

Tertiary Education in Vietnam: Responding to the New Normal

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ABSTRACT: The new normal created by COVID-19 has opened opportunities for higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide to digitalize their teaching and learning management. In Vietnam, beyond the adoption of e-learning and distance learning, strategic-level actions have been implemented to ensure a cohesive online experience for students, supporting both academic and personal development. This study examines a private Vietnamese HEI's response to the new normal using a case study approach, analyzing the quality of these actions through students' satisfaction and feedback surveys. Although limited to the Vietnamese context, this study provides a valuable example of digitalizing learning and teaching management in tertiary education, illustrating how HEIs can overcome challenges posed by the new normal.

KEYWORDS: Online learning; Student satisfaction; Learning management; Digitalization of education

1. Introduction

Deeply concerned by the alarming spread and severity of COVID-19, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020 [1]. The pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners across more than 190 countries. School and learning-space closures impacted 94% of the global student population, rising to 99% in low- and lower-middle-income countries. However, the crisis has also stimulated innovation in education. Innovative approaches emerged to support continuity, ranging from radio and television programs to take-home packages. Distance learning solutions were developed thanks to rapid responses from governments and partners worldwide, including the UNESCO-led Global Education Coalition [2]. In Vietnam, higher education experienced significant disruptions. The timely response of the Vietnamese government and relevant education departments helped HEIs navigate these challenges. Vietnam was recognized as an early success story in managing the pandemic. Dr. Kidong Park, WHO representative in Vietnam, attributed this success to the government's "proactive and consistent response" to the crisis [3].

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The role of information and communication technologies in the new normal of education.*

According to UNESCO [4], information and communication technologies (ICTs) strengthen education systems by improving knowledge distribution, access to information, learning quality, and service efficiency. ICTs allow all learners—regardless of age, gender, or location—to access high-quality education. Universities worldwide are expected to integrate diverse ICT-based teaching and learning methods. ICTs not only support long-term global education goals but also provide solutions to disruptions caused by COVID-19, which affected over 180 countries with school closures [5]. At the 2021 Global Education Meeting, ministers and international education leaders proposed enhancing global education cooperation to respond to unprecedented learning disruptions and elevate education on political agendas. The World Bank Group (WBG) developed strategies for EdTech, including research sponsorship, innovation, and knowledge sharing. COVID-19 shifted the EdTech question from “if” to “how” it should be implemented. Changes in classrooms included shorter, engaging content, edutainment, small online group discussions, and continuous feedback. While in-person interaction remains irreplaceable, ICTs can enhance social and educational connections in virtual or blended learning environments [5].

2.2. *E-Learning and virtual mobility.*

E-learning refers to the use of ICT and electronic devices for teaching and learning, encompassing distance learning, virtual education, web-based or computer-based training, and other technology-enhanced learning methods [6]. E-learning promotes individualized, flexible education and supports lifelong skill development, problem-solving, and effective resource use. E-learning also facilitates the internationalization of education, with virtual mobility playing a key role [7]. Virtual mobility enables cross-border collaboration and intercultural exchange [8]. Even before the pandemic, it was important for HEI internationalization [9] and has become increasingly significant in the 2020s. Programs such as online study tours and remote internships develop students’ digital, linguistic, and intercultural competencies while maintaining engagement through online resources and support systems [9, 10].

3. Case Study: X University’s Responses to the New Normal

3.1. *Student support strategies.*

X University, a dynamic private HEI in Vietnam, aims to provide globally competitive education and intellectual development opportunities. Under Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) guidelines, the university implemented several student support strategies: (1) Using e-teaching and learning tools, and (2) Maintaining tuition fees and sharing financial burdens with students. The COVID-19 pandemic affected 70% of students globally [11], directly impacting teaching and learning in Vietnamese HEIs. MOET promoted the motto “No schooling but still learning,” supporting e-learning and distance learning as solutions to the pandemic and as transformative measures for education [12, 13]. Official decrees, including No. 795/BGDĐT-GDDH (13/3/2020) and No. 988/BGDĐT-GDTrH (23/3/2020) [15], ensured the quality of distance learning and recognized the academic results of online learning. Consequently, X University adopted video conferencing tools such as Zoom, Teams, Google

Classroom, and Google Hangouts. Practical courses like music or martial arts were postponed until on-campus sessions resumed. To support students unable to return to campus, X University enhanced tutoring, applied online examination methods, and conducted online programs covering health knowledge, stress management, and personal development. The Student Service Department addressed student and parent inquiries. In Summer 2020, tuition fees were reduced by 20% to alleviate financial burdens caused by COVID-19.

3.2. Internationalization strategies.

Despite the pandemic, X University continued internationalization initiatives through X Global, its international unit. X Global adapted short-term study tours and remote internships to virtual formats, enabling international students to continue academic and cultural experiences online. The Online Study Tour combined academic courses with cultural activities, emphasizing the LEARN-ENGAGE-STEP UP teaching philosophy to enhance student participation. Remote Internships allowed students to work online with X University departments and partners, supported by monthly training on remote work skills and Vietnamese business culture. Each student was assigned a coordinator and a Vietnamese buddy for academic and cultural guidance. These programs strengthened X University's internationalization, ensuring its global presence despite border closures.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Student satisfaction survey.

The X University academic program had three semesters per year: Spring, Summer, and Fall. In each semester, X University distributed a student satisfaction survey to senior students to evaluate teaching quality and the performance of relevant departments, and to help the departments adjust their activities to better fit students' needs. In addition, the more comments and suggestions X University received from its students, the better learning conditions were provided to them. During the pandemic, the survey was one of the most effective tools for assessing the university's response and for planning future actions to address the new normal. The three most significant categories for X University students were academic management activities, support activities, and cultural activities, which provided many benefits for developing students' additional skills. This was why these categories were selected for analysis in this paper. Furthermore, since the World Health Organization recognized the pandemic status on March 11, 2020, the authors selected semesters from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 to analyze the student satisfaction survey results. In this case, changes in student satisfaction before and during the COVID-19 pandemic period could be observed more clearly [14].

3.3.2. Internal reports.

Not only did COVID-19 affect the regular training programs at X University, but it also impacted the programs between X University and its foreign partners. Therefore, in addition to the student satisfaction surveys collected every semester, this study used internal reports of X Global's delivery of online mobility programs from 2020 to December 2021. The reports contained the number of international students hosted by X Global each year and across the tracks presented in the previous section, their nationalities, as well as the main advantages and disadvantages of the programs they joined.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Internationalization Strategies.

Figure 1 illustrates fluctuations in student satisfaction across the three key categories before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we examine the scores for academic management activities at X University (blue line) throughout the analyzed period. Overall, the academic management activities score showed the steepest decline beginning in the Spring 2020 semester, when the pandemic emerged in Vietnam [1, 3]. At the start of the period, the score was 4.05 in Fall 2019, falling to 3.98 in Spring 2020. It continued to decrease to 3.91 in Summer 2020 and further declined to 3.83 in Fall 2020. This pattern reflects the challenges faced by the university in rapidly adjusting administrative and academic procedures in response to the pandemic.

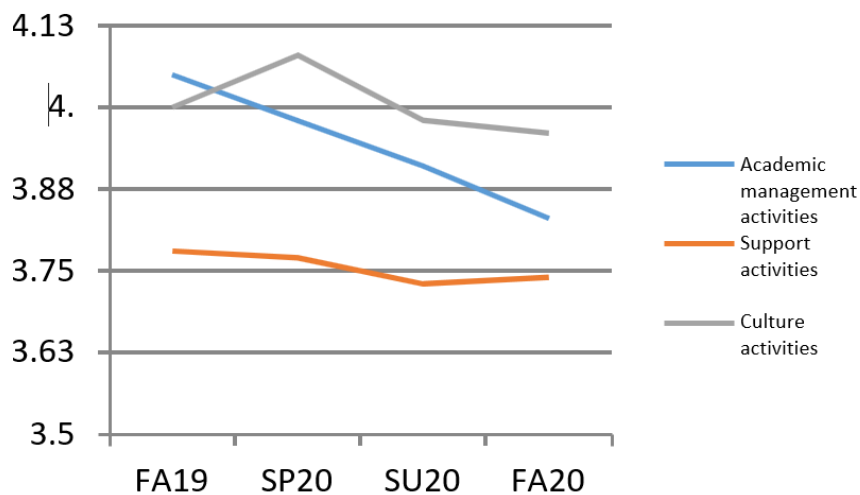


Figure 1. Three categories of X University’s student satisfaction survey from the Fall 2019 semester to the Fall 2020 semester.

Next, the support activities score (orange line) started at 3.78 in Fall 2019 and declined slightly to 3.77 in Spring 2020. However, it then dropped further to 3.73 in Summer 2020 before recovering marginally to 3.74 in Fall 2020. These fluctuations highlight the initial difficulties students experienced with distance learning infrastructure and support services during the early stages of the pandemic [15–17]. Finally, the score for cultural activities (green line) began at 4.00 before the pandemic and rose to a peak of 4.08 in Spring 2020, likely reflecting engagement with online or hybrid events. However, from Spring to Fall 2020, the score declined sharply, falling to 3.98 in Summer 2020 and 3.96 in Fall 2020. This decrease was primarily due to the suspension of in-person cultural activities, including Lunar New Year events and volunteering programs, as a result of social distancing measures [11, 12, 14].

4.1.2. X University’s Internationalization Strategies: X Global’s Programs.

Figure 2 shows the total number of students participating in X Global’s virtual mobility programs over the years. There was a competitive growth rate of 74.8% for Online Study Tour students and 54.4% for Remote Internship students. However, growth may slow in 2022 and beyond as global travel restrictions ease [9, 10]. The qualitative data from internal reports were examined regarding students’ perceptions of the virtual program’s key advantages and disadvantages. While international students often found it challenging to keep up with the

workload and preparation for online lessons and internships, many valued the local connections fostered despite the virtual format. These connections were facilitated by program coordinators and Vietnamese buddy teams, who created interactive environments emphasizing networking and cultural exchange. Activities such as English pair tutoring and cultural sharing sessions enhanced students' motivation and engagement in the programs [8, 10].

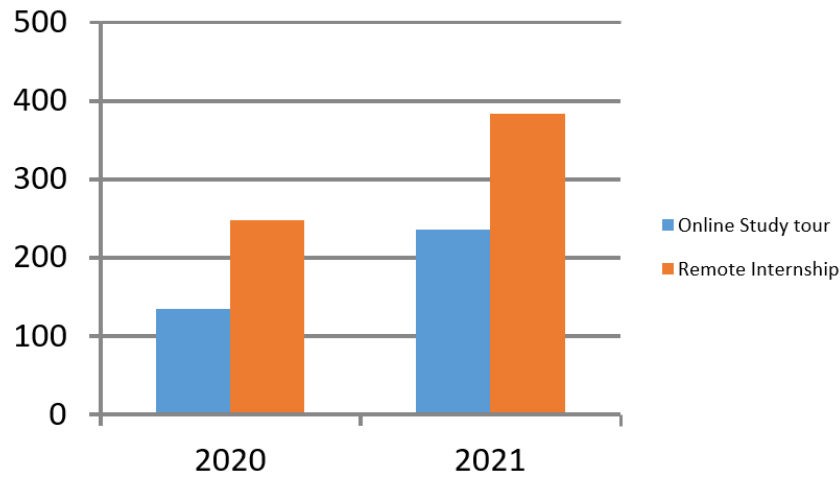


Figure 2. Growth in X Global's Virtual mobility students from 2020-2021.

4.2. Discussion

X University was among the private universities that rapidly transitioned from traditional offline learning to online methods to ensure the health and safety of faculty and students [15]. All courses, lesson plans, and examinations were delivered via Google Hangouts. However, the shift to distance learning presented notable challenges. Many courses, especially those designed for in-person interaction—such as Vovinam martial arts or traditional music instruments—could not be fully adapted to online delivery and were temporarily suspended. For other courses, faculty and students had to rapidly adjust, investing significant time and effort to maintain instructional quality [15–17]. During the pandemic, X University's support departments—including the Training Organization and Management Department, the Testing Department, the Student Services Department, and the IT Support Department—played a critical role in facilitating this transition. The Training Organization and Management Department provided guidelines for faculty, extended tutoring hours, and ensured students could access lectures without additional fees. The Testing Department implemented online examinations with reduced participants per session, allowing proctors to address student concerns efficiently. The IT Support Department ensured network stability for all online teaching and learning activities [15].

Despite these efforts, the high demand on infrastructure and the large number of students accessing Google Hangouts initially caused difficulties. Student satisfaction scores for support activities declined but improved in the Fall semester after two semesters of experience, aided by the Ministry of Information and Communications of Vietnam's provision of free servers and bandwidth for distance learning [15]. Financial support measures also contributed to positive outcomes. Many families were affected by the pandemic, and the 20% tuition fee reduction in Summer 2020 was well received by students and parents, allowing students to continue their studies uninterrupted [12]. Cultural activities, however, were significantly impacted. Events such as Lunar New Year celebrations, volunteering programs, and other in-

person activities could not proceed due to social distancing regulations issued by local authorities. While some activities were adapted for online delivery, their interactive and engaging nature was limited, resulting in lower student satisfaction scores for cultural programs compared to pre-pandemic periods [11, 12, 14].

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed X University's responses as a case example of HEIs' timely actions during the first wave of COVID-19 in Vietnam. By adapting offline activities to online formats, the university successfully addressed challenges faced by students, ensuring continuous learning, stress management, and maintenance of academic quality. Internationalization efforts were preserved through the implementation of virtual mobility programs, enhanced by local support and coordination, providing students with meaningful global experiences despite the online format. Nevertheless, some solutions require further improvement to achieve long-term effectiveness. Courses that rely heavily on interaction, such as traditional music or martial arts, need more research into suitable online delivery methods to prevent student overload while maintaining learning progress. Additionally, continuously refining online courses will allow the university to better meet student needs and respond to changes in the COVID-19 situation. Overall, X University's response demonstrates that e-learning can be central to sustaining teaching, learning, and internationalization during crises. Although online methods have limitations compared to traditional offline approaches, they offer significant opportunities for the digital transformation of higher education. In the coming years, hybrid models of teaching and internationalization are expected, providing both immediate solutions to disruptions and long-term advancement in educational digitization, aligning with UNESCO's longstanding emphasis on ICT in education.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author Contributions

Huyen K. Pham, Anh Thi Phuong Le, and Nguyen Thi Thao Ho contributed equally to this work, including conceptualization, data collection and analysis, and manuscript preparation.

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