

# Transitioning to Online and Flexible Modes of Delivery: Challenges and Opportunities During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has led to community lockdowns which, in turn, required educational institutions around the world to adopt online, flexible or remote learning instructional models as an emergency response. Philippine educational regulatory bodies and universities have initiated training and other capacity-building efforts to train teachers in converting their classes for online or technology-mediated delivery. One of these initiatives is a massive open online course on strategic planning to transition to remote teaching and learning. This paper specifically aims to determine the challenges and opportunities facing educational institutions during the pandemic as perceived by massive open online course learners; and (2) recommend strategies to facilitate the better integration of online/flexible learning and their affordances in the educational system beyond the pandemic period. The study has shown that course participants faced challenges such as poor access to technology, lack of readiness of teachers and students, cultural bias against online or remote learning, and economic factors. On the other hand, perceived benefits of transitioning to this mode of delivery include new perspectives and skills for teachers, independent learning skills and other affordances for students, access to learning resources, and greater resiliency for educational institutions. These findings imply that overcoming these challenges and maximising the opportunities provided by online learning require a multi stakeholder and systems approach. Recommendations on capacitating educational institutions to strategically transition to online learning are provided.*

**Keywords:** *Online Learning, Remote Learning, Pandemic, University Strategic Planning, COVID-19, Massive Open Online Course*

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## 1. Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to community lockdowns and quarantines in almost every part of the world. Suddenly, educational institutions had to adopt more flexible modes of delivery to continue educating their students, most of whom were not allowed to leave their homes (Irfan et al., 2020). Just like their counterparts abroad, schools and universities in the Philippines which used to conduct face-to-face classes had to shift to online learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Mahyoob, 2020; Muslimin & Harintama, 2020; Butnaru et al., 2021; Meda & ElSary, 2021; Zalat et al., 2021).

Local educational institutions faced a number of challenges transitioning to online and remote learning (Dubey & Pandey, 2020; Maphalala et al., 2021). One initiative which was aimed at addressing this

problem was a massive open online course (MOOC) on Remote Teaching and Learning (RTL) originally designed for university executives. At that time, the discourse revolved around the adoption of remote learning as a flexible mode of instruction and alternative strategy for traditional educational institutions amidst the pandemic-induced disruption in the country, hence, the use of the term “RTL” in the course (Handog, 2020; Reuters, 2020).

Part of the learning activities in the third module of the course asked learners to share their views on the challenges and opportunities that their respective schools or universities encountered during the transition period. The posts that they shared could offer a general picture of their situation at the time of transition as well as provide implications for future-proofing their institutions. This paper is specifically aimed at determining the challenges and opportunities faced by educational institutions during the pandemic as perceived by MOOC learners; and recommend strategies to facilitate the better integration of online or flexible learning and their affordances in the educational system beyond the pandemic period.

In this paper, online learning means “access to learning experiences via the use of some technology” and is characterised by “connectivity, flexibility and ability to promote varied interaction (Moore et al., 2011). RTL will be used for any reference to the MOOC or any data gathered from the MOOC for this study.

## **2. Literature Review**

The transition to the online mode of delivery during the pandemic encountered the following challenges:

### **2.1. Technological Issues**

Issues surrounding the use of information and communication technology (ICT) were cited as one of the main challenges to online learning. These issues are manifested in terms of lack of access to devices (Maphalala et al., 2021), lack of stable internet access (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Fernando et al., 2020; Barrot et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2021; Maphalala et al., 2021; Zalat et al., 2021), and prohibitive data costs (Simamora, 2020; Dhurumraj et al., 2021). Not only teachers but also students and institutions suffer from poor internet access (Dubey & Pandey, 2020). Molise and Dube (2020) reported that the digital divide was further exacerbated in schools in rural areas, where technological facilities were not well-defined and managed (Dubey & Pandey, 2020).

The digital divide between resource-rich and resource-poor institutions was also noted (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Simamora, 2020). Cuéllar et al. (2021) reported that in Chile, for instance, public schools were more concerned about student access, connectivity and feedback compared to private schools which were more focused on acquiring knowledge and capacities in online teaching given the latter’s understanding that “basic requirements of online pedagogical interaction are already satisfied, due to the advantageous conditions in which their students live” (Cuéllar et al., 2021, p. 57).

In addition, there seems to be inadequate support in terms of assisting both teachers and students in the use of technology. Dhurumraj et al. (2021, p. 10) reported a “lack of professional support needed to navigate virtual digital platforms and technical difficulties experienced with the utilisation of ICT tools.” In some cases, both students and teachers were not encouraged or supported to use an existing technology such as a learning management system, thereby affecting the level of online participation among the users (Maphalala et al., 2021).

### **2.2. Online Pedagogical Issues**

Teachers' lack of familiarity with the teaching and learning approach in online learning is another challenge. Both academics and students face the difficulty of getting accustomed to virtual teaching and learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Maphalala et al., 2021). Many teachers were said to be ambivalent about their capacity to employ innovative instructional strategies for online teaching and learning (Dhurumraj et al., 2021). Others found it a challenge to present content using online technologies (Irfan et al., 2020). For Ferri et al. (2020, p. 1), the pedagogical challenges were “principally associated with

teachers' and learners' lack of digital skills, the lack of structured content versus the abundance of online resources, learners' lack of interactivity and motivation, and teachers' lack of social and cognitive presence (the ability to construct meaning through sustained communication within a community of inquiry)." Dubey and Pandey (2020) also pointed out three challenges for teachers: (1) preparedness to complete learning mechanism to stand before the online platform; (2) competence to handle the existing technology used for digital delivery of course; and (3) ability to handle technology and address possible roadblocks effectively and efficiently.

For other authors, this issue goes beyond the lack of online teaching and learning skills. Dubey and Pandey (2020, p. 44) argued that "a paradigm shift in thinking for adoption of digital learning of learners would be difficult" since it requires them to adopt a change in thinking process or mindset. The lack of deeper understanding about the nature of online teaching and learning can also be observed in terms of how institutions responded to the transition. In Chile for instance, Cuéllar et al. (2021) said that many schools focused more on managing the methodological domain (i.e., integration of technological tools in instruction) at the expense of the equally important curriculum domain (i.e., design and implementation of learning programmes and includes learning sequences and trajectories). The authors argued that curriculum prioritisation during the transition should have emphasised the development of necessary skills rather than reducing the curriculum's content, as recommended by UNESCO. In addition, technology access does not equate quality learning outcomes. Dubey and Pandey (2020) also said that there were questions on the extent to which teachers were able to adopt technology for constructivism.

### **2.3. Other Challenges**

Aside from the two broad set of issues, some institutions also cited institutional issues (Molise & Dube, 2020), the physical and mental health of students and teachers (Colclasure et al., 2021), integrity of assessment (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Maphalala et al., 2021), and unfavourable home learning environments (Ferri et al., 2020; Barrot et al., 2021; Maphalala et al., 2021).

### **2.4. Opportunities and Positive Effects**

While most studies tended to emphasise challenges, a few authors mentioned the positive effects of the shift to online learning and the opportunities which came along with these. Jusas et al. (2021) argued that educational institutions must organise distance learning not only during times of pandemic or emergencies and that a "smarter" university should harness it for future challenges. The same authors also cautioned that a transition to distance learning would be smoother (Kear et al., 2016) and would make better sense if it fits the institution's vision and mission (García-Peñalvo, 2021) and is incorporated in the institutional strategy.

Navickiene et al. (2021) reported that the adoption of online learning led to the following benefits: (1) better self-confidence in teaching remotely; (2) incorporation of distance learning practices in traditional modes of teaching; (3) appearance of new forms of studying at the university and strengthening of existing ones; (4) promotion of independent learning and development of learn-to-learn competencies among students; (5) mastery of new tools and technologies, and (6) improved communication between all levels of the university and the community.

According to Simamora (2020, p. 92), students found the ability to access a subject matter from any location at any time the most positive aspect of online learning while teachers could integrate web-based applications and resources into learning materials without difficulty. These positive changes offer new opportunities for educational institutions including: (1) potential for continuous updating of course content and enhancement of quality of content; (2) increased capacity to offer blended programmes in the future; (3) better understanding of the depth and extent of the work lecturers and students actually put into teaching and studying; (4) development of innovative approaches in teaching and learning; and (5) mastery of communication technologies for sustained communication and cooperative decision making between and among university stakeholders (Navickiene et al., 2021).

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3.1. Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for this qualitative study emanated from naturally occurring data (Kiyimba et al., 2018) – the discussion posts shared by learners in a module on Strategic Transitioning to Remote Teaching and Learning in which they wrote the challenges and opportunities they and their schools or universities faced in transitioning to more flexible modes of instructional delivery. A total of 929 original posts and replies were shared on the discussion forum. The posts included in the analysis were selected randomly from a matrix of posts downloaded from the course site.

The selected texts were then coded in terms of challenges and opportunities to come up with broader thematic categories. The “find” function of the spreadsheet was used to see any potential recurrence of the codes in the document. Once the recurrent patterns of categories appeared saturated, the random selection of posts was discontinued (Given, 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). The codes were then clustered to come up with thematic categories, which were validated by comparing them with the ideas and views shared by other educators participating in other webinars on the same topic by the same open university.

#### **3.2. Study Setting**

The data used for this study was culled from discussion forums posts in a MOOC specifically designed for universities that are interested in strategically transitioning to flexible models of instruction beyond the pandemic. It consists of three modules: Module 1: Remote Teaching and Learning: Concepts, Models, and Technologies; Module 2: Quality Assurance for Remote Teaching and Learning; and Module 3: Strategic Planning to Transition to Remote Teaching and Learning. Module 3, from which this study drew data, was offered on 25-29 March 2020. In one of the learning activities, learners were asked to concisely identify the challenges and opportunities being faced by their educational institution and discuss how RTL could address the challenges and make use of the opportunities.

Of the 1,690 learners registered in the MOOC, 61% came from all regions of the country, with the majority from the National Capital Region, Calabarzon, and Central Luzon. More than half the learners were female.

#### **3.3. Limitations of the Study**

The study’s data was limited to posts made by self-enrolled MOOC learners only. While the study adopted a saturation technique (Given, 2016) to limit its sample size, it is quite possible that not all perspectives were included in the study due to the sheer volume of the data available. The data represented only the views of university administrators, academics, and teachers, including those that referred to the students’ experiences. Typical of qualitative research, results of the study are more interested in understanding meanings rather than prediction, which means that the study’s findings are not claimed to be generalisable to the whole population (Jackson et al, 2007).

### **4. Findings**

This section presents the findings of the study based on the data analysis conducted.

#### **4.1. Challenges**

Based on the learners’ responses in the online discussion, the following appear to be the common challenges faced by educational institutions as they transitioned to RTL during the pandemic.

Theme and description	Sample quotes from the participants
<p><b>Availability of gadgets</b> Many students do not have and cannot afford to buy gadgets. Many teachers do not own a laptop.</p>	<p>“Considering many other learners who have no ... gadget, [it] is really a challenge.”</p> <p>“Not every one of the teachers have laptops which they will use in [teaching and learning] same with the students at home. Some have smartphones but with only mobile data which is not enough for opening and downloading apps for their learning.”</p>
<p><b>Unreliable internet connection</b> Many students and teachers have poor access to reliable internet.</p>	<p>“Given our context in our locality, a stable internet connection is a big problem. The same with limited institutional capacity for ICT.”</p> <p>“The absence of internet connection also makes it difficult for teachers and students to communicate with each other.”</p>
<p><b>Readiness of students</b> Students have limited or no experience in independent learning.</p>	<p>“A lot of them expressed that they had difficulties doing their home tasks on their own without their teacher literally teaching them or telling them what to do.”</p>
<p><b>Readiness of teachers</b> Teachers have limited or no experience with technology-supported instruction.</p>	<p>“Not all faculty members have the idea on how to convert traditional modules into multimedia learning materials. Hence, capacity building in this area must be considered by administrators.”</p> <p>“Most of them are not yet exposed to conducting online classes. They are still in the training process. Another concern is the support system. Before, the technical team could provide technical support to teachers to learn about online teaching and learning. In this current situation, the team can no longer offer the same level of support to all faculty.”</p>
<p><b>Cultural bias against online learning</b> Many teachers and students prefer face-to-face classes over remote teaching environments.</p>	<p>“There is a general misconception by the public, parents included, that online education is inferior to traditional face-to-face education.”</p>
<p><b>Economic factors</b> The negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the economy may lead to decreased enrolment, threatening the financial viability of schools.</p>	<p>“Due to the gloomy economic outlook brought about by COVID-19, a significant number of Filipino families are unable to send their children to private schools; hence, what is at stake is the enrolment.”</p>

#### 4.2. Opportunities and benefits

The following are the recurring opportunities and benefits.

Theme and description	Sample quotes from participants
<p><b>New perspectives and skills for educators</b> The transition experience has provided some teachers with renewed “perspectives and paradigms in the education process” and new skill sets.</p>	<p>“We realised that education cannot be simply viewed and measured in its traditional sense. RTL during COVID-19 has transformed our systems and mindsets, and has opened gateways to more possibilities in education.”</p> <p>“Faculty now make more use of other technology in creating adjuncts to their modules and lessons. Videos and synchronous classes via Zoom, Google Hangout, and Google Meet are now in their field of vision as ways to enhance the teaching and learning process.”</p>

Theme and description	Sample quotes from participants
<p><b><i>Access to educational resources</i></b> The teachers and students appreciate that the internet provides vast amounts of educational resources that can be used.</p>	<p>[There is a host of] “lesson plans, videos, tutorials, and other resources ...but also, podcasts and other resources that require less data usage.”</p> <p>“Students like the convenience of ... accessing the [course] materials which allows them to save and/or maximise resources.”</p>
<p><b><i>Greater resiliency for educational institutions</i></b> RTL provides an opportunity for educational institutions to be resilient despite various disruptions and to learn, innovate, and move forward.</p>	<p>“The availability of different RTL strategies will enable the education institutions to address its current needs and priorities, with utmost consideration of their current scenario, what is available at hand and the other opportunity to learn and improve.”</p>
<p><b><i>Benefits for students</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <i>Independence and flexibility</i></li> <li>b. <i>New learning skills for students</i></li> <li>c. <i>Safety of students</i></li> </ul>	<p>“They like the sense of independence, freedom, and control in managing their workload at their own pace and thus befitting their learning styles.”</p> <p>“How to prioritise, discipline, time management, independence, and creativity are some of the learning attributes that students will develop in online classes that are not present or available in the traditional method.”</p> <p>[There is] “decreased risk of being exposed to COVID-19 while travelling from home to school.”</p>

## 5. Discussion

Previous results indicate that academics and administrators in the Philippines during the pandemic share a lot of similarities with their counterparts in other parts of the world in terms of the challenges they faced in transitioning to more flexible modes of delivery: (1) lack of access to equipment, gadgets, and internet connectivity, and prohibitive data costs (Dhurumraj et al., 2021; Ferri et al., 2020; Maphalala et al., 2021); (2) lack of preparedness to teach at a distance (Dubey & Pandey, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Maphalala et al., 2021); (3) misconceptions of online learning (Cuéllar et al., 2021). This limited view of online learning has resulted in the belief that online learning is equivalent to lectures done online or to excessive emphasis on acquisition of skills in online teaching at the expense of managing the curriculum to enhance flexibility and prioritise essential learning outcomes (Cuéllar et al., 2021). This requires a paradigm shift so that educators can maximise the benefits of online learning for different instructional purposes.

Economic factors also play a crucial role. Generally speaking, private and urban schools in both countries tend to be in a better position than their counterparts in rural and public schools given that students in the former have access to reliable internet (Dubey & Pandey, 2020; Cuéllar et al., 2021). However, the study has also shown that smaller private schools in the Philippines have had difficulty retaining students after shifting to online learning. The shift was accompanied by additional expenses in technology acquisition, provision of support systems, retooling of teachers, and production of new media.

It is worthy to note that despite the challenges faced by the participants, some of them also seemed to appreciate the opening up of possibilities that this shift could afford to universities and other educational institutions (Navickiene et al., 2021). Such views open up opportunities for schools and universities to look at online learning not just as an emergency response to the pandemic but also as a long-term strategy to adopt open educational practices to make their academic programmes more accessible to a more diverse set of learners. While this opportunity is open to all institutions, the road to the realisation of such vision is not without hurdles.

There are a couple of implications that we can deduce from the above discussion. First, the challenges faced by institutions during their shift will affect their ability to take advantage of adopting more educational practices in the future. These challenges cover areas that fall beyond the control of schools and universities – digital divide, cost of education, internet infrastructure, and perceptions of online learning. Addressing these challenges will require a multi-stakeholder approach. There should be a concerted effort with national agencies dealing not only with education but also ICT development, and open and distance e-learning (ODEL) institutions and practitioners. A conducive policy environment needs to be created not only to capacitate institutions but also maximise limited resources.

Second, if we are to encourage more institutions to adopt ODeL as a strategic direction in the future, multiple stakeholders should work together to ensure that these schools and universities are capacitated in all aspects of the ODeL system. Moving forward, universities and schools need to be able to define the role of online learning in their respective institutions in the long term. Remote, flexible or online learning can be seen as more than an emergency response to a public health problem. The world we live in right now is fast changing. Rapid developments in ICT will render many jobs irrelevant in the years to come and so universities and other educational institutions need to prepare learners on how to learn anytime and anywhere throughout their professional lives. The benefits of flexible education are many – increased access, equity, and opportunities to promote 21st-century skills, including digital literacy among today's learners.

Flexible modes of education offer the education sector the means to achieve this vision. While administrators may be aware of these opportunities, stakeholder support for such vision cannot be achieved if there is no clear articulation of the relationship with online learning and the institutional mandate. Administrators of universities and schools should be able to articulate how this mode of learning supports or fits their mission and vision to their multiple stakeholders (García-Peñalvo, 2021). Educational institutions have also realised that transitioning to more technology-maximising and flexible instructional models will require changes in the way they operate. The inherent learner-centeredness of flexible education requires that an institution's course design and delivery, student support and organisation, quality assurance, and management systems are set up and coordinated in an integrated, effective and efficient manner (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). When schools and universities are ready to tackle these challenges, they can make online learning work for their institutions in the long term. During the transition, much of the training was focused on the development of course materials and setting up of learning management systems and other web-based tools. Future training should cover all the other aspects of managing an online or flexible model of instruction.

In a more ideal situation, the transition to flexible modes of learning could have been done more systematically by the higher education sector. Transitioning to remote, flexible or online learning is a pandemic-induced intervention for most educational institutions. Schools, teachers, and students had to adopt an unconventional mode of teaching and learning due to restrictions caused by the public emergency. Various public and private agencies have responded to this challenge by offering online training on how to convert courses for online delivery. School administrators have to set up learning management systems and support mechanisms for their teachers and students. Change is a difficult process and the only way to deal with it is to provide a space for the different stakeholders – the teachers, students and their parents, and administrators – not only to share their concerns and suggestions but also to manage one another's expectations. University administrators have to look at these challenges from a systems perspective. While it is important to quickly convert courses for online delivery in the short term, it is important that educational institutions go further by examining how schools or universities could enhance students' learning experiences through the provision of learner support (i.e., information dissemination, counselling, independent learning skills development), capacitate their teachers through skills development and motivational strategies (i.e., psychosocial wellness, appropriate monetary incentive schemes), and empower university leaders (i.e., aligning RTL with the university mission and vision).

As the study has shown, educators and administrators agree that online learning has provided teachers and learners with additional skills and affordances and institutions with opportunities to innovate. Online learning has proven to be an appropriate and cost-efficient strategy to capacitate large numbers of teachers during this time. However, it is also recognised that educational institutions are situated in

varying contexts, thereby requiring different approaches and solutions. Some schools would have to rely on a combination of traditional media (e.g., print, broadcast) and web-based media. In the long term, online capacity-building courses can be combined with face-to-face or synchronous sessions where learners can present their plans and outputs and can be critiqued by a panel of peer experts. In addition, customised consulting can be provided to certain educational institutions intending to make this transition as a stepping stone to making their course more open and accessible. The University of Philippines Open University (UPOU), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and Technical and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) have a big role to play in such capacity-building and institutional development initiatives as provided for in the Republic Act 10650 (Open Distance Learning Act).

To assist educational institutions that are interested in strategically transitioning to more open and flexible modes of delivery, a nationwide survey can be conducted by UPOU and CHED to identify their plans and needs. This can be used as a basis for planning in a more detailed manner the capacity-building initiatives that can be provided to them. RA 10650 provides for the establishment of zonal centres around the country to be the hub of capacity building and learning resources on open and distance learning in the region. CHED and UPOU can fast track the identification and development of these zonal centres as conduits for training, technical assistance, and multimedia resource and technology sharing among interested institutions. To address the issue of access to the internet in the long run, CHED, UPOU, and TESDA can work with the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) in the establishment of internet access points in rural and disadvantaged areas in the country.

Lastly, many of the learners in the MOOC have gone on to teach remotely during the pandemic. It would be good to empirically document their experiences, specifically the pedagogical and administrative issues they faced in their remote classes. Learners' experiences as independent learners can provide good insights on the ways by which they adapted to this new context. It would be good to see the best practices adopted by various institutions to adapt their preferred approaches in teaching (i.e., problem-based and collaborative learning, and practical and lab classes) during this period. Such research can give a more nuanced picture of the issues, challenges, and prospects faced by the higher education sector as they transition to flexible modes of delivery. It could also help guide policymakers on how to facilitate the integration of open, technology-mediated and flexible models of education into the broader educational landscape in the future. Not only is this necessary to broaden people's access to learning but also to future-proof the educational system to sustainability challenges that may come in the years to come.

## 6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is a disruptive phenomenon which has posed a number of challenges to the higher education sector. While there has been a move towards greater openness in the education system in past decades, this public health emergency has made transitioning to flexible modes of instruction more of an imperative rather than an option. Consistent with previous research, the study has indicated that the transition encountered a number of difficulties. While there have been efforts to train teachers around the country to teach online at least during the period of the pandemic, educational institutions also have to attend to broader issues – the access of teachers and students to the internet, gadgets, and other technologies; their lack of preparedness for distance learning; and lack of resources to support flexible learning. Compared to previous studies which focused on the challenges of shifting to online learning, this study has shown that educators and administrators also see this time as an opportunity to innovate and adopt more flexible models of instruction even beyond the pandemic. It is imperative that educators, regulatory agencies, and the private sector work together to help schools and universities realise their vision of maximising the opportunities that open educational practices – not just online learning – can offer both learners and educational institutions in the not-so-distant future.

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