

# Voices from the Classroom: HEI Faculty Experiences with Flexible Learning

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## ABSTRACT:

This study explored the narratives of HEIs' faculty on Flexible Learning (FL): The Case of the Philippines. It captured salient narratives regarding respondents' assessments of the implementation of Flexible Learning in their institutions, the challenges they encountered in implementing it, and the strategies they applied to address them. It employed a descriptive qualitative study using a narrative research approach, focusing on individuals' lives as recounted by the participants. The researchers employed a Focus-Group Discussion guided by open-ended questions for the participants to answer. Significant findings revealed the following: the implementation of Flexible Learning among HEIs in the Philippines comprised the following: (a) complexity of Flexible learning, (b) preparation of modalities, and (c) preparation of teaching and learning designs. Thus, upon thematically investigating the narratives of the participants as to the challenges encountered with FL, the following themes were derived from the interviews: (a) role of technology; (b) resistance to FL; and (c) accessibility. Finally, after categorizing the initial labels/codes, the themes on the strategies addressed by the participants as to the challenges encountered in the FL included the following: (a) upholding academic continuity; (b) promoting equitable access; and (c) sophisticating teaching standards and skills emerged. It is hoped that through this exploration, HEIs may be able to reskill, upskill, and cross-skill their faculty regarding FL to maintain the quality of education despite various adversities.

**Keywords:** Flexible Learning, Academic Community, Challenges, Strategies

## 1. Introduction

The evolving landscape has transformed how people live, work, and learn, creating new demands for highly skilled workers. To capture these pressing demands, access to equitable education is critical [1]. Flexible Learning has been noted as a trajectory to these challenges. [2] describes Flexible Learning (FL), which integrates different ways of learning, namely e-learning, m-learning, and online learning (i.e., FL provides learners with choices about where,

when, and how learning occurs). Research on FL claimed that flexibility extends beyond mere convenience; it entails creating an ecosystem in which students' needs are tailored [3].

In the Philippines, the shift led to a significant change. To capture learning continuity, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) mandated, through its Memorandum Order No. 4, s. In 2020, the adoption and introduction of Flexible Learning in the Philippines. [4]. This mandate has underscored the need to discover

other groundbreaking learning modes that would simplify the exodus from traditional to flexible teaching and learning opportunities. As learners come from different geographical locations, they have options regarding their learning time, place, and pace of study, creating an opportunity for students to access education on their own terms. Moreover, FL, as described by [5], is the process of providing learners with the freedom to choose their place, pace, and pathway of study, thereby enabling them to engage in effective teaching and learning. Similarly, [6] posits that FL provides a learning-space milieu that can readily accommodate students with equitable access to education. In addition, [7] delineates that accessibility and empowerment among learners, through greater control and choice, are fundamental components of FL. These connote two pivotal forms in course design: pedagogical and logistical.

The study by [8] on Flexible Learning revealed that real-life situations and independent learning are key components. Conflicting opinions may exist on various ecological issues. However, these opinions were grounded in their readings, which showed that students can access the course learning materials. [9] research claimed that academic members at Philippine HEIs continue to struggle with internet connectivity and access to technological resources. Standards for schools, universities, and education departments are in place to address various issues and concerns related to ICT integration in education. Considering these uncertainties, it is worth gaining insights into teachers' lived experiences in Flexible Learning [10]. Several studies were examined in the investigation. Internet issues, media training, preparation, and the preference for in-person learning [11] of content, engagement, and internet connectivity, were identified as drawbacks in FL [12] and time spent on online classes and self-study, social life, and mental health [13], challenges and struggles in terms of technology, delivery, and motivation [14]. Additionally, the study by [15] examined the challenges faced by Philippine public higher education institutions. It was stated that to acclimate to the shift to online learning, both

teachers and students were making considerable changes. These instructional plans are derived from the institution's established policies. Among the significant problems mentioned by the learners was internet connectivity.

This exploration distinguishes itself from previous research in two significant ways: first, it provides the participants' direct accounts of FL. Second, the current research investigates the participants' strategies for coping with this new learning hemisphere, and addressing these areas would illuminate the extent of the challenges the participants face. The researcher is currently a professor at a state university and, having observed a lack of resources, such as laptops and other devices, for addressing different learning modes, designs, programs, and assessments, she considered exploring the experiences of HEI faculty regarding FL.

## Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the participants regarding FL with the following research questions: (a) assessment of the implementation of Flexible Learning in their institution, (b) challenges encountered in conducting Flexible Learning in an online teaching and learning environment, and (c) strategies applied in addressing the challenges in Flexible Learning.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### A. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which is well-suited to exploring and understanding participants' accounts within a specific context. [16] describes qualitative research as a method for exploring interpretations that people or groups make of a social or human phenomenon. Descriptive qualitative design allows participants' voices to emerge authentically by offering a rich, straightforward description of experiences without imposing pre-existing theoretical frameworks [17]. The researcher employed a narrative inquiry approach, which emphasizes the collection and interpretation of participants'

stories to understand how they construct meaning from their experiences [18].

### B. Respondents and Sampling Procedure

This study used **purposive sampling**, a non-probability sampling technique that involves the careful selection of participants based on specific criteria. According to [16], purposive sampling is commonly employed in qualitative studies because it ensures that participants can provide rich, detailed, and meaningful accounts related to the phenomenon under investigation. The respondents in this study were English language faculty members from various higher education institutions (HEIs) who had direct experience implementing Flexible Learning. Due to time constraints and personal circumstances, only six of the thirteen invited participants were able to attend the focus group discussion (FGD). Despite this limitation, the number of participants was deemed adequate for generating in-depth qualitative data. [20] demonstrate that smaller sample sizes can be sufficient in a qualitative study, provided that data saturation has been achieved. Similarly, [21] argued that the appropriateness of sample size in qualitative studies depends on the richness of the data collected rather than on numerical representation.

### C. Instrumentation

To gather substantial, context-specific data, the researcher employed a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions to elicit information from participants. The instrument was developed based on relevant literature and subsequently expert-validated to maintain its transparency and objectivity. The guide questions focused on major core domains (a) assessment of the implementation of Flexible Learning in their institution, (b) challenges encountered in conducting Flexible Learning in an online teaching and learning environment, and (c) strategies applied in addressing the challenges in Flexible Learning.

### D. Data Collection

An FGD was conducted. The researcher then converted the unprocessed data into codes that

could be read and examined after the interviews and disassociated herself from any preexisting prejudices to explore and evaluate the data with a fresh perspective and objectivity. The study's scope was confined to HEIs within NCR, which automatically limits the generalizability of its results. This geographic focus might not be representative of the varied challenges and strategies that HEI faculty in other areas face, especially those with varying levels of access to technology and resources.

### E. Data Analysis

The researcher immersed herself in the data by analyzing the narratives before applying thematic analysis (TA), a method for generating themes and patterns of meaning within qualitative datasets ([19]. Following the six-phase framework for thematic analysis, the data were systematically analyzed through the following steps: (a) **familiarization of data**, where the researcher had indulged and perused the verbatim responses of the participants to gain familiarity and processing; (b) **generating initial codes**, essential aspects of the data were systematically captured in the data sets; (c) **searching for themes**, codes were grouped into potential themes anchored on uniformities of concepts; (d) **reviewing themes**, examined in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure coherence; (e) **defining and naming themes**, each theme was appropriately stipulated, established, and captured to encompass its core; and (f) **producing the report**, where a detailed narrative account was developed, integrating compelling extracts from participants to support each theme.

## 3. Results

### A. Implementation of Flexible Learning (FL) among HEIs in the Philippines

The experiences of the participants during the implementation of Flexible Learning among HEIs in the Philippines reveal the following truths: their observations and realizations regarding their expectations versus the realities they encounter. The following themes in this question emerged: (a) *complexity of Flexible learning*, (b) *preparation of modalities*, and (c)

*preparation of teaching and learning designs.* This has significantly impacted curriculum design, particularly with respect to technological resources and infrastructure [10]. Likewise, initiatives to align FL approaches and methods to promote inclusivity have created pitfalls in ensuring accessibility, adoption, and preparation [22].

Participant 1 has described the implementation of FL as a complex experience due to readiness issues and changes in the educational landscape. *“The problem was that our school has no structured LMS. We utilize various platforms, including Zoom and Google Meet, and some have even turned to social media. The problem worsened when our school introduced the prescribed LMS, which created resistance among the older faculty due to readiness issues. Some were negative about it, while others did their best to focus on mastering the platform.”* Participant 2, on the other hand, shared his assessment of FL at their university, where it was referred to as remote learning. *“The event turned out to be a shocking experience for all of us. Our university also provided premium accounts for use in both synchronous and asynchronous classes, such as Zoom and Microsoft 365. Teacher 4 has been positively recommending her university as somewhat prepared for the implementation of the FL. “When the pandemic hit, our departments in engineering and IT were already using LMS. However, a majority of the faculty faced a complex and challenging situation in orienting themselves to the new web-based tools. Our university facilitated various undertakings.* Participant 3 lamented that, at the outset, they panicked because they were unprepared to navigate the online platforms used for classes. *The university's initiatives to prepare and conduct webinars on flexible learning management training for faculty and students were a critical step toward our adjustment to the modalities of FL. The university has introduced the prescribed LMS for our online and offline sessions.*

Teacher 5 also recounted his experiences regarding the implementation of FL. *“I observed that my co-teachers were not ready and were full of hesitation regarding FL. So, the University has prepared for the modalities of FL and instituted various initiatives to address the problem, including numerous webinars and training sessions on using the university's LMS. Further, we were using Moodle, the university's prescribed LMS.*

*Additionally, the university provided various notable supports, including laptops for every faculty member, the organized distribution of modules via courier service, and the electronic storage of modules on USB drives. When asked about the implementation of the FL in their HEIs, the researchers clearly highlighted teachers' experiences regarding the **Preparation of Modalities.***

Another theme that was revealed through this exploration: **Preparation of Teaching and Learning Designs.** Three participants have elaborated on their experiences below: Teacher 6 narrated her ordeal. She said... *“At first, it raised a lot of concerns for me, as I personally had no experience introducing LMS management to students. Thus, some of my colleagues were also caught unprepared. However, when the University introduced the Technology-Based Learning Hub (TBL), our LMS, we were able to identify what platforms were suitable for our classes. Through continuous training and webinars, faculty and students were able to embrace and adapt to these new adjustments. Finally, preparations were also made for modular students through the support of an express service delivery to cater to their needs.* The findings of this study underscore the need for higher education to develop more sustainable solutions and systems that balance technology integration with pedagogical innovations.

### **Challenges Encountered During the Conduct of Flexible Learning in an Online Teaching and Learning**

Upon thematically investigating the narratives of the participants, the following challenges were derived from the interviews: **(a) role of technology; (b) resistance to FL; and (c) accessibility.**

The participants encounter technology-related issues. Participant 1 has contended... *“I realized that we had made a significant transition from face-to-face to online learning. Based on my observations, the institution was unprepared from the start of the epidemic in terms of infrastructure and technology, resulting in significant issues, including a lack of defined policies and protocols regarding the who's and when's of FL.* Further, Participant 2 accounted... *Currently, I teach theater at the university. This subject entails physical interactions among its actors, production staff, and audience. The*



*biggest challenge was in practical courses, such as acting, directing, stagecraft, theater practicum, and theater internship. On the other hand, Participant 3 had shared...* Firstly, access to devices, equipment, and infrastructure, as well as internet connectivity, significantly affected how we pursued our classes. Meanwhile, Participant 4 narrated: *"I was part of the University's team to train teachers and students in preparation for FL." One of the challenges I observed was the preparation and conduct of the training workshops. As an IT administrator at the University, I was under pressure to determine the best approach for implementing the training. Lastly, preparing resources for synchronous classes was one of the biggest challenges I've encountered because of the complex groundwork involved.* The facts presented above have fueled the digital transition in higher education and tested its capacity to act quickly and effectively. Schools are successfully addressing a range of policy, structural, budgetary, and social demands.

The resistance to FL is also explained. Participant 2 shares, *"Some of the organic faculty are negative about the new modality. They felt they were digital immigrants. At the onset, they were resistant since they were having a difficult time learning the platforms."* On the other hand, Participant 3 mentions, *"Another was the struggle for teachers to use technology. They had difficulty learning the web-based tools, which made them negative about it."* Then, Participant 4 says, *"Then, during the training, senior faculty were slow when it came to navigating the platforms. Initially, they were not embracing the administration's initiatives. However, they remained faithful as regards what they had studied."* Three participants had opened up about their challenges regarding accessibility in the following areas: gadgets, equipment, infrastructure, and internet connection. Participant 1 had shared that internet connectivity was one of the significant issues affecting the FL, as the teacher had mentioned, *"Another issue was internet connectivity, which hampered both teachers and pupils and led to some older teachers being skeptical about the new system."*

#### **A. Strategies Applied in Addressing the Challenges in Flexible Learning**

The following themes are laid out based on the revealed challenges from the participants' narrations: **(1) upholding academic**

**continuity; (2) promoting equitable access, and (3) sophisticating teaching standards and skills.**

These participants also articulated notable experiences amidst the challenges of FL. For instance, Participant 1 says, *We believe that no one could hinder our mission to always continue education amidst the chaos. Some of the notable strategies sought included inviting resource speakers, digital practitioners, media practitioners, and theater practitioners to support online production.* Furthermore, Participant 2 mentions that various strategies were employed to continue quality education and address the problems in FL. *Firstly, we also attended multiple webinars and training sessions on navigating the LMS, course guides, and modules.* Participants 5 and 6 extrapolate, *"We also integrated the discussions from our classes to cope with online migration fully. We also conducted and convened conferences for both local and international audiences."* Lastly, Participant 5 claims, *"I also immersed myself, becoming familiar with the ins and outs of online learning and teaching by attending professional development endeavors, which led me to embrace the new realm of education gradually."* Collectively, these responses manifest that FL implementation is contingent not only on ICT integration but also on faculty resilience and preparation, capacity building, and support systems. Such strategies resonate with the equilibrium need to sustain accessible and equitable education.

#### **4. Discussion**

The experiences of the participants during the implementation of Flexible Learning among HEIs in the Philippines reveal the following truths: their observations and realizations regarding their expectations versus the realities they encounter. The following themes in this element emerged: *(a) complexity of Flexible learning, (b) preparation of modalities, and (c) preparation of teaching and learning designs.*

[23] has claimed that universities are still confronted with numerous demands, including technological concerns, evolving academic learning requirements, and pedagogies for teaching with FL. Similarly, [24] identified several significant issues, including accessibility, technical support, time constraints, and pedagogical

challenges. Furthermore, [25] argued that even without sufficient resources, FL cannot fully replicate in-person experiences unless equitable success is achieved and manifested. Consistent with these insights, [26] reported that students' academic performance and learning approaches were challenged by the sudden shift to the FL ecosystem.

When asked about the implementation of the FL in their HEIs, the teachers clearly highlighted their experiences regarding the **Preparation of Modalities**. [27] claimed that FL has led to HEIs adopting its platform. However, not all academic institutions can keep abreast of this paradigm. Asynchronous learning is a form of independent study in which pupils progress at their own pace [28], [29]. When using this learning method, students can communicate with one another via email, a learning management system (LMS), Moodle, or other social networking sites that provide access to the course content. Another is Synchronous Education—a live, interactive, real-time learning environment in which students and teachers use online platforms [29]. The immediate closure of schools should not stop them from continuing their plans and programs. Instead, they need to educate learners and parents to always adhere to government protocols [31]. [28] argued that the shift to online learning sparked a movement in the Philippines, citing the unfortunate living conditions of some learners. [32] asserted that a distinct gap exists between those who have and those who do not have the resources to access the new education platform.

Various trajectory dimensions to consider when reorganizing and planning (curriculum, resources, tools), as well as innovation (transforming current practices) and reflection (collecting data on the emergency experience to inform sound future decision-making [33]). Building on this, [34] highlighted the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach as a practical methodology for FL, where content delivery and assessment are clearly aligned. Additionally, [35] state that one of the teachers' responsibilities is to ensure that assessment strategies are appropriate for flexible modalities, including ensuring that the assessment is of high quality. Likewise, [36] stated

that the design of physical spaces is often considered a flexible learning strategy that supports individualized instruction and student-centered learning. Schools adopted necessary ICT, enhanced learning materials, established systems and infrastructure, developed new teaching protocols, and revised curricula [37]. The current situation is unique, as movement restrictions and health precautions may make online learning more challenging ([38].

The study by [39] found that most problems encountered during the significant shift were minor. However, they postulated that some of the most pressing issues included comprehension of the learning content, student engagement, and internet connectivity, which the participants likewise identified as disadvantages of FL. According to [40], in FL learning design, students must consider potential quirks with various learning tools (such as tablets, phones, and PCs), infrastructure needs (such as cellular networks, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, and online connectivity), and any unique hypothetical situations that may be pertinent. In a study by [41] on the relationship between university students' flexible thinking and their resistance to change (as an opposing trait), and their proficiency in ICT, it was found that the students who are more likely to adjust to novel learning situations are also less prone to desire routine, react emotionally, and pay attention to the present.

Universities experience pitfalls in creating an impactful FL environment, including ICT integration, student diversity, workforce demands, and varied teaching methods [42]. Challenges to technology adoption can stem from external factors, including equipment, time, access, and technical support [43]. It has been challenging for remote learning to fully replicate the advantages of in-person instruction; this necessitates modifications to the curriculum, faculty training, and equitable access [44]. The sudden transition to online learning had a significant impact on students' well-being, disrupted traditional learning frameworks, and raised concerns about academic integrity [45]. This contradicts the study by [42], which found

that students gave blended learning implementation high marks for meeting their needs in accessibility, technology quality, and realized benefits. Although the teacher-participants emphasized the importance of strengthening academic continuity, this had an opposite reaction among the students, as indicated in the study by [45]. According to [46], online teaching offers an interactive learning environment that enables students to participate effectively in class without being physically present. Furthermore, the study by [47] highlighted that students' readiness for and achievement in online learning, as well as their satisfaction with it, positively influenced their likelihood of remaining interested in it. One of the strategies proposed by [48] is for educational institutions to develop policy guidelines about the online learning systems and meeting platforms they use.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper explores the Narratives of HEIs' faculty on flexible learning, specifically in the context of the Philippines. From the accounts of the participants, the following conclusions are offered: (1) The experiences of the participants upon the implementation of Flexible Learning among HEIs in the Philippines revealed the following truths: Major findings revealed the following: the implementation of Flexible Learning among HEIs in the Philippines comprised the following: (a) complexity of Flexible learning, (b) preparation of modalities, and (c) preparation of teaching and learning designs. Thus, upon thematically investigating the narratives of the participants as to the challenges encountered with FL, the following themes were derived from the interviews: (a) role of technology; (b) resistance to FL; and (c) accessibility. Finally, after categorizing the initial labels/codes, the themes on the strategies addressed by the participants as to the challenges encountered in the FL included the following: (a) upholding academic continuity; (b) promoting equitable access; and (c) sophisticating teaching standards and skills emerged. In conclusion, Flexible Learning should not be seen as a

temporary workaround—it must be embraced as a **transformative model for the future of education**. But transformation requires more than structural and logistical mechanisms. It demands **continuous investment in support**, capacity building among teachers, and a deep recognition of inclusivity and educational justice. This exploration invites all researchers, educators, and policymakers to listen more closely to the voices from the classroom because when everyone listens, the world builds systems that not only work but also **endure**.

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## Statement of Ethics

All participants provided informed consent prior to the commencement of the data collection process. They were assured of the protocols governing voluntary participation and the confidentiality of their responses.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

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## Author Contributions

The author was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, writing – original draft, review and editing, and supervision of the study.

## Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this article and its supplementary material files. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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