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Preparing Philippine higher education institutions for flexible learning during the period of COVID-19 pandemic: Curricular and instructional adjustments, challenges, and issues

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Abstract

The current situation, which is considered the *new normal*, calls for an immediate response and action from all higher education institutions (HEIs). This is a qualitative study that shares the experiences and preparations of universities and colleges in the Philippines during the first four months of shifting to flexible learning as an alternative way to deliver curriculum and instruction at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through analysis of public documents like memoranda, advisories, reports, and updates from leading organizations and HEIs, this study identifies curricular and instructional adjustments done and discusses several challenges and issues experienced by higher education institutions in shifting to flexible learning. The study also recommends a model that universities and colleges could use in planning for an effective and efficient implementation of flexible learning.

Keywords: Flexible learning, COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions

1. Introduction

The disease brought about by the coronavirus (COVID-19) has been rapidly spreading across various countries around the world, causing death to multitudes of people, anxieties, and economic turmoil. COVID-19 started in December 2019 as a respiratory illness in Wuhan, Hubei Province of China (Li Q et.al., 2020). It spread too swiftly at the start of the year 2020, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare it as a global pandemic. The number of individuals getting infected and the mortality rate of those getting infected continue to increase daily at an alarming rate. Globally, COVID-19

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prevention and control strategies and methods are currently done from national to community level (Adhikari et.al., 2020). Lockdowns that seemed draconian when instigated in Wuhan few months ago are now becoming commonplace (The Lancet, 2020).

In the Philippines, classes started to be suspended in all levels in Metro Manila from the first week of March 2020. On March 15, 2020, the President issued Presidential Proclamation 922, placing the entire country in a State of Public Health Emergency, and declaring the entire island of Luzon under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) initially for one month. Schools were the first institutions affected by the ECQ policies when the government closed down their operations in all levels. Most classes among higher education institutions (HEIs) were still in the first two months from the start of the semester at that time. As a result, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) released several advisories (CHED COVID-19 Advisory 1 – 6 s2020) to guide all public and private universities in responding to the challenges and threats posed by the pandemic, and to the enhanced community quarantine imposed by the government.

The University of the Philippines COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team (2020) has done simulations on the spread of SARS-COV-2 in the country, showing an estimated peak in the number of infected individuals by end of April to June, especially in Metro Manila alone. In response to the estimations provided by the said team and by the scientific community, the government extended the ECQ period to May 2020 in selected areas particularly in Metro Manila. With the looming possibility of another round of extension until a cure is found, it is essential for people to know how to protect themselves against this highly contagious disease. Consequently, CHED decided that opening of classes would be on August 2020. It has become imperative for higher education institutions to devise ways on how learning may continue and be disruption-free even during a pandemic. Furthermore, CHED announced that only those who are ready for flexible learning would be allowed to open classes in August.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted all universities and colleges in the country to rethink and redesign the entire education system using ICT and all available alternative delivery modes of instruction. Flexible learning is slowly taking shape already in the country due to the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. However, with the *new normal* situation brought about by the pandemic, HEIs have no choice but to drastically change the traditional delivery of education and immediately adapt flexible learning to address the situation. Thus, this study explores the preparations, curricular and instructional adjustments, challenges and issues experienced by HEIs in shifting to flexible learning during the entire period of the COVID-19 pandemic and enhanced community quarantine.

Higher Education Institutions in the Philippines

Higher education plays an important role in national development. As of school year 2018-2019, the CHED Office of Planning, Research, and Knowledge Management - Knowledge Management Division (OPKRM-KMD) reported that there is a total of 1,963 higher education institutions in the Philippines. There are 111 state universities and colleges (SUC) in 17 regions across the country with 430 satellite campuses. There are also 118 local universities and colleges (LUC) and 13 special chartered public higher education institutions. These public HEIs are serving a total of 1,519,512 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in various academic degree programs (CHED OPKRM-KMD, 2020). With the implementation of Republic Act 10931, otherwise known as Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act in the Philippines, all students enrolled in public HEIs will be free of tuition fees. The graduate students are either on scholarships or are privately financing their studies. The free tuition fee program of the government does not cover graduate students in public HEIs. All public HEIs receive full financial support from the government.

There are 1,721 private universities and colleges in the country. Out of this number, 353 are sectarian schools and 1,368 are non-sectarian serving a total of 1,693,030 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in various degree programs (CHED OPKRM-KMD, 2019). These private HEI rely heavily on the tuition and miscellaneous fees collected from the students. Only few students receive scholarships from the government or private sectors.

Majority of the universities and colleges in the Philippines are in traditional and residential modes. Classes are conducted through the traditional face-to-face instruction with few institutions using blended learning and other alternative delivery modes of instruction. In 2019, the CHED issued a memorandum encouraging all public universities and colleges to start the school year in August. Many private HEIs also adapted this change and started adjusting their academic calendars. This means the first semester will start on August up to December, the second semester will start from January up to May, and summer term is scheduled on the months of June and July.

With the cancellation of classes and changing the academic calendar due to the pandemic, all the 2,997,075 students plus the senior high school graduates who are enrolling in tertiary this SY 2020-2021 will be affected. In response to this, the CHED issued several advisories guiding all HEIs in the country on how to respond to the needs of students, faculty, and staff during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the remarkable suggestions from CHED is for all HEIs to explore shifting their traditional classroom instruction to virtual learning, blended learning, and flexible learning options (CHED COVID-19 Advisories 1 – 6 s2020).

The Concept of Flexible Learning

Flexible learning has always been the response of educators and learning institutions to be the most suitable approach to widen access to education. Educational solutions encouraged by Education 4.0 are always anchored on flexible learning that maximize the use of ICT tools and other alternative learning modes. It is supported by a learner-centered philosophy that respects the individual right of the learners to make decisions in their education (Lewis and Spencer, 1986). In terms of purpose, flexible learning "increases opportunities and options available for learners and gives them greater control of their learning through a variety of learning modes and interactions; and in its broadest sense, it is a continuum of different educational approaches in terms of time, place, content, and mode of learning applied in varying degrees" (Deakin University. 2009, p.1). In flexible learning, all hurdles and difficulties for students to engage actively in the educational process are removed.

The following are some of the conceptions and definitions of flexible learning from various groups and individuals:

- "It is a philosophy that frames strategies and approaches to learning and teaching to require more holistic forms of provision to support students' learning" (Jones and Walters, 2015, p.67).
- "An entry point and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education" (UNESCO, 2015, p.33).
- "Provides students with the opportunity to take greater responsibility for their learning and to be engaged in learning activities and opportunities that meet their own individual needs" (Unger and Zaussinger, 2018, p.10)
- "Use of internet-based tools such as virtual learning environments (VLE) or learning management systems (LMS), discussion boards or chat rooms; and may be designed using blended learning approaches, with content available electronically and remotely, as well as *face-to-face* classroom tutorials and lectures" (Joan, 2013, p. 38)
- "Flexibility of admissions and enrolment processes, flexibility in assessment and assessment times" (Deakin University, 2009, p.1).

The scope of flexible learning is not confined with utilization of technology in learning; it is an innovation that includes a set of learning philosophies, administrative support, and instructional support system providing learners with freedom to make decisions to suit their personal and learning needs (Shurville et al. 2008). This means that flexible learning allows learners to choose about where, when, and how learning occurs. Gordon (2014) referred to these as the pace, place, and mode of learning**.**

- **Pace -** encompasses accelerated and decelerated programs, part-time learning, recognition of prior learning and associated credit frameworks;
- **Place -** refers to the physical location of learning, whether it takes place in a classroom, or is completed at home, while commuting, or as part of a work-based experience;
- **Mode -** refers to the ways that technologies can be used to deliver learning in fully online, blended, or technology enhanced experiences (p.4).

In higher education, Ayer and Smith (1998) observed that flexible learning is often associated with "open learning and distance learning" (p.1035). In practice, open learning and distance learning design courses and programs flexible to the needs of individual students, which is one of the major features of flexible learning. In flexible learning, learners become more empowered, self-determined, and more independent while teachers become facilitators of learning and instructional coaches. The students are empowered to make choices and decisions about learning, that include class schedules, course content, instructional delivery, and instructional materials. In more advanced HEIs, ICT-based instructional support systems are also provided to students.

At any level of education, widening access to quality education has become the major impetus for flexible learning. It requires educators to redesign their curriculum, make it more accessible through a variety of learning delivery systems, and provide an efficient instructional and administrative support to students. Jones and Walters (2015), citing the works of the University of Southern Queensland, Australia also suggest a definition of flexible learning to include the following important components:

- *Flexible curriculum design,* including flexible forms of assessment which takes into account different learning styles of students;
- *Flexible admissions criteria,* including mechanisms for recognition of prior learning and credit accumulation and transfer; and
- *Flexible delivery,* including distance, online, on campus, a mix of these modes as well as accelerated or decelerated options (p.66).

UNESCO (2020) also identifies eight dimensions for flexible learning focusing on teaching and learner management level that could be useful in planning for flexible learning among HEIs and other schools: (1) schedule and place of learning, (2) content, (3) instructional delivery, (4) strategies, (5) learning resources, (6) technology, (7) assessment, and (8) support and services. Ryan and Tilbury (2013) also define the scope of flexible learning through the lens of six pedagogical ideas: "learner empowerment, future-facing education, decolonizing education, transformative capabilities, crossing boundaries, and social learning" (p.14).

These ideas provide educators with a broader understanding of flexible learning. HEIs will find these eight dimensions and the six pedagogical lenses useful in planning for flexible learning for the students, and to ensure all considerations are addressed

before its full implementation. Currently, flexible learning is one of the proposed solutions by the CHED to enable higher education institutions to continue their operations and reach out to all students during the period of enhanced community quarantine caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. CHED encourages all higher education institutions in the country to explore flexible learning as the new philosophy and approach to providing quality, relevant, and responsive education. However, this drastic shift to flexible learning due to the pandemic and the continuous community quarantine also posts enormous challenges as well as various opportunities for all HEIs.

Challenges and Opportunities of Flexible Learning in Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many higher education institutions in various parts of the world. In developing countries like the Philippines, there are several challenges that need to be addressed, as far as the implementation of flexible learning in higher education is concern:

- Access to technology – Many students does not have access to a computer.
- Access to Internet – Teachers and students have poor Internet connection.
- Capacity and Ability to do Online Learning – Not all teachers and students are equipped in utilizing ICT in learning.
- Infrastructure for Flexible Learning – Many HEIs are still in the process of building the necessary infrastructure to support flexible learning.
- Geographical location of the students – Many students are living in far, rural communities that have no Internet connection.

In spite of these challenges, there are also immense opportunities for using flexible learning to all HEIs, namely:

- Transformation in the total educational system – Make teaching and learning more empowering and learner-centered.
- Change in the culture of HEIs – Enable the education system to focus on the needs and contexts of the learners; Remove barriers for students to have access to quality education.
- Development of new pedagogy – Identify new instructional designs, learning strategies, and assessment tools, and create a dynamic and flexible learning environment.
- Evolution of new learning theories – Strengthen the constructivist theory and other learner-centered theories and philosophies that support flexible learning and allow new theories to emerge.
- Systematic designing of curriculum – Give more freedom for students to be part of the curriculum design process, giving more options and providing standards and contents that are transdisciplinary.
- Utilization of ICT in teaching and learning – maximizing ICT tools in delivering instruction based on the needs, interests, and contexts of the students.

Adapting flexible learning now will not only address the needs of the students during this COVID-19 pandemic. It will prepare colleges and universities for the demands of 21st century learning. Shifting to flexible learning could be the prelude to preparing Philippine higher education system to the demands and challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Flexible learning in many ways is a blessing to HEIs as it rekindles innovation and creativity in responding to the needs of students and faculty, and in creating an inclusive learning environment.

2. Method

This study is a qualitative research that includes analysis of important documents that capture the curricular and instructional adjustments done by Philippine HEIs as they shift to flexible learning including the challenges and issues they encounter during the first four months (March – June) of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study answered the following questions:

1. What are the curricular and instructional adjustments for shifting to flexible learning done by Philippine HEIs during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and enhanced community quarantine?
2. What are the challenges and issues encountered in the implementation of flexible learning in the university?
3. What model can be used by HEIs that are planning to shift to flexible learning?

2.1. Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher analyzed documents such as advisories, reports, and memorandum orders issued by the Commission on Higher Education for public colleges and universities, Coordinating Council of Private Education Association (COCOPEA) for private colleges and universities, Legal Education Board (LEB) for all Law schools, and the University of the Philippines System (UP) as special chartered national university of the country. The study also examined publicly available reports, updates, and plans from other universities and colleges in the country during the first four months (March-June) of the lockdown and enhanced community quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All the documents and materials that were analyzed are available for the public.

2.2 Analysis of Data

The data gathered from the aforementioned documents were analyzed and reported qualitatively. Programs, plans, and strategies for the implementation of flexible learning were identified, clustered, and reported in the study. Likewise, the challenges and issues were clustered into themes based on the research questions. The answers to the first two research questions were used to develop the proposed planning model for shifting to flexible learning.

3. Results

The results of the study are presented and discussed based on the three research questions raised in the study.

3.1. Curricular and instructional adjustments for shifting to flexible learning done by Philippine HEI during the period of COVID 19 pandemic and enhanced community quarantine

Out of the 1,963 higher education institutions in the Philippines, CHED (2020) reported that only 876 universities and colleges shifted to flexible learning during the enhanced community quarantine period. Majority of the HEIs were not prepared for the challenges brought by the COVID 19 pandemic. Nevertheless, they need to respond and be creative. Flexible learning has become the emerging response from various educational sectors as shown in the six advisories issued by the CHED, COCOPEA Study and Report, and the memoranda and guidelines issued by the LEB and the UP System. Shifting to flexible learning necessitates HEIs to do major curricular and instructional adjustments. Table 1 shows the curricular adjustments required of HEIs to be able to shift to flexible learning.

Table 1. Curricular adjustments for shifting to flexible learning

• Revising course syllabi
• Transforming courses to flexible learning mode
• Reviewing course outcomes and competencies
• Revising course contents and course design, learning materials and assessments
• Making curricular support system accessible online
• Changing of academic calendar
• Doing academic advising and mentoring online
• Allowing students to select courses and number of units to enrol
• Implementing bridging programs through self-instructional modules, learning packages or online workshops

- Developing new programs designed for flexible delivery
- Modifying curriculum to integrate changes in internship and practicum requirements
- Deciding on contact hour requirements for the completion of a course
- Shortening completion of degree programs

Curriculum can be defined as a set of learning experiences, set of contents, a plan of learning, a set of competencies and learning outcomes, a list of courses and subjects, and it could also mean everything that students learn in school (Pawilen, 2019; Pawilen, 2012). Thus, the reforms required to shift to flexible learning should start with the curriculum. Since majority of the programs and courses offered by HEIs are designed for the traditional classroom-based instruction and planned for a fixed schedule in terms of semester offering and weekly schedules, there is a need to review the course outcomes, competencies, and course contents if flexible learning is adapted. This will provide more flexibility for students to study based on their own pace and context. The courses also need to be transformed for online learning for students to access. Flexible learning allows students to select courses based on their needs and resources. This means fixed block sections of courses will be discarded, and minimum units for regular loads of students will be flexible too.

There is also a challenge to make all curricular, administrative, and students' support system available to students. This means, wherever the students are, they should have access to advising and mentoring program, library, counselling, and other forms of student support. Table 2 shows the necessary instructional adjustments done by HEIs to be able to shift to flexible learning.

Table 2. Instructional adjustments for shifting to flexible learning

- Using online, virtual, and blended learning modes
- Using alternative delivery modes of instruction or "low-tech" options (e.g. SMS, printed worksheets, lecture notes, and utilizing modules) for students with poor internet access
- Using learning management system (LMS)
- Using learning portfolios and online alternatives to augment the number of hours lost because of the ECQ
- Making remaining examinations, submission of class requirements, and thesis defense online
- Modifying course requirements and assessment
- Creating an alternative grading system
- Adopting synchronous and asynchronous learning
- Adjusting the number of hours and activities for laboratory work, fieldwork, practicum, internship, and other out-of-classroom activities
- Taking the form of distance and remote learning, problem-based learning, and other creative or innovative methodologies that promote student autonomy and self-directed learning

Oliva (2005) opined that instruction is the implementation of the curriculum. Thus, in shifting to flexible learning, several adjustments in instruction have to be done. Flexible learning allows students to use online and virtual learning platforms. In this regard, HEIs in the country are implementing a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning approaches to reach out to students. For those who do not have access to Internet and those who do not own a computer, alternative delivery modes of instruction or low-tech options are also allowed. Thus, they may use modules, worksheets, and printed learning materials that they could bring and study at home.

The shift to flexible learning allows faculty members to creatively design their courses and lessons. There are various activities that could be selected by the students depending on their learning styles and capacity. Currently, based on the documents analyzed, HEIs are using Canvass, Blackboard Learn, Google classroom, Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, video calls using Facebook, and other alternative delivery modes to deliver instruction to the students. Some HEIs are also equipped with their own LMS like the UP System and Silliman University, among others.

The result of document analysis also shows that course requirements are modified to give students liberty to select from multiple options. Laboratory courses were redesigned to explore online simulations. Courses requiring practicum and immersions were also redesigned to allow the use of online alternatives and online learning portfolios. Alternative learning activities such as modules, self-directed learning activities, simulations, case studies, assignments or other related activities performed by the student-trainees in the offices or laboratories shall be part of the portfolio to be submitted by the trainees (CHED 2020).

3.2. Challenges and issues encountered in the implementation of flexible

While HEIs are in the process of doing necessary curricular, instructional, and system adjustments to shift to flexible learning, they encountered several challenges and issues. Table 3 shows the challenges in shifting to flexible learning based on the experiences of HEIs reflected in the reports and memoranda that were analyzed.

Table 3. Challenges and Issues for shifting to flexible learning

• Preparing students and faculty members for a paradigm shift of learning
• Helping students and faculty embrace necessary changes, challenges and demands of flexible learning
• Encountering difficulties in adjusting to online learning and other alternative delivery modes of instruction on the part of some students
• Transforming traditional courses to flexible learning mode
• Putting all necessary instructional and students' support systems online

- Equipping faculty members on flexible learning strategies and approaches
- Developing learning management systems
- Building an ICT infrastructure to support alternative learning
- Exploring alternative delivery modes of instruction for students with limited internet access
- Ensuring sustainable financial resources to support innovations brought by flexible learning
- Having no access to the internet for many students
- Not being equipped in utilizing ICT in their classes for some faculty members
- Making adjustments to majority of the courses that are developed for a traditional residential instruction
- Finding alternatives to practicum, laboratory classes, and immersion programs
- Developing a flexible time schedule for all courses and programs

Moving out from the comfort zone of traditional instruction is not easy for faculty and students. It requires a complete paradigm shift in the philosophy of education, delivery of instruction, and organization of the learning environment (Jones and Walters, 2015; Shurville et al., 2008). Thus, faculty members and students must totally understand and embrace the philosophy, principles, and practices of flexible learning. With the emotional stress caused by the ECQ and the COVID-19 pandemic to students, faculty members and their families, it is not easy to effect changes in their way of doing things though this is a must. It takes time for people to adjust to the new normal brought by the pandemic.

Another challenge is to transform all the courses to online and virtual learning and other alternative delivery modes to give students who do not have Internet connection a chance to continue learning off-line. This will require modification of course outcomes, course contents, requirements, and learning activities. HEIs also face the challenge of providing alternatives to practicum, laboratory classes, community immersions, and physical education classes.

The development of LMS for students and faculty is a herculean challenge to all Philippine HEIs (Marcial, et.al. 2017). The LMS will help the students in the learning process, and in tracking their academic progress. The LMS also makes instructional support system accessible to students. Currently some HEIs that are not equipped to develop their own LMS and those who cannot afford to subscribe to commercially available LMS are collaborating with textbook companies to provide them with the LMS they need. Nevertheless, the development of an institutional LMS is desirable for the full implementation of flexible learning.

The effect of ECQ to the economy, class suspensions, and changing the academic calendars because of the COVID-19 pandemic also brought financial crisis to schools, especially to private HEIs. There is a need to have a sustainable source of income to support all the changes and innovations needed for the shift to flexible learning. Building

a good ICT infrastructure, increasing the Internet bandwidth capacity, and developing and maintaining an LMS, among others, need the steady financial capacity of HEIs.

The report of a survey recently conducted by COCOPEA (2020) on 25 HEIs located in different parts of the country shows that 92% reported that they are ready for flexible learning. In terms of approach, 56% signified preference to blended learning and 44% preferred fully online learning (this includes enrolment in a Learning Management System, regular class facilitation with course instructors, pre-determined or self-determined pace of engagement, self-determined deadlines of completion). In terms of flexible learning immediacy, 68% are ready while the rest have different timelines.

In a developing country like the Philippines, while HEIs are encouraged to use online and virtual learning platforms, there is a need to consider the socio-economic and geographic contexts of students. Few students have the capacity to own computers, connect to Internet for 24 hours, and own a cellphone or a gadget with all the applications needed for virtual and online learning. It is not safe to assume that majority of students have access to Internet while they are only dependent on phone data to connect to cyberspace. Also, internet subscription, unless provided for free, is an additional burden to students from poor and working-class families, especially at the time of the pandemic and ECQ where families suffer economically due to the halt of many business operations and cancelation of work. Moreover, not all students, even if they have all the gadgets at home, are comfortable with a fully online and virtual learning.

There is also a need to equip faculty members, staff, and students on the approaches and instructional modalities that will be used for flexible learning. Not all teachers have access to Internet and have the skills to easily shift to flexible learning. Majority of the courses are also designed for residential and traditional instruction. They need to hire technical experts who can transform the courses to fit the requirements of a flexible learning mode. Finding alternatives to practicum, laboratories, and immersions is also one of the issues. It is not also easy for teachers to accept that there are possible alternatives to actual conduct of practicum, laboratories, and immersions.

Developing a flexible time for all courses and degree programs also posts an immense challenge and issue to HEIs. Students, faculty, and staff are used to fixed schedules in terms of contact hours, number of school days, and academic terms. With flexible learning, it is now possible for students to master a course in a shorter period. They can study independently in a series of asynchronous sessions without the pressure of rigid schedules.

These challenges and issues are part of a larger issue of digital inequality where only those who own gadgets and get Internet connection can fully enjoy the benefits of online learning (Aldama, 2020). Not only this, only big and well-endowed universities and

colleges can afford to provide all the necessary ICT infrastructures and support systems to support the students' learning.

These challenges and issues also show that students and faculty have limited understanding of the scope and practices of flexible learning. They always associate flexible learning with online and virtual learning. They seem to be unaware that flexible learning embraces various modalities in bringing the desired learning experiences to the students and there are philosophical and pedagogical considerations that must be considered. Furthermore, there is a need to change the mindset of the teachers and encourage them to embrace the paradigm shift brought by flexible learning.

To face all these challenges and issues, centers of excellence and autonomous and deregulated colleges and universities should provide training and share technical expertise to other HEIs in shifting courses to flexible learning. Perhaps this is not the time for HEIs to compete with one another, but they should take this time as an opportunity to collaborate and share expertise and best practices to perfect the implementation of flexible learning and continue to provide quality education to all students.

3.3 Model that could be used by HEI that are planning to shift to flexible learning

The global impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of enhanced community quarantine in various parts of the country prompted all HEIs to abruptly change their respective systems and find ways to respond to the needs of students through flexible learning. Based on the curricular and instructional adjustments done and the challenges and issues encountered by HEIs in shifting to flexible learning, and inspired by the literatures on flexible learning, this study suggests a model that could be adapted by HEIs in planning for flexible learning in the Philippines. The proposed model is shown in Figure 1.

	Types of Learners	**Pace**	**Place**	**Mode**
Administrative Support System				
Curriculum				
Instruction				

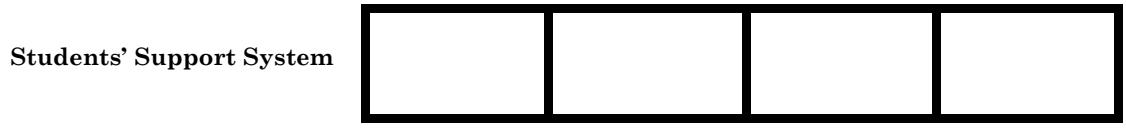

Figure 1. Proposed planning model for flexible learning

Phase 1: The first phase requires analysis of four components or areas that HEIs should focus on as they plan to shift to flexible learning. The vertical axis presents these four areas.

- **Administrative Support System** – includes admission process, enrolment procedures, changing of grades, and crediting of courses.
- **Curriculum** – refers to the course requirements of a degree program that include list of courses, program outcomes, course learning outcomes, and contents.
- **Instruction** – refers to teaching and learning activities and assessment tools for learning.
- **Students Support System** – includes guidance support, instructional support, and other students support services provided by HEIs. It also refers to the physical, virtual, and psychosocial learning environment provided by HEIs.

Phase 2: The second phase involves identifying the elements of flexibility that should be considered when planning strategies and making decisions for flexible learning. The horizontal axis presents these four elements of flexibility.

- **Type of Learners** – describes the learning styles, needs, and contexts of the learners: (1) those who do not have access to Internet and technology, (2) those who do not have the skill to learn through technology, and (3) those who are not comfortable in online and virtual learning.
- **Pace** – refers to time frames that are considered like by semester, months, and flexible time, among others.
- **Place** – refers to physical or geographic location where learning and support services will take place in reference to the students.
- **Mode** – refers to instructional delivery modes and support services. An example for this is the utilization of technology and other alternative delivery modes.

Higher education institutions could use this model as they plan to shift to flexible learning. It could also be used to assess the readiness and capacity of HEIs in shifting to flexible learning. In using the proposed model, the socio-economic contexts, needs, and nature of the students should be considered.

4. Conclusion

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates all higher education institutions to restructure the educational system and adapt flexible learning as the best alternative to move forward and provide the best service to all students. There are curricular and instructional adjustments that have to be done, and these adjustments need to be supported by academic policies and support systems. Existing academic policies need to be reviewed, revised, or totally changed if necessary, to adapt to flexible learning mode. With the limits of time and resources, HEIs in the Philippines are determined to respond to these challenges and issues and implement whatever curricular and instructional adjustments have to be done. The COVID-19 pandemic definitely brought anxieties and stresses in the academic community, but it also has brought renaissance in the academe. The curricular and instructional adjustments require creativity and innovation. Perhaps with the use of flexible learning, new courses and academic programs could be developed.

In shifting to flexible learning, there is also a need to address several challenges and issues related to quality, access, and relevance. This crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the hard truths about the scope of the digital divide in the country. Access to technology and ICT literacy remain to be the greatest challenge to flexible learning and HEIs should have the necessary infrastructure and support system needed for flexible learning. Faculty members and students also need orientation and training on the philosophy and pedagogy of flexible learning. Finally, the proposed model for flexible learning will guide educators and administrators in planning for smooth transition to flexible learning mode in the country. The model will enable universities and colleges to realize that flexible learning is not just about technology. Flexible learning is finding the best possible ways to reach out to every learner and providing them the best quality of education they deserve in various ways.

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