

# Experiences and expectations from high school to university during the COVID-19 pandemic: Undergraduates' perspectives and their implications on teaching and learning

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ISSN: 2243-7703  
Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 3 August 2023

Revised: 16 August 2023

Accepted: 25 August 2023

Available Online: 25 August 2023

DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2023.60

## Abstract

Classes in Taiwan have switched to online method and employed blended learning since COVID-19 cases surged in May of 2021. This prompted an inquiry on what experiences students acquire/d during the period prior to and while attending university, how the situation between expectations and actual experiences in university has transpired or is transpiring, and how teachers can decrease any learner hindrances caused by the pandemic or unmet student expectations and encourage and improve student learning in the future when potential teaching and learning trends formed by similar contexts may emerge or persist. Participants were freshmen and sophomore undergraduate students from the department of applied foreign languages at a university of science and technology in northern Taiwan, and have adapted to or are currently employing blended learning the onset of the pandemic. Qualitative method was applied for data collection using open-ended questionnaire administered online during a two-week period. Analysis of textual data revealed that relationships, self-assessment, the new normal, proficiency improvement, and adaptation are the key factors to understanding students' conditions. Encouraging communication with students can lead to better assistance with school work and monitoring of performance during challenging times such as the pandemic, and temporary adjustments to such circumstance should not hinder nor affect student progress. Although such or any similar future change is inevitable, they can become opportunities to increase skills.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, pandemic, distance learning, Taiwan, learner perspective

# **Experiences and expectations from high school to university during the COVID-19 pandemic: Undergraduates' perspectives and their implications on teaching and learning**

## **1. Introduction**

Since COVID-19 cases surged in 2020 worldwide (Anwar et al., 2020; Hamzah et al., 2020; Tanne et al., 2020; Zhai and Du, 2020), in the case of Taiwan, May of 2021 (Akhmetzhanov et al., 2022), academic classes have switched to online method. As a result, students who graduated from high school in the years 2021 and 2022 have spent their senior year in high school and first year in university have had their classes mostly if not entirely held online. As schools were prompted to conduct online courses for safety purposes, teachers utilized technological tools and communication platforms, innovative methods, and eventually apply blended learning throughout the period when students were advised to stay at home to avoid contraction of the virus until such time when schools have already lifted restrictions and gradually adjusted to the normal routine of attending physical classes.

Given that such period is uncommon and changes resulting to learning adjustments may have an effect on students concerning study and personal factors, this study aimed to find out what experiences have students acquired during the pandemic period prior to and while attending university, how the situation between expectations and actual experiences in university has transpired, and how teachers can decrease any learner hindrances caused by the pandemic or unmet student expectations for them to encourage and improve student learning in the future when potential teaching and learning trends formed by similar contexts may emerge or persist.

This empirical research thus sought to answer the questions: How have student expectations and experiences from high school to university during the pandemic affected their learning? What implications can such expectations and experiences have on teaching?

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Student experience during the pandemic and distance learning*

Mucci-Ferris et al. (2021) asserted that the COVID -19 pandemic has become a memorable part of the student experience from spring 2020 through the semesters that follow. Some important aspects of university life, such as friendships and personal identity development were much harder to achieve in a solely online environment (Torda et al., 2020). For first-year college students, difficulties in adapting to the COVID-19 situation were inevitable, but they tried to cope with them (Jun et al., 2021). Even though students may have had difficulty adjusting to distance learning possibly due to lessened physical interaction with teachers and classmates and inexperience in learning beyond the classroom space, Yates et al. (2021) claimed that students valued supportive pedagogies and motivational strategies which enabled academic progress and enhanced wellbeing. Such supportive pedagogies may have come in the effective use of technology that mediated supportive teaching

According to Chicha et al. (2021), the most important factors that influence the feelings of students are the feeling of pleasure in the change from teaching in the classroom to teaching in the distance learning, and having the sense of self-efficacy. First year college students' experiences for example were complemented by having them develop their self-awareness through self-reflection, engaging activities, and resources that encouraged creating relationships or producing results (Jun et al., 2021). Students who transitioned from high school to

university have already expected to use advanced IT technologies and equipment at university, and most of them perceived little disconnection between the technology they used in high school and that of university. Although students have had a practical contact with technology during distance learning in high school, majority of them even seemed satisfied by the use of technology in their university courses (Keane et al., 2022).

## 2.2 Teaching in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic

Higher education has faced many concerns during the pandemic including remote learning experience (Mucci-Ferris et al., 2021). Due to COVID-19, universities have been facing challenges in generating the best possible experience for students (Lobos Peña et al., 2021). For teachers, the transition to online teaching and assessments during COVID-19 required various considerations of instructional approaches (Othman, 2020). The role of the teacher was not to only educate students but also to show empathy and understanding of students' conditions (Bailey and Lee, 2020). During the pandemic, teacher experiences reflected expected challenges and the choice of activities that would work best or ideal during such situation. Such activities were not limited to physical context since online classes were conducted. Although such shift may have caused teachers to realize the change as challenging, those with online teaching experience perceived fewer obstacles and used a wider array of communication channels and activities to facilitate learning. Also, the wide range of experiences for college students during COVID -19 gives university leadership a clearer understanding of unplanned upheaval.

Overall, findings from previous studies on the given subject offer enlightening perspectives toward student and teacher experiences during disadvantageous circumstances such as the pandemic. It is therefore of interest what findings may derived from student transition, particularly from high-school to university, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what implications it may have for the education sector.

## 3. Methodology

**Method and participants** - The study employed qualitative method to collect and analyze data. Participants were freshmen and sophomore Taiwanese undergraduate students from the department of applied foreign languages in a university in northern Taiwan who have adapted to distance learning in school since the onset of the pandemic. Sophomores graduated from high school in 2021, and freshmen in 2022. Being a qualitative study, students were only requested to participate voluntarily, thus no sampling or a target number of participants was required. As a study looking at student expectation and experience from their high school-university transition, student major was also not considered.

**Data collection instrument and collection period** - A 10-item open-ended semi-structured interview questionnaire in English was constructed via Google forms and sent to the participants online in the middle of the fall semester of 2022 and were given a duration of 2 weeks to send their responses. Since participants were collectively grouped by year level, the study was not conducted in any particular course. From the freshmen (n = 35) and sophomore (n = 22) groups, a total of 22 students have sent their responses, with freshmen comprising of 41% (n = 9) and 59% for sophomores (n = 13). As for gender distribution, there were equal number of 11 participants for males and females.

**Data analysis** - Analysis of textual data was done by open, axial, and selective coding using NVivo.

## 4. Findings and discussions

This section details the analysis of quotes and key words derived from students' answers, and the themes produced according to sub-categories. To facilitate data analysis, the questionnaire items were grouped into three main categories: experiences, expectations, and problems encountered and learning methods.

Table 1 shows the result from answers to the questions under the category Experiences. Given that most students have answered that their study experience in high school and university during the pandemic was

initially challenging yet an enjoyable time and memories of amity with classmates and teachers despite restrictions to meet physically for study and for leisure, a change can be seen once they moved on to university. This may be due to a new and unfamiliar environment where students need to make an adjustment in study behavior and company. The themes of relationships and self-assessment were derived, as exemplified in such period when students adapt and reflect. Where experiences vary according to degree or type, students may cope with new conditions by making acquaintances and developing skills needed for study habits and daily activities resulting from the secondary to tertiary level transition.

**Table 1**

*Analysis of answers for questions under the category Experiences.*

Interview questionnaire items	Answer quotes / key words	Sub-categories	Themes
1. How do you describe your experience in senior high school during COVID-19?	<i>Challenging; I enjoyed my high school life; fun; teachers were supportive; teachers were approachable; friendly classmates; can't meet friends</i>	Degree or type of experience	
2. How do you describe your experience in university during COVID-19 so far?	<i>So-so; I study on my own; I am having some difficulty adjusting; my behaviour changed; kind of easy; interesting; new people; can't talk to my classmates</i>	Interaction Skills	Relationships Self-assessment
3. During the pandemic, what experience/s did you have in high school that are different in university so far?	<i>Not sure; more free time; time management; easier to study in university; don't know how my classmates look like; need to take the bus; drive scooter to school</i>	Attitude	

Although there may be an apparent and ubiquitous difference between high school and university culture in terms of student activities in school and after school as well as teacher involvement (e.g. lectures, teacher-student relationship), the impact of the pandemic may have deterred students to interact with new classmates and teachers in university. This may have been exacerbated by the inability to recognize classmates and teachers, as everyone was required to wear masks as part of the regulations to avoid contracting the virus. With prolonged restrictions, students may have felt apprehensive to interact.

Students who have become acquainted with classmates in high school and have not followed social distancing rules and have not worn masks prior to the onset of COVID-19 in Taiwan have had the opportunity to better recognize and be close with each other, and face-to-face interaction may have been facilitated by facial expression, in which non-verbal expressions such as smiling encouraged better communication and understanding. Time however may solve problems that stemmed from the inability to interact and engage with new classmates and teachers, as students are still in their first and second years in university when the present research was conducted. The gradual decrease of COVID-19 infections in Taiwan would eventually lift restrictions such as social distancing and wearing of masks, and a return to normal was at hand.

**Table 2***Analysis of answers for questions under the category Expectations*

Interview questionnaire items	Answer quotes / key words	Sub-categories	Themes
4. What were your expectations in university in general when you were in high school?	<i>I had high expectations; might me difficult; I must improve my English; learn more things; improve my English</i>	Preparedness	New normal
5. What were/are your expectations in university while the pandemic was ongoing?	<i>Social distancing; always wear a mask; online classes; no need to go to school; more work to do; might get infected</i>	Responsibility	Proficiency improvement

As for expectations (see Table 2), students anticipating university life during the pandemic indicate their expectations on the degree of difficulty learning in higher education, consequently leading them to feel the need to increase their English proficiency level. Given the education level, students also assume accomplishing more tasks in university than in high school. Since online classes are being conducted since their first day in university while gradually returning to physical classes, students expected lesser time to go to school yet need to follow rules to avoid contracting the virus. With the new normal as a global reaction to living with the pandemic, students are to become accustomed to restrictions while studying through blended learning. However, returning soon to pre-COVID conditions should encourage students to consistently improve their English proficiency as requirement for their selected major.

**Table 3***Analysis of answers for the questions under the category Problems encountered and Learning methods.*

Interview questionnaire items	Answer quotes / key words	Sub-categories	Themes
6. Have you encountered any problems or hindrances while studying during the pandemic?	<i>It was not difficult for me to adjust; need to know how to use Google Meet/Teams; can't hear the teacher; can't see my classmates</i>		
7. Did you find it difficult to adjust from face-to-face to online learning during the pandemic?	<i>Not really; I was enthusiastic to use Google Meet and Teams It was hard to concentrate; stay at home is relaxing; Difficult to talk to the teacher and classmates</i>	Transitions	Adaptation
8. Which learning method do you prefer; online or face-to-face?	<i>Online (N=15) Face-to-face (N=12)</i>	Mixed methods	
9. How has switching classes from face-to-face to online affected your learning in high school and university?	<i>It was easier to study; I learned a lot from my teachers; Easy to submit homework; can't ask questions to classmates</i>	Blended learning Restrictions	

*10. What kinds of technological tools or innovative methods have you used for your online classes in high school and university?*

*Google Meet, Teams; PPT; group chat; online sources*

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Table 3 shows students' responses on having had any problems while studying during the pandemic. While learning at a challenging time, students faced difficulties with unfamiliar communication platforms and the issues that arise from their use. These include audio problems such as volume, background noise, or patchy quality. Other students however may have thought otherwise, having considered the novelty of using platforms as a way to acquire skills from the use of technology, learn new features, and to effectively communicate despite the limitations brought about by distance. Staying at home may also alleviate the search for information needed for particular courses, as students can easily look in the Internet as the source when they use their computers at home.

Online learning provided convenience to students considering communicating with teachers and submitting requirements. However, compared to the classroom setting where the teacher and all students are able to see and easily communicate with each other, using cameras to show themselves and be seen by the teacher may hinder prompt communication due to the one-way manner in which individuals may have to speak one at a time in order to avoid misunderstanding caused by simultaneous talk. However, getting habituated with the distance learning method may not have to be daunting. Adapting to changes caused by the need to function normally amid the pandemic suggests that schools can generate ways to adapt to teaching and learning methods without sacrificing quality and efficiency.

## **5. Conclusion**

### *5.1 Implications of the study*

Learning and teaching during a difficult time such as a pandemic poses many challenges both for learners and teachers. Answering the research questions on how student expectations and experiences from high school to university during the COVID-19 pandemic have affected learning and what implications such expectations and experiences can have on teaching also suggests a challenge, as situations that affect human activity on a global scale including epidemics may be varied by effect, and their origins and end may be unpredictable. Regardless of uncertainties, the education sector should not neglect the conditions of students and should come up with means to cope with issues that hinder communication in order to facilitate teaching and learning. Teachers may need to foster interaction whether face-to-face or online, because encouraging communication can lead to better assistance with school work, improving skills, and monitoring school performance.

Although the term 'new normal' is adopted whenever people need to adjust to unfavorable conditions that could persist, it is important to learn, develop, and improve skills, especially for students who need to gear up toward the future. Adjusting to contemporary standards while studying may not be an easy task. However, adjustments to changes does not have to hinder nor affect student progress, as such changes are temporary and learning has to persist. The use of technology for teaching and learning also needs to be made accessible at any time whenever predicaments such as epidemics are not expected beforehand. Teaching and training students to use technology can also help them learn new skills and become resourceful. COVID-19 may have caused global suffering, yet such spread of a virus calls for preparedness and attention. Although the need to adjust as a result of changes in daily activities is inevitable, it can be turned into an opportunity to increase skills. For students, exposure to technologies not only facilitates learning but also adds to their skills bank. Such technologies may however have to be used appropriately.

## 5.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Many students were reluctant to answer the questionnaire despite it having been administered online, and the questionnaire could be answered at their own convenience. Given the students came from only one department and major in applied foreign languages, findings concerning university students' reasons for selecting their major (future goals concerning type of job desired, foreign language study and proficiency, reason for choosing university, etc.) may have been derived.

Quantitative method may be applied, thus requiring expanded sample sizes for freshmen and sophomore levels. Participants may include students from different universities, departments, and programs. A target sample size may also help the research achieve a higher response rate. Quantitative method by administering pre- and post-tests for a longitudinal study may also be applied, which entails conducting the study to high school students prior to and after graduating. However, the gradual and eventual lowering of COVID-19 cases indicating that the spread of the virus is weakening shows the society's return to normality. Therefore, conducting the quantitative research may already be late in time. Measuring students' attitude may also be done in order to find out students' degree of experiences and expectations. Although the online questionnaire was administered in English, a Chinese version may have facilitated or encouraged students to participate in the study, as one cause of students hesitating to answer the questionnaire is the English reading proficiency.

As for the study having been conducted in a single university in Taiwan, implications concerning culture and system remain indefinite. However, since COVID-19's impact has been observed on a global scale, future research with national and international scopes, and a cross-cultural comparison concerning teachers' attitude and perspectives on dealing and helping with student transition can be done.

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