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# Navigating the Ups and Downs of Flexible Learning

**Al-Yusri S. Aller**
Palawan State University
ayaller@psu.palawan.edu.ph

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**Index Terms:**

coping mechanism, flexible learning, learning opportunity, learning challenges

**Abstract.** In response to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions adopted flexible learning methods to ensure the continuity and delivery of quality education. Recognizing the importance of understanding student experiences within this new learning environment, this study explored the impact of flexible learning modalities on students. The study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of learners. Data were collected through validated semi-structured interview questionnaires administered to selected students. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to students' experiences in flexible learning. Findings revealed that students encountered several challenges while adapting to flexible learning. These included conflicts between academic tasks and domestic responsibilities, increased academic workload, unstable or unreliable internet connectivity, and uncertainties regarding their learning outcomes and academic performance. These challenges affected students' ability to fully engage in their courses and created additional pressures in managing their academic and personal responsibilities. Despite these difficulties, students demonstrated resilience and optimism in dealing with the new learning environment. They viewed these challenges as opportunities for personal growth and development. Students developed coping strategies such as improving their time management skills, becoming more resourceful in accessing learning materials, and communicating with peers and instructors for academic support. These strategies helped them continue their studies despite the limitations posed by flexible learning. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening institutional support systems and providing accessible learning resources to better assist students in navigating flexible learning environments and enhancing their overall learning experiences.

## Introduction

Flexible Learning extends beyond mere reliance on technology, offering students the freedom to choose when, where, and how they engage with their studies. Pelayo and Pelayo (2020) note that this approach empowers learners to tailor their activities to suit their individual needs, interests, and levels of enthusiasm. By facilitating personalized planning, Flexible Learning cultivates a conducive environment for students, promoting a sense of ease and reducing anxiety.

The current studies have merit for a better understanding of the concerns of instructors and students. There is no single model of flexible teaching and learning which can be superimposed on a particular university setting. Rather, a university may adopt as a principal commitment to increase flexibility for its clientele, and exhibit and develop a variety of manifestations of flexibility in practice (Lundin, 2012). However, the use of technology is increasing in higher education institutions worldwide, flexible learning institutions, more than any other, have long been preoccupied with the exploration and expansion of media and technology to strengthen teaching or learning experience (Aggarwal, 2013).

*ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4550-910X*

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In this shifting education landscape, it is important to take perspective: not only to assess current practices and immediate agendas, but with an eye to the 'big picture' of the changed educational response taking shape in this terrain (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013).

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued memorandum order no. 4 series of 2020, also known as Guidelines on the Implementation of the flexible learning. The said memorandum directed Higher Education on the adoption to flexible learning as the delivery mode beginning AY 2020-2021 and maybe extended upon consultation of the stakeholder concerned and upon review of the commission. Palawan State University has accepted the challenges of adopting flexible learning as the delivery mode of the courses offered.

The responsibilities and tasks for instructors and students seem to be growing exponentially. It becomes imperative to comprehend the essence of teaching and learning, particularly in a flexible learning environment, as this understanding is crucial when implementing strategies during times of pandemic.

Thus, this study will determine the students experiences towards flexible learning, identifying what are challenges and issues to the growth and effectiveness of Flexible Learning. This study also explores the coping mechanism of the students.

## Methodology

*Research Design*

A phenomenological investigation was utilized to capture insights that provided a more profound understanding of the experiences of students in the Flexible Learning through an in-depth interview. Specifically, it sought to examine the following: challenges and issues, and coping strategies

*Participant and Setting*

The researcher involved ten (10) students from the selected external south campuses of Palawan State University using a convenient sampling. These were the students who were given consent by their respective parents to participate in the study.

*Instrument*

An interview with open-ended and semi-structured questions regarding students' challenges, and coping mechanisms was done to gather the data for the qualitative part of this study. An in-depth interview was utilized since Boyce and Neale (2006) stated that in-depth interviews provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys. The interview questions were presented to experts to ensure the appropriateness and correctness of the instrument.

*Data Gathering Procedure*

The participants were interviewed individually in a quiet room. Health protocol were strictly observed during the interview session. After making rapport, the researcher briefly discussed with the students the interview questions and they were asked to provide answers based only on their experiences so they cannot vouch for the experiences or opinions of others. The interview sessions lasted at least twenty (20) minutes for each participant to ensure the richness of the data. In the in-depth interview, the researcher familiarized with the data gathered followed by assigning preliminary codes and then searching for patterns or themes to fully explain the research questions.

*Data Analysis*

The data analysis process for the responses of the participants to the in-depth interview followed the six steps based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. The steps are (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

## Results and Discussion

There are 10 students who were interviewed as participants of this study. However, the data became saturated by the 5th participant. This means the researcher observed a similar pattern in the responses of the interviewees or students regarding their experiences with flexible learning modalities.

*Challenges and Issues Encountered by the Respondents in Implementing Flexible Learning.*

This part presents the findings and analysis of the data obtained from participants in the interview who were asked about their challenges and issues encountered on the implementation of flexible learning modality. The following themes were emerged:

*Theme 1: Conflict in Domestic Activities*

The pandemic brought students learn at the safety of their homes. With this, nearly most of the students during the flexible learning are either working students or helping with the house chores which affects their performance in the course. In one of the interview session, a participant said:

> *My class schedule conflicts with my work schedule since I have a job. I am making a living to help my parents. I am having difficulty keeping up with the classes. Sometimes, I cannot attend my online class.*

> *Moreover, it is difficult for the students to study while having a side hustle as mentioned by one of the participants:*

> *It is difficult for me since I work every day. I can only carry out my modules and activities at night.*

It has been laid out in one study that there are persisting problems in the use of flexible learning since this will hinder or might get in the way of domestic duties. Domestic duties include all household chores and other related activities needed for their livelihood (Alvarez, 2020). The same has been found in the respondents setting. It has been a recurring theme among the respondents that they find home-related activities as hindering factors to their study under flexible learning.

*Theme 2: Additional Burden*

The flexible learning is viewed as additional burden by participants, majority of the participants in this study have monthly income of PHP 10,000 and below. During the interview one participant said:

> *For me, Sir, it is tough; it's difficult for me. Sometimes, my money is not enough to buy a load.*

Aside from having issues with the money to buy load for internet, it was also noted that flexible learning made life in general difficult. Some areas within the municipality where the three (3) campuses are located may a weak internet connectivity that forced students to travel and look for a place with better or stable internet connections, thus making them at risk with the pandemic. This is depicted in an interview with one of the respondents:

> *My experience is challenging because, in the first place, our area has a weak internet connection for our online class*

Another participant added:

> *Another barrier is that I cannot find a suitable place that has a good internet connection during our Environmental (Science) class. Sometimes the place is noisy. I cannot hear what the teacher is saying.*

*Theme 3. Poor Internet Connection*

The flexible learning requires internet connection in order to function. Specifically, the aspect of online learning requires internet connectivity, thus students needed to buy internet load for them to be able to connect with their instructor and classmates as well as to access the Learning Management System (Google classroom). This has mentioned by one of the participants:

> *What's difficult for me is the weak internet connection*

*Theme 4: Uncertainty with the Learnings*

The flexible learning promotes self-directed learning in which they are required to learn by themselves as well as to monitor their progress on the course in which could turn them better adapt with the aspect of online learning. However, with the recent flexible learning, students were not quite certain with their learnings. Below is an excerpt from the interview with one of the participants:

> *Sometimes, the lesson is not clear to me, and self-studying is hard for me as well. I am not certain if I am doing the right thing or if I am learning the lesson right.*

Besides, students also having difficulty with the tools necessary for the learning. One respondent mentioned in regards with the factor that made their output late for submission was the unfamiliar or uncertain with productivity tools. Respondent said:

> *Then, there are also times when we must submit drawings. It's hard for me to send it in our Google Classroom since I made it using WPS (productivity tool). When I am to submit them, the format changes. That is the reason why there's a delay in submitting my outputs. Another is when I must edit my outputs, it's difficult, thus I submit my outputs late.*

Since flexible learning is a new system to be adopted, people will take time to get used to it. However, identified, and lingering issues on limitations of technological resources, internet connectivity, financial restrictions to afford expanded flexible learning materials, and lack of readiness of teachers and students to flexible learning remain the same even among the respondents. These are problems that are beyond the scope of any school to simply address as an institutional problem. These are national issues and concerns that are yet to be solved with finality. Thus, in effect, it results in the recurring struggles of uncertainty as to how effectively and how long can the stakeholders persist in flexible learning (Barrot, et al., 2021).

Flexible learning in developing countries like the Philippines is perceived as an additional burden. This is related to the mixing of domestic duties and schoolwork. Traditionally, the school is perceived as the sole place to do academic-related activities (Stepanović, 2020). Doing the entire course module at home is a new setup under the Philippine learning setting except for a very few who adapted the system long before the pandemic. For most institutions, the technical abilities of teachers and students as well as the technical support on gadgets to operate flexible learning has been established as a problem (Coman, et al., 2021). The same issues have been evident among the respondents who repeatedly admitted that flexible learning is an added burden due to limitations in technical readiness, support, and related gadgets to use flexible learning.

*Strategies Employed by the Students to Cope with the Issues in their Flexible Learning.*

In the interview conducted which asked respondents on their strategies used to cope up with the issues in their flexible learning of modality. The following themes were emerged:

*Theme 1: Self-Help Technique*

With the issues pertains to self-directed learning on which students are uncertain with the things they do in the course, and in spite of that, students approach these issues as an opportunity to learn by communicating with their instructor or classmates for assistance. This agreed with one of the respondents who mentioned:

> *Sometimes the lessons were not clear, I really have trouble with self-study; I really don't know if I am teaching myself right, but with the help of the technology, I communicate with my teacher and classmates about our lesson*

This opinion is also supported by another participant, who said:

> *With the help of technology, I communicate with my teacher and classmates about the lessons discussed.*

Students and teachers found great opportunities to learn new things under the flexible learning brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the opportunities recurrently shared by respondents is how they found time to integrate other activities with schoolwork. This has been evident after some time when they start to learn to balance their time for domestic and school-related activities. Previously, they complained about how the two would conflict in time but, later, they found

ways to cope with it even going as far as saying that they found ways to do more things such as learning via online modality. This phenomenon has been found to be congruent with the findings in other studies which stated that students eventually cope with the new learning modalities and find more productivity in doing so (Almendingen, et al., 2021).

*Theme 2. Resourcefulness*

With the inconvenience that are occurring with the flexible learning, students were looking for ways on how they can participate with the online course and other related activities. For instance, students with unstable internet connection due to their location tend to go outside of their homes to look for a better place with good internet connectivity. This is supported in an interview that respondent mentioned:

> *We go out of our homes and look for an area with a strong internet connection for us to join the class.*

Some students with no internet connection at all tend to communicate with their classmates for assistance on how they may keep up with the course, and sometimes ask them to connect their device to the internet. A respondent said:

> *To overcome this challenge, I go to my classmate's home whose house is conducive to learning and has a good internet connection.*

Even though the Philippines adopted flexible learning on short notice due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, students, and their parents alike found ways to adjust and live with the new system. There have been many efforts conducted to conquer the difficulties presented by flexible learning, but stakeholders have been cooperative and optimistic to find new chances to grow and make flexible learning a part of the new normal (Bhamani, et al., 2020). Moreover, in spite of the inconvenience of flexible learning and limitations in the real world, students and teachers are very cooperative to learn and adapt to the new system. This has been supportive of the findings in the study conducted by Zhang et al. (2020) that students' participation and understanding are relatively limited, but most students have a positive attitude toward a new learning modality and are willing to choose it in the future.

*Theme 3. Adaptive and Resilient*

Despite the inconvenience, learners learn how to be adaptive and resilient on achieving their learning goals. They sought ways to maximize their learning and tried their best for alternatives to resolve persisting issues and difficulties in flexible learning. Quoting a positive behavior from a respondent, that said:

> *I use earphones if the place I am at is noisy. If I am not able to attend my online class, I ask my teacher about the topic discussed since we have a GC (group chat).*

Besides, other studies on the same topic where stakeholders continued to live their lives as students and or teacher to achieve their learning goals (Amir et al., 2020). This is similar with the perseverance of the students to learn the course material, one respondent said:

> *We study the modules sent to us. We search for additional information on the internet for us to better understand the lesson.*

Adaptation is one of the hallmarks of humans as an animal species. Despite all the limitations, stakeholders have decided to move on and continue with their lives to do business as usual—to learn. This is similar to findings in other studies where learners are decided what they can to move forward and get on with their lives (Global Campaign for Education, 2021).

*Theme 4: Time Management*

Given the fact that students and teachers are the main active players in flexible learning, they offer solutions unique to their situations. This has been the same with other studies offering the need focus to concentrate effort and resources to increase the success of online learning as the new flexible learning mode (Coman et al., 2021). One aspect on the flexible learning as suggested solution by the respondents were time element in which they should be given ample amount of time to accomplish their task. Quoting from one of the respondents who said:

> *I'd like to suggest giving time for an online class. Allocate time for it; ask the students if they are available and if they have a good internet connection because most of the students have work.*

Another respondent who confessed that learning modules should be given with enough time and they need someone who might tutor them with the said learning material. This opinion is supported by the respondent who said:

> *We wish for enough time for us to answer our modules and for us not to be late on returning them. We tend to submit them late because we struggle in understanding the lesson. We need someone to teach us.*

In this study, time is among the most important needs of the learners. It appears that despite other technical and technological limitations related to flexible learning, students are willing to find solutions, work on problems and achieve their learning goals. However, to do all that requires more time than usual because the more problems present, the more time is also needed to address each one according to its nature (Fidalgo, 2020).

With the existing requirements of the flexible learning, especially on the aspect of online that requires internet connectivity, respondents are suggesting an alternative materials suitable with their needs and abilities. The respondent's opinion were:

> *I hope there will be available materials for students because not all students have gadgets or access to the internet. The materials that I am referring to are the materials applicable for offline setup so that students can keep up with the lessons.*

Technology is perhaps among the most difficult to address because it requires not only the skills to use it but more importantly, the financial resource to afford and maintain it. For flexible learning, technology is a must. This has also been identified in many studies that policymakers need to provide adequate resources and knowledge in integrating technologies into distance education, especially those working in the public sector (Saadati et al., 2021).

## Conclusion and Implications

Based on the findings of the study, it was found that students experienced various difficulties when flexible learning was implemented as the teaching-learning modality of the course. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated optimistic attitudes and resilience in adapting to the uncertainties brought by the new learning environment. This suggests that while flexible learning offers opportunities for continuity in education, it also requires adequate support systems to help students effectively cope with academic and technological challenges.

Furthermore, the study revealed that students employed different coping mechanisms to manage the challenges they encountered. Their persistence in finding ways to overcome these difficulties highlights their adaptability and determination to continue their learning despite unfavorable circumstances. This implies that educational institutions and instructors should strengthen academic support, provide accessible learning resources, and adopt flexible and student-centered teaching strategies to further assist students in navigating flexible learning environments.

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## Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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# Appendices

No appendices are included in this article