
Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: Student challenges and lessons learned in Vietnam

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Introduction

Since the first semester of the academic year 2018-2019, the Faculty of Education from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City has used Moodle, a learning management system, as an official online learning platform in several courses for hybrid learning. To be more specific, students have started to do their tasks with online learning activities, namely discussing with peers, submitting of assignments, receiving of feedback and scores from lecturers. Thanks to those methods, students of the Faculty of Education have improved and got familiar with active learning activities and the integration of technology into the classroom environment.

Besides, a training workshop is organized at the beginning of each academic year to acquaint students with our learning management system (Moodle) active learning methods, and raise their awareness in engaging with the new learning methods. At least two or three sessions and workshops which are about sharing and improving skills for lecturers in choosing appropriate teaching and learning methods as well as educational technology tools are offered and delivered by both local and foreign experts.

Although the Faculty of Education is seen as one of the first pioneers in the University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, in using LMS as a tool for blended learning, the COVID-19 pandemic has put us into an unavoidable situation where we have to transfer from face-to-face learning and blended learning methods to online learning without sufficient preparation for both students and faculty members in order to cope with the social distancing period. This article focuses

on the experiences of some students in the university and discusses the opportunities for supporting student online learning. We obtained data from a survey administered to the students.

Survey Sample & Method

The participants of the present survey were full-time students from the Faculty of Education of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities–Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. The number of students who took part in the survey was 101, with a 100% response rate in which 93 students took at least one online course during the social distancing period. Second-year students comprised the highest percentage with 53.5%, followed by first-year students with 23.8% and third-year students with 21.8%, and there was only one last-year student who took part in the survey. The data were collected from September 04 to September 10 in 2020.

The survey explores the difficulties that students from the Faculty of Education had to deal with when studying online as well as future opportunities for those students in online learning.

Findings

Context

Over four-fifths of the students (84.9%) from the Faculty of Education chose to study more than three courses during the time that they could not have in-person classes, while 12.9% took two courses, and only 2.2% took one course to study online.

The locations where the students studied online varied from big cities to rural areas. 33.3% of students

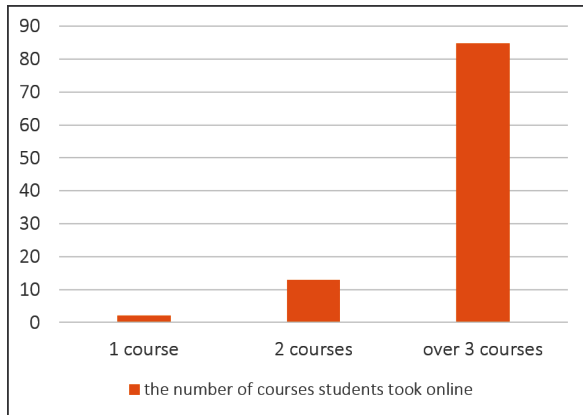


Figure 1. The number of courses students took online

reported that they were in the countryside when participating in their online courses. The second and third common places were big cities and towns (32.3%), and districts which belong to cities (21.5%). The remaining 12.9% of respondents were in remote areas, such as mountainous areas.

The Difficulties that students from the Faculty of Education had to deal with when Studying Online

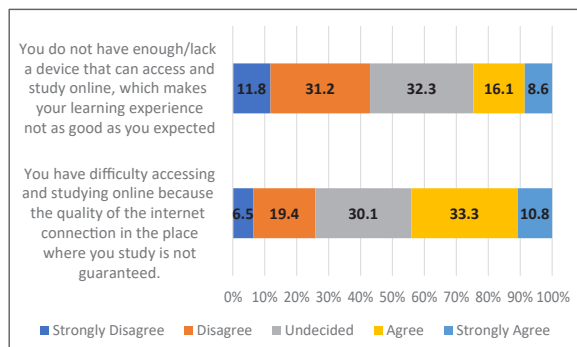


Figure 2. Facilities

Facilities are the first things that need to be considered when transitioning to online learning. The proportions from the two questions show that the surveyed students did not have many obstacles when studying online with the devices used in their learning activities, with 32.3% responded ‘undecided’ when they were asked whether they do not have or lack a device to access online learning. Following that, 31.2% of students did not agree, and only 8.6% of students strongly agree with this question. Besides, 33.3% of students agreed that they had trouble with the internet connection in the place where they study, and there was only 6.5% of

students who strongly disagreed with this.

Skills and background Knowledge of Students

When it comes to skills and background knowledge of students, the respondents indicate that the full-time students of the Faculty of Education were overall well-prepared, and well-equipped with skills and background knowledge of technology, with around 50% of agreed respondents in all items of the categories.

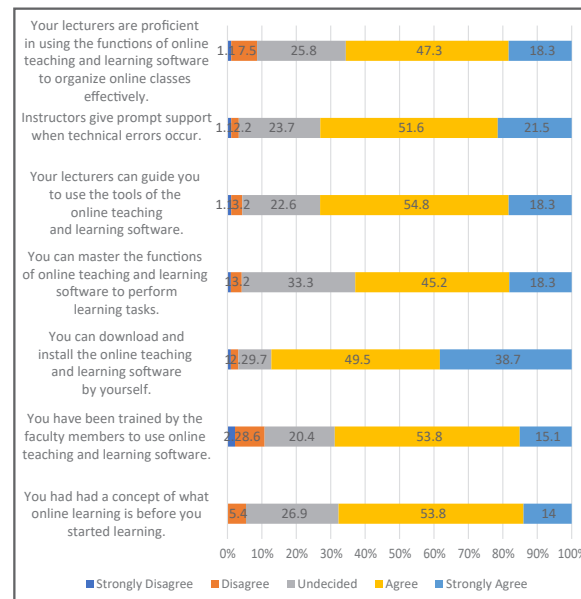


Figure 3. Skills and background knowledge of students

The highest proportion is 54.8% which means the lecturers can guide their students to use tools in online learning. Moreover, it can be inferred from the data that some faculty members of the FOE have a solid background of integrating technology into teaching and learning activities with a percentage of 47.3 using the function of online software. In contrast, the lowest percentage of 45.2 is in mastering the functions of the software.

It seems that students did not have difficulties in downloading and installing the online teaching and learning software by themselves, with 49.5% and 38.7% of students agreed and strongly agreed with this respectively.

Reasons to take Online Classes

There are many reasons for students to take online classes, and those reasons both come from intrinsic motivation like new knowledge that students can attain when taking online courses and extrinsic motivations such as scores and attendance check. The data from the survey also reveals that a large number of students agreed with scores (43% of them), attendance check (46.2%) and new knowledge (50.5%) as their reasons to attend an online class. It is worth pointing out that no student disagreed with attaining new knowledge as his/her goal to stay in an online class.

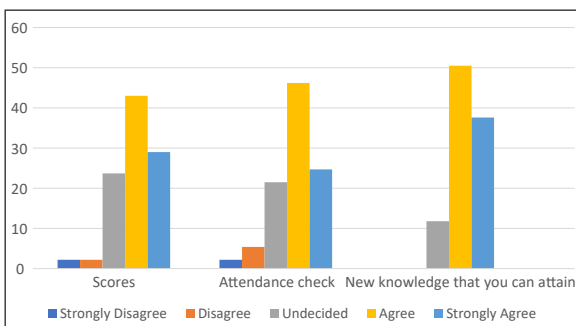


Figure 4. Reasons to take online classes

Patall, Cooper, and Robinson found “intrinsic motivation occurs when we act without any obvious external rewards” (2008, as cited in Coon & Mitterer, 2012, p.332). Besides, Niemiec, Ryan, and Deci stated “we simply enjoy an activity or see it as an opportunity to explore, learn, and actualize our potentials” (2009, as cited in Coon & Mitterer, 2012, p.332). The only one intrinsic motivation in this survey constituted the highest percentage of the students that agreed and strongly agreed.

What Students often Do during Online Class

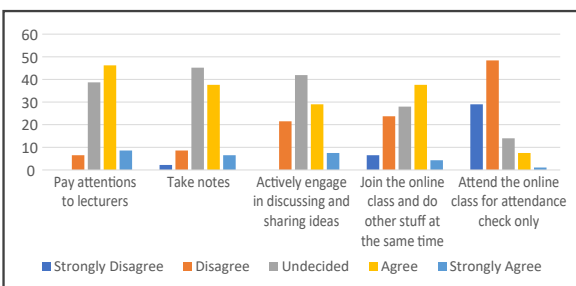


Figure 5. What students often do during their online class

In terms of what students usually do during their online class sessions, it is noticeable that students do not attend their online classes just because they want their attendance status to be checked; the ‘disagree’ item accounted for 48.8% of the total respondents while the ‘strongly agree’ option only made up for 1.1%.

However, students want to pay attention to lecturers, with 46.2% agree, and 37.6% want to take notes of the lectures carefully. In addition, the proportion of students who actively engage in discussing and sharing ideas is just under 30%, which can be inferred that they did not have opportunities to raise their hands or the lecturers did not create chances for them to speak out since there was no activity for this. However, the rating of the item ‘Join the online class and do other stuff at the same time’ is around 37%, which means the students were distracted by other activities and only focused on learning activities.

Self-management Skills

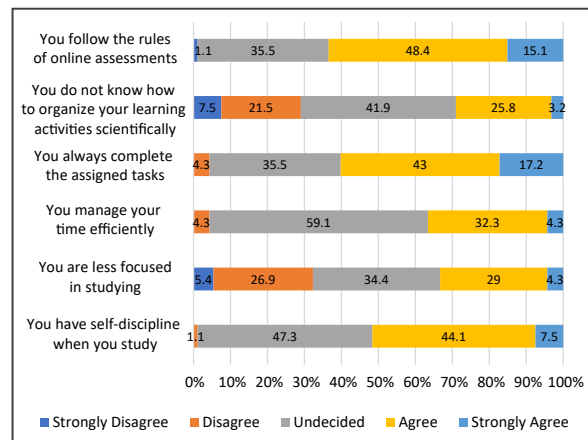


Figure 6. Self-management skills

With regard to self-management skills, students are aware of completing their assigned tasks, following the regulations of online examinations, and they have self-discipline during the time they attended the online class, with 43%, 48.4%, 44.1%, respectively agreed with those questions.

Furthermore, it can be deduced that students are responsible and aware of their study. To be more specific, students chose ‘undecided’ when considering whether they can manage their time efficiently during their study (59.1%). In comparison, those figures in

paying less attention in studying and incapable of organizing learning activities are lower with 34.4% and 41.9%, in that order.

External Factors affecting Students' Learning Activities

On whether or not doing household chores created a burden on students' online learning, 33.3% percent of students agreed and 9.7% of students strongly agreed compared to 14% and 9.7% students who disagreed and strongly disagreed.

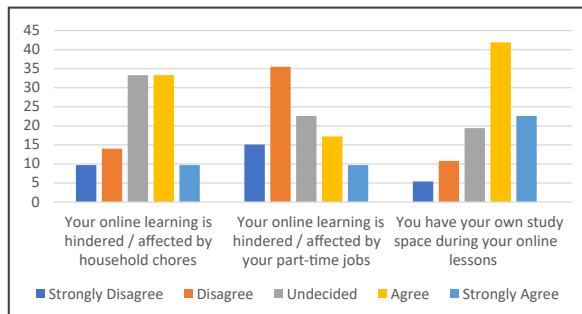


Figure 7. External factors

As to part-time jobs, 35.5% of the students said that they did not agree that their learning was affected by their part-time jobs and 15.1% strongly disagreed with this, while 22.6% of students were undecided on this matter.

Forty one and nine tenths (41.9%) percent of students agreed that they had their own study space during online lessons compared to just over 10% of those disagreed. The number of students who agreed on this matter also took the highest place amongst other charts.

Implications for Future Instruction

Despite some difficulties in facilities and internet connection for remote learning, some percentage of students attended remote courses for attendance check only, or were distracted while attending courses, we have positive results about remote learning of students at FOE. First, students were quite confident in manipulating tools and software; they received timely support from instructors. Therefore, students joined remote courses with motivation to get knowledge. However, we also see that students did not have enough self-management skills to organize learning

activities, manage time effectively, and concentrate on learning. Along with technical skills, these skills are crucial for effective online learning.

University and Faculty have organized many training sessions to provide tools, techniques and understanding on how to improve online teaching. Students appreciated the proficiency of lecturers in using tools and techniques of online teaching and learning software (65.6% agreed and strongly agreed), and their prompt support for technical errors (73.1% agreed and strongly agreed). Students were also trained in the use of Moodle and provided with instruction on using online learning software.

Most students did not encounter obstacles when studying online; still, some students had difficulty with equipment, internet connection, technical skills, part-time jobs, or having private study space. Means and Neisler (2020), when studying online learning during pandemics, have emphasized training focusing on how to develop better strategies for dealing with inequities across student populations. In addition to the improvement of quality in teaching and learning remotely, we need to adjust instructional designs, course policies and practices for students with limited access to appropriate devices, poor internet connectivity, family and job responsibilities and no private place at home for doing coursework.

Research also showed that diversity of instructional practices including personal messages to students about their accessibility of online course, live sessions for students' Q&A and discussions; breaking up class activities into small pieces; and having break-out groups during a live class; working on group projects separately from the class time; had a clear connection to level of satisfaction of students when shifting to remote learning (Fox et al., 2020).

Recommended Strategies

Although the pandemic has been under control in Vietnam, unexpected new outbreaks are possible. Faculty and Institutional leaders are working to ensure the high quality of teaching-learning when having to shift or flexibly adopt face-to-face, hybrid or online learning. Below are some recommended activities for faculty members and students of the Faculty of Education:

Faculty support

- Organizing training and sharing sessions on online instructional practices; especially on keeping and promoting students' engagement in different modalities of learning. These sessions will focus on how to design courses that can be transitioned between different modalities with equity in minds.
- Developing online resources pages, including technical help, guidance on high-quality instruction online, sharing best practices and strategies.

Students support

- Preparing students for different modalities of learning by training; providing guidelines on technical issues; learning to learn online, especially self-management skills.
- Developing support pages; Q&A forum; group chats to provide prompt support on technical, academic and personal issues.

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