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Flexible Learning Opportunities and Challenges: Exploring the Experiences of Benguet State University During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of Benguet State University (BSU) students and faculty on flexible learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The researchers used an embedded mixed methods approach. Survey questionnaires in Google Forms for faculty members were distributed online and in print on the different campuses of BSU from July 2020 to May 2021. Questionnaires for students were distributed only in La Trinidad Campus. Descriptive statistical tools were utilized to analyze the quantitative data, while thematic analysis was employed for the qualitative data. Document review and analysis were done to validate the survey data. Findings indicate that both teachers and students faced challenges related to technological access, including infrastructure; financial constraints; and knowledge gaps. Despite these pedagogical and technical obstacles, both faculty and students demonstrated resilience in adapting to the demands and opportunities of flexible learning delivery. Institutional support was provided through training and the implementation of flexible distance learning guidelines. Various technology-friendly programs and social media apps such as Facebook, Google Classroom, Edmodo, and YouTube were used to supplement distance learning. Strengthening technological and pedagogical support and access for both educators and students may contribute to a robust distance learning structure that can be effectively applied in the long term.

Introduction

The education sector worldwide has been largely affected when the novel Coronavirus disease broke out during the early quarter of 2020. Governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Shahzad et al. (2020) remarked that almost 120 countries have stopped face-to-face learning that affected approximately a billion students' education. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020) reported that as of February 26, 2021, 208,848,445 learners worldwide from pre-primary to tertiary education levels were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippines, the suspension of classes from March 17 to May 31, 2020 affected over 28

million Filipinos across academic levels who have to stay home and comply with the quarantine protocols. Joaquin et al. (2020) shared that certain higher education institutions in the Philippines have implemented policies to cater to the enrolled 3.5 million tertiary-level students. One of these policies included the employment of flexible learning strategy for students to continue their education. Magsambol (2021) noted that the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) adopted the policy on Flexible Learning (CHED CMO number 4 series of 2020) because the Philippine government opted not to risk the "exposure of the country's educational stakeholders to the same risk if another pandemic comes in."

The continuous spread and the recent mutation of the virus into other more infectious variants was another cause of alarm. This situation resulted in more educational institutions being faced with the challenge of maintaining continuity of teaching and learning while the closure of schools was extended. The immediate and seemingly simple solution was to conduct remote classes for education to continue.

Flexible learning, otherwise known as remote education, enables both the educators and the learners to continue with education while staying in the comforts of their own abode. He emphasized that educational institutions resort to this approach when there occur emergency situations that may be a threat to students' safety (Ray, 2020). Bandalaria (2020) noted that there are several models of flexible or remote learning; these models include offline materials/non-digital instructional materials like printed material plus online learning activities (synchronous and/or asynchronous); offline/ online instructional materials (non-digital and digital) and online interaction (synchronous and/or asynchronous); and purely online instruction. She noted that online interaction is common to the three modes.

Countries that needed to shift abruptly to flexible learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic experienced several difficulties. Given that these countries do not have a repository of learning materials for the remote learning set-up, educators were subjected to the challenge of quickly designing, implementing, and sustaining a distance learning program while schools were closed (Cobo et al., 2021).

Afroz et al. (2021) noted that distraction and reduced focus, heavy workload, problems with technology and the internet, lack of information and communication technology (ICT) knowledge, poor network infrastructure, limited availability of educational resources, low attendance of learners, uncooperative learners, and insufficient support from instructors and colleagues were the most recurrent reasons for a negative attitude towards flexible learning from both students and teachers.

Ferri et al. (2020) categorized the challenges of emergency remote education into technological, pedagogical, and social. Technological challenges include lack of internet connectivity and electronic devices. Pedagogical challenges include lack of digital skills, lack of structured content versus the abundance of online resources, learners' lack of interactivity and motivation, and teachers' lack of social and cognitive presence (the ability to construct meaning through sustained communication within a community of inquiry). The social challenges are mainly related to the lack of human interaction between teachers and students as well as among the students, the lack of physical spaces at home to receive lessons and the lack of support from parents who are frequently working remotely in the same spaces.

Pedagogical and instructional challenges have been emphasized also by Caluza et al. (2017). The authors noted that most of the teachers have basic knowledge of ICT that needed improvement. In this situation, teachers need more training to integrate ICT in teaching and other related tasks assigned to them to be able to assist in the development of ICT literacy of the students. Teaching in a flexible learning mode requires specialized skill sets including understanding how to conduct classes in a virtual environment, knowing when and how to use video conferencing, sharing content, and responding to students' submissions.

Since the Philippines adopted flexible learning in 2020, there have been reports that both teachers and students faced a variety of challenges. Magsambol (2021) noted that students had been struggling to cope with the demands of online learning, while Akindele (2020) claimed remote learning remains out of reach for 500 million students. Codamon (2020) also stated that with the new normal setup of the educational system brought about by the pandemic, parents, teachers,

learners, and all stakeholders are faced with the challenges of strengthening connectivity in areas where there is weak or no signal, expenses for the reproduction and packaging of modules, the means of delivery of instructional packets from the teacher to the learners, and the need for para-teachers or community learning facilitators. In the case of the learners who have been exposed mostly to face-to-face classes prior to the emergence of COVID-19, the struggle was enormous, especially in the first few months of the pandemic when classes were done on modular or online platforms.

Consequently, an academic freeze was demanded by many students and groups in the country. The stress of the majority of Filipino students due to the sudden shift in the learning set-up initially led to online protests. Joaquin et al. (2020) cited that the social media had been filled with hashtags like #NoStudentLeftBehind, #NoSchoolLeftBehind, #EndOnlineClasses, #EndTheSem, and #NoToOnlineClasses that show students' sentiments. In addition, these authors also underlined that student governments from different universities in the Philippines called on the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to mandate the cancellation of online classes citing Jones' (2019) assertion that "45% of Filipino citizens (46 million) and 74% (34,500) of public schools do not have access to the Internet." In addition to this, Joaquin et al. (2020) also cited Bagayas' (2020) remark that the continuation of online classes increased the burden of students during lockdown since there were issues with the lack of environments conducive to learning at home and the effectiveness of online lectures.

Advisories from the Benguet State University administration (2020) directed faculty members to continue classes employing alternative learning modes in order to make learning available to students. Faculty were tasked with the preparation of learning materials for the topics that were missed during the commencement of the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) that began on March 17, 2020. These learning materials were communicated or delivered to students via email, Facebook Messenger, learning management system, calls, and text messages. The sudden change in the teaching and learning environment brought many challenges to both faculty and students. An Office Memorandum issued in 2021 emphasized that the University still adheres to flexible learning as the primary learning delivery mode.

Hence, this study was conducted to explore the experiences of Benguet State University (BSU) students and faculty on flexible learning. Specifically, the study: (1) identified the challenges encountered by students and faculty members on flexible learning; (2) determined the coping mechanisms employed by students and faculty members to deal with the challenges brought by flexible learning; and (3) ascertained the opportunities on flexible learning as discovered by students and faculty members.

Methodology

The study was conducted at Benguet State University during the school year 2020-2021. Purposeful sampling was used in searching for respondents. For the faculty respondents, the following criteria were used: the faculty (a) taught in any of the three campuses of BSU; (b) taught during the school year 2020-2021; and (c) volunteered to participate in the study. On the other hand, the criteria utilized to choose student respondents included: the student is a) enrolled in BSU La Trinidad campus; (b) enrolled during the school year 2020-2021; (c) enrolled in one subject under the Department of Social Studies; and (d) willing to participate for free in the study.

The study involved 129 faculty respondents (out of the 472 faculty) from the three campuses of Benguet State University (La Trinidad, Buguias, and Bokod). During the school year 2020-2021, most of the faculty members had 21-29 units workload. During the pandemic, most of the teacher respondents stayed in urban areas. On the other hand, there were 919 student respondents (out of the 10,471 students) all from the La Trinidad campus. The majority of the respondents stayed in rural areas (provinces), specifically in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) and the Ilocos Region, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study employed mixed methods research, particularly the embedded approach. The researchers gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from the respondents using the same questionnaire. The quantitative data was used for the frequency and percentage counts in relation to the respondents' profiles. The qualitative

responses, on the other hand, were gathered to answer the study's objectives. Both quantitative and qualitative data were utilized in the analysis and interpretation of results.

The primary data gathering instrument used was a survey questionnaire in Google survey form. The survey form was composed of three portions, namely: brief demographic profile of respondents, close and open-ended questions on flexible learning during the pandemic, and open-ended questions on mental health and the pandemic. Though most of the questionnaires were sent to the respondents online through a link, some printed copies were distributed in the different campuses, colleges, and institutes of Benguet State University. Informed consent was integrated into the forms. Data gathering was done from July 2020 to May 2021 in time for making policy recommendations. The researchers sought the help of faculty members in each college of the three campuses to help in sending and sharing the link for the questionnaire in Google form to other faculty in each respective college in each of the campuses. To ensure maximum faculty participation, hard copies of the questionnaire were also printed and distributed in every college. These questionnaires were then retrieved after a month of follow-ups. The same link of the questionnaire was sent to all the classes of the faculty in the Department of Social Studies who agreed to let their students participate in the study. The faculty explained to their students that their participation would be voluntary and that they can decline to participate. It was also made clear to them that not taking part in the activity will not have any impact on their scores or grades.

Most of the statistical data were analyzed through descriptive statistical tools (frequency and percent); thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the survey. The authors utilized the model of inductive thematic saturation of the data with a focus on the identification of codes or themes. Document review (with the use of consented open letters, posts in official Facebook pages, and institutional memoranda issuances) and analysis were done to validate data gathered through the survey.

Results and Discussion

Challenges Experienced by Faculty Members in Adopting Flexible Learning

Figure 1 shows the top ten faculty responses on the challenges they experienced in adopting flexible learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Based on these responses, corroborated with faculty narratives in social media, the challenges faced by BSU teachers were categorized into the following themes: lack of logistics, learning packet or module preparation issues, and student-related concerns.

Lack of Logistics

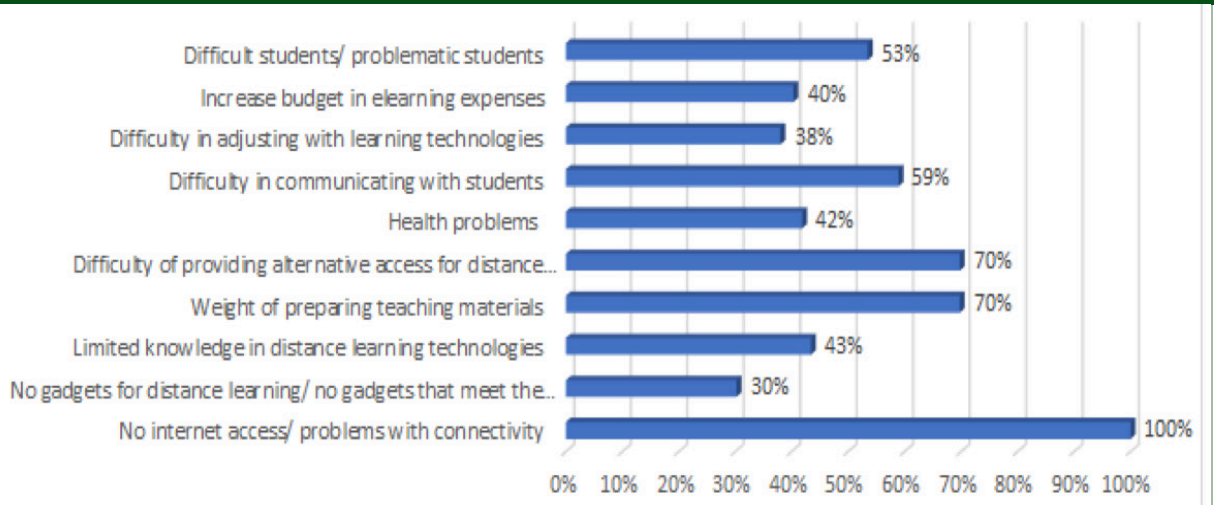
The primary challenge that confronted the faculty was internet connectivity (Figure 1). Respondents revealed that internet connectivity had been crucial since this was the primary mode of connection between them and their students during the implementation of the flexible learning setup. Internet connectivity was utilized by both faculty and students to access learning management systems like Google Classroom, social media sites like Facebook and Messenger, electronic mail, and other applications that were utilized for flexible learning. However, internet connection in BSU campuses was also a challenge. This situation was clearly seen from the posts of faculty on the BSU Faculty Club Facebook Page. Some of these posts included the following statements:

> "the very glaring issue/challenge that I know in the implementation of flexible learning that the University has adopted is poor and unstable internet connection; there should be net connection in every office or a common room with net connection; *sana po ay madagdagan ang internet connection or wifi sa opisina. 3 lang po ang LAN sa opisina at 24 po ang faculty na nagsasalitan* (I hope the internet connection or wi-fi in the office will be increased. There are only 3 LANS while there are 24 faculty who take turns in using these)."

In addition, not all faculty had a post-paid internet connection at home. A number of faculty members relied on mobile data for internet connection, and this was also posted on the BSU Faculty Club Facebook Page. One faculty

Figure 1

Top 10 Challenges Experienced by BSU Faculty Members in Adopting Flexible Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic



mentioned, "*Ado mam ti teachers nga mobile data met lang usar da*... (Many teachers also use mobile data)." Because of this, not all faculty members conducted synchronous online classes and instead opted to use asynchronous means to deliver their lessons to students. A number of faculty members also allotted a portion of their month's salary to buy load for mobile data connection. Teacher-respondents shared that they spent Php100.00 to Php5,000.00 monthly to pay for data or internet connection for them to deliver their lessons by uploading their learning materials and checking student requirements submitted online, as well as following up students. In addition to internet connectivity, 30% of the respondents (Figure 1) noted that they do not have the necessary gadgets for distance learning. This problem probably is the case because prior to the pandemic, faculty members took turns in using the department or college desktop; they did not foresee the need to have their own laptops.

These challenges were also voiced by the former faculty club president. She highlighted the "financial stress of personally bearing the cost of internet services for many teachers at home or within the university where internet connectivity remains problematic. Others had to upgrade or purchase new laptops or cell phones just so they can go online (BSU Faculty Club, 2020a)."

BSU administration, on the other hand, recognized this financial stress on the faculty; as part of its support and/or assistance to the faculty, cell cards worth Php1,500.00 were given to each faculty during the semesters of the school year 2020-2021. In addition, as a response to the clamor of the faculty to improve internet connectivity on the campus, the internet connection was "upgraded from 30 mbps to 200 mbps for faculty and staff use (BSU, 2020)."

In accordance with IATF mandates, faculty members were also accorded work-from-home (WFH) schedules; faculty members utilized their internet connections at home to compensate for the work they cannot do in their offices due to the unstable connection. However, there were a number of faculty members who opted not to avail of these WFH not because they were unafraid of COVID-19 whenever they travel to their respective offices, but because they find it burdensome to prepare several documents as attachments to their work-from-home accomplishment reports. This result was also seen in the letter of the former BSU Faculty Club President to the former BSU OIC President Director Danilo B. Bose: "Many gave up their WFH option because of the greater stress felt from the requirements of doing so as imposed by their superior, e.g. plan and accomplishment checked by superiors to the detail to ensure that it impeccably commensurate to the required eight-hour work (BSU Faculty Club, 2020b)."

Learning Packet or Module Preparation Concerns

The second most pressing concern that was faced by the faculty was the difficulty of providing alternative access to distance learning materials and the burden of preparing teaching materials. Since modular learning (offline learning) was one mode of flexible learning that was also utilized by the faculty especially to cater to students who did not have any access to the internet, faculty members transformed their lectures into learning packets or modules that were printed and then photocopied by students. In relation to this, the faculty shared that they faced limited supplies of printing materials like bond paper and printing ink. They also took on the concern of who will shoulder the reproduction of the learning packets or modules, and how these will be delivered to students who were in the various provinces of the Cordilleras and cannot travel because of the lockdown restrictions.

The BSU administration distributed supplies of printing materials; however, these were not enough to cover the printing of modules or learning packets since a huge number of students chose to undergo modular learning. Hence, there were faculty members who also resorted to using their personal supplies and money to print their students' learning materials. This was narrated by some of the colleagues of the researchers in the department where they were affiliated with. The reproduction of these learning materials added to the financial stress of the faculty along with the lack of or limited internet access.

To help decrease the faculty's module concerns, the Office of the University President issued Office Advisory dated February 1, 2021, which emphasized that students were given the option to download their learning materials or print or photocopy these at their own cost. This advisory came as a relief to the faculty. Consequently, most teachers uploaded their learning materials for the second semester using online platforms such as Google Classroom or Facebook Messenger.

Another serious challenge faced by the faculty is the burden of preparing these learning packets or modules. Since the shift to flexible learning was sudden, the faculty had to convert their lecture notes and PowerPoint presentations into learning packets or modules in a short time. Moreover, based on their profile, many faculty members needed to prepare two to four sets of modules or learning packets since they handled two to four subject preparations during the semesters. In addition, their workloads remained within 21 to 30 units for the first and second semesters of the school year 2020-2021. All of these heightened the physical and mental stress inferred to have been experienced by a majority of the faculty. Converting lecture notes or powerpoint presentations for two to four subject preparations into learning packets or modules with a prescribed format in a short span of time was really burdensome on the part of the faculty, especially the older ones. Data (Figure 1) revealed that 43% of the faculty had limited knowledge of distance learning technologies, and 38% experienced difficulty in adjusting to learning technologies. One even mentioned that the thought of early retirement came to mind because of the difficulties the person experienced in the preparation of these teaching materials, use of gadgets, and navigation of the learning management systems like Google Classroom.

These predicaments reached the office of the former Faculty Club President who underlined that "the preparation of modules and learning packets for several subjects and finding ways to have learning materials delivered to where these can be accessed by students has been physically and mentally exhausting" (BSU Faculty Club, 2020).

The BSU administration, through its Learning and Development Services, responded by sponsoring free seminar workshops as well as trainings on module preparation and packaging, navigation of Google Classroom, and other ICT-related topics to all faculty. This action by the administration indicates that it recognized the struggles of its faculty members, and implemented measures to help address the concerns.

Student-Related Concerns

The third challenge faced by faculty members was the existence of student-related concerns. The respondents actually labeled these students as difficult or problematic (Figure 1). They described these students as those who lacked ICT skills; students who found it difficult to use the features of the Google Classroom and other internet applications that were utilized in flexible learning; students who did not utilize their real names in

their Facebook and Google accounts; students who submitted their activities in any available portal (despite being instructed by the faculty to submit using only one specific platform) making it difficult for faculty to look for their work for checking purposes; and students who sent SMS or direct messages (through Facebook Messenger) or call their instructors/professors even during night time and weekends. The characterization given to these students probably justified the connotation of them being difficult or problematic. The students also tried to adjust to flexible learning; hence, these concerns. Consequently, these student concerns increased the stress experienced by the faculty.

Based on the findings, generally, the BSU faculty encountered technological (internet connectivity) and pedagogical challenges for two semesters. In addition, these findings conform with Afroz et al.'s (2021) assertion that flexible learning comes with problems that included heavy workloads, problems with technology and the internet, lack of ICT knowledge and poor infrastructure, limited availability of educational resources, low attendance of learners, and uncooperative learners.

Challenges Experienced by Students in Adopting Flexible Learning

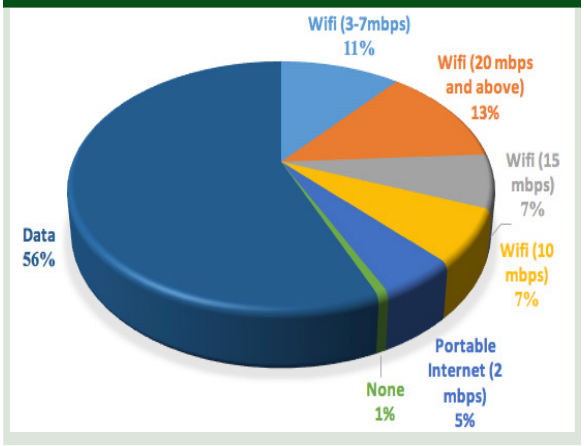
College students were not spared from the academic struggle brought about by the pandemic, especially in developing countries like the Philippines where education was already plagued by problems even before the pandemic as claimed by Rotas and Cahapay (2020). It is not surprising then that the sudden change in the teaching and learning environment and the stress that came along with this also brought challenges to BSU students. These challenges were grouped into the following themes: lack of logistics and academic-related concerns.

Lack of Logistics

Similar to the faculty experience, the lack of access to high-speed internet connection and access to distance learning technologies were also the foremost concern of the students. Fifty-four percent of the respondents stayed in the various provinces of the Cordilleras during the first year of the pandemic, and 56% of students relied on the use of mobile data for internet connection (Figure 2). On the other hand, most of the student respondents who stayed in the urban areas also subscribed to mobile data for internet access.

Figure 2

Internet Source/Access of a BSU Student During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Internet access in most rural areas in the Philippines was a major concern during the implementation of the flexible learning mode. Internet connection may be limited, or worst none at all. Even if the greater majority of respondents subscribed to mobile data, this did not guarantee a strong and stable internet connection. Some students shared that they had to wake up late at night or sleep late at night because it was the only time of the day when they are able to get a good internet signal. These findings affirm Talosa et al. (2021) assertion that the situation of connectivity is "worse for those from remote areas."

Nedescu (2019) explained that the mountainous topography of the Philippines and the remoteness of some areas are the primary reasons why mobile network operators struggle to expand and maintain a reliable network in the rural areas of the country. Nedescus' description depicts the topography in the Cordilleras, which made access to the internet a challenge to the students. In the Cordilleras, internet connection is available, but it may be intermittent primarily because of the mountainous topography of the region. The findings of the study conform with Nedescu's assertion that on the average, internet users in the CAR spent around 68% of their time on 4G networks both in urban and rural areas, which does not show any difference in these two types of locale. This result means that

internet connectivity is available in both rural and urban areas. However, he noted that the download speed in rural areas is slower because users spend more time on 3G networks. Nedescus' claim was affirmed by Mirandilla-Santos (2021) who noted that 3G technology "is still prevalent in rural areas... some communities have low access to Wi-Fi." In addition, she notes, "the absence of or the limited number of telecommunication towers may cause end-users to have degraded or poor cellular signal." This perhaps explains why despite the presence of an internet signal in the Cordilleras, students, especially from the rural areas, found it difficult to connect and download their learning packets and submit their activities online. Based on the experience of the researchers, it is difficult to access uploaded video materials and have a stable Zoom meeting using mobile data.

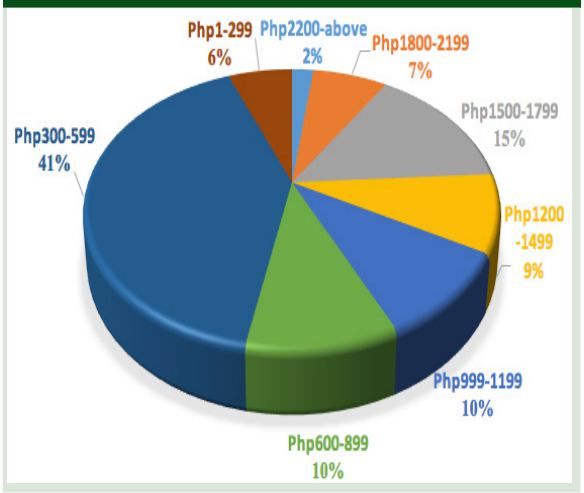
Because of the students' desire to be able to access their learning packets online or join their synchronous class sessions, students spent a considerable amount of money to be able to have an internet connection. Figure 3 shows the average internet expenses of the respondents.

Figure 3 shows that a majority of students spent between Php300.00 to Php599.00 monthly for internet access. These amounts were assumed by the researchers to be too much on the part of the students. Royandoyan (2021) discussed that in the Philippines, the internet is pricey; in addition, he noted that Filipinos have to work approximately for 5 hours to be able to avail of the cheapest internet package. There were students who narrated that their parents lost their jobs due to the pandemic and that they have to look for part-time jobs to make ends meet. This finding confirms the result of the Mountain Collegian (2021) online survey where it was revealed that 56.2% of BSU students were financially unstable. In addition, this result concurs with one of the findings of Iskwela ya Poldiya, a documentary produced by the BSU-Human Resource and Development Office, where it was shown that most of the students had to work for them to earn to buy cellphone loads. These findings reveal the vulnerability of students; these situations would have had an impact to their physical, mental, and emotional aspects.

The BSU administration, on the other hand, responded to this pressing concern by upgrading the internet connection in the campus from

Figure 3

Average Internet Expenses per Month of a BSU Student During the COVID-19 Pandemic



50 mbps to 100 mbps for students' use (BSU, 2020b). However, this measure did not totally solve the concern. Only students who stayed within the Baguio and La Trinidad area were able to access internet connection within the La Trinidad campus. Students who do not live within these areas were not able to avail of the service.

Apart from the issue on internet connectivity, another challenge that confronted the students during the pandemic was the access to flexible learning technologies such as desktop computers, laptops, and smartphones. Only 46.25% of the student respondents had a smartphone to access the lessons uploaded by their course facilitators. This finding is far from the results of the Mountain Collegian (2021) online survey where it was revealed that more than a majority (94.8%) of BSU students utilized smartphones for their flexible learning.

With just a single smartphone to use, the ability of the students to conduct research and do assignments was limited since smartphone batteries easily run out. Aside from this, the capability of students' smartphones prevented them from using two or more applications simultaneously. Many students revealed that a single smartphone that they possess was shared with their siblings and even cousins who were also studying (2 to 5 users at most share gadgets in a single household). This finding affirms Guisinger's (2020) claim that with the pandemic

affecting the economy and causing a recession and unemployment to rise, some families might not even afford gadgets. As mentioned earlier, there were students whose parents lost jobs due to the pandemic; because of this, their basic needs were prioritized. This finding connotes that the students' academic performances during the first year of the pandemic might be classified between poor to satisfactory category. Students cannot concentrate on their lessons because they do not have printed copies of their learning packets; they cannot spend more time with their smartphones because other family members need to use them.

Academic Related Concerns

With the sudden shift to flexible learning, students were not able to adjust well during the first year of the pandemic. Many of the respondents noted that they had no background and experience in the use of the different applications in the conduct of flexible learning. They were referring to Google Classroom, which was the primary learning management system (LMS) utilized by BSU to deliver learning to its students during the first year of the pandemic. It is understood that they had no experience in the utilization of the LMS because they had been accustomed to the traditional face-to-face classroom interaction. The difficulty of these students in navigating Google Classroom can be reflected in the statements of the faculty who had technologically challenged students as one of the challenges they faced during the flexible learning setup.

In addition, some students remarked that they were anxious to attend online/virtual classes, and they preferred printed modules. Moreover, they also shared that they do not know some computer applications like converting a Word document into PDF format, and how to download or upload a material online. Furthermore, some students also stressed that it was difficult for them to contact their subject teacher during this period.

These academic concerns due to their lack of knowledge on how to navigate online platforms like Google Classroom, Google Meet, and Zoom utilized by their teachers could have made students more apprehensive. This apprehension could have impacted their academic performance or rating. For example, based on narratives of faculty, majority of their students incurred marks such as dropped and incomplete during the pandemic. A no-failure policy was released during the first year of the pandemic; as a result, only 2 deficiency marks could be reflected in the student's grade sheet. Although no one among the student respondents expressed that they dropped from their classes because of the difficulty of adjusting to the new education setup, it could be assumed. Although the then BSU Supreme Student Government president noted, "Some students withdrew some of their subjects because of anxiety and the academic pressure brought by such issues (bulk giving of requirements, deadline issues, timed quizzes, non-editable worksheets) being experienced (BSU SSG correspondence, September 25, 2020)."

In relation to this, a chairperson from one of the departments at BSU remarked that students who dropped or withdrew from their classes at BSU did so because they transferred to higher education institutions located closer to their residence. This was one of the reasons given by the students who submitted their forms for the chairperson's signature. This result implies that these students thought that this move will enable them to have better access to their printed modules, and perhaps they can easily contact their instructors.

Another challenge that students faced was time management. Seven percent of student respondents revealed that they were working part-time during the first year of the pandemic. They revealed that they were not able to join their Zoom or Google Meetings because the schedules were in conflict with their work schedule. In addition, they also remarked that they were oftentimes late in submitting their module activities.

In addition, some students struggled with managing their time between household chores and schoolwork. These students underlined that their parents thought that they were only surfing the internet while using their smartphones for a number of hours. These students shared that their parents obliged them to help with the household or garden chores.

All of these findings also conform with Talosa et al. (2021) study that students in distant learning environments "often experience cognitive overload… due to disorientation, new teaching/learning methods, unfamiliar subjects, and the challenge of working with unfamiliar technology."

Apart from the earlier concerns associated with flexible learning, the issue of how to manage time equally between work, household chores, and school work aggravated the struggle of some of the student respondents during the first year of the pandemic. These students worked because as mentioned earlier there were some whose parents lost their jobs due to the pandemic; hence, these students saw the need to step up and help with the family's expenses, including the expenses due to flexible learning–internet connection, gadget, and photocopying of printed modules. Talosa et al. (2021) noted that "the capacity to manage time effectively is emphatically identified with scholarly achievement, and alternately, poor timing leads towards failure and a decreased achievement level." This can possibly explain why working BSU students who struggle to manage their time did not perform well academically.

Based on faculty's and students' perceptions, many parents were not oriented with the new normal in education during the first year of the pandemic. This resulted in parents misunderstanding their children's use of smartphones for their online classes.

These struggles stressed BSU students during the first year of the pandemic. One of the student respondents asked "Can we have an academic break? This is really exhausting and tiring." Another student shared, "As students we experience stress; we feel tired and exhausted; there is a lack of discussion in our lessons." These statements summarize what students felt during the first year of implementation of flexible learning. In addition, these statements may also be an illustration of the effect of the faculty's struggle of not being able to develop good learning packets or modules during the first year of the implementation of the flexible learning modality. The instructional materials may not have discussed only the most salient concepts that students were supposed to know and may have contained terms too technical for students to comprehend.

All of these problems reflect pedagogical and social challenges in remote learning as categorized by Ferri et al. (2020). In addition, the findings also indicate that BSU students were not ready for online learning during the first year of the pandemic. Talosa et al. (2021) stressed that students need to have "critical thinking skills, collaboration skills, academic writing skills as well as computer and internet skills" in order for them to deal with online learning.

The findings conform with Magsambol's (2021) assertion that students were struggling to cope with the demands of online learning since 2020, and for this reason, an academic freeze was demanded by many students and groups in the Philippines. Joaquin et al. (2020) cited that hashtags like #EndOnlineClasses, #EndTheSem, and #NoToOnlineClasses that proliferated in social media that show student sentiments.

These sentiments were acknowledged by Director Danilo B. Bose by issuing Office Memorandum Numbered 106 series of 2020 allowing an academic break for both faculty and students from October 26-30, 2020. During the given period, faculty were advised not to give any activities so that students will be able to de-stress from the demands of flexible learning.

Coping Mechanisms to Deal with Flexible Learning Challenges

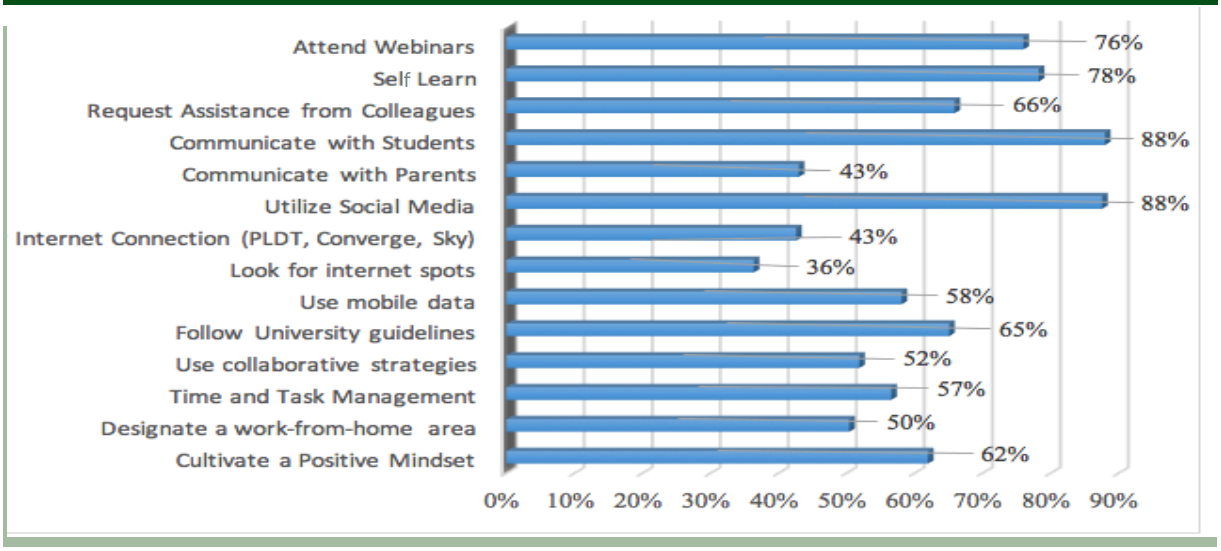
Coping Mechanisms of BSU Faculty

Filipino teachers are resilient; they find ways to make their tasks easier in order to cope with the challenges in a flexible teaching and learning setup. Based on the responses of the faculty (Figure 4), the top three coping mechanisms practiced were communication, self-learning, and attendance at webinars.

Communication was the primary coping mechanism of the faculty. The majority of faculty respondents noted that they set aside a certain amount of their salary to buy cellphone load for their mobile data connection. Some of the faculty members shared that whenever they report in their respective offices within the university, they look for an area or a spot where there is a good internet signal. A few remarked that they applied for a stable internet connection for their homes. In addition, these faculty members also underlined that since signal is difficult in rural areas where most of the students stayed, they utilized Facebook Messenger to be able to reach out to students. Moreover, they also talked to the parents or guardians of students when they come to the colleges to get copies of modules for their children or ward.

Figure 4

Coping Strategies Employed by Benguet State University Faculty to Cope with Flexible Learning Challenges



This finding shows that despite their struggles, the faculty were willing to find ways to have a more stable internet connection so that they can reach out to students and help them with their subject concerns. Since they acknowledged that the internet signal in rural areas was poor or intermittent, they opted to use Facebook Messenger, which can be easily opened by students using a lower bandwidth, as the primary means of communication between them and their students. Based on the practice of faculty in some offices, Facebook group chats were created by the faculty to easily address students' concerns. This practice proved to be effective since students are known to oftentimes check their Facebook accounts. Moreover, some colleges created and used college Facebook pages for posting academic matters such as Google Classroom codes for the subjects enrolled by students in the college. Based on the experience of the faculty respondents, these strategies made communication between students and college personnel easier.

Self-learning was another coping mechanism of the faculty. The respondents shared that they looked into YouTube videos and other self-help videos about the use of different applications to improve their knowledge and skills. In addition, some senior faculty narrated that they sought the help of the junior faculty who were more knowledgeable and skilled in computer applications to tutor them. Moreover, they also attended webinars on the use of Google Classroom and module writing that were sponsored by BSU and other institutions as a means of improving their knowledge on flexible teaching applications.

These findings revealed that the faculty also adjusted to the new normal. They had to help themselves; thus, taking the initiative to learn on their own. Flexible learning also paved the way for strengthening the collaboration of senior and junior faculty in offices.

The administration of BSU tried to explore means that will equip faculty members with the needed knowledge and skills for the sudden change of the teaching-learning environment, as well as to procure the needed facilities for the improvement of its delivery of flexible learning. These findings conform to Vegas' (2020) assertion that the government's action to aid teachers in flexible learning is an essential factor that might affect their attitude towards it. It was evident from the results that although the faculty struggled, they still had a positive attitude towards flexible learning-teaching by employing these coping mechanisms.

Coping Mechanisms Employed by BSU Students

The following were the coping strategies that were enumerated by students to alleviate the challenges of flexible learning: time and task

management; analyzing and understanding their modules; seeking help from family, friends, relatives, and teachers; browsing the internet and checking updates from teachers; self-learning by watching YouTube videos and like (e.g. how to use Google Classroom); adapting positive attitudes (proactivity, resourcefulness, creativity, flexibility, optimism, openness); finding alternative internet connections (from neighbors, internet shop); grit and determination to finish and submit school requirements; continuously communicating with teachers (e.g. clarifications); and working while studying to support studies.

Based on the results, it was evident that the students were forced to face the new normal of education. As a result, they relied mostly on themselves to get through the semesters. Since they needed financial assistance, they were determined to balance time spent on their part-time job and the time devoted to school activities. It was also evident that these students acknowledged the importance of communication for them to survive the semesters. They then connected with their subject teachers, classmates, friends, and family members to help them with school concerns.

It is also commendable that they adopted a positive attitude; they did not give up despite the challenges they faced. They also displayed maturity like taking the initiative to search for places with better internet signal, watching and understanding YouTube videos, studying modules independently, and seeking help when needed.

New Opportunities Brought by Flexible Learning

As Seen by BSU Faculty

Possibilities and new opportunities while teaching in the new normal were also opened to BSU faculty members. The respondents noted that flexible learning accorded them the opportunity to learn new skills, adopt more positive attitudes toward students, and develop learning materials.

CHED's policy on flexible learning paved the way for BSU faculty to enhance their technological and module packaging skills. A number of respondents shared that collaboration and mentoring were strengthened because of the flexible teaching environment. As earlier mentioned, faculty exerted effort to attend several webinars on various computer applications as well as module development.

One of the most important opportunities that was opened during the pandemic was the adoption of more positive attitudes towards the students. Faculty members narrated that they printed modules and made these available for students who opted to be on modular learning and were willing to shoulder the cost of photocopying. Some faculty also extended the deadlines for the submission of activities. In addition, faculty members communicated with the students enrolled in their classes by sending them SMS or emails, providing them information as to their Google Classroom codes, and other pertinent information related to their subject.

A post from the BSU faculty club also showed how the faculty's treatment of students somehow changed. A faculty shared that maximum tolerance on their students was observed; another faculty mentioned going the extra mile (like taking time to get to know the students) before getting mad at them. Another faculty noted that through simple conversations with students, she was able to find out who among them needed to work from 7 am to 7 pm to have money to buy food; some of her students also borrowed cellphones from their immediate superiors to be able to access their modules. Another faculty also mentioned that she stopped using Google Classroom when she found out that she had students who relied only on mobile data; she instead shifted to printed modules (BSU Faculty Club, 07 October 2020).

These findings show that faculty members became more considerate and compassionate towards their students. Faculty began to be more conscious of the students' mental health. They acknowledged that similar to the faculty experience, students also experienced stress and anxiety because of the new normal of learning.

Finally, the flexible learning setup paved the way for more faculty to produce instructional materials like learning packets, modules, and pre-recorded videos. Some faculty noted that apart from the learning packets, they also uploaded a pre-recorded video of themselves discussing or summarizing the module they gave to the students. In line with the number of instructional

materials that were produced, a faculty member suggested that BSU should have its own printing press or bookstore (BSU Faculty Club, 07 October 2020).

Though they faced numerous challenges with regard to this, one positive outcome is the production of the faculty's own learning materials that can be copyrighted with the help of the BSU Intellectual Property Rights Office (IPRO). In addition, many faculty members religiously attended trainings on module making that were organized by BSU and other institutions. Their allotment of time to attend these trainings on module making is a clear indication that they wanted to learn how to improve their module content for their students.

As Seen by BSU Students

The shift of the learning environment to a flexible one provided a number of opportunities for BSU students. The opportunities they listed are exposure to online/digital learning; increased independent learning experience; spending more time with family and relatives; multi-tasking; having more reflection time; learning to ask for help from others; and developing self-discipline skills.

The majority of the students noted that they were able to improve their technological skills as a result of having to access online lessons during the school year 2020-2021. They shared that they came to know what Zoom meetings were as well as Google Meet, although as earlier noted, they were anxious about attending online meetings. Also, the flexible learning setup enabled students to rely on themselves to understand the modules of their subjects, but they were also able to develop the courage to ask for other people's help once they realize that they could not understand concepts in their modules. Improving their technological skills and self-reliance as opportunities conform with Talosa et al. (2021) study result which showed that self-regulated learning and digital technology efficacy are two of the learning opportunities from the flexible learning modality.

Through flexible learning, students had more time to be with their families. Since these students were called by their parents to go home at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, they had ample time to catch up with their family's affairs and the like. Since they were in the comforts of their home, some students narrated that they had time for self-reflection. Working students were able to multitask and engage in work while studying.

In addition, there were also students who expressed that flexible learning as an alternative mode of learning can be more economical and convenient. It is noted though that this response may have come from students who were able to have stable internet connections as well as digital technologies that were essential for flexible learning.

In general, these new opportunities opened by flexible learning enumerated by the students show that despite the struggles they faced, they still have a positive attitude towards flexible learning.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the following conclusions are derived: 1) The most pressing concerns faced by both BSU faculty and students were pedagogical and technical ones, such as internet connectivity and lack of knowledge on navigating Google Classroom; 2) Both BSU faculty and students relied mostly on themselves to cope with the various difficulties associated with flexible learning; and 3) Amidst the challenges experienced by both BSU faculty and students, the flexible learning setup also provided new opportunities. These opportunities included the learning of new skills, adoption of a more positive attitude towards students, the development of learning materials, exposure to online/digital learning, increased independent learning experience, more time spent with family and relatives, enhanced multitasking abilities, more time for self-reflection, and enhancement of self-discipline.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations: First, the BSU administration address the pedagogical and technical challenges faced by its faculty and students. The administration may continue assisting its faculty members to improve their skills, knowledge, and experience in developing student-friendlier learning packets or modules. A periodic assessment of the faculty members' knowledge and capabilities on the use of e-technologies and online tools in order to address their pedagogical challenges on e-learning through a series of training sessions can also be done. BSU faculty, on the other hand, may consider simplifying the contents of their modules by including only the most essential concepts, and if possible, pre-record their discussions or lectures. These strategies may help students more easily comprehend the concepts. In addition, the BSU administration may also reconsider reducing the number of teaching units and/or preparations assigned to a faculty. This move may reduce the stress of the faculty in terms of module preparation and delivery of synchronous lectures. Moreover, further upgrading of ICT-related infrastructures such as strong and stable internet connectivity on the campuses, up-to-date equipment, and licensed soft wares may be considered.

Second, it is recommended that the BSU administration sustain the support needed by its faculty and students as they try to adjust to flexible learning and teaching mode. The BSU administration may continue to give cellphone load to faculty members for mobile data connection. In addition, the Office of Student Services may continue conducting programs and activities that deal with easing mental anxiety or stress among students. Moreover, the BSU administration may also sustain the academic break session/s or period/s for both students and faculty to free themselves from academic pressure for a while.

Finally, it is recommended that both faculty and students continue to adopt a positive attitude towards flexible learning and teaching modality.

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