

# EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF STUDENT PERCEPTION AND SUPPORT SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## ABSTRACT

This research provides a comprehensive understanding of international students' experiences in Philippine HEIs, offering valuable insights for institutions to enhance administrative services and support mechanisms for this diverse demographic. This mixed-methods study delved into the dynamics of international students' experiences in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines, with focus on visa application, admission, enrolment, instructional delivery, awareness of support services, satisfaction levels, and coping mechanisms. Drawing insights from 234 international students across two universities in Baguio City, the findings underscore the positive perceptions of students in critical areas.

Notably, the visa application, admission, enrolment efficiency, and instructional delivery all received strong agreement, indicating a high level of satisfaction among the international student population. A nuanced awareness pattern emerges, with a notable discrepancy between traditional support services (such as library materials and medical services) and online services (including networking events and free campus internet). While the overall satisfaction with support services is evident, the dissatisfaction with free campus internet services stands out as a specific concern. The findings indicate a diversity of strategies, from self-care and positive reframing to engagement with social media and seeking guidance from teachers and school counsellors used as coping strategies utilized by students. However, the prevalence of entertainment-focused coping mechanisms, such as watching movies and television, signals the importance of a holistic approach to student well-being beyond academic support.

Institutions are recommended to focus on refining communication strategies for online services and addressing specific concerns raised by students. Additionally, fostering a supportive environment that recognizes and accommodates the diverse needs of international students is crucial.

**Key words:** *Visa application, admission, enrolment, instructional delivery, support services, coping mechanism.*

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the Philippines, the government and interested stakeholders such as administrators, curriculum developers, and faculty members among others collaborate, increasing their interests, toward the promotion of quality higher education particularly in colleges and universities across the country. Through the years, the higher education sector has been through immense expansion and development in terms of student enrolment and number of academic institutions. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED, 2021) accounted that student enrolment for the school year "2019-2020 was 3,408,815, an increase of 457,620 from the school year 2010-2011 student enrolment of 2,951,195. This number also includes international students taking up various degrees and certificate programs offered by higher education institutions across the country. The number of higher education institutions such as colleges and universities on the other hand has also increased; at the moment, the number stands at 1,573 private and 607 public higher education institutions (K12Academics, 2023).

These outstanding increases came with challenges. Also, the number of teaching facilities and services was already inadequate and overstretched to accommodate the increasing number of student enrolments. In addition, the higher education institutions are fraught with acute shortage of teachers for the increasing number of student enrolments which led to the call by the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) appealing to the Philippine government to hire at least 147,000 new teachers in order to reduce the class sizes especially in public schools (Mateo, 2022). Moreover, higher education institutions in the

country have low research outputs and publications in reputable international journals and the number of international students is low compared to some countries within the ASEAN region (Rogayan and Corpuz, 2022). Furthermore, higher education institutions deal with the challenges of insufficient funding that could have been used for research and development purposes; their investment toward research and development among ASEAN member countries is considered to be the lowest (Madula, 2018).

While the country's research publication citation impact competes favourably well with its ASEAN peer countries, an area of weakness still remains especially in the lack of openness to international students and academics (Queroda, 2020). Covering through the variables of the study in the context of the Philippines, the following results were accounted. The process and requirements for securing visas by students intending to study in the country is complex and oftentimes tedious and the situation is more cumbersome for academics that wish to practice their profession in the country (Killingley and Ilieva, 2015). The fact that 60 percent of ownership must be relinquished to a Filipino partner by foreigners intending to set up a venture in the Philippines represents a significant setback. This is based on the fact that overseas higher education institutions with strong brand visibility and reputation, who are intending to set up branch campuses in the country, are prevented from doing so because they would like to retain ownership and direct control over the quality of education provided. As a result, the country suffers from the inability to attract and retain talent, less strong stronger than their ASEAN counterparts (Killingley and Ilieva, 2015).

An exploration of international students' perspectives on the administrative and support services provided unveils crucial insights for the enhancement of their academic experiences. In terms of visa application Bombita&Dicolen (2020) underscored the challenges faced by international students, emphasizing the need for streamlined and efficient processes to facilitate a smoother entry into the Philippine academic environment. Additionally, the examination of enrolment and admission procedures within the local context, drawing on the work of Rotas and Cahapay (2020), revealed potential areas for improvement in transparency and accessibility, ensuring a seamless integration process for international students consistent with the earlier results as forwarded by literature.

Addressing instructional delivery, a study by Cabual (2021) emphasized the significance of adapting teaching methodologies to cater to diverse learning styles, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive approaches for international students. This local perspective provides valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by international students in navigating instructional methods within the Philippine higher education context. In terms of support services, the study by Quitaras and Abuso (2021) provided an overview of the types of services offered by HEIs in the Philippines, shedding light on the existing support mechanisms. There remains a gap however in understanding the effectiveness of these services and their alignment with the unique needs of international students.

The assessment of satisfaction levels with support services among international students within Philippine HEIs is another critical area for exploration. While the work of Cornillez(2019) provides insights into the general satisfaction levels of international students, there still a need for a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing satisfaction, including quality, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity of support services. Meanwhile, the coping mechanisms employed by international students in the Philippine higher education context similarly remain unexplored. Kimhi et al. (2021) touched on the resilience of international students but did not delve into the specific coping strategies employed. This presents an opportunity for the present study to contribute by providing a detailed examination of the coping mechanisms that international students utilize to navigate academic challenges within the Philippine setting.

Amidst the challenges faced by higher education institutions in the Philippines, there has been a growing impetus to reshape policies and strategies to enhance the quality of education. A significant strategy involves intensifying internationalization efforts, with various Philippine universities establishing branch campuses globally. CHED, a key player in this endeavour, issued a policy framework in 2016 to guide internationalization activities, aligning them with national development goals (CHED, CMO 55, S., 2016). CHED, in collaboration with the United States embassy, further emphasized the importance of cooperation between Philippine and American universities in areas such as research, government collaboration, and capacity development (Giray, 2022). This paradigm shift has compelled Philippine higher education institutions to restructure and realign their internationalization policies to remain competitive and attract international students. Institutions have engaged in initiatives like student exchange programs, faculty participation in international activities, joint research with foreign partners, and curriculum development to meet global standards (Dumanig and Pe-Symaco, 2020; Khalid et al.

2019). These efforts have not only improved the institutions' reputation but also attracted a diverse cohort of international students. A testament to this is the fact that universities in the country with research partnerships with universities in other countries are reported to enjoy rich course offerings and improved institutional profile (Tasci, 2021).

These institutions are easily attracted to international students which influence them to develop and implement quality programs to maintain their reputation and competitiveness in the increasingly dynamic Philippine's education sector; this despite recognized challenges, notably the limited funding for research collaborations, hindering the full realization of internationalization goals (Ferrer, 2020; Ramirez, 2019). The study then aims to address these gaps by providing a localized understanding of international students' experiences, aiming to inform targeted policies and practices for a more inclusive and supportive environment in Philippine higher education.

This study, conducted in Baguio City, Philippines, holds significant relevance due to the city's vibrant educational landscape and diverse student population, making it a hub for higher education. The city's allure is heightened by its unique cultural setting, making it an attractive destination for international students in pursuit of quality education. Baguio City's appeal is evident in the substantial number of international students it attracts, estimated at around 5,000 as reported by Esmail (2021). This influx reflects the city's reputation as a preferred educational destination and highlights the global recognition of its institutions. The study gained relevance as it unfolded within this dynamic educational environment, providing insights into the experiences and perceptions of international students who contributed to the city's rich cultural tapestry.

The continuous surge in international student enrolment can be attributed to the proactive implementation of internationalization policies and activities by higher education institutions in Baguio City. This commitment demonstrates their dedication to providing not only quality education services but also fostering a globally engaged academic environment. As such, the study not only explored the dynamics of student perception of administrative and support services but does so within the context of a city that actively promotes cross-cultural interactions and educational excellence.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This research holds significant benefits for various stakeholders within the landscape of higher education in the Philippines. First, for the management of higher education institutions in the country, the study provides invaluable insights into the specific challenges and opportunities faced by international students. This localized understanding can inform strategic decision-making, aiding in the refinement and enhancement of policies related to internationalization, support services, and academic quality.

Second, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) stands to benefit by gaining data-driven perspectives on the effectiveness of its current internationalization policies. The research equips CHED with evidence to evaluate and potentially adjust strategies, ensuring they align with the evolving needs and experiences of international students. Additionally, teaching faculty can find value in the study's findings, as it sheds light on their role in internationalization efforts and provides insights into enhancing cross-cultural engagement and instructional practices. For international students, the research is pivotal in amplifying their voices, addressing challenges, and fostering a more inclusive environment.

Future researchers can build upon this study, using its methodology and identified gaps to further explore the complexities of international student experiences in the Philippines. The research contributes to the broader body of knowledge in international higher education, enriching the literature with context-specific insights that can inform global discussions on effective strategies for supporting and integrating international students into diverse higher education environments.

Furthermore, the findings of this study in Baguio City may have implications for global discussions on international student experiences in higher education. As internationalization becomes increasingly integral to higher education institutions worldwide, understanding the nuances of international students' encounters in diverse locales contributes to a more comprehensive and contextually informed approach. The insights garnered from Baguio City can serve as a microcosm, providing valuable lessons and perspectives that can inform policies and practices not only within the Philippines but also across the global higher education landscape.

In essence, by honing in on the unique context of Baguio City, this study offered a nuanced and locally relevant contribution to the broader discourse on international student experiences in higher education. Through an exploration of perceptions, support services, satisfaction levels, and coping

mechanisms, the study endeavours to enrich both local practices and the global understanding of the intricate dynamics involved in fostering a positive and inclusive educational environment for international students.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1978), proves to be a pertinent framework for comprehending the experiences of international students in the Philippines within the context of higher education. This theory posits that individuals draw a sense of identity and self-esteem from their affiliations with social groups, and for international students, their shared identification as part of the international student community becomes significant. Tajfel & Turner's work (1978) highlights that individuals tend to favour their in-group, a phenomenon applicable to international students and their distinct experiences.

In examining students' perceptions of services, social identity theory suggests that the common experiences of international students form a shared identity, potentially influencing how they evaluate and perceive services compared to local students. The author's argument about in-group favouritism becomes particularly relevant here. Furthermore, when considering types of support services, the theory emphasizes the role of social categorization and identification. The theory suggests that individuals are motivated to maintain positive social identities, indicating that international students may prefer and engage more with support services that align with their international student identity (Brown, 2020).

Satisfaction levels, according to Social Identity Theory, are intricately linked to the alignment between individual identity and perceived support. The SIT authors posit that individuals derive satisfaction when their social identity is positively reinforced by the support they receive. In the case of international students, the theory implies that their satisfaction with support services may be influenced by how well these services cater to their unique needs associated with their international student identity.

In terms of coping mechanisms, social identity theory contributes to the understanding of how international students navigate challenges. The theory suggests that individuals seek social support from their in-group during challenging situations. Tajfel & Turner's (1978) insights imply that exploring how international students connect with their peers and support networks can unveil effective coping mechanisms, as they draw on their shared identity for support. In essence, Social Identity Theory enriches the study by providing a nuanced understanding of the unique social context of international students in the Philippines' higher education landscape.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The purpose of this scholarly work was to explore the dynamics of student perceptions and support services provided by higher education institutions in the Philippines with perspectives drawn from international students. Specifically, the study provided answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the international students' perception of the services in Higher Education Institutions regarding:
  - a. visa application;
  - b. admission;
  - c. enrolment; and
  - d. instructional delivery?
2. What is the awareness distribution of the international students on the support services provided by Higher Education Institutions?
3. What is international students' level of satisfaction of the support services provided by Higher Education Institutions?
4. What coping mechanisms do international students employ to navigate academic challenges?

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this section, the methodologies and procedures employed for data collection and analysis in the subsequent phases of the research are outlined. The presentation follows a structured order, covering aspects such as research design, population and locale of the study, the instrument used for data

collection, the procedures employed for data collection, and the subsequent treatment of the collected data.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research employed a mixed-method research design, specifically utilizing the quantitative descriptive and explanatory-sequential research design. The quantitative descriptive research design, characterized by the use of survey questionnaires, was selected to delineate the characteristics or behavior of the identified study population, aligning with the "what" research question posed in this study (Bloomfield and Fisher, 2019). This choice is justified as it facilitates providing comprehensive answers to the research queries formulated in the previous chapter. Furthermore, the explanatory-sequential research design was incorporated to follow up and complement the quantitative findings with qualitative data, a practice advocated by Edmonds & Kennedy (2017). In this study, the researcher integrated an interview guide along with the questionnaire. The qualitative insights gained from the interviews served to enhance the interpretation and clarification of results obtained from the quantitative data. This dual-method approach aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem and enriched the overall analytical framework.

## **POPULATION AND LOCALE OF THE STUDY**

The study's population comprised of international students from two prominent universities in Baguio City. Data were specifically collected from international students enrolled in the second term of the academic year 2022/2023. International students were chosen as the study population due to their alignment with the research's theme, their status as primary targets of Philippine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and their role as stakeholders contributing to the enhancement of educational services and policies. To address the impracticality of studying the entire international student population in Baguio City, a sample was drawn as a representative subset. Formal permission was sought from the registrars of the selected universities to conduct the study, and information provided revealed a total enrolment of 578 international students across both institutions. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) population sample table, a sample size of 234 international students was determined through stratified random sampling. This method allowed the identification and selection of participants based on shared characteristics such as country of origin, current enrolment status, university affiliation, and area of residence. Additionally, twenty-two (22) participants (11 from each university) were selected for interviews following the survey, number deemed comprehensive for a thorough assessment. This decision aligns with recommendations in the literature (Shetty, 2023). The study aimed to gain insights into international students' perspectives, contributing valuable data to the ongoing efforts of HEIs to enhance their internationalization initiatives in the Philippines.

## **DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS**

In this study, the researcher used two distinct data collection instruments to gather comprehensive data. First, a survey questionnaire was utilized to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire, comprised sections adapted from the University of Michigan (2001) and Prairie Research Associates (2009), suitably modified to align with the research objectives. Distinctly, the researcher personally crafted other sections to ensure a tailored approach. The questionnaire was accompanied by a well-crafted cover letter introducing the researcher, outlining the research title, and articulating the study's objectives. It also included a section encouraging the active participation of respondents, coupled with a reassurance of the confidentiality of their responses.

The questionnaire was structured into five sections for a comprehensive exploration of international students' perceptions and experiences. The first section encompassed demographic details with four personally formulated statements. The second section delved into the first research question, assessing student perceptions of HEIs' services concerning visa application, admission, enrolment, and instructional delivery. This part utilized Likert scale measurements, including an open-ended question for additional insights. The third segment focused on the second research objective, identifying the students' awareness of support services provided by higher education institutions. Respondents used a checklist

with "aware" or "unaware" options for each statement. The fourth part concentrated on the third research objective, evaluating student satisfaction with support services using a Likert scale.

To ensure questionnaire reliability, a pilot test involving twenty respondents from other universities was conducted on July 19, 2023. The reliability test, measured with Cronbach Alpha, resulted in a coefficient of 0.889, indicating good internal consistency. Pilot test respondents were excluded from the actual study to avoid pre-empting results. The final part incorporated an interview guide, personally formulated by the researcher. The guide covered aspects not addressed in the questionnaire. It included an introduction letter, motivating the study's purpose, and was divided into four sections. The first addressed perceptions of international students regarding HEIs' services, covering visa application, admission, enrolment, and instructional delivery. The second part of the questionnaire explored types and awareness of support services, while the third delved into the level of satisfaction with these services. The last section focused on the coping mechanisms employed by international students to manage academic challenges.

## **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

Data collection unfolded systematically in distinct phases. Initially, the researcher sought permission from the adviser to initiate questionnaire distribution. Subsequently, the questionnaire was administered and collected via both face-to-face interactions and online platforms using Google Forms. The hybrid method of data collection was warranted due to various logistical considerations. Notably, reaching all 234 respondents in person was impractical, given the geographical diversity of the sample, with some students residing outside of Baguio City. Furthermore, the dual approach facilitated flexibility, allowing the researcher to adapt to respondents' accessibility either online or in person, streamlining the data gathering process within a reasonable timeframe. The entire process of administering and collecting the questionnaires was completed within 45 days. Additionally, thirty respondents were initially invited for interviews, of which twenty-two participants agreed and were included in the interview section, conducted concurrently with the survey data collection. The interviews were diverse, with one participant opting for a face-to-face interview, while others submitted written responses. The combination of recorded oral responses and written statements enriched the qualitative aspects of the study's results and discussions.

## **TREATMENT OF DATA**

The gathered data was tabulated and analyzed using various statistical tools. First, the weighted mean was employed to present, analyze, and interpret international students' perceptions administrative services in higher education institutions, as well as their level of satisfaction with the support services provided by HEIs in the Philippines. Second, frequency counts and percentages were utilized to analyze and interpret the awareness of the types of support services provided by HEIs and the coping mechanisms used by international students to manage the challenges they experienced in their academics. Finally, inductive thematic analysis was applied to identify and classify relevant themes from the oral and written statements obtained during the interviews.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presented a meticulous analysis and interpretation of the collected data, utilizing the statistical tools identified in the preceding section of this study. The discussion follows a systematic structure aligned with the arrangement of the research objectives. Commencing with the interpretation of data pertaining to international students' perceptions of administrative services in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the discussion further explores the awareness distribution of international students regarding the support services provided by HEIs, their satisfaction levels with these services, and the coping mechanisms employed to navigate academic challenges. Additionally, the analysis and interpretation integrated relevant literatures and theory, enhancing the overall quality and depth of the study results.

**Table 1. International students' perception of the services in HEIs**

<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	<b>WEIGHTED</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
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		MEAN	
1	Visa application process	3.59	Strongly Agree
2	Enrolment process	3.42	Strongly Agree
3	Admission process	3.37	Strongly Agree
4	Instructional Delivery	3.27	Strongly Agree
Average		3.41	Strongly Agree

The data analysis reveals overwhelmingly positive perceptions among students regarding key dimensions of services provided by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as illustrated in Table 1. Students strongly agree on the efficiency and effectiveness of visa application, enrolment, admission, and instructional delivery processes, resulting in an impressive overall average of 3.41. The positive perceptions across dimensions carry significant implications for multiple stakeholders. For prospective students, these findings serve as a compelling endorsement, influencing their decision-making and contributing to the institution's reputation. Positive experiences, both quantitatively and qualitatively, act as powerful marketing tools, attracting new applicants and enhancing the institution's standing. For university administration, the high positive experience levels signify the success of current processes and practices. These positive perceptions underscore the importance of maintaining and further improving these processes to sustain a positive learning environment and attract a diverse and satisfied student body. This reaffirms the value of engaging and high-quality teaching practices in enhancing the overall educational experience for students.

These findings align with existing literature, emphasizing the crucial role of streamlined processes in shaping students' overall positive experiences of an institution (Arkoudis et al. 2019). The positive sentiment across dimensions underscores the success of current administrative service practices and their impact on students' holistic experiences. The efficiency of the visa application process garnered strong agreement among students. A participant noted, "the visa process was surprisingly smooth. They provided clear instructions, and I didn't face any complications. It definitely influenced my positive perception of the university" (Interviewee "A", Female). This firsthand account aligns with existing literature (Guo, Milke and Jin, 2022) and reinforces the significance of streamlined visa processes in shaping positive perceptions. The researchers' study brings forth the idea that a streamlined visa application process is not merely an administrative formality but a crucial determinant of the initial encounter international students have with their chosen institution. When this process is clear, transparent, and free from unnecessary complications, it lays a positive foundation for the students' academic track. The study emphasizes that the ease and efficiency of visa procedures contribute significantly to the overall satisfaction and confidence of international students.

Students similarly strongly agree on the processes of their institutions' enrolment. A participant affirmed this sentiment, stating, "enrolling was a breeze. The staff guided me through the entire process. I felt supported, and it made transitioning into the academic environment much easier (Interviewee "B", Male)." In support to this point, another respondent went further to say, "I appreciate how they handle the enrolment process. It's well-organized, and they offer assistance in choosing subjects. It reflects the university's commitment to student success (Interviewee "C", Female)." These qualitative insights align with research emphasizing the importance of a seamless enrolment experience (Gao & Liu, 2019), further corroborating the positive influence of a well-organized enrolment process on student experiences. Moreover, the admission process garnered strong agreement from students. A participant emphasized, "admission staff was really helpful. They responded promptly to my queries and provided all the information I needed. It played a crucial role in my decision to study here" (Interviewee "D", Male). This echoes Wen & Hu (2019) who emphasized on the pivotal role of the admissions office in shaping students' perceptions and reinforces the practical impact of efficient and supportive admission processes. Finally, students demonstrated a strong agreement to the indicators on instructional delivery. A participant attested to this, stating, "instructional delivery exceeded my expectations. The professors were engaging, and the methods used made learning enjoyable. It made a significant impact on my overall experience (Interviewee "E", Male)." Another student added, "the interactive nature of the classes and the use of real-life examples made complex concepts easier to grasp (Interviewee "F", Female)." These

qualitative insights resonate with Tajfel & Turner's (1978), social identity theory on student satisfaction, further emphasizing the vital role of engaging teaching methods in shaping positive student experiences.

**Table 2. Awareness distribution of the international students on the support services provided by HEIs**

INDICATORS		AWARE		UNAWARE	
		F	%	F	%
1	Library materials.	234	100.0	-	-
2	Medical and dental services.	211	90.0	23	10.0
3	Computers and other electronic gadgets that support student learning.	206	88.0	28	12.0
4	Study skill seminars and workshops.	190	81.0	44	19.0
5	Gym equipment and facilities.	187	80.0	47	20.0
6	Availability of international student organization.	187	80.0	47	20.0
7	Counseling services such as helping students deal with emotional stress, academic struggles and career counseling etc.	185	79.0	49	21.0
8	Clear and simple online procedures for handling and resolving complaints.	55	74.0	61	26
9	Staffed help desk and advisory services.	117	50.0	117	50.0
10	Language center, eg, English language center.	115	49.0	119	51.0
11	Clear and up to date information provided via the university website.	98	42.0	136	58.0
12	Online library services.	94	40.0	140	60.0
13	Networking and training events.	75	32.0	159	68.0
14	Free campus internet services.	66	28.0	168	72.0

Table 2 details students' awareness of the support services provided by HEIs. The overall analysis of support services indicates a variation among students. Notably, a number of respondents demonstrated awareness of the support services that include library materials, medical and dental services, and computers/electronic gadgets supporting learning. The results underscore the importance of enhancing communication strategies to increase awareness of the full spectrum of support services. This aligns with social identity theory, emphasizing the role of shared information and experiences in forming a positive identity within a group. A more comprehensive understanding of available services contributes to a shared positive identity among students, fostering a sense of belonging and support within the university community. In essence, the comprehensive understanding of these services plays a pivotal role in shaping a positive and cohesive student experience, fostering a strong connection and unity among individuals within the academic environment. The identified awareness patterns among students resonate with established literature emphasizing the significance of fundamental services for student well-being and academic success (Yang et al. 2022; Roy et al. 2019). This alignment reinforces the notion that essential resources, such as library materials and medical services, form the bedrock of support systems in higher education. However, the considerable lack of awareness surrounding online library services, networking/training events, and free campus internet services



indicates potential gaps in communication channels or accessibility, hindering students from fully benefiting from these offerings.

Categorizing the individual indicators reveals two main clusters. The first cluster comprises tangible and immediate services, including library materials, medical and dental services, and electronic learning support. These are services with physical presence and immediate impact on students' daily lives. The second cluster encompasses services that demand active engagement and awareness, such as counseling services, networking/training events, and online library services. This categorization aligns with Karunaratne & Perera (2019) research, highlighting the dichotomy between physical and virtual support services in a university setting. Interview comments further substantiate these findings. One participant reflected, "I knew about the library and medical services from the beginning, but I only found out about the online library and networking events later in my academic journey (Interviewee "M", Male)." This testimonial underscores the necessity for improved communication strategies regarding virtual services. Another student, emphasized, "I wish there was more information about the online library. It could have been helpful earlier in my studies (Interviewee "N", Male)." These narratives accentuate the potential benefits students might miss due to limited awareness of online resources and events.

Consequently, HEIs need to prioritize comprehensive communication strategies, leveraging both physical and virtual platforms to ensure students are well-informed about the entire spectrum of support services. This approach aligns with the social identity theory, emphasizing shared information and experiences as crucial components in forming a positive identity within a group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Fostering a collective awareness of available services contributes to a shared positive identity among students, cultivating a sense of belonging and support within the university community. Improved awareness not only bridges the gap between available services and students' utilization but also promotes holistic well-being and academic success (Kapur, 2023; Lau, Garza, and Garcia, 2019).

**Table 3. International students' level of satisfaction of the support services provided by HEIs**

	<b>SUPPORT SERVICES</b>	<b>WEIGHTED MEAN</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
1	Library materials	3.60	Very Satisfied
2	Medical and dental services	3.56	Very Satisfied
3	Counseling services such as helping students deal with emotional stress, academic struggles and career counseling etc	3.53	Very Satisfied
4	Study skill seminars and workshops	3.50	Very Satisfied
5	Availability of international student organization	3.47	Very Satisfied
6	Language center, eg, English language center	3.38	Very Satisfied
7	Clear and up to date information provided via the university website	3.35	Very Satisfied
8	Gym equipment and facilities	3.31	Very Satisfied
9	Staffed help desk and advisory services	3.16	Satisfied
10	Clear and simple online procedures for handling and resolving complaints	3.13	Satisfied
11	Networking and training events	3.09	Satisfied
12	Computers and other electronic gadgets that	3.03	Satisfied

support student learning			
13	Online library services	2.99	Satisfied
14	Free campus internet services	2.05	Dissatisfied
Average		3.23	Satisfied

The level of students' satisfaction of the support services provided by HEIs is revealed in Table 3. The analysis provides an overall positive sentiment with an average weighted mean of 3.23, indicating a general satisfaction among students. The implications of these findings are substantial for HEIs aiming to create a positive and supportive environment for their international student population. Recognizing the distinct clusters of satisfaction can guide institutions in prioritizing and improving specific services based on students' immediate needs and enhancing communication strategies for services requiring active engagement. The social identity theory further justifies the study's focus on satisfaction, as shared positive experiences and perceptions contribute to a collective identity among students, fostering a sense of belonging and support within the university community. As international students perceive a shared positive environment, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. This broad satisfaction aligns with the existing literature emphasizing the pivotal role of support services in enhancing students' overall well-being and academic success (Husain et al. 2022; Bynum, 2019). However, delving into the individual indicators unveils nuanced patterns that warrant attention. Categorizing the indicators into two main clusters sheds light on the distinct aspects influencing students' satisfaction. The first cluster comprises tangible and immediate services, such as library materials, medical and dental services, counseling services, study skill seminars, and workshops. Students express a high level of satisfaction with these services, reflecting the crucial role they play in addressing immediate academic and well-being needs. This resonates with the research of Biserova & Shagivaleeva (2019) highlighting the positive impact of comprehensive support services on student satisfaction and success.

The second cluster involves services that require active engagement and awareness, such as networking and training events, language centers, information via the university website, gym facilities, and staffed help desk services. While these services still fall under the category of satisfaction, the lower mean values suggest a more moderate level of contentment compared to the first cluster. The variability in satisfaction levels within this cluster emphasizes the need for HEIs to focus on enhancing communication and accessibility to these services, aligning with the findings of Demir et al. (2021), who emphasize the importance of virtual support services and effective communication. Interview comments provide valuable insights into these satisfaction patterns. A participant, remarked, "I'm very satisfied with the counseling services. It's been a tremendous help in dealing with stress and academic challenges (Interviewee "O", Male)." This testimonial reinforces the positive impact of immediate support services on students' well-being. On the other hand, another participant expressed, "I didn't know much about the networking events initially. It was only later that I discovered the opportunities available. I wish there was more promotion. The university should actively promote these opportunities to ensure all students are informed. It could greatly enhance our academic and social experiences (Interviewee "P", Female)."

Additionally, another participant mentioned "I had some issues with the online library services. It was not as user-friendly as I expected, and sometimes finding the resources I needed became quite frustrating. Improving the interface and accessibility would significantly enhance the overall experience for students relying on online resources (Interviewee "Q", Male)." These comments shed light on the challenges students face with virtual services, pinpointing areas for improvement in the design and functionality of online platforms as well as the need for improved awareness and communication regarding services falling within the second cluster. References to previous studies further support these findings. Mandrekar (2020) and Goodrich, Kingsley & Sands (2020) argue that satisfaction with tangible services, such as library facilities and counseling services, contributes significantly to overall student satisfaction and academic success. Conversely, Alharthi (2020) emphasized the growing importance of virtual services and the need for effective communication strategies to enhance student awareness and satisfaction.

**Table 4. Coping mechanisms employed by international students to navigate academic**

## challenges

INDICATORS		YES		NO	
		F	%	F	%
1	Self-care which is evidenced through their self-awareness and them knowing when to seek help in case they have a feeling of stress or being overwhelmed by academic tasks.	211	90.0	23	10.0
2	Positive reframing, eg, thinking about opportunities in difficult situations, using positive language etc.	187	80.0	47	20.0
3	Chatting on social media.	187	80.0	47	20.0
4	Browsing the internet, watching movies and television programs.	173		61	27.0
5	Being organized.	171	73.0	63	27.0
6	Taking things slowly and gradually.	168	72.0	66	28.0
7	Taking a walk around amusement parks and shopping malls.	143	61.0	91	39.0
8	Participation in social and cultural immersion activities.	87	37.0	147	63.0
9	Participating in school sporting events.	82	35.0	152	65.0
10	Seeking the advice and guidance of teachers and school counselors.	75	32.0	159	68.0

Presented in Table 4 are the results of the coping mechanisms employed by international students in managing their academic challenges. The coping mechanisms unveil a multifaceted approach to maintaining well-being and addressing stressors. The implications drawn have far-reaching consequences for the design and implementation of support programs and services within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The study's revelation of a spectrum of coping mechanisms, ranging from self-care and positive reframing to engagement with social media and seeking guidance from teachers and school counselors, underscores the necessity for a holistic approach to support programs. Support initiatives cannot be one-size-fits-all but could encompass a versatile array of services that acknowledge and cater to the individual needs of international students. This recognition is particularly vital in promoting a culture of inclusivity within HEIs. Moreover, the prevalence of entertainment-focused coping mechanisms, such as watching movies and television programs, signals the importance of considering the social and recreational dimensions of well-being. Support programs should extend beyond academic assistance to encompass activities that contribute to the social integration and overall satisfaction of international students. This could involve organizing cultural events, networking opportunities, or recreational activities that foster a sense of community and camaraderie.

Overall, the results suggest a considerable adoption of coping strategies, with self-care, positive reframing, and social media engagement being predominant. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the importance of diverse coping mechanisms for students' overall well-being (Roca et al. 2021; Cao, Zhu, and Meng, 2021). Interview comments provide nuanced insights into these coping strategies. A participant during the interview highlighted the significance of positive reframing, noting that "changing my perspective during challenging times has been crucial. It helps me focus on solutions rather than problems (Interviewee "Interviewee "R", Male)." This individual account resonates with the positive reframing literature, emphasizing its role in fostering resilience and positive mental health (O'Byrne et al. 2021). Categorizing the coping mechanisms reveals two primary clusters. The first cluster involves self-directed strategies, such as self-care, positive reframing, being organized, and taking things slowly. These strategies highlight students' individual agency in managing their well-being, emphasizing the importance of internal coping resources (Goloshumova et al. 2019). The second cluster encompasses

social and external strategies, including social media engagement, browsing the internet, and participating in cultural immersion activities. These mechanisms reflect the students' inclination toward social support and cultural integration as integral components of their coping repertoire (Yang, 2020). A participant articulated the importance of social engagement, stating, "Connecting with friends on social media and engaging in cultural events helps create a sense of belonging. It's a crucial part of my coping strategy (Interviewee "S", Male)."

Further exploration of specific coping mechanisms unveils the diversity in students' approaches. A participant emphasized "the value of seeking advice from teachers and school counselors" (Interviewee "T", Male) highlighting the importance of formal support structures in the coping process. This aligns with the literature stressing the role of academic support in students' resilience and coping strategies (Abdelghaffar et al. 2019). Conversely, another participant shared the therapeutic effect of leisure activities like "walking in amusement parks, emphasizing the importance of recreational and leisure activities as coping mechanisms (Interviewee "U", Male)." This aligns with studies recognizing the positive impact of leisure activities on stress reduction and overall well-being (Herbert et al. 2020). The social identity theory, which underpins the study's justification, aligns with these coping mechanisms by emphasizing the role of social connections and a sense of belonging in shaping individuals' well-being within a group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Integrating this theory into the study's framework strengthens the argument for holistic and culturally responsive support services that consider the diverse coping needs of international students.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. International students appreciate the school's visa assistance and effective communication but suggest improvements in conveying fee payment information and streamlining enrollment. Additionally, recognizing teachers' positive influence, there's a call for increased English language use in classroom discussions to enhance the overall learning environment.
2. International students widely recognize the availability and importance of library materials, recognizing improvements in the needed provision of free campus internet services.
3. International students' expectations with the quality and quantity of support services were met and exceeded, though a notable dissatisfaction with the provision of free campus internet services was recorded.
4. International students generally exhibit a high level of self-care, demonstrated by their self-awareness and ability to seek help when feeling stressed or overwhelmed by academic tasks, yet there is room for improvement in seeking advice and guidance from teachers and school counselors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insights gleaned from the study's conclusions, it is advisable to implement the following measures for enhanced effectiveness and improvement of administrative and support services for students:

1. Schools should enhance communication about annual fee payments by implementing a clear and accessible online portal and sending timely reminders. Streamlining the online enrollment process can be achieved by optimizing the application interface, simplifying navigation, and offering step-by-step guidance. Additionally, fostering increased English language use in classroom discussions can involve implementing language-oriented workshops for teachers and incorporating language development activities into the curriculum.
2. To enhance the provision of free campus internet services, the schools may invest on upgrading infrastructure and increasing bandwidth to ensure reliable and high-speed internet access across campus. Implementing user-friendly authentication processes for accessing the internet and providing adequate technical support can contribute to a smoother experience for international students. Regularly assessing and addressing the specific internet needs and usage patterns of students can guide future improvements in the campus internet services.

3. To address dissatisfaction with the provision of free campus internet services, the schools may conduct a thorough review of the existing infrastructure and explore options for upgrading to meet the increasing demand. Implementing a feedback system for internet-related issues and actively addressing reported concerns in a timely manner can improve overall satisfaction. Additionally, considering alternative internet service providers or negotiating improved service agreements can contribute to meeting and exceeding international students' expectations for campus services.
4. To enhance students' engagement with teachers and school counselors, the schools may organize regular workshops or events promoting the importance of seeking guidance for academic and personal development. Implementing a mentorship program where students are paired with faculty or counselors for ongoing support and advice can foster stronger connections. Creating an open and supportive environment for students to comfortably express their concerns and seek guidance will contribute to a more comprehensive approach to self-care and academic success.
5. Recommendation to future researchers: While this study offers valuable insights, it acknowledges limitations such as a confined study population in Baguio City and the absence of factor analysis. To enhance the understanding of international students' experiences, future researchers may explore the multifaceted dimensions of HEIs administrative services, delve into the intersectionality of social identity theory, and consider longitudinal studies that account for external factors such as global events or policy change to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving landscape of international student services.
6. Future researchers are encouraged to delve deeper into the nuanced patterns of awareness and satisfaction with support services. Specifically, exploring the factors influencing the disparity between traditional and online services could offer insights into tailoring support mechanisms to better meet the diverse needs of international students. Further research could also focus on the long-term effects of refined communication strategies for online services, addressing specific concerns, and creating a supportive environment that acknowledges and accommodates the unique challenges faced by international students.

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