

Received: 17-07-2024
Revised: 30-08-2024
Accepted: 09-09-2024

Investigating the Perceptions of Master's Degree Students in the Online Educational Landscape: A Case Study of an Open University in Thailand

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Abstract

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the integration of technology has become increasingly prevalent. In 2023, the decision of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Thailand to transition to a 100% online learning platform marks a significant paradigm shift in the delivery of education. This transformative move necessitates an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions towards the online learning environment. The population of the study involved 24 students from different locations who were studying Master degree of curriculum and instruction majoring in English language teaching, school of Educational Studies at the open university, Thailand registering in course block 22762 Foundations and Methodologies of English Language Instruction at the academic year 2023. They were divided into 2 groups of learning; 12 students per one group. One of the two groups was chosen purposively, as the sampling of the study. The research design used for this study employed a qualitative approach. A focus group interview was conducted online via MS Teams and lasted up to 60 minutes and then analyzing data through content analysis.

The students were ensured that their participation and personal information was kept confidential. The interview guide questions were used to collect data from students. A focus group interview delves into students' perceptions and experiences of online learning. From the focus group interview, findings revealed that there were commonalities among the students' response, which links to common attributes of effective learners while each student is unique in their approach to online learning. The results were divided into advantages and disadvantages of online learning that cover interview topics which are identification of strengths and challenges, assessment of educational effectiveness, enhancement of teaching and learning strategies, impacts on student engagement and motivation, tailoring support services, and feedbacks for continuous improvement. Employing content analysis as the analytical framework, the study revealed that, while students generally expressed positive perceptions of online platform learning, there were some disadvantages associated with this mode of learning. By exploring their

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perceptions, this study aims to contribute valuable insights that will inform strategic decisions, enhance the quality of online education, and ultimately elevate the overall learning experience for students not only at the STOU but also students in other open university sharing a very similar context.

Keywords: Online learning platform, Perceptions, Open University, School of Educational Studies

Introduction

In the 21st century, the integration of technology has indeed become increasingly prevalent, transforming the way students learn, educators teach, and institutions operate. Learning in the 21st century is characterized by a dynamic and evolving landscape shaped by technological advancements, global connectivity, and a shift towards skills-based education. (Ali, Ali, & D'Souza, 2023). Students must embrace technology to prosper in a fast-changing digital world. This is obvious when the COVID-19 epidemic has caused a fundamental transformation in how we learn, leaving an enduring effect on the educational system (Office of National Higher Education Science Research and Innovation Policy Council, 2022; Rossum, Pearson, Howells, & Randall, 2023). In response to the disruption due to the pandemic, the rapid use of educational technology as a way to guarantee smooth learning continuity was spurred by this extraordinary circumstance. Technology has become a major facilitator, enabling educational institutions to support the development of new skill sets and adapt to the demands of students, independent of geographic constraints. Educational technology combines technology and digital media with conventional teaching methods to enable multimodal forms of learning. This offers flexibility, improves engagement, and produces learning solutions that are globally recognized (Joshi, 2023). Regarding the affordance's technology provides during the COVID 19, higher education institutions have adopted the technology and transformed themselves to keep pace with the changing world (Atmojo, & Arif, 2020; Bashir, Bashir, Rana, Lambert, & Vernallis, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020). Especially for open universities, the role of technology is pivotal, shaping the learning experience, accessibility, and effectiveness of education delivery since open universities are unique institutions designed to provide flexible and accessible education to a diverse range of learners (Zuhairi, Karthikeyan, & Priyadarshana, 2020).

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand (STOU) is not an exception. Being an open university, STOU has adopted what technologies provide to enable the university to reach a broader audience by offering online courses and resources through online learning platforms. Learners from remote locations or with limited access to traditional educational institutions can participate in distance learning programs (Belawati, 2022). Also, digital platforms and tools facilitate flexible learning schedules, allowing students to study at their own pace and convenience. Online lectures, interactive multimedia materials, and classrooms support self-paced learning and personalized education paths (Mirata, Awinia, Godson, & Bergamin, 2022). Moreover, technology creates interactive and engaging learning environments through features like discussion forums, video conferencing, and collaborative tools. Students can interact with peers and instructors, participate in group projects, and receive real-time feedback, enhancing their understanding and engagement. Through the use of technology, STOU utilizes multimedia resources such as videos, simulations, and interactive tutorials to enhance learning experiences. These resources cater to diverse learning styles, making complex concepts more accessible and engaging. Overall, technology empowers

open universities to break barriers, expand access to education, and create dynamic learning environments that foster student success and lifelong learning (Smith, 2022; Zuhairi, Karthikeyan, & Priyadarshana, 2020). In addition, after the disruption of COVID-19 on the learning platform of STOU's students, the administrative team of STOU embraces the changes and has a policy to transform to digital university by shifting teaching and learning activities online.

In 2023, the decision of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Thailand to transition to a 100 percent online learning platform marks a significant paradigm shift in the delivery of education as STOU Plan 2000 (Yongbanthom, 2022). This transformative move necessitates an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions towards the online learning environment. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of 12 Master's degree students majoring in English language teaching at STOU enrolled in a course block in the academic year 2023.

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open university (STOU) Context

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open university (STOU) is a distance learning system university in Thailand, established in **1978**. According to the university vision, STOU strives to be a world-leading open university utilizing technology and educational innovation to provide lifelong education for all which means the STOU distance learning system has made quality higher education accessible to all, providing students with the freedom to study and interact according to their individual circumstances and locations since the beginning. The School of Education Studies, established on 7 February 1979, offers programs which focus on developing in-service educational personnel who can strengthen their communities with increased academic knowledge and professional ethics. The school also aims to promote research development in the fields of teacher education and educational studies, provide academic services to educational personnel and other interested parties, and contribute to the preservation and maintenance of national arts and culture.

Studies at STOU are not confined to traditional classrooms. Study programs are made up of many required and elective course blocks. Each course block contains 15 units, and students are expected to complete them at the pace of one unit per week (15-week semester). Students must enroll in at least one course block (6 credits) per semester, with a maximum of two for a master's degree. The course blocks are various, some contain both print-based and computer-based (e-learning) and some contain only printed materials. Course block number 22762 Foundations and Methodologies of English Language Instruction is the obligation course block of students who study a Master degree program of curriculum and instruction majoring in English language teaching, school of Educational Studies at Sukhothai Thammathopen university. This course block is presented in two ways: print-based and computer-based (e-learning) and normally the students have to participate the face-to-face seminar once per semester. After the university follows the STOU Plan 2000 in providing distance education courses. According to this plan, as technological capabilities increase throughout the country, STOU continually explores opportunities to implement new media and students switch from the face-to-face seminar to online platform through MS Teams. Moreover, the shift from traditional, face-to-face courses to hybrid (face-to-face and online) and then to totally online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic has made lots of changes and has produced mixed reactions, opinions, and views in the higher education. Teachers s have to seek the effective way to deliver the courses online.

Actually, online learning has become a part of the 21st century as it makes use of online platforms. E-learning is defined as using online platform technologies and the Internet to enhance learning and provide users with access to online services and services (Ehlers & Pawlowski, 2006). Luschei, Dimyati, and Padmo. (2008); Ramos, Nangit, Ranga, and Trinona (2007) and Suciati (2011) also stated that in distance education universities like in the Philippines and Indonesia, online learning has become an integrated part of the learning system.

Before COVID-19 pandemic, students were required to attend face-to-face tutorial sessions twice per one subject. Since COVID-19 pandemic, graduate studies at STOU employs a blended learning of independent learning with printed material (textbooks and workbooks) and implementing e-learning (Moodle) integrated with online communication for courses tutorial, academic and thesis advising. They usually access eight units of online material, which serves as triggers for discussions, per course per semester. Students access two or three class assignments online and submit the assignments to lecturers for marking and feedback. A course final grade might be determined based on tutorial performance (60%) and final assessment (40%) depending on the courses. After the use of the STOU Plan 2000 and COID-19 pandemic situation, the course shifted to 100 percent online, students need to learn via printed material, Microsoft teams and e-learning (Moodle). There were some challenges at the beginning then both teachers and students have to adapt themselves and seek the effective learning ways. As a result of that, the students' perceptions need to be revealed and studied; thus, teachers will be able to learn and improve the teaching styles. The research question: "What are students' perceptions towards online platform when implemented in the university education?" will be answered in this study.

Previous studies

The shift towards online learning, accelerated by the global pandemic, has significantly transformed the educational landscape. Students' perceptions of online learning have been a critical factor in determining its effectiveness and success. This section reviews recent studies exploring students' attitudes, experiences, and challenges related to online learning, providing insights into the factors that influence their perceptions.

Positive Perceptions

Students generally appreciate the flexibility and convenience of online learning. According to Martin, Sun, & Westine. (2020); Soliman, Salman, & GamalEldin (2022), many students value the ability to access course materials at their own pace and the opportunity to balance their studies with other responsibilities, such as work and family commitments. Furthermore, Dhawan (2020) found that students feel empowered by the increased control over their learning environment, which can be tailored to their personal preferences and in line with their level of self-directed learning.

Challenges and Negative Perceptions

Despite these advantages, several studies highlight significant challenges associated with online learning. A common concern among students is the lack of face-to-face interaction, which can lead to feelings of isolation and reduced motivation (Besser, Flett, & Zeigler-Hill, 2020). The absence of real-time feedback from instructors and peers was identified as a significant drawback, negatively impacting students' engagement and understanding (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomažević, & Umek, 2020). Technical issues, such as unreliable internet connections and

inadequate access to digital devices, also contribute to students' negative perceptions. In a study by Aguilera-Hermida (2020), students reported frustration with these barriers, which can hinder their ability to participate fully in online classes and complete assignments on time.

Impact on Learning Outcomes

The perception of online learning's impact on academic performance is mixed. While some students believe that online learning has enabled them to achieve similar or even better outcomes compared to traditional classroom settings (Bashir, Bashir, Rana, Lambert, & Vernallis, 2021; Oraif & Elyas, 2021), others feel that the lack of structured schedules and face-to-face support has adversely affected their learning (Khalil et al., 2020). This disparity suggests that individual factors, such as self-discipline and learning styles, play a crucial role in determining students' success in an online learning environment.

Objective

This study explored students' perceptions of the online platform for learning at Master degree level of curriculum and instruction majoring in English language teaching at an open university.

Definition of Terms

Students' perceptions mean the study of Master's degree students' opinion towards curriculum development, instructional design, technology integration, student support services, and overall pedagogical approaches in online education platform.

Online learning refers to the process of delivering and engaging in educational activities, such as lectures, discussions, assignments, and assessments, through the using Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) platform. This software facilitates a virtual classroom environment where students and instructors can interact in real-time or asynchronously. Features of MS Teams for online learning include video conferencing, chat functions, file sharing, collaboration on documents, and integration with other educational tools. These functionalities enable a flexible, accessible, and interactive learning experience, accommodating both synchronous (live) sessions and asynchronous (on-demand) learning activities.

Expected Benefits

By exploring students' perceptions, this study aims to contribute valuable insights that will inform strategic decisions, enhance the quality of online education, and ultimately elevate the overall learning experience for students not only at the STOU but also students in other open university sharing a very similar context. This includes decisions related to curriculum development, instructional design, technology integration, student support services, and overall pedagogical approaches in online education. By understanding students' perspectives, institutions can identify areas for improvement and implement strategies to enhance the quality of online education platform. This may involve optimizing online learning platforms, improving communication channels, and addressing specific challenges or barriers faced by students.

Research Methodology

The research design used for this study employed a qualitative approach. A focus group interview was conducted online via MS Teams and lasted up to 60 minutes and then analyzing data through content analysis. All the students were ensured that their participation and personal information was kept confidential. The interview guide questions were used to collect data from students.

Population and sampling

The study population consisted of 24 students from various locations, all enrolled in the Master's program in Curriculum and Instruction, majoring in English Language Teaching, at the School of Educational Studies, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand. These students were registered in the course block 22762, Foundations and Methodologies of English Language Instruction, during the academic year 2023. The students were divided into two learning groups, with 12 students in each group. One of these two groups was purposively selected as the study sample based on voluntary participation.

The sample comprised 12 students from the Master's program in Curriculum and Instruction, majoring in English Language Teaching. These students were also enrolled in the course block 22762 during the 2023 academic year. The ages of the sampled students ranged from 22 to 45 years old. Among them, nine were female and three were male. The group included six English teachers from government schools, five English teachers from private schools, and one vocational teacher.

Results and Discussion

From the focus group interview, findings revealed that there were commonalities among the students' response, which links to common attributes of effective learners while each student is unique in their approach to online learning. The results were divided into advantages and disadvantages of online learning that cover interview topics which are identification of strengths and challenges, assessment of educational effectiveness, enhancement of teaching and learning strategies, impacts on student engagement and motivation, tailoring support services, and feedbacks for continuous improvement.

Identification of strengths and challenges

Since online education allows students to attend classes from any location of their choice, it is quite convenient for the students as they are living in different places in the country. They don't have to travel and request a sick leave on Friday to travel from where they are. One student (Eng1) said "it's much more convenient learning through online systems. There's no need to travel, it saves time and money". This is related to Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, and Sethi (2020) who stated that flexibility and student-centered learning are one of the major advantages of online learning courses. In addition to saving on travel time and expenses, online learning eliminates the costs of transportation, meals, and accommodation associated with attending classes on campus. For students enrolling in open universities, attending face-to-face classes appears to be a significant concern. Open university students are often comfortable with technology and online learning platforms. They tend to be resourceful, seeking out additional support and learning opportunities beyond what is provided in the course materials. Many students

develop strong communication skills, as they engage in online discussions, collaborate on projects, and interact with peers and instructors remotely. They are independent learners who take responsibility for their own learning journey, seeking out resources and assistance as needed but also capable of self-directed study since they know their limitations. Most of the students are working full-time, occupied with family business and have limitation of learning budgets.

Additionally, online lectures can be recorded, archived, and shared for future references, so students are able to listen to the lectures and access the learning materials once again at a time of their comfort. One student (Eng2) mentioned that they can listen to recorded lectures and presentations of peers many times and I also share my work to friends and see my friends' works easily through MS Teams, which is more convenient.

On the other hand, some students did not favor online theses advising and prefer face-to-face discussion with their lecturers. Since students worked full-time as an English teacher at schools in various provinces, they need study buddies or study network to keep them company. They also love to have onsite class; they will be able to share and discuss with their lecturers and friends. This is related to Bao (2020) who stated that the usefulness of online learning depends on the student's personality or personal attitude towards learning.

Some students mentioned that there are minimal physical interactions between students and teachers while learning online. As a result of that, they have a sense of isolation as Rossum, Pearson, Howells, and Randall (2023) stated in his study that online learning students reported they were feeling isolated and it became challenging for them to continue the course. Furthermore, Rovai, Wighting, and Liu (2005) also mentioned that during online classes students feel a weaker sense of connectedness and belonging than on-campus students who attend each other in face-to-face classes. Additionally, online learning increases the likelihood of students being distracted by social media, other websites, family responsibilities, and current work commitments

Assessment of educational effectiveness

In the postgraduate level, students are assessed through several assessment tools such as class assignments, reports, and final examinations. For students who enrolled in the 22762 Foundations and Methodologies of English Language Instruction, they are assessed through their participation during online classes, reports, and final examination. All of the assessment tools were assessed through online interactions. Students mentioned that they feel comfortable using online assessment. Assessment criteria were informed in advanced and lecturers always explained the assessment rubrics for class participation, reports and final examination. One student (Eng3) said “I like the online examination I was afraid at the beginning, I didn't know how to submit the exam paper but after the university examination orientation I was so confident”. One also said (Eng4) that “in the course orientation, the lecturer explained the assessment rubric to students clearly, I could ask questions about the online assessment.” Students are positive to online assessment due to its convenience, the ability to provide timely feedback, and flexibility in engaging with students (Cavalcanti et al., 2021). Moreover, it allows them to track their progress and address areas for improvement in a timely manner. This continuous feedback loop supports ongoing learning and growth. This is in relation to the study of Todd et al. (2021) that rubrics and assessment criteria should be explained to students in advance so that they are aware of what are going to happen during their assessment.

Enhancement of teaching and learning strategies

Students commented they are positive to learning online since they believe that online interaction can enhance teaching and learning strategies. Online teaching encourages the use of innovative teaching methods and technologies, such as gamification, simulations, virtual reality, and augmented reality, to create engaging and immersive learning experiences. They observed that lecturers employed a lot of online teaching tools to promote online interaction and engage students during the lectures. Teachers used online tools can facilitate interactive learning experiences through features like discussion forums, multimedia content, and collaborative projects. One student (Eng 6) stated that “the teacher has tried to motivate and engage students via online while learning. If teacher only lectures via online class, I will be very sleepy.” These tools promote engagement and active participation among students. This in line with the studies of Moonma (2021); Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, and Sethi, (2020), which suggest that when resources are limited, teachers often utilize multimodal teaching tools in online classes, such as computer program extensions, online whiteboards, educational games and applications, and breakout room features, to enhance student engagement. However, online learning is one of the barriers in relationship between teachers – students and students- students. Teachers have to play the crucial role to make a good connection between students-studets and students – teachers.

Impacts on student engagement and motivation

Scholars mentioned that online platforms may interfere students’ interactions since students cannot meet face-to-face and may not be familiar with their classmates enough to interact because they may feel losing face when they make mistakes academically (Bao, 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Oraif & Elyas, 2021). However, lecturers often use online platforms including features such as discussion boards, group projects, and collaborative activities that facilitate peer-to-peer interaction. These interactions can promote knowledge sharing, critical thinking, and peer learning. Enrolling in the 22762 Foundations and Methodologies of English Language Instruction, students had a chance to meet synchronously through lectures using MS Teams, and asynchronously through the use of class e-learning. Two students (Eng 7 and Eng8) stated that we love discussion sessions, we enjoyed talking in the assigned group. We also knew other friends while working in the assigned tasks. Some online learning formats incorporate synchronous sessions, such as live lectures. These sessions enable real-time interaction between students and instructors, fostering engagement and immediate clarification of concepts. For the asynchronous communication such as class e-learning, email, messaging apps, or discussion forums, allows students to engage in discussions and collaborate on projects at their own convenience. This flexibility accommodates diverse learning styles and schedules (Suksawas & Yiemkuntitavorn, 2022). However, there were some students (Eng1 and Eng5) mentioning after they got back to their works and they lost contacts with their friends. They had to motivate and remind themselves about the studies and assignment that they had to do.

Tailoring support services

In online interactions, students not only interact with their peers and lecturers but also with supporting staff online. One (Eng12) commented that “this is very convenient for students since students do not have to call or come to the university office and look for staff who are responsible for different matters such as enrollment, IT

supports, submitting documents". Through email, university website chat bot, Line application and STOU SISA, students can get their records and academic results, register for classes and pay tuition fee via mobile phone, and receive information about teaching and learning, exam venues, and exam results. This approach not only enhances efficiency but also provides flexibility and accessibility for students (Wang, Zhang, Zhao, & Jiang, 2020). The supports are indeed beneficial for student engagement and overall experience. Nevertheless, there are some difficulties students have to meet relating to students support such as the delay of getting learning materials and responses from the university staffs. One student (Eng2) said "It took a long time to get the learning materials from the university, I tried to contact the university staff every day at the beginning of the semester."

Feedbacks for continuous improvement

Though the use of collaborative projects during the course, lecturers assign group projects or collaborative tasks that promote students to work together, communicate effectively, and leverage each other's strengths. Collaborative tools like shared documents or project management platforms facilitate teamwork and coordination. While working together, three students (Eng 9, Eng10, Eng11) mentioned that they got feedback from peers when negotiating for meaning during their group work. Learners interact in whole class, group work and pair work interaction via the use of MS Teams and breakout rooms. This helps incorporating peer feedback mechanisms into assignments and assessments that encourage students to critically evaluate their peers' work, provide constructive feedback, and engage in reflective learning practices (DeGuerrero & Villamil, 2000). In addition to peer feedback, lecturers provide feedback promptly after assignments, assessments, or discussions to ensure that students receive guidance while the content is still fresh in their minds. Timely feedback helps students understand their progress and make improvements. Adaptive learning technologies can also be utilized to provide personalized feedback and support. This is related to Wang and Houdyshell (2021, p.40) who stated that the use of synchronous communication technology considerably increased, and they believed it "will be part of the new norm in academic advising"

Conclusion

By exploring students' perceptions, this study contributes valuable insights that can inform strategic decisions, enhance the quality of online education, and ultimately elevate the overall learning experience for students not only at the STOU but also students in other open university sharing a very similar context. This includes decisions related to curriculum development, instructional design, technology integration, student support services, and overall pedagogical approaches in online education. By understanding students' perspectives, institutions can identify areas for improvement and implement strategies to enhance the quality of online education. This may involve optimizing online learning platforms, improving communication channels, and addressing specific challenges or barriers faced by students.

Recommendations

Although students have optimistic views about online education platform, there is always challenges and obstacles for improvement. The study was only focused on students' views. Teachers' view is also important.

Therefore, to achieve the goal, there should be the study of the teachers' opinion and perceptions towards online education platform and students' behaviors as there is a need to study the perspectives of all parties involved

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