

Which University Do You Choose During the Covid-19 Pandemic?

Covid-19 made a come-back in Vietnam, causing many young people to worry about their university, the place they chose for their first choice - about whether teaching at their university would experience interruptions leading to prolonged studies.

This is a justified concern.

In Vietnam there are currently only a few universities “exempt” from the pandemic - still able to maintain normal lectures to ensure students can graduate on schedule. These are universities who made good investments in information technology (IT) infrastructure as well as in a professional team of online lecturers. These universities will enjoy young people’s preference during the 2020 enrollment season.



The beauty of the seaside city of Danang

Good online lectures require serious investment

If it were as simple as organizing some online classes with a couple of lecturers with good IT skills, by way of example, it would be within many universities’ reach. But if all lectures, for five thousand students

or more, must go online, very few Vietnamese universities are up to it. This is due to the following reasons:

- Hundreds of lecturers with high-level IT skills are needed. This becomes a big issue, especially for universities specialized in economics, management, social sciences & humanities, or pedagogy, or for universities with an aging lecturing team.

- Files, documentation, and study schedules of thousands of students must be managed. This requires an education management system and an e-learning platform of sufficiently high standards. Such e-learning platforms can usually be bought or even obtained from open source projects as with Moodle or Sakai, but education management systems must go through a testing phase to harmonize them with the school's regulations and learning process. Commercial software obtained on the market often does not meet all requirements. To obtain an education management system meeting their needs, schools must either develop the software internally or buy it from a provider who guarantees to calibrate and synchronize it according to the specific requirements of the university's training management and administration.

- A lot of money must be invested in the school's servers and data centers. If it is for only a couple of hundreds of students, the school can use services from the internet for online lectures, but if it is for thousands, it will need a data center with servers of sufficient capacity, the latest network switches, and a secure firewall. A data center typically costs at least a million US dollars, and only those of two million US dollars and more can truly be considered adequate.

Not any Vietnamese university is able to invest in such data centers. And we are not yet even considering the fact that, as the number of students goes up, the price of the data center goes up exponentially; it does not stop at those two million US dollars. Some will say that, in these times of cloud computing, universities do not need to invest in data centers, as they have but to buy cloud services online. In practice, buying cloud services for several dozens of people is still cheap, but for thousands it is not only a lot of money, but also less versatile than a data center. In practice, all big universities around the world invest in a data center, no need to buy cloud services.

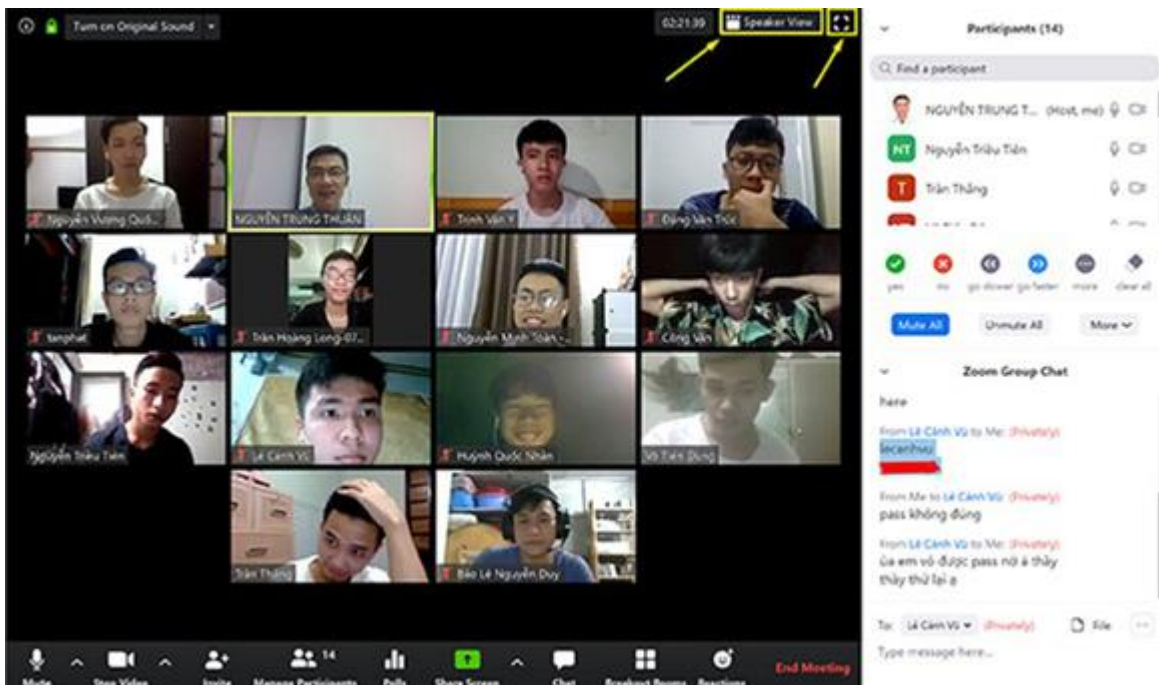


Modern data center and machinery used for online lecturing

Meeting other requirements

During the previous wave of Covid-19 infections in Vietnam, many universities held online lectures, but not at all of them did the online lectures meet requirements. Some universities even bought more professional conference and online lecturing software like WebEx Meetings, Zoom Meetings, or Microsoft Teams, but this does not yet ensure online teaching in the true sense of it. Why? At the universities with the aforementioned tools, lecturers switch on their computers and start their classes, but does the interaction with the students meet quality requirements? The following happens:

- Lecturers cannot “buy time”, and so they cut short their online classes, and if the study materials are not succinct enough, it is difficult to teach efficiently.
- Interactions in an online classroom are not concentrated and continuous like in a traditional classroom. When attending an online lecture, many students may be doing other things or they may be listening without really taking in much, such that any interruption in the flow of the class has them lose all understanding of the lesson.
- Online study materials are not always available and complete at all universities. Some schools may have some sample online subjects with study materials and mature question pools to serve as examples when necessary. But if, in a pandemic, they suddenly need electronic study materials for hundreds of subjects right away, they have a hard time.



Lecturer and students in an online class

To meet the aforementioned requirements, there is one final obstacle not all universities can overcome: online exams. Some schools decided not to take exams online to ensure integrity. Actually, the main reasons can be:

- Most universities do not have sufficient question pools for all subjects. Exam and test questions they have ready since long are almost all open-ended, and multiple-choice questions, which are more objective and have more interactions and relevance for online examinations, are lacking.
- Information technology network infrastructure for online exams may be lacking if the number of students goes up in the thousands. If a university has five thousand students, what are the complications during the one or two weeks of final exams? How many students must the system be able to take simultaneously during exams to avoid crashes? How much memory and processing power does the system need to save all student answers minute by minute, such that, if their connection is broken, their answers are still secure? It is obviously no simple feat to take exams online, especially for universities with thousands of students or more.

DTU: a truly online university

In spite of many such obstacles, Vietnam still counts several universities that overcame them and managed to offer online classes with top-notch quality guaranteed, enjoying the trust of the Ministry of Education, of the students, and of the entire nation. At the recapitulatory conference on online teaching on April 17, the Ministry of Education and Training announced their statistics of 110 universities offering online teaching (and 97 that did not) in the entire country, but only four of them offered online classes in the true sense of it and could guarantee quality. They are:

- Hanoi Open University,
- Ho Chi Minh City Open University,
- FPT's FUNiX, and
- Duy Tan University (DTU)

These are all universities with a long tradition of online lecturing thanks to experience at distance learning, to possessing campuses in many places that need to stay connected, and mostly to a modern development orientation from the start.

Among the four universities mentioned above, we would like to introduce DTU, ranked among Asia's top 500 universities by QS Asian University Rankings, in more detail. Through rapid investment in online lecturing infrastructure of sufficient quality for 150 classrooms during the first wave of Covid-19 - with

wide-angle cameras, AV hi-fi sound systems, and other devices for online lecturing like projectors and Wacoms in addition to the purchase of a Zoom Meetings license for about a thousand lecturers - the university was ready to start teaching its twenty thousand students online right when the pandemic officially started in March 2020.



DTU is present in many Asian and worldwide rankings

IT infrastructure is, however, only a part; more importantly, the university's experience at online lecturing since 2008, 2009 is the real foundation for the aforementioned readiness. In particular, the university prepared:

- an AMS education management system and the myDTU portal, developed by the university itself;

- the Sakai e-learning platform (open source), customized and highly tuned to the university's training requirements throughout the years;
- a previously existing data center worth over three million US dollars, an investment of many years;
- experienced lecturers who are always ready to teach any type of students online;
- previously existing electronic study materials and question pools, originally localized from standard question pools from around the world;
- students had been "initiated" to regular online classes through the "blended learning" formula (mix of classroom lectures and online lectures) right from their first year.

With this preparation, the pandemic did not push DTU into a passive role, DTU students' progress was not slowed down, and even students of majors with a practical component received a simulated format through IT solutions of sufficient quality to take these subjects online. Practice shows that DTU's most recent graduates could finish on schedule: during the first week of June 2020.

The WHO recently warned that humanity may have to learn to live with Covid-19, even if we can find a vaccine by September or October. To get enough vaccines for the over 7.5 billion people on the planet, at least three years and maybe more will be needed, about the time necessary for a university degree. This is the very time you would spend as a student.

You certainly want your university studies to unfold normally with or without pandemic, such that you can obtain your degree in exactly four years. If you desire this, you will certainly think extra carefully about which university you want to spend your student life at.

We believe you are smart enough to make the right choice!

For detailed information, please contact:

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DTU

- The second Vietnamese university to obtain American ABET accreditation
- Ranked among Asia's top 500 universities by QS
- Ranked 1,659th in the top 2,000 universities worldwide and third of four in Vietnam by CWUR
- Ranked 1,147th in the top 2,500 universities worldwide and third of eight in Vietnam by URAP
- Ranked second of ten leading universities of Vietnam in international publications by the Nature Index

(Media Center)