various standards that need to be used to develop a compliance-driven policy. The university might also enhance the efficiency of the pastoral care approach through strengthening the practical implementation to meet the students' needs, rather than addressing mental health needs only. However, Stevenson, Gurung and Zagala (2024) mentioned that the universal wellbeing model supported the implementation of the pastor care framework. This model effectively incorporates 6 human dimensions, such as “*Social, Physical, Intellectual, Cultural, Emotional and Spiritual*”. Different universities follow this model, which helps to incorporate psychological, emotional and academic support into the unified framework. As a result, the various universities successfully developed a preventive wellbeing system to eradicate anxiety, depression and loneliness, which further improves engagement and retention.

Strong development of peer network and social connection for supporting wellbeing

Peer support and social integration programme, which is a significant part of institutional wellbeing strategy, as this helped students to adjust in the cross-cultural environment post covid. Caligiuri et al., (2020) stated that peer-to-peer intervention created an opportunity for information exchange between domestic and international students over online communities and on campus. This allowed domestic students to exchange solutions against the problems of fair health concern, social isolation and adaptability of cross-cultural environments. Moreover, domestic students also help international students to develop the student network to get on-campus jobs, even in the limited job opportunities post-COVID era. This helped in addressing the financial challenges of the international students, which gradually developed into financial stress and affected their wellbeing. Sidhu et al., (2021) found that this developed a supportive culture which helped the student to adjust to the cross-cultural environment. It also helped the universities to engage international students into higher studies for the long term. On the contrary, Xu, Mansor and Amat (2025) contradicted the view that financial and career restriction stresses were the major factor that forces the student to leave international higher study, which affects engagement, adjustment and retention. Mentorship programmes and student-led communities developed a cross-cultural ecosystem where international students got the opportunity to interact with domestic students from different cultures. This allowed international

students to understand the cross-cultural parameters to adjust to cross-cultural students without any psychological harassment. The students got the opportunity to exchange information with alumni or senior students to gain knowledge regarding different financial income sources to overcome financial stress. Moreover, Vasandani et al., (2026) stated that alumni also suggested a suitable digital platform to gain valuable resources for academic support and gain career opportunities aligning with relevant subject domains. This reduced the possibility of financial stress and enhanced the engagement and retention of the international student for higher enrolment in post-pandemic situations.

A holistic support service for academic and financial wellbeing

A flexible and inclusive learning model enhanced student engagement and improved academic adjustment after the pandemic. Adel and Dayan (2021) mentioned that the multiple universities experienced a demographic transition from a traditional learning system to a blended learning system. This created the scope for online education, learning through recorded lectures and an inclusive curriculum that met the needs of the undergraduate and graduate students. This provided multiple language options in the recorded videos, diverse learning styles, mental health support and strong digital culture adaptation that contributed to a higher retention rate. This significantly enhanced the enrolment numbers, course completion and participation levels, which indicates the strong adjustment and retention of the international students. In contrast, Russell et al., (2025) mentioned that holistic support services attracted new admissions and retention of the existing international students, eradicating financial and career stress. Financial aid through scholarship attracted a huge number of Asian and South Asian students. This eradicated the financial stress due to the cost of living, even in the lower job environment post-Covid and enhanced engagement and retention through higher enrolments. Moreover, food assistance through food banks and free meal services saved food costs for international undergraduate students, which helped them control the financial stress. Career readiness and immigration support also supported international students through visa management and renewing student work permits. This significantly eradicated the depression for survival during the study and helped to retain the international students.

Institutional wellbeing strategies meet safety needs through responsive counselling service, improved peer network and social connection for supporting wellbeing and holistic

support service for academic and financial wellbeing. This theme formed a pertinent background to the study.

Relevant Theories and Framework

Theory 1: Berry's Acculturation Theory

Berry's Acculturation Theory was initially developed by John W. Berry in 1980, which provides an acculturation model to explore the individual adaptation strategies. This explores the dimension of retention or rejection of the native culture of individuals and adoption or rejection of the host culture. According to Choy et al., (2021), *the integration* approach pushed the individuals to adopt host culture norms. In this case, international students engaged with the indigenous society of New Zealand, maintaining their home culture. This significantly supported the demographic transition after enhancing diversity in the country of origin for strong adjustment and participation. However, Separa (2024) stated that the *assimilation* reflects that the cultural norms of the host country are adopted by international students. In the COVID situation, these students generally analysed the age and study level parameters and considered undergraduate cohorts as peers to develop the network through demographic changes.

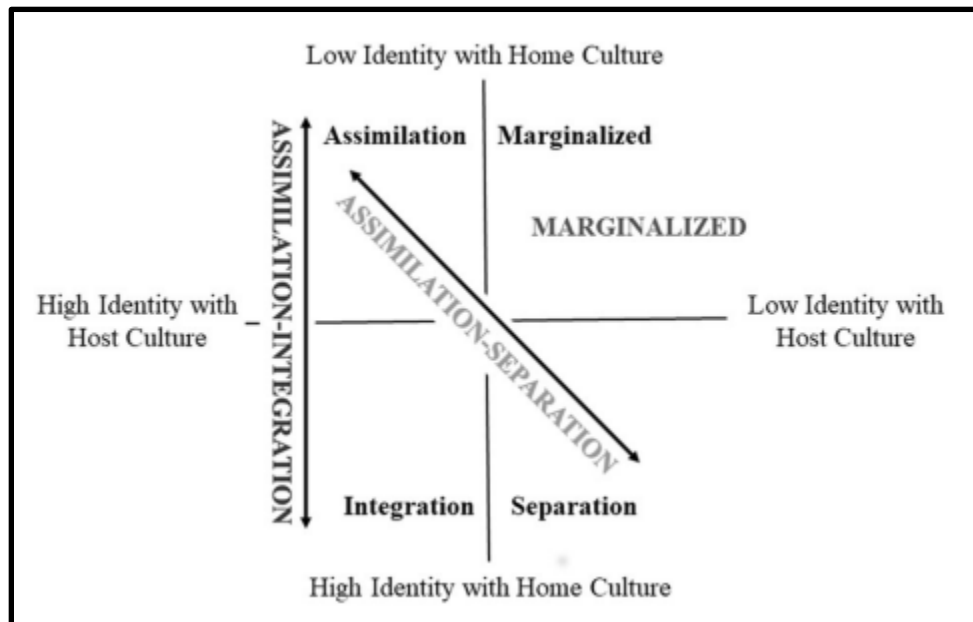


Figure 2.4: Berry's Acculturation Theory

(Source: Spann et al., 2024, p.481)

Van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2022) stated that *separation* demonstrates rejection of the dominant or host culture by a particular individual for preserving the culture of origin. International students, particularly from Asia, intended to preserve their cultural identity and engage in limited interaction. This occurred because of the existing language barrier or excessive admission of the student from a particular country. This created a scope for conflict among domestic and international students, which leads to negative influence on wellbeing and poor engagement and retention in post-COVID situations. However, Shaheen, Laxman and Nanayakkara (2026) mentioned that *Marginalisation* demonstrates the disconnection or rejection of the international students from both home culture and host culture. This happened in the large parameter post-pandemic situation due to isolation and stress. This significantly affected the adaptability of the international students and the adjustment approach.

Theory 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory was initially developed by Abraham Maslow, who explored human needs that need to be accomplished for survival. According to Ihensekien and Joel (2023), this theory demonstrates that psychological and safety needs as the highest priority, which is required to be accomplished. It can be associated with post-Covid situation where the cost of living in New Zealand is quite high and creates difficulties for international students to manage their expenses. This indicates that it raises psychology and safety needs for international students. Jangjou (2022) stated that universities are found to offer free food assistance through the e-food pantry, food bank and scholarship. This results positively as it fulfils the psychological and safety needs and ensures long-term engagement and retention. However, Chen et al., (2025) found that development of peer networks and social integration programs developed emotional relationships and provided guidance, which reflected the *belongingness*.

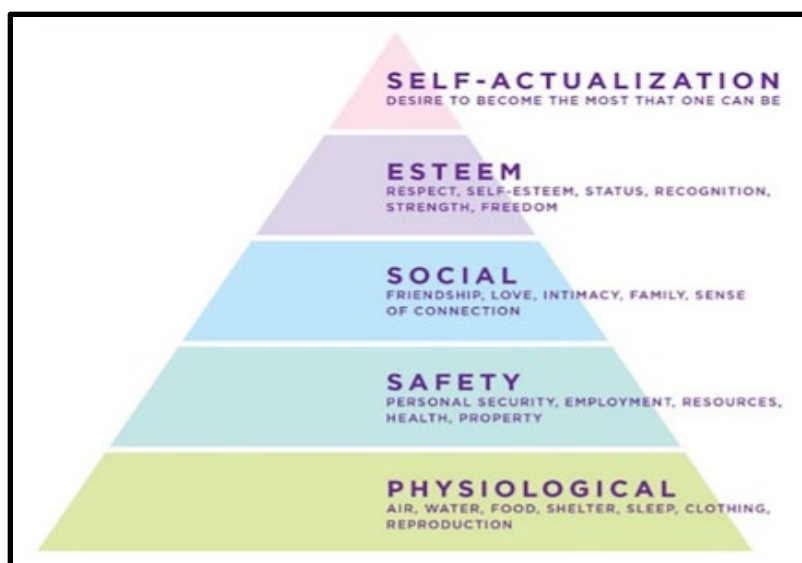


Figure 2.5: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

(Church et al., 2022, p.3)

However, Martirosyana, Van De Walker and Saxon (2022) stated that esteem and self-actualisation incorporate strength and a particular achievement for the individuals. This can be integrated with the wellbeing support for meeting needs of international students including personal growth and academic needs. Bright et al., (2022) stated that counselling and career support made a strong contribution towards maintaining esteem and self-actualisation, which helped international students to gain academic success. This theoretical approach explored that international students experience higher levels of depression and stress if the basic needs of the students remain unfulfilled. In contrast, Firmante (2025) stated that the universities and educational institutes demonstrated a proactive approach in the post-pandemic situation to reduce the financial stress, encourage student demographics to make a transition towards hybrid learning and organise mentorship programmes. This significantly allowed the universities to fulfil the basic needs of the students while doing higher study in New Zealand and engaged and retained them for higher enrolment in the future.

Literature Gap

This study focuses on analysing the demographic shift and wellbeing strategies for international students in the post-COVID era. However, this study also consisted of some gaps that need to be addressed successfully. This study included a major gap in terms of availability of literature on the demographic shift and wellbeing strategies post this period. This literature

carries sparse information that supports demographic transition and wellbeing strategies after Covid. Therefore, this can be considered one of the gaps existing in the research, which brings some limitations in the research domain. This study might fill the gap by analysing the post-pandemic data related to demographic shifts and wellbeing strategies. It will provide the updated information regarding how demographic shift influences enrolment and encourages the formation of effective wellbeing strategies.

This study also used sparse information regarding strategies of institutional wellbeing for meeting the needs of international students in the post-covid period. This research will fill this gap by addressing the various needs of the international students and evaluating the diverse institutional wellbeing strategies to address them. It will provide updated data to support the institutional wellbeing approach and policy intervention that might address these challenges.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the previous studies to evaluate the demographic shifts of international students and wellbeing strategies in the post-COVID era. The chapter presented a literary argument to discuss the significant changes in population trends and demographic shifts experienced by international students in the post-pandemic era. Institutional wellbeing strategies and their efficiency were discussed to determine how the universities retained engagement and helped international students to adjust in their higher studies under the immediate influence of post-COVID. The chapter included “*Berry’s Acculturation Theory and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory*”, which helped to develop the theoretical framework. Research variables were identified to develop the conceptual framework.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Research methodology is the foundation of the entire research, which helps in designing the research path to commence research. It is the methodological framework that helps to design the systematic plan to solve a particular research problem (Samanth, 2024). In research, the selection of the appropriate method determines the reliability and validity of the outcome. The aim of this chapter is to implement the appropriate methods to deeply investigate the demographic transition and wellbeing strategies of the international students in higher education in New Zealand. The relevant methods were applied to collect this information related to AUT University, considering the post-pandemic era during 2020-2026. These methods included research philosophy, approach, design, method, and collection of data, data analysis, and many other methods, which were thoroughly discussed in this chapter. The research incorporated Research Onion as a methodological framework to design a research path. The research onion's layers reflect different approaches and decision-making to offer a strong blueprint for designing the entire research (Melnikovas, 2020). This remained helpful in developing the foundation of the research path transparently.

Research Questions

RQ1: What changes in the international student population trends in the post-COVID period (2020-2026) did the AUT University experience?

This research question addresses RO1 through identifying and evaluating the changes in international population trends in AUT during post-COVID period (2020-2026).

RQ2: Which demographic changes in international students (such as changes in country of origin, enrolment levels, age profile, and level of study) did AUT University experience during the post-COVID period?

This research question addresses RO2 by identifying and evaluating the demographic characteristics of international students through exploring country of origin, enrolment levels, age profile and level of study in AUT.

RQ3: Which strategies of institutional wellbeing have been the responses of AUT in meeting the needs of international students following the post-COVID era?

This research question addresses RO3 by exploring various institutional wellbeing strategies as the strategic response by AUT to meet international student's needs following the post-COVID era.

Research Onion

The study incorporated the “*Research Onion*” as the methodological model to design the six-layered research path. “*Research philosophy*” is the outermost layer that reflects two major methods, including interpretivism and positivism (Ahmed et al., 2025). Research was developed after incorporating “*interpretivism philosophy*” as a preferred philosophical view. The primary reason is that the interpretivism method explores unaddressed things through an individual's perception and understanding of reality. This helped to discuss unaddressed realities about “*student demographic transition and wellbeing strategy in the post-pandemic period*”.

“Research approach” is the second outermost layer where the inductive approach was aligned with this study. The major reason is that it is a “*bottom-up approach*” which facilitates the research to “*start research with observation and develop new theories*” (Mphale, Gorejenaand & Nojila, 2024). This helped to discuss strategies of institutional wellbeing for international students in AUT.

“*Strategy*” is identified as the third layer where qualitative case study strategy was aligned with this study. The reason behind this is a qualitative case study facilitated the researcher to incorporate AUT case study. This helped to incorporate the evidence related to “uneven recovery for student mobility, mental health support, diversification and source countries and others”.

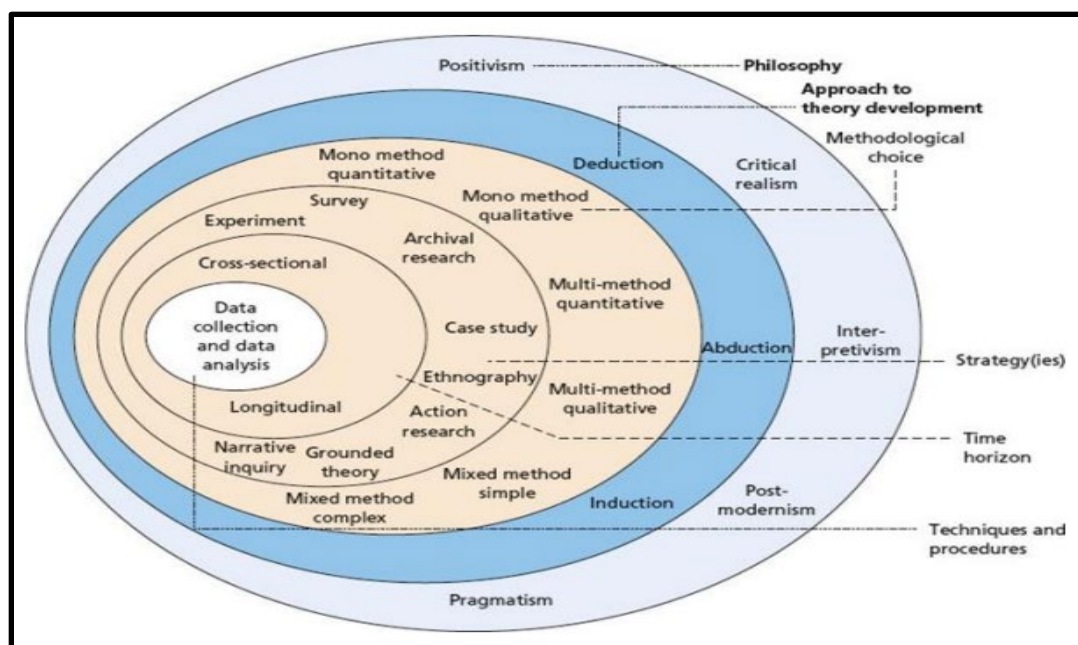


Figure 3.1: Research Onion

(Source: Mbedzi et al., 2020)

“*Choices of method*” is the fourth layer that reflects three possible choices, including mono, mixed and multi-method to include in the study (Kennedy, 2023). This study was framed under a qualitative method to explore the demographic changes and wellbeing strategies of AUT, which indicates the inclusion of a mono method. “*Time horizon*” is the fifth layer that reflects the consolidated time frame within which a researcher accomplishes research (Alturki, 2021). The study proceeded forward to collect the longitudinal data because the research included an AUT case study and qualitative data, which incorporated details of post-pandemic in different timeframes during 2021-2026. The research onion incorporated “*data collection and analysis*” as the innermost last layer. In this study, the secondary data collection method included published data on international students at AUT. Data were analysed through theme development to answer the research questions.

Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is a “*system of beliefs, values and framework*” which is classified into three major categories, such as “*interpretivism, positivism and pragmatism*” which are also termed as “paradigms” (Gamage, 2025). In this research, the investigation was carried out in accordance with the interpretivism philosophy due to its strong applicability in the qualitative

study. The primary reason is that interpretivism philosophy is often grounded in social constructionism and prioritises a subjectivist ontological stance (William, 2024). In this research, the interpretivism method helped in exploring the significant demographic changes experienced by international students in the post-COVID period. This was useful to incorporate the evidence regarding demographic change in the level of study, enrolment numbers and country of origin of international students at AUT after COVID-19.

Additionally, interpretivism methods are also considered an “*epistemological perspective*” and demonstrate that “*knowledge is subjective*”, which is developed through “*interpretation and contextual understanding*” (Sharma, 2024). The interpretivism method favoured the researcher in carrying out this study forward after incorporating the AUT case studies. In this study, interpretivism helped to incorporate complex information regarding the “*institutional wellbeing strategy*” after understanding the international students' needs. This created scope for identifying the students' needs, such as health support needs, financial needs, learning needs and others, while higher studies at AUT after COVID. In addition, interpretivism philosophy always significantly recognises correlations and other relationships that create the necessity to perform further investigation and evaluation (Fischer, 2025). In this study, the interpretivism method allowed the study to relate the diversity policies and visa flexibility with international student enrolment through the COVID to the post-COVID era.

Research Approach

Research approach is considered as the plan and procedure that determines the logical direction of research to answer research questions. Research approaches are classified into three categories, which are inductive, deductive and abductive approaches (Kumar & Ujire, 2024). Each research approach has a different nature and a different area of applicability, which determines its suitability to incorporate into the research. The present study included an inductive research approach to empirically support the research process. The primary reason is that inductive methods move from cases to broader generalisations or theories. This method helps to commence research starting from observation, recognise the pattern and develop a theory to validate claims (Gamage, 2025). In this study, the inductive method enabled a researcher to observe changes experienced by the “*international student population trends and influence of wellbeing strategies*” after evaluating the institutional indicators. The inductive method allowed

"Berry's Acculturation Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory" to me to analyse the demographic transition and wellbeing strategies through a theoretical lens.

An inductive approach also incorporates causal reasoning, which recognises the cause-and-effect relationships between multiple events (Dudovskiy, 2025a). This developed the foundation for the study to analyse the institutional wellbeing strategies, including mental health and counselling services, flexible inclusive learning models, peer support and social integration programs during the post-pandemic period. It is the reason that inductive methods remained suitable and highly applicable to incorporate into this study. However, Kumar & Ujire (2024) found that the inductive method is fundamentally qualitative by nature and strongly supports the documentation analysis. This significantly enhanced the approach to utilising the published AUT data to perform documentation analysis and explore the demographic transition and institutional wellbeing strategies. The inductive approach consists of condensing expensive raw text data into a highly summarised form to establish relationships between objectives and findings (Locsin & Schoenhofer, 2024). In this study, an inductive approach helped in incorporating the raw published data of AUT through annual reports and the university website to derive findings. Inductive methods remain highly supportive in implementing the documentation analysis in qualitative research.

Research Design

Research design is identified as the consolidated planning framework which is followed throughout the research to collect, measure and analyse the data to gain an outcome. In the field of research, research design is classified into multiple categories, including *"descriptive, exploratory, experimental, correlational"* and others (Thomas & Zubkov, 2023). The study applied an *"exploratory research design"* framework to respond to the research questions. The primary reason is that *"exploratory research design"* focuses on exploring the research problem, which is not explicitly defined (Olawale, Chinagozi & Joe, 2023). The covid era caused demographic change in enrolment, country of origin, age profile, mental health conditions, inclusive learning model and holistic support for international students. This directly and indirectly influenced the wellbeing of the students in the New Zealand Universities. However, factors of demographic changes, wellbeing issues and strategies were not explicitly defined in the previous studies. Therefore, this created the necessity to include an exploratory research

design to conduct the research considering the AUT case study. Additionally, exploratory design creates the scope to collect the relevant information, recognise patterns and develop knowledge regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Dudovski, 2022). In the study, an exploratory design helped to collect the relevant insights regarding demographic changes and efficiency of wellbeing strategies and recognised the pattern of admissions of international students in New Zealand after the post-pandemic period.

The major characteristic of “*exploratory research design*” is that it focuses on exploring the variables that significantly help in the development of themes for data analysis in qualitative research (Sharma et al., 2023). In this research, an exploratory design helped in identifying the variables such as “*Demographic and cultural diversity, Mental Health and Counselling support, Peer and Financial Support and Career and immigration support policy*”. Identification of the variables remained quite helpful in designing themes to implement the documentation analysis through a secondary qualitative strategy. It enabled the study to deeply evaluate the demographic transition and wellbeing strategy of AUT for international student engagement with the valid secondary evidence.

Research Method/ Strategy

The research method is taken into consideration as a consolidated plan which is followed throughout the study to push research in the right direction. The selection of appropriate methods directly influences the path of the research and nature of the outcome. In the field of research, three types of research methods exist, which include qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods (Taherdoost, 2022). The qualitative research method was utilised by a researcher throughout the research, which helped to carry out research through necessary investigation.

The qualitative method created the scope to collect the non-numerical data to analyse the demographic shift and wellbeing strategies of the international students of higher education in New Zealand. The research collected the data from the published documents of AUT including Annual Reports and the Website of AUT. Additionally, qualitative methods always remain suitable to retrieve data from past incidents (Taherdoost, 2021). In the study, this method supported a documentation analysis approach where the researcher analysed the data of Annual Reports and the Website of AUT University. The study obtained data from AUT’s annual reports, “Student Services and Administration (SSA)” report and AUT website listed below:

- AUT 2021 impact report: Student Services and Administration.
- AUT 2022 impact report: Student Services and Administration.
- AUT 2023 impact report: Student Services and Administration.
- AUT 2024 impact report: Student Services and Administration.
- AUT Student complaints & critical incidents 2024 annual report.
- AUT Annual report 2021: Te Pūrongo ā-Tau.
- AUT Annual report 2025: Te Pūrongo ā-Tau.
- AUT Student Impact Report webpage.
- AUT Student Medical Centre webpage.
- AUT Facts & Figures webpage.
- AUT Immunisations webpage.

The data was analysed through development of themes aligning to the research questions. This helped in analysing the efficiency of institutional wellbeing strategies and changes experienced by international student population trends in the post-COVID period. Additionally, a qualitative research approach is also useful to employ the existing data instruments to determine the planning for the documentation analysis approach (Masenya & Chisita, 2026).

Data Collection Method

Data collection is a significant phase where a researcher is involved in collecting and measuring data to meet objectives and research questions. Two types of data collection methods, including primary and secondary methods (Ajayi, 2023). In this study, a secondary method was used to obtain the qualitative data to support the document analysis approach. The published data were gathered from AUT's annual reports, "*Student Services and Administration (SSA)*" report and AUT website. The major focus was to analyse published data on international students in AUT University that reflected institutional policies on wellbeing strategies, international student support policies, enrolment statistics, and strategic plans. The rest of the data sources were publicly available and accessed over the internet. The study included secondary sources reflecting demographic change and wellbeing strategies in AUT during the COVID and Post-Covid-era. The research included AUT published data between 2020 and 2026.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the result-oriented process where data are analysed and interpreted to derive a research outcome. There are three types of data analysis, including "*descriptive*,

diagnostic, and prescriptive” (Sharma et al., 2022). In this study, thematic analysis was performed to analyse the data, which is a descriptive data analysis process by nature. Thematic analysis facilitates the researcher to design and develop the theme after aligning with the research questions and objectives (Ahmed et al., 2025). This study developed three major themes, where the first theme discussed changes faced by *the "international student population trends"* after the COVID-19 era. In this theme, diversification and source countries, student support services and wellbeing, and changes in the student hybrid learning model were discussed. The second theme reflected the demographic change faced by international students, where multiple elements, including changes in the country of origin, enrolment numbers and study levels, were explored. The third theme reflected *"institutional wellbeing strategies"* to meet the needs of international students. In this regard, the third theme significantly evaluated a flexible and inclusive learning model, mental health support, peer support and others with evidence. This significantly examined the efficiency of the various wellbeing strategies, including peer support, counselling service, social integration programme, flexible learning models and others.

Theoretical Framework

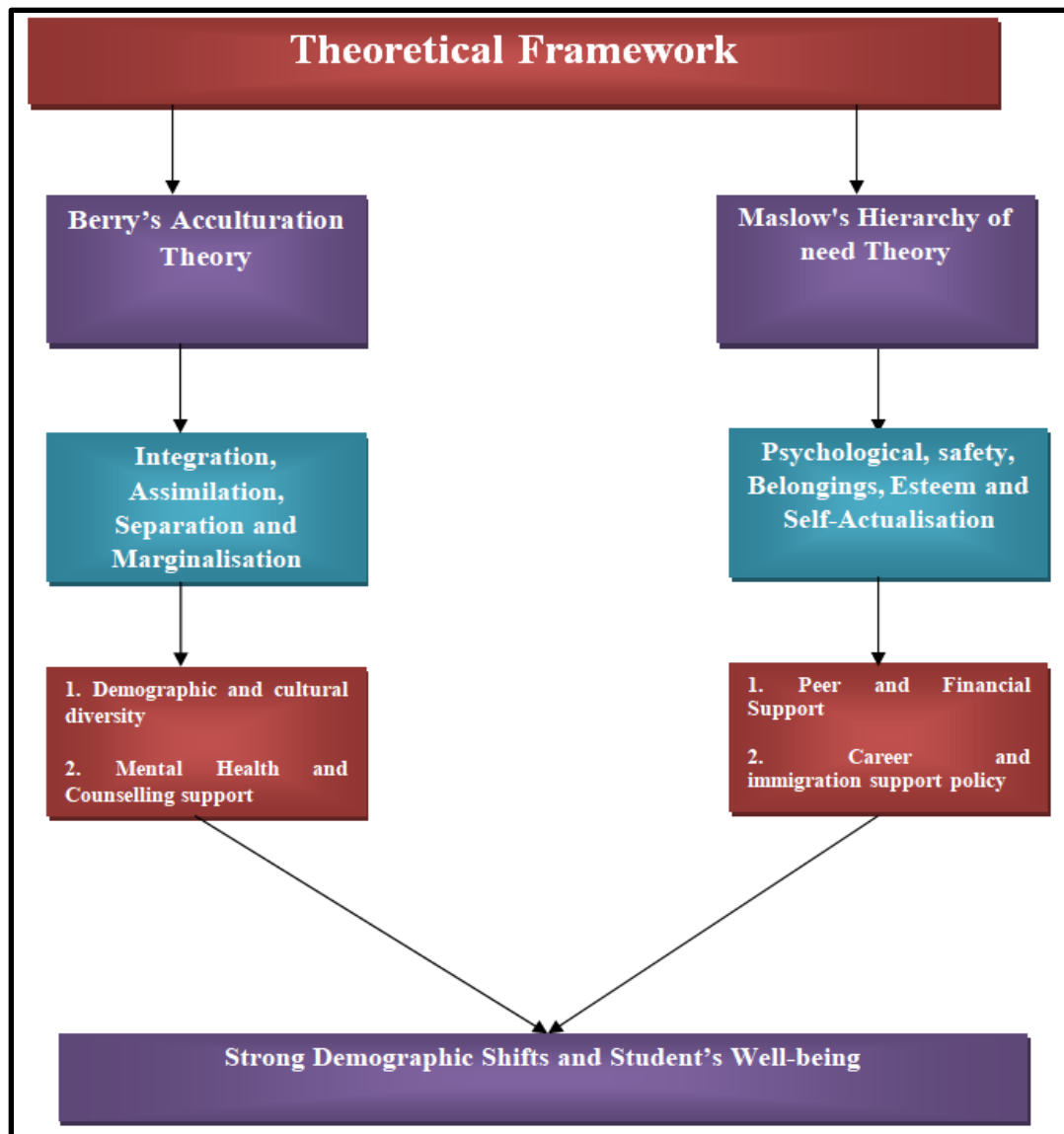


Figure 3.2: Theoretical Framework

I developed the above theoretical framework which relates theoretical concepts to my document analysis. Choy et al., (2021) stated that the framework “*Berry's Acculturation Theory*”, which focused on four major dimensions, including integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation. This significantly creates the scope for maintaining the demographic and cultural diversity and mental health and counselling support for positive demographic shifts of international students and their wellbeing. “*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory*” indicates the psychological, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation needs.

Church et al., (2022) stated that this helped the international students to accomplish their needs from peer and financial support, and career and immigration support policies. This creates the foundation for strong demographic shifts and welling of the international students.

Conceptual Framework

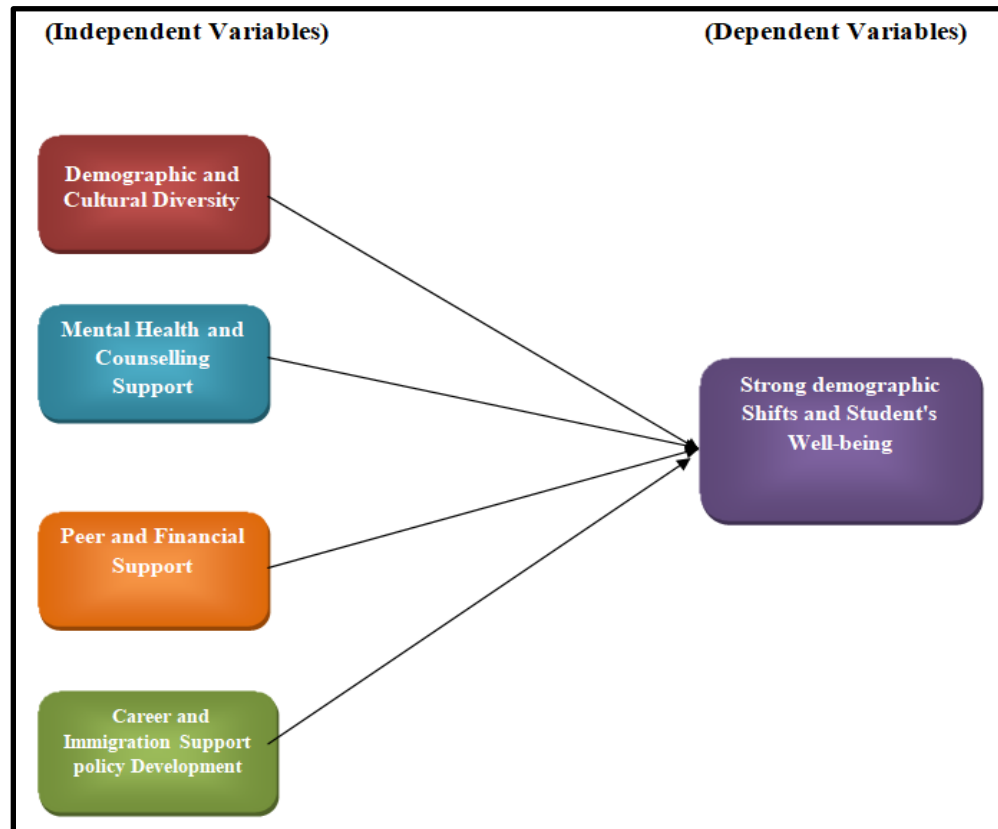


Figure 3.3: Conceptual Framework

I developed a conceptual framework which identified different research variables. The major reason behind the development of the conceptual framework was to exhibit a strong relationship and dependability between independent and dependent variables. This is highly relevant to the research as it maps out variables and pushes the research in the right direction. “Demographic and cultural diversity, Mental Health and Counselling support, Peer and Financial Support and Career and immigration support policy” are four major independent variables of the research. However, strong demographic shifts and students' wellbeing is the dependent variable of the research. As per Manfreda-Foley (2024), demographic and cultural diversity represents the classification of individuals considering the age, study level and cultural parameters. These create the scope for the international students to determine the approach to develop peer

networks while doing higher studies in New Zealand in a post-pandemic situation. However, Cerolini et al., (2023) stated that mental health and counselling support are important factors for international students. Majorly, young demographic students suffer from anxiety due to financial stress and social isolation in post-pandemic situations while pursuing higher studies in foreign countries. Mental and counselling support helps in reducing the stress level by showing alternative methods to eradicate the problems.

Moscaritolo et al., (2022) stated that peer and financial support facilitate the involvement of international students in the student group and exchange of ideas and problem-solving skills. Financial support is offered by the university in the form of international student funding and scholarships. This reduces the financial stress for international students and encourages new ones to take admission in foreign universities. However, Park and Shimada (2022) mentioned that career and immigration support policies are provided by the university to international students. Students are provided a visa and a work permit to ensure their presence in the university till the completion of the programme and on-campus earning opportunities. This also encourages international students to shift towards New Zealand for higher studies in the post-pandemic situation. These overall support the strong demographic shifts and wellbeing, accomplishing all the necessary needs of the international students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research approach and methods employed in this study to design research pathways. This chapter utilised the research onion as the methodological blueprint to execute the entire study. The chapter incorporated “*interpretivism philosophy and inductive approach*” which collectively supported the document analysis approach. Additionally, “*exploratory research design*” was included, which helped to define the research problem explicitly. The study followed the “*qualitative method and document analysis approach*”. AUT published data from annual reports, Student Services and Administration reports and the university’s official website were used for the purpose of this study. *Thematic analysis* was performed to respond to research questions. Finally, the research did not require ethics approval because of the use of published data. However, ethical considerations were always at the forefront and allowed me to maintain the integrity, credibility, authenticity and honesty required of a researcher.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter focuses on analysing the data and deriving findings regarding the demographic transition and wellbeing strategies of the international students at AUT after the pandemic. For this purpose, thematic analysis was used to perform descriptive analysis to present findings in this chapter. Findings demonstrate the development of four themes after aligning the research questions to the research outcome. The findings revealed changes in international student population trends, demographic transition in the post-pandemic period, strategies of institutional wellbeing and their efficiency considering institutional indicators. Moreover, the findings have been further analysed to demonstrate the implications of the result. This secondary analysis approach helped to perform the documentation analysis to analyse the publicly available data on international students of AUT in the post pandemic period. The years 2020 to 2021 represent the COVID-19 period, while 2022 onwards is generally considered the post-COVID recovery period. The study derived results from AUT's annual reports, "*Student Services and Administration (SSA)*" report and AUT website.

Findings 1: Post-Covid recovery and diversification of international student enrolment at AUT (2020-2026)

Disruption happened by the border closer between 2020 and 2022. During this period, higher education institutions have faced slow recovery in enrolment, diversity and geographic origins of international students. Additionally, operational and financial challenges impact higher education institutions.

AUT University has experienced a gradual but measurable recovery in international students' enrolment. Between 2022 and 2026, University has implemented diversification strategies to reduce dependency on the number of source countries and expand recruitment across emerging markets like Latin America, Asia and African regions. AUT strategic response was useful during Covid-19 when travel restrictions disrupted international students' mobility (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2025).

Growth and recovery of international student enrolments

Significant demographic changes have been identified during the post-COVID period, which have changed international student enrolment. The AUT 2021 report mentioned that approximately 15.2% international students out of 21,500 enrolled in 2021, which decreased to 11.9% out of 18,500 students in 2022. In 2020, post graduate students were 14,18, bachelor and graduate programmes were 1,520 and diploma and certificate were 75. This shows a major decline in the number of international students enrolled due to the immediate impact of COVID-19 and travel restrictions. After lifting travel restriction, this loss was recovered by AUT through improving the diversity and student wellbeing strategy (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2025). AUT experienced growth of 14.5% in 2023, 16.8% in 2024 and 16.5% in 2025 in the number of international students. The current enrolment process indicates that there is a strong student demand for AUT as a higher education institution. International education changes not only to boost the economy but also to create business opportunities. The current growth highlights the international education sector's process towards achieving the "government growth plan goal" by 2034.

International students in tertiary education have improved by 15% by 2025 (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2025). However, domestic enrolment has been reduced during the same period. The current trends evaluated the growing importance of students in the AUT. Besides that, the recovery trend is also noticed that AUT University hosted 4,509 international students from 108 countries in 2026. This data indicates that AUT University's strong global presence attracts students from different geographical areas. In this report the current growth of enrolment has been attributed to education quality, immigration policies and safety in New Zealand.

The post-COVID era has changed the demographic pattern for international students in New Zealand. The current recovery of international students' enrolment has identified global trends in student mobility. The increasing number of recoveries after 2022 indicates dependency and reliability of international students in the AUT. Border restrictions have created significant barriers to students' mobility. But the number has increased after 2024, where 83,425 international students have increased to 92,580 by 2025. The strong recovery process has confirmed that international students have regained social and economic significance within AUT.

Improving diversity of the international student demographics

AUT accelerated the immigration process by creating a “*Student Immigration Advisory*” role to advise and support on immigration student visa and post study visa (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2023). During the post-covid recovery period, these advisory services become important in assisting students from diverse countries to navigate immigration requirements. The availability of dedicated immigration supports students to access accurate visa information, reduce administrative barriers and contribute to AUT efforts which retain a more diverse international student population. This resulted positively as student immigration advisors started to take appointments for various international students from diverse countries which promoted student diversity. Additionally, immigration workshops specific to cohorts in higher education also enabled the international students to make the transition from student visa to work visa. These initiatives demonstrate the commitment to support diverse international students throughout the journey.

Diversity of international students has been captured in Table 4.1 during the COVID period and post-COVID period. The table 4.1 shows that the recovery of international students does not only involve simply improving enrolment numbers but also increasing the range of nationalities within the university. International students' enrolment is recorded with a limited number of source countries, mainly in India and China. The limited numbers of enrolments are noticed due to broader closures, travel restrictions and changes in visa policies that affect AUT. The above table identifies China, India, Vietnam, South Korea and Hong Kong as the top 5 countries in the table. From 2020-2025 data indicate that the number of international student enrolment has decreased.

Countries	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
China	1758 [40%]	1,636 [50%]	1,351 [49%]	1,283[37%]	1,273 [31%]	1,302 [29%]
India	955 [22%]	289 [9%]	191 [7%]	96 [17%]	1,073 [26%]	1,057 [23%]
Vietnam	200 [5%]	195 [6%]	179 [6%]	167[5%]	171 [4%]	178 [4%]
South Korea	134 [3%]	116 [4%]	107 [4%]	1274%	116 [3%]	114 [3%]
Hong Kong	104 [2%]	81 [2%]	69 [2%]	672%		
Saudi Arabia	85 [2%]					
Thailand	75 [2%]	792%	63 [2%]	83[2%]	106 [2%]	105 [2%]
Canada			71 [3%]	158[5%]	105 [2%]	95 [2%]
United States of America	62 [2%]					
Oman	56 [1%]	532%				
Malaysia	54 [1%]	461%	45 [2%]	56 [2%]	68 [2%]	
Indonesia		532%	51 [2%]	54 [2%]	69 [2%]	
Srilanka				97 [3%]	154 [4%]	213 [5%]
Myanmar					92 [2%]	151 [3%]
Taiwan		451%				
Nepal						100 [2%]
Bangladesh						102 [2%]
Other						
[94countries]	4734	680		742	7899	1,092

Table 4.1: International students at AUT

(Source: Student Services and Administration report, and Annual Report of Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025)

India and China are the top source markets for international students' enrolment between 2020 and 2025. AUT experienced enrolment of 1,758 [40%], 1,636 [50%], 1,351 [49%], 1,283[37%], 1,273 [31%], 1,302 [29%] international students from China in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025. However, enrolment of students from India includes 955 [22%], 289 [9%], 191 [7%], 96 [17%], 1,073 [26%] and 1,057 [23%] between 2020 and 2025. The enrolment data indicate that China remained AUT's largest international students' market throughout their period. The downward trends suggest that AUT becomes less dependent on a single source country. Besides that, enrolment from India fell sharply due to border closure, which impacted international students' mobility.

Apart from that, enrolment numbers were also enhanced for the students from Vietnam, South Korea, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia and Thailand respectively. According to AUT statistics, 4,509 international students originated from 108 diverse countries, which indicate diversity within the institutions. The diversity of AUT's international student strategy attracts students from emerging and traditional markets. Diversification strategies seem to eliminate the university's dependency on a small number of countries as it also began attracting students from Canada, USA, Oman, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Taiwan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Based on the finding, it is argued that increasing diversity of the international student body is likely to improve AUT multi-cultural campus environment by bringing together students from a wide range of linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds.

The AUT student population has already contributed ethnic diversity from Pacific, Asian and European communities. The diversity has changed the global mobility pattern where students prefer alternative study options without traditional markets like the UK, US and Australia (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2025). AUT responded to the changing pattern of the global student mobility by expanding its recruitment beyond the traditional source market. AUT depends on India and China, but the University attracts the students from different countries. The diversification strategy depends on a small number of recruitment markets.

The geographic diversification pattern profiles indicate that current changes indicate an increasing interest in postgraduate and master's level qualifications. The number of postgraduate students has increased by 1,970 (62%) by 2025 compared to 2024 (1,562). The above table has shown that international students' mobility patterns have increased due to wellbeing, support, safety and quality. As a result, New Zealand is the most successful country for international students as it has a stable educational environment. The primary aim of the AUT is to nearly double revenue to NZ\$7.2 billion by 2034 lifting student numbers from 83,400 to 119,000 (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2026). International students' education exports represent the total expenditure by overseas students on tuition and living costs. Important diversity, AUT aims to offer more than 250 programmes for the international students in Auckland such as undergraduate postgraduate and foundation pathways.

Summary

The above findings identified AUT University successfully adapted to the challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic through a combination of enrolment recovery, market diversification and student support initiative. The fall in the international student's enrolment between 2020 and 2022 identifies the direct impact on broad closure and travel restriction on global student mobility. Additionally, the increasing enrolment from 2023 identifies that AUT recovery strategies are effective to restore international demand. The enrolment trends suggest that AUT has shifted from a recruitment model heavily dependent on China and India towards more diversified international students. China remained the largest market throughout the study, but it declined as a single source country. Similarly, India enrolment has slightly increased after border opening. The successful diversification strategy is also noticed from the other countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Canada, Malaysia and Myanmar. The geographic distribution eliminates risk associated with dependency on a limited number of recruitment markets. The above findings evaluated that enrolment recovery was supported by institutional initiative then border reopening. Visa workshop, immigration advisory service and student support system has reduced administrative barriers and improved international students into academic study. Hence, current initiatives are consistent with student's wellbeing strategies that improve successful adoption and retention among international students.

AUT international students' diversity plan was thoroughly supported by the “*Student Immigration Advisory*” role and immigration workshops specific to cohorts in higher school education. This led to positive implications by solving the queries of international students and availing them visa services. AUT offered first time study visa and post visa services that promoted international student diversity post covid. Without the traditional destination, New Zealand's educational quality and safety have provided a significant attraction for the students. Besides that, domestic students' enrolment has reduced but the number of international students is continuously increasing. As a result, the number of increments has generated revenue and institutional growth.

Findings 2: Growth of Asian student dominance and age profile among international students in New Zealand

International students' demographic change profile is recorded in the post-COVID period. International students have recovered not only across all the student groups but also following border reopening. Current findings derived from Table 4.1 have been recorded between 2020 and 2025. International students' enrolment has concentrated among the students from Asian countries, mainly China, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and other neighbouring Asian countries. Additionally, the composition of qualification level with postgraduate enrolment has created a dominant position in certificate and diploma programmes. Therefore, the trends have shown broad changes in international students' mobility within New Zealand.

Increasing dominance of Asian student markets in post Covid recovery

The dominance has been noticed in Asian countries. Table 4.1 demonstrates that China recorded approximately 40% enrolment with 1,758 students in AUT in 2020. In 2021, it decreased and reached up to 1,636. In 2025, it contributed approximately 29% of the international students' enrolment. On the contrary, India is another significant country which represents 22% enrolment in 2020, which slightly increased 23% in 2025. Apart from India and China, the dominance is also noticed in countries like Vietnam, South Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Canada, the United States and other countries. Without the traditional dominance of India and China, current data identified that participation from emerging Asian markets has increased significantly. Additionally, Vietnam, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar also contributed enrolment positions during this period. Meanwhile, the importance of students is also reflected within the AUT student population. According to AUT statistics, more than 4,500 international students from 108 countries have been placed in New Zealand (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2026). As per the institutional demographic data, the effective presence of students from Asian backgrounds within the university community. The highest level of Chinese students' enrolment opened a significant market for New Zealand, with the big four of the industry, such as the UK, US, Australia and Canada (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2026). Behind the Chinese enrolment, it is noted that the Chinese market has faced a tough time as the unemployment rate of China is 16.5%. Hence, continuous growth in Asian

enrolment highlights strategic importance in the educational and recruitment network within the Asian markets.

Postgraduate dominance and age profile in international students' enrolment

International ETFS	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Postgraduate	1418 [47%]	664 [31%]	454 [26%]	1,074 [45%]	1,562 [56%]	1,970 [62%]
Bachelor's and Graduate programmes	1520 [50%]	1,416 [65%]	1,251 [70%]	1,239 [52%]	1,165 [42%]	1,138 [36%]
Diploma& Certificates	75 [3%]	83 [4%]	68 [4%]	81 [3%]	59 [2%]	53 [2%]
Total headcount	4734	3,273	2,764	3,430	4,126	4,509

Table 4.2: Students by level of the study

(Source: Student Services and Administration report and Annual Report of Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025)

The above 4.2 table shows “*Student Service and Administration (SSA) Report and Annual Report*” from 2021 to 2025. This illustrates that the second major demographic change is recorded in international students across the qualification levels. In 2020, 1,418 (47%) students sought admission and 664 (31%) students enrolled in 2021 in the postgraduate programme. This number has further increased and reached up to 454 (26%) in 2022, 1,074 (45%) in 2023 and 1,562 (56%) in AUT. This indicates the progressive result of the student visa assistance service offered by AUT in the post-COVID period. In 2025, postgraduate students accounted for 1,970 enrolments in postgraduate programmes with a 62% rate at AUT. This indicates that demand for postgraduate programmes remains quite high among international students in the post-pandemic era at AUT. However, bachelor's and graduate programmes, diplomas, and certificates are also part of the students' academic qualification criteria. Meanwhile, certificate and diploma programmes remained low during the study period. Certificate and diploma students account for only 2-4% of the international enrolment between 2020 and 2025. Besides that, the undergraduate enrolment pattern is comparatively lower than the postgraduate enrolment in 2025. The dominance of postgraduate enrolment identifies a change in motivation among international students in a post-pandemic environment.

As per the institutional statistics of AUT, 71% of the students are under the age of 25 and 8% aged are 40 years and above. International students made delayed international plans during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the traditional international student population is dominated by younger individuals in undergraduate programmes. Younger individuals prefer international education to improve their employability, changing labour market requirements and specialised skills. Additionally, younger learners prefer digital learning technology and hybrid education environments during and after the pandemic. Therefore, dominance of postgraduate and younger international age profiles focuses on personal development, skill acquisition and employability. On the contrary, younger international students face continuous language barriers, homesickness and financial management.

Summary

Based on findings, demographic changes among the international students have been identified by an increasing Asian preference. The continuous dominance of Asian students plays a significant part in the primary recruitment market for New Zealand. Current development has been explained through the push-pull theory. The demand for international education, the competitive labour market and the increase in the middle-class population have increased the push factor. This indicates that international students from diverse countries become major entities to accomplish the international higher education demand after the Covid-19 situation. Apart from that, safety, quality and professional network development create significant opportunities as a pull factor in New Zealand. As per AUT statistics, India and China made the largest contribution to international enrolment. Apart from that, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Nepal, Bangladesh and Japan are also part of the emerging markets. This demonstrates the approach to strengthen the regional recruitment strategies and partnerships. This creates the scope for developing and diversifying the international student's portfolio while developing strong relationships with international Asian students.

The dominance of postgraduate students is recorded through "human capital theory". Individuals taking part in higher education create significant future opportunities and professional development. Post-graduate admission is enhanced with a rate of 47%, 31% 26%, 45%, 56% and 62% between 2020 and 2025. Postgraduate education has improved students' wellbeing. However, students face challenges like financial pressure, family commitment and

employment responsibilities. In this response, AUT students' medical centre, AUTSA services and international student support service address the students' needs. The younger population is also recorded as a demographic change. Younger students, mostly under the age of 25 years have shifted within the AUT population.

Finding 3: Strategies of institutional wellbeing for meeting the needs of international students

AUT implemented diverse institutional wellbeing strategies which accomplished the need of international students post pandemic.

Comprehensive Health and Mental Wellbeing Support

AUT offers comprehensive health and mental wellbeing support through campus clinics and centres (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2026). Three clinics offer free-to-low-cost healthcare, in-person and virtual counselling and mental health services, considering the needs of international students. AUT moved the campus clinic to the city which creates the scope for offering physical and mental wellbeing and counselling services to the students. Puawaitanga is the phone counselling service that also offers private and confidential counselling sessions to the individuals in Aotearoa. In AUT, this helped international students to support their wellbeing and overcome anxiety, depression and isolation. Additionally, students are supported by offering facilities of a gym and recreation centre which meet their needs for physical and psychological improvement. Following health protection policies, AUT and the Immunisation Advisory Centre provide advice and vaccination to protect against preventable diseases such as influenza, rubella, measles, mumps, chicken pox and meningococcal disease. These supports indicate that AUT offers multi-dimensional health and mental wellbeing support to international students in the post-pandemic period.

Strengthening Pastoral Care and Student Protection Frameworks

AUT implemented the “*Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners*” Code of Practice 2021 (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2021). This facilitated the university to retain consistent standards for tertiary education and support international students by offering academic, social and personal support. This support structure provides accommodation facilities through community-based residential services to international students.

This addresses the residential needs without facing isolation in a new environment that influences mental wellbeing.

Category of complaint	Investigated	Resolved/ partly resolved/ withdrawn	Upheld	Not upheld	Ongoing	Total*
COVID related	Yes	-	-	1	-	1
Quality of service	Yes	3	-	6	3	12
Quality of decision	Yes	3	-	6	3	12
Quality of information	Yes	3	-	6	3	12
Supervision/course	Yes	2	-	5	2	9
Facilities/access	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total		11	-	24	11	46

Figure 4.1: Complaint System in AUT

(Source: Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2024, p.3)

The above 4.1 figure shows a system for international students to complain against unfair treatment, quality of service, decisions, information, supervision and facilities. This accomplishes the safety needs of the international students on campus and promotes wellbeing.

Enhancing Social Integration and Student Engagement Opportunities

Auckland University of Technology Student Association (AUTSA) offers club and community facilities and organises events to support diversity among the students. This is the kind of social integration programme that strengthens the social connections that were disrupted during the pandemic and eradicates the sense of isolation that improves mental wellbeing. Additionally, AUT offers “*taha wairua*” spiritual wellbeing supports and introduces “Tautoko” initiatives to help international students facing hardship. This addresses the needs of morale and financial support that reduces financial stress and improves focus on learning. Student engagement is also enhanced by the flexible, inclusive learning models where students can be involved in digital and online learning through recorded lectures, online library access and culture-responsive education methods. This blended learning reduces academic pressure by connecting international students with their peers virtually. AUT offers personalized support services and various extracurricular activities as the parts of wellbeing strategies. Moreover, it also offers modern campuses and state-of-the-art facilities that develop an inspiring environment for international students to improve balance between academics and wellbeing.

Summary

From analysing the findings, it can be revealed that comprehensive wellbeing and health initiatives strengthened the overall reputation of the AUT as the student-centred institution in higher studies. AUT implements directional health and mental wellbeing support through “*in-person and virtual counselling*”, and the mental and health wellbeing supports are provided through campus clinics. This is a combined approach and reflects the existence of strong physical and technical infrastructure for providing health support to international students, which is a positive factor. Students involved in private counselling sessions that help the counsellor to understand different parameters that international students fail to cope with and suffer from depression and isolation. Apart from mental health support, Fitness gyms also improve physical wellbeing which indicates effective resources management for international students. New international students meet with domestic and international colleagues in the recreation centre which reduces isolation and stress. This indicates AUT invests in health training facilities and avails resources as part of strategic wellbeing. The most effective approach for health safety includes immunisation and vaccination. This results positively as it provides safety to the international students from the prevailing diseases and supports safe learning.

Findings further revealed that the wellbeing strategy is incorporated with the Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners Code. This facilitates the management to offer room facilities with additional benefits and lower cost and eradicate the stress when they newly enroll into the programme and enter the campus. As a result, this reduces the extra struggle for international students to seek residential complexes and eradicates the possibility of taking a home on rent at higher cost outside the university campus. However, most international students leave higher studies because the university fails to solve the problems associated with health, unfair treatment, bullying and poor supervision. The pastoral care framework also promotes equity by developing the complaint system to eradicate unfair treatment and poor quality of service, supervision and facilities. It is the much-needed support for international students to promote wellbeing as it eradicates the possibility of racism and bullying and strengthens the supervision for inclusive learning.

Findings further revealed that clubs, community facilities and events create the scope to develop peer networks with classmates with the same or different cultures and religions for inclusive learning. This impacts positively as this establishes social connections between the

international and domestic students and reduces cultural barriers. This significantly creates opportunities for existing international students to adjust in the diverse cultural environment without mental harassment. “*Taha Wairua*” promotes spirituality and connects the international students with inner self communities and nature to improve mental strength. Findings further revealed that “*Tautoko*” initiative’s financial hardship results positively as it eradicates chronic stress and restores mental resources. It facilitates the international students to retain mental peace and focus on academics without concern of financial wellbeing. In contrast, the student association also provides support for flexible and blended learning. It reflects that the university has a strong technical educational infrastructure that facilitates international students to be involved in online study. This leads to a positive implication as it promotes student engagement and inclusive and flexible learning without any social and cultural clash.

Analysis of the findings also revealed a holistic development approach as the part of wellbeing strategies. These include personalized support services and various extracurricular activities, modern campuses and state-of-the-art facilities. This indicates that institutional wellbeing strategies are aligned with students' benefits including health management, cognitive development and psychological wellbeing to support academic growth. This is quite an effective protective measure and approach by AUT that strengthens the wellbeing strategies and helps international students to make adjustments under the protective health measures. This is the proactive institutional wellbeing strategy that helps AUT to offer progressive and inspiring environment to international students.

Chapter summary

In summary, findings and analysis have shed light on the international students' demographic and wellbeing strategy recorded in the AUT. The findings highlighted that diversification has created a re-opened situation for student mobility. International students' education recovery is largely participated in by Asian countries. The chapter highlighted the increasing dominance of Asian students, mainly from China and India. Besides that, student enrolment is only noticed in postgraduate and undergraduate programs. However, wellbeing strategies have been implemented by AUT through health services, student assistants, and academic support. Therefore, this chapter has focused on demographic and wellbeing patterns within New Zealand higher education.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The chapter “*Discussion*” emphasised on interpretation of the findings for evaluating the demographic transition of international students and AUT wellbeing strategies in the post-COVID era. The implication of the finding was discussed after comparing the different literature for interpretation. Interpretation of the findings aligns with literature, enhancing the validity of the information. Additionally, each discussion of the findings was aligned with theoretical dimensions to make the claims in the discussion valid and authentic. The chapter included three major discussions to support and validate the findings. The first discussion focused on recovery and diversification of international students. The second discussion reflected how Asian students and a certain age profile dominated the international student enrolment. The third discussion deeply analysed the institutional wellbeing strategies considering the demand of the international students. For this purpose, the discussion of the findings was aligned with Berry's Acculturation Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory.

Discussion of recovery and diversification of international students

This discussion emphasised on the interpretation of the findings reflecting recovery and diversification of international students in AUT in the post pandemic period. The discussion significantly reflected the enrolment pattern of international students from various countries, demographic diversification and immigration support that helped in recovery and maintaining international student diversity in the post-pandemic era. Findings revealed that pandemic caused travel restrictions and border closures that further affected students' mobility. The post-COVID period has been identified as a significant change within the New Zealand international student population. This affected the international student enrolment between 2021 and 2022 by reducing the international student's enrolments. This declining trend was supported by Pan (2021), who found that COVID-19 accounted for a decline in financial independence and international student movement for study abroad in New Zealand and Australia. However, AUT recovered from this damage after the normalisation of the pandemic period and experienced continuous growth of international enrolment from 2023 to 2025. This positive increase may be

attributed to AUT's wellbeing strategies and immigration facilities, which helped AUT to improve recovery planning. Aithal and Aithal (2023) argued that the comprehensive support services leave a positive impact on the recruitment and retention process for engaging international students. AUT enrolled more than 4,500 international students from 108 countries in 2026 which indicates a major increase in number in comparison to the growth in domestic students (Auckland University of Technology New Zealand, 2026). This demonstrates the multidimensional approach of AUT to recover and enhance international student enrolment after the pandemic.

The decision to develop a student immigration advisory role and immigration workshops resulted in positive outcomes and was the strategic approach to support diversity. Findings suggested that AUT's student immigration advisory role and immigration workshops offered student visas and post-study visas to the international students. This helped international students to study at AUT and make a transition towards the job market. This can be supported by the literature of Tran et al., (2023) which found that the university provides authorisation to the international students for part-time work following the immigration work policy of New Zealand. This significantly contributed to giving equal opportunities to international students irrespective of nationality and community.

Findings revealed that AUT promoted student diversification by allowing international students originating from 108 countries by 2026. China, India and Vietnam remained the top three dominant source markets for international students between 2020 and 2026. Additionally, AUT enrolled international students originating from South Korea, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Canada, the United States and other countries, which eradicated the problem of limited international students. This aligned with Pawar (2025) who stated that diversification is responsible for increasing institutional resilience and minimising the risk of overdependence on a limited number of markets. In the case of AUT, international student diversity was promoted due to the origin of the students from Pacific, Asian and European.

The analysis of the findings also revealed that AUT experienced growth in the international student diversity in terms of the level of studies. AUT experienced growth in postgraduate students, bachelor's degree, graduate programme and diploma and certificate. This indicates the inclination in the number of students in diverse programmes, which might help to double revenue. This can also be effective in pushing the number of international students

upward in 2021. However, findings revealed that most of the international students enrolled in the postgraduate programme, which strengthened their profile for employability and migration. This can be aligned with *Berry's Acculturation Theory*, which demonstrates the dimension of retention of the native culture of individuals and adoption of the host culture (Sidler *et al.*, 2021). Tran, Blackmore and Rahimi (2021) stated that international students experienced student visa facilities and student immigration advisory. It was the administrative support provided by AUT that helped international students to take admission into higher studies. As per "*Berry's Acculturation Theory*", the concept of assimilation demonstrates the adoption of cultural norms of a host culture over their original culture (Sidler *et al.*, 2021). Student diversity promotes a supportive culture for non-native students. These develop diverse and progressive cultures that increase the adaptability of new trends and cultures, irrespective of their cultural background. Overall, AUT experienced major enhancement in international student growth, demographic diversity and post-COVID recovery.

Discussion of Asian student dominance and age profile among international students in New Zealand

This discussion majorly focused on evaluating the postgraduate enrolment pattern and age profile of the international students to explore the dominance of Asian international students and age profile for higher study in AUT. This discussion analysed the findings and explored the immigration opportunities, evaluated digital learning preferences and cultural adaptation. This significantly developed the foundation for the demographic transition and Asian student participation in AUT. From the above analysis of the findings, it can be discussed that AUT experienced significant growth in Asian students in the post-pandemic period. Most of the students from Asian countries, including India, China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Myanmar and others, are enrolled in large numbers compared to other continents. It reflects that international students are coming from a particular source of destinations in a higher number which is increasing the dominance of the students from a particular continent. It aligns with Collins (2021) who found Asian students' enrolment was quite high because of the emerging skill gaps in the international market, enhancing demand for international qualifications and career advancement. India and China remained major dominators in international student enrolment. However, consistent growth in the number of international students was also seen from other

Asian countries as well, which includes Vietnam, Taiwan, Bangladesh and Nepal. This indicates the balanced growth in the Asian students, which made the international student populations diverse. This can be supported by the study of Liu, Ran and Jia (2022) that revealed that immigration opportunities occurred after the post-pandemic period, which attracted the Asian students to study and work in New Zealand. This indicates the policy flexibility that enhanced the population of Asian students in AUT. Analysis of findings revealed that Chinese students remained highly dominant in numbers compared to Indian international students. The unemployment rate in China was quite high during and immediately after COVID, which also forced Chinese students to migrate for study and work in New Zealand. This aligns with Gao and Brown (2023) who found the Chinese students had the intention to gain a safe learning and work environment. Wellbeing strategy and flexible immigration workshops attract the Chinese students to study abroad and work for stability. Students from China also gave major priority to financial wellbeing and enrolled into higher study in New Zealand due to fair and equal opportunity of funding during study and post work facilities.

From the above given analysis, it can also be discussed that most of the students are enrolled in the postgraduate programme. Higher numbers of international students were admitted to postgraduate programmes. Though most postgraduate admissions included Indian and Chinese students, the postgraduate programme also experienced a major enhancement in admissions from Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. It can be aligned with study by Omisakin and Kularatne (2023) that revealed that postgraduate programmes significantly help international students to receive the post-study visa to work full-time following the New Zealand immigration policy. Findings revealed that most of the students enrolled were under the age of 25. It indicates that younger individuals dominate the age profile for undergraduate programmes. This age of students enrolled in post-graduate programmes to develop the skills and academic competence considering career priority. The major reason behind this is that younger international students give a major priority to international education to utilise the opportunity that has emerged due to specialised skills and labour market requirements.

The findings further revealed that younger international students give a major priority to hybrid education and digital learning Technology. However, post-graduates and young people also face language challenges, financial management issues and homesickness. In support, Strielkowski (2022) revealed that the university offers financial assistance to international

students and develops the infrastructure to offer digital learning with multiple language facilities. This causes growth of Asian student dominance and demographic shift of international students based on age profile. This can be supported by *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory*, which focuses on the accomplishment of the needs of individuals (Saif, 2024). Theory indicates that accomplishment of the individual's demand supports wellbeing and develops strong relationships and loyalty. In this case, post-graduates utilised the flexibility and convenience offered by the university to fulfil self-actualisation needs. In this regard, international students utilize opportunities for career development and employment to gain financial stability in the future. The social support is provided by offering a digital platform with multilingual facilities that help to develop a sense of belongingness. This reduces the language barriers and homesickness issues by meeting the cultural adjustment needs.

Discussion of institutional wellbeing strategy for meeting the needs of international students

This discussion put major emphasis on analysing the institutional wellbeing strategies implemented by AUT for international students after COVID-19. The discussion incorporated an evaluation of the pastoral care, financial assistance, community support and accommodations, which played a crucial role in supporting safety, wellbeing and inclusion. Through analysis of the findings, it can be discussed that institutional wellbeing strategies implemented by AUT remained highly efficient in fulfilling the needs of the international students. AUT offers comprehensive health and mental wellbeing support through campus clinics and centres that offer affordable healthcare support. “Puawaitanga” offered phone counselling sessions that significantly eradicated the anxiety, depression and isolation of the international students (Puāwaitanga, 2021). This indicates communication technologies were used to offer wellbeing support through counselling sessions to cover many students in a short time period to improve student's wellbeing. It aligns with Fronek et al., (2023) who revealed that health and safety support are given higher priority and 24/7 emergency services are offered to international students. The programme offers immediate treatment solutions and health guidance to the students following the health safety policy. This remains quite effective in fulfilling the safety needs of the international students. Vaccination helps in protecting the international students from multiple diseases and supports their academic wellbeing. It is identified as the progressive

approach where major priority is given to protect the health of the students through support of the entire health advisory team. The gym, club and recreation centre offer fitness and psychological support to international students. These facilities meet the physical, mental and health safety needs of the international students. Priestley et al., (2022) supported this by exploring that health safety infrastructure and digital support strengthen the institutional wellbeing strategies. Crisis intervention addresses the needs of the students, such as funding, peer support and others that improve mental wellbeing.

From analysing the findings, it can be further discussed that “Pastoral Care Code of Practice 2021” creates scope for offering academic, social and personal support. Using this standard, AUT successfully maintains the consistent standards for tertiary education. AUT offers residential support to the international students that meet the needs of accommodation immediately after admission. This aligns with the study of Erickson et al., (2026) who found “*Pastoral Care*” provides cultural support and dispute resolutions. These significantly develop an inclusive environment and solve academic and education-related problems of international students. Moreover, the pastoral care framework enabled AUT to design systems that eradicate unfair treatment and poor quality of service and improve decisions, information, supervision and facilities.

From the analysis of the findings, it can be discussed that club and community facilities and events are organised by the “*Auckland University of Technology Student Association (AUTSA)*”. “Taha Wairua” spiritual wellbeing supports are responsible for increasing mental peace and maintaining psychological balance among the international students. “Tautoko” initiatives reduce the psychological pressure by reducing the financial hardship. This fulfills the financial and cognitive needs of the international students, which positively influences their health and wellbeing. In support of the finding, Mendoza, Venables and Linden (2026) revealed that inclusive learning is supported by digital and online learning support. This blended learning support helps the international students to eradicate academic stress through improving communication virtually. Through findings, it can be discussed that AUT offers personalised support, a modern campus, extracurricular activities and state-of-the-art facilities. This accomplishes the academic and wellbeing needs of international students through holistic support.

These institutional wellbeing strategies can be aligned with *Maslow's hierarchy of needs Theory*. This theory reveals that psychological safety, love and belonging are the major needs of individuals that are required to be met (Mustofa, 2022). This theory gives major priority to the health safety and belongings needs that encourages the individuals to develop the network with others. The supportive approach creates the scope for maintaining wellbeing for the individuals for the long term. Health safety support and advisory roles help to accomplish the safety needs, which further influence enrolment in the post-COVID period. *“Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners”* improves tertiary education standards that fulfil the accommodation needs. It also resolves the disputes between domestic and international students through the development of students' complaints and support systems. Maslow's hierarchy of needs considers personal security and resource management as the higher priority. Spiritual initiative connects the international students psychologically and physically which reduces the stress level (Davis & Came, 2022). Additionally, it also increases the students to gain better resilience and develop prosocial behaviour. Blended learning and peer support develop a network, digital resource access and assistance. These institutional wellbeing strategies remain effective to support the health and safety of international students.

Chapter Summary

The chapter focused on analysing and evaluating the demographic transition of international students and wellbeing strategies in AUT post-COVID. This chapter discussed post-COVID recovery and international student diversification. It demonstrated that the number of international students decreased during COVID, which created a student shortage. After the pandemic, flexible visa policies and wellbeing initiatives significantly supported international students' mobility, which helped to recover and fill the student gap. Furthermore, the chapter evaluated growth of Asian student dominance and age profile that accelerated the international students' enrolment in AUT. China and India are the two top destination sources from where international students rolled in the huge number in higher study. Young individuals of around 25 years of age demonstrated a major dominance in the enrolment. AUT's institutional wellbeing strategies were discussed through thematic analysis, which also indicated the approach to fulfil the needs of the international students while pursuing higher education. AUT is responsible for offering accommodation, funding, learning facilities and peer network. It always remains quite

effective to reduce the sense of isolation, financial and academic stress among the international students to promote their wellbeing. Offering health safety facilities also remains crucial for the international students to opt for higher education in AUT.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Conclusion

Research performed an investigation to analyse and evaluate the demographic shift of international students and wellbeing strategies implemented by AUT in the post-COVID period. The research discussed post-COVID recovery and significant changes in international student enrolment, which found that travel restrictions and immediate pandemic effects affected student enrolment in 2022. However, international students started to increase in 2023 due to lifting travel restrictions, open international student admissions and Visa flexibility. This creates an opportunity for the international students from China, India, Japan, Thailand, South Korea and different parts of the world to take admission in higher studies at AUT. It has been found that the majority of the international students sought admission in the postgraduate programme to make a transition into post-study work.

The finding also revealed that AUT experienced a significant increase in the number of Asian students compared to students from other continents. Though students from China and India were higher in numbers, Thailand, Japan, Myanmar, Vietnam, Nepal and others also sought admission for higher education studies. The unemployment rate in Asian countries, the increasing skill gap and flexible immigration policy in New Zealand attracted Asian students to take admission into higher studies to gain work opportunities later. The majority of the postgraduate students were below the age of 25 years, and a very small percentage of international students were above the age of 40. These younger international students also prepare a digital learning and hybrid education environment and give priority to improve employability, utilise the labour market opportunities and gain specialised skills.

It can also be concluded that the institutional wellbeing strategy of AUT was quite effective in meeting the international students' needs and attracted them to higher study enrolment after COVID-19. AUT has a campus clinic and centres that offer low-cost healthcare services, Puawaitanga initiative offers phone counselling and gym facilities, and recreation centres improve physical fitness and mental health strongly. The AUT and the immunisation advisory centre also provide vaccination support to the students to protect them from multiple diseases. AUT follows the *"pastoral care of tertiary and international learners"* code of practice. This significantly eradicated the accommodation concerns of the students by availing

presidential facilities and developing a complaint system to control the unfair treatment and to address the safety needs of international students. The AUT student association played a crucial role in promoting diversity by offering club and community facilities. Spiritual wellbeing is supported by the “Taha Wairua” initiative and financial challenges are addressed by the “Tautoko” initiative, which accomplishes the financial and psychological safety of international students. As a result, this helps to provide holistic support to international students by addressing their learning and mental support needs.

Linking with Objectives

Meeting research objectives is a significant part of the research, which increases the validation and authentication. This research has significantly met all three objectives of the research.

Linking with Objective 1

The first objective is *“to explore the changes in the international student population trends in the post-COVID period (2020-2026) experienced by AUT University”*. For this purpose, the literature review presented literary arguments to evaluate the uneven recovery for student mobility, international student diversification and source countries and major transitions in the student hybrid learning model. The literature claims were thoroughly supported by the findings that perform documentation analysis. The finding utilised AUT published data to explore the growth of international students from 2021 to 2026. This revealed that the diversity was enhanced in the international student demographics due to the help from the student immigration advisory that attracted the students worldwide. This made the international student’s population diverse by attracting students from Pacific, Asian and European communities. These significantly helped the researcher to present strong facts and meet the first objective of the research successfully.

Linking with Objective 2

The second objective is *“to evaluate the demographic changes (such as changes in country of origin, enrolment levels, age profile, and level of study) experienced by the international students at AUT University after the COVID-19 period”*. To meet this objective, the literature reviews the previous studies to explore the demographic transitions based on the country of origin, significant changes in the enrolment level and level of studies. To support the

literary claim, thematic analysis using AUT documentation discussed that Asian students dominated the enrolments in a UT between 2020 and 2025. Most of the Asian students below 25 years of age sought admission in the postgraduate programmes to utilise the opportunity of post-study work. The study included evidence that demonstrated international students sought admissions in postgraduate bachelor's degree, graduate programme and diploma in certificate. The overall indicates the demographic transition in terms of country of origin, age profile, enrolment level and level of study. This indicates that the second objective of the research has also been met successfully.

Linking with Objective 3

The third objective is *“to examine the institutional wellbeing strategies as the responses of AUT in meeting the needs of international students following the post-COVID era”*. To meet the last objective, the literature deeply analysed the mental health and counselling services, flexible and inclusive learning models, peer support and social integration programmes. The findings implemented a documentation analysis approach and revealed that the health and mental wellbeing supports are given by *“campus clinic, Puawaitang initiative and immunisation advisory centre”* which includes virtual counselling and vaccination support. The study also discussed the role of the *“Pastoral Care code of practice and framework”* in providing residential support and resolving the students' complaints. Social integration and student engagement are promoted through the *“Taha Wairua”* spirituality concept and *“Tautoko”* initiatives under the support of the AUT student association. Blended learning support and culture-responsive education methods meet the learning needs and help to develop the peer network that positively influences wellbeing. These institutional wellbeing strategies significantly help to meet the needs of safety, accommodation and academics that have a direct impact on the health of international students. Therefore, it can also be concluded that the third objective of the research has been met successfully.

Recommendations

Multiple recommendations can be given to improve the diversity in the international student demographics and improve the wellbeing strategies. The following recommendations are given below:

Recommendation 1: Recruitment strategy for strengthening international student diversification

It is recommended that AUT effectively design the recruitment strategies to give major priority to international student diversity. For this purpose, AUT should develop partnerships with schools, educational institutions, and education agents in diverse countries, including Latin America, Vietnam, Nepal, Thailand and others. This recruitment strategy might be quite effective in increasing the number of international students and reducing the dependence on the limited Asian countries, such as China and India (Ponce & Escuadra, 2024). This recruitment strategy might be quite effective to bring enrolment stability for a long period and improve the cultural diversity for the growth of international students.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen international student integration and cultural inclusion

Cultural parameters are the crucial factors that influence the demographic transition and wellbeing of international students. In this regard, it is required to develop inclusive programmes such as inter-cultural student meetings, collaborative learning projects and highly diversified community engagement events (Assefa, 2025). This might create an opportunity to promote the interaction between international and domestic students, which can be helpful for the students to know about different cultural parameters and set up unity. AUT should have organised the orientation programmes for international students throughout the academic year rather than at the admission period. This might be quite helpful to develop a multi-cultural campus environment and help to support students psychologically by developing a sense of belonging.

Recommendation 3: Development of multi-dimensional wellbeing and mental support

AUT should focus on organised multilingual wellbeing services and virtual counselling programmes. This might enable the international students who speak different languages to share the problems without any hesitation that influence their mental health (Karim & Bakri, 2024). Additionally, the AUT is required to develop a multidimensional intervention system that can collaboratively eradicate the academic pressure, homesickness and financial challenges of the students. Peer mentoring support can be provided that can promote communication and exchange of information related to mental and physical health. It brings psychological relief through the development of a strong peer network. This might be quite effective in eradicating the issue of social isolation among international students.

Research Limitations

This research consists of multiple limitations, which create the foundation for further improvement in the future. They incorporated only one case study of AUT rather than the evidence of multiple institutions and universities in New Zealand. Therefore, this single case study's focus is responsible for bringing a major limitation to the generalisability of findings in the international context. Therefore, institutional wellbeing strategies might not be implemented universally for all universities, as different institutions implement different wellbeing approaches. However, the lack of primary data is another limitation in this research. This study is highly dependent on the AUT published data, which is not highly effective in collecting human perceptions and first-hand experience due to a lack of interviews or surveys. Therefore, this can also be considered one of the existing limitations of the research.

Future Scope

This research creates the scope for future implementation through the implementation of longitudinal evaluation of wellbeing strategies. In this case, the investigation can be performed to analyse the influence of institutional wellbeing strategies and potential success and barriers in this context. This might be quite effective to analyse the psychological health, international student retention and engagement approach and post-study outcomes as a future implication. Moreover, there is a scope to carry out the research through a primary method, which includes interviews and surveys. This might be quite effective to collect the relevant evidence regarding the cultural adaptability, wellbeing needs and significant changes needed to be implemented within the institutional support service. These inevitably remain helpful to design highly responsive and result-oriented wellbeing strategies to engage international students. However, demographic changes of the international students can be broadly discussed through comparative multi-university research. In this case, the study might incorporate the case studies of different universities in New Zealand to analyse and evaluate the effective practices and institutional differences. This research might also be helpful to investigate multiple approaches to make the recruitment and inclusion process highly standardized and diversified for creating the possibility of higher enrolment of international students.

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