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STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON DISTANCE EDUCATION AT A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY: AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

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Abstract: Distance education has become increasingly prevalent in higher education to meet diverse student needs and technological advancement, with Learning Management Systems (LMSs) serving as the primary platform for online learning activities. The present study investigated undergraduate learners' reflections on distant learning offered by a public university in Hanoi, Vietnam. A mixed-methods approach with a survey questionnaire based on Gibbs' reflective cycle that included both Likert scale questions (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and open-ended questions, along with semi-structured focus group interviews, was used to collect data from 58 English-major students enrolled in a distance learning program. The findings from the students' reflections revealed a gap between their pre-course expectations and their post-course actual learning experiences in a distance education program. While they valued flexibility and improved technological skills, they faced challenges in interaction, lecturer support, unclear materials, learning motivation, and time management when using the LMS. The implications of the findings of the present study are crucial for instructors, practitioners, policy makers and institutions to improve distance education courses.

Keywords: distance education, learning management system, reflections

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NGHIÊN CỨU KHÁM PHÁ VỀ PHẢN ÁNH CỦA SINH VIÊN ĐỐI VỚI GIÁO DỤC TỪ XA TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: Giáo dục từ xa ngày càng phổ biến trong giáo dục đại học nhằm đáp ứng nhu cầu ngày càng đa dạng của sinh viên và sự phát triển của công nghệ, với hệ thống quản lý học tập được sử dụng như nền tảng chính để triển khai hoạt động học tập trực tuyến. Nghiên cứu đã tìm hiểu những suy nghĩ và trải nghiệm của sinh viên về hình thức học tập từ xa tại một trường đại học công lập ở Hà Nội. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ 58 sinh viên chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh, hệ đào tạo từ xa, thông qua phương pháp tiếp cận hỗn hợp, kết hợp bảng khảo sát dựa trên chu trình phản ánh của Gibbs (bao gồm các câu hỏi thang đo Likert và câu hỏi mở) cùng với các cuộc phỏng vấn nhóm tập trung bán cấu trúc. Kết quả cho thấy có sự chênh lệch giữa kỳ vọng trước khóa học và trải nghiệm thực tế của sinh viên trong chương trình giáo dục từ xa. Dù đánh giá cao sự linh hoạt và khả năng nâng cao kỹ năng công nghệ, người học vẫn gặp khó khăn trong việc tương tác, nhận hỗ trợ từ giảng viên, nghiên cứu tài liệu học tập, duy trì động lực học tập và quản lý thời gian hiệu quả khi học trên hệ thống học trực tuyến. Nghiên cứu có ý nghĩa quan trọng đối với giảng viên, học viên, các nhà hoạch định chính sách và tổ chức giáo dục nhằm không ngừng nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo từ xa trong bối cảnh học tập trực tuyến ngày càng phát triển.

Từ khóa: giáo dục từ xa, hệ thống quản lý học tập, phản ánh

1. Introduction

Distance education not only broadens access but also fosters flexibility and autonomy in the learning process, with Learning Management Systems (LMSs) functioning as the central hub for delivering online courses. One of the outstanding benefits of this method is the flexibility of time and location, allowing learners to easily arrange their personal schedules without being bound by fixed time frames. Moreover, distance learning allows students to adjust the speed of knowledge acquisition according to their personal needs (Turan et al., 2022). The ability to save time is also a great advantage, as students do not need to travel to traditional classrooms, helping them to make effective use of time for other activities (Begicheva et al., 2023). For English majors, this mode of learning offers several benefits, including access to a wealth of international resources, improved learning technology skills, and expanded opportunities to interact with learners around the world (Zainuddin et al., 2024).

However, the distance education model also poses many challenges. Although LMS platforms provide synchronous and asynchronous communication tools (Sharma et al., 2023), one of the main problems is the lack of direct interaction and limited immediate feedback from instructors, which can hinder language practice and learning, especially in subjects that require high interaction (Osei, 2010; Kravchyna, 2021). In addition, maintaining learning motivation is a major challenge, especially for part-time students, who have to balance work and study. Distance education also requires high time management skills, as students need to plan their

own studies and ensure progress without direct supervision from lecturers (Fidalgo, 2020), even though LMS platforms provide features for tracking learning progress (Sharma et al., 2023).

In Vietnam, distance education is gradually becoming a popular trend, especially after the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many universities have implemented online learning programs via LMSs to meet the increasing learning needs of students, especially those who want to combine work and study (Dang, 2021; Le et al., 2014; Nguyen, 2023). However, some students still have concerns about distance education because they are not familiar with the model. This form of learning or concerns about the quality of training or lack of it compared to the direct learning form (Dao & Duong, 2021).

It can be seen that although distance education has become a popular choice, there are still many questions about students' reflections on this learning method. Therefore, this study is conducted to clarify reflections from English majors before and after their distance education course. Understanding these factors will not only improve the quality of distance education training but also help educational institutions design programs that are suitable for the needs and desires of learners, thereby optimizing the distance learning experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Distance Education

Recent studies have explored various definitions of distance education, emphasizing its multidimensional nature and dependence on instructional technology. Tatlılıoğlu (2023) viewed that distance education was characterized by removing time and place constraints, leveraging virtual environments and web-based technologies to facilitate learning. Some stated that compared to online learning, it was a broader term and a more established and thoughtfully designed approach with an emphasis on independence and active engagement, even though both models offer flexibility and accessibility than online learning (Shenderuk & Bykonia, 2022). Umar (2023) emphasized that it involved teaching and learning without the need for in person presence, using a variety of technologies for communication and interaction. It has evolved to include various types and tools, with synchronous and asynchronous learning being the primary approaches (Hadji-Nikolova et al., 2022). Synchronous learning involved real-time interaction, fostering engagement but potentially facing scheduling and technical issues. Asynchronous learning allowed flexible, self-paced study but may lack community engagement (Chen et al., 2020). Other formats included video conferencing, online courses with open or fixed schedules, and hybrid learning. According to Koi-Akrofi et al. (2020), it could utilize various media, including print, audio, and video, in addition to online platforms. Popular platforms like Moodle, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet supported these learning modes (Hadji-Nikolova et al., 2022). Epidemics, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, have further accelerated the adoption of distance education methods, highlighting their advantages and potential for integration with traditional face-to-face education (Tatlılıoğlu, 2023). Based on the definitions from previous literature, the researchers agreed that distance education was a flexible learning method. The variety of formats and delivery methods in distance education not only positioned it as an alternative to traditional education but also highlighted its potential to significantly enhance the overall learning experience.

2.2. LMS in Distance Education

Prior studies have showed that LMSs were widely recognized as software solutions that streamline educational processes by providing a structured environment for course organization

and learner interaction. They functioned as web-based platforms supporting curriculum design, course delivery, administration, performance tracking, while also enhancing student engagement (Draeger & Winckelmann, 2020; Sarwadi et al., 2025; Tran, 2021). They allowed instructors to create and structure courses, upload a variety of materials such as text, audio, video and interactive content and support communication through discussion boards, messaging tools and assignment feedback. These features enabled learners to access content flexibly and enhance opportunities for interaction between students and instructors in different geographic locations (Sharma et al., 2023). However, LMSs still had some limitations. Despite having progress management tools and communication support, LMSs could not replace face-to-face interaction, leading to slow feedback and a sense of isolation for learners in distance education environments (Abdelaziz, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to understand how students experience learning on LMSs in order to improve the quality of online education.

2.3. Benefits and Challenges of Distance Education

Recent studies highlighted both benefits and challenges of distance education in higher education. Agormedah et al. (2020) noted that distance learning offered unprecedented opportunities for widening access to education, especially for marginalized populations. They asserted that distance education could enhance access to higher education in Africa, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals. Rodriguez-Ayala and Ayala-Tigmasi (2023) supported this notion that distance learning democratized access to education, especially for those in rural areas or with physical limitations. Another key advantage of distance education was the reduction of expenses associated with traditional learning environments (Mahasneh et al., 2021). They highlighted how students financially benefited from online education by saving costs related to commuting and physical materials. This is facilitated by LMS tools that enable instructors to design and structure courses, organize materials and deliver content effectively, thereby making education more accessible (Draeger & Winckelmann, 2020). The convenience and flexibility of studying were also regarded as major benefits of this learning approach. Students appreciated the ability to study at their chosen time and location, accommodating work and life commitments (da Silva et al., 2022; Turan et al., 2022). Thanks to the interactive features of LMS platforms such as discussion forums, assignment feedback, messaging tools (Draeger & Winckelmann, 2020), the flexibility inherent in distance education allowed students to connect with peers and faculty from diverse geographic backgrounds, fostering a rich exchange of ideas (Santana de Oliveira et al., 2018). This connectivity was especially beneficial for underrepresented groups, as it could help bridge gaps in access to educational resources and support networks. This was strongly supported by da Silva et al. (2022), who argued that distant learning was particularly advantageous for those living far from educational institutions or those with busy schedules, as it promoted autonomy and self-regulated effort among students (Turan et al., 2022). Last but not least important is the enhanced ability of students to utilize computers and the internet effectively. Research indicated that the transition to synchronous distance education has compelled students to engage actively with digital platforms, improving their computer literacy and internet navigation skills (Lee et al., 2021).

However, challenges existed, including potential feelings of isolation and difficulties in obtaining immediate answers to questions (da Silva et al., 2022; Kravchyna, 2021). This was reinforced by Abdelaziz (2022) who found that despite benefits like convenience and flexibility, students reported feeling isolated, lacking self-motivation, and struggling to get timely help from instructors. In addition, in distance education, students also faced significant challenges, particularly related to workload and learning materials. Masrek and Baharuddin (2023) pointed out that students experienced information overload from excessive course materials, constant

notifications, and technological challenges, including familiarizing themselves with the features of LMS, leading to stress and anxiety. Those views closely aligned with Osei's findings (2010), which indicated that students were concerned about the excessive workload in distance learning. Ul Hassan and Iqbal (2024) supported this viewpoint, noting that students struggled with understanding and processing paperless assignments, developing ICT skills, and receiving timely, descriptive feedback from instructors. The difficulty in understanding instructional objectives was also a persistent problem in distance learning as discussed by Kusmaryono et al. (2021). Besides, Romero (2011) further emphasized that students were also confronted with balancing work commitments, family responsibilities, and adapting to online study methods. Despite challenges, distance education had potential to compensate for pandemic-related limitations, and it was predicted to become increasingly prevalent in education (Kusmaryono et al., 2021).

2.3. Previous Related Studies

To date, reflection in distance education has been studied from various perspectives, including student perceptions, learning experiences, satisfaction, reflections, and methods for improving instruction. Many studies have examined students' initial perceptions of distance education, helping to identify learning motivations and factors influencing their decision to take online courses. Osei (2010) implemented a study on student perceptions of the use of distance education in an Executive Master of Business program in Ghana. Using a survey method, the research team collected data from 691 students using a 20-question questionnaire to assess learner attitudes and satisfaction. The results of the study showed that distance education was favored by older students (over 30 years old) and married students, because it helped them balance work and study. However, there were still some challenges such as slow feedback from lecturers, lack of learning support facilities, and learning materials that were not really easy to understand. Another study on student perceptions of distance education in a multinational context done by Fidalgo et al. (2020). Using a survey approach, the research team collected data from university students in Portugal, the UAE, and Ukraine to assess their attitudes, perceptions, and willingness to engage in distance education. The results of the study indicated that students' main concerns regarding distance education included time management, motivation to learn, and English language skills, but many students still expressed interest in taking online courses. Åkerfeldt et al. (2023) also surveyed 78 teachers from five distance education institutions to explore adult learners' perceptions. They found that teacher accessibility and course structure improved social presence and satisfaction, though fostering peer connections remained challenging.

Other studies have focused on student responses or reflections to online teaching methods, providing data on how instructors and course content influenced learning quality. Faltynkova et al. (2021) surveyed 272 students at secondary and higher education institutions, using an 18-item questionnaire to assess factors such as initial communication, learning content acquisition, teaching methods and final student feedback. The results of the study showed that factors such as teacher-student interaction, content delivery, and the level of learning support have a great influence on the quality of online teaching. Simonova et al. (2021) gathered responses from 272 secondary and higher education students to explore their experiences with online learning - its pros, cons, and suggestions for improvement. Using eight open-ended questions, they found key issues like poor teacher training for online platforms, time management struggles, and weak technical support. The study also highlighted the need to better equip students to succeed in distance education.

Regarding student satisfaction, Sahin and Shelley (2008) studied the model of satisfaction with distance education. Using structural equation modeling, the research team collected data from 195 students, focusing on factors such as computer skills, flexibility, usefulness, and satisfaction. The results showed that students who were skilled in using online tools and perceived the flexibility and usefulness of online learning were more satisfied, thereby increasing their participation, learning, and success in this environment. Keane et al. (2022) also highlighted the importance of digital technology in sustaining flexibility and ongoing education, noting that many students valued online learning and preferred blended models to enhance their experience. Similarly, Turan et al. (2022) emphasized that flexibility and learner autonomy were critical predictors of satisfaction, indicating that satisfaction depended not only on technological support but also on students' ability to manage their own learning.

2.4. Reflection Models

Regarding reflection models, there have been a few typical ones as follows:

Schön (1983)'s concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action described how individuals reflect during and after an activity, respectively. These ideas, especially relevant to practical skills education, have greatly influenced professional practice and learning (as cited in Ferry & Ross-Gordon, 1998).

Dewey (1933) saw reflection as a way for learners to deepen understanding through active, critical thinking (as cited in Rodgers, 2002). Building on his work, Rodgers (2002) defined reflection as a structured, meaning-making process that links experiences and promotes learning. She emphasized it requires open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness, and added two key traits: curiosity and a desire for growth. Their shared goal was to foster learner autonomy and use reflection to activate prior knowledge - especially useful in developing language skills. Rodgers also outlined phases of reflection, including presence, description, analysis, and experimentation, valuable in teacher development to enhance focus on student learning. Presence involves deep observation and focus, while description recorded events objectively. Analysis examines causes and effects, leading to experimentation, where teachers apply insights to refine their methods and enhance student learning.

Meanwhile, Gibbs (1988) developed a six-step reflective cycle to help learners analyze and learn from their experiences: Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle is a widely used six-step model for analyzing and learning from experiences. This cycle included description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action planning (as cited in Hashim et al., 2023):

(1) Description focuses on objectively presenting the event, (2) Feelings helps identify personal reactions before, during, and after the situation. (3) Evaluation considers positive and negative factors, (4) Analysis seeks to understand the causes, linking to theory for deeper understanding. (5) Conclusion summarizes lessons learned, and (6) Action suggests ways to improve in the future.

Although the above models can be applied to reflective research, each model has its own approach, Gibbs' was chosen as the theoretical framework for this current research scope because of its systematicity, ease of implementation in the form of a survey, and suitability for evaluating distance education experiences at each stage. Due to time constraints, this study only adapted Gibbs' model at the initial stage, mainly focusing on factors such as reasons for enrolling in distance education, initial expectations, experience evaluation, and analysis of influencing factors, but did not go into a detailed description of a specific learning experience and comprehensively exploit personal emotions.

In recent times, some studies have applied Gibbs' Reflective Cycle in the field of education. Ahmadpour et al. (2025) used a quasi-experimental design to study the impact of Gibbs-based narrative writing on 80 nursing students. Results showed significant improvements in both empathy and communication skills after the intervention. Nurlatifah et al. (2023) conducted a study on the application of reflective assessment based on the Gibbs reflection cycle to assess students' writing skills. Using an experimental design, the research team surveyed 28 EFL students from a secondary school in Bandung and used a pre- and post-test along with a questionnaire to collect students' perspectives on reflective assessment. The results of the study showed that the Gibbs cycle was effectively applied in reflective assessment, helping students improve their writing and reflective thinking skills.

It can be seen that the Gibbs' model has been widely applied in education to enhance learning, foster reflective thinking, and improve teaching quality. However, most previous research has focused on traditional face-to-face settings, with limited exploration of its use in online learning environments. In addition, studies on distance education often emphasized either student perceptions or isolated reflections, rather than providing a comprehensive view of learners' experiences. This separation limits the ability to deeply understand how students emotionally and cognitively engage with online learning. Furthermore, prior studies relied heavily on quantitative methods, which may overlook the depth and complexity of students' personal experiences. Therefore, this study is urgent because adapting the Gibbs' to distance education would help clarify students' reflections, including their perceptions on this form of learning. Based on the students' reflections, the study could propose practical solutions to improve the quality of online teaching. From the above research objectives, the following research question need to be addressed: How do students' reflections change before and after taking a distance learning course?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Site

This study was conducted at a public university in Hanoi, where a distance learning program has been in effect since 2022. The courses have been structured into units with video lectures, practice tasks and mini-tests between units to help students apply their knowledge and keep track of their progress. It is noted that during the course, students were allowed to access the learning materials available on the LMS platform, attend three synchronous sessions with the lecturer and use the HD72 forum for support and discussion. The program is currently running smoothly, with Intake 19 being the third cohort and enrolling 89 students, surpassing the numbers of the previous two intakes. This study examined how English major students from Intake 19 reflect on the program and their overall learning experiences. The findings aim to provide valuable insights for proposing enhancements to improve the quality of training in the future.

3.2. Research Methods and Participants

This study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), integrating qualitative data analysis, including thematic analysis, with quantitative approaches enriches the understanding of complex research issues, providing deeper insights into the topics under discussion. The triangulation within this methodology allows researchers to overcome the inherent limitations of each method, leading to more robust and well-founded conclusions.

Intake 19 consists of a total of 89 students; however, when the online survey link was

sent out, the researcher received only 58 responses. Therefore, the official number of participants in this study is 58 including 23 males and 35 females. The participants' ages range from 19 to 48. They are from diverse backgrounds, having graduated from various universities and colleges in different fields, all aiming to obtain a bachelor's degree in English after approximately two years of training. They all completed Listening and Speaking 2 course.

To enhance the reliability of the research findings, the researcher also invited 20 out of the 58 respondents in semi-structured focus group interviews. To maintain research ethics, all participants are involved voluntarily, with their privacy and anonymity safeguarded. The data collection and analysis processes are conducted objectively, ensuring that no influence is exerted on the participants.

3.3. Research Tools and Procedure

3.3.1. A Survey Questionnaire

The researcher designed a survey questionnaire adapted from Osei (2010) and Simonova et al. (2021) based on Gibbs' model for several compelling reasons. First, the studies shared the common goal of understanding learners' perceptions and reflections on distance education. Second, Gibbs' 6-step reflective cycle was chosen as the theoretical framework because it is systematic, easy to implement in the form of a survey, and suitable for assessing distance education experiences at each stage. From the perspective of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, this survey is designed with two main parts: students' personal information and students' reflections, including the following stages:

- Description & Feelings: Combining multiple choice questions (MCQs) to determine the reasons for choosing distance learning and the learning format, along with assessing learners' expectations on a 5-level Likert scale regarding self-learning ability, interaction with lecturers, learning materials, etc. This section helps to explore learners' motivation to participate, initial understanding of distance education and their perceptions before the actual experience.

- Evaluation of experience: Learners reflect on the actual experience, including time management ability, support from lecturers and quality of learning materials.

- Analysis: Identifying factors that influence the learning experience, also assessed on a 5-point Likert scale

- Conclusion & Action: Including open-ended questions that allow learners to reflect on lessons learned from the distance education course and suggest ways to adjust their learning habits and improve the program in the future.

3.3.2. Semi-structured Focus Group Interviews

After collecting the results from the survey questionnaire, the researcher deliberately selected 20 out of 58 students who provided contact information and agreed to participate in the interview. The selection criteria for interviewing students included: students from different majors, students with vague answers, students who provided rich and detailed answers, and students whose answers were consistent or different from the majority. These criteria were intended to maximize the amount of information collected and ensure that the views and opinions fully reflected the aspects of the research problem. This approach is consistent with the method of selecting interview participants in qualitative research, where diversity and depth of information are important (Subedi, 2021). These students were divided into five groups of four based on the participants' availability. The primary purpose of the interviews was to compare and validate the responses provided in the survey, as well as to gather additional

insights into students' reflections on distance education.

Semi-structured interviews are a valuable qualitative research method that offers flexibility and depth in data collection. They allowed the researcher to explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences in detail, adjusting questions based on responses. This approach creates a comfortable environment for participants to share openly (Thille et al., 2021). Therefore, the interview questions in the current study were semi-structured, based on the content of the survey, and included 10 questions assessing students' reflections on the distance education course. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 45 minutes and was scheduled at a time that was convenient for the participating students. All interviews were recorded to facilitate comprehensive data analysis. After transcribing the interviews, the data were analyzed using an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data without being constrained by a pre-existing theoretical framework. The coding process was carried out in the following steps: repeated reading, identifying initial codes, grouping codes into themes, and reviewing for consistency. To ensure the privacy of the participants, the researcher coded the identities of the 20 students, designating them from S#1 to S#20.

3.3.3. Data Processing and Analysis

Data collected from the survey questionnaire and interviews were separately analyzed. SPSS version 20.0, a widely recognized statistical software (Rahman & Muktadir, 2021), was used to analyze the data collected from the survey questionnaire. The responses from the questionnaire were compiled and presented in the form of tables and graphs to facilitate effective comparison and analysis. The data collected from the interviews were processed using qualitative interpretive methods, focusing on identifying key themes from the participants' responses. The interview transcripts were converted into text, which were then coded according to relevant themes to find common trends.

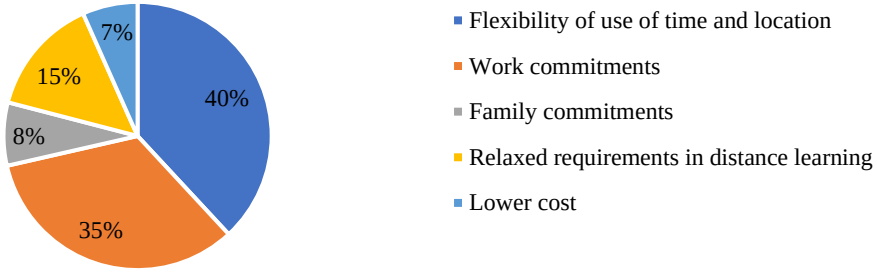
After independent analysis, the data will be aggregated and compared based on two main themes: (i) students' reflections before taking a distance education course and (ii) their reflections after completing the course. To ensure consistency of the research results, the data collected from the research instruments were cross-validated by comparing themes and responses between the survey and the interviews. The interview responses were examined with the survey results to identify similarities, clarify differences and capture insights that were not evident in the survey data. Beyond triangulation, the interview findings added depth to the quantitative data by explaining why students were satisfied or faced difficulties during distance learning.

4. Results

Data from Figure 1 show that 40% of respondents chose this form because of its flexibility, helping them balance between studying and working. As one student shared: *"I work full-time, so studying online gives me the flexibility to arrange my study time*." (S#5). 35% of students enrolled due to work commitments, most of whom were working people who wanted to improve their qualifications without affecting their careers. Some students admitted: "*With a busy work schedule, studying online helps me continue to improve my knowledge*" (S# 15), "*I need to achieve the required foreign language level to complete the PhD training program*" (S#1).

Figure 1

Reasons for Enrolling in a Distance Education Course



Another reason that 15% of students chose was because the entry requirements were less stringent, creating favorable conditions for admission. S#1 said: *"The class participation requirements are less stringent than traditional courses, which gives me more autonomy."* In addition, family commitments and lower costs accounted for 8% and 7%, respectively. S#6 said: "*I have to take care of my young child; online learning helps me balance my studies and family*." S#14 added: "*Distance learning helps me save a lot of money, just need a laptop and internet connection.*" Several other students also emphasized that this form helped them maintain a balance between personal life and study, avoiding the pressure of having to travel to a live class. (S#9, S#12)

Overall, data from the survey questionnaire and student semi-interviews showed that flexibility, work, and entry requirements are the main reasons why students chose distance learning. Actual reflections from students also emphasizes that this form of learning meets the increasing needs of learners in the modern context.

4.1. Students' Expectations Before the Distance Education Course

As can be seen from Table 1, working at own pace is rated the highest (mean 4.58, SD 0.64), reflecting those students highly value flexibility in learning. They want to be able to actively adjust their schedules without being bound by fixed times. The expectation level for interaction with lecturers and classmates is also quite high (mean 4.42, SD 0.81), but the larger standard deviation indicates that there is a difference in expectations among students. This implies that some want to communicate frequently with lecturers and classmates, while others need less interaction. Regarding guidance and support from lecturers, the expectation level reached mean 4.36, SD 0.77, reflecting a relative consensus among students on the importance of this factor. They want to receive quick support when they encounter difficulties in learning. Other factors such as time management (mean 4.18) and access to online learning resources (mean 4.04) were also rated highly, indicating that students expected to have good control over their study schedule and easy access to course materials.

Table 1

Students' Expectations Before the Distance Education Course

Expectation Factor	Mean	SD
Working at own pace	4.58	0.64
Receiving guidance and support from instructors	4.36	0.77
Managing study time	4.18	0.72
Access to online learning resources	4.05	0.68
Clear, easy-to-understand learning materials	4.04	0.62

Overall, the data showed that students' initial perceptions of distance education were quite positive, with expectations focusing on flexibility, self-learning ability, and quality of teaching support. These results provide important insights into students' expectations before taking the course, helping to guide improvements to the training program to better meet the needs of learners.

Table 2

Students' Post-Course Evaluation on the Distance Education

Evaluation Factor	Initial Expectation (Mean, SD)	Post-Course Reflection (Mean, SD)	Comparison
Self-paced learning	4.58 (0.64)	4.56 (0.61)	Consistent
Interaction with instructors and peers	4.42 (0.81)	3.88 (0.79)	Decreased
Relevant guidance and immediate support from instructors	4.36 (0.77)	3.72 (0.84)	Decreased
Time management in learning	4.21 (0.73)	4.12 (0.74)	Slightly decreased
Access to learning resources	4.12 (0.68)	4.25 (0.75)	Slightly increased
Clear and easy-to-understand learning materials	4.04 (0.62)	3.92 (0.64)	Slightly decreased
Increased Computer skills	—	4.42 (0.65)	—
Satisfaction and program recommendation	—	4.05 (1.00)	—

According to the survey data from Table 2, the majority of students who participated in the survey had positive assessments of some aspects of distance education, with the mean score (Mean) ranging from 3.72 to 4.56. However, the level of diversity in responses is represented by the standard deviation (SD) value, ranging from 0.61 to 1.00, reflecting the differences in experiences between students for each factor.

Comparing the interview findings, some post-course reflections align with students' initial expectations, while others reveal areas where their expectations were not fully met. In specific, self-paced learning is maintained stable (Mean 4.58 → 4.56, SD 0.61). This suggests a consistency between expectations and reality, which is reinforced by interview responses, where some students reported feeling more proactive in their learning, rather than relying on their lecturers or classmates as before (S#3, S#8, S#17). The low SD values also demonstrate strong student agreement on this benefit.

In contrast, there was a significant difference in interactions with lecturers and classmates (Mean 4.42 → 3.88), reflecting that the actual experience did not fully meet expectations. This finding aligns with interview responses, where a few students shared that they felt disconnected, for example, one student said: "*When I don't have the opportunity to discuss with my classmates or lecturers, I feel a bit lost and unmotivated*" (S#16). The SD value of 0.79 shows that there is a large variation among students - some still had a good interaction experience, while others found it difficult to communicate in the online learning environment. Similarly, relevant guidance and immediate support from instructors also decreased (Mean 4.36 → 3.72), reflecting that many students felt that the support was not really adequate. This difference is also reinforced by the interview data. Students shared that the response time from instructors was quite slow, which affected the learning process (S#2, S#7, S#20). The SD value of 0.84 implies that there is a large dispersion in the response, meaning that some students have a positive experience, while others have difficulty. Time management in learning and clear and

easy-to-understand learning materials decreased slightly (Mean 4.21 → 4.12, SD 0.74; mean 4.04 → 3.92, SD 0.64) respectively.

Interview data further clarify this issue, as students expressed challenges in self-regulated learning. One student shared "*Although I have made an effort to be more proactive in my studies, I sometimes struggle to maintain a consistent study schedule without the guidance of a lecturer*." (S#19). Similarly, another student noted, "*The materials contain a lot of useful information, but when studying independently, I often find certain concepts unclear, which makes it harder to fully grasp the content*." (S#6). Regarding improved computer skills with Mean 4.42, SD 0.65 showed that the majority of students were confident in their ability to use technology for their studies. This was consistent with interview responses, where many students stated that they were familiar with online learning platforms before taking the course, which made it easier for them to adapt (S#1, S#4, S#6, S#10, S#11). In terms of overall satisfaction and likelihood to recommend the program, the mean score (Mean 4.05, SD 1.00) indicates that the majority of students had a positive opinion of the course, but the highest SD value (1.00) reflects a wide range of responses—some students were very satisfied, while others had expectations that were not fully met. One student commented "*The program has many strengths, but I would like to see some improvement in the level of engagement*" (S#8).

Overall, the survey questionnaire and interview data showed some consistency in some areas such as the ability to work at one's own pace and computer skills, but there were clear differences in expectations and reality regarding interactions with instructors and peers, as well as support from instructors. To improve the learning experience, mechanisms for connecting students and instructors, as well as more effective learning support measures in a distance education environment, may be needed.

4.2. Analysis of Influencing Factors on Students' Distant Learning

Although students responded positively to flexibility and technology skills, they still encountered some challenges during distant learning, especially related to workload, motivation, and delays in feedback from instructors. Interviews revealed that heavy online assignment workload was one of the factors that most affected students. One student said: "*There are a lot of online tasks, sometimes I feel overwhelmed and don't know where to start*" (S#11).

Table 3

Influencing Factors on Students' Distant Learning

Influencing Factors	Mean	SD
High online assignment workload	4.25	0.79
Learning motivation	4.05	0.75
Delayed lecturer feedback	3.95	0.86
Difficulty in managing study time	4.12	0.74
Challenges in interacting with lecturers and peers	3.92	0.81

In addition, balancing study time with personal work was a major challenge, with the mean of this factor reaching 4.12. One student shared: "*I have a full-time job, so sometimes it is difficult to find time to study and complete assignments on time*" (S#14).

Finally, both the survey and interviews revealed that motivation to study had a significant impact on students' learning experiences. One student said, "*Because I study alone, sometimes I lose motivation and don't know if I'm on the right track*" (S#7). "One significant factor affecting their learning motivation is the pressure from work and family responsibilities, as shared by the majority of students.

4.3. Students' Lessons and Recommendations

Data from the survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews show that students learned many lessons from their online learning experiences, especially in two aspects: self-regulated learning and developing critical thinking. (S#1, S#3, S#6, S#9). Based on their learning experiences, many students said they would improve their time management skills, find ways to maintain their learning motivation, and be more proactive in interacting with instructors and classmates. One student said: "*After this course, I understand that I need to plan my studies more closely, otherwise it is easy to procrastinate*" (S#7). In addition, students also suggested that instructors should provide more timely feedback, as this is a factor that significantly affects the quality of learning. One student suggested: *"AI chatbots can be integrated into the online support system, helping students receive feedback quickly*". In terms of the program, some students also suggested that there should be synchronous live classes with teachers to increase interaction, helping students share, discuss, and have their questions answered promptly. (S#5, S#10, S#13). Overall, survey and interview data show that distance education offers many benefits in terms of flexibility, self-learning ability, and technology skills development, but there are still challenges related to large workloads, motivation, delays in feedback from lecturers, and interactivity. To improve learning efficiency, students need to have better time management strategies, while distance learning programs need to develop more effective support and interaction mechanisms.

5. Discussions

5.1. Students' Reflections Before the Distance Education Course

The collected data from the survey questionnaire and student interviews show that students have high expectations for distance education, in terms of flexibility, self-paced learning, and support from lecturers. The factors that were rated highest before the course were learning at their own pace (mean 4.58, SD 0.64), interacting with instructors and peers (mean 4.42, SD 0.81), and immediate guidance and support from lecturers (mean 4.36, SD 0.77). This reflects those students are aware of the core benefits of distance education, especially the ability to personalize learning according to their needs.

These findings are consistent with the research of Fidalgo et al. (2020), where students in many countries also emphasized the importance of time management and motivation in online environments. However, this study adds the perspective that lecturer interaction and support are also decisive factors for the learning experience, which is related to the results of Åkerfeldt et al. (2023) when the research team found that course structure and access to lecturers significantly influenced learner satisfaction.

It is noteworthy that expectations for lecturer support and interaction levels were somewhat higher than what was met. This raises the need to improve support mechanisms and teaching methods in distance education environments to better match students' perceptions of learning quality.

5.2. Students' Reflections After Taking the Distance Education Course

After the practical experience, the students had specific reflections on the positive and negative aspects of distance education. Factors that remained highly satisfactory included learning at one's own pace (mean 4.56, SD 0.61), access to online learning resources (mean 4.05, SD 0.75), and improving computer skills (mean 4.42, SD 0.65), indicating that students still perceived the benefits of this flexible learning format. However, the level of satisfaction with interactions with instructors and classmates reduced from 4.42 to 3.88, support from instructors

decreased from 4.36 to 3.72, and clear, easy-to-understand online learning materials fell from 4.04 to 3.92, reflecting those initial expectations were not fully met. These findings are consistent with the study by Sahin and Shelley (2008), who asserted that the flexibility of distance education increased student satisfaction. This conclusion is further supported by Turan et al. (2022), who identified flexibility as a key predictor of satisfaction, alongside students' self-regulation efforts. However, teacher-student interactions remained important to promote learning motivation. This is also in line with the study by Osei (2010), where slow feedback from instructors was identified as one of the main challenges of online education.

In addition, students' reflections on motivation for learning are linked to the study by Faltynkova et al. (2021), who emphasized that the quality of online teaching depends heavily on how instructors deliver content and support students. In the current study, students also suggested that better support mechanisms are needed, especially quick feedback from instructors and improved connections with peers.

Students appreciated the learning materials but still had difficulty in self-learning due to the lack of clarity of the content, which supports the study of Faltynkova et al. (2021) on the role of lecturers in organizing and transmitting knowledge effectively. Students reflected that distance education improved their technological skills, helping them adapt to digital learning. This finding is consistent with the conclusion of Sahin and Shelley (2008) and is further reinforced by Keane et al. (2022), whose study highlighted the role of technology in ensuring educational continuity and supporting students' adaptation to new learning environments. Overall, these findings align with prior related studies, highlighting that although students benefit from flexibility and develop technological skills, they still face challenges in managing online assignment workload, clarity of materials, and learning support. To enhance the distance learning experience, it is necessary to optimize the workload, improve teaching materials, and strengthen support mechanisms from lecturers to ensure learning effectiveness.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided a comprehensive view of students' reflections on distance education, highlighting the differences between pre-course expectations and actual post-course experiences. The survey results showed that students had high expectations for flexibility, self-paced learning, interaction with instructor and peers, and support from lecturers. In reality, however, the level of interaction, timely support from lecturers, time management in learning and clear and easy-to-understand learning materials did not fully meet expectations. Although students recognized the initiative and development of technology skills as clear benefits of online education, they also recognized that learning motivation needed to be improved to optimize the learning experience.

The application of the Gibbs model helped students systematically reflect on the learning process, identify challenges, and propose adjustments to improve learning effectiveness. These results suggested that to improve distance education, training programs need to strengthen support mechanisms, enhance interactions between lecturers and students, and optimize workloads. This study not only confirmed some previous findings but also contributed to the expansion of the application of the Gibbs model in the context of online learning, providing new directions for the development and improvement of digital education models.

Although the study provided important insights into students' reflections on distance education, there are still some limitations that should be noted. First, the small sample size made it difficult to generalize the results to the entire online learning community, so future studies

could expand the scope of the survey. Second, as the survey was conducted at the end of the course but required students to recall their pre-course expectations, the potential risk of recall bias is acknowledged as a methodological limitation. Moreover, the study lacks long-term evaluation, focusing only on reflections immediately after the course without considering its lasting impact on learning outcomes and career development. Finally, this study does not include data from instructors or online reports from LMSs, relying primarily on students' reflections. It is suggested that incorporating these additional sources through triangulation could help ensure greater objectivity in the findings.

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APPENDIX

The following QR code provides access to the appendices: