

Supporting Part-Time Students in a Full-Time World

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Abstract

Globally, widening participation agendas outline ambitious goals to increase student enrolments, with an associated increase in student diversity. Part-time study intersects with all equity groups. However, students who study part time have lower success and retention than their full-time peers. The aim of this study is to identify challenges contributing to this disparity and to determine enablers of part-time student success. A mixed methods research approach was used, including Australian public university sector data and a national survey completed by 965 part-time students from 35 Australian universities. In 2024, 35% of Australian domestic university students were enrolled to study part time and the average success rate was seven percentage points lower than for full-time students. The most common reason for studying part time was the need to work. Part-time students valued quality learning and teaching to help with success, including engaging and inspiring teaching, an easy to navigate learning management system (LMS), and recorded lectures.

Keywords: Part-time; equity; higher education; widening participation; student success.

Introduction

In response to the Australian Universities Accord (the Accord), a review of higher education in Australia, the Australian Government has set an ambitious goal to expand tertiary participation (O'Kane et al., 2024). This involves increasing the working-age tertiary attainment rate from 60% to 80% by 2050. The Accord highlighted the importance of a more equitable system and recommended that university enrolments for four currently underrepresented groups need to reach population parity. The four priority groups are Australian First Nations people; students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds; students with disability; and those from rural, regional, and remote (RRR) areas (O'Kane et al., 2024). Creating a more equitable higher education system is not limited to Australia. Globally, widening participation agendas outline ambitious goals to increase student enrolments, with an associated increase in student diversity (Adefila et al., 2020). Many students now are studying part time, are older, have caring responsibilities, and are employed. Collectively, these students can be described as the “new majority” (Malm & Weber, 2017; Younger et al., 2019).

Part-time students are at a higher risk of both failure and attrition, and from 2019 to 2022, part-time students faced more than twice the risk of dropping out compared with their full-time peers (O'Kane et al., 2024). Consistent with this, studying part time is a significant risk factor for non-completion of a program in Australian universities (Norton et al., 2018). Additionally, a recent analysis of students studying part time at Australian universities from 2011 to 2018 showed that part-time students are more likely to take leave from study than full-time students (Harvey et al., 2025). Part-time study, defined as less than 0.75 equivalent full-time study load (EFTSL), most commonly involves studying four units per year (Norton et al., 2018). Growing numbers of Australian students are choosing to study part time, as evidenced by reduced EFTSL per student in 34 of 38 public



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universities in 2022 (O'Kane et al., 2024). Universities must respond by adapting to meet the diverse needs of part-time student cohorts; however, there is limited research on how institutions can best support part-time students.

Universities have traditionally been designed for full-time students, with minimal competing commitments. From administrative processes to academic expectations and funding models, university systems are skewed toward support for full-time, on-campus students (Malm & Weber, 2017; Younger et al., 2019). As a result, the sector often frames the challenge of supporting students as a problem of student engagement, asking students for proof of commitment to study (Bennett & Burke, 2018). This framing overlooks the reality that part-time students must balance study with paid work, caregiving, and other significant responsibilities or life circumstances, all of which influence students' decisions to discontinue study (O'Kane et al., 2024). The few studies that have specifically investigated part-time students have reported on the demands of balancing work and caring commitments with study and indicate difficulty in accessing university support, contributing to a reduced sense of belonging (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Kember, 1999). Another study found that the number of hours spent in weekly paid employment does not necessarily affect the grades of part-time students, suggesting that factors beyond workload influence academic performance (Darolia, 2014). However, understanding how students balance work and study remains critical, as evidence shows that students benefit from internships, placements, career-related paid work, and casual paid work (Luchinskaya & Tzanakou, 2025).

Part-time students studying in Australia are more likely to be from one of the four government priority groups, and part-time study intersects with multiple underrepresented groups (O'Kane et al., 2024). The barriers to education are generally not single or isolated, and intersectionality theory has been found relevant in an educational setting when considering the number of equity groups to which a student belongs (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Students who are members of two or more of the four priority groups make up approximately 10% of Australian university students, and this cumulative disadvantage is associated with poorer educational outcomes (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Universities need to become more inclusive. Over 20 years ago, Sally Kift developed a Transition Pedagogy Framework as an evidence-based response to support students from all backgrounds through their first year of university (Kift, 2025). Transition pedagogy encompasses First Year Curriculum Principles that incorporate good first year teaching and *just-in-time* and *just-for-me* support. The six principles should be embedded across the first year of university and include transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring (Kift, 2009). Universal design for learning (UDL) is a synergistic framework that aligns with transition pedagogy to create a more inclusive teaching environment (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018). Key elements of UDL include diverse representation, multiple means of expression, and varied opportunities for engagement (CAST, 2024). There is evidence that providing elements of UDL, such as early access to materials, a consistent learning management system (LMS) layout, and access to lecture recordings, supports students (Accardo et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2020; Linden et al., 2025). The growing adoption of UDL in higher education reflects an important shift to embedding inclusive practice into university learning and teaching (Timuş et al., 2024).

There is a significant body of literature on students studying online. Online learning has played a crucial role in widening participation for students from non-traditional backgrounds by accommodating student diversity (Stone, 2017). This includes students who require flexibility to combine online study with other responsibilities, such as work and family commitments, that would otherwise have prevented them from enrolling (Stone, 2017). However, online students do not experience an equivalent level of success. Student retention and completion rates of online students are lower than those of on-campus students (Stone, 2017). Lower success rates can be attributed to a combination of factors, including unclear expectations about university study (Moore & Greenland, 2017), lack of time commitment (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015), lower-quality course materials and delivery (Devlin & McKay, 2016), and decreased accessibility and responsiveness of the teaching staff (Vincenzes & Drew, 2018). It is possible that some of these issues could be ameliorated by embedding principles of transition pedagogy and UDL into online units.

The aim of this study is to identify challenges contributing to the disparity between part-time and full-time students and to determine enablers of part-time student success. This study provides evidence for the importance of recognising our part-time student cohorts and their needs for success.

Methods

A mixed methods research approach was used, including analysis of sector data and a national survey of part-time students. Ethics approval was received by the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee for the data component of this study (H25104) as well as for the survey with part-time students across Australia (H25099).

Semi-aggregated sector data for Australian domestic students enrolled in public universities in 2023 and 2024 were provided by the Department of Education under the Universities Australia data sharing agreement. Due to the semi-aggregated nature of the data, statistical analysis was not possible, and the data are presented as the mean of each group. The cumulative equity group count was calculated by the addition of each of the four priority groups: disability, Australian First Nations, low SES, and RRR. The success rate was calculated by dividing the successful EFTSL by the completed EFTSL and is expressed as a percentage. First-year retention was calculated as the proportion of students who commenced a course in 2023, did not complete, and continued in 2024 divided by the total number of students enrolled who did not complete at any Australian institution in that time frame.

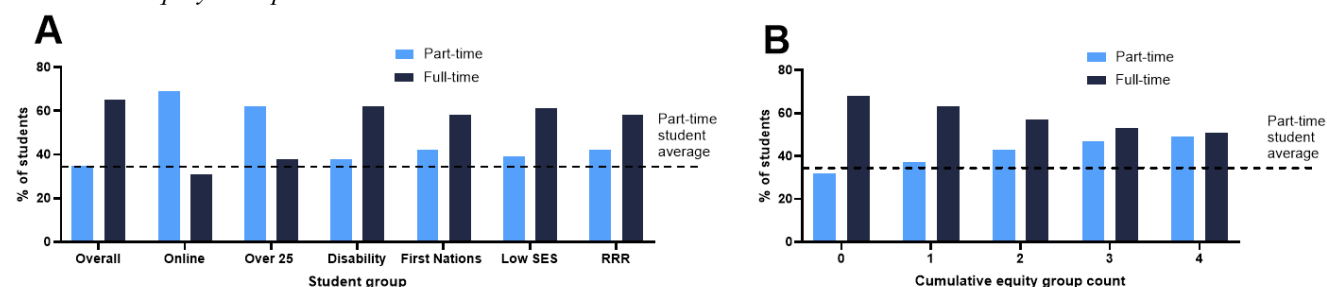
An online survey was developed using SurveyMonkey and made available for five months in 2025. Any student who was currently studying or had previously studied part time in the last three years at an Australian university was eligible to participate. A total of 965 part-time students from 35 Australian universities completed over 20% of the survey and were included in the study. Survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative analysis of deidentified open-text survey responses was performed using NVivo 15. Coding was performed by two individual researchers. The discussions that followed allowed for comparison of themes using a process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Findings

In 2024, 35% of Australian domestic university students were enrolled to study part time (Figure 1A, dashed line). The majority of part-time students were enrolled in an undergraduate-level degree (53%), while 37% were enrolled in postgraduate coursework and the remaining 10% were enrolled in other course levels, such as enabling, micro-credentials, or higher degree by research (HDR; data not shown). Overall, 69% of online students were studying part time, as were 62% of students over 25 years old, compared to 13% and 22% of full-time students, respectively (Figure 1A). Students from equity cohorts studied part time at a higher rate than the average of 35%. Of the students studying part time, 38% were students with disability, 42% were Australian First Nations, 39% were low SES, and 42% were from RRR areas (Figure 1A). The proportion of students studying part time who were not a member of any of the four government priority groups was below the average of 35% (32%). As the cumulative equity count increased from 1 to 4, the proportion of students studying part time increased from 37% to 43%, 47%, and 49%, respectively (Figure 1B).

Figure 1

Proportion of Students Enrolled in Australian Universities in 2024 Studying Part Time and Full Time by Student Group and Cumulative Equity Group Count



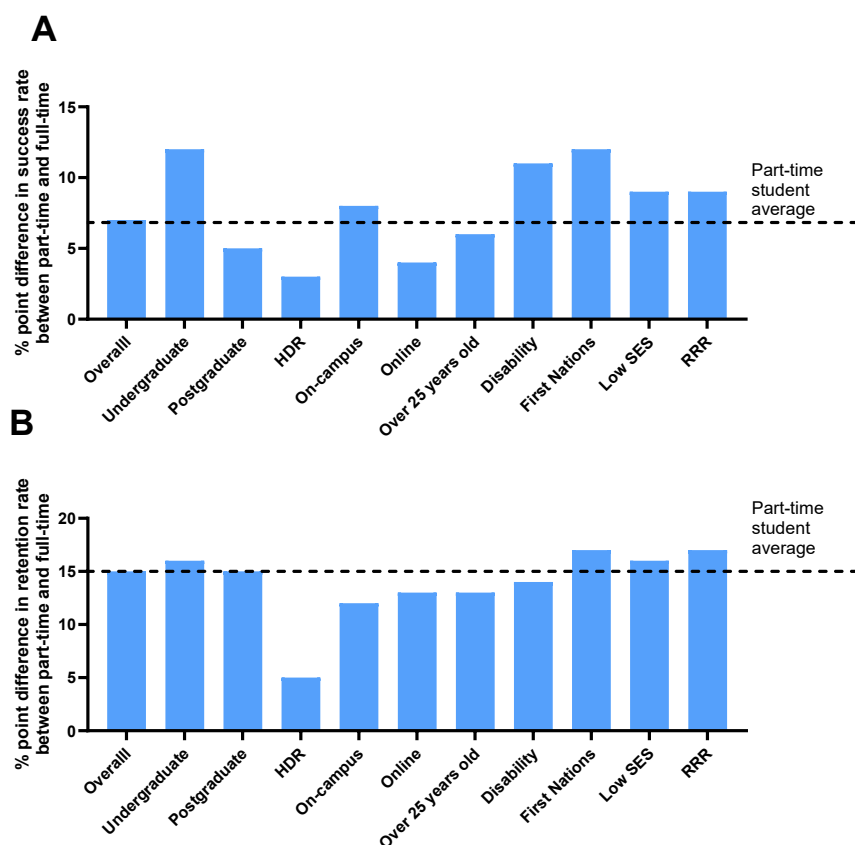
Note. The dashed line indicates the part-time student average participation rate. Light blue bars above the dashed line represent above average participation of part-time students for that student group. Panel A: Proportion of students by student group. Panel B: Proportion of students by cumulative equity group count.

In 2024, the success rate of part-time students across the sector was seven percentage points lower than that of full-time students (84% vs. 91%; Figure 2A). The differences in success rate were greatest for undergraduate students (79% vs. 91%), students studying on campus (84% vs. 92%), and students from all four government priority groups (Figure 2A). The first-

year retention rate of part-time students was 15 percentage points lower than for full-time students (77% vs. 92%; Figure 2B, dashed line). The differences in first-year retention rates (Figure 2B) were greatest for undergraduate students (76% vs. 92%) and students from three of the four government priority groups: First Nations (69% vs. 83%), low SES (73% vs. 89%), and RRR (74% vs. 91%).

Figure 2

Success Rate and Retention Rate Differences Between Part-Time and Full-Time Students Enrolled in Australian Universities



Note. The dashed line indicates the part-time student average. Bars above the dashed line represent poorer outcomes than the part-time average. Panel A: Percentage point difference in success rate. Panel B: Percentage point difference in first-year retention rates.

An online survey was completed by 965 part-time students from 35 Australian universities, with most students enrolled in an undergraduate course (67%). Participants had a range of experience, with 56% enrolled in their course for two years or less, 42% for three or more years, and the remaining 2% had graduated since 2022. Most participants were studying online (72%), while the remaining 28% were studying on campus (Table 1). Participants were enrolled in a wide variety of courses including most disciplines other than tourism, hospitality, personal services, and sport and recreation.

Participants were more likely than the sector average to belong to one or more equity group (Table 1). The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) shared the survey through disability teams at Australian universities, which accounts for the high proportion of students with a disability who participated in the study. The survey data presented below is not a true representation of the average part-time student in Australia. However, this is a representation of the students who completed the survey, and a strength of the study is the high proportion of students with disability who participated and provided feedback. Based on the principles of UDL, if higher education is made more inclusive and accessible for students with disability, it is likely that all students will benefit.

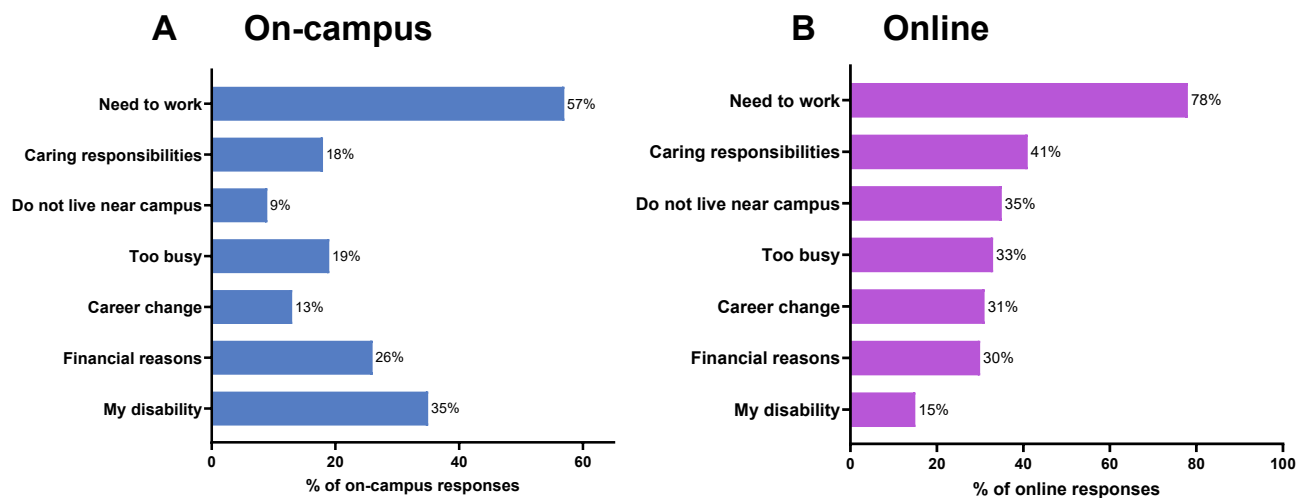
Table 1*Self-Reported Demographics of Survey Participants Vs. the 2024 Sector Average*

Student Characteristics	On-campus	Online	Sector average
Survey participants	274 (28%)	689 (72%)	-
Average age	31 years	37 years	32 years
Disability	50%	36%	14%
First Nations Australians	2%	2%	3%
Low SES	9%	29%	17%
RRR	16%	50%	21%
First in Family	34%	55%	30%
Caring responsibilities	27%	54%	-
Part-time work (30 hours or less per week)	61%	45%	-
Full-time work (more than 30 hours per week)	19%	43%	-

Reasons for Studying Part Time?

To understand the reasons for studying part time, participants were asked, “What influenced your decision to study part time?” While the most common response for both online and on-campus students was the need to work (Figure 3), the reasons that followed were notably different between the cohorts. Students studying online more commonly reported caring responsibilities and not living near campus. For on-campus students, the next two most common reasons were managing disability and financial reasons. Students indicated that there are a range of reasons other than full-time work that influence the decision to study part time, with 97 open-text responses such as:

As I reside in a different state, I study part time alongside my full-time role working in family violence support and two part-time jobs to bring in additional financial support. I have two neurodivergent children who need constant care and have medical needs. (S422, online)

Figure 3*Responses to the Question “What Influenced Your Decision to Study Part Time”*

Note. Percentages add up to more than 100% as participants were able to select more than one response. Panel A: On-campus students, n=274. Panel B: Online students, n=689.

Factors and Resources That Support Student Success

Survey participants responded to the open-text question, “What factors or resources have been the most helpful?” The most common theme (n=836) related to quality learning and teaching, with the top sub-themes displayed in Table 2. Access to understanding and engaging lecturers (n=192) was important to many students: “teachers that are engaging, helpful and deliver content in a manageable way” (S811, online). Students identified the lecturer characteristics they valued most, including compassion and engaging and inspiring teaching: “excellent lecturers who are experts in their subjects - who inspire me to keep going and keep me interested and challenged” (S353, online). One participant noted:

When lecturers are understanding and show an awareness of the monumental juggling act that is post graduate study with small children, it can completely change your mindset and your ability to engage with your course. Knowing that you have someone in your corner is invaluable. (S468, online)

Students frequently commented on four valuable factors that were thematically coded to flexible and inclusive approaches and aligned with UDL principles (Table 2). Overall, 35 survey participants made direct reference to UDL.

Survey participants valued student support from disability services (n=44) and the library, particularly the access to after-hours appointments (n=18), resources (n=25), and free access to textbooks (n=19) in supporting their studies.

Table 2*Factors Influencing Part-Time Student Success*

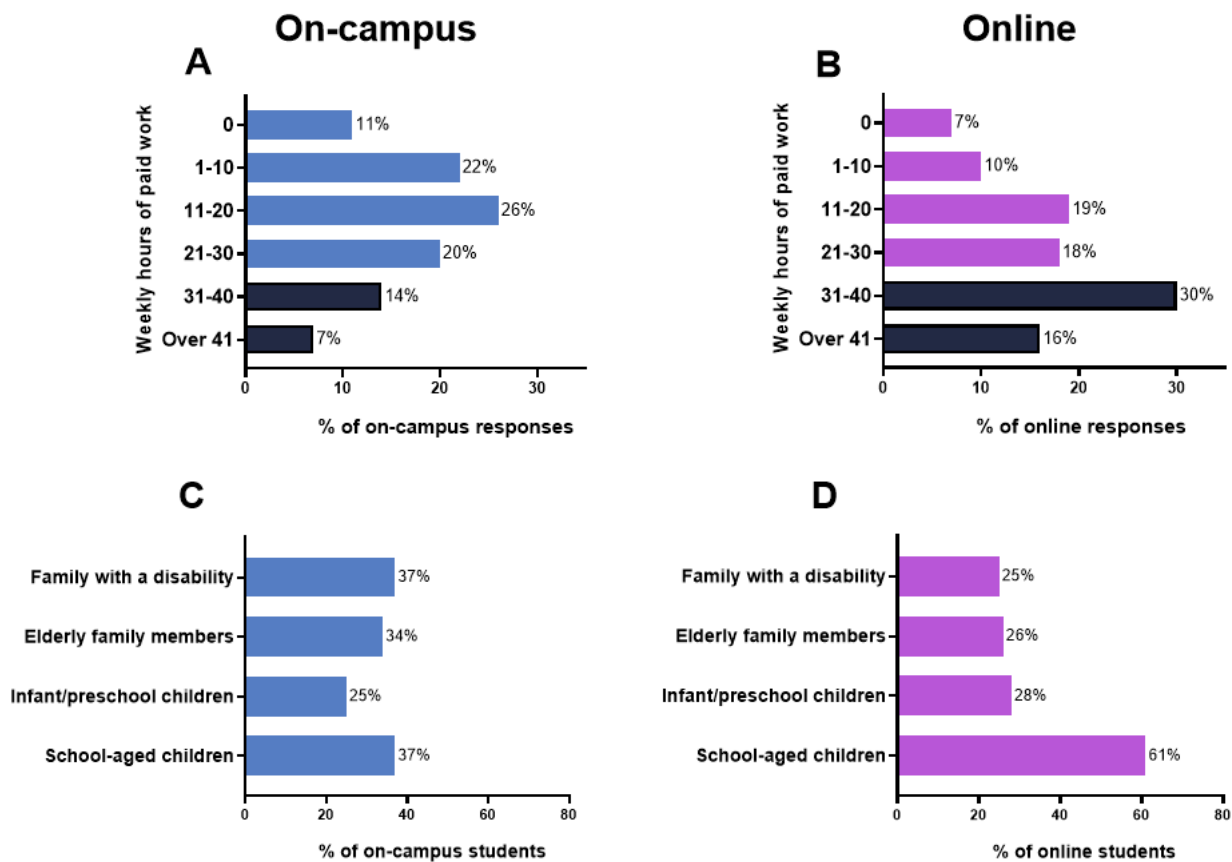
Thematic code	Responses, n	Participant quotes	Participant ID
Access to understanding and engaging lecturers	192	"The lecturers are very understanding of work or family schedules for part-time distance students, and willing to be contacted by phone."	S746, online
An LMS that is easy to navigate	148	"Really clear and easy to use online systems. Reminders through these systems are invaluable, and it makes the learning experience clear."	S721, online
		"Clearly presented, well-organized content and well-explained assessment tasks. Subjects that have all three are really manageable, even if content is challenging."	S394, online
Recorded lectures	140	"Recorded lectures. These have been absolutely essential to my current success at university."	S253, on-campus
Content available early	70	"Having all of the weekly modules, assignments, etc. available from the first week of each semester rather than slowly releasing it piece by piece."	S213, on-campus
Access to simple or no-questions-asked extensions	70	"Extension support probably is the most important and helpful."	S204, on-campus

Work and Caring Commitments

To understand more about external commitments, participants were asked about weekly hours of work as well as their caring commitments. The average hours worked per week was 19 for on-campus students and 26 for online students. A total of 79% of on-campus students worked part-time hours of 30 hours or less a week (Figure 4A), compared to 54% of online students (Figure 4B). Meanwhile, 21% (on-campus) and 46% (online) of part-time students reported working near or at full-time hours of 31 hours or more per week (Figures 4A and 4B). A total of 27% of on-campus students and 54% of online students reported having caring responsibilities (data not shown). School-aged children were the most common caring responsibility for online and on-campus students (Figures 4C and 4D). Additionally, students described the financial and time burdens associated with caring for elderly parents while managing work commitments: "I work two jobs and am a carer to my parents" (S856, online). Participants also reported receiving insufficient carer's payment to cover the costs associated with studying: "I live on a carer's payment which just isn't enough" (S809, online).

Figure 4

Responses to the Questions “During Semester, What is the Average Number of Hours of Work That You Undertake in a Week?” and “Do You Have Personal Caring Duties?” for On-Campus and Online Students



Note. Percentages for C and D add up to more than 100% as participants were able to select more than one response. Panel A: Weekly hours of paid work of on-campus students, n=246. Panel B: Weekly hours of paid work of online students, n=652. Panel C: On-campus students with caring responsibilities, n=65. Panel D: Online students with caring responsibilities, n=346.

Challenges of Part-Time Study

The survey provided nine possible responses to the question “What are the main challenges in studying part time?” The most common responses for all students were work commitments and allocating time to study (Figure 5). A total of 113 participants provided optional open-text responses, which were thematically analysed. A major theme was poor-quality learning and teaching and a lack of understanding from lecturers (n=23): “I have a full-time job and other commitments, if a subject is presented poorly, it makes it much more difficult. Studying online is hard, poor study material makes it harder” (S922, online). One participant stated:

Perhaps it's because I am a professional secondary school teacher, but I feel that there needs to be a Master/Bachelor of Teaching (Tertiary) created for academic staff to complete prior to being allowed to teach. Expertise in one's academic field isn't enough. (S36, on-campus)

Some students commented how a lack of clarity necessitated additional support from teaching staff:

Students would ask less simple questions if teachers provided more clear information more often without too much assumed knowledge, when I make time to study I need it to be productive, not time wasted trying to get answers to simple questions, some teachers seem to not help with simple things with anticipated or timely help because they think post-grad students should struggle to avoid making it too easy. (S514, online)

The importance of understanding lectures was also highlighted:

Also, an understanding from the teaching staff that most of the students in the course [are] part-time (as in my case) and not assuming everyone is full-time—when this assumption is made, it can be demeaning to part-time students, e.g. the assumption that you're part-time because you don't care enough about your study. (S721, online)

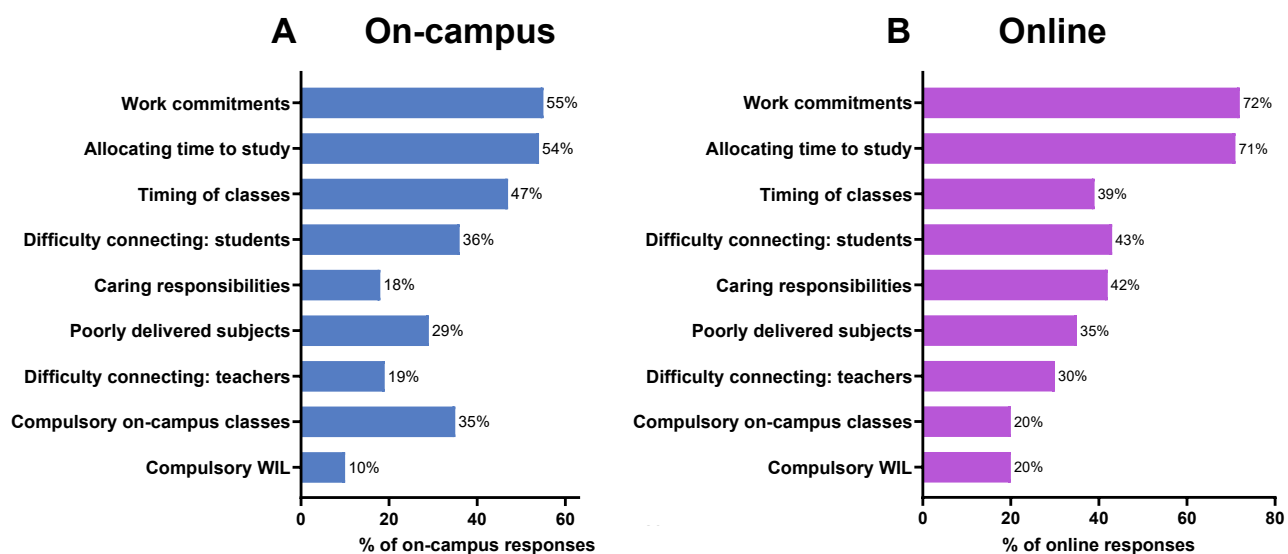
Sixteen participants commented on the difficulty of balancing study with life: “Allocating energy to study, even when the time is available” (S125, on-campus). One participant noted:

Complete absence of consideration of anyone over the age of 25 and is juggling other commitments. Lots of young people are busy too and need to study part time, but uni structures are weighted towards young people and don't cater for people with more life/work experience, more complex life outside uni, etc. (S26, on-campus)

Students also commented on support issues (n=11): “Lack of class support beyond discussion board (i.e., available tutor and study groups among classmates)” (S351, online).

Figure 5

Responses to the Question “What are the Main Challenges in Studying Part Time?” for On-Campus and Online Students



Note. Percentages add up to more than 100% as participants were able to select more than one response. Panel A: On-campus students, n=274. Panel B: Online students, n=689.

Overall, part-time students expressed a strong sense of being undervalued and misunderstood, particularly in relation to their commitment and intentions to study: “Just stop treating us like ‘less-than’, like we're not serious about our studies because we can't dedicate all of our lives to it” (S78, on-campus). The negative impact on students' sense of belonging was highlighted in student comments such as “Sometimes I feel 'less of a student'” (S415, online). This is despite several students indicating that studying part time was out of necessity and not their preference, stating, “We often don't drop to part-time because we want to, it's because we have to” (S32, on-campus) and “Having the option to do part-time online study is the only way I could possibly attend university” (S717, online).

Discussion

Across Australia in 2024, 35% of domestic university students were enrolled part time. Part-time study is important for widening participation, as students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to study part time than the average student. However, the average success rate for part-time students was seven percentage points lower than for full-time students. Furthermore, the difference in success rate between part-time and full-time students was greater for students from the four Australian government priority groups—students with disability, Australian First Nations, Low SES, and RRR. Previous studies have reported poorer outcomes for students studying part time (Harvey et al., 2025; Norton et al., 2018; O’Kane et al., 2024); however, they have lacked detail on why students study part time, the challenges of studying part time, and what helps with success. The overwhelming response of 965 part-time students from 35 Australian universities who were motivated to participate in the current study provides evidence that there are issues in higher education that part-time students want to highlight. If the Australian Government is to reach the ambitious target of a working-age tertiary attainment rate of 80% by 2050 and population parity of priority equity groups (O’Kane et al., 2024), it is critical that part-time student success is supported.

The two groups studying part time at the highest rate are online students and those over 25 years old. Online learning has been shown to be crucial in widening participation, as it accommodates student diversity (Stone, 2017). It is therefore not surprising that the part-time students who completed the survey reported considerable caring and work commitments. When asked what influenced the decision to study part time, the need to work was the most common response for all students. For part-time students studying online, having caring commitments was the second most common response, with over half of those students having school-aged children. Universities have been designed with full-time school leavers in mind, and generally lack leniency for students with external commitments (Dargusch et al., 2026; Malm & Weber, 2017; Younger et al., 2019). Students who conform to traditional university time, such as attending class, are considered to have the commitment required to succeed at university, whereas those students who have trouble conforming are labelled uncommitted, disorganised, or lacking capability (Bennett & Burke, 2018). These perceptions do not consider circumstances outside of a student’s control. Students reported a strong sense of being undervalued, particularly in relation to their commitment and intentions to study, as, despite showing considerable commitment, university cannot always be the number one priority.

A major finding of this study is the importance of quality learning and teaching to the success of part-time students. When asked what factors or resources had been the most helpful, most students cited access to understanding and engaging lecturers and quality units, including an easily navigable LMS, recorded lectures, content available early, and access to simple extensions. Other studies have shown that incorporating principles of UDL into unit design can meaningfully support students (Accardo et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2020). These findings also align with a recent study that found the most significant impact on student success from a first-year retention project came from redeveloping quality units with the principles of UDL (Linden et al., 2025). Part-time students require flexibility and access to simple, no-questions-asked extensions has been found to reduce stress and help students manage a balance between work, life, and study (Linden et al., 2026). Access to simple extensions is particularly important as many formal special consideration policies exclude regular work demands (Dargusch et al., 2026), the main reason identified in this research that students elect to study part time. Conversely, when participants were asked about the challenges of part-time study, a major theme was the impact of poor-quality learning and teaching. Students commented that a lack of understanding from teaching staff made students feel like “you’re part-time because you don’t care enough about your study”. A lack of clarity in learning resources also creates substantially more work for students, who already find it challenging to allocate time to study.

Conclusion

Part-time students are managing competing responsibilities, including caring and work commitments, and university cannot always be their number one priority. In 2024, part-time students accounted for 35% of Australian domestic students, and students from equity groups studied part time at a higher rate than the average. However, at the same time, student success and retention rates were lower for all part-time students, and lower again for part-time equity students. To meet the ambitious participation target of the Accord, it is important that more is done to support part-time students. A major finding of this study is that the most important element for part-time student success, according to students, is quality learning and teaching, specifically understanding and engaging lecturers. Quality learning and teaching requires institutional policies that support flexibility and universal design and, importantly, provide academics with adequate workload to engage and empathise with students and deliver high-quality units.

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