

# Flexible Learning in the Time of a Pandemic: The Case of a Higher Education Institution in the Philippines

Michael Angelo A. Legarde

College of Teacher Education  
Palawan State University  
Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, Philippines  
malegarde@psu.palawan.edu.ph

**Abstract:** COVID-19 is having a major impact on multiple parts of society around the world. The constant increase in confirmed cases has affected the general public and has led to the closure of businesses, workplaces, schools and colleges to protect everyone. In an instant, the education system around the world was transformed from a traditional classroom setup to a combination of flexible online, homeschooling, modular, asynchronous, synchronous, and technology-enhanced learning. As a result, teachers were forced to complete the school year through online, blended, flexible and modular learning. According to Lalani (2020), COVID-19 is having a significant impact on students, faculty and educational organizations around the world by shifting the learning environment from conventional to online education. Hence, this study was conducted to determine the barriers that significantly affect both teachers and students during the implementation of flexible learning. The analysis involved the 241 college students and 85 faculty members from a state university in the Philippines. Findings reveal that learner motivation, access to internet, and social interactions were found to be the very strong barrier that the respondents experienced during the implementation of flexible learning. This strongly suggests that teachers should find ways on using innovative and interactive teaching strategies to increase students' motivation and engagement towards learning amidst the pandemic.

**Keywords**—flexible learning; technology-enhanced learning, self-paced learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has a major influence on several parts of society all across the world. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, as the number of confirmed cases continues to climb. According to the World Health Organization, the Philippines had 1,976,202 confirmed cases as of August 18, 2021. (World Health Organization, 2021). The constant rise in proven instances concerned the general public, prompting the closure of companies, workplaces, schools, and colleges for everyone's protection. In an instant, the educational system all over the world was transformed from traditional classroom setup to online, blended, flexible, homeschooling, modular, asynchronous, synchronous, and technology-aided learning (Avila et. al. 2020). As a result, teachers were forced to complete the school year via online, blended, flexible, and modular learning. COVID-19 has a significant influence on students, instructors, and educational organizations throughout the world, according to Lalani (2020), by shifting the learning environment from conventional to online education. The abrupt change in learning style was a tremendous problem for everyone because no one was prepared for such an abrupt change. Online learning allows students to continue their studies while remaining at home during this period when face-to-face interaction is not permitted. Given that, various issues with this new form of learning have surfaced, such as students' lack of interest, motivation, and attention.

COVID-19's emergence has undoubtedly sent shockwaves across the world. The exponential increase in infected people,

as well as the devastating repercussions of severe cases of the disease, have overloaded health experts and placed tremendous burden not just on the health sector, but also on education. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all levels of schooling. According to the UNESCO study (2020), educational institutions throughout the world have either temporarily shuttered or adopted localized closures, affecting around 1.7 billion students globally. In accordance with this, lockdown and stay-at-home measures have been used as the necessary step to flatten the curve and reduce disease transmission (Sintema, 2020).

Because of the isolation, the use of technology has been deemed the best, if not the only, option for keeping educational systems operational in many regions of the world during this pandemic. Despite the hurdles and problems in implementation, some benefits have been discovered and acknowledged in the need to change to remote or online learning, which may be a fantastic chance for instructors and students to become more creative and inventive (UNESCO, 2020). Most nations have shuttered educational institutions due of the COVID-19 pandemic's lockdown and social distancing tactics. There is a fundamental shift in the way instructors give great education—via multiple online channels. Despite the difficulties faced by both students and teachers, online learning, distance learning and continuing education have emerged as the panacea for this unprecedented global epidemic. The move from conventional face-to-face learning to online learning can be a radically different experience for both learners and educators, and they may be forced to adapt with few or no other alternatives.

Because of the pandemic, the delivery of basic education has altered dramatically in the Philippines. Due to the closure of public and private schools to preserve the health of students and instructors, teaching had to be done remotely using modular and digital platforms (DepEd, 2020). In response to the pandemic scenario in the Philippines, the Department of Education established the Basic Education - Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) as a substantial reaction and commitment to safeguarding the health, safety, and well-being of students, teachers, and staff. The BE-LCP is in compliance with Section 1 of Article XIV of the 1987 Constitution, which mandates the state to protect and promote all citizens' right to great education at all levels, as well as to make reasonable steps to make such education available to everyone. Section 6, Chapter 1 of Republic Act No. 9155, or the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001, vests DepEd with the authority, accountability, and responsibility for ensuring access to, promoting equity in, and improving the quality of basic education. (DepEd, 2020). The BE-LCP, in particular, has been designed with a legislative framework that is responsive to the "new normal," while still keeping in mind the constitutional need to ensure that all people have access to quality education at all times. BE-LCP incorporates numerous learning delivery modes, with blended learning and distant learning being important alternatives. DEPED has developed many learning modalities that take into account the accessibility and availability of technology and connections for learning. Distance learning is used to continue education even when teachers and students are geographically separated via the use of online and offline technology, TV and radio, and printed modules. Furthermore, blended learning is a combination of any of these modalities,

Meanwhile, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) launched reforms in curriculum delivery and student service accessibility in order to better fulfill the needs of higher education students (Boliver, 2020; Magsambol, 2020). The metaphorical ball is now lies in the efficiency and efficacy of these plans of action for the holistic development of students while they remain in their own homes. Surprisingly, it is at this point that the ramifications of condensed curriculum combined with changes in educational delivery systems are evident. As directed by CHED, the majority of universities and colleges in the Philippines have built flexible learning systems to continue education that take into account the change of the educational landscape during and after the pandemic, focusing on analysis, design, implementation, and evaluation of the many types of modalities that impact learning and teaching, and anchored on the concepts of inclusive and resilient education.

According to Cassidy et al. (2016), flexible learning is a pedagogical strategy that allows for flexibility of time, location, and audience, including, but not limited to, the use of technology. Although it frequently employs remote education delivery techniques and educational technology facilities, this may vary based on technology levels, device availability, internet access, level of digital literacy, and approaches (Macalalde, 2020). As a result, the department advocated for a

flexible learning arrangement that focuses on the development and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions required to suit the particular demands of learners in terms of speed, place, method, and learning products (Cervantes, 2020). These flexible learning arrangements necessitated the development of new learning management systems, faculty capacity-building or training, and repositories for flexible learning resources. Despite challenges with remote or online learning, such as inequalities in access to various remote modalities of learning due to socioeconomic status differences among students, a change to flexible learning delivery was required (Simbulan, 2020).

Even after the present epidemic, the flexible learning system that integrates many teaching techniques will become the new norm in the education industry (CHED, 2021). According to CHED (2020), there are three forms of flexible learning: 1) online, which uses an available online classroom for instruction delivery; 2) offline, which does not require internet connectivity since learning is done through printed modules or digital material in storage devices; and 3) blended, which is a combination of online and offline modes (Magsambol, 2020). Furthermore, flexible learning supports the continuation of inclusive and accessible education when traditional modalities of teaching are impractical, such as in the event of a national emergency. Given connection constraints, the notion of flexible learning has developed as a viable alternative for online learning, particularly in higher education institutions in the Philippines. Flexible learning focuses on offering students options for their learning pace, location, and mode, which may be fostered via suitable pedagogical practice (Gordon, 2014). Learners are given the option of how they will continue their studies, where and when they may advance, and how they can comply with the standards and demonstrate learning results. According to Alexander (2010), as referenced by Dayagbil et al. (2021), flexible learning and teaching encompass a wide range of techniques that may accommodate the unique demands of diverse learners. These include learning independence in terms of time and place, as well as some degree of choice in the curriculum, including content, learning tactics, and evaluation, as well as the use of modern information and communication technology to enable a variety of learning styles.

As the Philippines faces a severe scenario as a result of the aforementioned health crisis, it has become imperative to investigate additional creative learning modalities that would simplify the transition from traditional to remote teaching and learning. Palawan State University, as a higher educational institution, implemented a flexible learning plan in compliance with CHED Advisory No. 7 s. 2020, as well as CMO No. 4 s. 2020, when the first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year began. Despite the administrators' and educators' concerted attempts to continue teaching and learning beyond the typical face-to-face training, instructors and students were not yet completely prepared for alternate modalities of teaching. Faculty members were urged to use both synchronous (online sessions) and asynchronous (modular learning) modes of

learning in order to continually deliver excellent education and teach students who will become agents of change, creative and critical thinkers, effective communicators, research-oriented learners, and value-laden persons. In the face of the University's attempts to deliver quality education in the middle of the epidemic, various hurdles arose along the road. Apart from the difficulties that instructors and students experience, the researcher feels that there is a need to plan, monitor, and assess the implementation of flexible learning in this new normal. Hence, this becomes the impetus for this study

## 2. METHODOLOGY

To answer the research problems raised in this study, quantitative-descriptive research design was employed. The study was conducted in a higher education institution in the Philippines. 241 college students and 85 faculty members from eight campuses of a state university were involved in this study. In collecting the data needed, a survey questionnaire developed by Mulenburg & Berge (2005) was adapted. The research instrument was bifurcated into two parts. The first part includes the respondents' demographic characteristics whereas the second part includes a 5-point Likert Scales that describes the challenges and difficulties experienced by the respondents during the implementation of flexible learning. The said survey questionnaire was administered online via Google Form.

Furthermore, descriptive analysis was utilized in this study. Descriptive measures such as frequency distribution and mean were employed to describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the challenges and difficulties they experienced during the flexible learning.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the profile characteristics of the 241 student-respondents in the study. The analysis reveals that the majority of the participants were females (76.80%). In terms of age, majority or 52.70 % of the participants were 19 to 20 years old whereas only few or 12% were 23 years old and above. With respect to family monthly income, majority (139) or 57.67% have monthly income of below P7,890.00 and 66 or 27.39% have monthly income between P7,890.00 and P15,780.00. As pertain to their parents' educational attainment, majority of their father completed high school (19.50%) whereas most of their mother completed college (25.73%).

**Table 1. Frequency Distribution of the Student-Respondents' Demographic Profile**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	56	23.20%
Female	185	76.80%
<b>Age (in years)</b>		
17-18	67	27.80%
19-20	127	52.70%

21-22	35	14.52%
23 & Above	12	4.98%
<b>Family Monthly Income (in PhP)</b>		
< 7,890	139	57.67%
7,890 < 15,780	66	27.39%
15,780 < 31,560	24	9.96%
31,560 < 78,900	10	4.15%
> 78,900	2	0.83%
<b>Father's Educational Attainment</b>		
Some Elementary	34	14.11%
Completed Elementary	23	9.54%
Some High School	44	18.26%
Completed High School	47	19.50%
Some Vocational	8	3.32%
Completed Vocational	11	4.56%
Some College	28	11.62%
Completed College	37	15.35%
Post-College	9	3.73%
<b>Mother's Educational Attainment</b>		
Some Elementary	19	7.88%
Completed Elementary	15	6.22%
Some High School	33	13.69%
Completed High School	57	23.65%
Some Vocational	5	2.07%
Completed Vocational	11	4.56%
Some College	27	11.20%
Completed College	62	25.73%
Post-College	12	4.98%

The demographics of the 85 teacher-respondents in the study are shown in Table 2. According to the data, the majority of the faculty members who responded to the survey questionnaire (81.00%) were females. In terms of age, the bulk of participants (34.00%) were between the ages of 30 and 39, with only 11% being 50 and older. In terms of their employment status, the majority (35) or 41.00% held a permanent post, whilst 32 or 38.99% were contract of service during the conduct of the study. In terms of their length of service at the university, the plurality (24) or 28.00% of them have been there from 6 to 10 years, with only two serving for at least 26 years.

**Table 2. Frequency Distribution of the Teacher-Respondents' Demographic Profile**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
-----------------	-----------	------------

Challenges	Mean Rating	Qualitative Description
<b>Teacher-Related Issues</b>	<b>3.92</b>	<b>Agree</b>
Teachers do not know how to teach online	3.89	Agree
Lack of timely feedback from the teachers	3.80	Agree
Voluminous academic tasks and requirements	4.07	Agree
<b>Social Interactions</b>	<b>4.36</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Lack of interaction/communication with the teachers	4.35	Strongly Agree
Lack of interaction/communication with their peers/classmates	4.32	Strongly Agree
Lack of students' collaboration	4.41	Strongly Agree
<b>Learner Motivation</b>	<b>4.46</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Procrastination	4.58	Strongly Agree
Lack personal motivation for online learning	4.52	Strongly Agree
Multiple activities during online learning	4.27	Strongly Agree
<b>Support</b>	<b>3.94</b>	<b>Agree</b>
Lack of supports from family and peers/classmates	4.05	Agree
Interruptions during online learning at home	4.16	Agree
Insufficient time to learn during online learning	3.68	Agree
<b>Access to Internet</b>	<b>4.38</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Lack of adequate internet access	4.43	Strongly Agree
Lack of devices (smartphones, laptops, computer) during online learning	4.38	Strongly Agree
Lack of technical assistance	4.34	Strongly Agree
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	16	19.00%
Female	69	81.00%
<b>Age (in years)</b>		
20-29	32	37.00%
30-39	29	34.00%
40-49	15	18.00%
50 & Above	9	11.00%

<b>Employment Status</b>		
Permanent	35	41.00%
Temporary	18	21.00%
Contract of Service	32	38.00%
<b>Number of Years in Service</b>		
1-5	20	23.00%
6-10	24	28.00%
11-15	18	21.00%
16-20	15	18.00%
21-25	6	7.00%
26 & Above	2	3.00%

The analyses in Table 3 revealed that out of the five major challenges identified, learner motivation, access to internet, and social interactions were found to be the very strong barrier that the respondents experienced during the implementation of flexible learning as indicated by their over-all mean ratings of 4.46, 4.38, and 4.36, respectively. In terms of learner motivation, the data indicates that procrastination, lack of personal motivation for online learning, and multiple activities during online learning were found to be very strong barriers as perceived by the students. This implies that students who are motivated learned better amidst the flexible learning modality as compared with unmotivated students. Hence, teachers should find ways to increase students' motivation through innovative strategies and activities. Moreover, as pertains to access to internet, the analysis also reveals that lack of adequate internet access was found to be a very strong barrier to the implementation of flexible learning. This stresses that poor internet connectivity, lack of devices to be used for learning, as well as insufficient technical assistance, were considered hindrance for the students as they learn in this time of pandemic. In addition, with respect to social interactions, the analysis also reveals that the lack of interactions between and among their teachers and classmates were considered very strong barriers. This reflects the importance of using interactive strategies that will requires communication and collaboration among students.

Legend: 1.0-1.79 – Strongly Disagree; 1.80-2.59 – Disagree; 2.60-3.39-Undecided; 3.40-4.19 – Agree; 4.20-5.00 – Strongly Agree

#### 4. REFERENCES

- [1] Avila, E.C. et al. (2020). Students' Perception on Online and Distance Learning and their Motivation and Learning Strategies in using Educational Technologies during COVID-19 Pandemic. Journal of Physics.



- [2] Boliver, J. M. (2020). CHED conducts massive teaching training programs for higher education teachers. Philippine Information Agency. <https://pia.gov.ph/news/articles/1051452>
- [3] Cassidy, A. et al. (2016). Flexible Learning Strategies in First through Fourth-Year Courses. Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching, Vol. IX.
- [4] Cervantes, F.M. (2020, April 30). CHED pushes for flexible learning for HEIs in August. Republic of the Philippines Philippine News Agency. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1101519>
- [5] CHED (2020a). CHED Memorandum Order No. 4, series 2020. Guidelines on the implementation of flexible learning. <https://ched.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/CMO-No.-4-s.-2020-Guidelines-on-the-Implementation-of-Flexible-Learning.pdf>
- [6] CHED (2020b). CHED COVID Advisory No. 7. <https://ched.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/CHED-ADVISORY-7-final.pdf>
- [7] Dayagbil, F., Palompon, D., Garcia, L., & Olvido, M. M. (2021, July). Teaching and Learning Continuity Amid and Beyond the Pandemic | Education. *Frontiers; Frontiers in Education*.
- [8] Gordon, N., (2014). Flexible Pedagogies: technology-enhanced learning. From the report series Flexible Pedagogies: Preparing for the Future. The Higher Education Academy, January. Online at: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexiblelearning/flexiblepedagogies/tech\\_enhanced\\_learning/main\\_report](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexiblelearning/flexiblepedagogies/tech_enhanced_learning/main_report).
- [9] Lalani, F. (2020). The Rise of Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic | World Economic Forum. Available online at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/> (accessed December 1, 2020).
- [10] Macalde A. S. (2020). Integrating Technologies in the New Normal: A Study of Blended Learning. *International Journal of Quantitative Research and Modeling*.
- [11] Magsambol, B. (2020, April 14). CHED: Colleges, universities free to adjust academic calendar. *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/ched-says-colleges-universities-free-adjust-academic-calendar-2020>
- [12] Sintema, E. J. (2020 April 7). Effect of COVID-19 on the performance of grade 12 students: Implications for STEM education. *EURASIA Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education*, 16(7). <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejmste/7893>
- [13] UNESCO (2020, May 29). The socio-cultural implications of COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/news/socio-cultural-implications-covid-19>
- [14] World Bank Education COVID-19 School Closures Map. (n.d.). World Bank. Retrieved November 8, 2021, from <http://worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2020/03/24/world-bank-education-and-covid-19>
- [15] World Bank (2020a). Remote Learning and COVID-19: The use of educational technologies at scale across an education system as a result of massive school closings in response to the COVID19 pandemic to enable distance education and online learning. Retrieved from <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/266811584657843186/pdf/RapidResponseBriefing-Note-Remote-Learning-and-COVID-19-Outbreak.pdf>
-