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The New Normal: Student Preferences for Online Advising Before, During, and After the Pandemic

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Abstract

Learning advisers have traditionally been reluctant to conduct online appointments. We compared proportional student use of online appointments over the course of the pandemic, and relative student satisfaction between online and in-person appointments in 2021. After the initial lockdowns eased and students were able to choose their preferred appointment type, online appointments have remained popular on an ongoing basis, although in-person appointments are slightly preferred overall. There was no difference in student satisfaction between modes.

Keywords: learning advising, online learning, COVID-19, self-regulation

Background

Despite decades of research into the benefits and affordances of online learning in higher education (e.g., Ebner & Gegenfutner, 2019; Martin et al., 2022; Mayer, 2018), many teaching staff were unprepared to teach online when the pandemic hit in 2020. Some claimed that students prefer face-to-face teaching, perform worse in online environments, and that the quality of teaching and learning was poorer online (e.g., Sangster, 2020). Early studies during the pandemic supported this view, with the majority of students reporting that they disliked online learning, primarily due to poor internet access (e.g., Blizak et al., 2020) and problems with distractions and maintaining motivation at home (e.g., Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). This was arguably because the transition online was rushed by the pandemic, and emergency remote teaching is not necessarily representative of well-designed online learning (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Guppy et al., 2022).

Learning advising aims to support students to develop their academic skills and become independent learners, as defined by Hobbs and Dofs (2015). Visiting a learning adviser significantly improves student grades and retention, even after accounting for student motivation (Ashton-Hay & Doncaster, 2021; Glew et al., 2019; Ma, 2018). The discussions between students and advisers are flexible, discursive and collaborative rather than didactic

(Wilson et al., 2011), and particularly focus on using reflection and dialogue to move the students along their learning trajectory (Mynard, 2020). Learning adviser appointments are interactive; distinct from email or online asynchronous services, which tend toward proofreading (Harwood & Koyoma, 2020).

Although many universities in Australia have outsourced some or all of their online academic advising with third-party providers (e.g., Ashton-Hay et al., 2021; Benzie & Harper, 2020), in-house academic advisers are often reluctant to move individual appointments online, as in-person support is believed to be higher quality, better at developing language, and preferred by students (Hobbs & Dofs, 2015; Mullen et al., 2021). However, Rennar-Potacco (2019) found no difference in retention or grades for online students compared to in-person students attending a peer tutoring service. The learning advisers described by Davies et al. (2020) were initially concerned about moving appointments online during the pandemic as they thought students would be worried about talking online, particularly if they had never met the adviser in person. Once online bookings opened, Mullen et al. (2021) found that fewer students made use of online appointments at the start of the pandemic, Ohara and Ishimura (2020) observed no change in appointment numbers and other learning centres found that their appointment numbers increased significantly (Cavaleri & Tran, 2021; Davies et al., 2020).

At our institution, appointments are normally booked to capacity during semesters, and this did not change during the pandemic. As such, we were more concerned with the type of appointment students chose to book rather than the number. Our study aimed to compare the use of and satisfaction with online and in-person learning adviser appointments by students over the course of the pandemic. This research was conducted to address concerns around the perceived quality of online advising and help institutions to make decisions about ongoing service offerings.

Methods

Edith Cowan University (ECU) is a mid-sized public university in Western Australia with approximately 30,000 students, traditionally one-quarter of whom study fully online. Pre-pandemic, approximately 50% were mature in age, and 10% were international students. ECU offers a range of learning support to students, including academic skills workshops, online resources, Peer Assisted Study Sessions, drop-in sessions, and bookable 30-minute individual appointments with a learning adviser. Advisers focus on supporting students from

all disciplines to develop their academic skills, including understanding assignment tasks, academic writing conventions and structure, English language development, academic integrity, basic numeracy, and understanding feedback from teaching staff. Our learning advisers take an active-learning approach to appointments to foster student's self-efficacy and belonging (following the model of Kahu and Nelson, 2018), by scaffolded academic skills using techniques such as reflective dialogue, questioning, and goal-setting (see Mozzon-McPherson & Tassinari, 2020), with the aim of empowering students to become more autonomous learners (as suggested by Shelton-Strong, 2022).

Learning adviser appointments are self-access resources: they are completely optional and external to classes. Some students are strongly encouraged to book appointments based on referrals from teaching staff or academic misconduct, but both booking and attending appointments are completely voluntary and driven by the student.

Until early 2020, these learning adviser appointments were only offered in person at each of the three campus locations or by phone. With the onset of the pandemic, online meetings through Microsoft Teams were also introduced (described in Kelly et al., 2020). This provided an opportunity to compare the usage patterns and satisfaction with learning adviser appointments before and after the introduction of online advising. Learning adviser appointments are typically booked by students in advance through ECU's online booking systems. We used proportions in our analysis rather than the number of appointments, as the overall number of appointments fluctuated based on staff availability rather than student demand. Approval to use the data was granted through the ECU Human Research Ethics committee.

We analysed the number and type of learning adviser appointment bookings over six semesters (semester 2, 2019, through semester 1, 2022). In Australia, there are typically two semesters per year, with semester 1 running February to June and semester 2 running July to November, with breaks in between semesters. The time span of our data collection covers pre-pandemic appointments, the onset of the pandemic in 2020 with an initial lockdown followed by a gradual easing of restrictions, three shorter lockdowns in 2021, and the re-opening of borders in 2022. A detailed overview of pandemic lockdowns and the dates on which they occurred can be found on Wikipedia's timeline of the pandemic in Western Australia (2022). Although the initial lockdown had negative impacts on West Australia's mental and physical health (Bhoyroo et al., 2021), overall Western Australia had comparatively fewer lockdowns and restrictions compared to more populous Australian states

(Edwards et al., 2022). Australia had relatively fewer COVID deaths compared to other countries (Klein, 2022).

Student satisfaction with learning adviser appointments was measured using an anonymous online survey in Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2022) at the end of semester 2, 2021. The survey link was emailed to all students who had met with a learning adviser at any point in 2021 and collected 188 responses (10.5% response rate). Prior to this, student satisfaction data were collected on an ad-hoc basis by individual advisers. However, in 2021 we decided to conduct a single, systematic survey to collect data on student satisfaction. This also provided an appropriate opportunity to measure satisfaction between online and in-person appointments. There were six items addressing student satisfaction, each on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

- I learned something relevant to my study and/or assignment
- The Learning Adviser addressed my needs
- The Learning Adviser was helpful
- I felt comfortable sharing my ideas and asking questions
- I felt more confident after attending the appointment
- I would recommend this survey to other students

The survey was piloted for clarity on a small group of casual student staff who work as Peer Advisers. Students who used phone appointments (n=34) or mixed modes (n=28) were excluded from this analysis due to small sample sizes. Statistical analyses were conducted in SPSS. Non-parametric tests were used as the distribution was non-normal.

Results

Over the six semesters we examined, ECU's learning advisers delivered 10,214 appointments, averaging 1,702 appointments per semester. Prior to the pandemic, 90% of appointments were conducted in person, with the remainder by phone (Figure 1). At the beginning of the pandemic, Western Australia went into lockdown from 16th March 2020 (week 4 of semester), and restrictions were eased gradually through May and June. During this time, there were no in-person appointments, and students displayed a clear preference for online appointments (75%) over phone appointments (25%). After restrictions were eased, appointments settled at relatively stable proportions of 48-53% in-person and 35-39% online for three semesters (Figure 2). Online appointments grew to 47% in semester 1, 2022, when COVID-19 spread through Western Australia and the rates of home quarantine increased.

There was minimal fluctuation week-to-week during semester, except when lockdowns were in place (Figure 1).

Student satisfaction with online appointments averaged 3.5 out of 4 on all measures, with no significant difference by mode of appointment ($p>0.05$ on all measures) (Figure 3).

Figure 2

Proportion of Learning Adviser Appointments by Mode Over Time

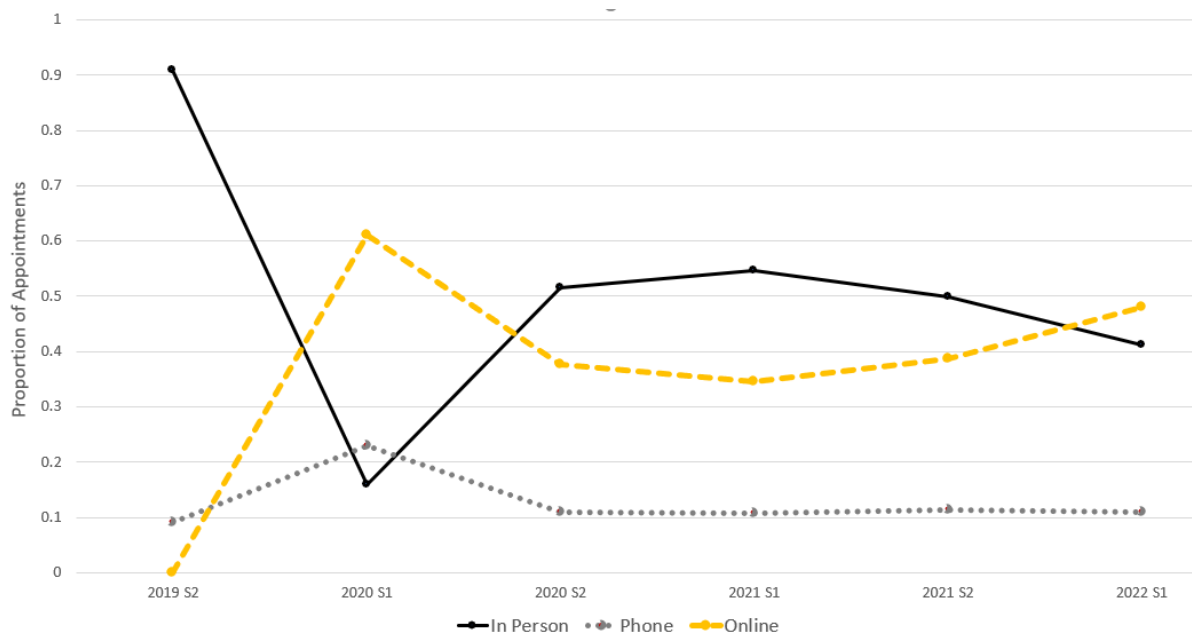


Figure 3

Student Satisfaction With Online (n=115) And In-Person (n=79) Learning Adviser Appointments in 2021.

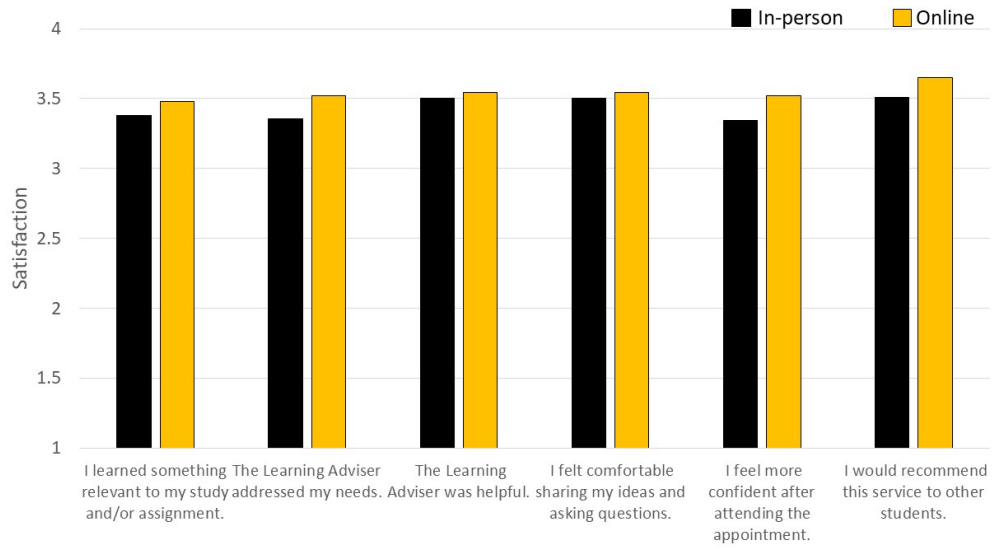
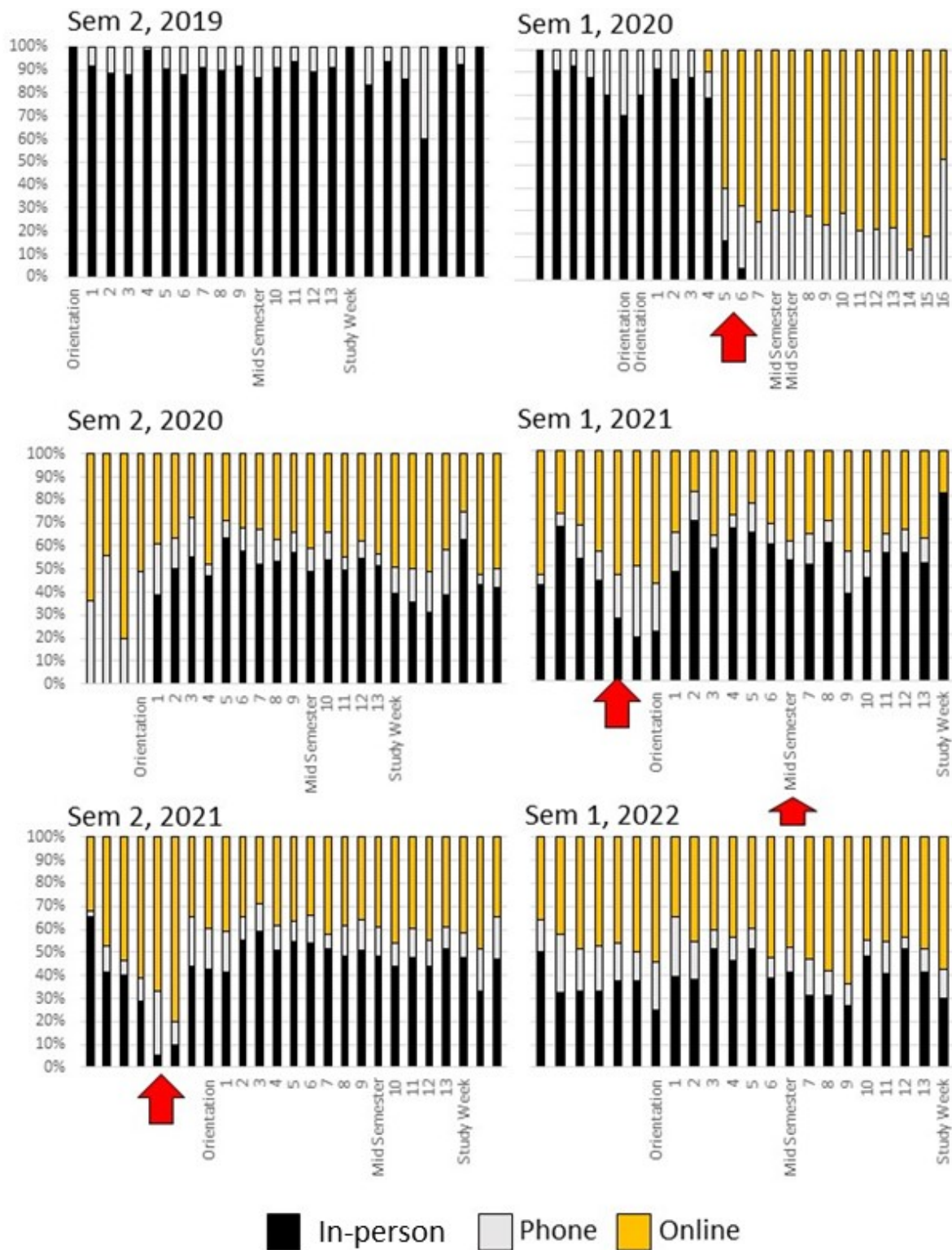


Figure 1

Proportional Distribution of Learning Support Appointment Types Across Six Semesters, With Lockdowns.



Arrows denote lockdowns in Western Australia. Note that in Semester 1, 2020 there were additional orientation and semester break weeks to give students and staff additional time to adjust to the move to online learning.

Discussion

After the initial fluctuations caused by pandemic lockdowns, student use of different appointment modes quickly stabilised. In the absence of lockdowns or high community spread, in-person appointments were preferred by around half of the students, with online appointments only slightly less popular.

There are multiple reasons that students may have preferred to attend in-person appointments. During the pandemic, students who had deliberately chosen to study in person were forced to study online. Studies conducted during the pandemic found that while some students found that they preferred online study, most expressed that they wished to return to on-campus study when possible (e.g., Gherhes et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2022). Other research found that students who preferred on-campus study were more likely to self-report that they struggled with time management, motivation and lack of direct interaction with staff and peers (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Zhu et al., 2022). Zhu et al.'s (2022) survey results suggest that students are actively reflecting on their learning dispositions and capability to self-regulate; and that even high achievers with normally high levels of self-regulation became frustrated with online learning if it did not suit their preferred learning strategies.

Online appointments rose sharply during the pandemic and then maintained a steady usage rate with students after lockdowns. There are several logistical reasons that students may prefer an online over an in-person appointment. In their pre-pandemic study, Rennar-Potacco (2019) found that online tutoring was preferred by students with long commutes and those with family caring responsibilities. Anecdotally, we also observed that online appointments are particularly valued by students who have caring responsibilities. ECU has a high proportion of mature students, and although all campuses have affordable creches, the logistics of transporting children to and from campus for a 30-minute appointment is a deterrent. Additionally, during mask mandates, online appointments may have been preferred by non-native English speakers, as they often rely more on facial cues and lip reading that are obstructed by masks (Guskaroska, 2021).

Phone appointments were low, accounting for around 10% of bookings, and returned to pre-lockdown levels once restrictions were lifted. Phone appointments provide the same flexibility to study from home as online appointments, but they do not require an internet connection. Students should not be disadvantaged due to low digital literacy or poor internet connections at home (Hamilton, 2020). In Blizak et al.'s (2020) study that found poor satisfaction with online learning, more than half of students reported having a weak internet connection, and nearly 80% of students were studying from their smartphones.

There were no differences in student satisfaction data between online and in-person appointments. Davies et al. (2020) commented that the shift to online sessions made little difference to students' feedback or access to the services. Anecdotally amongst our learning advisers, online and in-person appointments were very similar. As in Harwood and Koyoma's (2020) study, we noticed no differences in students' predisposition to engage in conversation, questioning and learning in online compared to in-person appointments. Learning advisers encouraged student engagement in online appointments through the use of tools such as screen sharing, annotations, and chat, as in reports by Davies et al. (2020) and Ohara and Ishimura (2020). We did not have a large enough sample size of phone users to compare student satisfaction reliably; however, our learning advisers found phone appointments to be more difficult to administer since they were unable to view documents together with the student.

The main limitation when considering that there was no difference in self-reported satisfaction between online and in-person appointments is that this study was not randomised: the survey was conducted when there were no lockdowns in place, and students had a free choice of their preferred mode, which is likely to influence their overall satisfaction. There are advantages and disadvantages for students in both modes of study. Individual students can develop strong, stable preferences towards one or the other based on their experience and needs (Zhu et al., 2022). Western Australian students were relatively lightly impacted by the pandemic, with shorter lockdowns and fewer cases of COVID-19 per capita compared to many other parts of the world. This may have reduced their negative experiences and emotions surrounding online learning, especially compared to students who had poorer regional internet infrastructure or less institutional support for the transition online (e.g., Ferri et al., 2020; Turnbull et al., 2021). Another limitation is that participation in both appointments and the survey were completely optional, which is likely to bias the results towards more motivated students.

As the pandemic continued, learning centres began to shift towards the view that online services should be maintained on an ongoing basis even when students could return to campus (e.g., Cavaleri & Tran, 2021; Davies et al., 2020). Despite initial doubt surrounding the success of moving learning online, the transition of learning advising at ECU has been successful and online appointments are now a permanent part of our service. Our long-term dataset shows that online appointments are unlikely to ever fully replace in-person services, but they are a popular option that helps to address concerns around equitable access. Providing multiple modes for appointments supports students to manage their individual

needs and self-regulate how they prefer to learn. We recommend that universities continue to provide both online and in-person appointments in balanced proportions.

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