

Enhancing online teaching: addressing the challenges faced by early-career academics at Vietnam National University, Hanoi

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to teaching staff at universities, particularly in the realm of online teaching. This study evaluates the challenges faced by early-career academics at Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU) in adapting to online teaching. A survey of 804 lecturers at VNU reveals that while they recognize the advantages of online teaching and hold a favorable perspective towards it, they face challenges related to proficiency in using new teaching technologies and learner motivation. Based on the findings, this study proposes some recommendations for early-career academics at VNU to address these challenges and enhance their online teaching.

Keywords: *Online teaching; online learning; educational technologies; quality assurance; higher education; professional development.*

1. Introduction

The advancement of science and technology has had a tremendously positive impact on various aspects of society and holds a significant role in various fields with practical applications. Technology has greatly benefited education by providing easy access to academic resources, textbooks, and research materials online, eliminating the need for physical libraries. Research indicates that online teaching and learning are increasingly perceived positively (Thai & Tran, 2022). At the VNU, which encompasses 34 units including 9 member universities, 3 affiliated schools, and 3 training centers, diversity is a hallmark characteristic among its learners, who possess varying characteristics, needs, perceptions, and concerns. Despite the growing use of technology and active teaching methods at VNU, there is a lack of extensive research studies with a sufficient number of subjects to accurately determine the impact of technology on active learning among learners. Given the aforementioned reasons, this research aims at identifying the current status and those challenges that early-career lecturers deal with in teaching online at VNU, and proposing some solutions to help improve the quality of online instruction. The research employed a quantitative data analysis approach, utilizing a sample of 804 responses from VNU educators. The analysis took into account various factors including gender, teaching field, teaching seniority, educational level, the country where the highest degree was obtained, and the faculty unit at VNU.

2. Literature review

The literature on online teaching suggests that incorporating technology into teaching activities has various benefits, but limited in-depth investigations into the quality of online teaching have been conducted. Online teaching involves instructional activities facilitated through technology platforms in an online environment, differing from traditional, in-person teaching in physical classrooms. Globally, research on active learning and the integration of educational technology in teaching has been extensive, with a majority of studies being empirical or qualitative in nature and focusing on specific training areas. Studies have been conducted to enhance online teaching, with some utilizing analytical methods to clarify the nature of online teaching activities in schools, while others have employed meta-analyses to explore the impact of technology on students' learning in online classes. For instance, research has shown that technology creates a more positive learning experience compared to non-technology use (Le et al, 2022; Muhtadi, 2013; Tamim et al., 2011; Thai & Tran, 2022).

Studies indicate that technology has a generally positive impact on learning, with students finding it appealing compared to traditional materials. However, selective and strategic use of technology is necessary to avoid distractions and ensure effective collaborative learning in online environments. Traditional classroom settings may be more effective for certain

tasks compared to distance learning. Additionally, integrating technology effectively into the learning process may require significant investments in infrastructure and resources. Technology in online teaching can enhance student interaction during initial stages, collaborative activities, and post-classroom learning. It can also improve teaching effectiveness, increase access to global students, offer flexible scheduling, reduce costs, and decrease environmental pollution. Studies have shown increased student scores in the first year of implementation. However, limitations of technology in education include increased opportunities for cheating, decreased attention span, imagination, and thinking ability among students, as well as increased time, cost, and health-related burdens for lecturers. (McLaren et al., 2022; Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018; Viorica-Torii & Carmen, 2013; Wang, 2020).

The enhancement of online education quality necessitates the implementation of robust training programs and knowledge dissemination initiatives for instructors and students. This entails upgrading IT infrastructure, improving students' IT competency, and providing training for educational leaders and instructors on modern teaching techniques, scientific and technical innovations, and digital technology in education (Le & Truong, 2020; Thai & Tran, 2022). Further research is warranted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with integrating technology in online teaching and its impact on training quality. Evidence-based solutions are required to enhance educators' skills, improve students' learning outcomes, and address the dearth of studies in this domain. In this regard, VNU has formulated guidelines to ensure high-quality online training that aligns with the quality assurance requirements of the Government of Vietnam and VNU. These guidelines encompass various aspects, including teaching content, teaching and learning activities, testing and assessment, technical infrastructure, and learning resources, providing an effective framework for the implementation of online teaching activities.

3. Research Methods

Data used in the study was collected through an online survey for new faculty members when they participated in a training program on “New Teaching Methods and Application of Information Technology in Teaching for Lecturers at VNU” from 2021 to 2022. The total number of questionnaires collected was 903, after eliminating any disqualified responses, the data collected from 804 faculty members were analyzed to address the research topics. The survey data was processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS software.

In terms of the sample structure, the research team conducted a classification based on several demographic variables including gender, field of teaching, teaching seniority, level of education, country where the lecturer obtained their highest degree, and unit. Analysis of the gender distribution in the sample revealed that the proportion of female participants (67.9%) was more than twice that of male participants (32.1%). In relation to teaching seniority,

17.4% of the lecturers had 3-5 years of experience, 43.8% had 1-3 years of experience, 30% had 6 months to 1 year of experience, and 8.8% had less than 6 months of experience. With regard to education level, more than half of the lecturers held a Master's degree (50.6%), while 38.3% held a Ph.D. degree, and the remaining 11.1% held a Bachelor's degree. In terms of the country where the highest education degree was obtained, 62.6% of the lecturers obtained their highest degree in Vietnam, 34.1% obtained it abroad, and the remaining 3.3% provided invalid responses (see Figure 1 below).

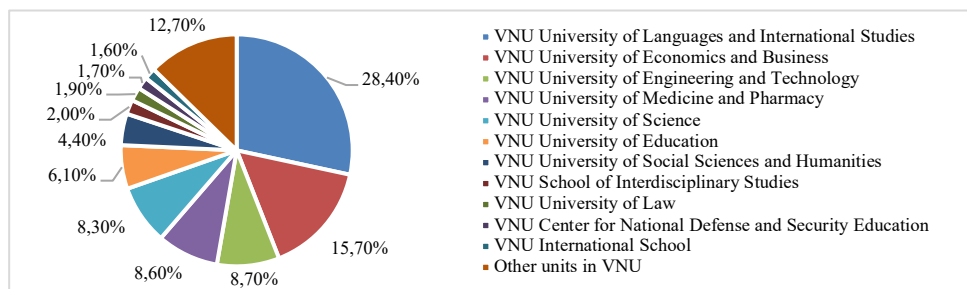


Figure 1: Description of the sample in units.

4. Online teaching at VNU: the current situation and challenges

The findings of this study reveal that although lecturers are aware of the advantages of online teaching and express willingness to utilize this mode of instruction, they encounter challenges related to their proficiency in using new teaching technologies and learner motivation. The results of the research provide insights into how instructors utilize tools for online teaching, their awareness of online teaching, and the challenges they encounter when working with students in a virtual environment.

First of all, Table 1 shows how lecturers use teaching online tools in their work.

The research used Yes/No questions to gather information from instructors. The survey results indicate that video conferencing, social media, online video, online quizzes, and mobile applications are the most frequently utilized tools by lecturers, with over 60% of them employing these tools. These tools were also frequently utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic when teaching and learning had to be entirely conducted online. However, some other tools such as peer review tools and ePortfolios, are underutilized with less than 10% of the surveyed lecturers using these tools in their classrooms. Another tool deemed necessary for teaching, especially in online or blended teaching, is the learning management system (LMS), which has not gained widespread popularity among lecturers at VNU. Only 41.7% of lecturers reported using this tool during their teaching. This may be due to the recent development of VNU's LMS system and its lack of synchronization with the information of

all training units, making it difficult for lecturers of some units to access and understand how to use the system with their modules.

Table 1. Frequency of using tools/software in online teaching by lecturers.

Tool/software has used for online teaching	Frequency	Percent	Tool/software has used for online teaching	Frequency	Percent
Video conferencing	645	80.2%	Online interactive activities	339	42.2%
Social media	583	72.5%	LMS	335	41.7%
Online video	540	67.2%	Wikis	121	15.0%
Online Quizzes	535	66.5%	Blogs	103	12.8%
Mobile application	507	63.1%	Courses from eBooks or iTunes	88	10.9%
Online discussion forum	374	46.5%	Peer review tools	58	7.2%
Online collaboration tools	357	44.4%	ePortfolios	31	3.9%

Furthermore, the lecturers affiliated with VNU exhibit a clear understanding of the advantages associated with delivering courses online. In addition to comprehending the benefits offered by online teaching, the teaching staff demonstrates preparedness in terms of their practical skills and teaching methods, as elucidated in the subsequent table:

Table 2: The awareness and practices in online teaching for lecturers.

Items	Frequency	Percent
I understand the benefits of using technology in teaching so I can make informed decisions about when and where to use technology in my teaching	777	96.7%
I know how to evaluate the online teaching activities and tasks that I have/will be implementing	686	85.3%
I've been exploring new technologies to integrate into my teaching and feel it's appropriate and doable	639	79.5%
I am sure about which learning activity or task is best for online teaching	635	79.0%
I feel that learners are more interested in learning when technologies are integrated in my teaching activities, which encourages me to try applying new technology to teaching activities	612	76.1%
Online teaching is right for me	590	73.4%
I have a clear understanding of classroom assessment requirements when transitioning to an online teaching context	573	71.3%

The results of the survey indicate that a high percentage of the 777 surveyed lecturers (96.7%) expressed their understanding of the benefits of online teaching and their proficiency in utilizing technology in their teaching activities. Likewise, 666 lecturers (85.3%) reported having the ability to evaluate online teaching activities and tasks, while 639 (79.5%) claimed to have successfully integrated new teaching tools into their instruction. Furthermore, 612 lecturers (76.1%) noted that the use of technology in teaching was more motivating for both themselves and their learners, and 590 (73.4%) considered online teaching as a suitable approach for themselves. These results indicate the willingness of lecturers to adopt new technologies in their teaching, however, the successful implementation of such technologies is still hindered by certain challenges. The survey findings highlight certain problems that have impeded the lecturers in effectively integrating technology into their teaching activities.

Finally, many challenges in teaching online have been faced by teaching staff, as follows:

Table 3: Challenges for teachers in online teaching.

Challenges	Frequency	Percent
My ability to access and use online technologies is not good	447	55.6%
Learners lack interest and interest in my online lectures	390	48.5%
I'm not sure if the learning outcomes in online teaching are the same as those in face-to-face teaching	362	45.0%
Lack of support on mechanisms and policies from VNU and training institutions	344	42.8%
I don't know how to properly search for and use online content or resources	300	37.3%
I don't have a good understanding of effective pedagogical methods in online teaching	282	35.1%
It took me too long to prepare for the online lesson	278	34.6%

The survey results indicate that a substantial proportion of faculty members encounter difficulties when implementing online teaching methods. Specifically, 55.6% of the lecturers reported challenges in accessing and utilizing online technologies. The attitude of learners also posed a challenge for 48.5% of the lecturers in successfully implementing online teaching methods. Additionally, a lack of experience in online teaching (45% respondents) and insufficient support from VNU regarding policies and mechanisms (42.8% respondents) are significant barriers to the implementation of online teaching methods by the faculty. It is evident that while the lecturers at VNU have embraced the use of new technology, support from the university and active participation from learners are critical factors for the successful implementation of these teaching methods and technologies. The collaboration between

schools, lecturers, and learners will be instrumental in ensuring the success of teaching innovations and improving the quality of learning experiences for learners.

5. Recommendations to improve the quality of online teaching

In light of the aforementioned findings, the research suggests three levels of implementation to address the challenges encountered by early-career lecturers in online teaching, as follows:

At VNU level, it is recommended that guidelines, regulations, and mechanisms be developed to facilitate the implementation of online and blended teaching practices across all member institutions. This could include the development of comprehensive guidelines and regulations that outline the best practices for online and blended instruction, as well as the establishment of mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these practices. Additionally, it is suggested that regular seminars and professional development workshops be conducted to support faculty in acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively utilize methods and tools for online and blended instruction. These initiatives could provide faculty with the necessary resources and support to enhance their competency in online teaching and ensure the quality of instruction in the online and blended learning environments.

At VNU's member institution level, it is suggested to implement regulations and guidelines specifically tailored for online and blended learning, with a particular focus on new faculty members. These regulations and guidelines could provide a framework for new faculty members to effectively engage in online and blended teaching practices, and could include incentives to encourage their active participation in adopting innovative teaching methods and educational technologies. Additionally, it is recommended that VNU's member institutions establish mechanisms for monitoring and assessing the teaching activities of early-career lecturers, with the aim of improving the quality of instruction. This could involve regular evaluations of online teaching performance and feedback to help lecturers enhance their teaching practices. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish a technical team with expertise in educational technologies to provide support and guidance to new and novice instructors in utilizing new teaching methods and technologies effectively. This could include offering training programs, workshops, and ongoing technical assistance to ensure that faculty members are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively integrate technology into their teaching practices.

At the individual level, it is encouraged for lecturers to actively engage in continuous professional development opportunities to acquire and apply innovative teaching methods and technologies in their instructional practices. This could include participation in training sessions, seminars, and workshops that focus on the advancement of modern teaching methods and technologies. Moreover, it is recommended that instructors introduce the teaching methods and technologies they plan to utilize in advance to their students, and

encourage students to familiarize themselves with these tools. Gathering feedback from students on the effectiveness of these methods and technologies can provide valuable insights for instructors to refine their teaching practices. In addition, lecturers should engage in regular self-reflection and evaluation of their teaching activities to promptly identify areas for improvement and strive to enhance the overall quality of instruction. This could involve critically examining instructional strategies, student engagement, and learning outcomes, and making adjustments as needed to optimize the learning experience for students.

6. Conclusion

The integration of technology in online teaching has brought a multitude of benefits to early-career academics in their pedagogical pursuits, and a majority of these lecturers are cognizant of these advantages. Nonetheless, each lecturer still encounters at least one challenge (the challenges of slacking proficiency in the utilization of new teaching technologies and the lack of motivation among learners pose difficulties for online teaching) when delivering their lessons online. To enhance the quality of online teaching for early-career academics at VNU, it is imperative to have a coordinated effort from both the management and the educators themselves. The management should establish appropriate policies for implementation, support, and supervision to create an optimal environment for online teaching. Additionally, the VNU Center for Teaching Excellence should play a proactive role in supporting and encouraging early-career academics to actively explore and incorporate innovative teaching methods into their online teaching practices.

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