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FLEXIBLE LEARNING STRESSORS AND COPING STRATEGIES OF STUDENTS IN THE HEIS OF DAVAO DEL SUR

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ABSTRACT

The transition to flexible learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant academic, technological, and psychological challenges among higher education students. This study examined the stressors associated with flexible learning and the coping strategies employed by students enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Davao del Sur, Philippines. Guided by the Stress and Coping Theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the study utilized a descriptive research design involving 320 students from seven HEIs in Davao del Sur during the Academic Year 2023–2024. Respondents were selected using stratified convenience sampling to ensure representation across participating institutions and academic programs. Data were collected using an adapted survey questionnaire composed of measures on technological stressors, learning-related stressors, transition concerns, and coping behaviors. The instrument underwent content validation by three experts in educational research and psychology and yielded acceptable internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha = .87 for stressor items and .84 for coping behavior items). Findings revealed that technological issues in flexible learning were perceived as moderately stressful (M = 3.36), while learning-related issues were rated as very stressful (M = 4.00). Students particularly had trouble focusing during remote instruction, completing assignments on time, and maintaining motivation. Concerns associated with the transition to flexible learning were also found to be very stressful (M = 3.57), especially regarding communication with classmates and online privacy. In terms of coping behaviors, students sometimes practiced various coping mechanisms (M = 2.98), including seeking information through professional sources and social networks, relying on social support, and engaging in faith-based coping. The study concludes that while flexible learning increased educational accessibility during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, students continued to experience substantial stress related to digital inequality, instructional delivery, and academic adjustment. The findings highlight the importance of institutional support systems, mental health interventions, digital readiness programs, and strengthened communication mechanisms to improve students' learning experiences in flexible education environments.

KEYWORDS: Flexible Learning, Stressors, Coping Strategies, Higher Education Institutions, Technological Issues, Learning Issues.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to flexible learning during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly transformed higher education systems worldwide. Flexible learning refers to a learner-centered approach that combines online, offline, synchronous, and asynchronous modes of instruction to ensure continuity of education while accommodating diverse student needs and circumstances. Although flexible learning increased access to education during periods of crisis, it also introduced substantial technological, academic, social, and psychological challenges among students. Globally, studies have documented that students experienced heightened stress, anxiety, and academic difficulties during the implementation of online and flexible learning modalities. According to UNESCO (2021), educational disruptions during the pandemic affected millions of learners worldwide and intensified educational inequalities, particularly among students with limited technological resources. Similarly, Aristovnik et al. (2020) found that university students across different countries reported concerns regarding internet connectivity, limited access to digital devices, increased workload, and mental health difficulties during remote learning. In developing countries such as the Philippines, the challenges associated with flexible learning became more pronounced due to digital inequality, unstable internet infrastructure, and economic limitations. Students in rural and geographically isolated areas encountered difficulties accessing reliable internet services and digital learning platforms (Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). The digital divide further widened disparities in educational participation and academic performance among learners from different socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, students struggled with self-regulated learning, motivation, and balancing academic responsibilities with household obligations during remote instruction (Baticulon et al., 2021). Flexible learning also altered the social and emotional dimensions of education. The lack of direct interaction with instructors and peers contributed to feelings of isolation, reduced engagement, and emotional exhaustion among students. Agung et al. (2020) emphasized that students experienced stress related to unclear instructional expectations, difficulties concentrating during online classes, and inadequate communication with teachers. Consequently, students developed various coping mechanisms to manage the stressors associated with the new learning environment. The present study is anchored on the Stress and Coping Theory of

Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which explains stress as the result of an imbalance between perceived demands and available coping resources. According to the theory, individuals evaluate stressful situations through cognitive appraisal processes and subsequently employ coping strategies to manage these stressors. The theory is appropriate for understanding how students perceive and respond to the academic, technological, and emotional demands of flexible learning. Despite the growing body of literature on flexible learning, limited local studies have comprehensively examined the stressors experienced by higher education students in Davao del Sur and the coping mechanisms they employ. Understanding these experiences is essential for designing institutional interventions that can support students' well-being and academic success in flexible learning environments. This study aimed to determine the stressors encountered by students in the implementation of flexible learning and assess the coping strategies they employed in adapting to the sudden educational transition.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aimed to:

1. Determine the level of stressors experienced by students in flexible learning in terms of: 1.1 Technological Issues 1.2 Learning Issues
2. Characterize students' concerns regarding the transition to flexible learning.
3. Determine the coping behaviors employed by students in response to the stressors of flexible learning.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

The study employed a descriptive research design to describe the stressors experienced by students in flexible learning and identify their coping behaviors. Descriptive research is appropriate for studies that aim to systematically describe characteristics, conditions, or phenomena without manipulating variables. The respondents of the study consisted of 320 students enrolled in seven Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Davao del Sur during the Academic Year 2023–2024. The participating institutions included the University of Mindanao (Bansalan and Digos City Campuses), Polytechnic College, Davao del Sur State College, Southeastern College of Padada, SCMBI, Cor Jesu College, and St. Mary's College. The study utilized stratified convenience sampling to ensure representation from the participating institutions and various academic programs. Students aged 18 years old and above who

were officially enrolled during the data collection period were considered eligible participants. Respondents came from different academic programs, including Bachelor of Science in Education, Bachelor of Science in Criminology, and other undergraduate degree programs. The sample size of 320 respondents was considered adequate based on recommendations for descriptive survey research, which suggest that larger sample sizes improve the reliability and representativeness of findings in studies involving multiple institutions and variables. An adapted survey questionnaire was used as the primary data-gathering instrument. The questionnaire consisted of three parts:

- Part I gathered the demographic profile of the respondents.
- Part II measured stressors related to technological issues and learning issues experienced during flexible learning.
- Part III assessed students' coping behaviors in response to flexible learning stressors.

The first four items in Part III briefly assessed resilience and self-esteem based on Connor and Davidson (2003). Seven items (Items 5–12) were adapted from the Coping Behavior Questionnaire (COPE) developed by Carver and Scheier (1989), while additional items (Items 13–15) were included to reflect coping behaviors relevant to the flexible learning context. To ensure content validity, the instrument was evaluated by three experts in educational research and psychology. Revisions were incorporated based on their recommendations regarding clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of items. Pilot testing was also conducted among students who were not included in the actual study. Reliability testing yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .87 for stressor-related items and .84 for coping behavior items, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the administrators of participating HEIs. After approval, questionnaires were distributed to eligible respondents through online and printed formats. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and anonymity, were strictly observed throughout the study.

2.2. Statistical Treatment

Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, means, and grand means, were used to analyze the data. A five-point Likert scale was utilized to measure stress levels and coping behaviors. For stressors, the following interpretation

was used:

- 1.00–1.80 = Not Stressful
- 1.81–2.60 = Somewhat Stressful
- 2.61–3.40 = Moderately Stressful
- 3.41–4.20 = Very Stressful
- 4.21–5.00 = Extremely Stressful

For coping behaviors, the following scale was applied:

- 1.00–1.80 = Not at All
- 1.81–2.60 = Rarely True
- 2.61–3.40 = Sometimes True
- 3.41–4.20 = Often True
- 4.21–5.00 = True Nearly All the Time

2.3. Limitations of the study

The study was limited to selected Higher Education Institutions in Davao del Sur; therefore, the findings may not be generalized to all higher education students in the Philippines. The study also relied on self-reported responses, which may be influenced by personal perceptions, recall bias, and social desirability bias. Furthermore, the descriptive research design limited the ability to establish causal relationships among variables.

Future studies may employ mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to gain deeper insights into students' experiences and coping mechanisms in flexible learning environments.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Technological Issues on Flexible Learning

Flexible learning requires students to utilize digital devices, internet connectivity, and online learning platforms to participate effectively in educational activities. Table 1 presents the technological issues experienced by students during flexible learning. The findings revealed that students perceived technological issues as moderately stressful, with a grand mean of 3.36. Students identified instructor discomfort or lack of familiarity with required technologies ($M = 3.45$) and their own lack of familiarity with digital applications ($M = 3.43$) as very stressful. Access to library resources ($M = 3.59$) also emerged as a major concern. The results suggest that both students and instructors experienced difficulties adapting to technology-based instruction. Although flexible learning increased educational accessibility, the sudden shift exposed gaps in digital readiness and technological competence. Students also reported moderate stress related to internet connectivity, digital collaboration tools, and access to reliable devices. These findings support the study of Santiago *et al.* (2021), which emphasized the importance of preparedness and

technological competence in successful online learning engagement. Similarly, Jose et al. (2023) reported that Filipino tertiary students struggled with inadequate gadgets and unstable internet connectivity during online learning. Gocotano et al. (2021) further explained that students living in rural communities and financially disadvantaged households experienced greater stress due to limited technological resources. The findings also align with recent international literature on digital inequality,

which argues that unequal access to technological resources significantly affects students' learning experiences and psychological well-being (OECD, 2021). Students who lack stable internet access and appropriate digital devices are more likely to experience academic stress, reduced participation, and lower academic performance.

3.1. Learning Issues on

Table 1. Technological Issues on Flexible Learning among HEI students in Davao del Sur.

Indicator	Mean	Verbal Description
1. Instructor discomfort or lack of familiarity with required technologies or applications	3.45	Very Stressful
2. My own discomfort or lack of familiarity with required technologies or applications	3.43	Very Stressful
3. My access to reliable internet service	3.34	Moderately Stressful
4. Unclear expectations around which technologies and applications I am required to use	3.31	Moderately Stressful
5. Adequate digital replacements for face-to-face collaboration tools (e.g., whiteboards)	3.34	Moderately Stressful
6. My access to other computer hardware (e.g., printer, scanner)	3.24	Moderately Stressful
7. My access to library resources	3.59	Very Stressful
8. My access to reliable communication software/tools (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Google)	3.34	Moderately Stressful
9. My access to specialized software (e.g., Adobe products)	3.18	Moderately Stressful
10. My access to a reliable digital device (e.g., laptop, mobile device)	3.39	Moderately Stressful
Grand Mean	3.36	Moderately Stressful

(1.0 -1.80 - Not at stressful, 1.81 - 2.60 - Somewhat stressful, 2.61 - 3.40 - Moderately Stressful, 3.41 - 4.20 - Very Stressful, 4.21-5.00 - Extremely Stressful).

3.1.1. Learning Issues on Flexible Learning

The study found that learning-related issues were perceived as very stressful, with a grand mean of 4.00. Students reported that difficulty focusing or paying attention to remote instruction (M = 4.47) was the most stressful learning-related concern. Personal motivation to complete coursework (M = 4.17), unclear assignment expectations (M = 4.13), and finding time to participate in online classes (M = 4.12) were also rated as very stressful. The results indicate that flexible learning environments require higher levels of self-regulation, time management, and independent learning skills. Students may have struggled to maintain concentration and motivation due to distractions at home, reduced interaction with instructors, and increased academic workload. These

findings are consistent with Agung et al. (2020), who found that students experienced difficulty concentrating and adjusting to online instruction due to limited interaction and inadequate learning environments. Rotas and Cahapay (2020) also identified poor learning conditions, unstable internet connectivity, and excessive academic tasks as major barriers to effective online learning among Filipino students. The findings may also be explained using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory. Students perceived flexible learning demands as exceeding their available coping resources, resulting in heightened stress responses. The lack of direct support and structured learning environments contributed to students' difficulties managing academic requirements.

Table 2. Learning issues on Flexible Learning among HEI students in Davao del Sur.

Indicator	Mean	Verbal Description
1. Completing course assignments in a timely manner	4.00	Very Stressful
2. Personal motivation/desire to complete coursework	4.17	Very Stressful
3. Difficulty focusing or paying attention to remote instruction or activities	4.47	Very Stressful
4. Personal preference for face-to-face learning	4.04	Very Stressful
5. Unclear expectations around course/assignment requirements	4.13	Very Stressful
6. Finding time to participate in classes (e.g., live-streaming lectures or video conferencing at a set time)	4.12	Very Stressful
7. Course lessons or activities that haven't translated well to a remote environment	4.04	Very Stressful
8. Completing class meetings and schedules	3.19	Moderately Stressful
9. Instructor availability/responsiveness	3.92	Very Stressful
Grand Mean	4.00	Very Stressful

(1.00 -1.80 - Not at stressful, 1.81 - 2.60 - Somewhat stressful, 2.61 - 3.40 - Moderately Stressful, 3.41 - 4.20 - Very Stressful, 4.21-5.00 - Extremely Stressful).

3.2. Concerns with transition to Flexible Learning

The transition from traditional face-to-face classes to flexible learning was perceived as very stressful, with a grand mean of 3.57. Students reported that communication with classmates (M = 3.64) and concerns regarding online privacy and protection of personal data (M = 3.47) were very stressful. Moderate stress levels were also observed in terms of keeping up with coursework, balancing school responsibilities with other priorities, and concerns regarding graduation delays. These findings demonstrate that students faced not only academic

difficulties but also social and emotional challenges during the transition. The findings support Turan et al. (2022), who found that limited flexibility in teacher communication and barriers to online interaction negatively affected students' learning experiences. Students may have felt isolated due to reduced peer interaction and limited opportunities for collaborative learning. Moreover, concerns regarding online privacy and data security reflect students' awareness of the risks associated with digital learning environments. The increasing use of online platforms during the pandemic heightened concerns regarding cybersecurity, confidentiality, and unauthorized access to personal information.

Table 3: Concerns with transition to Flexible Learning among students of HEI in Davao del Sur.

Indicator	Mean	Verbal Description
1. Keeping up with coursework	3.28	Moderately Stressful
2. Grades/performing well in class	2.90	Moderately Stressful
3. Balancing school with other priorities	2.66	Moderately Stressful
4. Communication with instructors	3.32	Moderately Stressful
5. Communication with classmates	3.64	Very Stressful
6. Possible delays in graduating/completing my program	3.37	Moderately Stressful
7. Missing out on extracurricular/on-campus activities	3.28	Moderately Stressful
8. Changes to grading structure (e.g., pass/fail, credit/no-credit)	3.27	Moderately Stressful
9. Online privacy, protection of personal data	3.47	Very Stressful
10. Security/privacy in taking online exams	3.22	Moderately Stressful
11. Accessibility accommodations	3.28	Moderately Stressful
Grand Mean	3.57	Very Stressful

(1.00 -1.80 - Not at stressful, 1.81 - 2.60 - Somewhat stressful, 2.61 - 3.40 - Moderately Stressful, 3.41 - 4.20 - Very Stressful, 4.21-5.00 - Extremely Stressful).

3.2.1. Coping Behavior of Students

Students reported that they sometimes practiced coping behaviors to manage flexible learning stressors, with a grand mean of 2.98. The most commonly practiced coping behaviors included using professional sources to obtain information (M = 3.52) and using social networks to seek information (M = 3.52), both interpreted as often true. Students also reported relying on faith-based coping,

emotional support from friends and relatives, and substitute activities to distract themselves from stress. These findings indicate that students employed both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), problem-focused coping involves actively seeking solutions to stressful situations, while emotion-focused coping aims to regulate emotional distress. The students' tendency to search for information and seek social support reflects

adaptive coping strategies intended to manage uncertainty and stress. However, the findings also revealed that some students sometimes used alcohol or drugs to feel better (M = 3.36). This suggests that certain students may engage in maladaptive coping mechanisms when faced with prolonged stress and academic pressure. Educational institutions should therefore strengthen mental health programs and counseling services to support students'

psychological well-being. The findings are consistent with Son et al. (2020), who found that university students coped with pandemic-related stress through social support, recreational activities, spiritual practices, and information-seeking behaviors. Nevertheless, prolonged stress exposure may increase the risk of unhealthy coping practices and mental health concerns.

Table 4. Coping behavior to flexible learning among students of HEI in Davao del Sur.

Indicator	Mean	Verbal Description
1. I can adjust to the situation and deal with the changes	2.95	Sometimes True
2. Believing that coping with stress can strengthen me	2.89	Sometimes True
3. I can stay focused under pressure	2.98	Sometimes True
4. Perceive myself as a strong personality	2.67	Sometimes True
5. I try to get advice from someone about what to do	2.63	Sometimes True
6. When I have a question about the situation, I search for information	2.69	Sometimes True
7. I use alcohol or drugs to make myself feel better	3.36	Sometimes True
8. I put my trust in God	3.20	Sometimes True
9. I turn to work or other substitute activities to take my mind off things	2.93	Sometimes True
10. I enjoy the jokes about the situation	3.09	Sometimes True
11. I try to get emotional support from friends or relatives	2.77	Sometimes True
12. I eat more than usual to calm myself down	2.56	Rarely True
13. When I have a question about the condition, I use professional sources (articles or medical articles) to get information	3.52	Often True
14. When I have a question about the situation, I use social networks to get information	3.52	Often True
Grand Mean	2.98	Sometimes True

(1.00 -1.80 - Not at all, 1.81 - 2.60 -Rarely true, 2.61 - 3.40 -Sometimes true, 3.41 - 4.20 -Often True, 4.21-5.00 -True nearly all the time)

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Students perceived technological issues associated with flexible learning as moderately stressful, while learning-related issues were perceived as very stressful.
2. Concerns related to the transition from face-to-face instruction to flexible learning were perceived as very stressful, particularly in terms of communication, online privacy, and academic adjustment.
3. Students sometimes practiced various coping mechanisms to manage the stressors associated with flexible learning, including information-seeking behaviors, social support, and faith-based coping strategies.
4. Flexible learning environments continue to present significant technological, academic, and psychological challenges among higher education students, particularly those experiencing digital inequality and limited institutional support.

5.1. Recommendations:

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Higher education institutions should implement capacity-building programs and digital literacy training for both faculty members and students to improve technological competence and readiness for flexible learning.
2. Institutions should strengthen internet infrastructure, provide accessible digital resources, and expand learning management support systems to minimize technological barriers.
3. Mental health support services, including counseling programs, peer-support initiatives, stress management seminars, and psychological first aid interventions, should be strengthened to support students experiencing academic and emotional stress.
4. Higher education institutions should establish clear communication mechanisms regarding course expectations, grading systems, online privacy policies, and cybersecurity practices.
5. Institutions may explore the integration of

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), blended learning strategies, and flexible instructional approaches to improve accessibility and learner engagement.

6. Future researchers are encouraged to examine

coping strategies among different student populations and identify evidence-based interventions that best support students' academic adjustment and psychological well-being.

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