Readiness and Challenges of Higher Education to the New Normal – A Case of a Philippine Public University

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ABSTRACT

Research on online learning has been focused on student readiness and few studies have been conducted among faculty members of higher education institutions. This study aimed to identify the readiness and challenges of faculty members in a Philippine Public University. Using an adapted but modified questionnaire from Gay (2016), 205 (53.39%) college faculty members from 9 satellite campuses participated after systematic sampling during mid-year 2021. Salient findings revealed that the faculty members are highly ready in online learning in terms of the following areas: technical, lifestyle, and pedagogical. Lifestyle readiness received the lowest mean rating while pedagogical readiness received the highest mean rating. Internet connection, beating deadlines, scoring student outputs, managing class time and other works, and stressful atmosphere during online class were found to top the challenges which the faculty members experienced in relation to the learning modality. The findings of the study have underscored the positivity among the faculty members in online instruction, and while issues found in their study could potentially retard the implementation of the Flexible Learning Modality at the University, it has to be understood that the University has no control on various challenges posed including intermittent power interruptions, poor internet connection, and learning spaces at home.

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INTRODUCTION

To choose to learn through online modalities is not the focus of debate anymore, it has in fact emerged as the only feasible option for educational institutions in their quest of educating the young. The world will learn how to acclimatize in the new mode of learning. The world has shifted from what was ideal to what is doable.

In its official website, UNESCO is supporting countries in their efforts to mitigate the impact of school closures, address learning losses and adapt education systems, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. To mobilize and support learning continuity, UNESCO has established the Global Education Coalition which today counts 160 members working around three central themes: Gender, connectivity and teachers. Educational institutions are doing all possibilities to continue with its mandate to educate students. To do this, it should ensure readiness of all aspects of the teaching and learning process including the readiness of its teachers.

Online learning is an integral aspect of the current educational framework—institutions must be able to strategically adapt and change based on student needs. How these efforts and activities are defined may look very similar across the spectrum, but they must also be tailored to support the unique needs of each institution. This also applies to defining faculty readiness for online learning. Although the concept can be globally defined, each institution must incorporate relevant details and aspects in their approach (Hope, Jr., 2015). The disruption caused by Covid-19 has forced the adoption and emergence of alternative way of teaching and flexible learning, such as online learning, modular and face-to-face classroom learning. Teacher training is a major consideration that would require schools to readjust their budget allocation to respond to this emerging need. Online teaching involves a lot of preparation, and teachers now find themselves having to use tools they are not familiar with. For sure, there will be adjustments.

The biggest challenge for schools transitioning to a new normal academic set-up is the widening inequality of access and usage of information and communications technology. Advancements in information technology and the internet are expanding the gap between low income and high income. Many Filipino households cannot afford a constant internet connection. Even those with access to the internet experience some infrastructural gaps, including the discrepancy in internet speeds in different regions

Sonny M. Angara wrote in his Better Days article the challenge of education in new normal looks into the major concerns of academic approach. And it all comes down to two major concerns: Internet connectivity, and the issue of the curriculum and educational materials that have to be adapted for use with a blended learning environment. Access

to educational materials through the Internet isn't worth much if the Internet itself is inaccessible due to lack of service or network infrastructure. Be it through provisions for budget, equipment, and commercial access to the Internet much has to be done to improve digital connectivity throughout the country. It would also be important to fast-track the implementation of RA 10929, the Free Internet Access in Public Places Act, which mandates that public basic education institutions, state universities and colleges (SUCs), and Tesda technology institutions to have free Wi-fi access.

Tito Genova Valiente in his annotations in Online learning: A line of one's own points out the following: Two words define education in these days of quarantine and virus: Online and offline. Whoever came up with these terms must be aware that the two concepts placed side by side cancel each other. Online, the more functional and accessible word connotes the use of technologies that links people to each other in virtual mode. In a classroom setting, this means the absence of a classroom or the negation of place. One accesses the Internet and finds a program that connects him to his class and/or to a university or a department, as represented by a professor or moderator. Given this, what does offline mean? It means one has removed himself from the virtual space of learning and tuned out?

Technological developments require faculty members to consider new ways to prepare, organize, deliver, and assess courses and learning materials for online teaching (Pagliari, Batts, & McFadden, 2009; Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006). Bawane and Spector (2009) argue that the competencies required to teach online are not substantially different from those needed to teach face-to-face; it is assumed that a faculty member's past teaching experience serves as the foundation to teaching online (Wray, Lowenthal, Bates, & Stevens, 2008). However, some researchers disagree with this idea and explain that teaching in the online modality is different from teaching in the classroom and that the online faculty member's role is different from that of a faculty member teaching in the classroom (Ko & Rossen, 2017; Wray et al., 2008). Online faculty focus on instructional time and space, virtual management techniques, and the ability to engage students through virtual communication (Easton, 2003).

The coming new normal post-COVID-19 era can be a teachable moment for content that is significant, relevant, and useful. For instance, Gonser (2020) specifically suggested simple content such as "why hygiene matters" and "how germs spread" to more complex ones like "ethical decisions, the science behind how viral infections work, or the mathematics underpinning pandemics." Flannery (2020) interviewed teachers who integrated relevant content. One teacher began work with her students a topic on coronavirus vaccines in animals which is a relevant topic both in the general situation and ranching societies. Another teacher focused on teaching a new normal behavior called

social distancing. These are examples of contents that are relevant in the new normal post-COVID-19 era.

Jess Obana on his article "What will schools look like in the new normal?" (May 13, 2020) point out that online teaching and learning is going to be more regular and teachers must be prepared to teach online. Online learning is not new. What is new is that schools are embracing it as vital to how the next generation of learners are taught. In a world where disasters and disruptions are increasingly becoming the norm, it is imperative for schools and universities to train teachers on how to teach online and to encourage them to devote their time to teaching online at least as a drill mechanism to prepare for unexpected events. It is not just about the pandemic we are experiencing right now. Other events, such as earthquakes, floods and other calamities will compel teachers and students to stay home to teach or study online. We will see more classes being conducted through web video conferencing. Some schools and universities will use a learning management system (LMS), such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Blackboard Learn and Canvas, to enable students to complete assignments, deliver presentations, take assessments, and receive immediate feedback from their teachers online.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a great deal of disruption to learning, the impact of which will be felt long into the next academic year and possibly beyond. The sector has been forced to quickly adapt to new ways of doing things to ensure education continued across the country. This inevitably resulted in some challenges along the way and while some of the changes may not be long-term, some may be here to stay. The most obvious change has been learning shifting from the classroom to the home, with technology needing to be adopted and improved to accommodate this. While some students have since returned to the classroom, a significant number continue to learn remotely and this is likely to continue until the new academic year. Our recent blog on how to engage learners while working remotely can help you to continue to support your learners who are learning at home (NCFE Organization in the United Kingdom).

According to the World Economic Forum, the COVID-19 has resulted in schools shut all across the world. Globally, over 1.2 billion children are out of the classroom. As a result, education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of e-learning, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. Research suggests that online learning has been shown to increase retention of information, and take less time, meaning the changes coronavirus have caused might be here to stay. While countries are at different points in their COVID-19 infection rates, worldwide there are currently more than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries affected by school closures due to the pandemic. In Denmark, children up to the age of 11 are returning to nurseries and schools after initially

closing on 12 March, but in South Korea students are responding to roll calls from their teachers online. With this sudden shift away from the classroom in many parts of the globe, some are wondering whether the adoption of online learning will continue to persist post-pandemic, and how such a shift would impact the worldwide education market. Even before COVID-19, there was already high growth and adoption in education technology, with global edtech investments reaching US$18.66 billion in 2019 and the overall market for online education projected to reach $350 Billion by 2025. Whether it is language apps, virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools, or online learning software, there has been a significant surge in usage since COVID-19.

On the study of Pedrotti on E-Learning In An Emergency: A Language Teacher's Tips For Adapting To Education's New Normal last May 7, 2020, E-learning is now the primary mode of instruction for millions of students around the world. An experienced language instructor offers her insights on creating an engaging blended learning curriculum combining language apps and video lessons in the face of new challenges. In the field of education, the pandemic has brought sudden, radical change: a shift from learning in a traditional classroom to new, largely untested online formats. Universities, schools, and educational institutions had to switch to virtual classes and distance learning overnight. Teachers are now confronted with questions about which online teaching platforms to use, where to find quality digital resources, and how to deliver quality instruction in a challenging and unfamiliar environment. Many professors and teachers are new to online teaching and struggling to adapt as rapidly as the situation demands.

Many educational systems are contemplating responsive approaches to implement the curriculum. Most of the mare looking into the role of technology. During a near of social distancing practice demonstrating a major new normal behavior, many schools are headed towards complete online modality or blended learning modality in instruction. The complete online modality of the instructional approach during the post-COVID-19 era can be feasible. For example, in China that was the first epicenter of the virus, more than 180 million children were ordered to remain at home. But while schools were closed for quarantine, education had to continue but this time in an altered modality. It was implemented online through a variety of online courses and electronic textbooks (Patrinos & Shmis, 2020)

Several months after the initial backlash in March 2020, CHEd Chairperson, Prospero De Vera qualified the idea of flexible learning as "more encompassing than online learning." De Vera explains that while online learning requires internet access, flexible learning does not necessarily require connectivity. Instead, it "focuses on the design and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions that address the

learners' unique needs in terms of pace, place, process, and products of learning" (Parrocha, 2020).

Moving forward, the Philippines needs a clear set of policies and guidelines based on an innovative educational framework. This requires a careful and sincere assessment of the country's readiness to offer learning programs that demand more than the traditional requirements.

As the Philippines ventures into a new mode of learning, several factors need to be considered. This includes teacher capacity, situation and context of the learner, and efficiency of the learning environment. These are, of course, on top of the more obvious issues of internet speed, cost of materials, and mode of delivery. The best way to move forward is to take a step back and design a strategy that engages teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and technology-based companies. This collaborative response based on a collective vision is the kind of creative solution this novel problem warrants.

On the Article in Manila Times of Teresita T. Tumapon: Learning in the new normal. Blended learning is not wholly new. Philippine universities, such as the University of the Philippines Open University, have used blended learning. In the new normal, all schools will have blended or purely online courses. Training in using teaching and learning platforms will be available for both teachers and students. DepEd, CHEd, and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority have issued and will continue to issue notices much like the March 22, 2020 notice of India's secretary of HE sent to India's HEIs. The said notice suggested to the teaching and research academics "to utilize this lockdown period for various academic activities including (a) online content development, online teaching, and online evaluation, (b) prepare a lesson plan and develop instructional materials and (c) carry on research, write articles and prepare innovative questions or question bank, etc.

Mathew R. Cruz reported, that only 20 percent of state universities and colleges (SUCs) are equipped to conduct online classes next school year, said Commission on Higher Education (CHEd) chair Prospero de Vera III. In a radio interview on Monday, De Vera said CHEd would work double-time over the next three months to train teachers, assist SUCs as they create learning management systems, and look into the connectivity in schools, but conceded the work ahead would be "very challenging. "Our higher education institutions are not ready," De Vera said. "Only 20 percent of SUCs have learning management systems that allow a shift to flexible learning, including online learning."

One of the basic problems seen by Kasrekar (2020) is the conduct of classes despite the closure order. As the face to face classes pose a higher risk of spread, the most viable solution is through online teaching and learning. This platform challenges both the teachers and the students as it occurs something new to them. This calls for an 'adopt quickly' response to the new normal in teaching and learning amidst the pandemic (Tanhueco-Tumapon, 2020). The shift to online learning was too sudden at very short notice but academic institutions have to strategize and accelerate new forms of teaching pedagogy. The question of how ready the schools are in terms of technical infrastructure is still left unanswered. Reopening the schools at this stage is really expensive (Felter & Maizland, 2020).

The study aimed to determine the Readiness in Adaptation of New Normal on Academic Practices in Pangasinan State University in terms of the profile of the respondents; to determine the readiness in the adaptation of new normal on academic practices in Pangasinan State University; to determine the challenges encountered by the employees in readiness in the adaptation of new normal on academic practices in Pangasinan State University; and to propose intervention scheme to develop the readiness of the employees in embracing the new normal approach in the academic system.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed a survey-questionnaire to qualitatively collect relevant data from the respondents (n=205) who were systematically sampled from each of the satellite campuses of the Pangasinan State University. The survey-questionnaire was an adapted instrument from Gay (2016) with modifications to include questions on challenges, the draft form pre-tested and validated (M=4.23, 'Very Highly Valid') by experts in the field of Educational Management (n=5). The revised form was digitally sent to the participants during the mid-year 2021 with a span of 3 continuous weeks. The response rate was 53.39% from a target of 384 respondents. Analysis of data was done through SPSS, descriptive statistics were recorded for the readiness, while simple ranking was performed for the challenges. A 5-point likert scale and a scale of interpretation (i=0.80) was used as basis to interpret the mean descriptively. The respondents were in the working age range of 28 - 54 (76.57%), with considerably equal gender segmentation (Male=43.9%, Female = 56.1%), who are either single (46.03%) or married (51.07%), and hold permanent plantilla positions in the University (56.10%).

RESULTS

Readiness for the New Normal

Table 1 displays the means (category and weighted means) and the corresponding interpretations for all the dimensions of readiness studied, viz, technical, lifestyle and pedagogical. The faculty members were asked to rate their readiness for the new normal of instruction by describing themselves at the onset of online learning modality in mid-2020 up to mid-2021.

Table 1. Readiness on the New Normal of Faculty Members

DIMENSIONS ON READINESS	Mean	Interpretation
Technical Readiness		
I know how to access the online help desk.	4.06	Highly ready
My computer setup is sufficient for online learning.	4.00	Highly ready
I have access to software such as word processor, spreadsheet, or browser	4.21	Highly ready
I have access to a printer.	4.10	Highly ready
I receive emails sent to my online work email address even though it may not be my primary account.	4.08	Highly ready
I have access to the internet for substantial periods of time, perhaps 45 minutes or so, at least 3 times a week.	4.13	Highly ready
I have access to dedicated network connection or have an Internet Service Provider (ISP).	4.03	Highly ready
Category Mean	4.09	Highly ready
Lifestyle Readiness		
I have a private place in my home or at work that I can use for extended periods.	3.78	Highly ready
I have adequate time that will be uninterrupted in which I can work on my online courses.	3.80	Highly ready
I routinely communicate with people by using electronic technologies such as email, text, messaging and voice mail.	4.11	Highly ready

I have persons and/or resources nearby who will assist me with my technical problems I might have with my software applications as well as my computer.	3.78	Highly ready
I value and/or need flexibility.	4.17	Highly ready
Category Mean	3.92	Highly ready
Pedagogical Readiness		
When I am asked to use technologies that are new to me such as fax machines, voice mail, or a new piece of software, I am eager to try them.	4.19	Highly ready
I am a self-motivated, independent learner.	4.23	Highly ready
It is not necessary that I be in a traditional classroom environment in order to teach.	4.01	Highly ready
I am comfortable providing written feedback rather than giving immediate verbal feedback.	3.83	Highly ready
I am proactive with tasks; tending to complete them well in advance of deadlines.	4.00	Highly ready
I communicate effectively and comfortably in writing.	4.17	Highly ready
Category Mean	4.07	Highly ready
Weighted Mean	4.03	High ready

Table 1 reports, in terms of technical readiness, that access to software such as word processor, spreadsheet or browser received the highest mean rating of 4.21 in terms of technical readiness. This suggests that the faculty members of the University are in possession of gadgets that have installed these vital computer programs to deliver instruction, not to mention the installation of Microsoft Teams as the official learning platform of the University for use by both students and faculty, as well as administrators. The indicator on access to dedicated network connection or having an internet service provider received the lowest rating of 4.03, though still within the range of interpretation as 'highly ready'. This suggests that faculty members, while being technically ready in terms of gadgets, consider possible issues from its internet provider's performance. This is supported by the study of Callo & Yazon (2021) which revealed quite interesting findings from the Laguna State Polytechnic University. They found several factors that could significantly influence the readiness of both faculty and students to online teaching and learning modality. These factors include respondents' familiarity and capability,

preparation, device and access connectivity, self-efficacy and experience with technology.

In terms of lifestyle readiness, the ratings are markedly rated low compared with the high ratings in terms of technical readiness, while still being interpreted as 'highly ready'. The lifestyle indicator on valuing and needing flexibility for the new normal received the highest mean rating of 4.17. This has strong implications on the mindset of faculty members in higher education. Faculty members have already accepted that they, too, need to be flexible. This means that they have accepted, or at least 'highly ready', that adjustments will be inevitable in the new setup of learning, and that their lifestyle will adjust accordingly. Despite this, two indicators received low mean ratings. The lifestyle indicator on the respondents' accessibility to a private place in their home and the availability of persons and/or resources to assist during their technical problems were appraised with low mean ratings of 3.78. This finding suggests that while flexibility could help a faculty member to be lifestyle ready, adjustments at home with provisions of teaching spaces and technical assistants pose another concern.

In terms of pedagogical readiness, the faculty members rated themselves with the highest readiness mean rating of 4.23 with their view as self-motivated independent learners towards the new normal. This supports the earlier data that faculty members value and need flexibility. To be flexible in this time of instructional disruption due to the covid-19 pandemic suggests that a faculty member has to exhibit self-motivation and manifest independence in executing their duty to teach their students. The indicator on feedback assessment, though, received the lowest mean rating of 3.83. This indicator explains that faculty members prefer giving written feedback to students rather than giving immediate verbal feedback. This preference implies some reluctance to verbally share comments to students to provide feedback for their outputs. Faculty members, at this point in time, are performing duties at a heightened modality. They try to beat deadlines while delivering instruction to students. Providing either written or verbal feedback by the faculty members to their students could be explained by the increased number of reports which they have to prepare. This is partly explained by the easy accessibility and expected availability of the faculty members for works or tasks assigned to them. This finding invites an issue that faculty members need digital training on assessment.Table 2. Paired Samples t-test on Research Skills Assessment

Challenges for the New Normal

To triangulate these readiness, faculty members were asked to identify the challenges which they have experienced so far. Table 2 shows 15 identified challenges experienced by faculty members in Pangasinan State University as a preparation for the new normal mode of learning. Frequencies of faculty members having each of these challenges were reported. Simple ranking was performed as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Challenges Experienced by Faculty

Challenges in terms of:	*f*	*R*
Having stable internet access intended for online learning.	155	1
Beating the deadlines and requirements set by the school administration.	145	2.5
Checking and evaluating students' output from the e-mail of an online Leaning Management System	145	2.5
Time management in the conduct of classes, monitoring of response, availability of students, and other online learning issues	117	4.5
Managing the stress caused by community quarantine at home and in between online classes demands.	117	4.5
Sudden shift from face to face to online classes.	116	6
Encouraging participation and utilization of features in online classes.	114	7
Building a positive environment through online classes through emotional support among my students aside from content-based teaching and learning	113	8
Establishing communication with my students.	109	9
Establishing a network of communication among stakeholders such as parents for support at home.	104	10
Knowledge and skills required in delivering online class.	99	11
Use of any Learning Management System (LMS).	91	12
Use of phones, laptops, and tables or any devices for online learning.	88	13

Giving instruction and responding to queries through e-mail and messages.	73	14
Use of social media, e-mails and other platforms for online learning.	58	15

Based on Table 2, the top 5 challenges include issues and concerns on the following, (1) Internet, (2.5) Deadlines, (2.5) Outputs, (4.5) Time, and (4.5) Stress. The faculty members consider hours or days of unstable internet connection as a challenge which obviously retards or stops work. The Internet is the modern 'road' where all people have to cross, and if this road is cut - all others are cut. To beat deadlines in the submission of reports as required by school administration sits as Top 2.5 challenge experienced by faculty members. While reports are necessary for the continuous service delivery of the University, faculty members struggle to beat deadlines of submissions either because deadlines are impossible to beat or that data needed for these reports are impossible to produce prior the deadlines. This suggests that indeed this covid-19 pandemic tripled the workload of both faculty and administrators. Ranking as Top 2.5 also is on assessment of outputs of students from the online learning management system. In the University, each student is given a user account in the online learning management system which is called the 'MS Teams'. Students and faculty members hold classes in this platform much like how zoom and google meet works. When students submit outputs, they do so by uploading such in the MS Teams, which further poses challenges to the faculty members when the MS Teams load very slowly or manifest technical issues. The tons of outputs required from the students will provide an even greater pressure to the faculty who needs to check and evaluate each of these outputs.

Ranking 4.5 includes challenges in managing both time and stress. Faculty members need to attend their classes online, monitor responses from their students despite some issues on stable internet connection, check whether students have attended their classes or not, and reach out to them if they don't and other online learning issues - all these through online. Management of stress is another challenge as community quarantines are in place, its changing status per region and/or province, and differing restrictions in mobility add up to the ever-growing list of issues and concerns that challenge the self-motivation and independence of the faculty members while being flexible at all times for the continuous service to the University.

IMPLICATIONS

To say that technology is important in everyday life is already an understatement. At this point in time of academic disruption, technology use is the only mode to continue what there is to continue, especially in the teaching and learning process. Technology use through online learning platforms have mushroomed in higher educational institutions for less than a year. Gone are the days that online learning is only due for the most versatile and most flexible and most academic types of students, mostly in graduate schools. Today, if one wants to learn, online class is the most preferred option.

The findings of the study have underscored the positivity among the faculty members in online instruction as revealed by high mean ratings and interpreted as highly ready in all of the categories considered (i.e. technical, lifestyle, and pedagogical). These findings provide a definite answer of yes on whether or not the Pangasinan State University could still serve its studentry with the challenge to go from traditional to online learning. Findings on the challenges experienced by the faculty, while providing implications for further research, did not emphasize any challenge to the modality (i.e. did not question the modality) but provided a list of opportunities through which the University can help its faculty. While some of these challenges need immediate response, many of these are within the control of both the faculty and administrators. Suffice to say, when these controls are put in place, these challenges will lessen its effect and better service delivery could be expected. Tabisola, Camara & Sison, 2021 claimed that while issues found in their study could potentially retard the implementation of the Flexible Learning Modality at the University, it has to be understood that the University has no control on various challenges posed including intermittent power interruptions, poor internet connection, and learning spaces at home.

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