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## **Migrating to Flexible Learning: Experiences of Teachers from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Northern Mindanao, Philippines**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The covid-19 crisis prompted a significant shift in teaching and learning approaches in continuing education in the Philippines. This study aimed to examine teachers' experiences with flexible learning in higher education institutions in Northern Mindanao, Philippines, both public and private. Three dimensions of the teaching experience are considered contexts for their sharing: a) the teacher's primary function of course delivery to students; b) the teacher's role as the frontline of academic administration and intermediary for online education delivery; and c) the teacher's attainment of personal goals. This study employed a transcendental phenomenology approach. Focus group and in-depth interviews were employed to gather data from participants who were classified into four categories: a) those with less than one year of experience; b) those with one year to less than five years of experience; c) those with six years but less than ten years of experience; and d) those with ten years or more of experience. Interviews were transcribed and loaded into KoBoToolbox as data. The data were examined using a modified van Kaam technique. The findings indicated that covid-19 compelled all teachers, regardless of tenure, to modify and adapt to the flexible learning modality as implemented by the institution relative to their academic responsibilities, administrative duties and responsibilities, and attainments towards their personal goals. It implies that educational institutions must be prepared beyond the crisis by strategizing measures and learning much from the experiences of teachers and students to deliver quality education amidst the volatile, uncertain, ambiguous, and shifting scenarios.*

**KEYWORDS:** *flexible learning, pandemic, Higher Education Institution Teachers, transcendental phenomenology*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Flexible learning entails several distinct characteristics. It gives learners options on where, when, and how learning occurs by employing various instructional tools (Lee & McLoughlin, 2010). This mode of instruction has grown in prominence and importance to ensure learning continuity and minimize class interruptions in the new normal (Czerniewicx et al., 2020). Worldwide, HEIs have begun to adopt flexible learning with synchronous or asynchronous classes (Crawford et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Ali, 2020; Huang et al., 2020). In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) released memorandum no. 4 series of 2020 on flexible learning. The design and delivery of courses, programs, and learning interventions are calibrated to the learner's inclusive accessibility needs.

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Relevant studies on university teachers' role concerning flexible learning are rare (Stigmar et al., 2012). For instance, research on flexible learning during the pandemic centered on primary education, particularly students' experiences. For instance, studies were conducted on student satisfaction with online learning (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020) and student homeschooling experiences (Mælan et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2020). Although there were studies conducted on the experiences of the use of flexible learning in higher education, most of these studies explored student's challenges and coping mechanisms (Barrot et al., 2020; Baloran, 2020), the impact of COVID-19 on flexible teaching, and learning modalities (Anderton et al., 2021), perception of teachers in school's readiness and response (Alea et al., 2020), and challenges of teachers in modular learning (Castroverde, 2021).

Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the holistic experiences of teachers in HEIs regarding the employment of the flexible learning mode. A broader understanding of the experiences and potential difficulties faced by teachers as they migrate from face-to-face to online pedagogies during the pandemic is critical to developing more adaptable and resilient pedagogical techniques (Phillips, 2021), especially since teachers are crucial agents in the implementation of flexible learning strategy effectively and creatively (Tupas & Laguda, 2020; Ellerani & Gentile, 2013).

This study explored the holistic experiences of HEI teachers in implementing flexible learning during the S.Y. 2020-2021. There are three dimensions of the teaching experience that were considered contexts for their sharing: a) the essential function of the teacher to deliver content to students; b) the function of the teacher as the frontline of academic administration and the intermediary of online education delivery; and c) the function of the teacher in matters of personal affairs. The findings of this study will provide qualitative descriptions of teachers' first-hand experiences to better understand the various aspects of a teacher's holistic function vis-à-vis the formulation of school policies, especially during crises.

### ***Statement of the problem***

This study explored the lived experiences of HEI teachers in public and private universities on implementing flexible learning during the S.Y. 2020-2021.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers describe their experiences with flexible learning?
2. How has the flexible learning mode affected teachers during a pandemic?

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### ***COVID-19 and flexible learning***

The spread of COVID-19 poses a significant threat to school institutions. Classroom education has never been conducted in the same way to contain the spread of COVID-19 and reduce infections (UNESCO, 2020). Temporary suspension of in-person instruction (Di Pietro et al., 2020); school closure (Viner et al., 2020); tough wearing of face masks and

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better health care, self-isolation, and mobility limitations were all imposed (WHO, 2020; CDC, 2020) alter the educational landscape like never before.

Numerous governments have directed universities to discontinue face-to-face training for most of their students, forcing them to transition almost immediately to online teaching and virtual education. It presents an opportunity for higher education institutions to transition to virtual education (Daniel, 2020). Thus, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide have begun to embrace flexible learning approaches where synchronous or asynchronous classes are conducted (Crawford et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Ali, 2020; Huang et al., 2020). The utilization of flexible learning has become visible and critical in most universities to ensure learning continuity (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). According to Anderton, Vitali, Blackmore & Bakeberg (2021), many universities worldwide have to make the tough decision to rapidly adjust their approach to learning via online course delivery and streaming. Thus, universities' rapid and abrupt digital transition has imposed a significant workload on teachers (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020) to swiftly construct online resources, which is a labor-intensive process even under normal conditions (Parker, 2020; Illanes, Law, Sanghvi, & Sarakatsannis, 2020).

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) granted HEIs academic freedom to implement alternative delivery modes (CHED, 2020). According to Martinez (2020), online teaching has become the only option for colleges and universities in the Philippines. Being one of the most affected sectors, schools' responses to balance the effect include curriculum adjustments, shifts in the academic calendar, technical resources and infrastructure provisions, and regulations on instructional delivery and assessment (Barrot, Llenares & del Rosario, 2021). Despite this, the primary worry with closing higher education institutions is the inability to provide fully operational courses that require in-person training and practice. As a result, it appears that culture development and in-service training for professors are critical, as is the coordination and empathy of necessary authorities and management to plan accurately and coherently (Ahmady, Shahbazi & Heidari 2021).

### ***Challenges experienced by teachers at the center of the Flexible Learning Approach***

Teachers are at the forefront of the changes in the educational milieu. The pandemic brought about by Covid-19 caused a drastic call for change in teaching and learning methods in continuing education in the Philippines. This necessity for change to technological use and the significant reliance on online teaching and learning to serve education to the people shaped everyone in different ways and aspects in this global predicament; higher education teachers.

Changes in the educational landscape show adverse effects of the transition toward the teachers. For instance, the lack of technology and internet connection is the most significant obstacle to overcoming teaching and learning problems (Asio, Gadia, Abarintos, Paguio & Balce, 2021). According to Barrot, Llenares & del Rosario (2021), traditional teachers were forced to embrace technology despite their lack of technological literacy. Thus, they become experts in online learning almost quickly (Porter, T. 2020), which is likely impossible. Multiple studies on the effect of technology have demonstrated that technology integration affects academic excellence and the quality of teachers' instruction delivery (Francisco & Barcelona, 2020).

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### **On Adapting to the flexible learning approach**

Others have found that teachers struggled to adapt their teaching approaches to match the demands of this new normal with inadequate resources, skills, and competencies (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Andrew et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Iivari et al., 2020). As a result, they could not develop appropriately planned online instruction that eased the transition (Hermida, 2020). According to Kalloo, Mitchell & Kamalodeen (2020), the pandemic reveals that teacher training must go beyond learning technical skills necessary for effective teaching in a 'typical' classroom. Early career teachers' position as 'digital natives' does not automatically imply that they have developed significant digital abilities, as cited by König, Jäger-Biela, & Glutsch (2020). They advised that training to equip instructors and combat negative attitudes about ICT use and curriculum revisions that increase students' ICT competency should be prioritized. Further, training teachers in mixed or online educational approaches is critical for their professional development (Aperribai, Cortabarría, Aguirre, Verche, & Borges, 2020). Hence, for Dayagbil, Palompon, Garcia & Olvido (2021), the university must consider and facilitate the provision of needed equipment, materials, systems, software, and physical structures to support flexible learning.

Teachers stated that face-to-face delivery of assessments would no longer be effective in the new learning environment. According to Osborn (2015), design, planning, and parameters governing how assessments are scored are crucial considerations in formulating assessments. Teachers also have raised concerns about the ability of the students to do assessments alone and be more directed. It is affirmed by the works of (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015) that teachers are limited to proxy observation of learners in online assessments, making it impossible to supervise and manage to cheat. However, in an unfamiliar setting, students must engage in independent, self-directed learning (Dayagbil, Palompon, Garcia & Olvido, 2021).

In a longitudinal study by Lizana, Vega-Fernandez, Gomez-Bruton, Leyton, & Lera (2021) among Chilean teachers, it was revealed that the quality of life of teachers was decreased low due to work overload. It has profoundly affected women, most notably their mental and physical health. According to Bos, Donders, van der Velden, & van der Gulden (2013), the workload is recognized as one of the significant predictors of poor mental health in the university sector. The result is also supported by the works of Aperribai, Cortabarría, Aguirre, Verche, & Borges (2020) and Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), stating that teachers have experienced higher levels of distress due to the workload generated during the lockdown, unexpected financial and time expenditures.

According to Sirgy and Lee (2017), work-life balance has two dimensions: role participation in numerous work and nonwork life roles and minimum friction between work and nonwork roles. Work-life balance is difficult for everyone, especially women who work from home and juggle daily chores and office work. Problems have driven staff to fight harder and have enabled people to manage their work and home life under one roof (Singh, Sharma & Gupta, 2021). Consequently, the work-life balance is affected by several employment characteristics, including job demand, time pressure at work, job autonomy, position ambiguity, and scheduling flexibility. In addition, work-life balance is influenced by various organizational support programs designed to help employees better balance work and personal obligations (Sirgy & Lee, 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative approach. Qualitative research is best utilized when there is limited information and exploration to decipher participants' experiences in a phenomenon (Long et al., 1993; Creswell, 2013). *Qualitative research* is "interpretive research," emphasizing human experiences, expressions, and values (Stake, 2010). Thus, a qualitative design was used to understand teachers' insights who have experienced implementing the flexible learning approach during the "new normal of education."

Specifically, this study used transcendental phenomenology. The phenomenological approach is a research design of inquiry in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Fraenkel et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2000). A phenomenological inquiry explains that an idea or phenomenon has shared meaning among multiple individuals (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). Transcendental phenomenology is founded on Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) view that the way to comprehend the context of people's "lived experiences or human experiences" (Moustakas, 1994). These shared characteristics, or universal essences, can be identified to generate a generalizable description (Neubauer et al., 2019). They allow what is in front of one to enter consciousness and grasp its meanings and essences through intuition and self-reflection when the real and the ideal are combined (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants of the study were taken following the inclusion criteria below: having taught and experienced flexible learning during the school year 2020-2021; those who have taught for less than a year; those who have taught for one year to five less than five years; those with six years to ten years of teaching; and those with ten years-up teaching experiences.

Focus groups and in-depth interviews were undertaken face-to-face and via google meet (that would allow recording) to elicit teacher-participant experiences on flexible learning. Interview guide questions were made to uncover the lived experiences of teachers. In qualitative research, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews are appropriate for understanding other people's lived experiences with interest in others' stories because they are valuable and necessary (Seidman, 2013). A total of eight Focus group interviews (FGI) and seven in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted in an identified place and time as approved by both the researchers and participants within two months (see table 1). Interviews ran from 1-1.5 hours for IDI. and 1.5-2 hours for FGI's. The collected data were encoded via the KoBoToolbox. The participants were allowed to remark on and validate the results. Based on the comments and ideas of the participants, modifications were made.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants from public and private SUCs who participated through FGI and IDI

Category of Teachers	Institution			
	Public SUC # of FGI	Private SUC # of FGI	Public # of IDI	Private # of IDI
less than a 1 year	1	1	1	
1 year- but less	1	1	2	1

than 5 years

5 years-but less than 10 years	1	1	1	1
10 years-and above	1	1	1	

Van Kaam technique to data analysis was utilized, as explained by Moustakas (1994). The Van Kaam method is a road map for comprehending crucial phenomenological research procedures:

1. The procedure begins with horizontalization.
2. The reduction and removal step.
3. The researchers explored the latent meanings and grouped extracts based on these latent meanings.
4. Identification of the invariant constituents was performed to eliminate overlapping statements.
5. This stage was followed by an "individual textural description" for each participant.
6. It was subsequently followed by creating individual structural descriptions characterized by inventive diversity.
7. The data were then used to synthesize the textural-structural descriptions, the invariant elements, and the themes.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Before beginning this study, the researchers obtained consent from school officials. The safety and security of the researchers and participants were ensured by taking precautions. With the formally approved request to the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Human Resource Office for each school, a list of teachers to be interviewed was compiled. In addition, the researchers requested the respondent's voluntary participation in the study based on the respondent's comprehension of the proposed research's purpose, techniques, requirements, risks, potential benefits, purpose, methods, and requirements. Participants in the data analysis were notified of using pseudonyms, identifying numbers, and dates to ensure their anonymity and privacy and address ethical concerns. The researchers took considerable care to preserve privacy and anonymity.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The result of the qualitative data has the following emerging themes of the experiences of teachers in HEIs:

1. The teacher's primary function of course delivery to students
2. The teacher's role as the frontline of academic administration and intermediary for online education delivery
3. The teacher's attainment of personal goals

***Theme 1: Being the facilitator of learning: How do teachers fulfill their primary function of course delivery to students?***

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As a result of the global growth of COVID-19, teachers at higher education institutions must modify their curriculum in particular. The impact of the pandemic differs from what teachers have encountered. The enormous influence of COVID-19 on the school landscape has never been witnessed before, as teachers attempt to implement flexible teaching strategies. Three themes emerged as a result of the focus group and in-depth interviews. These were: delivery of instruction, curriculum adjustment, and technology integration. Under the curriculum adjustments, however, three sub-themes were made (syllabus calibration, course content development, and assessment).

### ***Sub-theme 1.1: Delivery of instruction***

Regardless of tenure, all teachers have expressed concerns about the challenges in delivering instruction to the students. It is even most difficult for 'newbies' teachers with less than a year of experience in the university. Narratives below are examples of the experiences shared by teachers.

*"Online learners had internet connectivity difficulties due to unreliable low bandwidths during online lessons or cloud meetings." (Participant 8, male, single, less than a year of teaching experience)*

*"...the problem of synchronous classes is that students do not have this stable connection and the gadget (smartphones) to use. Also, the lack of facilities for teaching (assigned/separate room for teachers to conduct online classes) and internet connectivity are common problems by the teachers." (FGI 2, female, single, with one year but less than five years of teaching experience, April 30, 2021)*

According to Asio et al. (2021), the lack of technology and internet connection is the most significant obstacle to overcoming teaching and learning problems. Consequently, a weak internet signal and irregular internet connections impede the successful delivery of education. Moreover, mobile technologies such as cell phones benefit modern education, particularly learning. It was claimed that in the Philippines, 45 percent of the population (46 million people) and 74 percent (34,500) of public schools do not have access to the internet (Jones, 2019).

### ***Sub-theme 1.2: Curriculum adjustment***

Adjustments to the curriculum are intended to increase the range of instruction, learning, and assessment to reach more students and adapt to their particular needs while offering an acceptable level of challenge and recognizing that students operate differently. In this instance, teachers had to calibrate the curricula where alignment is required as one of many phases. In this regard, teachers must determine which portions of the syllabi must be calibrated in light of the content that requires emphasis and the to-be-implemented assessments without compromising the learners' learning outcomes.

#### ***Sub-theme 1.2.1: Syllabus Calibration and Identifying course content***

It was found that among the participants, those teachers with less than one year to five years of teaching experience were mainly affected.

*"We find it difficult to navigate the course content. They are already 'non-negotiable designs and elements that we need to follow, and we must make it understandable, students". (FGI 1, female, single, less than a year of teaching experience, April 22, 2021)*

*"Calibrating the syllabus was a big hurdle. I Felt like a headless chicken when we were doing the syllabus." (IDI 2, female, one year but less than five years teaching experience, March 30, 2021 transcript)*

However, teachers' narratives with years of experience in the teaching profession in developing course content vary. Such is the situation for people with over six to ten years of experience. They share in the focus-group interview that:

*"The course content is compressed. We picked those which are essential. Somehow, determining course content to be included is a challenge, but we anchor our recalibrated to the previous one. We are motivated to do it since our job as teachers." (IDI 6, female, married, six years but less than ten years teaching experience, May 14, 2021 transcript)*

*"We collaborated with the different departments of the university's programs. Consultations were mad. We sat down with the program heads to develop the course content of their programs, and assessments were tailored to fit the course's needs." (IDI, 7, male, single, ten years and above teaching experience)*

In times of pandemics, the necessity for cooperation and assistance has been crucial. The success of adopting flexible learning is mainly attributable to the collaborative efforts of teachers. Collaboration happens when multiple people contribute ideas and skills to achieve a similar goal, such as curricular modifications. Collaboration increases teachers' accountability, which increases their motivation, mainly when teachers function digitally. Saltkjel et al. (2017) noted that the significance of teacher collaboration in enabling adaptive education increases when instructors are engaged in their core teaching activity.

### ***Sub-theme 1.2.2: Assessment***

Most of the participants agreed that the assessments during the pandemic were very challenging. However, they also believed assessments should align with the course outcomes. Conventional assessments like quizzes and examinations must be omitted or lessened as much as possible. Further, others have seen that assessments were different during the pandemic, with teachers becoming innovative in their approaches. Below are examples of stories shared by the teachers.

*"Assessments in this new learning modality have been adaptive to the demands of the time; the pandemic has filtered what things to focus on and delimit those unnecessary. I think Being SMART is both on my part as an instructor and the Student Learners as well...I do Short Essays, Infographics, Travelogues, SWOT Analysis, and Graphic Organizers." (IDI 3, female, single, one year but less than five years teaching experience, April 21, 2021 transcript)*

*"...considering the situation brought about by the pandemic, there is a need for new output-oriented approaches. It is now more specific and comprehensive. The student's capability, mobility, and safety must be SMART but formative." (FGI 4, female, married, ten years and above teaching experience, May 17, 2021)*

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The assessment methods are necessary to ensure that students have acquired diverse information and skills and are prepared for a job or future study (Coates, 2015). Teachers stated that face-to-face delivery of assessments would no longer be effective in the new learning environment. According to Osborn (2015), design, planning, and parameters governing how assessments are scored are crucial considerations in formulating assessments. Teachers also have raised concerns about the ability of the students to do assessments alone and be more directed. This is affirmed by the works of (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015), saying that teachers are limited to proxy observation of learners in online assessments, making it impossible to supervise and manage to cheat. However, in an unfamiliar setting, students must engage in independent, self-directed learning (Dayagbil et al., 2021).

### ***Sub-theme 1.2.3: Technology integration***

Integrating technology is one of the most vital parts of realizing asynchronous online classes. However, what is constraining is that students themselves are not tech-savvy. Consider the statement of one of the teachers.

*"The challenge is integrating technology in classroom instruction because many of my students are not tech-savvy. From what I know, many of them do not have any means to connect to the internet or have limited access to the internet. Also, most have never owned a laptop/tablet or the like. Some even said that they cannot afford a smartphone." (IDI 4, female single, six years but less than ten years teaching experience, May 7, 2021 transcript)*

On the other hand, newbies or old teachers have to be confronted with the need to integrate technology into their lessons. Although newbies in teaching are thought to be well-adjusted to online classes, this is not primarily the case. The need to be familiar with the learning management system became one of the challenges. Below are some notable statements shared by the teachers during the in-depth and focus-group interviews.

*"I have been having late nights creating videos, making my methods more interesting, looking for media or clips for analysis, unlike before, we just relied on the hard text. I design more on the activities." (FGI 5, male, less than one-year teaching experience, May 17, 2021 transcript)*

According to Kalloo et al. (2020), the pandemic reveals that teacher training must go beyond learning the technical skills necessary for effective teaching in a 'typical' classroom. Early career teachers' position as 'digital natives' does not automatically imply that they have developed significant digital abilities, as cited by König et al. (2020). They advised that training to equip instructors and combat negative attitudes about ICT use and curriculum revisions that increase students' ICT competency should be prioritized. Further, training teachers in mixed or online educational approaches is critical for their professional development (Aperribai et al., 2020).

However, the fact that ICT integration in the Philippines faces challenges rooted in the following areas: infrastructure and facilities (computers and other technology), human resources (limited teacher training, low motivation, and limited technological knowledge), and finally, the need for a technological leader who would play a leadership role (Tomaro & Mutiarin, 2018) much of these challenges remained the same. Multiple studies on the effect

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of technology have demonstrated that technology integration affects academic excellence and the quality of teachers' instruction delivery (Francisco & Barcelona, 2020).

***Theme 2: Being an intermediary of learning: How does the teacher's role as the frontline of academic administration and intermediary for online education delivery materialize?***

Under this theme, three sub-themes were generated. These were: Teachers being at the forefront of F.L., The need for more institutional support, and the pursuit of Professional growth amidst the crisis.

***Sub-theme 2.1: The teacher is at the forefront of F.L.***

The demands on the shift of classroom instruction are overwhelming. Teachers at the frontline of the flexible learning implementation must be flexible enough to rise above the occasion. New and seasoned teachers have felt the effect of the pandemic to some extent. This is true among teachers who were given designations. More often than not, teachers with designation often have difficulty attending to the class's needs and fulfilling administrative duties. Here are a few of the personal experiences offered by teachers:

*"My designation is more administrative, like preparing for audits and accreditations, than my teaching. Nevertheless, there are activities in teaching that tend to be administrative; honestly, I do not think these should merge. To some degree, it becomes a burden. Teachers should focus on delivering instruction now since we need to help our students. Other activities tend to get in the way, which makes me sad." (IDI 7, male, single, more than ten years teaching experience, May 21, 2021 transcript)*

According to Anderton et al. (2021), many universities worldwide have to make the tough decision to rapidly adjust their approach to learning via online course delivery and streaming. Thus, universities' rapid and abrupt digital transition has imposed a significant workload on teachers (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020) to swiftly construct online resources, which is a labor-intensive process even under normal conditions (Parker, 2020; Illanes et al., 2020). In a longitudinal study by Lizana et al. (2021) among Chilean teachers, it was revealed that teachers' quality of life was decreased due to work overload, which has a profound effect on women's mental and physical health. According to Bos et al. (2013), the workload is recognized as one of the significant predictors of poor mental health in the university sector. The result is also supported by the works of Aperribai et al. (2020) and Adedoyin & Soykan (2020), stating that teachers have experienced higher levels of distress due to the workload generated during the lockdown and unexpected financial and time expenditures.

Even though there is increased emphasis on student autonomy away from the teacher and toward the student, the teacher plays a crucial role in student learning. A good teacher assists students in acquiring knowledge. This individual contributes in numerous ways (Saad ALRowais, 2015). However, the pandemic has altered how the role of the teacher as the frontline of academic administration and intermediary for online education delivery is smeared in a way that has hampered the smooth delivery of synchronous and asynchronous classes.

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***Sub-theme 2.2: The need for more institutional support***

The pandemic has called for much institutional support for all teachers. No one was ready to transfer from conventional teaching to a flexible learning modality. Teachers believed that additional training should be given to all teachers regardless of years in service. Training on the LMS and other learning management software like google classrooms, Edmodo, and E-learn must be undertaken. The support given by the administration was either through INSET or CAPDEV, retooling, and mental health seminars. Below are the narratives shared by the teachers:

*"Admin support in preparing the teachers is apparent, training the teachers re LMS. Teachers were also allowed to use school amenities, lessening the transition's negative impact. One participant said: "The institution is allowing me to come every day to school using all the amenities." (FGI 6, female, single, less than one-year teaching experience, April 21, 2021 transcript)*

*"Training is very vital, in this time, esp. in this new normal, we should have learned how to use technology, we should have skills on this, so we may not have left behind, and of course, technology integration is necessary for academic, it has a lot to offer." (FGI 3, female, single, less than one-year teaching experience, May 18, 2021 transcript)*

The result corresponded to the study of Bautista et al. (2021), stating that most teachers received adequate support from their institutions regarding capacity development, technology and data protection issues, information dissemination platforms, and online learning management. However, more in-depth and specific training that meets the teachers' needs is necessary to equip them for the transition entirely. According to Pressley (2021), teachers' anxiety is associated with teaching demands, parent communication, and administrative support without regard to the years of teaching experience. Hence, for Dayagbil et al. (2021), the university must consider and facilitate the provision of needed equipment, materials, systems, software, and physical structures to support flexible learning. In this way, teachers would be assured that they have the administration's confidence in navigating the new changes in instruction.

***Sub-theme 2.3: The pursuit of Professional growth amidst the crisis***

The institution's role in upskilling and rewiring teachers' competencies is also necessary in times of crisis. Faculty development in this time should be pursued regardless of the situation. Nevertheless, teachers shared a narrative of how the administration supported teachers during the pandemic. They shared:

*"The administration is very supportive of the professional growth of its employees." (FGI 3, female, six years but less than ten years teaching experience, May 18, 2021 transcript)*

According to Mulla et al. (2020), in the post-pandemic world, most of the initial faculty development process will occur in the eLearning environment, where faculty development program participants will acquire new skills and roles and engage in highly interactive tasks. Higher education institutions must migrate to a flexible teaching and learning model to ensure teaching and learning sustainability during and after the pandemic. Increasing the faculty's skills is one of several areas requiring attention (Dayagbil et al., 2021).

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***Theme 3: Our personal lives matter: How do teachers attain fulfillment of their personal goals?***

Regarding how the teachers maintain the attainment of their personal goals, the following sub-themes emerged; Personal Development and Goals, Economic, Social, and Health considerations, and healthy family relationships.

***Sub-theme 3.1: Personal Development and Goals***

Although the demand for school-related activities has increased since the pandemic, teachers revealed how they maintain the necessary life-work balance. Most participants in the focus group and in-depth interviews were aware of the life-work balance. Here are some of the teacher's narratives:

*"Online teaching is taking sort of my time, as a mother and as a wife...students especially chat at night... but I choose to strike a balance and understand my students."* (IDI 3, female, single, one year but less than five years teaching experience, April 21, 2021 transcript)

*"You have to strike a balance. You cannot make all the calls all the time. It shifted my perspective to set myself the balance."* (FGI 6, female, single, one year but less than five years teaching experience, April 21, 2021 transcript)

*"Keeping the balance between and among all these facets is still a must; we can choose what to engage and not to aside from the compulsory ones."* (IDI 2, female, one year but less than five years teaching experience, March 30, 2021 transcript)

According to Sirgy and Lee (2017), work-life balance has two dimensions: role participation in numerous work and nonwork life roles and minimum friction between work and nonwork roles. Work-life balance is difficult for everyone, especially women who work from home and juggle daily chores and office work. Problems have driven staff to fight harder and have enabled people to manage their work and home life under one roof (Singh et al., 2021). Consequently, the work-life balance is affected by several employment characteristics, including job demand, time pressure at work, job autonomy, position ambiguity, and scheduling flexibility. In addition, work-life balance is influenced by various organizational support programs designed to help employees better balance work and personal obligations (Sirgy & Lee, 2017).

***Sub-theme 3.2: Economic, Social, and Health considerations***

The demands of shifting to a new modality have significantly affected the teachers. In this case, teachers shared how they are doing their best to implement flexible learning. Economically, they shared that they have been spending more this time. Below are some of their experiences shared:

*"I am spending more these days to make sure that I have the needed materials for my online class."* (IDI 3, female, single, one year but less than five years teaching experience, April 21, 2021 transcript)

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*"Yes. I spend a load of mobile data more than the average of my consumption to meet the student's academic needs. I do not have more time because I have a lot of paperwork. Though during weekends, I see that I have my social time and leisure for the good of my mental health."* (FGI 6, male, single, five years but less than ten years teaching experience, April 21, transcript)

Furthermore, they also shared how online classes have affected their social and personal health. They shared:

*"It is not healthy for me in many ways... it affects my multiple roles and physical health."* (IDI 3, female, single, one year but less than five years teaching experience, April 21, 2021 transcript)

*"Online teaching is not healthy as it strains my eyes."* (FGI 1, male, single, less than one-year teaching experience, April 22, 2021 transcript)

According to Adedoyin & Soykan (2020), unexpected financial and time expenditures are anticipated due to the crisis and the increasing workload demands. Long, never-ending working hours increase workload, hurting personal/family life and creating a work-life imbalance. This caused mental and physical exhaustion/fatigue, burnout, stress, and inefficiency due to job demands (Singh et al., 2021).

### ***Sub-theme 3.3: Healthy family relationships***

Family support is critical for teachers' adjustment during the pandemic. Such is the case in the focus group and in-depth interview, where participants are happy to share their family status. To wit, teachers shared:

*"My family has become very understanding. They know that things have become very stressful, so they call me and ask me from time to time. However, I also go home if I have time during the weekend."* (FGI 1, male, single, less than one-year teaching experience, April 22, 2021 transcript)

*"Mas Dako impact...and happier. We have learned to know each other all the more." (The impact is a lot bigger and happier. We have learned to know each other all the more.)* (FGI 8, female, single, ten years and above teaching experience, May 7, 2021 transcript)

*"It does not affect it negatively since I conduct my online classes on weekdays. Weekends are my time and family time."* (IDI 7, male, single, more than ten years teaching experience, May 21, 2021 transcript)

The need for family support during the crisis has been intensified as its effect has been widely seen to have a positive impact, particularly on mental health (Klop et al., 2021; Li & Xu, 2022). The lack of a source of regulation, particularly familial support, can increase emotional distress, heightening feelings of isolation and depression (Mariani et al., 2020). Family support appears to mitigate the adverse effects of stress as a protective factor (Tselebis et al., 2020).

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## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Understanding the success of implementing flexible learning requires understanding teachers' experiences as a context. Given that higher education institutions transitioned to a flexible teaching and learning mode in a flash, the core of the implementation should reflect the teachers' strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities experienced by teachers themselves. Regarding the teacher's primary function of course delivery to students, results revealed that more attention was given to calibrating the delivery of instruction, curriculum adjustment (e.g., syllabus calibration, content development, and assessment), and technology integration. Although teachers have significantly changed, adjusted, and modified current curricula and assessments and identified what technology to use to cope with the demands of the time, there is still, of course, a need to fully equip the school's infrastructures and further increase the faculty's capacities for technology integration. In the teacher's role as the frontline of academic administration and intermediary for online education delivery, the teachers' need for more institutional support and continued professional growth was seen as most valuable. Finally, on the attainment of personal goals, it was found out that flexible learning has crossed the path between personal and work such that teachers themselves highlighted striking a work-life balance, due consideration on economic, social, and health, and lastly on maintaining a healthy family relationship.

Implementing flexible learning in private and public universities provided teachers with several challenges and concerns. Continuity of teaching and learning throughout the pandemic and post-pandemic situations requires evaluating teachers' holistic experiences as learning facilitators in the classroom. As innovators of teaching and learning, teachers must be adequately equipped to gain the essential abilities in response to the pandemic's demands. Moreover, it is also essential to examine the university's operational boundaries from various stakeholders, including students, faculty, and external stakeholders. In times of crisis, institutions should afford to strategize measures to limit the crisis's adverse effects, primarily on teachers and students.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Extra caution should be exercised when evaluating the study's results. First, the focus was limited to public and private universities in Northern Mindanao, and the number of participants may have been insufficient to reach theoretical saturation; however, it cannot be extrapolated to all teachers in the country because the context of flexible learning in the country cannot be generalized. Second, the methodology of this qualitative phenomenological investigation may require additional elucidation. Therefore, it is suggested that future research employing quantitative or mixed methods be conducted to capitalize on the strengths and weaknesses of the study's findings and explore alternative ways of examining the barriers and mechanisms teachers face in implementing flexible learning in the country.

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