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## Enhancing Online Learning for Adult Learners: Insights from Student Perspectives

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### INTRODUCTION

Adult learners without access to face-to-face facilities have always sought alternative ways to learn. Some have pursued self-directed programs of study, while others have enrolled in instructor-led courses. For those seeking formal academic credit, attending classes on a college or university campus was once the standard path. Yet many, constrained by geography or personal obligations, turned to alternative methods of education.

In the 19th century, correspondence courses emerged as an early vehicle for distance education (Maldonado et al., 2023; Woods & Baker, 2004). Students followed structured curricula designed by instructors, mailed in assignments for grading, and waited weeks for feedback. While this approach expanded access, it was limited by slow communication, minimal instructor interaction, and a heavy reliance on self-directed study.

The late 20th century ushered in a new phase with the rise of the internet. Students gained faster access to assignments, quicker instructor feedback, and increased connectivity with peers. Still, asynchronous formats could not fully replicate the immediacy of face-to-face interaction. Platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet later enabled synchronous online learning, where instructors could deliver lectures in real time, replicating many aspects of the classroom experience. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 accelerated this transformation, forcing higher education institutions worldwide to transition rapidly to online delivery in both synchronous and asynchronous formats (Harrington et al., 2021). Enrollment in online education steadily expanded, rising from 8.2% of students in 2003–04 to 34.3% in 2015–16 (Harrington et al., 2021). By fall 2023, over half of U.S. students (53%) were taking at least one online course, and 25.6% were fully enrolled in online programs (Coffey, 2024).

At the same time, universities sought ways to meet the needs of adults eager to complete degrees more efficiently. Accelerated and self-paced online programs and courses emerged. The needs of adult learners align with the principles of andragogy, the field of adult learning theory. Knowles (1980) emphasized that adults are self-directed, draw on accumulated life experiences, and are



motivated by practical, goal-oriented learning. Unlike traditional students, adult learners often return to education while balancing roles as professionals, parents, and community members. Their studies are shaped by prior knowledge, workplace experience, and clear personal or professional goals, making program design that recognizes these needs essential.

The typical adult learner is between 25 and 45 years old, employed either full- or part-time, and motivated by career advancement, career change, or personal development (Kasworm, 2009). Many seek credentials to remain competitive in an evolving labor market, while others aim to complete degrees begun earlier in life. For some adult learners, flexibility remains one of the central drivers for their participation in online higher education. Balancing employment, family obligations, and financial responsibilities requires options that allow variable schedules and self-paced learning (Cercone, 2008). Other adult learners often value peer collaboration, which provides academic support and professional insights (Tisdell & Taylor, 1999), and the opportunity to graduate at a fast pace. Recognition of the needs of this group of adult learners has pushed higher education to expand beyond traditional semester-long online classes, offering accelerated courses, which are structured, intensive, and typically run for 5–8 weeks.

Accelerated online delivery often appeals to older, working students who, on average, demonstrate slightly higher GPAs than peers in traditional online programs (Harwood et al., 2018). Such programs are delivered through two main formats: semester-based open enrollment and cohort-based enrollment. In open enrollment, students individually select courses, while in the cohort model, groups of students progress together through a predetermined schedule. The cohort format fosters peer networks that provide accountability and support, helping students persist in accelerated study.

This pilot study attempts to answer the key question: Are there significant differences in student satisfaction between self-paced online courses and accelerated cohort-based courses? While in the United States there is no one standardized definition of self-paced online courses and accelerated cohort-based courses, this study utilizes definitions provided by Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania: Cohort-based learning is a collaborative learning style in which a group of individuals advance through an educational program together; Self-paced, or on-demand, which individuals advance through the courses on their own path.

This study utilizes survey instruments and subsequently analyzes the data obtained, which leads to the discussions and conclusions about the enhancement of online learning for adult learners.



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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The Role of Traditional, Self-Paced, and Accelerated Online Learning**

A growing body of scholarship has examined alternative delivery modes in online higher education, especially as they relate to adult learners' needs for flexibility and engagement while maintaining academic rigor.

In a study of graduate outcomes, Harwood et al. (2018) found students prefer the flexibility of accelerated courses with 86% finding online superior to face-to-face delivery, citing this method as a convenient, efficient use of student time. The shorter completion time, continuous learning, and fewer classes at one time were noted benefits. Students saw less time for review and learning and increased stress as negatives. The researchers found no significant differences in instructor ratings, student satisfaction, or performance outcomes. Results of cohorts were equal to or superior to traditional classes when students were supported by active faculty and cohorts had clear goals and community support.

A study of third-year medical students had mostly positive findings on accelerated online courses. Leong et al. (2022) found that students appreciated the immediate feedback and small group sessions, but needed more engagement and feedback from faculty.

Some studies even find stronger classroom community perceptions in accelerated formats than in traditional-length courses, likely due to tighter pacing and structured interaction (Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022).

Akerfeldt et al. (2024) compared asynchronous (self-paced) and synchronous (cohort-based) delivery models. Their study highlighted key trade-offs: while asynchronous learners benefited from greater flexibility, they often reported social isolation and reduced academic engagement. Conversely, synchronous formats provided more structure and stronger peer connections. This reinforces the importance of balancing lifestyle flexibility with opportunities for social interaction and academic support in course design.

Reichgelt and Smith (2024) extended this comparison to include face-to-face, asynchronous online, and synchronous online modes. Their results indicated that student satisfaction did not significantly differ across modalities, challenging the assumption that face-to-face learning automatically yields higher satisfaction. Instead, factors such as clarity of communication, instructor availability, and perceived respect and care emerged as stronger determinants of student satisfaction.



These findings suggest that the quality of interaction, rather than the mode of delivery itself, is the critical driver of positive learning experiences for adult learners.

## **Traditional versus Cohort Format**

Cohort benefits extend beyond the classroom setting, providing connections and support both in the program and later in students' careers. Within the cohort setting, benefits included job preparedness, networking, higher retention rates, and continued interaction among members over the duration of their professional careers. (Akhtar, et al. 2024).

Harrington et al. (2021) noted that cohorts in a community college leadership program developed strong peer bonds vital for persistence and learning, and provided stability, work-life balance, and a built-in support system. Cohort graduation rates were similar to traditional formats and enhanced accelerated doctoral programs, while Nimer (2009) found higher degree completion among cohorts.

The cohort format supports motivation, especially during intense online periods (Rice et al., 2022). Students with higher cohort bonds reported higher program satisfaction and lower attrition. In accelerated programs, when students are supported with structured cohorts and active faculty, results are equal or superior to traditional classes (Harwood et al., 2018). Thompson et al. (2022) found that the cohort model enhanced an interactive learning environment online when group work and peer discussions were employed. Faculty mentorship in the cohort model encourages retention and satisfaction (Harrington et al., 2021). Mentorship, job preparedness, networking, collegiality, higher levels of engagement, and camaraderie were some of the benefits cited by cohort members (Akhtar et al., 2024; Harrington et al., 2021).

## **Academic Rigor in Online Programs for Adult Learners**

Academic rigor is a cornerstone of quality education and refers to the level of challenge presented by curriculum content, the complexity of assessment, and the expectations for student performance. For adult learners, academic rigor must strike a balance between intellectual challenge and practical application. In online learning environments, ensuring rigor while maintaining accessibility and flexibility presents both opportunities and challenges.



## **Defining Academic Rigor in Online Contexts**

Rigor in online learning is more than the volume of content—it involves the cognitive complexity of tasks, alignment of learning outcomes with assessments, and meaningful student engagement. According to Johnson and Mejia (2014), rigorous online courses foster critical thinking, require application of knowledge in real-world scenarios, and promote sustained learner effort. Adult learners, in particular, seek academic experiences that are immediately relevant and intellectually stimulating (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

## **Perceptions of Rigor Among Adult Learners**

Adult students often evaluate rigor through the lens of relevance and workload. Research by Lee and Cho (2018) found that adult learners appreciate high standards when they see a clear connection to their personal and professional goals. However, perceived rigor without adequate support can lead to frustration or dropout, particularly in asynchronous formats where peer and instructor interaction may be limited (Hart, 2012).

A study by Xu and Jaggars (2013) observed that while adult learners tend to perform equally well in face-to-face and online settings, they reported greater difficulty engaging deeply with online material unless the instructional design was intentionally interactive and scaffolded. This reinforces the idea that rigor must be supported by structure and guidance.

## **Instructional Strategies to Foster Rigor**

To deliver academic rigor effectively in online courses for adults, several instructional strategies have been recommended:

**Scaffolded Assignments:** Complex tasks are broken into manageable steps, helping adult learners build mastery progressively (Garrison et al., 2001).

**Authentic Assessments:** Assignments that mimic workplace challenges—like case analyses, policy briefs, or project-based learning—encourage learners to apply theory to practice (Lombardi, 2007).

**High Expectations with Support:** Instructors who communicate high standards while providing prompt feedback and support promote both persistence and learning (Rovai, 2003).

**Other interactive methods:** Interactive learning methods such as group work and peer discussion are vital to the success of online cohort-based programs. (Harwood et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2022), These strategies are particularly effective with adult learners, who value clarity, relevance, and the



opportunity to demonstrate competence.

## **Measuring and Maintaining Rigor in Accelerated Formats**

Online programs for adult learners are often delivered in accelerated terms (e.g., 5- to 8-week sessions). This compression raises concerns about whether academic rigor is maintained. According to Sheldon and Durdella (2010), accelerated formats can be equally rigorous if learning outcomes are clearly defined and instructional time is replaced with deeper independent engagement. Harwood et al. (2018) found no significant difference in student satisfaction or performance outcomes in a study between traditional and intensive online asynchronous programs. Likewise, the study found that cohorts fostered social and academic engagement, and cohorts performed as well or better than traditional classes.

Accreditation bodies such as Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE), and Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) emphasize the importance of aligning course content and assessments with program-level learning objectives, regardless of format or delivery mode. Their standards require institutions to document how rigor is upheld across modalities (SACSCOC, 2024; IACBE,2024; AACSB,2020).

## **Faculty Role in Ensuring Rigor**

Faculty plays a critical role in maintaining academic standards in online settings. Research shows that faculty development in online pedagogy significantly influences the quality and rigor of instruction (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). Training in backward design, Bloom’s Taxonomy, and universal design for learning (UDL) enables instructors to create challenging yet inclusive environments for adult learners.

Moreover, adult learners appreciate instructors who respect their time, provide constructive feedback, and engage in intellectual discourse—behaviors associated with academic rigor and professionalism (Kasworm, 2009).

In summary, research in the field of online course delivery modalities underscores that no single delivery mode is universally superior. Instead, effectiveness depends on aligning course design with adult learners’ diverse lifestyles, engagement needs, and expectations of instructional quality, while upholding academic rigor.



## Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine adult learners' preferences between online accelerated cohort-based and online self-paced courses. A questionnaire was distributed to current students and recent alumni of online degree programs for adult learners, namely the B.S. in Business Administration, B.S. in Accounting, and M.S. in Management. The survey included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions as well as open-ended questions capturing demographic data, format preferences, perceived benefits, and challenges. Data collection occurred during the Spring 2025 semester. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative tests to identify significant patterns in learner preferences and satisfaction.

## Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was developed to examine perceptions and experiences of adult learners engaged in online programs. The target population comprised of current adult students enrolled in online courses and recent alumni of the same online programs. Both undergraduate and graduate programs' participants were included to enable comparison across program levels.

Because the achieved sample size was modest ( $N = 32$ ), the study is positioned as pilot research and is not intended to yield definitive conclusions, but instead serves to test the clarity of survey items, evaluate feasibility of administration procedures, generate preliminary data patterns to guide hypotheses and sample-size calculations for subsequent large-scale study, and make non-definitive preliminary conclusions. Methodological literature emphasizes that pilot studies with 20–40 participants are generally adequate to achieve these goals, particularly when the aim is to refine an instrument and explore variability rather than establish population-level generalizability (Hertzog, 2008; van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

## Participants and Sampling

The survey was distributed electronically to 61 current students and alumni of online programs. Out of these, 32 completed responses were obtained, representing a response rate of 52.5%.

Program level (undergraduate vs. graduate) was captured to support stratified analyses. Recruitment drew from the programs' internal contact lists and communication channels. Participation was voluntary.



## Demographic Measures

Three initial items characterized the sample:

1. Age range (categorical ranges of 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64).
2. Employment status (e.g., full-time, part-time, not employed).
3. Program level (undergraduate or graduate, regardless of responders' current status).

These variables were used both to describe the sample and to define groups for inferential analyses (ANOVA, Chi-square).

## Survey Instrument, Structure, and Administration

The survey instrument was developed and administered using Microsoft Forms. It comprised 24 Likert-type items designed to elicit respondents' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences as adult learners in online education. The items reflected key dimensions of the online adult learning environment, including course design and rigor, instructional support, peer collaboration, flexibility, workload, and engagement. Each item was presented as a statement, and participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on the provided scale. Duplicate entries were checked and none were retained.

## Response Format and Coding

Each item used a six-option response set:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- N/A

For quantitative analyses, responses were coded on a 5-point ordinal scale (Strongly agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly disagree = 1). N/A was treated as missing for that item and excluded from item-level and composite-score calculations.

Five additional open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire to gain deeper insights into students' personal experiences and perceptions beyond the structured Likert-scale responses. These questions were designed to capture the perceived strengths and weaknesses of different online



learning formats, as well as preferences and rationales for accelerated cohort-based versus self-paced models. The responses help to identify factors that influence academic performance and provide suggestions for improving course design to better support adult learners.

- *What do you see as the main advantages of accelerated online cohort-based courses for adult learners?*
- *What do you see as the main disadvantages of accelerated online cohort-based courses for adult learners?*
- *Would you prefer a self-paced model over an accelerated cohort-based model? Why or why not?*
- *What aspects of either format (cohort-based or self-paced) enhanced or hindered your academic performance?*
- *How could either format be improved to better support rigorous learning outcomes?*

## **Statistical Tools**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

- **Demographics:** frequencies and percentages for age, employment, and program level.
- **Item-level responses:** response distributions, item means, medians, minimum, maximum.
- **Composite scores:** means, standard deviations.

### **ANOVA and Chi-Square Analyses**

Both ANOVA test and Chi-square analysis were conducted at  $\alpha = .05$ , with 95% confidence intervals.

One-way ANOVAs provided an opportunity to examine differences between students' study level (undergraduate and graduate) and their response to each item on the survey questionnaire.

Chi-square tests of independence examined associations between categorical data such as level of study and employment status, as well as age group and employment status.

### **Rigor and Quality Assurance**

This pilot study prioritized transparency, reliability, and feasibility. The modest sample size ( $N = 32$ ), as it was already mentioned, limits generalizability but provides valuable preliminary insights into patterns of adult learners' experiences in online programs. Findings will inform refinement of the survey instrument, guide larger-scale data collection, and contribute to the development of evidence-based practices in online higher education for adults.



## Results

Out of 32 survey participants, 22 were either current students or recent alumni of the accelerated undergraduate online business and accounting programs, 10 were students or recent alumni of the accelerated graduate online management program. The age was distributed as follows:

18-24 years old: 1 (3%)

25-34 years old: 6 (18.8%)

35-44 years old: 11 (34.4%)

45-54 years old: 11 (34.4%)

55-64 years old: 3 (9.4%)

Employment Status:

Full-time: 29 (91%)

Part-time: 2 (6%)

Not employed: 1 (3%)

The table in the Appendix summarizes the mean, standard deviation, median, minimum, and maximum values for the 24 Likert-scale survey questions.

Below is a synthesis of the key patterns emerging from the descriptive statistics.

### Academic Rigor and Intellectual Challenge

Participants generally perceived both formats as academically rigorous, though the cohort-based model received slightly higher ratings. The statement “*The cohort-based accelerated courses I took were academically rigorous*” had a high mean of 4.28 ( $SD = 0.89$ ), while the parallel item for self-paced courses received a mean of 4.07 ( $SD = 0.92$ ). Similarly, learners rated cohort-based accelerated courses as more intellectually challenging ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) than self-paced ones. Interestingly, the standard deviation for this item was among the highest in the dataset, suggesting diverse experiences among respondents.

A noteworthy finding is related to difficulty in maintaining academic standards in self-paced courses. The item “*I found it difficult to maintain academic standards in self-paced courses*” scored relatively low ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ), indicating that many learners either disagreed with this perception or had mixed views. The complementary item regarding timely task completion in self-paced settings also scored low ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), reinforcing students’ perception of self-paced classes as relatively manageable from the academic standards and time management points of view.



## Time Management and Study Habits

The cohort-based structure appeared to support academic discipline. The item “*Cohort-based courses helped me stay on track with deadlines*” received a high mean score of 4.19 ( $SD = 1.09$ ), while “*Cohort-based accelerated learning fostered strong academic discipline*” scored even higher at 4.34 ( $SD = 0.65$ ). In contrast, “*I developed better study habits in self-paced courses*” scored moderately ( $M = 3.27, SD = 1.15$ ), and slightly lower than its cohort-based counterpart ( $M = 3.69, SD = 1.18$ ).

It is worth mentioning that participants expressed strong appreciation for the flexibility of self-paced learning. “*I appreciate the flexibility of self-paced learning for managing my time*” had one of the highest mean scores at 4.27 ( $SD = 0.72$ ), indicating that adult learners highly value autonomy, even if it presents some challenges for task completion or structure.

## Instructional Support and Feedback

Both formats received favorable ratings for instructional support, though cohort-based courses edged out slightly. For instance, “*Instructors in cohort-based courses provided timely feedback*” had a mean of 4.31 ( $SD = 0.97$ ), compared to 4.15 ( $SD = 0.61$ ) for self-paced courses. Regarding academic support in general, cohort-based models were again rated higher ( $M = 4.38, SD = 0.87$ ) versus ( $M = 3.88, SD = 1.03$ ) for self-paced courses. These findings suggest that learners feel more seen, supported, and guided in environments with more synchronized structure and shared pacing.

## Social Connectedness and Peer Learning

The most positively rated items in the entire survey were related to peer interaction in cohort-based settings. The highest single mean score was for “*I felt more connected to classmates in cohort-based courses*” ( $M = 4.59, SD = 0.91$ ), followed closely by “*I had meaningful academic discussions with peers in cohort-based settings*” ( $M = 4.50, SD = 0.84$ ) and “*I benefit from the resources and experiences shared by peers in cohort-based online courses*” ( $M = 4.41, SD = 0.56$ ).

These responses reflect the clear value that adult learners place on a sense of academic community, a factor often missing in the self-paced model. Even the retention-focused item, “*I retain information better when I learn alongside a group in cohort-based courses,*” scored noticeably higher ( $M = 3.88, SD = 1.07$ ) than its self-paced equivalent ( $M = 3.15, SD = 1.08$ ).



## Perceived Rigor and Learning Depth

Participants viewed both formats as intellectually valuable, with nuanced differences. The item *“Self-paced courses gave me the opportunity to explore the material in depth at my own pace”* received a strong mean of 4.00 (SD = 0.89), suggesting appreciation for content flexibility. However, cohort-based learning was seen as more conducive to deeper understanding, as reflected in the item *“Cohort-based classes allowed me to have a deeper understanding of the material”* ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ).

Additionally, the item *“I believe the cohort-based format maintains higher academic rigor than the self-paced format”* received a mean of 3.97 (SD = 1.09), reflecting a moderately strong consensus in favor of cohort-based structure for academic depth and integrity.

## Summary of frequency distribution results

Key positive trends for accelerated cohort-based format:

1. Perception of academic rigor: 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the cohort-based accelerated courses were academically rigorous; 78% indicated they felt more intellectually challenged in cohort-based settings than in self-paced format.
2. Structure and Accountability: 78% agreed that cohort-based courses helped students stay on track with deadlines; 75% felt that cohort-based learning fostered stronger academic discipline.
3. Engagement and Understanding: over 81% said the cohort-based format allowed them to have a deeper understanding of course material, highlighting the effectiveness of peer interaction and guided pacing.

Challenges identified in the accelerated cohort-based format:

1. Time constraints: a notable minority (27%) reported difficulty balancing the accelerated pace with work and personal obligations – a common concern for adult learners.
2. Peer dependence: several respondents mentioned frustration with inconsistent peer participation or group work dynamics, affecting their learning experiences.

Mixed perception of self-paced learning:

1. Depth vs. isolation: while 59% of students agreed that self-paced courses gave them the opportunity to explore content more deeply at their own pace, many responses reflected concerns about a lack of engagement and connection. Students noted the absence of peer interaction and support in self-paced formats.
2. Academic standards: only 47% felt that self-paced courses maintained high academic standards, compared to significantly higher confidence in the rigor of the cohort-based course



## Chi-Square Test Results

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the relationship between level of study (Bachelor's vs. Master's) and employment status (full-time, part-time, or not employed). The association was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2, N = 32) = 1.50, p = .47$ . This result indicates that undergraduate and graduate students in the sample did not differ significantly in their employment status, with the majority of both groups reporting full-time employment.

A second chi-square test was conducted to examine the relationship between age group and employment status. The association was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(8, N = 32) = 22.50, p = .004$ , suggesting that employment patterns varied by age group. Younger students (18–24) were represented only among part-time workers, while middle-aged students (35–44 and 45–54) were predominantly employed full-time. The oldest group (55–64) included both full-time and part-time workers. These findings indicate that employment status was unevenly distributed across age groups. However, there is only 1 respondent in the 18-24 age group and that only respondent reported part-time employment, and only three respondents are in age group of 55-64, out of which only one has part time employment. So total of part-time employed respondents is 2. This fact allows us consider the sample as relatively homogeneous.

## ANOVA Analysis Results

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to examine differences between undergraduate and graduate students on the 24 Likert-scale survey items. Across all items, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups.

For example, perceptions of academic rigor in cohort-based courses were nearly identical for undergraduates ( $M = 4.27, SD = 0.75$ ) and graduates ( $M = 4.30, SD = 0.67$ ),  $F(1, 30) = 0.01, p = .94$ . Similarly, ratings of self-paced course rigor did not differ significantly, with undergraduates reporting ( $M = 4.06, SD = 0.82$ ) and graduates ( $M = 4.11, SD = 0.70$ ),  $F(1, 30) = 0.02, p = .89$ . On intellectual challenge in cohort-based courses, graduates reported slightly higher means ( $M = 4.13, SD = 0.83$ ) compared to undergraduates ( $M = 3.62, SD = 1.05$ ), but the difference was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 30) = 1.01, p = .32$ .

Although graduate students tended to score somewhat higher than undergraduates across several items—particularly regarding intellectual challenge and maintaining academic standards in self-paced courses—the observed differences were not large enough to reach statistical significance. These results suggest that undergraduate and graduate students in the sample generally perceived



cohort-based and self-paced online learning experiences in similar ways.

## Results of the Open-Ended Questions

The responses to the five open-ended questions from 32 participants demonstrated some variation, but the predominant response patterns can be summarized as follows:

*Q.1. What do you see as the main advantages of accelerated online cohort-based courses for adult learners?*

Most frequently cited advantages: speed, flexibility, focused content, shorter time commitment, peer support, and networking opportunities.

*Q.2. What do you see as the main disadvantages of accelerated online cohort-based courses for adult learners?*

Most frequently cited disadvantages: heavy weekly workload, challenges with group projects due to limited time and scheduling conflicts, and some respondents reported no disadvantages.

*Q.3. Would you prefer a self-paced model over an accelerated cohort-based model? Why or why not?*

Frequent responses: Most participants preferred the accelerated cohort-based model; five respondents favored the self-paced format for allowing more time to complete assignments.

*Q. 4: What aspects of either format (cohort-based or self-paced) enhanced or hindered your academic performance?*

- Cohort-based: Enhanced – networking and group work, motivation to stay on track, peer support; Hindered – limited time-frame
- Self-paced: Enhanced- flexibility to schedule study time around children's routines; No comments on hindrances

Students' responses to Question 4 primarily focused on the accelerated cohort-based course format.

*Q.5. How could either format be improved to better support rigorous learning outcomes? Typical Responses:*

- Cohort-based: More in-person events, increased interaction with classmates, additional examples and discussions during Zoom sessions, more extracurricular activities, and greater flexibility with due dates.
- Self-paced: More opportunities for group work, such as discussions and projects.



## DISCUSSION

The fact that Chi-Square tests and a one-way ANOVA analysis show practically no significant association between participants' preferences at either student level, age group, or employment status, indicates that adult learners have predominantly identical perceptions of online courses and life-work-education balance.

Responses indicate a preference and appreciation for the accelerated cohort-based course model, especially in terms of structure, engagement, and academic discipline, while also acknowledging certain benefits of self-paced learning. This can be understood in a several ways: (a) after relatively or, sometimes, significantly big time gap between previous college experience and current classes, adult learners need more supportive study environment, including ability to be engaged with peers and have structured deadlines; (b) in many cases, adults are eager to graduate quickly in order to jump-start a new career or advance within their current organization or industry, which can be achieved through accelerated programs and courses.

However, the accelerated cohort-based courses also have problematic issues such as a limited timeframe and, sometimes, uneven contribution of peers in group assignments. The latest can cause legitimate frustration.

It is important to mention that there were unexpected responses to one of the open-ended questions – Question 5: “How could either format (accelerated cohort-based or self-paced) be improved to support rigorous learning outcomes?” In addition to suggestions about course delivery, students also mentioned a desire for more in-person events and extracurricular activities. This indicates that even in an online environment, students value opportunities for real-world, in-person experiences.

In summary, while the study results indicate a more favorable perception of accelerated courses, certain aspects of self-paced courses – particularly the greater independence and flexibility they offer – are highly appealing to adult learners, as they allow study time to be scheduled around a busy daily routine.

## CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the previous section, the results of this study suggest that adult learners prefer an accelerated, cohort-based online format, while still valuing certain aspects of self-paced learning.

Therefore, enhancing online learning for adult learners may require accommodating diverse learning needs by integrating limited self-paced components into accelerated cohort-based courses. This approach can improve flexibility without compromising the rigor or integrity of the accelerated



format.

Strategies to enhance the online learning of adult learners may include the following:

- Maintaining the cohort-based format but integrating elements of flexibility—such as extended deadlines for selected assignments, or “grace periods”—to help learners manage time constraints without falling behind.
- Improving support for group work: Incorporating group work training early in the program to set expectations and offer strategies for effective collaboration; using peer evaluation tools to promote accountability and equitable contribution.
- Reducing scheduling conflicts through instructor-mediated grouping based on availability or time zones.

Enhancing online learning for adult learners should be a continuous process. This can be achieved through the implementation of regular, short feedback surveys to monitor learners’ experiences with pacing, workload, and group dynamics throughout the semester. The obtained feedback will help make real-time adjustments to enhance the quality of online courses.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

While this study provides valuable preliminary insights into student perceptions of online learning formats—particularly the comparison between cohort-based accelerated and self-paced delivery—several limitations exist.

The small ( $n = 32$ ) sample size limits the statistical power and generalizability of the findings. This pilot study’s results support the effectiveness of the instruments used and identify initial patterns. However, the modest sample size means that some subgroup analyses may lack robustness, and the results should be interpreted with caution when extrapolating to larger populations of adult learners.

Second, the study relied on self-reported survey data collected through Likert-scale items. While this approach is effective in capturing subjective perceptions, for deeper exploration the future research should include larger sample size and in-depth, in-person interviews with selected participants. Participants have agreed to take part in in-person interviews for future research. This qualitative phase will allow for a more nuanced understanding of adult learners’ lived experiences, motivations, and challenges within each online learning format.



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## APPENDIX

**Table 1.**

*Summary of descriptive statistics for 24 Likert-scale questions*

Survey Item	Mean	SD	Med.	Min.	Max.
The cohort-based accelerated courses I took were academically rigorous	4.28	0.89	4.0	1.0	5.0
The self-paced courses I took were academically rigorous	4.07	0.92	4.0	2.0	5.0
I felt more intellectually challenged in cohort-based courses than in self-paced ones	3.76	1.21	4.0	1.0	5.0
I found difficult to maintain academic standards in self-paced courses	2.52	1.19	2.0	1.0	5.0
Cohort-based courses helped me to stay on track with deadlines	4.19	1.09	5.0	1.0	5.0
In self-paced courses, I often struggled with completing tasks timely	2.62	1.39	2.0	1.0	5.0
I developed better study habits in cohort-based courses	3.69	1.18	4.0	1.0	5.0
I developed better study habits in self-paced courses	3.27	1.15	3.0	1.0	5.0
I appreciate the flexibility of self-paced learning for managing my time	4.27	0.72	4.0	2.0	5.0
Instructors in cohort-based courses provided timely feedback	4.31	0.97	5.0	1.0	5.0
Instructors in self-paced courses provided timely feedback	4.15	0.61	4.0	3.0	5.0
I received needed academic support in cohort-based courses	4.38	0.87	5.0	1.0	5.0



*Summary of descriptive statistics for 24 Likert-scale questions (continued)*

<b>Survey Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Med.</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
I received needed academic support in self-paced courses	3.88	1.03	4.0	1.0	5.0
I felt more connected to classmates in cohort-based course	4.59	0.91	5.0	1.0	5.0
I had meaningful academic discussions with peers in cohort-based settings	4.50	0.84	5.0	1.0	5.0
I had meaningful academic discussions with peers in self-paced settings	4.35	0.95	5.0	1.0	5.0
I retain information better when I learn alongside a group in cohort-based course	3.88	1.07	4.0	3.0	5.0
I retain information better in self-paced courses	3.15	1.08	3.0	1.0	5.0
I learn equally well in both self-paced and cohort-based online courses	3.57	1.30	4.0	1.0	5.0
I benefit from resources and experiences shared by peers in cohort-based online courses	4.41	0.56	4.0	3.0	5.0
Cohort-based classes allow me to have a deeper understanding of the material	4.30	0.73	4.0	3.0	5.0
Self-paced courses gave me the opportunity to explore the material in depth at my own pace	4.00	0.89	4.0	2.0	5.0
Cohort-based accelerated learning fostered strong academic discipline	4.34	0.65	4.0	3.0	5.0
I believe the cohort-based format maintains higher academic rigor than the self-paced format	3.97	1.09	4.0	1.0	5.0



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