

Flexible Learning in Criminology Education: Status, Challenges, and Coping Mechanisms of Students in the Philippines During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT:

This research aimed to find out about the conditions, problems, and ways of dealing with that situation of the criminology students of Pangasinan State University–Binmaley Campus, who were taking flexible learning courses for the Academic Year 2020-2021. A descriptive-survey design was employed in gathering the data from 498 Bachelor of Science in Criminology students. A validated questionnaire was used to collect data from which the findings were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings indicated that although a majority of students possessed digital devices, a significant number relied on smartphones and shared gadgets, which restricted their ability to fully leverage learning management systems. The challenges faced were not limited to technological issues—such as device constraints and internet connectivity—but also encompassed psychosocial factors, including difficulties in personal motivation, time management, and health and wellness. In response to these obstacles, students employed coping mechanisms such as planful problem solving, seeking social support, self-regulation, and positive reappraisal, which exemplify adaptive resilience. The research indicates that although adaptable learning allowed education to be maintained, it uncovered also some important differences which require targeted remediation measures. As a result, a Flexible Learning Remediation Program is proposed to not only increase digital accessibility and LMS proficiency but also to integrate students' emotional support that they may be equipped with academic excellence and professional ability after the pandemic.

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Introduction

The education systems around the globe were profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a change to alternative modes of instruction, largely online.

According to UNESCO (2020), the shutting down of schools affected more than 1.5 billion students worldwide in 195 countries, and this makes it one of the severest cases of school closures in recent times. To keep the learning activities going, numerous higher education

institutions changed to online and flexible learning systems. This change, though it saved public health, brought "a triple crisis" (access, equity, and quality) as acknowledged by Schleicher (2020).

According to the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), flexible learning is a learner-centered approach that allows students more control over the content, time, and mode of delivery, with the use of both digital and non-digital resources (CHED, 2020). This became the official format of the Philippine higher education institutions as from Academic Year 2020–2021, due to the enactment of CHED Memorandum Order No. 4, s. 2020. Nevertheless, the transition revealed the persisting unequal distribution of educational resources. Students coming from remote areas and those having financial difficulties, in general, face problems with the internet connectivity that is not only stable but can also be shared among a family, and some of them do not have the appropriate gadgets or a spot at home that they can use as their learning area (Economic Policy Research Institute, 2020; Baticulon et al., 2021). The disparities mentioned above have been found to cause various problems such as lack of engagement, poor performance, and low motivation, thus the question regarding whether flexible learning can be made truly inclusive in a developing country setting.

Criminology education is indeed a very specific and one-of-a-kind case when teaching through this format. The first thing to keep in mind is that unlike many other disciplines, criminology is a fully online program only partially theoretically based. Experiential training plays a significant part in criminology education and that faces limitations with the lack of physical engagement. A research conducted by Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) finds that the performance assessment of skills and learning based on practice become a hard task in complete online settings, a problem also noted in Philippine criminology programs where curriculum-based applied training is considered (CHED, 2018). Hence, students not only are confronted with technological and motivational difficulties associated with online

learning but they also question the adequacy of it in preparing them for professional practice.

Notwithstanding a worldwide study situation on online education during COVID-19, a huge gap still exists between local studies on the impact of flexible learning on criminology students in the Philippines. The one that would be incredibly interesting and the most significant research area would be provincial schools such as Pangasinan State University–Binmaley Campus with their wide range of students, scarcity of digital infrastructure, and dependence on the learning systems mandated by CHED such as Microsoft Teams. To craft responsive policies and remediation strategies, it is essential to first know the status of flexible learning implementation, the challenges students encounter, and the coping strategies

they use. The study hence first of all aimed to identify the status of flexible learning in PSU–Binmaley as seen by criminology students, especially dealing with the access to devices, digital competencies, and learning engagement. Moreover, it broadly probed such issues as challenges experienced in technology, motivation, health, and readiness dimensions, and also the coping strategies used by students. The research work aimed to develop a plan for the Flexible Learning Remediation Program that would be capable of achieving students' preparedness and providing quality education to the criminology field after the pandemic era by exploring these factors.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The investigators used a descriptive-survey research design to find out about the current situation, problems, and ways of dealing with them of Criminology students implementing flexible learning at Pangasinan State University–Binmaley Campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The descriptive method was considered the most suitable one as it allowed the organized gathering and interpretation of students' views concerning the flexible learning mode through quantitative data.

Locale of the Study

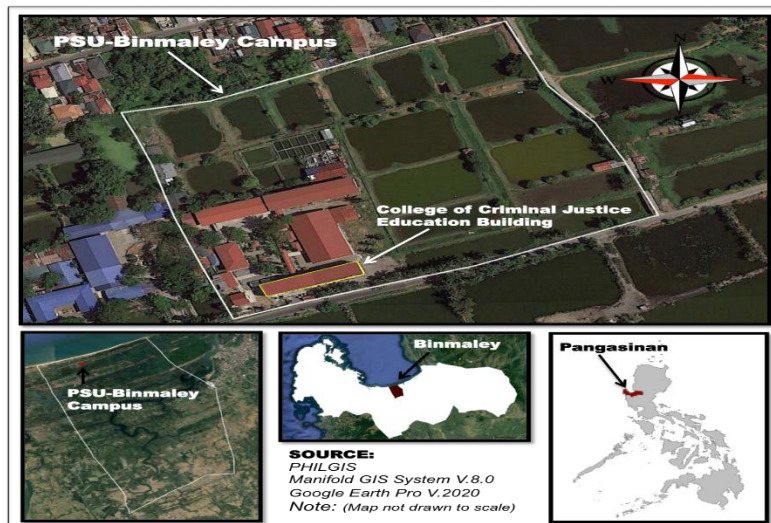


Figure 1. Location of Pangasinan State University–Binmaley Campus, Binmaley, Pangasinan (Google Maps, 2023).

The study was conducted at the College of Criminal Justice Education, Pangasinan State University (PSU)–Binmaley Campus, located in San Isidro Norte, Binmaley, Pangasinan. PSU is the only state university in Pangasinan that offers a Bachelor of Science in Criminology program and has implemented flexible learning through Microsoft Teams serves as the official Learning Management System (LMS) for the Academic Year 2020.

Participants of the Research

The participants were 498 Bachelor of Science in Such students studying criminology in Second Semester AY 2020–21. Using simple random sampling, students from all year levels were proportionally represented: 184 first-year (37%), 169 second-year (34%), 100 third-year (20%), and 45 fourth-year (9%). All respondents had experienced flexible learning using Microsoft Teams.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by year level.

Year Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
First Year	184	37.0
Second Year	169	34.0
Third Year	100	20.0
Fourth Year	45	9.0
Total	498	100.0

Instrumentation

Validated and well-organized survey questionnaire has been created to fulfill the objectives of the study and to serve as a guide in the relevant literature. The instrument was composed of four major parts: (1) Status of

Flexible Learning that included the main themes such as accessibility to the devices, internet connectivity, digital literacy, LMS use, and motivation; (2) Challenges Encountered that involved a set of issues such as utilizing LMS, device limitations, time management, personal motivation, health and wellness, and readiness for

online learning; (3) Coping Mechanisms that reflected on the students' strategies for overcoming the difficulties identified; and (4) Proposed Remediation Program which the flexible learning implementation explored the activities that could facilitate the effectiveness. The questionnaire was subjected to content validation by a panel of faculty experts and a statistician from Pangasinan State University, and a reliability test was conducted to make sure the result was consistent yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, which indicated high internal consistency.

Data Gathering Procedure

The validated instrument was digitized and disseminated through Google Forms due to restrictions on face-to-face interaction during the pandemic. The links of the surveys were sent to the respondents through their official class group chats as well as PSU email addresses. Respondents gave informed consent prior to

participation. All the responses were automatically saved in Google Sheets and exported for further analysis.

Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics like frequency counts, percentage, and weighted means were used in analyzing the data to condense the status of flexible learning, challenges met, as well as the coping strategies adopted. These were further displayed in figures and tables for ease of reading as well as interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Status of Flexible Learning

Table 1 presents the criminology students' access to digital devices for flexible learning. The majority (71.58%) reported that they already owned digital devices, while others received them from relatives (15.98%), shared with others (9.75%), borrowed (9.13%), or bought one (6.43%).

Table 1. Access to digital devices for flexible learning.

Access Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Already Owned	345	71.58
Given by relatives/guardians	77	15.98
Shared with others	47	9.75
Borrowed	44	9.13
Bought	31	6.43

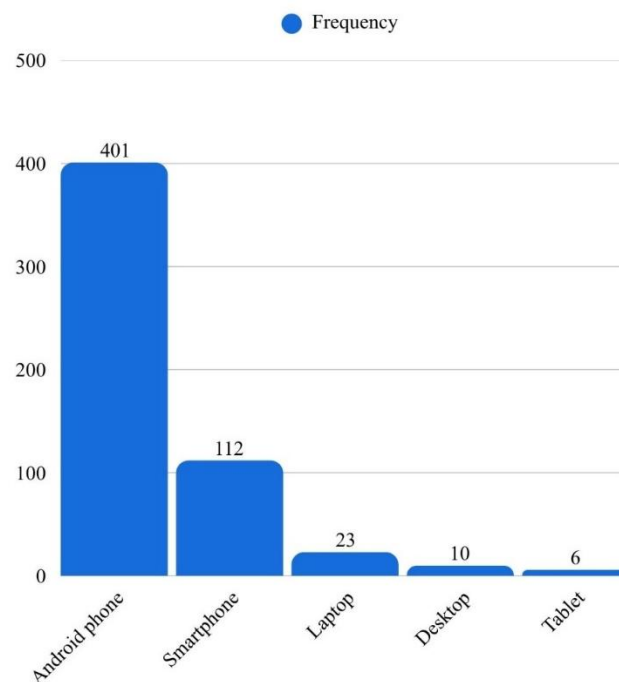
Findings highlight that while the majority of students had access to their own gadgets, close to one-third used shared or temporary arrangements almost all the time. Such dependence is problematic in flexible learning as availability of devices should be consistent to attend synchronous classes and do asynchronous tasks. Baticulon et al. (2021) found similar results, noting the Filipino students who are borrowed or are shared devices most that consequently create access inequities. Research all over the world also shows that students who do not have personal

devices are more likely to fall behind in online learning. Thus, access is directly related to engagement and performance (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

In addition, table 2 shows that the majority of the students used Android phones (83.20%) and smartphones (23.24%) as their main devices, while only 4.77% used laptops, and the number of people who relied on desktops (2.07%) or tablets (1.24%) was even lower.

Table 2. Type of device used for flexible learning.

Device Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Android phone	401	83.20
Smartphone	112	23.24
Laptop	23	4.77
Desktop	10	2.07
Tablet	6	1.24

**Figure 1. Devices used by criminology students for flexible learning.**

The dependence on smartphones points out the fact that the culture of mobile dependency in Philippine higher education during the pandemic is prevailing. Despite the portability and relatively low cost of mobile devices, they are not suitable for activities that require long typing, data processing, or multitasking. Hence, students of criminology may be put in a situation where they lack the necessary tools to accomplish the research reports, case studies, and the technical documentation of their course. A recent study has proved that mobile dependence limits students' abilities to access LMS features fully and also acts as a barrier to the development of digital literacy (Dayagbil et al., 2021). Hence, although

flexible learning could facilitate the flow of education, the level of engagement might have been affected by the limited capability of smartphones.

Challenges Encountered

Criminology students' challenges have been illustrated through a summary of Table 3. Among the issues, the most frequent that the students reported were personal motivation (32%), followed by the use of devices (30%), time management (28.5%), health and wellness (27%), readiness for online learning (25.5%), and use of LMS (24%).

Table 3. Challenges encountered by criminology students in flexible learning.

Challenge Category	Percentage Reporting Challenge (%)
Use of Learning Management System (LMS)	24.0
Use of Devices	30.0
Time Management	28.5
Personal Motivation	32.0
Health and Wellness	27.0
Readiness for Online Learning	25.5

The findings put a strong emphasis on the fact that non-technical barriers were as significant as technological ones. While device and LMS issues were anticipated, the higher percentage of motivation-related concerns suggests that keeping self-discipline and one's own motivation at a satisfactory level during flexible learning still remains a main problem. It corresponds to the statement of Lischer et al. (2021), who found that lack of peer interaction and structured schedules led to a decrease in student motivation in online settings.

Another point that was often mentioned (27%) is health and wellness. Long screen time, lack of movement, and isolation's psychosocial effects were among the most frequent pandemic reports, and they had a negative impact on student engagement (Almahasees et al., 2021). Dayagbil

et al. (2021) in the Philippines pointed out that students not only had to deal with academic requirements but also had to face the mental health issues of anxiety and tiredness, which indicates the need for institutional support in different areas.

Coping Mechanisms

Students used some coping methods in order to defeat the barriers. The most frequent coping method was planful problem solving (42%) as presented in Table 4. Being able to make study schedules, utilizing asynchronous modules to the maximum, and looking for other internet sources are examples of planful problem solving. Next was the group of social support (35%), self-regulation (31%), positive reappraisal (28%), and escapism/distraction (15%).

Table 4. Coping mechanisms used by criminology students.

Coping Mechanism	Percentage of Students Using (%)
Planful Problem Solving	42.0
Seeking Social Support	35.0
Self-Regulation / Motivation	31.0
Positive Reappraisal	28.0
Escapism / Distraction	15.0

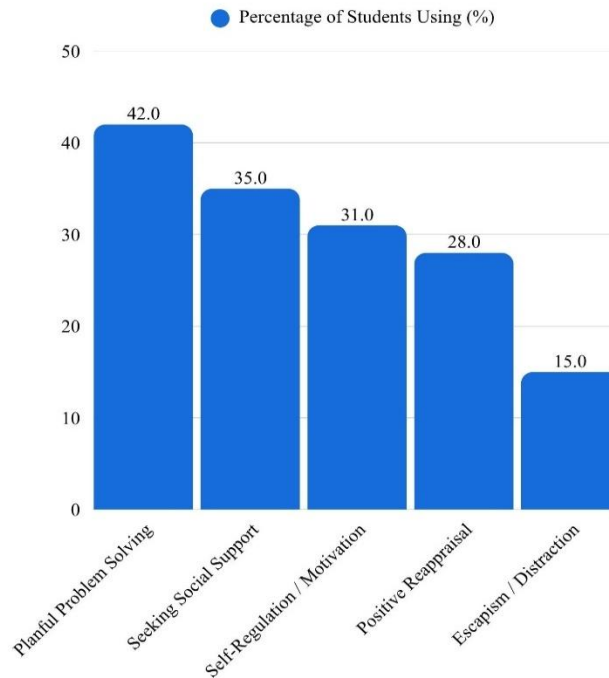


Figure 2. Coping mechanisms adopted by criminology students during flexible learning.

The predominance of problem-focused coping strategies indicates that the students were able to demonstrate their adaptive resilience even when they were hindered by some structural and personal barriers. They, through effective scheduling and tapping into alternative resources, not only showed their agency but also their command in dealing with the limitations of flexible learning. Such a result aligns with Onyema et al. (2020) who found that learners during COVID-19 adopted effective time management and problem-solving as their main strategies.

Social support (35%) was also among the major contributors to the findings of this study. The support from peers as well as from the family was the key factor for the students to remain positive. In a collectivist society like the Philippines, the use of a social network has been proven to save a person from stress and keep him/her interested in the remote learning environment (Almahasees et al., 2021). One more parallel is the use of self-regulation and positive reappraisal by the criminology students which is in line with the results of a study conducted at Cagayan State University revealing the strong connection

between emotional intelligence--stress management, adaptability, and interpersonal skills--and students' leadership effectiveness (Malana & Catli, 2020). This evidence is an argument that resilience and emotional regulation are not only instrumental for leadership roles but also form a big part in the maintenance of academic performance under flexible learning conditions.

The relatively lower reliance on escapism/distraction (15%) suggests that most students pursued constructive rather than avoidant strategies, which is encouraging for long-term academic resilience.

Implications for Criminology Education

Results show that criminology students at PSU–Binmaley have successfully adjusted to flexible learning mode; however, they still experience digital inequalities, lack of motivation, and health-related problems. Buyers' heavy use of smartphones indicates that flexible learning policy should deal with the compatibility of devices and accessibility. In the same way, the predominance of the issues of motivation and wellness points to the need for psychosocial

support, wellness programs, and mentoring systems.

Criminology is a practice-oriented field and thus the lack of face-to-face engagement will most likely reduce the students' professional preparedness. Recent articles claim that hybrid methods, as such online theoretical teaching combined with a small, secure, and organized practical training, are essential for those areas that need a field-based application (Lischer et al., 2021; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). This research proposes the development of a Flexible Learning Remediation Program that addresses not only the accessibility of issues but also assists in the formation of the digital competency and the well-being of the students for a complete preparation of criminology students for the professional requirements in the post-pandemic environment in order to ensure quality results.

Conclusion

Findings revealed that while a significant number of students had access to devices, phone reliance and sharing of devices prevented full utilization of academics. Motivation, management of time, health as well as wellness were primary challenges accompanied by technological limitations, an implication that psychosocial factors were equally responsible for the achievement of learning outcomes. Despite these constraints, students demonstrated resilience by finding ways around

problems, social supports as well as self-management strategies. Overall, the finding reiterates that flexible learning although efficacious under crisis conditions requires strengthening by targeted remediation efforts so that inequities can be alleviated as criminology students can be holistically prepared for professional tasks.

Recommendations

Based on the results, recommended for PSU–Binmaley and other similar institutions is the application of a Flexible Learning Remediation Program that mitigates both technological and psychosocial challenges. This can be done by offering device subsidy and data assistance, conducting structured training on the use of the LMS, and increasing access to digital literacy initiatives. Of equal importance is integrating wellness and counseling interventions for students' motivation and mental health as well as blended methods of training that simulate applied criminology capabilities. Policymakers and thought leaders in academia need to place flexible learning not just as a temporary measure but as a long-term approach that necessitates persistent adaptation, equity-driven policies, and initiatives that help foster resilience so that students can be better prepared when they encounter the future demands in academia and the workplace.

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