Master of Education Students' Perceptions of Face-To-Face, Online, and Hybrid Instructional Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate how MEd students perceive face-to-face, online, and hybrid modes of teaching and the extent to which these modalities support or hinder their learning within the specific context of Eastern University, Sri Lanka. a quantitative approach and utilized a survey design. 60 students were selected as the sample using an accidental sampling technique. A questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants. Descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyse the data, and SPSS software was used to generate numerical outputs, tables, figures, and percentages for interpretation. Consent was obtained from every participant, and the data were permanently destroyed at the end of the study. The study revealed that the majority of students prefer the on-site mode of delivery, and the majority of them were positive about the hybrid mode of delivery. Background of the students, such as gender, civil status, and family responsibility, influences their attitudes. However, a minority of students prefer the online mode of delivery, and it is influenced by distance from their hometown and the university. This study recommends considering the background information of every student when planning the mode of delivery of the programme, and adopting the hybrid mode of delivery based on situational awareness. Meanwhile, connection issues, technical tool-related issues, and enhancement-related issues need to be addressed during the online mode of delivery.

Keywords: Perception, Face-to-Face, Online, Hybrid, post-COVID-19 era

INTRODUCTION

A postgraduate programmme is highly significant for educational professionals, offering substantial benefits in career advancement, deepening expertise, increasing earning potential, and fostering personal development. A Master of Education (MEd) programme gives you in-depth knowledge and insight into the education system and how it works. It equips you with the tools and learning you need to effect change in the classroom and at the administrative level (Tsimtsiou et al, 2010).

In this background over the past several decades, the MEd has emerged as a highly sought-after qualification among teachers in Sri Lanka. Entry into the MEd programme typically requires a Bachelor of Education or a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), along with other recognized credentials. Upon completion, many teachers become eligible for career advancement and promotions within the school system.

Several state universities across the island have offered the MEd programme for the last forty years; due to sustained high demand, these institutions often apply selection tests and interviews to screen applicants. The Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL), through its Department of Education and Childcare under the Faculty of Arts & Culture, has provided the MEd programme for more than two decades in the medium of Tamil. It is the SLQF Level - 9 programme. Master's by coursework. It is a one-year postgraduate programme comprising two semesters and nine taught courses, including English and Information Technology, in addition, a research thesis component. With the establishment of a dedicated Faculty of Graduate Studies in 2024, responsibility for the MEd programme at EUSL was formally transferred to this new faculty.

Due to the shortage of permanent academic staff in the Department of Education and Childcare—primarily resulting from recent retirements—the Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL), frequently relies on visiting

lecturers from other state universities, including the Open University of Sri Lanka, the University of Colombo, and the University of Jaffna. In addition, a few retired academics from EUSL and a small number of internal academic staff also contribute to the teaching activities.These academics provide instruction, while students come from various parts of the island, with many lectures scheduled on weekends to accommodate working teachers.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MEd programme was delivered entirely on-site. During the pandemic, instruction shifted to an online format using platforms such as Zoom; in the post-COVID-19 era, EUSL adopted a hybrid model combining online and in-person sessions. This shift has also been influenced by the broader economic crisis in Sri Lanka, which increased transportation costs and made commuting difficult for many students.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

A substantial proportion of students enrolled in the MEd programme at EUSL reside outside the Batticaloa District, including areas such as Colombo, Kandy, Hatton, and Badulla. These students are required to travel more than 10–12 hours to attend face-to-face sessions. As Friday is a working day for teachers, many students begin their journey on Friday night, often by bus. For those coming from towns without direct transport routes, multiple bus transfers are required, further increasing travel-related fatigue. Consequently, students frequently arrive at the university exhausted and, in some cases, are observed to be drowsy during lectures, resulting in reduced concentration and engagement.

In addition to travel fatigue, these students incur high financial and social costs. They must stay overnight in Batticaloa on Saturday and bear expenses related to accommodation and meals. After completing lectures on Sunday, they travel back to their home districts despite the subsequent working day, causing physical strain. Moreover, they remain away from their families, including young children, for two full days and three nights—an added emotional and social burden.

Students residing within the Batticaloa District also experience challenges in attending face-to-face sessions. Although their travel time is comparatively shorter, they still spend considerable time commuting from various parts of the district and remain away from their families for approximately seven hours each day of the sessions.

Online sessions, introduced as an alternative mode of delivery, also present several limitations. A considerable number of students experience poor network connectivity, which disrupts their active participation. Additionally, students often face interruptions from family members, including children, as well as unexpected visitors at home. Such circumstances create significant challenges for students when attending online classes. Lecturers face difficulties in monitoring students' facial expressions and non-verbal cues, making it challenging to assess comprehension. Furthermore, some lecturers lack adequate confidence in using online teaching applications. Collaborative activities such as group work and presentations are also perceived as less effective in the online environment.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the availability of both face-to-face and online modes of delivery in the MEd programme, students continue to encounter significant academic, logistical, financial, and pedagogical challenges. However, limited empirical evidence exists on how these challenges influence postgraduate students' learning experiences and their perceptions of different instructional modes. Therefore, the research problem is to investigate how MEd students perceive face-to-face, online, and hybrid modes of teaching and the extent to which these modalities support or hinder their learning within the specific context of Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

Therefore, the problem addressed by this study is the lack of evidence on postgraduate students' perceptions of different instructional modes in the MEd programme, and how these modalities support or hinder their learning in the post–COVID-19 era context.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online Programmes

Online MEd programmes practice various delivery methods, often blended (online + in-person) or fully online, featuring weekend live sessions, asynchronous content (videos, readings), interactive platforms (forums, group projects), and sometimes on-campus exams for local students, offering flexibility for working educators through digital tools and diverse learning activities like case studies and digital portfolios (Klepikova et al, 2021). However, the mode of delivery may influence the differences in motivation to choose a course, as well as perceptions of its overall advantages and disadvantages. It can affect general levels of student satisfaction, which might be attributed to the mode of delivery of the course (Johnston & Challis, 1994). Moreover, Sava et al (2010) found that, in spite of being very favorable to the online offer, they were more content with face-to-face delivery, suggesting that, like this, they met professors from abroad, a highly appreciated opportunity. These findings highlight students' perceptions of online delivery mode and its impact on them.

Moreover, there are challenges in the fully online delivery, such as, inherent to online learning that must be addressed to optimize student-centered learning. These issues relate to: clarity of communication; difficulties in negotiating teamwork and in building relationships; technical demands; learning style preferences; and time commitment (Dyrbye et al, 2010). Meanwhile, student examination results were also compared between the two groups. Asynchronous online teaching and learning methods proved to be an acceptable alternative to classroom-based teaching for both students and staff. Educational outcomes were similar for both groups (de Jong, 2013), which shows that both online and onsite deliveries have the same impact on the outcome of the programme.

Challenges in Onsite Delivery

In a Master of Education (M.Ed) programme, the face-to-face mode of delivery refers to the traditional educational setting where students and instructors meet physically in a classroom at regularly scheduled times. This mode is also known as in-person or on-campus learning and is characterized by direct, real-time interaction without the physical separation of teacher and learner (Nage-Sibande & Morolong, 2020). However, there are more challenges in face-to-face delivery. Accordingly, it was found in face-to-face delivery that the human resources, instructional materials, and physical facilities were not adequate (Onduso, 2017). Moreover, the findings reveal that when compared with face-to-face, M-University's e-learning facilities are adequate and accessible to users, and most teachers are comfortable with the utilization of various facilities during classes, compared to most public tertiary institutions (Eze et al, 2018). Therefore, an alternative mode of delivery should be practiced in the field of education.

Hybrid Mode of Delivery

A hybrid learning delivery mode combines online digital learning with traditional face-to-face classroom instruction, often simultaneously, allowing students flexibility to learn in-person or remotely using video conferencing and Learning Management Systems (LMS) for a comprehensive, personalized experience. It bridges online and in-person methods, enabling instructors to teach both physical and virtual students at the same time, requiring technology for video, audio, and digital content delivery to ensure engagement for everyone (Kenny et al, 2025).

King Chan (2010) conducted a study that the initial application reported in this paper represents the first step in a longitudinal study investigating outcomes from the hybrid learning approach. A hybrid mode of suitability in influencing learner-centred practice, enhancing the learning and teaching experience, and assisting students to adapt to new learning situations is reported. Finally, the potential to develop the Model to provide teachers and learners with a simple, standards-based framework to traverse the continuum of learning design is discussed (Masson, 2008). In the hybrid mode performance of students in the hybrid class was no worse than the traditional class. Students were satisfied with online activities, but class evaluations were somewhat lower. The instructor found student learning benefits, but hybrid teaching was more time-consuming. The results suggest that planning educators should test and evaluate hybrid teaching for a wide range of planning courses (Willson, 2008). The findings ensure that, in the hybrid mode, students' performance improves and they are more satisfied.

Aim of the study

To investigate how MEd students perceive face-to-face, online, and hybrid modes of teaching and the extent to which these modalities support or hinder their learning within the specific context of Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers use the quantitative approach and survey design to collect and analyze numerical data, allowing them to identify patterns and generalize findings from a large sample to a broader population (Gul, 2023). Accordingly, the present study followed a quantitative approach and utilized a survey design.

A total of 71 students were enrolled in the MEd programme at the EUSL, and 60 students were selected as the sample using an accidental sampling technique. A questionnaire was selected to collect data from a large number of participants. A questionnaire was selected to collect data collection. The questionnaire was validated with the support of experts in the field of education.

The pilot study was conducted, and the Cronbach's Alpha value obtained was 0.882. The questionnaire was administered in person. Descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyse the data, and SPSS software was used to generate numerical outputs, tables, figures, and percentages for interpretation.

Consent was obtained from every participant, and the data were permanently destroyed at the end of the study. The limitation of the study was that out of the 71 selected participants, only 60 responded to the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data analysis has two parts

Part I: Personal Information

Part II: The Master of Education programme-related data analysis

Part I Personal Information

According to Figure 1, the majority (53%) of students are female, and 47% of students are male. In the Sri Lankan educational profession frequency of females is higher than males, and it is like the sample population. Also, a previous finding similarly mentioned that women, on average, outnumber men and are more successful in higher education (Severiens & Ten Dam, 2012).
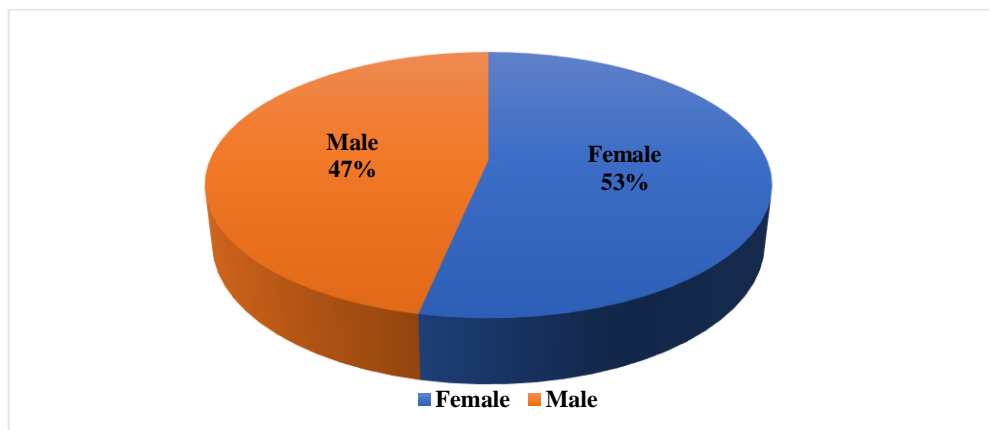

Figure 1: Frequency of Gender

The following Figure 2 describes the civil status of the students, according to the analysis majority (92%) of students are married, and 8% of students are unmarried. Generally, most of the postgraduate students are married

in the Sri Lankan context, and this may also influence the enhancement of academic activities. Findings of some studies explore the same experiences of married students. The results revealed that stress, financial stress, and social support are the greatest problems that married students experience (Yaacob, Vaez & Juhari, 2015). Moreover, Movahed et al (2019) found that married students encountered different types of experiences and faced numerous challenges during their studies. The experiences and challenges were related to children, health care, accommodation, climate, and food. As a result, ultimately, these challenges affected their academic performance. In addition, the themes on coping strategies were time management, family, and social support in Malaysia. A study revealed that the married students faced very critical challenges in higher education in Pakistan. Among these challenges, Academic Challenges, Social Challenges, Time Management challenges, Financial Challenges, and Health Challenges were found to be common in the married students at higher education in Pakistan (Tahira, 2023). These kinds of challenges may influence the academic performance of these students.
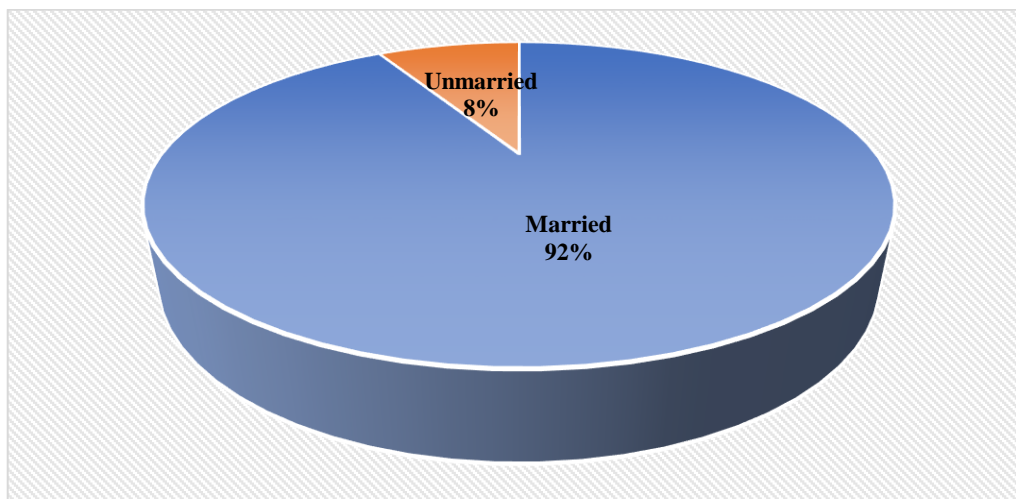

Figure 2: Civil Status of Participants

The following bar chart illustrates the number of children in the families of the students. Accordingly, 18 (30%) students do not have children, 15 (25%) students have one child in their families, 19 (31.7%) students have two children in their families, seven (11.7%) students have three children in their families, and one (1.7%) student has four children in their families. The number of children can also influence the responsibilities of students in these families. a case study reported real-life events of married couples with children, the challenges they faced during the study, and academic performance at the university (Wa-Mbaleka et al, 2015). This study also has several students with children, and it may influence their academic performance.
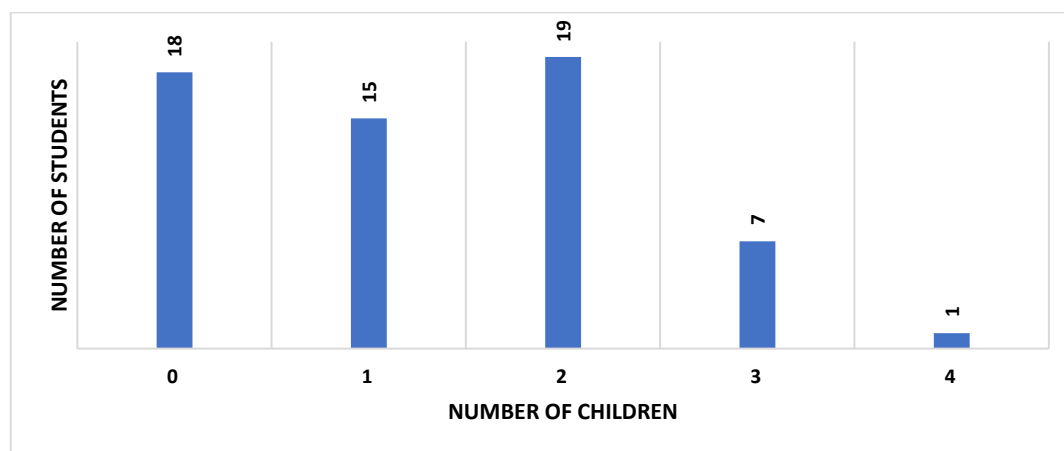

Figure 3: Number of Children in Students' Families

The following diagram shows the partners' jobs. Accordingly, 16 (26.7%) partners of the students have no job, 13 (21.7%) of the students' partners are teachers, six (10%) of the students' partners are development officers,

of the students' partners are doing business, and less than one (3.3%) of the students' partners are doing other jobs. It states that the majority of the students' partners are unemployed or teachers, and it will be more helpful to continue their Master of Education programme. There are five unmarried students in the sample, which explains the high percentage of non-working respondents. Both institutionally and familiarly imposed constraints caused the wife to subordinate her career to that of her husband, as indicated in the division of responsibility for domestic activities, perceived relative values of careers, and satisfaction (Bryson et al, 1976). This finding also highlights the significance of life partners in higher education.
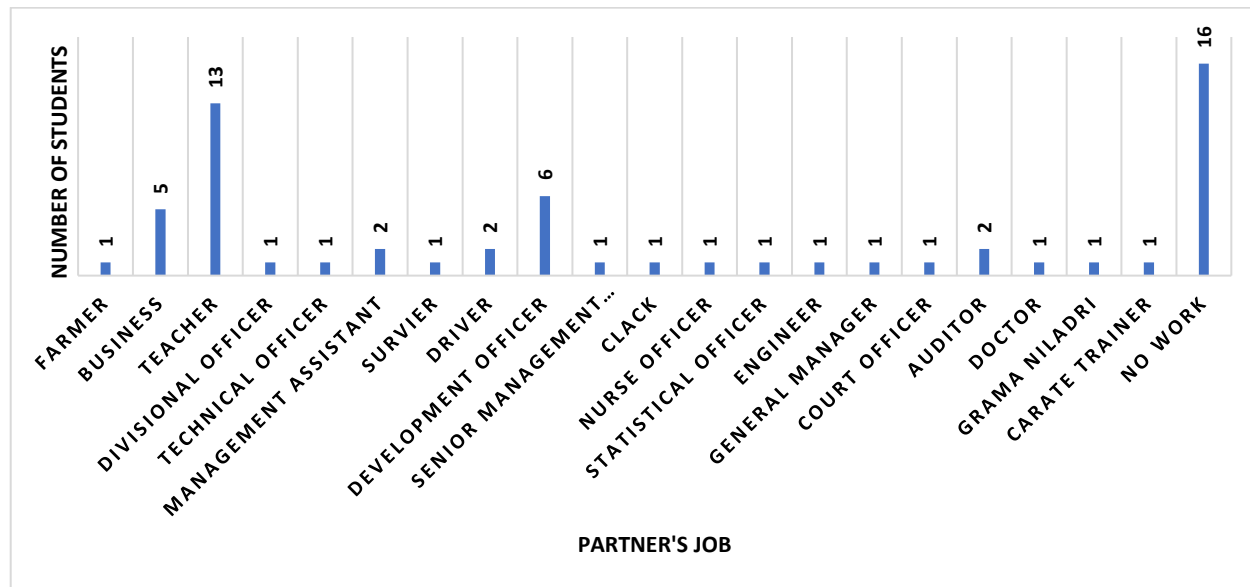

Figure 4: Students' Partners Jobs

The following Figure 5 illustrates the age range of students. Accordingly, 21.7% of students are between 25 and 30 Years old, 41.7% of students are between 31 and 35 Years old, 25% of students are between 36 and 40 Years old, 10% of students are between 41 and 45 Years old, and 1.7% of students are more than 45 years old. The analysis shows that the majority (63.4%) of students are less than 35 years old, and these practices will develop qualified teachers in the field of education. Similarly, Okafor (2017) has recommended that Individuals intending to invest in postgraduate education should be encouraged to do so at an earlier age to enable them to reap optimal benefits from their investments in education. It seems that, current study population's age range is also appropriate for enrolling in a postgraduate programme.
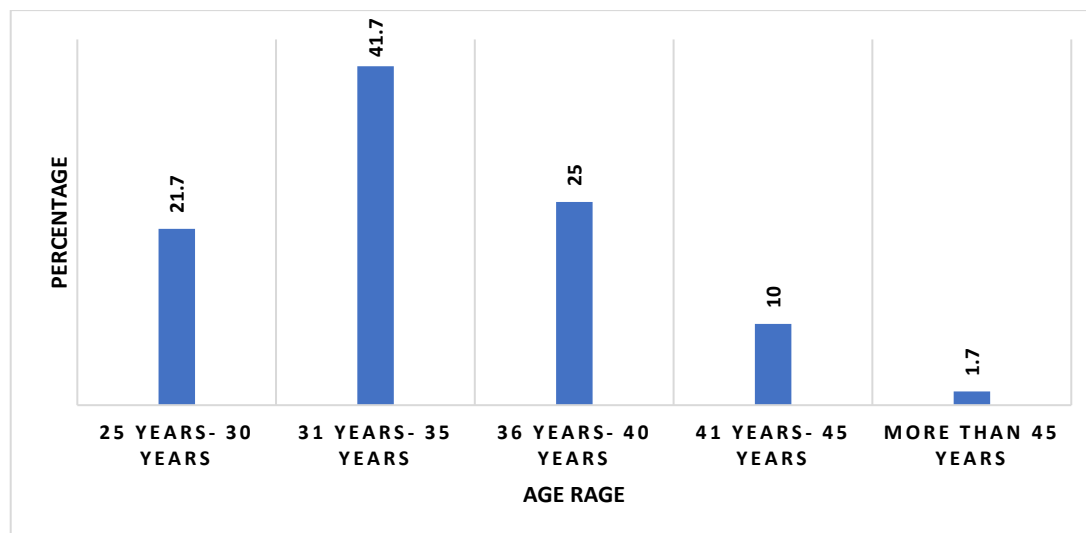

Figure 5: Age Range of Students

The following Figure 6 describes the age range of the students. Accordingly, the majority (58.3%) of students have experience in service from 6 years to 10 years, 16.7% of students have experience in service from 11 years to 15 years, 15% of students have experience in service from 1 year to 5 years, and 5% of students have experience in service for more than 16 years. Angell et al (2008) suggested that the "academic" and "industry links" aspects of service quality are the most critical to postgraduates. The sample of the study also contained students with service experiences.
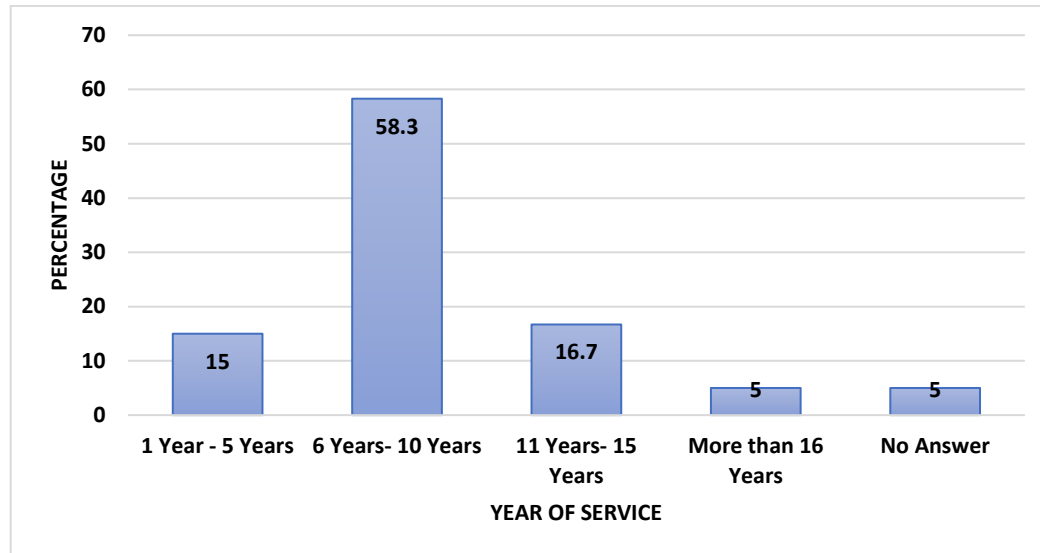

Figure 6: Years of Experience in Services

The following Figure 7 explains the distance from the university to the hometown. Accordingly, 15% of students are from more than 100 km away, and 11.7% of students are from 81 km to 100 km away. It influences the decision in preference for online classes, as Table 1 illustrates. The benefits of learning alongside students from other countries can be enhanced within an online learning environment through the appropriate use of discussion boards and other online learning strategies (Gemmell et al, 2015). Moreover, Harrison et al (2018) emphasized the need for ODL programmes to fully consider individual students' contexts, regardless of where they are in the world, and for these to be embedded in a pedagogical framework that gives due consideration to globally diverse cohorts of students. The current study also has some students from long distances, and the online delivery mode will be a solution.
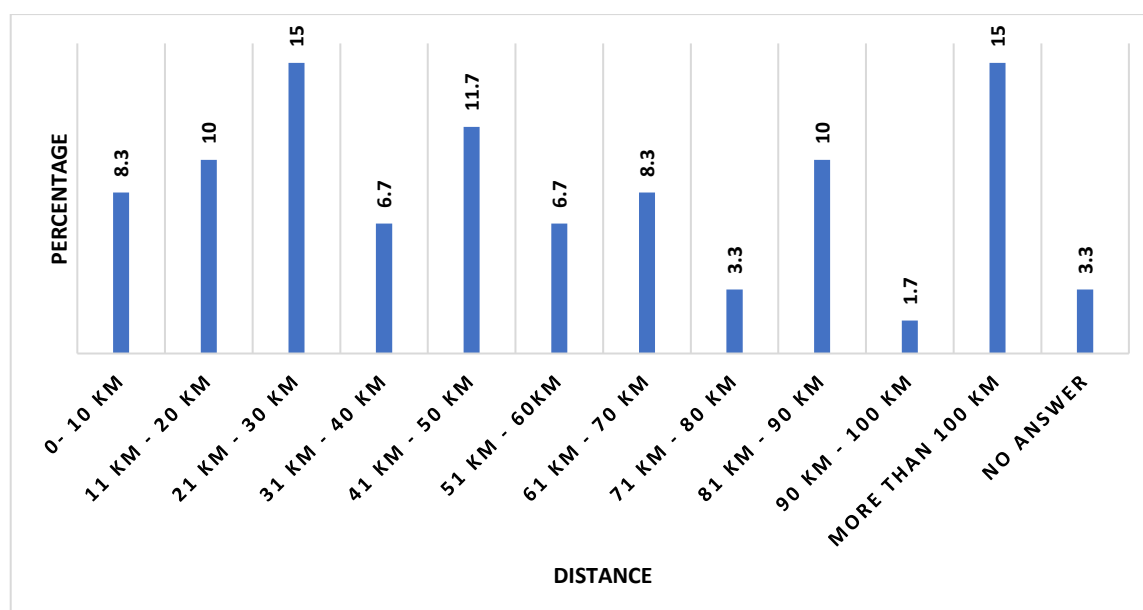

Figure 7: Distance from the University to Hometown

Table 1: Distance Between Home and University and Preference of Mode Crosstabulation

Distance Between Home and University	Preference of Mode				Total
	Onsite	**Online**	**Hybrid**	**No Answer**	
81 km - 90 km	2	4	0	0	6
90 km - 100 km	0	0	1	0	1
More than 100 km	2	5	2	0	9

The following pie chart illustrates the opinions of students enrolled in the Master of Education programme, delivered in a hybrid mode. Accordingly, 30% of students responded, 'it was more beneficial, the majority', (53%) responded 'it was beneficial', however, 5% of students responded, 'it was less beneficial.' It enlightens students who are willing to have on-site classes, even though practicing online delivery fully online. The positive perceptions about hybrid education are often linked to combining the benefits of face-to-face and online education. Students' preferences for their future education highlight both face-to-face and hybrid education (Nikolopoulou, 2022). The findings of the current study are very similar to previous findings mentioned above.
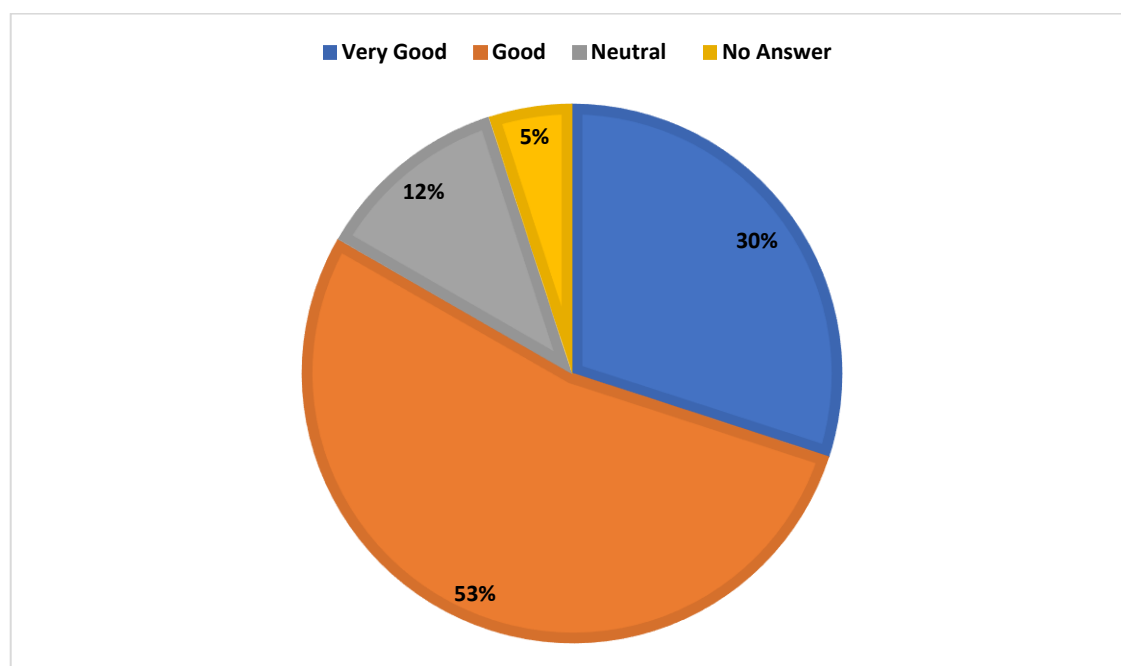

Figure 8: Opinion on the Hybrid Mode of Students

The following figure shows the preference of students for different modes of delivery. Accordingly, the majority (56.7%) of students prefer the on-site mode, meanwhile, less than half (21.7%) of students who prefer the on-site mode of delivery are willing to have an online mode of delivery. 18.3% of students are willing to have a hybrid mode of delivery. It shows that students are willing to have an on-site mode of delivery rather than a fully online delivery. However, Ashida and Ishizaka (2022) found that students' experiences of the sudden change to distance learning suggest that, to ensure a sustainable teaching and learning environment in various contexts, instructors should use class designs that consider distance learning, particularly designs that enhance students' help-seeking, even under normal circumstances. In addition, ensuring sufficient online/virtual spaces for communication among teachers and students is important. These findings contradict the findings of the current study, and it may depend on various factors.
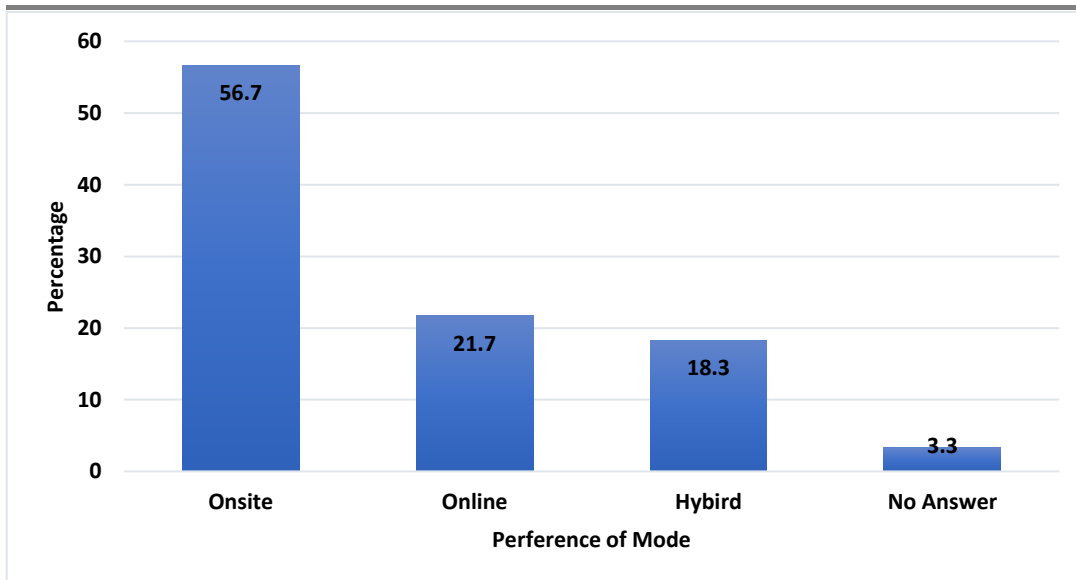
Figure 9: Preference of Delivery Mode

The following Figure 10 shows the challenges faced by students during online delivery. Accordingly, the majority of students responded that connectivity issues (66.7%), technical issues (81.7%), and no enhancement (60%). It describes the students' challenges in relation to the online delivery mode. However, the majority of students (93.3%) mentioned that they do not have issues with time management in the online delivery mode. The review of literature identified that the affordability of digital devices and the availability of Internet services were the major challenges for low- and middle-income economies. The ZOOM platform has been adopted by more than 90% of the education systems (Pinto de Moura et al, 2010). This finding demonstrates that the same challenges are crucial in the current study as well.
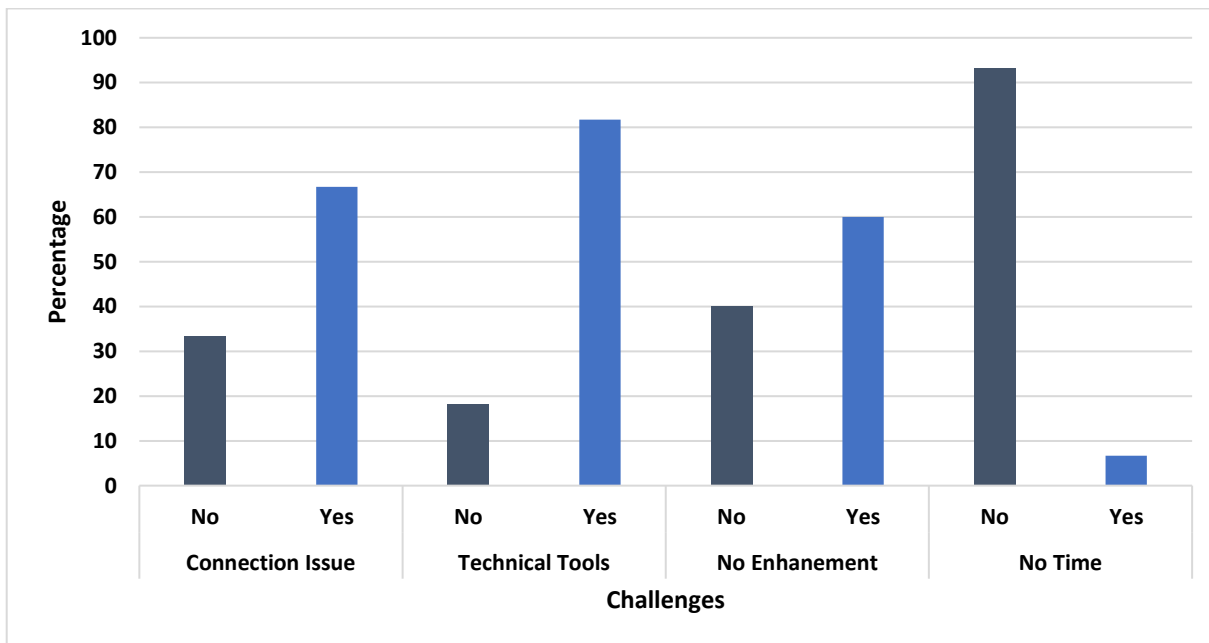

Figure 10. Challenges in Online Delivery Mode

The following Figure 11 shows the opinions of students on the on-site delivery. Accordingly, the majority of students have positive opinions about (76.7%), lecturers' advice (71.7%), interaction (80%), and direct activities (78.3%) in on-site delivery. It will be supportive to practice the full onsite practices in the future. However, the results from a study also indicated that face-to-face and online education are effective training for consumer sciences students, suggesting, however, that both systems should evolve to blended learning (Pinto de Moura et al, 2010). It will be balanced to the challenges faced fully online or fully onsite.
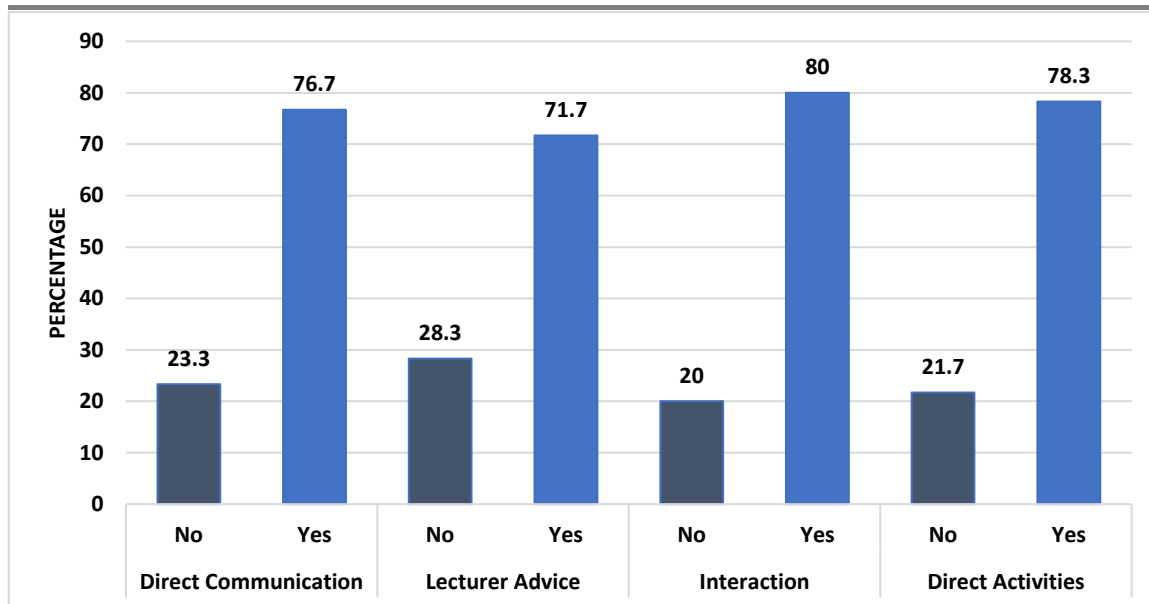
Figure 11: Students' Opinion on Onsite Delivery

The following Figure 12 explains suggestions for improving the hybrid delivery mode. Accordingly, the highest percentage (43.3%) of students suggested that the activity-based classes, 30% of students suggested that the teaching aid should be enhanced, and less than 10% of students suggested that conducting the short-term classes, providing recording, and ensuring internet connection. These suggestions may improve the hybrid delivery mode. Moreover, Bashir et al (2021) are embracing hybrid course delivery, which could offer a solution to ensuring students receive hands-on laboratory experience and face-to-face contact to remain motivated and benefit from the on-campus facilities and support, whilst allowing students some of the flexibility afforded by remote study. It seems the hybrid mode of delivery needs to be improved, even though students have challenges
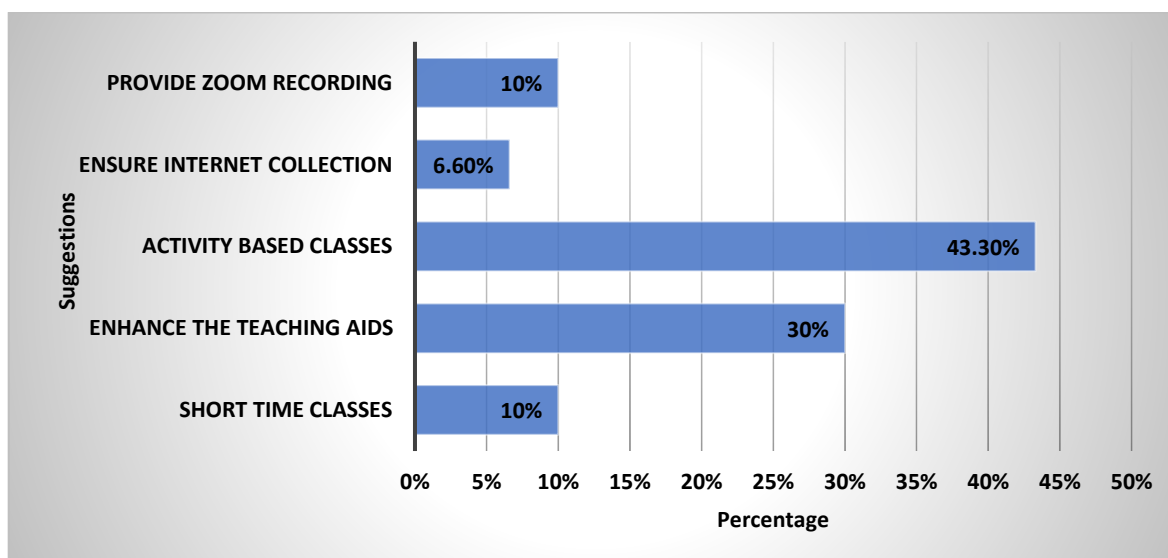

Figure 12: Suggestions to Improve the Hybrid Mode

The following diagram explores the improvement of the Master of Education programme in the future. Accordingly, 35% of students suggested having fully on-site classes, 25% of students suggested having the updated curriculum, 16.6% of students suggested having a hybrid mode of delivery, and 11.6% interactive online classes. However, there are unique suggestions, such as (1.6%) developing a Learning Management System (LMS), and (1.6%) need study leave to follow the programme. Developing an LMS is a more vital part of the online course delivery mode.
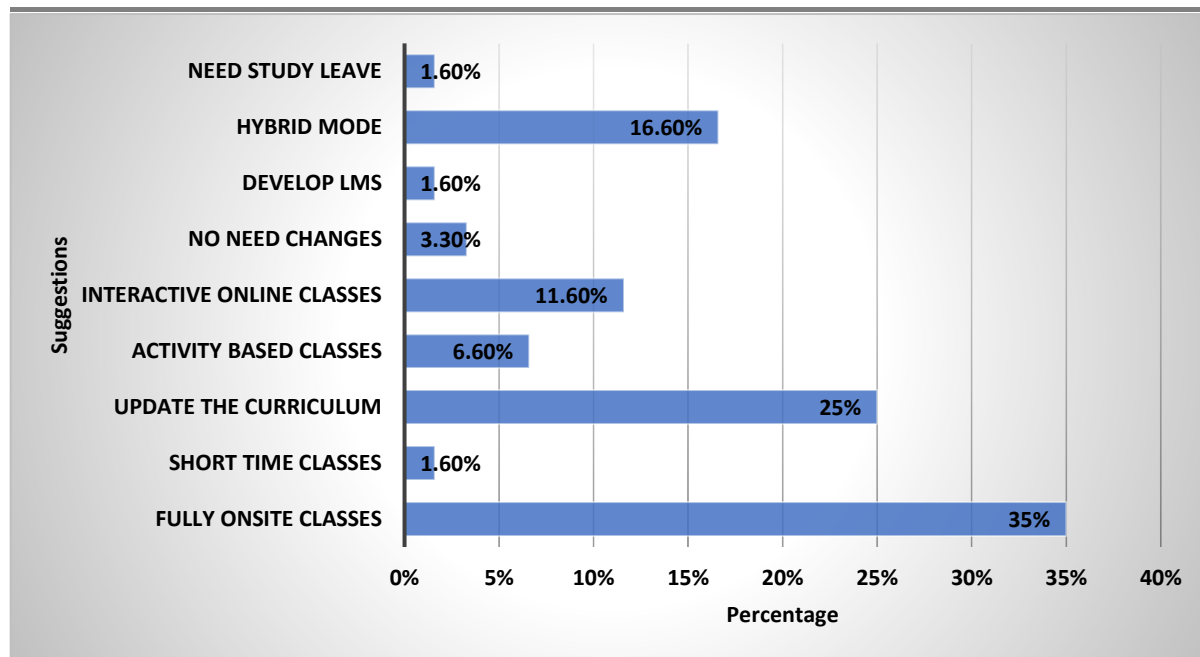
Figure 13: Suggestions for Improving the M.Ed. Programme in the Future

The above findings and discussions illustrate that the majority of females and married students follow the programme. The majority of students have family responsibilities, even though they have support from their partners. Most of the students are young, but they have experience in the field of education. The distance from the hometown to the university may influence the opinions on the hybrid mode of delivery. Students are facing several challenges in the fully online course delivery and are positively perceived regarding on-site course delivery. Students suggested improving the hybrid mode of delivery and the M.Ed. programme in the future.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

Students have different perceptions in relation to the hybrid mode of delivery, gender, civil status, family responsibilities, profession of partners, distance from hometown to the university, age range of the students, and period of service may influence their opinions about the online and hybrid modes of delivery. Moreover, suggestions may improve the future practices of the M.Ed. programme of the university.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study suggests the following recommendations based on the findings.

- The university should consider the background information of every student when planning the mode of delivery of the programme. It will meet the individual needs of the students and provide support to complete the programme.

- The coordination of the M.Ed. programme should consider the hybrid mode of delivery based on situational awareness in the future.

- The coordination of the M.Ed. programme can plan to deliver the theoretical parts in an online mode and practical and assessment-based activities on-site.

- Students can manage their time online; meanwhile, connection issues, technical tool-related issues, and enhancement-related issues need to be addressed during the online mode of delivery.

- Academics need to improve their competencies in using technical tools such as online platforms, communication software, LMS, etc.

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