

Online Study during Covid' 19: What Students Like and Dislike in Online Courses

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a research about the students' likes and dislikes in online courses. The project used surveys to the students of the Dalat University in Vietnam conducted during the fall term of 2021. After analyzing the sample of 708 students, it appears that the main findings are somehow close to many studies conducted at the same time approximately. Mainly, the students like the flexibility of asynchronous courses and the availability of the learning material at any time. They dislike the lack of interaction with the teachers and their classmates. As for online asynchronous courses, students like the possibility of interacting with teachers and classmates (in the case of interactive courses) and the clarity of the schedule. In all cases, the quality of the Internet connection and the power supply appear as a sine qua non condition to any satisfaction supporting any distance studies.

Some students have also noted health problems inherent to too long periods sitting in front of screens. This aspect is particularly critical for those who do not have computers and who are forced to work on their smartphones.

Keywords: students' perception, online study, survey, Covid-19 pandemic, students' likes, students' dislikes

1. Introduction

Since the Covid -19, there have been many research works focusing on online learning and students' feelings when experiencing online learning. Among other studies addressing the same kind of subject, one can cite (Stoian et al., 2022) studying the benefits of online education from students' perspective during the transition from online to face-to-face education after Covid -19. These kinds of studies have been conducted in many countries and, for the case which interests this article, i.e. Vietnam, one can cite (Phan et al., 2020), (Kang & Duong, 2021). Bari & Nguyễn (2024) is presented a study on students' perception of online versus face-to-face learning before and after their first online course.

The present article expands that study. It is based on the same survey that was sent by email to all the students of Dalat University (DLU) in Vietnam during the fall term of 2021, i.e. right during the Covid-19 pandemic (hereafter referred to as the pandemic). As a result of this survey, 708 valid responses have been collected. Figure 1 shows the distribution according to the major of the students.

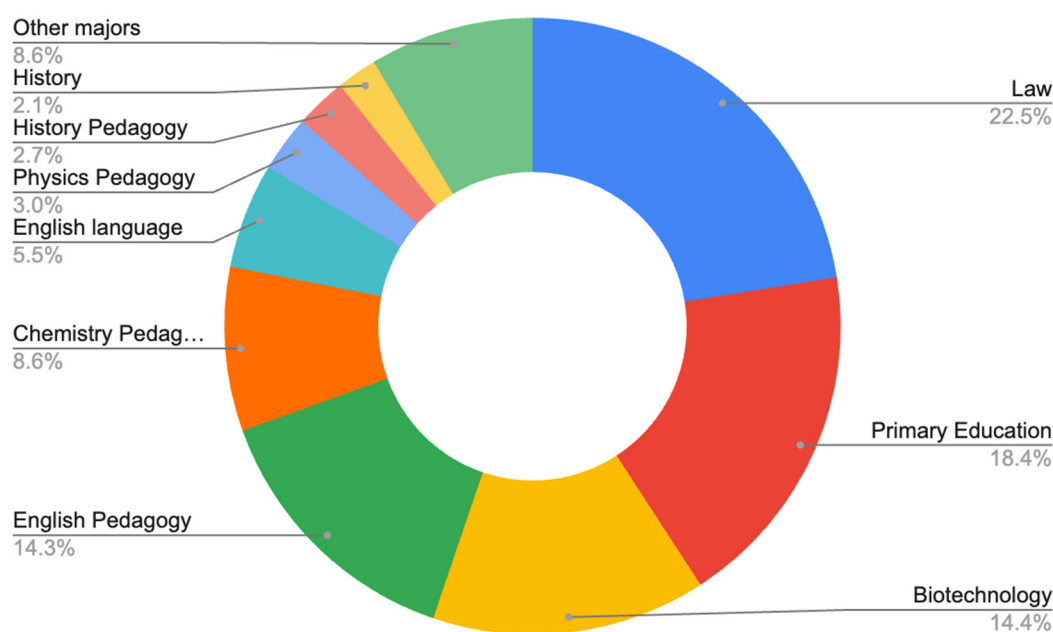


Figure 1. Distribution according to the major of the students

The survey used a questionnaire (created with Google Forms) comprising both open-ended and closed-ended questions and was written in Vietnamese with English translation. It is composed of 18 questions where the 11 first ones require a choice among multiple possibilities (close-ended questions). The 4 last questions are open-ended. The other questions are closed-ended with a possible extension to be open-ended depending on the chosen choice. As computers are almost mandatory to follow online courses, table 1 shows that almost 22% of the students don't have access to a computer at home. In this case, students have been studying using their smartphone.

Table 1. Access to a computer at home

Yes	551	77.82%
No	154	21.75%
No answer	3	0.42%
Total	708	100.00%

The main result of the preliminary research is that “*the perceived positive and negative feelings remain very stable before and after their first online course but with a large majority of positive feelings. The second finding is that most students would prefer face-to-face courses before and after their first online course*” (Bari & Nguyễn, 2024).

The present article is focused on the students’ likes and dislikes in online courses, whereas they are synchronous, asynchronous, or mixed.

This article is organized as follows: after the introduction, section 2 is dedicated to the students’ likes and dislikes in online asynchronous courses, section 3 presents the students’ likes and dislikes in online synchronous courses, section 4 presents the students’ likes and dislikes in online mixed courses, section 5 concludes this article.

2. The students’ likes and dislikes in online asynchronous courses

2.1 The Students’ Likes in Online Asynchronous Courses

Table 2 shows the responses for the asynchronous online courses likes. Almost half of the students like the flexibility of this kind of course delivery as the first advantage. A little bit lower is the number of students for whom the most important thing is always the availability of the course material. In fact, these two online characteristics are complementary. This is shown by almost 7% that choose the item “other” which supports this situation even if they use different words that have, ultimately, a similar meaning. For instance, one wrote liking “*the combination of flexibility and availability*”.

Table 2. Asynchronous online courses likes

	N	%
Availability of course material at all times	307	43.36%
Flexibility	335	47.32%
Other	49	6.92%
No answer	17	2.40%
Total	708	100.00%

On the other hand, others' response highlights the comfort felt in such delivery mode since *“there is no awkwardness between the teacher and classmates”*. Other responses point out the less pressure they felt compared to face-to-face class. In other words, online learning helps some students feel more comfortable when communicating. Some other studies showed the same kind of results. For instance, when 631 students in a university in the Center of Vietnam were asked about their perspective on learning online, 56.2% answered that online learning helps them to communicate without pressure (Pham, 2023).

Other responses highlight the quality of the teacher, for instance *“I really like the enthusiastic, friendly instructors making me feel very comfortable and receptive”*. This aspect of asynchronous online courses was also paid attention by Vietnamese students from other universities. For example, in research of Nguyen Tat Thang et al. (2023), students felt satisfaction (3.91 points on Likert-5-point scale) with online courses where lecturers created excitement and active learning among students. Others felt that this kind of delivery suits their learning style, and they don't feel as constrained as when they are studying face-to-face.

Few students have chosen the item “other”, and many have not yet followed an online course in this kind of delivery. Here are some comments: *“revisiting lectures to synthesize core content for exams more easily”*, *“doesn't create pressure”*, *“I feel comfortable, there is no awkwardness between the teacher and classmates”*. According to Phan et al. (2020) the availability of lecture videos for the students to revise is also a liking point of asynchronous online courses (3.63 points on Likert-4-point scale). Moreover, an online learning community that supported individual learning was also a bright point of online courses (Nguyen Tat Thang et al., 2023; Pham, 2020; Phan et al., 2020). It seems that the DLU students paid attention to all 4 dimensions of the web-based learning system, including learner interface, learning community, system content and personalization (Shee & Wang, 2008) which was the same as students from another university (Pham, 2020).

One response pointed out that in online courses, students *“don't have to photocopy course materials by themselves. Moreover, it is easier to get documents' translation online”*. Another felt *“more comfortable with my learning style. I don't feel constrained too much as when studying face-to-face”*.

2.2 The Students' Dislikes in Online Asynchronous Course

In this section are presented the results about what students dislike in asynchronous online courses. Each category is described in a specific subsection.

Table 3 shows what the student dislikes in asynchronous online courses

A high proportion of 46% think their main concern is the quality of the Internet connection. Of course, online courses need a high quality of power infrastructure and Internet. When it is not the case, students experience a lot of understandable frustration. When evaluating acceptance of students at universities in HCM city while attending online learning in the learning management system via Google Form, there were 42.5% responses (which is the highest, 945/2225 responses) stated that problems related to Internet (including, unstable connection, power cut, poor transmission speed, and high internet costs) are disadvantages of

learning online (Phan et al., 2020). Lack of interactions is a common barrier in learning online (Pham, 2023; Phan et al., 2020). In this study, almost 40% experienced a lack of interaction, feelings equally distributed between either classmates (19.77%) and teachers (19.07%). However, in another study, students only paid attention to interaction with teachers and didn't mention interaction with classmates. For comparison purposes, in (Phan et al., 2020) there were 217/2225 (9.75%) students feeling difficulty in study due to lack of interaction with lecturers, such as: some lecturers hardly ever interacted with students via communication channels or responded to students' questions in time. In Pham (2023), 40.7% of students reported inadequate teacher interactions and feedback. Interaction with classmates wasn't mentioned as advantages or disadvantages of learning online.

Table 3. Asynchronous online courses dislikes

	N	%
Lack of interaction with classmates	140	19.77%
Quality of the Internet connection	326	46.05%
Lack of interaction with the teacher	135	19.07%
Other	34	4.80%
Quality of the course material	36	5.08%
No answer	37	5.23%
Total	708	100.00%

Besides the main concern identified by the students, the ones who chose the answer "other" gave more information about their concerns, information highly enriching the diversity of their feelings regarding what they dislike. Here are some of these reasons:

- Lack of concentration in front of a computer, e.g. "*I take a lot of breaks!*". In another study, 56.5% of students had difficulty with concentration when studying online (Pham, 2023).
- Very difficult to study without a computer "*I study on my phone, but studying several shifts a day in a row is quite inconvenient*". In fact, Vietnamese students prefer to use computers to study online rather than other devices such as smartphones or tablets, but this depends on a computer possession. Other studies have addressed this point. For example, a survey on 2225 students in HCM city reveals that the percentage of students using laptops, smartphones, desktops, and tablets were 59.06%, 35.50%, 4.09% and 1.35%, respectively (Phan et al., 2020). Those figures are equivalent to those of Dao (2023) study, which found that there were 61.1% using laptops and 34.7% were using smartphones to study online.

- Disturbance during the learning time due to the ambient events (noise, ...)
- Health issues, e.g. *“too much contact with computers and phones has made me nearsighted.”*
- For some students, studying online is *“quite tiring because of boredom, not exciting because of not being able to absorb knowledge easily”*. This is a common bargain in learning online among Vietnamese students. In Phan et al. (2020), 18.29% (407/2225 comments) students believe that online learning is ineffective, not easy to understand and difficult to systematize knowledge while studying. The cause of this difficulty may be that students have not yet adapted to new learning methods or that students are not familiar with self-study through technological devices (Phan et al., 2020).
- Depending on their learning styles, some students reveal that *“At university, I learn more from friends than from teachers and textbooks. Not being able to meet friends is a big deprivation for me”*.
- Reduction of competitiveness leading to lower grades
- Many issues when doing group exercises. This may be because in a face-to-face classroom, there are more opportunities for the students to interact with each other and create social connections (Pham, 2023). Besides, as online communication does not have body language or facial expression, it is difficult for classmates to understand each other in some situations (Pham, 2023).
- Difficulties to have the physical learning material on time *“because my home is far away from the university, when I buy textbooks from instructors, it takes a long time to arrive, sometimes after the course is finished”*.
- A student summarized very well the feelings of a majority of students: *“Attendance online is more convenient in terms of travel and time, but power outages or network and computer problems, lack of equipment for majors, especially those that require practical practice such as Chemistry, Biology, Physics, etc., lack of interaction with the teachers and friends cause many problems”*. Interestingly, students have realized that practice is very crucial in practical courses. Consequently, studying those courses online will meet barriers from lack of infrastructure and learning equipment (Van & Thi, 2023).

Finally, 5.08% identified the quality of the course material as their main issue. Results of another work supported this idea when 17.2% students complained about inadequate quality study materials (Pham, 2023). As the question didn't specify what kind of course material support is the issue (textbooks or online material), it will be interesting to have this distinction explicitly stated in the future works.

Among the 34 responses having chosen the item “others”, some regret *“the enthusiastic, friendly instructors who are very approachable, making me feel very comfortable and receptive”*. Many others pointed out the *“external impacts during online learning (loss of network, electricity issues, noise, ...)*. This issue is also expressed in different ways, e.g. *“At*

home, my family's network is poor, and the power often goes out. I don't have a laptop to study, so I study on my phone, but studying several shifts a day in a row is quite inconvenient"; these health issues have been expressed by others, e.g. "I don't like studying online very much because too much contact with computers and phones has made me nearsighted". Another issue is related to group exercise "Doing group exercises is quite difficult because of the lack of interaction with teachers and classmates" whereas some others were missing the exercises after each class. Finally, one pointed out the "slowly learning due to the lack of interaction with teachers and friends".

The results of this study are similar to those focusing on the same subject at approximately the same time, for instance (Gherheş, et al., 2021), (Foo, et al., 2021), (Kang & Duong, 2021) or (Chisadza et al., 2021).

3. The Students' Likes and Dislikes in Online Synchronous Courses

In this section are presented the results about what students like or dislike in synchronous online courses. Each category is described in a specific subsection.

3.1 The Students' Likes in Online Synchronous Courses

274 students responded to this question. Some of the responses are just "OK" or "Good", etc. These responses were not considered in this study.

Regarding what students like in synchronous courses, the main responses, grouped in decreasing order of number of responses, are listed below. Some comments are cited to highlight the reason for liking such or such aspects.

- Interaction with teachers and classmates is the main reason students like this kind of course delivery, e.g. "getting feedback from teachers and help from classmates" or "Discuss and receive answers directly from tutors and friends". But, for some students, interacting is not so important because "You don't have to interact much, you can watch the lecture again and also benefit from the questions of other students". The reason for liking the interaction with teachers and classmates applies to the interactive online asynchronous courses followed by the students. But this is not always the case as will be seen in the next section.
- Clarity of the schedule is the second main reason for liking synchronous courses, e.g. "I already have a schedule so I can learn, join class and I don't miss any lesson"; "it made me highly disciplined"; "I can study according to the progression in the program", "having a clear schedule helps students be more self-aware and responsible in class", "fixed time makes it easier for me to get into a rhythm to study", "no need to plan by yourself".
- Technical issues due to the quality of the Internet connections, e.g. "Network connection may be unstable" or "Low device memory connection".
- Availability of the recorded classes, e.g. "When the course is recorded, I can review the lecture multiple times". Note that during Covid-19 isolation, DLU used LMS

which was modified from Moodle to add a function for the teacher to allow Google Meet links and record every session of the lecture. The recorded lectures were shared on LMS for the students to review.

- Convenience, a student summarized this as follows: *“you can see the screen very clearly (in class, sitting far from the board is difficult to see), listen to the lecture clearly (in class, students are not orderly), the lesson is recorded and can be viewed again when needed. You can do it as many times as you want without having to bother the teacher repeatedly”*; *“the documentation can be found easily online”*. One student summarized *“Convenient for those in remote areas and easy to interact with each other. During this epidemic, it is also safe, increases self-discipline and independence skills”*.
- Studying together with the whole class makes some students *“feeling safe because of the sense of belonging to my class.”*
- Advantage in group activities *“Interacting with classmates during a group activity is more convenient and effective”*.
- Promoting self-discipline *“synchronous online learning is better for those who are not self-disciplined like me”!*

Miscellaneous, e.g. *“We can freely choose a suitable place to study for ourselves”*, *“It's funny, I can wake up later than usual”*, *“gain time because studying at home”*, *“Inappropriate time allocation”*.

3.2 The Students' Dislikes in Online Synchronous Courses

245 students responded to this question with the same pattern as in the previous subsection (responses like “don't like” or “Not OK” were not considered).

As for the above subsection, the main responses, grouped in decreasing order of number of responses, are listed below. Some comments are also cited to highlight the reason for disliking such or such aspects.

- Lack of interaction with teachers and classmates. This aspect is cited many times. Indeed, synchronous courses were divided into interactive and no interactive. Such a distinction will be made in the previous work.
- Quality of the Internet and the power supply, e.g. *“Overcrowding makes internet quality unstable”*, *“the network connection is intermittent”*, *“power outage while doing a test”*, *“Sometimes the Wi-Fi lags, making the time to prepare for class last longer”*. This difficulty was shared among Vietnamese students. For example, 80.1% students from a university in the Middle of Vietnam revealed that they had an unreliable internet connection (Pham, 2023). Many students have difficult experiences participating in synchronous online classes, as well as downloading study materials (Pham, 2023).
- Too much work, e.g. *“There's a lot of homework... The teachers teach quickly and*

there are some subjects that create pressure and I feel scared when studying”, “A lot of homework assigned in all subjects, plus having to attend synchronous online classes 8 times a week, makes me have no time to rest and get stressed”.

- Miscellaneous, e.g. *“I don't like fixed time frames”, “Teacher asks students to turn on the cam”, “Even if it's called online learning, I don't like it”, “Maybe because I'm studying online, sometimes I have to look at the screen continuously, causing eye pain (or some bone disease)”, “Lack of feeling of learning, lack of inspiration”, “Sometimes unexpected incidents of opening the mic occur, causing disorder”.*
- Isolation feelings, especially in non-interactive courses, for instance *“You may feel isolated in your study space, lacking motivation”.*
- Technical issues due to the quality of the Internet connections, e.g. *“network connection may be unstable” or “low device memory connection”.*

Those findings are supported by results from (Huynh & Mai, 2021), who found a positive relationship between studying conditions as well as interactions with classmate and positive feelings of students while studying online. Noticeably, in general, the level of positive emotions was higher than that of negative emotions in the context of online learning. However, boredom, anxiety, and anger levels were all higher while enjoyment levels were lower compared to face-to-face learning.

4. The Students' Likes and Dislikes in Online Mixed Courses

4.1 The Students' Likes in Online Mixed Courses

245 students responded to this question about what they like in online mixed courses. Apart from those who had not experienced this combination, most of them like the flexibility of such course delivery. Many like the mix of discipline and flexibility. They have expressed why they like such combinations in different manners. For instance, *“Study on your own schedule and still have help from instructors and classmates” or “flexibility because it is possible to change classroom style when conditions are lacking” or “You can divide your time to complete assignments appropriately and on time without being forced into any other specific time period.”*

Some others highlight the better quality of learning because the 2 modes complement each other. For instance, *“You can both keep up with the instructor's lectures and have flexible time to complete the instructor assignments” or “it is possible to arrange your own study time, stay close to relatives, practice self-study, and be flexible in research”.* Other ways of expressing this situation: *“You can divide your time to complete assignments appropriately and on time without being forced into any other specific time period” or “You can study with teachers and friends combined with reviewing lectures after class”.* Still with the same idea: *“Watching the materials provided by the lecturer, then the lecturer will explain the main ideas to the students, and hearing the voices of friends and lecturers makes me feel happy”.* To conclude this section, a student summarized by writing: *“Combining the above two forms will reduce the shortcomings of synchronous and asynchronous classes”.*

4.2 The Students' Dislikes in Online Mixed Courses

170 students responded to this question about what they dislike in online mixed courses. As for the other online courses delivery, many students expressed their concerns about the Internet connection and the power quality. Among the other shortcomings, we can cite the confusion in adjusting their timetable: *"It is easy to confuse the timetable between subjects"* or *"Because we have to adjust both our own self-study time and the addition of synchronous learning in class, we are really terribly busy that we can't stand it"*. In the same sense: *"It is possible that the class schedule will be erratic, because in addition to the main scheduled class time, there are also other classes outside the scheduled time. That's what I don't like"*.

Many students complain about the quantity of work, e.g. *"It's also about the fact that a lot of homework takes up a lot of time in a hybrid classroom"* or *"too much homework, too much homework in every subject, so I'm extremely stressed"* and *"The lecturers give a lot of exercises and I know that is inevitable. But for some fourth-year students, it is too much because there are biology courses that improve many subjects, and the number of exercises is too much"*.

Same concerns about the group works as in the previous sections *"online group work lacks interaction when you only hear your voice when you feel uncomfortable opening the camera."*

Many students don't like online classes at all mainly because of the lack of interaction. For instance: *"I don't like studying online because listening to lectures is not the same as in person, and I can't meet people face to face to interact"*. One student summarized this situation by stating: *"Synchronous classes have many more students and have difficulty interacting with teachers. Asynchronous classes have fewer students and do not have as many opinions and contributions as synchronous classes"*.

Finally, even though the following situation is not strictly related to mixed online courses but to all the pandemic situations, here is an issue with the schedule of the tests: *"The timing of the tests are too strict. We may have problems or slow operations that cause us to submit our exam late or we may lose our exam altogether"*.

5. Conclusion

We have presented the results of research about the students' likes and dislikes in online courses. The project used surveys to the students of the Dalat University in Vietnam conducted during the fall term of 2021. The analysis of the sample of 708 students shows findings somehow close to many studies conducted at the same time approximately aiming at understanding the students' feelings about online learning during the pandemic, for instance (Gherheş, et al., 2021), (Foo, et al., 2021), (Kang & Duong, 2021) or (Chisadza et al., 2021). Mainly, the students like the flexibility of asynchronous courses and the availability of the learning material at any time. They dislike the lack of interaction with the teachers and their classmates. As for online asynchronous courses, students like the possibility of interacting with teachers and classmates (in the case of interactive courses) and the clarity of the schedule. In all cases, the quality of the Internet connection and the power supply appear as a

sine qua non condition to any satisfaction supporting any distance studies. Many students have also noted health problems inherent to too long periods sitting in front of screens. This aspect is particularly critical for those who do not have computers and who are forced to work on their smartphones. Finally, during the pandemic, and especially during the lockdowns, online learning appeared as the best solution to continue studying and to avoid extending the duration of studies. This situation to that described in (Akuratiya & Meddage, 2020) where “the students’ perception of online learning during pandemic was positive as advantages of the learning form such as enjoyable, able to learn at own pace, easy access to online material and active participation overcame challenges including reduce interaction with teachers and peers, social isolation and technical problems”.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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