

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY STUDENTS IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING: THE CASE OF THE PHILIPPINES DURING PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: *The study assessed the challenges of the students in the implementation of flexible learning in the new normal. Specifically, it evaluated students' socio-demographic profile, understanding of flexible learning, students' feedback on modules and activities, online platforms teachers used, the usual things students do during the online classes, the frequency of virtual classes, the teaching strategy of instructors, and suggestions to improve the delivery of instruction. The study used qualitative research design, utilizing an interview guide questionnaire through a personal interview. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 students from the Bachelor of Science in Business Administration majoring in Financial Management and the Bachelor of Public Administration. Using a phenomenological design, the researchers conducted an interview to identify the experiences and challenges of students in the implementation of flexible learning at North Eastern Mindanao State University (NEMSU) Marihatag Offsite class. Deductive thematic analysis was used in the interpretation and coding of data. Based on the findings of the study, the major challenges encountered by the students are technological limitations caused by financial constraints, particularly the lack of an internet connection and learning devices. A student support system, particularly on the aspect of technology, is recommended to address the identified gaps as defined in the study. Furthermore, while flexible learning gives students more flexibility, the institution should also adopt a policy to deliver limited face-to-face classes in collaboration with higher authorities to safeguard the students' health and safety during the pandemic.*

Keywords: challenges, students, flexible learning, pandemic, technology, internet connection, module, university, faculty, local government units

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic changed learning in many unprecedented ways. It was quite challenging for students to adjust to the new normal, missing the in-person interaction with faculty. Schools need to know how students feel about flexible learning and learn more about their experiences and challenges.

Based on the study [1], flexible learning enables students to choose their own learning path and learn at a time and location that works for them and is one way to address limitations in higher education during a time of pandemic. It was pointed out in the study [2] that flexibility can be indicated by the methods of assessments, such as presentations, research papers, team projects, peer assessments, and standardized tests. In the case of North Eastern Mindanao State University (NEMSU), it implemented its flexible learning in both modular and virtual meeting approaches by providing both printed and or digital modules to the students and requiring them to attend a scheduled weekly meeting for reinforcement of competencies, monitoring, and follow-up. However, there are reports that some of them were unable to meet the academic requirements and dropped out of school.

Marihatag, a municipality in the province of Surigao del Sur, is a third-income class municipality with a poverty incidence of 45.64 percent. It is also an off-site class of the university. Despite the high capacity of educational services from elementary and secondary education, it can be seen from [3] that it has a lower rate of employed people where the existence of enterprises and professional organizations is minimal. In the first semester of 2020, NEMSU offered two programs in Marihatag, drawing 305 students, of whom 35%

came from far-flung areas. Even though the faculty encouraged students to attend virtual classes, about 30 to 40% were able to do so regularly for some reason, which this study tried to evaluate and validate.

Hence, this study is designed to assess the experiences and challenges in the implementation of flexible learning in remote communities in order to come up with an intervention program to identify their needs and resolve problems. This study ought to answer the following questions:

- [1] What are the participants' perspectives on flexible learning?
2. What are the challenges encountered by the participants towards flexible learning?
3. What intervention program may be proposed for the academe as an output of the study?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Model of Research

This study used a qualitative research design using an interview guide questionnaire and a personal interview to collect data on students' experiences and challenges with implementing flexible learning during a pandemic. This design is considered appropriate because the study's objective was to get participants' feedback on their experiences and challenges.

2.2 Working Group

The study's target population was selected second-year students of NEMSU Marihatag off Site: 15 students from the Bachelor of Public Administration and 15 students from the Bachelor of Science in Financial Management programs. They came from two municipalities: Marihatag and San Agustin, specifically, from the communities of Antipolo, Barangay Poblacion, Barangay Bayan, Barangay Pong-on, Barangay Janipaan, Barangay Hornasan, and Barangay San

Isidro. The participants were selected based on their demographic profile in terms of location and age. They were chosen because the majority of them were mature enough and lived in remote areas where the researchers wanted to learn about their experiences during the pandemic.

2.3. Data Collecting Instruments

The researchers developed and validated a questionnaire to determine the experiences and challenges faced by students in order to find truth in the findings from the gathered data. The questionnaire has two (2) sections. Section I contains socio-demographic data, whereas Section II contains student experiences and challenges in implementing flexible learning in the new normal. All two (2) sections of the questionnaire were completed by participants.

2.4. Process

This study followed numerous phases in order to produce clear and unbiased research outcomes.

The researchers began by acquiring secondary data on the socio-demographic profile of the research area. After gathering secondary data, the researchers wrote a letter to the Municipal Mayor's Office and the Barangay Captains, requesting permission to conduct the study. The researchers provided the research instrument to the participants after receiving consent from the Municipal Mayor and Barangay Captains. To collect the socio-demographic profile of the students, the researchers forwarded the link from the Google form to all 2nd-year students.

After gathering the data, the researchers chose the participants based on their demographic profile in terms of age and geography. Personal interviews with the entire class were then conducted. Data was collected through a questionnaire and direct observation of students. Every answer was recorded and transcribed. In the third step, the data was compiled, tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted. The findings of the study were then used to form the researchers' conclusions, findings, and recommendations. Finally, the suggested intervention program was given to Marihatag Offsite students and faculty.

2.5. Data Analysis

The researchers employed video recording and field notes to obtain information on the students' 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.

The results were examined and translated from Kamayo to English after the data was collected. The researchers were thus able to obtain information on the students' experiences and challenges in implementing flexible learning during a pandemic.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section contains the results and discussion of the data collected in this study. The data pertains to the socio-demographic profile of the students, as well as their experiences and challenges. The evaluations given to the

students were recorded in tabular form before they were analyzed and interpreted.

Socio-demographic profile of the participants

This study involved 30 students from Bachelor of Science in Business Administration majoring in Financial Management and Bachelor of Public Administration programs. The study found out that 68% of the participants were female and 20–21 years old; 93% were single; 12% were working students. Most of the students also owned a mobile phone, which is 68%, while only 23% borrowed a mobile phone for their online class. Only 1% has shared a laptop, and 12% have borrowed a laptop or netbook for their online classes. All of the students have no personal computers. In terms of internet connectivity, the students' monthly payment for WIFI ranged from P1, 000 to P1, 500, which is 16%. The cost of load per month amounts to P250.00, which is 54%.

Students' understanding of flexible learning

Students understand that flexible learning is both online and modular. Students answered that flexible learning offers a module that allows them to continue their education and sustain their learning online rather than in person. It is preferable for them, especially for students who work but whose learning is limited. Although modularity exists, they said that it is more difficult to implement than face-to-face learning. However, other participants viewed flexible learning as fine because there are modules that can be read rather than extremely demanding online classes, preferring a virtual meeting to a physical meeting since the discussion moves too quickly for students to fully comprehend. It also provides flexibility for them. Students who are married said that working and caring for children takes up a lot of time, which makes it difficult for them to focus. There is a timing conflict because of the job. They cannot always respond to the module due to family obligations. They also encounter weak or no signals. Some students replied that they do not have a cellphone, so they could not complete the module online or on paper. Some of the added concerns identified include stress, a lack of time, and an inability to conduct research. In general, financial issues have a significant impact on their studies, particularly the lack of a cell phone, internet access, and load allowance.

Distribution and retrieval of module

As to this aspect, it has been found that there is no set schedule for the distribution and retrieval of printed modules, and the students are responsible for picking up and returning the printed modules from the office. The digital module was made available for distribution via Google Classroom, email, and Messenger. The module will be picked up and returned at Marihatag's offsite office, but some parts of the modules are blurred. In comparison to its early implementation, some students have practiced securing the modules through digital means, and instructors made it available to them as a less expensive way. Occasionally, the instructor will provide a link via group chat, where students will either see or download the modules. Unlike earlier, when there was a schedule, students would collect the modules before submitting them to the office. Their modules are currently distributed and retrieved rarely; hence, students are in charge of collecting and returning them to the school site. Hence,

some students always go online and download the modules. When the modules become accessible, students will obtain them by downloading them from the internet. They receive the modules in the office as soon as they become available.

Online platforms teacher used

In general, students use online platforms that are user-friendly, inexpensive, and limitless in terms of time use, such as Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger. The most commonly used one is the Google Meet. Messenger is also used for group communication. They chose these platforms because they are always accessible and available. Furthermore, [4] claims that it poses a useful challenge to both the educator and the students. Students must be adept at using technology. This suggests that in order to make the most of this virtual classroom, both students and teachers will need to think creatively. It is advantageous for them to push themselves and equip themselves with the 21st century abilities required by the current educational system.

However, some students find attending scheduled virtual classes difficult because the location lacks both an internet and a telephone connection. The majority of them are unable to attend since there is no internet connection, no phone, no load, and no signal in their location. The availability of technology, as mentioned by [5], is a crucial element in the study since it may affect the learner's ability to understand and finish academic activities during online education. The results of the [5] study demonstrate that, despite the fact that flexible learning is the best option for the university to replace in-person instruction, not all students—particularly those who live in remote areas, in areas with unstable networks, or in families with unstable finances—will find it applicable to them. Administrators and educators must take into account alternate learning strategies that are appropriate for students' backgrounds during a pandemic, such as employing non-digital technologies. However, despite the fact that most students thought that taking classes with unconventional formats was difficult, the study [6] discovered that they did not think that the format of the class would have an impact on their academic performance.

Usual things students do during the online classes

Some of the tasks that students commonly do when they are online are listening to the lectures, taking notes, sharing ideas, responding to questions from the instructors, and cooperating with their classmates on certain activities. The first thing the students did was prepare the cellphone. The lesson will then be delivered by the faculty. There will be reporting and an idea exchange. Then they will be observing and participating in the discussion. They will listen to the discussion while taking notes, offer some suggestions, and respond to the question.

On the frequency of virtual class

In general, the frequency of virtual classes or attendance rate of students is low because most students, particularly those who reside in rural areas, aside from lack of a cell phone, internet connection, or load, are unable to attend owing to work. This is corroborated by the study [7], which shows that students' home learning environments posed the biggest challenge, while technological literacy and competency posed the least difficulty. Furthermore, the ability to balance

education and life, time management abilities, acceptance of personal responsibility, instructor (in) accessibility, and connection with peers are the five primary repeating themes of student experiences, according to [8].

Moreover, students are unable to engage in virtual classrooms since they do not have access to a cell phone. In the virtual classroom, some students' learning is impaired because their cell phone screens are too small. Students claimed that they are capable of handling the activities, but that their internet connection is a problem. One participant stated that he has never attended virtual meetings because he lacks access, which causes him stress. The lack of high-speed internet for students living in rural and isolated places to attend lectures and do any type of research is a concern in the era of online learning [9], who emphasizes his point that this is a problem for those students. As the online classes were novel for the students, the teachers' first obstacle was to motivate the students to learn the lesson throughout the online class. It was quite difficult to sustain students' interests because the teachers could not see the students in person. The teachers cannot see all of the students' reactions while having the class. It was also found out by [8] that some students were satisfied with their online courses but still struggled with balancing online courses with work responsibilities.

Though teachers have a good technique for scheduling virtual lessons because there is no time conflict, virtual classes are not an option for some students because they do not have a cellphone and their location does not have an internet connection. Students would rather attend a live class than a virtual one, because for them, virtual classes offer less learning than face-to-face classes due to distractions in the environment. Because they could not always make it to class, they described it as ineffective.

Teaching strategy of instructors

According to [10], it is the teaching and learning process that brings the curriculum to life that determines what happens in the classroom and, subsequently, the quality of the learning outcomes. Another study states [11] that learners' choices can be offered using several instructional approaches, such as lectures with tutorials, independent study, discussion, seminar groups, debates, student-led discovery approaches, and educational gamification.

In this study, the strategies used by the instructors were visual aids, PowerPoint presentations, and verbal and non-verbal exercises. The instructor used a PowerPoint throughout the presentation, inquired about the students' comprehension of the discussions, and allowed students to participate in the events. This method is helpful, but owing to a poor internet connection, students cannot always join the lesson. In the group chat, the instructor will send the students videos and examples, use audio lectures, and communicate with the students to keep them from growing bored.

Moreover, the findings of [12] revealed that flexibility, cost-effectiveness, electronic research availability, ease of connection to the internet, and well-designed class interface were the students' positive experiences, while their negative experiences were caused by delayed feedback from instructors, unavailable technical support from instructors,

lack of self-regulation, sense of isolation, monotonous instructional method, and poorly-designed course content. Due to the crisis, [13] also revealed that participants lack motivation, poor concentration, and significant learning difficulties. The organization of work at the school and the efforts of teachers in this crisis are assessed as being very effective.

Suggestions to improve the delivery of instruction

Generally, students suggested face-to-face instruction rather than module or online classes, as well as visiting them at least once a month. This approach points to the blended learning model, which was defined by [14] as a combination of pedagogical strategies that blend the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technological advancements of online learning. Furthermore, [15] asserts that blended learning promotes student-led learning and enables independent learning. Students have more freedom in their studies, which enhances their academic performance.

It is also suggested by the students for the university to provide them with greater internet access so that they can use and discuss the lessons effectively during virtual classes. In fact, one participant stated that she had a better understanding of the module than the virtual class. As found out by [16], the primary issues were a lack of school funding for the creation and distribution of modules; students' difficulties with self-study; and parents' ignorance of how to academically direct their children. In conclusion, the study was able to pinpoint the participants' main resource, readiness, and communication challenges.

Another option is that the faculty gives extra attention to students who are regularly missing from virtual sessions and that the faculty is aware of the students' situation. This is corroborated by [17], which highlights the need to support students to establish plans and strategies for making decisions about their learning. Many people lack experience with the advantages and drawbacks of learning in a technologically advanced setting.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Flexible learning has been shown to be challenging for participants. Despite the teaching strategies employed by the faculty, the majority of students, particularly those who live in rural locations, claimed that they were unable to participate in the scheduled virtual classes due to technological limitations. Indeed, financial issues have a significant impact on their studies, particularly a lack of internet connection, a lack of a cell phone, and a lack of a load allowance. Work-related time conflicts and poor time management are minimal contributors to the challenges encountered by students under a flexible learning approach. As a result, it would be preferable for the institution, in collaboration with the local government unit, to assist or provide a support system in terms of giving learning devices to the students, such as cell phones, load, and a better internet connection, most especially to those who cannot afford the said online and offline flexible learning technologies.

In addition, faculty must be motivated and involved with their students as part of their teaching style. The university should pay a monthly or even weekly visit to the students on site. A

variety of effective teaching methodologies must be used to adapt to their situation. It would also be beneficial if faculty could deliver more easy-to-understand lectures and activities, as well as ensure that outcome-based education is implemented.

While flexible learning gives students more flexibility in terms of time, speed, and technique, the institution should also adopt a policy to deliver limited face-to-face classes in collaboration with higher authorities to safeguard the institution's health and safety during the pandemic. Furthermore, the modules should be made available in both printed and soft copy with a system of distribution and retrieval that is followed on a regular basis and distribution that is completed on time.

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