

# Rewards and Drawbacks of Flexible Learning: The Case of Students in Public Higher Education Institution

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## ABSTRACT

College students in rural areas in the Philippines were used to the traditional learning approach. The Flexible Learning (FL) though sounds enticing and inviting, was new and foreign to them. This qualitative-phenomenological study explored the individual experiences, perspectives, and views of college students on Flexible Learning (FL) during the COVID 19. Using the non-probability sampling, the researchers purposely chosen 24 college students. The researchers used a validated and structured interview guide to obtain the data. Findings revealed that Flexible Learning offered autonomy, more family time, and entrepreneurial opportunities. However, the transition from traditional to Flexible Learning (FL) triggered much anxiety especially to those who experienced low internet access, no gadgets, unresponsive mentors, and living in far flung areas. Despite the drawbacks, students remained resilient, positive, and developed adaptive behaviors. The results imply that Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) may look into the institution's technological capacity, students' needs, and academic readiness before deciding to implementing Flexible Learning (FL) so that it can serve better the students.

**Keywords:** rewards and drawbacks; flexible learning; public higher education, SPAMAST

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the closure of almost all educational institutions around the globe, academic managers adopted multiple learning platforms and tools to continue education delivery (Huang *et al.*, 2020). However, the shift to a flexible learning modality raised concerns about internet connectivity among students living outside the city (Tarrayo *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, the lack of training in delivering flexible learning modalities added to the problem (Bdair, 2021). Moreover, students became passive due to a lack of interaction (Balram, 2019). It was also found by Cybinski and Selvanthan (2005) that flexible learning promoted assessment anxiety.

Flexible learning emphasizes students' choices to satisfy diverse needs (Huang *et al.*, 2020). It is interchangeably associated with open, distance, and e-learning (Li & Wong, 2018). It is reported to facilitate student-centered pedagogy, self-independence, and autonomy (Kariippanon *et al.*, 2018) and develop students to achieve expected outcomes (Li *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, Lo *et al.* (2021) mentioned that flexible learning could solve the academic delivery problem and fit the pandemic's needs. A recent study (Delgado & Arellano, 2021) on the flexible learning approach found that students believed it did not hinder their learning. Students considered the approach as convenient, less expensive, and enjoyable.



Also, Shang and Liu (2018) mentioned that flexible learning promotes independent learning among students.

In the Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST), a flexible learning approach was implemented during the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, students need direction about how the lessons will be delivered. On the other hand, connectivity and gadgets of both teachers and students remain the primary concern. As time passes, adjustments have been adapted, albeit face-to-face is still strictly prohibited. Three semesters have passed, and a flexible learning approach remains the means of delivery. However, no evaluation has yet been conducted to determine whether flexible learning is affected.

Although several studies have been conducted on the flexible learning approach in different countries, such as that of Annita and Susanto (2021) of Indonesia and Luthfiana and Marzuki (2020) of Japan; however, those tackled the technicality of the flexible learning approach not on the personal experiences of the students. It is on this ground that the researchers decided to conduct this study. The study's finding was disseminated to the academic forum for the public to know and understand the students' successes, challenges, and coping mechanisms.

This study was conducted to determine the rewards and drawbacks of the flexible learning approach during COVID-19 among the students of the Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST). Specifically, this study was determined to share the significant experiences of the students to others regarding flexible learning during COVID-19; to determine the advantages of flexible learning approach during COVID -19; to determine the challenges encountered by the students in flexible learning approach during COVID-19; and to explore how students dealt with the difficulties they experienced in the flexible learning approach during COVID-19.

## 2. METHODS

This study used the qualitative-phenomenological method. According to Rust *et al.* (2017), qualitative methods are used to investigate a phenomenon from the participants' perspective while reducing the investigators' involvement in learning about unrelated issues. On the other hand, Holtrop *et al.* (2018) stated that qualitative methods are utilized to uncover and comprehend why and how such events occur. On the other hand, phenomenology illuminates the significance of the participants' experiences (Christensen *et al.* (2010), understands the process of knowing the experiences (Armstrong, 2017), understands the meaning of human experiences or explores concepts from new and fresh perspectives (Lin, 2017); and elaborates non-technical issues (Van Manen, 2017).

The qualitative-phenomenological method was appropriate in this study because this study explored the personal experiences, perspectives, and views of the participants on flexible learning. The flexible learning modality was considered new to most academic institutions in the Philippines because it was only implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A purposive sampling method was used in selecting the participants. A purposive sample is also known as judgmental sampling (Teeroovengadum & Nunckoo, 2018) or subjective sampling (Etikan & Babetope, 2019). It means that the participants were selected based on the criteria set by the researchers. According to Campbell *et al.* (2020), purposive sampling improves the study's rigor and the reliability of the information and outcomes by better matching the sample to the research's goals and objectives. The participants were chosen because they were believed to be the right individuals to supply the necessary information for the topic under investigation.

The participants' information collection was done online (via messenger, Facebook group chat, email, or video call). It was done to comply with the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) guidelines on

controlling the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The study participants were 24 purposively chosen students from the fourth year Bachelor in Public Administration (BPA) enrolled during the Second Semester of SY 2021-2022. Regarding the number of participants chosen for this study, the researchers believed this number was enough and manageable. Dworkin (2012) pointed out that in the qualitative method, the number of participants is usually minor compared to that of the quantitative method. He suggested that participants for the qualitative method can range from five to 50 persons.

A researcher-made questionnaire was used in this study and was subjected to validation. In this study, the guide questions were based on the research questions and composed of four questions, and each main question had probe questions. Probe questions were relevant to dig deeper into the experiences of the participants. The interview guide was appropriate in this study because it allowed vast scope of answers from the participants. Aballe and San Jose (2017) mentioned that interview guide questions are commonly used to 'dig out information' from the participants essential to the study.

The study was conducted at the Southern Philippines Agri-business and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST) Malita, Davao Occidental. It is located at Musa Street, Poblacion, Malita, Davao Occidental. This locale was selected because it was where the study participants were enrolled and used a flexible Learning approach.

The information was analyzed using a thematic approach recommended by Smith and Shinebourne (2012). This approach followed six phases: Reading and re-reading. The researchers familiarized themselves with the interviews by immersing themselves in the transcripts. Coding. The researchers started by identifying themes and categorizing data into topics. Memoing. The researchers recorded and made reflective notes about what they understood from the information. Clustering. The identified codes made by the researchers were categorized into common topics and sub-themes. Iteration. The researchers made check and re-check of the themes, sub-themes, and verbatim transcriptions. Narration. The researchers began to narrate the story of the findings in narrative form, which included the description of themes and the usage of verbatim to support the themes. Contextualization. The researchers interpreted the findings in light of what was already known about the subject.

The researchers followed San Jose's (2019) four steps in gathering the data. These steps were asking permission, formulating proposal and research questions, conducting focus groups, and analyzing information. Before the proper conduct of the study, the researchers asked an endorsement letter from Dept. Chairman of Bachelor of Public Administration to conduct the study. Melnyk and Fineout-Overholt (2002) averred that asking permission is a critical first step in the evidence-based practice of research. On the other hand, Howes (2011) said that asking permission is part of the protocols posed for humanities research. After the request for permission was granted, the researchers crafted the proposal and research questions. The proposal format was composed of the introduction and methods. The research questions were given to the expert validators for validation and verification. After the interview-guide questions were validated, the researchers conducted online focus-group interviews using Google meet. It was done to comply with the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) mandate on social distancing. Moreover, the researchers followed ethics in the conduct of the interviews. Protocols were complied such as asking for consent and confidentiality. The 24 participants were grouped into six. Each group was met virtually in different times and days. San Jose (2019) mentioned that interviewing the participants separately allows the maintenance of consistency and partiality of the information obtained. After the conduct of the interviews, the researchers transcribed the information gathered. The researchers conducted a preliminary analysis; however, the analyzed information were given a data analyst for confirmation and verification.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher followed San Jose's (2019) presentation in presenting the findings of this study. The findings were organized into a three-column table. The themes were drawn in the first column. These themes were categorized into general, typical, and variant. General, if the response rate was 50% or higher; typical, if the response rate was 21% to 49%; and variant, if the response rate was 20% or below.

Table 1. Rewards and Drawbacks of Flexible Learning Approach among SPAMAST Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Themes	Core ideas	Pattern of Response
Favorable situation brought by flexible learning	-Having flexible time with study and work	General
	-Becoming independent	General
	-Spending more time with families	General
	-Develop study habits	Variant
	-Submitting tasks before the deadline	Variant
Complications of flexible learning	-Poor internet connection	General
	-Lacking gadgets for studies	General
	-Having difficulty in achieving goals	Variant
	-Having delayed responses from teachers	Variant
Solutions to the challenges	-Developing new techniques	Variant
	-Finding ways to connect with instructors	Variant
	-Being positive always	Variant
	-Being adaptable	Variant

#### Favorable situation brought by flexible learning

Generally, the participants found that flexible learning gave flexibility in terms of time with their studies. They could study at their own pace. Also, they became independent because they could answer the module on their own without the guidance of their teachers. Further, they could spend time with their families. Valiantly, few participants mentioned that they could set a study timetable. They usually answered their modules when they were free. Others also revealed that they could develop skills, such as online selling, and become social media literate. They could submit their activities ahead of time because they could focus on the tasks given. Participant from FGDP1 supported the forgoing statement:

"Ang flexible leaning kay nakahatag sa akua ug flexibility nga maka gahin ko ug oras sa mga lihukonon, pamilya, higala, ug uban pa. Ako pong nakita na dali ra kayo mangita ug answer sa mga classmate, unya pwede rapud ko maka search ug mga answer sa internet." (*"Flexible learning allows me to spend time with work, family, friends, and significant others. I also find it very easy to ask for answers from my classmates or search answers on the internet."*) (FGDP1)

Similarly, participants from FGD2 and FGD3 supported the forgoing statement:

"Usa sa mga na sinati nako sa flexible learning kay maka pasa ko dayun sa mga pasahunon sa wala pa ang deadline, ug tungod sa flexible learning naa koy daghang oras mag answer sa akuang mga activities nga walay kabalaka. Ug naka kat-on usab ko ug mga maayo na mga abilidad as studyante ug future public servant." (*"One of the experiences I had in flexible learning was being able to do and submit my tasks before the deadline, and because of flexible learning I had a great time answering my activities without pressuring myself. I also gain valuable skills as students and future public servant."*)(FGD2)

"Ang flexible learning kay naay mga major na impact sa akuang learning outcome, maka buhat nako mag isa sa akuang mga modules, dili nako mag sige ug kabalaka ug kanus a nako gusto mag study sa akuang mga lessons. Ug tungod sa flexible learning naka baton ko ug unsaon pag manage sa akuang oras arun maka study ko in advance." (*"Flexible learning had a significant impact on my learning outcomes because it allows me to work at my own pace, I do not feel anxious about when or how I will go to study my lessons. It enables me also to manage my time so I can study in advance."*)(FGD3)

The participant from FGDP4 supported the forgoing statement:

"Tungod sa flexible learning daghan ko ug na buhat na klase-klase na butang, ilabi na sa akuang pag atubang sa mga nag dasok na mga schedules. Tungod sa flexible learning naka gahin nako ug daghang oras na maka uban akuang mga mahal sa kinabuhi." (*"Flexible learning has taught me to be adaptable in all aspects, particularly in dealing with my hectic schedules. As a result, I can now spend enough time with my loved ones."*) (FGDP4)

Likewise, participants FGDP5 and FGDP6 supported the forgoing statement:

Tungod sa flexible learning na himo akong usa ka independent, ilabi na sa pag tuon sa akuang mga buhatunon sa skwelahan, ug na enhanced usab nko ang akuang abilidad na magpabiling kusgan nga mo barog ilabi na sa akuang study habits. (*"Flexible learning brought me the character of being independent when it comes to self-learning, wherein it enhanced my ability to stand firmly, especially in my study habits."*)(FGDP5)

"Tungod sa flexible learning na motivate ko na mo padayon sa pag skwela, ug naka tuon usab ko na mamahimong usa ka independent na studyante, ug karun maka answer nako sa akuang mga activity mag isa, ug usapa ma monitor ug ma evaluate na nako usab ang akuang study habits." (*"Flexible learning motivates me to keep going, and trained me to become independent learners, wherein I can answer my activities alone, and monitor and evaluate my study habits."*) (FGDP6)

The results of this study coincide with the findings of Daniel (2020) which state that flexibility brought by the flexible learning gives students more freedom to participate actively in learning. Moreover, Edge and Loegering (2000) mentioned that flexible learning allows students learn even if they are separated from their instructors by space and time. For De Guzman (2020), flexible learning is the future and better way of education which makes learning faster and more efficient for the students.

A recent study by Hasana and Khan (2020) among students in India found that students favored implementing flexible learning because it is flexible; modules are provided; they can interact with peers; it is comfortable and self-paced. Conversely, the results of this study contradict Xie et al. (2020) findings in China. It was mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic created a 'lack of engagement among Chinese students. It would imply that different learners find flexible learning differently due to their backgrounds.

### **Complications of flexible Learning**

Despite the advantages mentioned by the students, they also revealed their concerns. Generally, they found that flexible learning made them anxious because of the poor internet connection, and most did not have mobile phones or computers for their studies. Anxious, they needed to make an alternative

solution to the problem by borrowing mobile phones or laptops from their peers. As a result of the difficulty, only some participants felt that they could achieve their goals of making good marks. Few others also mentioned that their mentors had delayed feedback on their submitted thesis and tasks.

Participants from FGDP1 and FGDP2 supported the forgoing statement:

"Tungod sa flexible learning na apiktuhan akuang learning outcome, kay kasagaran sa amuang online classes, naga antos jud kayo ko aning pagka hinay sa signal, ug usa pa daot-daot akuang cellphone, ug wala pud koy laptop na pang gamit unta sa online classes. (*"Flexible learning affects my learning outcome because, during online classes, I was struggling with the internet disruption, and also I do not have adequate gadgets for online classes."*) (FGDP1)

"Tungod sa flexible learning na himo kung tapulan, ug permi nako ma balaka tungod aning pagka hinay sa signal pag mag klase, ug usa pa wala koy maayo na cellphone, ug wala pud koy laptop nga pang gamit unta sa online classes." (*"Flexible learning approach makes me indolent and I always feel anxious because of the poor internet connection, and lack of gadgets for online classes."*) (FGDP2)

The participants from FGDP3 and FGDP4 supported the forgoing statement:

"Naka ingun ko na lisud jud kaayo ang flexible learning ilabi na sa akua nga nag puyo layo sa skwelahan, na perti ka hinay sa signal, ug usa pa puno-puno na akuang cellphone halos dili na maka download ug app, ug wala pud koy laptop, ug usa pa gamay ra kayo akuang kahibalo sa pag gamit anang mga social media platforms." (*"Flexible learning is tough because I was living in far-flung areas where the internet connection is poor, not having adequate gadgets, and being not so proficient at using other social media platforms."*) (FGDP3)

"Dili jud kayo ko satisfied aning flexible learning tungod saka hinay sa signal sa amuang lugar, unya kulang sa gadgets, taposs usahay pajud ma delayed pa ang mga reponses sa mga instructors ilabi na sa pag check sa amuang mga thesis ug uban pa." (*"I am not satisfied with having flexible learning due to internet disruption, lack of gadgets, delayed responses from instructors when it came to checking our thesis, and other requirements."*) (FGDP4)

The participant FGDP6 supported the forgoing statement:

"Tungod aning pandemic na sinati jud nako ang kalisud sa pag abot sa akuang mga pangandoy. Kay tungod aning flexible learning, nag lisud jud ko aning kahinay sa signal during online classes, ug wala pud koy laptop ug kulang-kuang ang akuang pang pa load. Maong usahay dili nako maka sulod sa klase kay wala koy pang load. (*"This pandemic makes me experience difficulties in achieving my goals. Because during online classes, I was struggling with the internet disruption, lack of gadgets and load allowance."*) (FGDP6)

The results of this study corroborate with Hasan and Khan (2020), who found that poor network and connectivity are the most challenging part of online and flexible learning among students. Likewise, Gurajena *et al.* (2021) and Mina *et al.* (2020) found that additional challenges among students were the need for more devices and gadgets such as laptops, webcams, printers, and smartphones. Additionally, Mohammadi *et al.* (2021) reported that students experienced ineffective learning because they faced

different learning opportunities due to a need for more resources. Noori (2021) also said that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected different aspects of students' learning, such as class projects, the load of their assignments, quality of their learning, their motivation for learning, educational activities, goals, knowledge of subjects, learning performance, educational opportunities, and the duration of their studies. It would imply that technological infrastructure and availability of gadgets are significant components of flexible learning approach.

### **Solutions to the challenges**

The variant answers of the participants to address the challenges of flexible learning signified that they had different foci and interests. Few participants found that flexible learning encouraged them to work hard and develop new techniques to contextualize their learning. Others mentioned that they needed to connect with their mentors so that they would have updates on their performance. Also, others said that they needed to look at the bright side of the situation and adopt the new normal to keep going.

The participants from FGDP1 and FGDP3 supported the forgoing statement:

*"Bisag unsa ka lisud sa sitwasyon, naningkamut lang jud gihapon ko ug nangita ko ug unsay maayong pamaagi arun maka kat-on ko bisag unsa ka lisud sa situation. Nahimo nako ang tanan ilabi na ang pag lampos sa mga kalisud. Ug Despite sa akuang mga pag antos nga na sinati sa skwelahan ug sa akuang personal na kinabuhi, ang sense of responsibility jud ang rason nganung ni padayun ko sa pag skwela." ("I work hard and discover techniques to learn easily, I become adaptable in dealing difficulties, and despite of all the struggles I've encountered each day in school as well as in my personal lives, it is the sense of responsibility that makes me continue with my studies, despite those challenges.") (FGDP1)*

*"Gi dawad nako ang kamatuoran ug ang kalisod arun dali rako maka irug sa panghitabo. Nag sugod ko ug manage sa akuang oras, ug nangita ko ug pamaagi na mabuhay nako ang tanan bisag unsa ka lisod." ("I accept all the difficulties so I could move forward easily. I initiate to manage my time and become flexible in all aspects.") (FGDP3)*

The participants from FGDP5 and FGDP6 also supported the forgoing statement:

*"Nangita ko ug pamaagi nga maka konekta ko sa akuang mga instructors ug mga klasmate. Ug tungod sa akuang gi buhat na encourage ko na dapat maningkamot ko, na mag build ko ug confidence mismo sa akuang sarili, ug mag discover ko ug mga bag-o sa akuang sarili, arun ako maka lahutay sa situation nga gina atubang karun." ("I find ways to connect with my instructors and classmates. Through this, it encouraged me to work hard, build confidence, and discover new things about myself.") (FGDP5)*

*"Akoa jud gigunitan ang essence of positivity ug determination arun akung ma lampusan ang mga kalisud nga akuang na sinati aning flexible learning. Ug despite sa mga kalisod, na motivate gihapon ko na mupadayon sa akuang pag eskwela tungod sa akuang pamilya." ("I embrace the essence of positivity and determination to deal with the difficulties I encountered with flexible learning. Despite all the challenges, I am still motivated to continue my studies because of my family.") (FGDP6)*

The findings of this study favor Khan (2007) who mentioned that flexible learning leads to meaningful learning among students. Also, Cornelius et al. (2011) said that flexible learning increases the contextualization of individual learning. It implies that with flexible learning, students become independent learners and make sense of their learning based on their situations.

Similar to the findings of Picault (2021), that during the COVID-19 situation, instructors are much needed by the students to keep warmth touch with their students to cultivate interaction and reduce the stigma of social isolation. Hence, Talosa et al. (2021) pointed out that open communication with the instructors allows students to clarify some lectures that were left unexplained. Thus, Lapitan et al. (2021) was correct that instructors must also develop ways to increase their contact with students and retain student interest and involvement.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Although flexible learning is new to the Philippine education system, it is found to be beneficial to the studies of participants. It allows the participants to have flexibility and independence and gives them time to enjoy the company of their families. It implies that flexible learning may be adapted even if the situations are back to normal to give students a choice of which learning mode they prefer. Flexible learning may be offered to those students who are employed, married, and lived in far-flung areas.

The poor internet connection and lack of gadgets bring anxiety to many students; hence, few fail to submit tasks and requirements. It implies that the Local Government Units (LGU), such as the Municipal and Barangay, may include in their strategic and development plan the acquisition or subscription of internet, which the students and the entire population of the area will use. The LGU may also offer study loans or scholarships to address the needs of students in their locality.

Despite the challenges brought by COVID-19 to the students' studies, they remain encouraged and optimistic. They realize that they need to find ways to continue with their studies. It implies that the students value their studies. Therefore, the college administration may consider improving technology structures relevant to the student's intellectual cultivation.

##### **Implications**

Flexible learning brings a new learning curve for students, but adapting to new learning methods has advantages. Flexible learning allows students to self-pace themselves and better manage their time, resulting in more efficient learning. Rather than sitting in class all day, students take more breaks to exercise and unwind before returning to work, which has proven highly advantageous to their grades.

Adapting to flexible learning was quite challenging at the onset of the pandemic because it was entirely new to most students. However, few activities like orientations and seminars have helped students adapt better. Before the pandemic, most students did not have functional study spaces, but the transition to flexible learning has emphasized the need for one. As a result, students got flexibility in terms of time with their studies.

Academic institutions must provide and actively promote training for students in the use of technology. They also need to provide platforms for online learning with easy access to the study materials. They need to improve faculty access and response times to students' correspondence.

The rewards and drawbacks of flexible learning do not rely on students, academic institutions, community, and Local Government Units (LGU) but on all. Hand-and-hand cooperation and collaboration among these entities are necessary to address the challenges and share success. The researchers believed that it needs a helping environment that makes students succeed in their academic or life endeavors.



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