



Postgraduate Students' Experience of Online Learning During Semester One 2020 at the University of Sydney

Report by SUPRA Education Committee

Purpose

Under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 23rd March 2020 the University moved Semester 1 learning and assessment practices fully online. On 25th June the University announced that for Semester 2 offshore students would be provided with remote online teaching due to travel restrictions and most lectures would be online for both onshore and offshore students. The University received some feedback from students of their online learning experience during this semester from two additional questions in the Unit of Study Surveys (USS), a FASS specific student survey and student panel feedback during the Education Symposium. SUPRA Education Committee decided to conduct an online survey to provide postgraduate students with an opportunity to give detailed feedback and inform SUPRA in making recommendations for the University's planning and delivery of student learning and assessment in Semester 2 2020.

Methodology

SUPRA promoted the online survey to SUPRA members and Usyd postgraduate students via SUPRA Facebook, Instagram, WeChat and our e-newsletter eGrad. During a two-week period from 4th to 17th July a total of 178 students from across 8 faculties completed the survey. 40% of all respondents were enrolled in the Business School and 82% of all respondents reported they were currently residing in Sydney. The survey comprised 20 questions which covered both general and focussed questions on Lectures, Tutorials/Labs, Lectures and Assessment.

Summary

Survey respondents preferred live Zoom lectures and just over 50% of all respondents rated the online interaction between lecturers and students as satisfactory. Many reported a lack of interaction between lecturer and students as a negative aspect of this transition.

According to many respondents' online tutorials posed the most problems. Over 50% of respondents found live Zoom tutorials limited discussion and almost 50% of respondents reported difficulty in obtaining feedback by tutors. Many respondents rated demonstration videos as poor and many complained that teachers were not familiar with the range of Zoom functions.



Almost 50% of respondents reported that online assessments caused them extra stress and reported technical problems during online assessments. Almost 50% of respondents also had requested special consideration in an assessment due to IT issues.

Over 30% of respondents rated their overall Semester 1 online learning experience as poor, and 41% rated it as satisfactory. In this question the survey recorded over 90 individual comments which to us reflects deep student frustration and a need to speak out about their Semester 1 online learning experience. (Appendices: 8 Respondent Comments)

Recommendations

1. Further ICT skill training.

That prior to Semester 2 2020 the University provides teaching staff with extensive training to improve operational knowledge and skills in using Zoom for lectures and tutorials. Furthermore, timely technical support must be available to students at all times, especially for offshore students. Finally, we strongly urge ICT to make necessary adjustments to ensure all students using a personal computer have a stable VPN connection.

2. Live online Zoom lecture/tutorial/labs.

That teaching staff develop and deliver live Zoom lecture/tutorial/labs to enhance communication between professor/tutors and students instead of using pre-recorded lecture videos. All live Zoom lectures and tutorials should be recorded to ensure students will not miss learning content if they face technical issues. Attendance in live Zoom tutorials should be capped at 20 to ensure a quality learning experience. Finally, we urge greater use of breakout rooms, as was highlighted by feedback in the Education Symposium and documented in the planned approach to online teaching in Semester 2.

3. Remote Zoom consultations.

That the University continues Zoom consultations to allow students to communicate with teaching staff and to allow students an opportunity to reflect on their progress and to have queries addressed to a satisfactory degree.

4. Flexible timetables.

That the University develops a timetable with the consideration of students living in different time-zones.

5. Mental health support.

That the University promote and make accessible, to culturally and linguistically diverse students, an effective mental health support program. Many respondents reflected that they were facing extra stress



and found online learning and exams particularly challenging. SUPRA is aware that many postgraduate students still do not know about CAPS as a free and accessible counselling service, now offering online services.



Key findings and discussion

Lectures

Teaching Format (Appendices: 2)

Respondents reported an even split of units with lectures delivered by pre-recorded video or lectures delivered by live Zoom. Of those respondents who reported they had live Zoom lectures; most rated the experience as Satisfactory to Very Satisfactory. Of the respondents who reported their lectures were pre-recorded, 61% indicated the lecture content was current or updated. The most mentioned units that used pre-recorded video lectures were FINC6001, FINC6021 and BUSS6000. A clear majority of respondents preferred live Zoom lectures (recorded for future access) or a combination of live Zoom with pre-recorded materials, rather than purely pre-recorded video lectures (Appendices: 7).

Interaction (Appendices: 2)

Just over 50% of all respondents rated the online interaction between lecturers and students as satisfactory. Of the 47% who rated their overall interaction experience as Dissatisfactory or Very Dissatisfactory, comments included: "I think it is hard to build connections with each other. Few students talk in the discussion part in the zoom"; "Unfortunately, without any interactions with classmates, I feel like we're missing a lot."

Tutorials/Labs (Appendices: 3)

Overall learning experience

Just over a 50% of all respondents complained of limited discussion in tutorials, and almost the same number reported difficulty in obtaining feedback by teachers. Many students also experienced difficulty working together: "Presentations with group mates were tough. It was difficult to coordinate and discuss and took up much more time and effort than presenting in class". Only 14% stated they had no problems with their online tutorials.

Receiving feedback

Among students who had taken online tutorials almost 50% reported difficulty in receiving feedback from professors/tutors and 30% identified there was too little time/no time given to ask questions during the tutorial. Comments included, "We are having much more stress, and we have to face more work without sufficient help. If we have the face-to-face lecture and tutorial, we can keep in contact with lecturers each week, while if online, I can do nothing if the lecturer doesn't return my ed question."



Teaching efficiency

Almost 30% of respondents gave feedback that the demonstration videos were not as effective when compared with in person teaching. Poor quality demonstration videos were reported by a majority of Engineering postgraduate respondents. Almost 24% of respondents reported teachers were not familiar with the range of Zoom functions.

Assessment (Appendices: 4)

Stress

45.24% of respondents who took online exams stated that they felt extra stress doing so.

Tech/Internet/Equipment

Almost 50% of respondents who took online exams reported experiencing internet issues, almost 30% reported technical problems with starting the exam, and one quarter experienced a personal equipment issue. Only 11% of respondents stated they had no problems at all with online exams.

Time Required

Some respondents mentioned they felt disadvantaged by time limits placed on online exams and noted issues including: time wasted by having to keep scrolling up and down the page to look at the question and then to type the answer; unable to highlight or remark online; time wasted having to type formulas and equations in mathematical based unit exams.

Special Consideration (Appendices: 5)

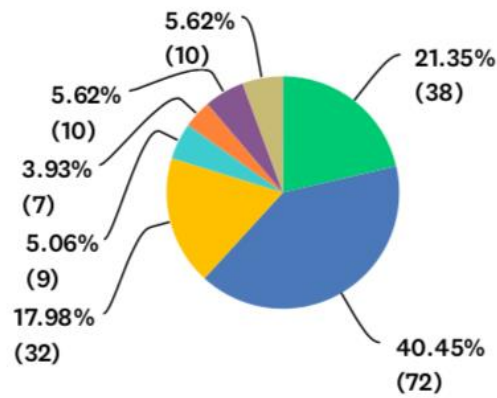
Almost 50% of respondents (half skipped this question which asked if they had applied for special consideration) stated they applied for special consideration in Semester 1. Almost 29% gave an IT issue as reason for applying, and another equal number gave self-isolation (mental health issues) as reason for applying. According to respondents who stated they applied for special consideration only 10% of applications were declined, although at time of the survey, a quarter of applications reported they were waiting on an outcome, possibly since these were late applications.



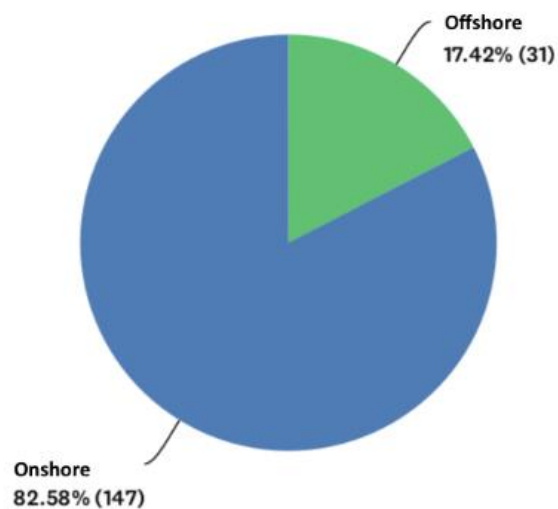
Appendices

1. Respondents by faculty

Answered: 178 Skipped: 0



■ Arts and Social Sciences
 ■ Business
 ■ Engineering
 ■ Medicine and Health
 ■ Science
 ■ Architecture, Design and Planning
 ■ Conservatorium of Music
 ■ Law
 ■ I did not enrol in Semester 1 or I decided to suspend after initially enrolling. (By check...

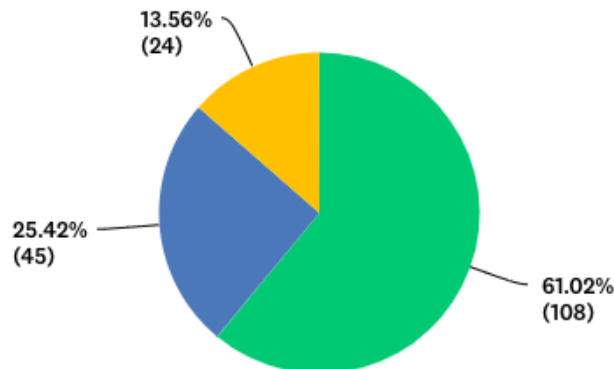




2 Lectures

If your lectures were pre-recorded,

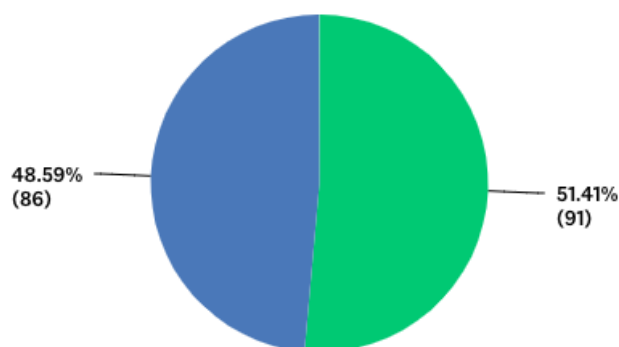
Answered: 177 Skipped: 1



■ All of my lecture materials are current (updated to the recent unit outline) ■ Don't know
■ I had one or more units used recycled materials from the previous year (Please specify the...)

How were your lectures provided in Semester 1, 2020?

Answered: 177 Skipped: 1

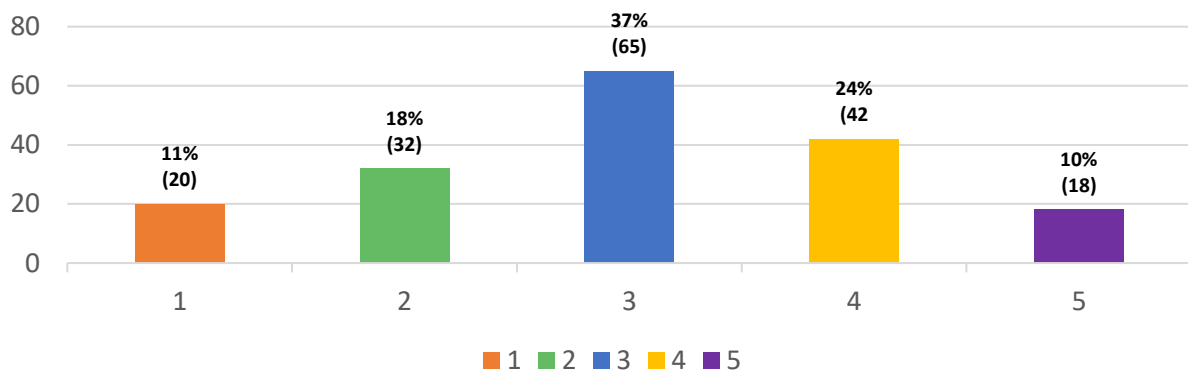


■ Only real-time Zoom (recorded for future access)
■ One or more units' lecture was provided by pre-recorded video (Please specify the uni...)



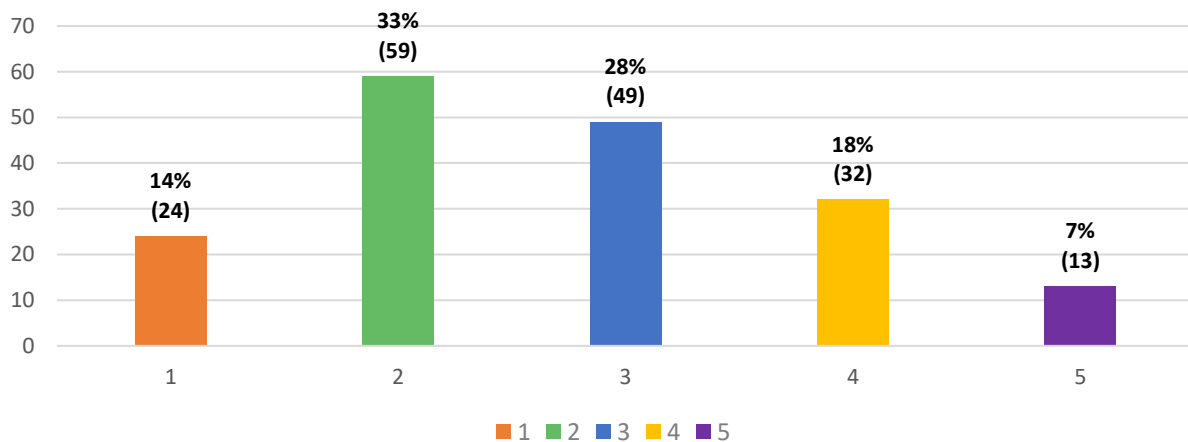
If your lectures were taken in zoom format, how would you like to score the zoom live lecture? (score 1-5 with 1 as very dissatisfied to 5-very satisfied)

Answered:177 Skipped:1



How would you like to score the overall interaction between your lecturers and students online? (score 1-5 with 1 as very dissatisfied to 5-very satisfied)

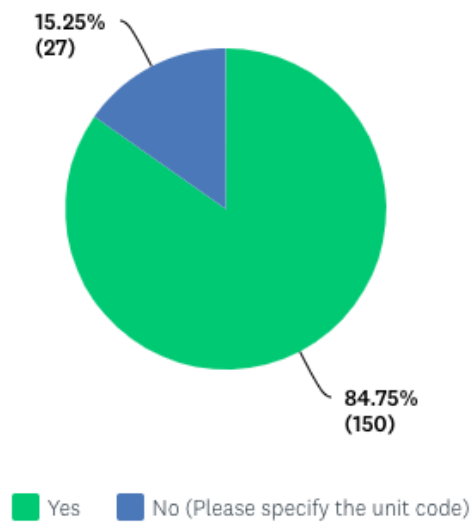
Answered:177 Skipped:1





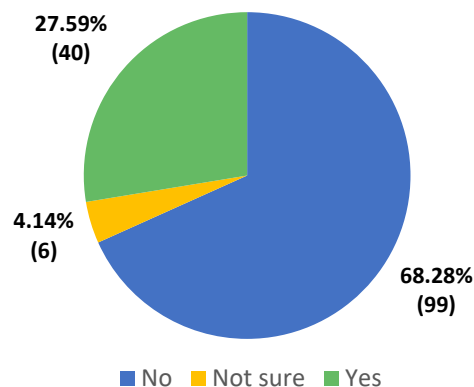
In your opinion overall was there sufficient learning material on Canvas for your needs?

Answered: 177 Skipped: 1



Were you aware that your lecture content was reduced after the teaching method moved online? (If yes, please specify the unit and share more details)

Answered: 145 Skipped: 33

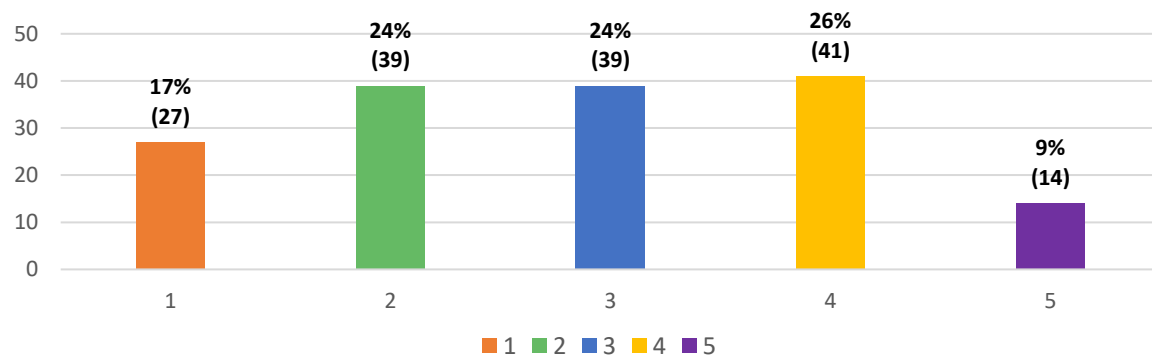




3. Tutorials/ Labs

If your tutorial/lab(s) were taken in zoom format, how would you like to score your overall experience? (score 1-5 with 1 as very dissatisfied to 5-very satisfied)

Answered:160 Skipped:18

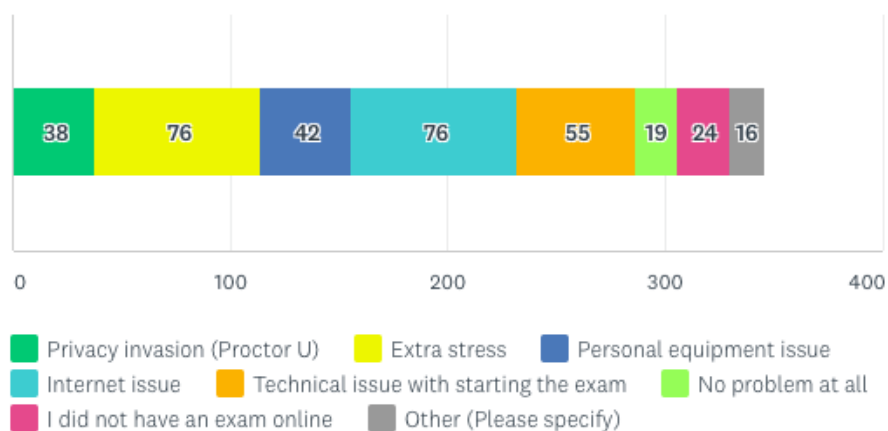




4. Assessments

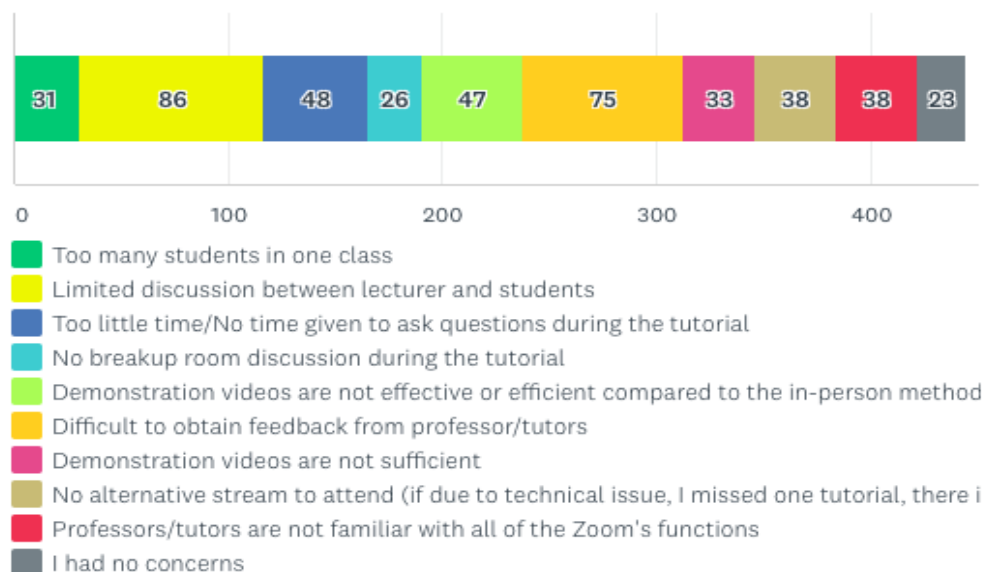
In Semester 1, did you experience any problems during the examination through online assessment method (e.g: ProctorU, online quiz on canvas etc.)?

Answered: 168 Skipped: 10



If tutorial/lab(s) were in zoom format, did you experience any of the following concerns? (You may check more than one)

Answered: 160 Skipped: 18

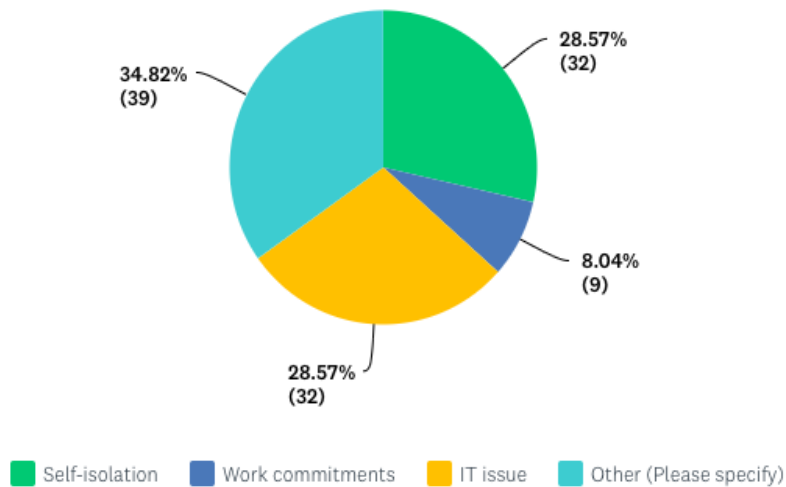




5. Special Consideration

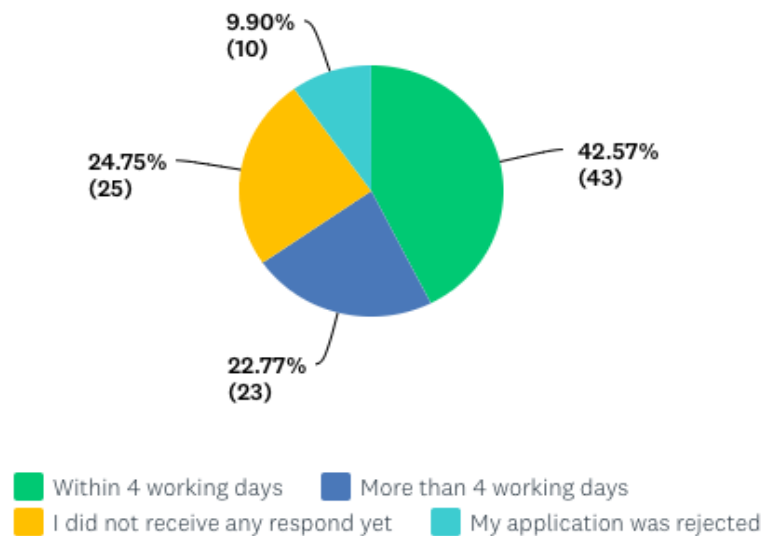
In Semester 1, if you applied for the special consideration, what was the reason?

Answered: 112 Skipped: 66



In Semester 1, if you applied for the special consideration, how long did the University take to grant you the approval?

Answered: 101 Skipped: 77

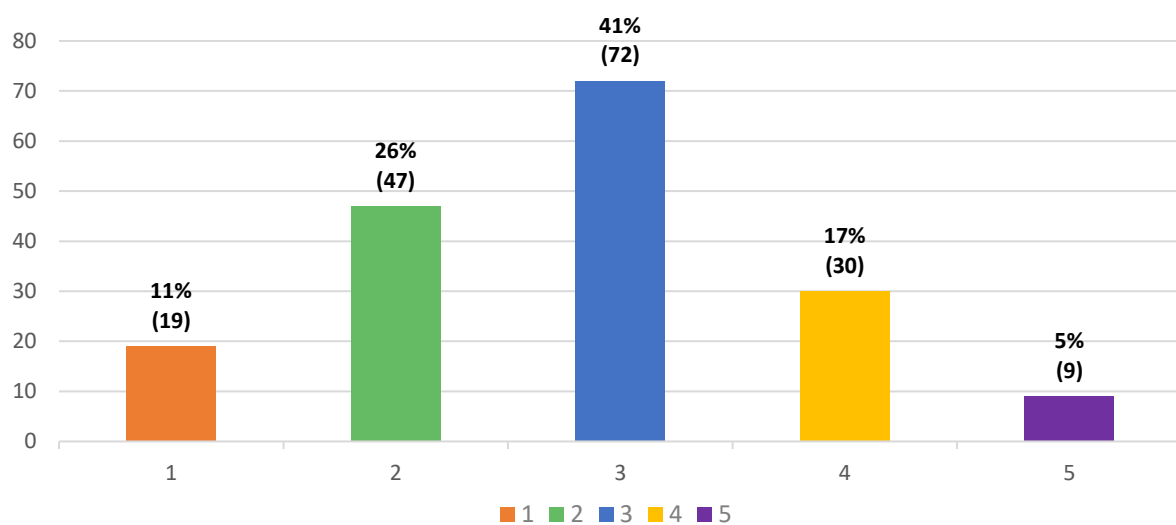




6. Overall online learning experience

In Semester 1, how would you like to score the 2020 Semester 1 online learning experience? (score 1-5 from very dissatisfied to very satisfied)

Answered:177 Skipped:1





7. Online learning preferences for S2 2020

In Semester 2 which form of online lecture format would you prefer?

Answered: 177 Skipped: 1

