EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF THE FACULTY IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: *The study assessed the experiences and challenges of the faculty of North Eastern Mindanao State University, Philippines, in the implementation of flexible learning during the pandemic period. This study used a qualitative research design utilizing an interview guide through a personal interview involving 18 faculty members of the university's offsite class. Deductive thematic analysis was used in the interpretation and coding of data. Specifically, it evaluated the socio-demographic profile of the participants, their experiences, and challenges in a flexible learning approach. Research findings indicated that most of the faculty owned a mobile phone, which is 89.5%, while only 10.5% borrowed a mobile phone for their online class; 94.7% of the participants had no iPad or tablet. Only 5.3% have owned an iPad or tablet, 57.9% have owned a laptop or netbook, while 26.3% have borrowed one, 15.8% have no laptop or netbook, 68.4% have no personal computers, and 63.2% of them spend P1,001 to 1,500 per month for internet connectivity. The major challenges encountered by faculty in the implementation of flexible learning are caused by the technology limitations in terms of internet connectivity and online learning devices. The educational background of the students and geographical location also affect the implementation of flexible learning. Universities, in partnership with the local governments, may consider providing a budget for internet connections, available communication tools, and transportation as a form of student assistance. Faculty development programs such as refresher courses on flexible learning, outcome-based education, teaching methodologies, and classroom management are to be considered. Furthermore, the provision of student development programs through a special training course on online and offline technologies, reading comprehension, and language proficiency is recommended as part of the intervention programs. There is also a need to improve management information systems to track down information on students for contact tracing. Implementation of limited face-to-face classes is also recommended to minimize and resolve the identified challenges.*

Keywords: experiences, challenges, faculty, implementation, flexible learning, pandemic, higher education, university, online platforms, students

1. INTRODUCTION

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was unexpected, which brought disruptions, particularly in the academic world. The Philippines, in particular, found itself in a precarious scenario as cases spread throughout the country. Limiting the hazards of academic community infection has been a top priority for higher education institutions. The monumental task then was to figure out how to keep teaching and learning implemented beyond face-to-face instruction. Exploring alternative learning modalities that will enable the transition from traditional to flexible learning has become an urgent need [1].

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) of the Philippines has published a policy standard to strengthen the quality assurance system through competency-based education. CHED is dedicated to creating and implementing an outcomes-based approach to quality assurance monitoring and evaluation, focusing on the intended, implemented, and accomplished learning outcomes [2]. It has advised Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to start implementing flexible learning modalities to protect Filipino students from contracting the virus. As cited [3], flexible learning can address the needs of students by allowing them to study in ways that are more convenient for them. It is a pedagogical approach that allows for time, place, and audience flexibility, including but not limited to the use of technology. Learners' specific needs are addressed through the design and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions that incorporate both digital and non-digital technology.

North Eastern Mindanao State University (NEMSU) is one of the State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) that have followed national and local government regulations as well as CHED's most recent advice. In the first semester of 2020, NEMSU offered two programs in Marihatag and acquired an enrolment of 305 students, 35% of whom came from far-flung areas. Among twelve (12) barangays, six (6) of which are considered remote communities, only 30% to 40% of the students were able to regularly attend virtual classes due to the claim of poor internet connection and distance.

NEMSU Marihatag, an offsite class of the university, is a municipality in the province of Surigao del Sur with a poverty incidence of 45.64% and is a third-income class municipality. It can be observed that it has a lower rate of employed population where the presence of businesses and professional organizations is minimal, in spite of the high capacity of school services from elementary and secondary education.

Higher education leaders therefore need to be aware of the experiences and challenges of the faculty in the implementation of flexible learning during a pandemic era. Hence, this study is designed to assess the actual experiences and challenges of the faculty in the implementation of flexible learning amidst the pandemic.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Model of Research

This study used a qualitative research approach, with an interview guide questionnaire to collect data on faculty experiences and challenges with flexible learning during the pandemic. This design is considered appropriate as the study sought to have the responses of participants about their experiences and challenges encountered.

2.2. Working Groups

The participants of the study consist of the faculty at NEMSU-Marihatag Offsite, with a total number of 18 faculty who experienced flexible learning in the new normal. The study surveyed the entire faculty of the university off-site located in Marihatag, which is a third-income municipality in the province of Surigao del Sur, Philippines, made up of 12 barangays with a poverty rate of 45.64%.

2.3. Data Collecting Instruments

In order to find truth in the findings from the collected information, the researcher formulated a questionnaire and validated it to identify the experiences and challenges encountered by the faculty. The questionnaire has two (2) sections. Section I is for socio-demographic variables, and Section II is for experiences and challenges encountered by the faculty in the implementation of flexible learning in the new normal. The questionnaire has been validated by academic and research experts, and it has also undergone a reliability test for its first section in terms of profiling the participants.

2.4. Process

This study followed several steps in order to come up with clear and unbiased results. First, the researchers conducted a secondary data collection about the socio-demographic profile of the research locale. After secondary data had been gathered, the researchers sent a letter of permission to conduct the study. The research instrument after validation was then distributed by the researchers to the participants after its approval. The researchers then sent the link from the Google form to all faculty to get their socio-demographic profile. After collecting the information, the researchers selected the entire faculty as participants and interviewed them via Zoom (an online platform), and direct observation of the participants was conducted. All the answers were recorded and transcribed. Third, the results were compiled, tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted. Then, the researchers formulated their findings, conclusions, and recommendations based on the results of the study. Finally, the suggested intervention program was presented.

2.5. Data Analysis

The researchers employed video recording and field notes to obtain information on the students' and faculty's experiences and challenges in implementing flexible learning in the new normal. Transcription was done following video recording to ensure that the recordings were clear. To have clear information, the participants' responses were written down. The technique was repeated for the remaining interviews, allowing the researchers to examine the data throughout the study.

After gathering the data, the results were analyzed and translated from *Kamayo* into English. The researchers then were able to get the findings as to the experiences and challenges encountered by the faculty in the implementation of flexible learning in the new normal.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results and discussion of the data acquired in the investigation are presented in this section. The data pertains to the socio-demographic profile of the students and faculty, as well as their experiences and challenges in the implementation of flexible learning. The evaluations made by the faculty were recorded in tabular form before they were analyzed and interpreted.

To aid in the systematic presentation, the datasets were presented in the order of the study's specified specific objectives. These were presented into two (2) sections: Section 1, discusses the socio-demographic profile of the faculty as to age, marital status, employment status, length of teaching experience, training attended, learning devices used, and budget for internet connectivity in flexible learning. Section 2 discussed the experiences and challenges of the faculty in flexible learning.

The socio-demographic profile of the participants:

This study involved 18 faculty from Bachelor of Science in Business Administration majoring in Financial Management and Bachelor of Public Administration programs. The majority of the faculty, which is 36.8%, are 22–25 years old; 68.4% are single; 47.4% are part-time; 68.4% have been teaching less than a year; and 42.1% have attended 1-3 training on flexible learning. Most of the faculty also owned a mobile phone, which is 89.5%, while only 10.5% borrowed a mobile phone for their online class; 94.7% of the participants had no iPad or tablet. Only 5.3% have owned an iPad or tablet, 57.9% have owned a laptop or netbook, while 26.3% of them borrowed one, and 15.8% have no laptop or netbook. The majority of the faculty also has no personal computers, which is 68.4%. In terms of internet connectivity, the faculty's monthly payment for wifi ranged from P1,000 to P1,500 and received the highest score of 63.2 percent. The cost of load per month amounts to P250.00, tied to the cost of load per month of P1,000.00, which is 26.5 percent.

Experiences in teaching using flexible learning during a pandemic

Although faculty members had differing perspectives on their experiences in implementing flexible learning, the majority of them described it as difficult due to bad internet connections and a lack of learning devices or gadgets for teaching and learning. The study [4] emphasized that while there is variation in individual experiences, faculty members' varying levels of adeptness with remote instruction contributed to students' experiences and their degree of satisfaction with their remote learning.

The first experience of the instructors in implementing flexible learning is quite difficult, especially in terms of technology. Many students have weak internet connections and are not digitally competent. The instructors are having difficulty communicating with the students, and the students are unmanageable. According to a study [5], the most frequently mentioned obstacles in online learning were connectivity and a lack of resources (38.2 percent). Attending online classes necessitates a strong internet connection as well as ICT gadgets, which most students lack. The accessibility of the internet in Marihatag is so poor that the submission of their papers was delayed. Furthermore, only 20–25 students can attend an online class, and the longer a session is held, the lower the number of students who can attend.

The participants revealed that most of the students are not reachable due to poor internet connection, lack of

encouragement, and no gadgets. It shows that not everyone has access to the internet, and some of the students are from far-flung areas. If they cannot join, they will just be dependent on the module. The study of [6] stated the technical difficulties with flexible learning, such as insufficient computer hardware or software, insufficient computer and typing abilities, and slow or unavailable internet access during their research. Students complained about the difficult navigation and the absence of intuitive features. A study of [7] also found that while designing flexible learning, it is critical to consider the aspects that influence implementation, such as students' internet connection and the availability of online learning devices. According to the population, in the study of [7], 25.8% of students do not have home internet access, and 43.3 percent are unwilling or unable to buy wifi equipment.

Another real struggle was for the faculty to adjust to the students in a way that they could understand the lecture because of distractions. The students are virtually present but not focused on the class because some are mothers and working students. The students have different priorities. Furthermore, time commitment was noted as a common problem in the study of [6], as expected from students who simultaneously have full or part-time professional responsibilities. Due to work and family demands, students find it difficult to complete coursework and participate on a daily basis.

The faculty struggles in contacting the students because some areas in Marihatag have no internet connection or have poor connection. It was revealed in the study [8] that the sudden shift to digital teaching was challenging for students, but it appears that they adapted quickly to the new situation.

In fact, based on the interview, thirty percent (30%) of the students are on the verge of dropping out due to a lack of online class devices and the internet connection is slow. The majority of students do not have cell phones, and those who live in remote areas have limited or no internet access. As a result, the faculty printed the modules and did home visits.

On the other hand, one participant responded that flexible learning is perfectly fine, except that the students have no stable or sometimes no internet connection and some of them have no gadgets. The faculty prefers a face-to-face class because it is more focused on actual engagement, especially for demonstrative or performance-based lectures and tasks. For instance, if the subject is computers but the students do not have laptops or computers, the emphasis is on terminology. Unfortunately, not everyone has the financial means to buy learning devices. The best thing that the teachers can do is print a module. The module, however, would not be sufficient on its own because it needs instructors' intervention for authentic assessment, monitoring, and follow-up. Therefore, the teachers have a recorded video for those students who live in remote places. This is corroborated by [9], which states that some webcasting platforms can record the video/audio for students to study after the lesson. For a number of reasons, just a few students are able to regularly attend the aforementioned online class. Some participants responded by recording the lecture and uploading it to a YouTube channel so that students may view it whenever they wished.

In this study, it was revealed that contacting the students was particularly challenging. Every class has the highest attendance rate of 40% only. Because they are learning from home and only meeting digitally, the students are unable to focus on their education. Some of them are employed and only attend virtual classes to satisfy their attendance requirements.

Another participant disclosed that when giving a lecture via an online platform, he is unsure whether the students are paying attention or asleep because the cameras are switched off to prevent the connection from being compromised if students open their own cameras. A one-hour online class is insufficient due to the students' numerous queries. Based on the study [6], the online learning environment was not suitable for all learning styles. Some students struggled with the emphasis on reading, online conversations, and group work for knowledge acquisition, claiming that it lacked the richness and depth of in-person education and discussion.

Level of comprehension, performance, and task responsiveness.

The majority of students, according to participants, are average, particularly in reading comprehension, however, they struggle to understand even basic English. Only 32% of students can understand and speak English well, and some have problems expressing themselves. Worse, some of the students' answers came from Google. Also, most of them did not read the instructions before they jumped into the questions. It is described that students' comprehension is comparable to that of a high school student. According to a participant, flexible learning is not a suitable platform for Marihatag students. The study [10] claimed that this kind of learning typically forces students to work more independently than they are accustomed to, so their teachers must adapt how they assist them in reading instructional texts.

Because the majority of students are parents, working adults who are out of school, or alternative learning system (ALS) graduates, instructors must occasionally translate instructions into the vernacular. It is noted then by [11] that other strategies that may aid students include augmenting reading assignments with explicit lesson objectives, lecture podcasts, and/or video tutorials. Furthermore, students can be motivated and assisted in completing their reading assignments by clear objectives and multimedia-supported information. The findings of [12] pointed out that online education technology is difficult to handle, that there is a significant degree of depersonalization, and that there is increased academic dishonesty.

While there are students who are performing well, there are also students who find it hard, especially those who haven't experienced senior high school. Some students do not have a cell phone and are unfamiliar with Google Classroom, email, and other online resources. According to the findings [3], a distance learning teaching and learning approach should have been designed to support remote learners. Developing comprehensive learning resources to help students' learning is frequently part of the approach.

Submission of students' activities and assignments

Most, approximately 70-80% of students, can submit their modules on time. Those who are late are coming from far-flung areas that have no internet connection and have no gadgets. Those who are active in the class can submit their modules on time, and most of the latecomers are parents or working students.

There are also reports that, based on the class record, only a few, such as 10 out of 40 or less than 20% of the students in a class, can submit their modules on time. The rest are because, as for them, they do not have gadgets and internet connection. And there are also students who just try to enroll if they can afford to go to school..

The subject is currently simple, which allows them to complete their modules on time. However, several students have yet to submit their modules. They are easily distracted for a variety of reasons, including a lack of signal in their location, a lack of budget for load, the fact that some are working, do not have devices, and the majority of the students are from low-income families. If they are unable to submit the modules, the teacher will normally send them a note in the group chat.

Some students' tactics, particularly in one community, are that those who are good will answer the module, while the rest will just copy it, leaving teachers in the dark about who is the original. This scenario is supported by [12], which stated that faculty members believe that online classes lead to increased academic dishonesty, are impersonal and lack feeling when compared to face-to-face classes, and are difficult to administer in terms of technology.

Moreover, the online channels that instructors use in the implementation of flexible learning include: Facebook Page for videos; the Messenger app to communicate with students; and Google Classroom to submit modules and output. Google Meet is used for online classes. They interact over Gmail as well. Google Meet and Google Classroom are both straightforward to use. Unlike Zoom, Google Meet does not have a time limit. Because they are simple to use and comprehend, Google Meet and Google Classroom are popular. Furthermore, according to [13], the technology's user interface and ease of use were the fifth most relevant elements. It was discovered that people preferred to accept a technology if they thought it was easy to use and did not demand much work.

Students' attendance at online classes

A report shows that only 37% to 50% of the students in a class can regularly attend virtual classes. Only those students who are active in the class were able to join the online class, and only 15-20% of students were able to actively participate in the online class. Others are not due to the following reasons: no gadgets, no signal or poor internet connection in their area, some are parents and working. Several of the students are from far-flung areas. The findings of [14] revealed that a variety of factors, including professor empowerment, assessment systems, classroom audiovisual equipment, educational curriculum, and class schedules, are linked to students' attendance in classes.

Support provided by the institution in terms of flexible learning

The university provided course materials, seminars, and technical support for the instructors, while the local government contributed funding for transportation vans to deliver modules, televisions, and flash drives to each community. The university also offers technical help in the form of a series of orientations and training workshops on flexible learning, creating syllabi, and developing modules.

As cited by [12], higher education staff must be given ongoing support and training as they adjust to the new normal in higher education and embrace the instructional difficulties posed by the pandemic. In addition to broad technology training, [4] underlined the importance of providing professors with additional training in online pedagogy and best practices. Include certain targeted topics, such as asynchronous pedagogy and trauma-informed education, that would be especially useful during the pandemic and beyond. Students' experiences with their remote learning were influenced by faculty members' various levels of expertise with remote instruction. In addition, create co-teaching models or an optional faculty peer-system in which seasoned online faculty can collaborate with new online teachers in their fields.

The honorarium for the faculty is paid by Marihatag's local government and is relatively late, due in part to the late submission of accomplishment reports by some instructors. Furthermore, the primary issues identified in [15] were a lack of school funds in the design and delivery of modules; students' struggles with self-study; and parents' lack of experience in academically guiding their children. It was also cited by [7] that the local government units may use their community units to assist students who do not have Internet access with enrollment by delivering enrollment forms, providing transportation, and distributing and collecting learning materials.

Experiences in teaching online compared to face-to-face

Instructors have varying perspectives on teaching online, but most of them agree that it is extremely challenging, not just for the instructors but also for the students. The majority of the instructors prefer and encourage face-to-face classes. Instructors said that there is no buffer for internet disruptions and power outages when online. Even if there is no electricity, instructors can continue the course face-to-face, allowing for instruction delivery.

Face-to-face classes create a unique bond between students and instructors, allowing for a more effective exchange of ideas. Students would be encouraged to be more engaged and eager to learn if instructors could see their real-life performances. As stated by [16], the use of online delivery facilitates successful learning. However, this strategy cannot replace interpersonal and supportive relationships.

However, there is a particular concern that the number of enrollees will decline as some of them work and prioritize their families. As claimed by [17], time is a valuable asset for students owing to employment and family obligations, so flexibility is essential. When it came to students with visual and hearing disabilities, flexible learning was regarded as a contradiction. Instructors will face numerous distractions online, such as students who do not have devices, no internet connection, power outages, and other noise. Due to signal

challenges, limited student involvement, and other variables, instructors will be unable to simply begin the lesson while online.

Because students' cameras are sometimes switched off due to slow connectivity, teachers have no idea what students are actually doing and are unaware of the students' reactions. Participants reported that they can also directly mentor students when they meet them in person and can employ more varied techniques in a face-to-face manner, whereas online strategies are severely limited. A study by [18] underlined the importance of researching and applying successful online teaching strategies, particularly those that heavily require a practical component, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fast transition to online learning. Furthermore, [4] emphasized that there is no one-size-fits-all answer for assisting students and professors; instead, an integrated, contextualized, comprehensive, and adaptive strategy will be required. Traditional, in-person solutions cannot simply be transferred to the virtual world.

Challenges encountered in teaching online or in a flexible-learning approach

Instructors face numerous challenges in implementing flexible learning during the pandemic period because the majority of the students are from remote locations and are unable to participate in virtual classes due to a lack of or bad internet connectivity, and some students may not have access to learning devices. According to [5], many people who have worked on building courses and student support systems believe that flexible and open-learning educational approaches necessitate a more rigorous and sympathetic approach to teaching. Furthermore, a study [19] emphasized that the problem for instructors working with online students is transferring good classroom formative evaluation procedures into the online instructional environment, which can be both synchronous and asynchronous in many circumstances. Modules and online classes alone are insufficient to meet the demands of students, given the majority of them have low comprehension skills. From participants' personal experience, not everyone has access to the internet, and some of the students are from far-flung regions. If they are unable to join, they will be completely reliant on the module.

Despite the training made available to the faculty, some believe they still need additional training. Furthermore, as indicated [11], sufficient training is absolutely necessary for a faculty member to shift from teaching traditional teaching to flexible teaching. Another significant challenge for faculty was adjusting to the students in such a way that they could understand the lecture and topics despite the distractions. Because some are mothers and others are working students, the students are virtually there but not engaged in the lesson. Students have various priorities.

Aside from that, there are students who do not have access to communication devices. Those who come from far-flung or remote places have poor or no signal. To provide internet access to students, [4] advised creating Wi-Fi hotspots in outdoor or other safe locations throughout the area. He added that affiliates can access Wi-Fi regardless of their home campuses at institutions with numerous campus locations by creating a simplified, effective, and user-friendly virtual faculty office hours system as well as investing in platforms and tools that support this purpose, such as scheduling software that allows users to arrange appointments without having to send an email, and web-based telephone tools for teachers to interact with students who do not have access to the internet or computers.

4.CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implementation of flexible learning in NEMSU-Marihatag is quite difficult for both instructors and students.

The lack of internet connection and devices hamper the teaching and learning process in higher education as to students' performance in terms of attendance in virtual classes where the instructors can supposedly reinforce and fill the gap between the distributed printed modules and students' performance in accomplishing their tasks. The gap in terms of non-availability of technology (learning devices), and notably poor connectivity, is driving the issues faced by instructors in implementing flexible learning during the pandemic. Students' educational backgrounds, as well as their geographical background, have an impact on their academic performance. Poor comprehension and English proficiency problems could be caused by a lack of educational foundation, necessitating the development of a student support system and intervention program for that concern.

Instructors and students are more likely to use online platforms that provide greater benefits to them in terms of consumption, infinite time, ease, and user-friendliness. They have also used social media platforms to provide more flexible learning, especially with demonstrative activities or performance-based tasks and assessments. The mode of orientation provided to the faculty and students may have been insufficient and ineffective due to low student attendance in virtual classes. Due to the fact that some students have poor comprehension skills, supplying printed interactive modules is insufficient to suit their needs.

The institution may be lacking in the usage of established management information systems or databases capable of tracking down student information details, which will aid in follow-up and assistance for individuals who are unreachable and live in remote places. Apart from online resources, communication tools have been recognized as areas for improvement that students can directly access or contact.

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

To address the issue of technological limitations, universities in similar situations may consider allocating budgets for internet connection, available communication tools, and transportation to specific areas to assist students with research and virtual meetings in collaboration with the local government.

Local government bodies may be able to help students by providing offline resources for recorded lectures at specific times. To inspire educators even more, a method for timely honorarium distribution must be devised.

Instructors should also be retrained on how to use online and offline tools (such as lecture videos) in the same way that students use them. To be a part of the student assistance program, training in the usage of online technologies such as Google Classroom, Gmail, Google Meet, and other online

applications is still required. This will address the unfamiliarity with using online tools.

A comprehensive student orientation training in different modalities (recorded and unrecorded), covering how to use online and digital library resources may be considered and a thorough reorientation of students, including their parents in their position as counterparts, is required to ensure the purchase of technology for flexible learning. They need a clear motivation and retention strategy to value education and improve their grades. Refresher courses in flexible learning and competency-based education delivery are needed for faculty, including training in teaching strategies and effective classroom management.

Because some students who have only completed alternative learning systems and have not completed senior high school are found to have poor or slow reading comprehension and have difficulty speaking, a special training course on reading comprehension and English proficiency is recommended as part of the student's development support intervention program.

It is vital for the university to strengthen its management information system as well, which can track down information from students' profiles for faculty to utilize in tracing their students necessary for follow-up, intervention, and monitoring, particularly those who do not have access to online learning devices.

The implementation of limited face-to-face classes is recommended to respond to the identified problems, especially for those who are located in remote areas and have poor or unreliable internet connections and no learning devices.

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