EXPLORING ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT AND ACCULTURATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING HIGHER DEGREE BY RESEARCH PROGRAMS AT AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Introduction

• **Higher Degree by Research (HDR)** programs: **international students (IS)** to gain research skills.
• Developing countries, look upon **Australia Universities (AUs)** as reputable providers of quality higher education programs (Yang, 2018).
• There has been an enormous growth of IS enrolling at AUs in the last two decades (Bentley & Meek, 2018).
• But also higher rates of attrition have been reported (Department of Education, 2019).
• Increased attrition adversely impacts international HDR students and the AUs (Clark et al., 2020).
• Past research has suggested that commencing international HDR students' academic adjustment abilities are the most powerful predictor of student attrition (Hassel & Ridout, 2018).
• Upon arrival, IS adjust to a new culture involving varying instances of cultural learning, maintenance, and synthesis (Berry, 2017).

Terminology

• **Academic adjustment** refers to the processes around managing the challenges that allow students to develop skills successfully (Anderson, 2016).
• The differences between IS' home culture and the new culture, may have a great impact in adjusting to a host environment (Fung et al., 2017).
• Berry (2006) referred to **acculturation** as the cultural adjustments that an individual or cultural group endures within a new environment.

Research Questions

1. What are international HDR students' experiences of acculturation and academic adjustment?
2. What relationships exist between academic adjustment and acculturation experienced by international HDR students from diverse ethnic backgrounds?
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the academic adjustment and acculturation experienced by international HDR students?
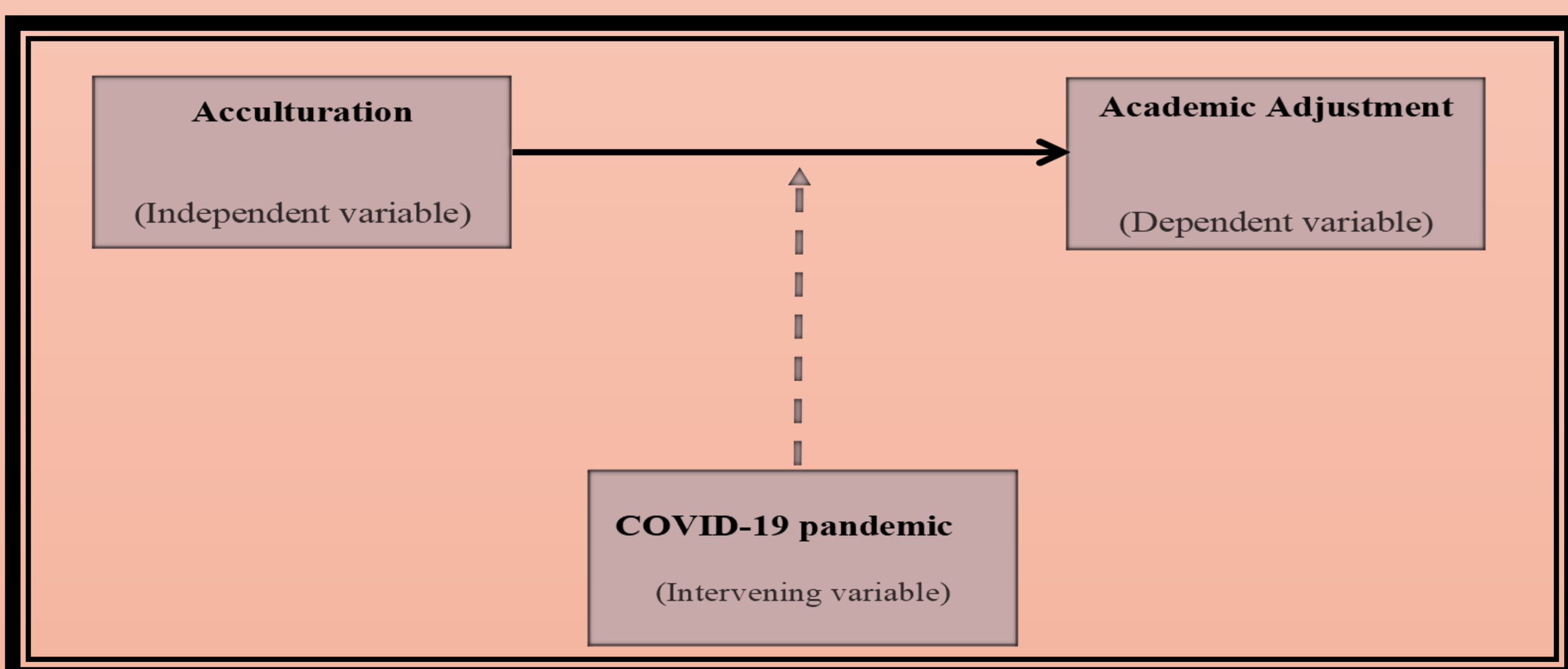

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Methodology

•an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018)

Methods

Phase 1 – survey

Academic adjustment scale (Anderson et al., 2016)
• to measure how well the students manages to meet the academic demands at the AUs.
Acculturation scale (Kuo et al., 2013)
• measures four dimensions of acculturation outlined by Berry (2017): assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization.
The COVID-19 scale (Super & Van Disseldorp, 2020)
• measure how students evaluate the measures taken by the university in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Phase 2 – semi-structured interview

Following the online survey, an interview plan containing open-ended questions will be used to further assess participants' experiences.

Research project setting

• This research will be conducted at the University of Tasmania and will involve international HDR participants enrolled in any other public universities across Australia.
• The pilot test of this study will be carried out at University of Tasmania.
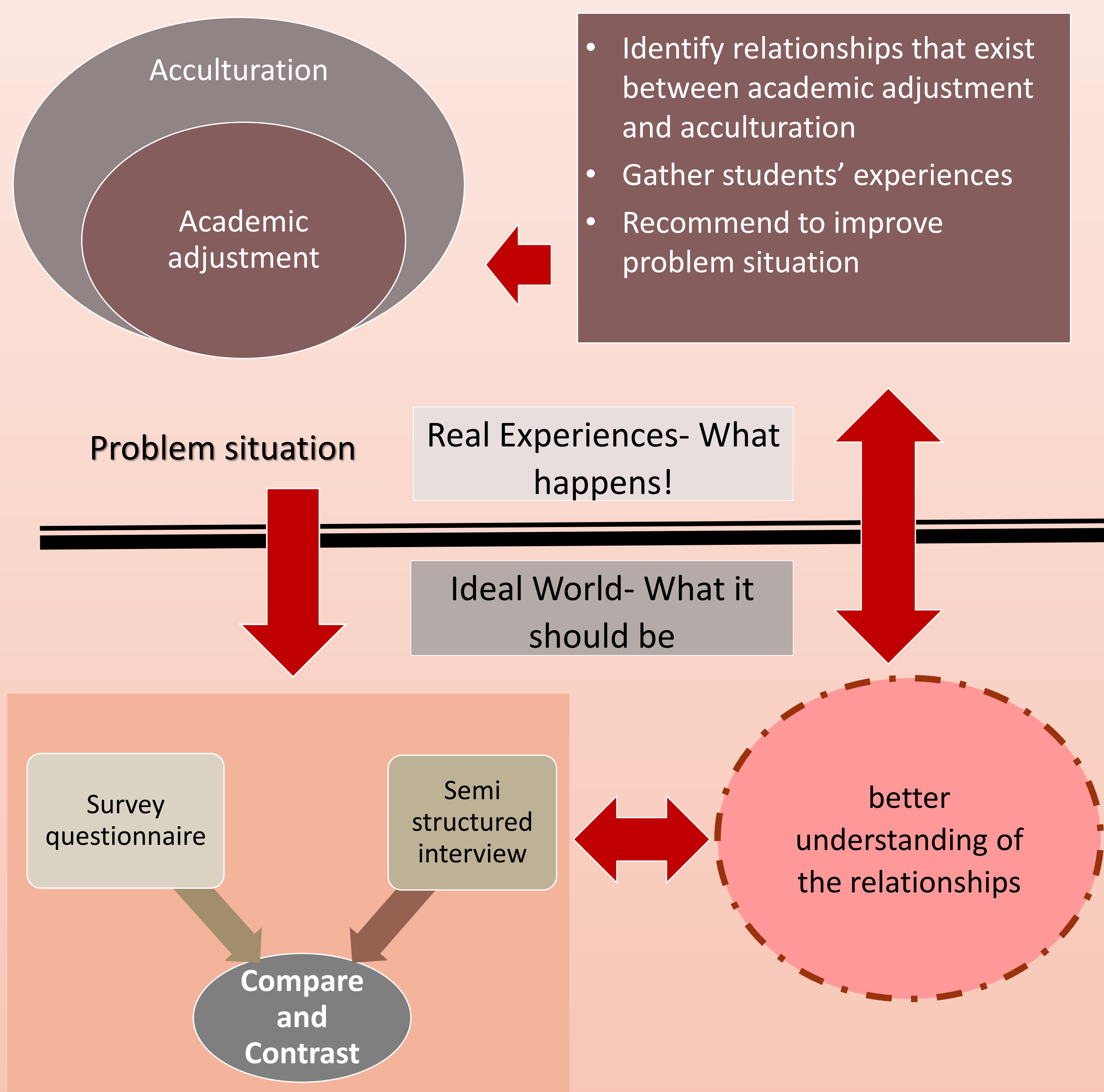

Figure 2: Method with approach

Findings

• contribute to new knowledge that will help to inform policies and practices that can help to re-attract international doctoral students when borders are open.
• gain a better understanding of the relationship between adjustment and acculturation for international HDR students.
• will help mitigate the rate of noncompletion and late submission of doctoral candidates and the related high financial and reputational costs.

Anticipated Research Challenges:

• For survey and interview sessions, the study didn't have the opportunity to meet students face to face.

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