

# “Addressing the interplay amongst university support, student experience, and university brand image at Vietnamese higher education institutions”

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# ADDRESSING THE INTERPLAY AMONGST UNIVERSITY SUPPORT, STUDENT EXPERIENCE, AND UNIVERSITY BRAND IMAGE AT VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

**Abstract**

During the last three years, the Covid-19 pandemic has made landmark changes in all aspects of the society and higher education is no exception. The current study examines the interrelationships between university support, student experience, and university brand image. The study used partial least square–structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) and Smart PLS 3.3.7 to conduct the analysis. Research data were collected by structured questionnaire with 300 students from various studying majors of 12 prominent universities across the nation. The findings firstly suggest that university support has a positive and significant impact on students' perceived support and overall student experience. Second, the student experience has a noticeable impact on the university image. In addition, the current paper also emphasizes the significant role of student experience in mediating the relationship between university brand image and student perceived support. Practically, universities have been suggested to provide more support for students, including both policies and activities, to improve student perceptions of support and experience. An outstanding student experience is critical to develop and enhance the university brand image. As a result, the findings aid higher education institutions in enhancing their competitiveness in today's dynamic educational environment.

**Keywords**

student support, student experience, university brand image, Covid-19 pandemic

**JEL Classification**

I21, I23, M14

**INTRODUCTION**

Due to the recognition that one of a company's most significant assets is its brand, branding has become a topic that has sparked increased attention recently (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Thanks to its rapid growth and crucial significance, branding makes its way from the commercial world to the educational sector. Higher education institutions gradually recognize that education is a special service sector, and they are devoting more attention to addressing the needs and expectations of their consumers – the students. With the fast-growing higher education and changes in social trends, globalization, and ever-increasing market competition, Kotler and Fox (1995) suggest that paying attention to student experience is critical to operating educational institutions sustainably.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the education business and higher education institutions. Due to the spread of the Coronavirus, traditions and customs in teaching and learning have shifted. Sudden changes have been causing many strug-

gles for students in both their daily lives and studies. As a result, to establish a polished brand image to attract new students, higher education institutions must focus on fulfilling and improving their current students' experience as all the university's activities revolve around the student experience. Many higher education institutions use student happiness to measure their progress. Keeping up with the competition in higher education necessitates improving student experience. Students' views, emotions, and behaviors are shaped by positive learning experiences, boosting their pleasure. In Vietnam's higher education system, educational institutions are now operating on a business basis, including price marketing, to promote competitiveness with limited educational resources. Value and performance should be emphasized to build a brand image and recruit more exceptional students.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several well-known higher education institutions have identified elements that improve student happiness and realize the importance of making investments as soon as feasible to improve student experience (Elliott & Shin, 2002). Various elements, including classroom interactions, faculty relationships, social contacts, and even the campus culture, were discovered to influence students' experiences (Elliott & Shin, 2002). However, Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) found a clear linkage between the overall satisfaction of students and their future retention. Umbach and Porter (2002) confirmed that departmental culture and environment substantially impact student learning quality and emotional satisfaction. Furthermore, Alzamel (2014) found that the quality of higher education environment, such as tuition, studying/researching environment, image and reputation of the universities, physical facilities, attitude and behaviors of academic staff, and university services delivery have been commonly agreed to be antecedents of student satisfaction. Since student experience impacts student decision-making, motivation, and academic success, university support is critical in educational institutions.

Given the importance of branding in today's higher education environment, Duesterhaus and Duesterhaus (2014) assert that understanding an organization's brand is critical. Casidy and Wymer (2016) argue that clearly defining a brand will provide tremendous value to universities. However, Rauschnabel et al. (2016) stated that research on university brand image has been limited due to considering education is not a service and university is not an enterprise. The aids or supports, from pastoral care to tape recorders and personalized tutoring support to a specific teaching environment, are per-

ceived student support (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009). Other definitions of "university support" place a greater emphasis on function and service. Sewart (1993) characterized student support as a "service industry," while Tait (2000) suggested that support should be defined in terms of the extent and function of its services. The support has been determined to cover three main functions: *cognitive* (supports learning), *affective* (ensures a supportive environment), and *systemic* (ensures a supportive environment). Wisker and Brown (1996) proposed that a strategic approach to student support should attempt to promote three factors: facilities, climate, and attitudes. The issue here is still more to do with the student's deficit model, but universities are still given a significant role.

The evolution of student support has been documented in several research and reports. Unfortunately, student services are rarely mentioned (Watson, 2000), despite a small section on student happiness and student input requests. Debt, discipline, employment, credit, international students, paid job and lifestyle, and the student union is some of the other topics included in the index. Other topics covered in the index include debt, discipline, employment, credit, international students, paid job and lifestyle, and student union.

Several well-designed research projects have recently provided insights into the usefulness of student support services and critical elements of a system designed to succeed for all students. Adequate support services have a comprehensive academic, social, and financial support network. University support policies refer to courses of action proposed by institutions to assist students in social and academic contexts. The goal of policymaking is to ensure that all students have access to support services for academic or non-academic issues during university studies.

In general, brand image can be considered a tool for consumers to identify products, building competitive advantages for the company by distinguishing its products from competitors' products (Panda et al., 2019). Following this definition, Chew (2006) clarified that it is the beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes, and ideas that a person has towards a person or organization. Similarly, in the educational system, a university brand image is defined as the sum of a person's feelings, truths, and the mental image of the institution (Foroudi et al., 2014). Nguyen et al. (2016) pointed out two key aspects of a university brand image: *functional* (tangible) and *emotional* (intangible). However, prospective students do not rely on tangible aspects such as infrastructure, facilities, and study costs to make university decisions, even though they can find accurate information; instead, they rely on evaluating their brand image.

According to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), experience is a person's totality of occurrences, which generally affects emotions and moods through the stimulation of products and services ingested. It is also an empathetic, emotional, and memorable interaction with intrinsic value (Ballantyne & Varey, 2008). Finally, it is an artifact of its products and services (Bolton et al., 2004). Darby and Karni (1973) defined university services into three categories: search, experience, and legitimacy (Durvasula et al., 2011). Overall, student experience is also a significant factor in determining the university's

quality (Baird & Gordon, 2009). Thus, it is critical to incorporate an emotional component into the assessment of university service.

According to Baranova et al. (2011), student experience has evolved. Learning/teaching experience comprises both the administrative and support services that students encounter during their studying period at universities. As a result, student experience encompasses both within and outside teaching and learning emotional perception and assessment at the university level (Baird & Gordon, 2009). When a brand has been built over time, the brand promotion changes the attitudes and emotions of consumers with a brand (Aaker, 1991), then gradually shapes the customer perceptions of the brand image.

## 2. AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the previous discussion, this study focused on four main objectives such as:

- 1) examining the impact of university support policies and university support activities on student perceived support;
- 2) determining the impact of university support policies and university support activities on student experience;

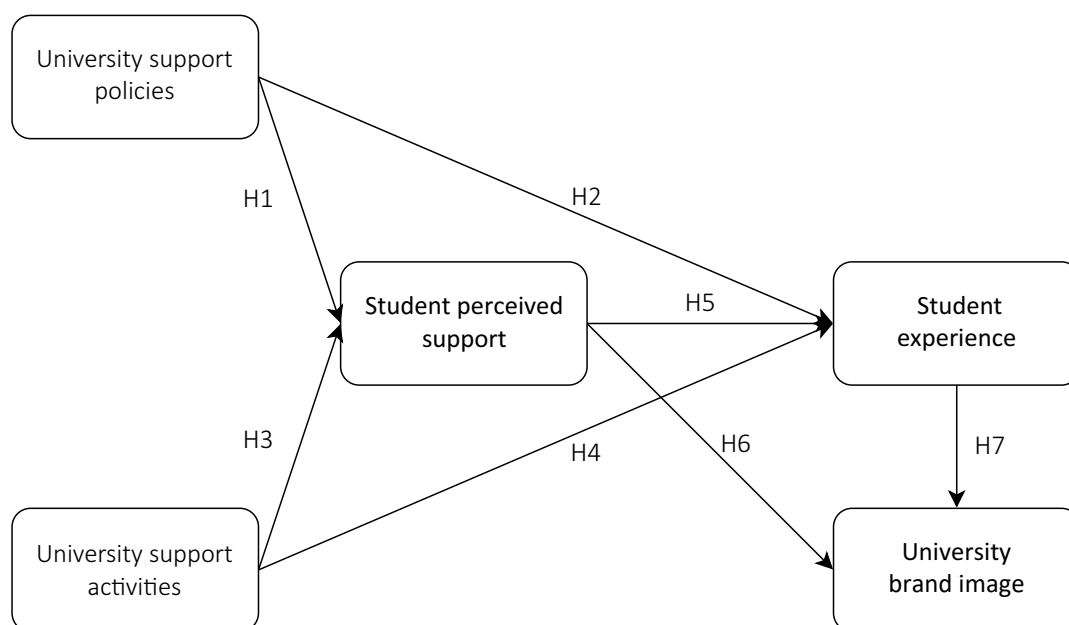


Figure 1. Proposed research model

- 3) exploring the relationships among student perceived support, student experience, and university brand image; and
- 4) proposing some practical implications for universities to enhance student experience, then finally the overall university brand image.

Based on identified objectives, the study formed the research model and the following hypotheses:

- H1: University support policy has a significant impact on student perceived support.*
- H2: University support policy has a significant impact on student experience.*
- H3: University support activities have a significant impact on student perceived support.*
- H4: University support activities have a significant impact on student experience.*
- H5: Student perceived support has a significant impact on student experience.*
- H6: Student perceived support has a significant impact on university brand image.*
- H7: Student experience has a significant impact on university brand image.*

### 3. METHODS

This study was mainly executed using the structured quantitative questionnaire in which the measurement items were adopted and developed from previously published studies. The collected data were purified to eliminate the errors and missing, then analyzed by Smart PLS 3.3.7. The survey was delivered online by google form to volunteer students of colleges and universities across the nation. Initially, a “call for volunteer form” was posted on Facebook to gather the sample for this study. Finally, 300 verified students from 12 higher education institutions, including universities and colleges, were chosen for surveying. The participants are pursuing various academic and practical majors such as Economics and Business (36.7%), Technology and Science (16.7%), Medicine and

Pharmacy (11%), Social sciences (15%), Linguistics (13.3%), and other majors (7.3%). Of the 300 surveyed students, there were 41.7% male and 58.3% female. The first-year student occupied 21%, the second year was 22.7%, 33% and 20.3% were the proportion of the third and the fourth years, respectively.

The five-point Likert scales were employed in this study. The measurement items of student experience were adopted from items introduced and validated by Chapman and Pyvis (2006), Douglas et al. (2008), Chahal and Devi (2013), Nguyen (2021). The scale of the university brand image was developed by combining the scales of Šerić et al. (2014) and Foroudi et al. (2017). The scales developed by Henderson and Argyle (1985), Eisenberger et al. (2002) were revised and used to construct the student support policies, student support activities, and student’s perceived support (Appendix A).

### 4. RESULTS

The measurement model was evaluated by examining the validity and reliability of multi-items by assessing the values of Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability, extracted average variance, and outer loadings. According to Hair et al. (2014), the convergent validity is appropriate when the outer loading exceeds .70. Both the Composite reliability and Cronbach’s alpha would be acceptable for internal consistency with a value between .60 and .70, and good reliability with a value between .70 and .90. Fornell and Larcker (1981) stated that validity and reality carry conviction if the extracted average variance for each latent variable exceeds .50.

The analysis results show that four items of SE1, SE2, USA4, and USA6 were removed from measurement scales as their outer loadings values were less than 0.70. There were 20 items of five constructs having outer loading values of greater than .70, and the AVE values of these constructs were higher than .5. Cronbach’s alpha values ranged from .779 to .853, and Composite reliability values ranged from .858 to .899. Hence, these constructs satisfied the excellent reliability (Table 1).

The Fornell-Lacker criterion and the Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) of correlation are nor-

**Table 1.** Internal consistency reliability and convergent validity

Constructs	Measurement item	Factor loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Student experience	SE (4 items)	.758-.824	.805	.873	.632
Student perceived support	SPS (3 items)	.803-.888	.789	.877	.704
University brand image	UBI (4 items)	.802-.869	.853	.899	.691
University support activities	USA (5 items)	.710-.827	.845	.890	.619
University support policies	USP (4 items)	.723-.812	.779	.858	.601

mally used to assess discriminant validity. The square root of each construct's AVE should have a better value than the correlations with other latent constructs. If the HTMT is more remarkable than 0.850, discriminant validity is lacking (Kline, 2011). Results in Table 2 indicated that the square root of all variables surpasses the corresponding correlations in the relevant columns and rows, with all HTMT values less than 0.850, which proved that the whole constructs meet the discriminant validity requirement.

**Table 2.** Discriminant validity

Constructs	SE	SPS	UBI	USA	USP
SE	.795	–	–	–	–
SPS	.640	.839	–	–	–
UBI	.704	.543	.831	–	–
USA	.694	.720	.500	.787	–
USP	.682	.661	.540	.740	.776

The Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were used to examine multicollinearity in this study. Hair et al. (2014) stated that multicollinearity does not occur when the VIF value is less than 5. According to the analysis results, USP2 has the smallest VIF value of 1.40, USP3 has the most significant VIF value of 2.14, and all the variables have VIF values much lower than 5, which represent no critical collinearity issue.

The structural model was evaluated by examining seven causal relationships created amongst five observed variables. The coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup> values) and the endogenous latent variables' path coefficient (values) determine the structural model's plausible explanation in PLS-SEM analysis. This study ensures statistical significance by using p-values and standard errors from a bootstrapping process with 5000 subsamples; this study ensures statistical significance. R<sup>2</sup> values of .25, .5, and .75, respectively, suggest weak, medium, and robust endogenous structures (Hair et al., 2014). The R<sup>2</sup> number also indicates how much of a dependent variable was accounted for by inde-

pendent variables. When the dependent variables vary, the path coefficient (values) reveals the degree of variation in the independent variable.

Furthermore, distinct scale levels of influence are measured by *f*<sup>2</sup> values of .02, .15, and .35, corresponding to tiny, medium, and significant effects. Additionally, for assessing the predictive relevance (Q<sup>2</sup>) (Hair et al., 2014), blindfolding, a sample reuse approach that omits every *d*<sup>th</sup> data point in the indicators of the endogenous components, was advised. Moreover, SRMR value should be employed for the reasonableness of model fit. If the Q<sup>2</sup> value is more significant than 0 (Akter et al., 2011) and the SRMR value is less than .10, the predictive relevance is established, indicating that the model fit is acceptable.

Table 3 shows that the student experience is roughly 56.4 percent through university support policy, student perceived support, and university support activities, with an R<sup>2</sup> value of .564. In contrast, university support policy and university support activities explained 55.5 percent of the variance in student perceived support (R<sup>2</sup> = .555). The R<sup>2</sup> of a university brand is .510, which suggests that student experience and student perceived support account for 51.0 percent of the institution's brand. All Q<sup>2</sup> values of .348, .383, and .335 are more than zero, indicating that student experience, student perceived support, and university brand image are relevant, and the good model fit as the SRMR value was .078.

**Table 3.** R<sup>2</sup>, Q<sup>2</sup>, and SMRM

Constructs	R <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>	SMRM
Student experience	.564	.348	.078
Student perceived support	.555	.383	
University brand image	.510	.335	

Table 4 shows that the student experience substantially impacts the university's brand image (*f*<sup>2</sup> = .440) and that university support activities have a medium to large impact on student perceptions

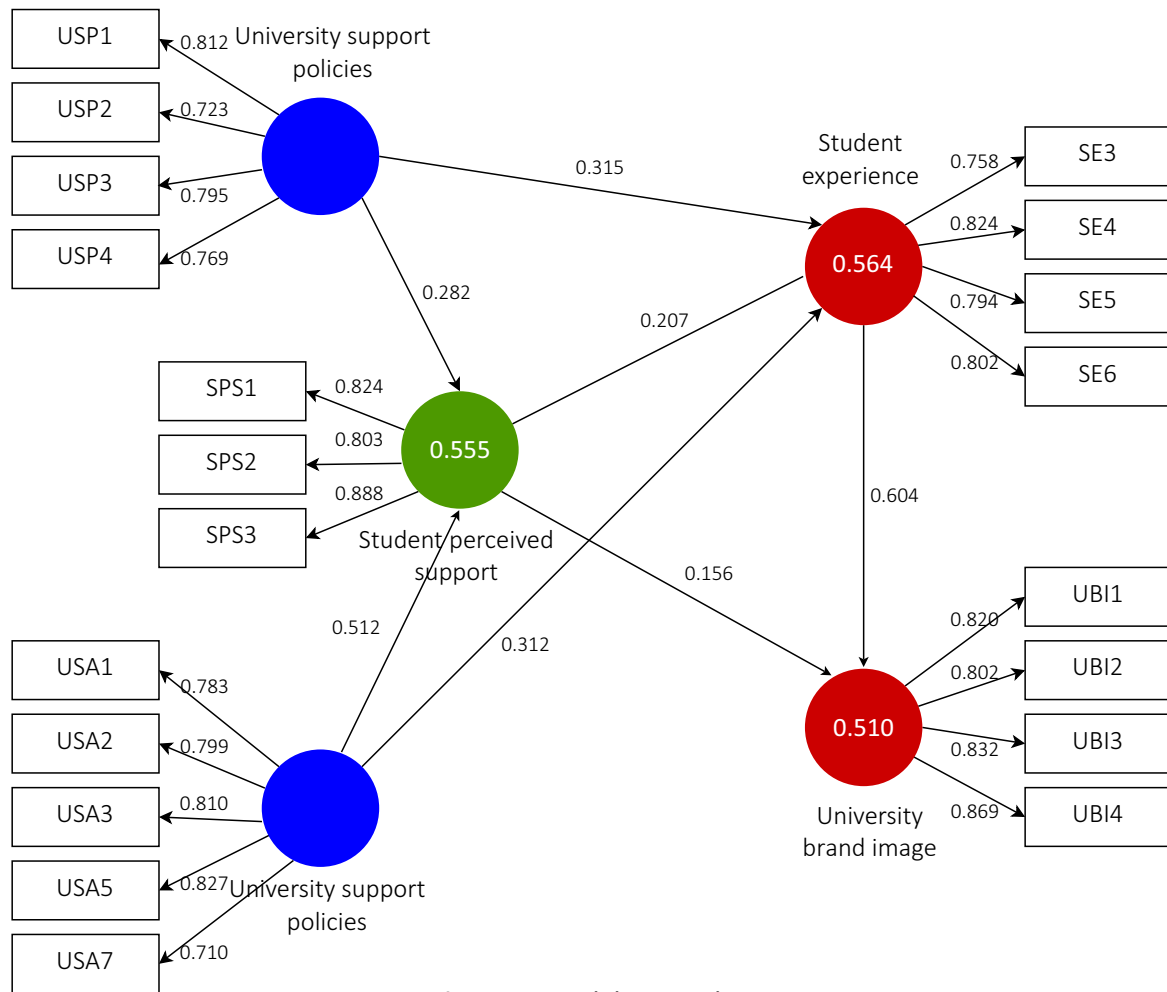


Figure 2. Modeling results

of organizational assistance ( $f^2 = 0.267$ ). Other relationships have  $f^2$  values ranging from .029 to .095, which has a minor impact but is still a good association compared to the ones mentioned earlier. The study also checked the path coefficients to understand the magnitude of change in the dependent variable as a function of each independent variable, in the first step of assessing structural models, as suggested by Gronemus et al. (2010). Table 5 demonstrates that all p-values were less than .050 and  $\beta$  values were greater than .100, in-

dicating that all independent factors have significant effects on the dependent variable. Therefore, all seven hypotheses were accepted. The study also revealed that the linkages had a strong correlation and a beneficial effect.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings have theoretically contributed to existed theories about branding and the relationship between branding and other factors in universities.

Table 4. Hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses	Path	$\beta$	t	$f^2$	p-value	Decision
H1	SE → UBI	.604	9.904	.440	.000	Accepted
H2	SPS → SE	.207	2.922	.044	.003	Accepted
H3	SPS → UBI	.156	2.668	.029	.008	Accepted
H4	USA → SE	.312	3.529	.080	.000	Accepted
H5	USA → SPS	.512	7.935	.267	.000	Accepted
H6	USP → SE	.315	4.237	.095	.000	Accepted
H7	USP → SPS	.282	4.210	.081	.000	Accepted

While there are currently very few studies on the relationship between university support and student experience, this study has shown and clarified the interrelationship between university support, student experience, and the university brand image.

This study indicates that university support significantly influences the student experience and student perceived support. Student experience is one of the factors that positively and significantly affect university brand image. The study highlights the crucial mediating role of the student experience in enhancing the brand image of higher educational institutions. The results of this study support the argument raised by Elliott and Shin (2002). The student experience is influenced by in-class interactions, relationships with academic staff, positive emotional perceptions, and social interactions.

Moreover, fitting in with the campus culture endorsed by Alzamel (2014) and Raina et al. (2013), in which the training quality, the tuition, the learning environment, the image of the institute, the facilities, staffing service evaluation, and student satisfaction are vital. Students come to university to get specialized knowledge and find an environment to practice and develop themselves. They expect the university to be able to create that environment through its policies. Just-in-time help is always appreciated and loved, making the student experience even better. Especially during the current Covid-19 pandemic, when the traditional education method is replaced, this causes many difficulties for students to learn and develop skills. Hence, university support is more meaningful to students than ever. Besides, by supporting students, the university indirectly affects the building university brand image. When the student experience is optimized, they will be satisfied with the university and reciprocate it. Therefore, the relationship between university support, student experience, and university brand image is more potent.

In terms of managerial implication, the paper recognized the critical role of both university support policies and university support activities on overall experience of students. Providing the necessary support for student learning and development will positively affect the student experience. Therefore, an institution needs to study and regularly update to have the appropriate support for students in different times and circumstances. Moreover, it should update students' feedback to improve its services. Besides, since student experience has a significant impact on the university brand image, higher educational institutions should also encourage students to share their feelings to improve the service and, on the one hand, consider it is branding for the university.

The paper also makes five implications for universities based on the research results. First, institutions should have multi-faceted support for students to create a fair, quality, and flexible educational environment. When students have feedback and contributions, they need to have a reasonable and flexible processing mechanism, strengthening the student experience. Second, by listening to students to provide good services and experiences, the university will increase its competitive position in the market. Third, the university's communication department should collect students' opinions regularly or actively survey students' needs to detect shortcomings that need to be overcome and take good feedback as a guide. Fourth, they need to have the policy to encourage students to speak up, creating an inclusive and dynamic environment for students to develop. Fifth, policymakers and media practitioners in universities should focus on one crucial factor – student experience. Optimizing the student experience will encourage student contributions to the university and help save resources because students are the media ambassadors promoting the university brand image.

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## CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore the relationship among university support, student experience, and university brand image to make reasonable recommendations for the university. Taking survey data from 300 university students from 12 higher education institutions in Vietnam, the study used a quantitative method. Moreover, the results show that these three factors have a close and associated relationship. The



university support strongly influences the student experience, and from there, the student experience has a significant impact on the university brand image. The student experience is a central factor that any university should pay attention to further developing its service quality and brand image. However, the study was limited to Vietnamese students and focused on the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, so it is impossible to cover the entire concept of students in general. This is also an opportunity for other future studies to test this research model in a different context at a different time. From the research results, the paper recommended that the universities focus on optimizing the student experience through its support to enhance the brand image in the market.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Hai Ninh Nguyen.

Data curation: Hai Ninh Nguyen.

Formal analysis: Hai Ninh Nguyen.

Investigation: Thi Dieu Phan, Cam Tu Pham.

Methodology: Hai Ninh Nguyen.

Project administration: Cam Tu Pham.

Resources: Thi Truc Tran.

Software: Thi Tra Phuong Nguyen.

Supervision: Hai Ninh Nguyen.

Validation: Thi Tra Phuong Nguyen, Thi Dieu Phan, Thi Truc Tran.

Visualization: Thi Dieu Phan, Thi Truc Tran.

Writing – original draft: Thi Dieu Phan, Cam Tu Pham, Thi Truc Tran.

Writing – review & editing: Thi Tra Phuong Nguyen, Thi Dieu Phan, Cam Tu Pham, Thi Truc Tran.

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## APPENDIX A. MEASUREMENT CONSTRUCTS

**Table A1.** University support policies (USP)

Code	Statements
USP1	My university has released numerous supporting policies for students
USP2	My university provided sufficient learning materials to students
USP3	The learning schedule at my university is flexible in comparison with other institutions
USP4	The learning timetable is well-organized to fit with the situation of the pandemic and the conditions of the students

**Table A2.** Student perceived support (SPS)

Code	Statements
SPS1	In general, students benefit greatly from my university's support policies
SPS2	The support of my university contains a great material value
SPS3	I feel satisfied with the support received from my university

**Table A3.** University support activities (USA)

Code	Statements
USA1	I am always fully consulted about the learning program and professional skills development activities
USA2	I frequently receive consultations from the university to obtain my learning objectives
USA3	I can directly ask for support from department officers and professors whenever I want
USA4	Department officers are caring, helpful, and easily accessible to students
USA5	Departments efficiently coped with complaints from student
USA6	The department officers are effective in dealing with my problems
USA7	My university and professors have special policies in treatment and learning assessment methods during the pandemic

**Table A4.** Student experience (SE)

Code	Statements
SE1	In general, I had a wonderful time at my university
SE2	My univeristy reputation depends much on the contributions of students
SE3	The teaching quality of my university is superior to that of another university in the same field
SE4	The teaching quality has been maintained as the normal situations
SE5	All my opinion and suggestions were listened and respected
SE6	I am satisfied with my study at my university

**Table A5.** University brand image (UBI)

Code	Statements
UBI1	My university is a prestigious institution in this field in Vietnam
UBI2	Most people recognize my university
UBI3	I am proud of being a student at my university
UBI4	Choosing my university is a judicious decision