



**ASEAN SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL**

Volume 11, Issue 01, June, 2023

ISSN : 2089-1075

e-ISSN : 2963-2404

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.58671/aswj.v11i1.36>

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## **Social Work Students' Challenges in Flexible Learning and Implications for Social Work Education: A Study in Bicol, Philippines**

**Angelo C. Uclaray\***

Affiliate: Social Work Department, Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, Philippines

\*Correspondence: [angelouclaray@gmail.com](mailto:angelouclaray@gmail.com)/ [acuclaray@bicol-u.edu.ph](mailto:acuclaray@bicol-u.edu.ph)

**Thea Mari M. Magdasoc**

Affiliate: Social Work Department, Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy & Department of Social Welfare and Development Field Office 5, Philippines

**Andrea Joyce A. Noora**

Affiliate: Social Work Department, Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy & Department of Social Welfare and Development Field Office 5, Philippines

**Ma. Vida Teresa O. Sales**

Affiliate: Social Work Department, Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, Philippines

Received: 31 March 2023 Accepted: 18 June 2023 Published: 30 June 2023

### **Abstract**

*Social work students encountered different challenges as they experience online and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Significantly, examining the learners' situations can contribute in obtaining evidence-based knowledge useful in enhancing academic policies and practices. Hence, this study investigated on the personal, institutional, learning environment, and technological challenges of social work students when flexible learning was implemented. It sought to discuss policy implications for social work education. The study captured 296 respondents in one university in the Bicol Region, Philippines. The researcher-made survey questionnaire used in the study obtained a coefficient of  $\alpha=0.92$ , which means that the whole scale's reliability estimate was highly acceptable. The instrument was in Google Forms and distributed to the respondents online. The collected data were subjected to descriptive statistics for interpretation and analysis. The results revealed that the frequently encountered challenges were: having to fulfill home and school responsibilities simultaneously, overlapping activities/tasks from two or more subjects, power interruptions, and having an unstable mobile data connection. Therefore, the academic community, including the administrators, student organizations, faculty members, and all equally essential stakeholders can address the identified challenges through policy enhancement and partnership building with organizations and companies offering technology-related services.*

**Keywords:** *Online Pedagogy, Virtual Social Work Learning, COVID-19 Educational Challenges, Policy Implications*

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has historically created the largest disruption in education systems and gave rise to numerous issues, including access to education and broader socio-economic issues among billions of learners worldwide (United Nations, 2020). On March 12, 2020, more than 370 million children and youth did not attend school because of temporary or indefinite school closures mandated by different governments worldwide to slow the virus spread (OECD, 2020).

In Southeast Asia, the Philippines was one of the countries immensely affected by the pandemic, targeting various sectors, such as academic institutions. The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have the autonomy to exercise academic freedom for tertiary education, like opening classes as stated under

Republic Act No. 7722. However, to ensure the safety of Filipino learners, the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) advised the HEIs to adopt flexible learning instead of traditional face-to-face classes.

The CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 04, series 2020 "Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning," defines flexible learning as the design and delivery of programs and learning interventions that address learners' unique needs in terms of pace, process, place, and products of learning. According to CHED, flexible learning "ensures the continuity of inclusive and accessible education when the use of traditional modes of teaching is not feasible, as in the occurrence of national emergencies." Therefore, flexible learning provides flexibility to the student regarding pace, place, access, content, and delivery mode.

Other universities in the Philippines and around the globe shifted to flexible learning during the quarantine and moved ahead with the opening of classes. These policies include modified forms of online learning aimed at facilitating student learning activities. For example, online learning might be synchronous, referring to real-time lectures and time-based outcomes assessments, or asynchronous, referring to delayed-time activities, like pre-recorded video lectures and time-independent assessments (Joaquin et al., 2020). However, the need for a more stable and reliable internet connection in the Philippines posed difficulties for some Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) in designing flexible learning methodologies (Abisado, 2020).

Existing studies have shown that students enrolled in flexible learning face challenges in various aspects, such as technological, learning environment, personal, and institutional. The challenges can hinder the efficiency of delivering education in distance learning and decrease their participation and involvement in education. During the start of the school year in flexible learning, many students shared their frustrations concerning academic demands and pressure in this learning modality. Difficulties accessing stable internet connectivity, lack of gadgets, such as mobile phones and laptops, cost of buying load for data and internet, and lack of proper interaction between students and instructors were cited as limitations (Fabito et al., 2020; Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Amir et al., 2020). To the extreme, suicide cases in some parts of the country were recorded because of stress and pressure in financial expenses related to online learning (Sibucan, 2020).

The academic community, including the students and faculty, raised various concerns through an online petition, urging the CHED to cancel online classes because it puts those with poor internet access at a disadvantage in flexible learning, coupled with the unconducive learning environment at home. Specifically, 45% of Filipino citizens (46 million) and 74% (34,500) of public schools did not have access to the internet (Jones, 2019). There were serious socio-economic related concerns for online learning in a developing country like the Philippines. It is critical to note that some students in the country's far-flung areas need roads or electricity and access to computers and the internet. Moreover, given the current internet infrastructure, even students in urban areas experienced limited internet access. It then results in a "digital divide" between those with access and those without access (Joaquin et al., 2020; Letendre, 2020). Furthermore, the closure of schools, libraries, and workplaces due to the pandemic has worsened the learners' situation, especially for those underserved students and rural communities. The digital divide has left children and adults with fewer educational and economic opportunities (Finley, 2020).

Social Work as a practice-based profession recognizes the need for students to acquire the appropriate skills, knowledge, and attitude to effectively perform their professional roles in future practice. The sudden shift from a traditional face-to-face setting to flexible learning resulted in a change in the learning landscape that social work students needed to adapt. Moreover, distance and online social work education may pose ethical challenges related to students' access to information, academic honesty, and personal privacy. Therefore, social work educators must foster and promote a set of norms regarding students' moral obligations to maintain academic integrity, and respect and protect privacy and confidentiality (Reamer, 2013). In addition, integrating technology in social work education allows the vast sharing of knowledge from different professionals to huge numbers of students. In this stage of development, it is essential to accept changes and develop guidelines, ensuring that social work education complies with its duty: "enhance person's social functioning, help people meet their basic needs, and empower people."

Despite the innovations made by Philippine HEIs in terms of alternative learning modes and technologies for delivering education, there are still gaps and challenges in the response to online and flexible learning adaptation. It is crucial that policy responses and learning innovations be grounded on a deeper understanding of distance education and sensitive to the call of the times (Joaquin et al., 2020), most significantly to the needs and situations of Filipino learners. Education is the primary driver of progress globally and the bedrock of peaceful, equal, inclusive, and just societies (United Nations, 2020).

To understand more the situations of social work learners and academic institutions, this study investigated the personal, institutional, learning environment, and technological challenges frequently encountered by social work students enrolled in the school year 2020-2021, when flexible learning started. As a practice-based profession and an academic discipline, social work explores clients' conditions through the micro, mezzo, and macro lenses to provide appropriate services and interventions. As this study investigated the students' challenges in flexible learning, academic administrators and educators can use this as a reference to identify and understand the student's learning conditions, which can pave the way for designing and realizing programs, activities, and measures responsive to students' needs and supportive of holistic student development during online learning landscape. Furthermore, the study's results may help enhance collaboration, support, and partnership among various stakeholders, such as, but not limited to, social work schools, private technological companies, and non-government organizations for effective and efficient implementation of online and flexible learning. By acquiring evidence-based findings, this paper intends to contribute to existing knowledge about the topic and discuss implications that might be useful in enhancing the delivery of flexible and online learning in social work education.

### **Methodology**

The study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to determine and analyze the frequently encountered challenges of social work students in online and flexible learning. The study was conducted in one university in the Bicol Region, Philippines. The study site has the highest number of students in the Bicol Region and was one of the institutions that implemented flexible and online learning during COVID-19 pandemic. It involved 296 social work students enrolled during the School Year 2020-2021. The Slovin's formula was utilized to identify the sample size and a random sampling technique through fishbowl method was done to select the respondents

Based on the gathered data, most of the respondents or 81% were women, 15.5% were men, and the remaining 3.4% preferred not to disclose their gender. The respondents were from the different provinces of the Bicol Region, particularly Camarines Norte (1%), Camarines Sur (4%), Masbate (7.8%), Sorsogon (12.5%), Catanduanes (1%), and the majority were from Albay (73.6%). On the other hand, 121 students have a monthly family income of ₱9,250 or below, and 2 with a monthly family income of P190,040 and above. Regarding gadget ownership, the respondents primarily owned desktops/ laptops and smartphones, with 64.2% and 97.3%, respectively. Of the 296 respondents, 53% did not have an internet subscription, meaning the majority used mobile data to connect online during synchronous classes.

The researchers used a survey questionnaire as the primary instrument. It consists of a list of challenges categorized under four aspects: Personal, Institutional, Learning Environment, and Technological. Each aspect has 12 indicators identified as challenges, and the respondents were asked to identify how frequently they encountered the challenges during flexible learning using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, and 5=Always).

The researcher-made instrument, conceptualized based on the literature review, underwent a pretesting to assess its reliability. A reliability estimate using Cronbach's Alpha revealed that the instrument was highly internally consistent, where all items relate to the other items and the overall items of instruments. Specifically, the personal challenges section with  $\alpha=0.83$ , the institutional challenges section with  $\alpha=0.81$ , the learning environment challenges section with  $\alpha=0.88$ , and the technological challenges section with  $\alpha=0.89$ . Therefore, the whole scale's reliability estimate is highly acceptable, with a coefficient of  $\alpha=0.92$ .

The survey questionnaire was distributed to the respondents using Google Forms and other online platforms such as messenger and email. Moreover, the forms also included basic information about ethical considerations to obtain voluntary participation, such as potential benefits, foreseeable risks, data sharing and dissemination, protection of confidentiality, and data disposal.

The researchers gathered, organized, and evaluated the data from the survey questionnaire. Afterward, the data was subjected to weighted mean computations to analyze and interpret each indicator and address the research objectives.

### **Results**

This section presents the results and interpretation of the gathered data based on weighted mean computation. The tables illustrate the personal, institutional, learning environment, and technological challenges frequently encountered by the respondents during online and flexible learning.

### **Social Work Students' Personal Challenges in Flexible Learning**

Table 1 provides data regarding the personal challenges of respondents. The personal challenges cover the difficulties of the students in coping with the demands of online and flexible learning related to time management, role performance, financial capacity, mental health, and motivation.

**Table 1. Personal Challenges of Respondents.**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Verbal Interpretation</b>
I had difficulty understanding the lessons discussed during online meetings.	3.21	Sometimes
I had a hard time understanding the learning materials on my own.	3.19	Sometimes
I found adjusting my learning styles in this kind of set-up hard.	3.51	Often
I experienced emotional and mental breakdowns (anxiousness, panic, or attacks.)	3.66	Often
I did not have the motivation to study.	3.42	Often
I mismanaged my time to finish the activities/tasks.	3.39	Sometimes
I procrastinated in starting and doing my projects and other activities.	3.40	Sometimes
There were conflicts in the family.	3.00	Sometimes
I had to fulfill home responsibilities and academic requirements simultaneously	4.02	Often
I found it hard to separate family issues from school-related concerns.	3.19	Sometimes
I encountered financial constraints.	3.24	Sometimes
I had a hard time sustaining load allowance for online meetings.	3.07	Sometimes

(Legend: 5.00-4.21 Always; 4.40-3.41 Often; 3.40-2.61 Sometimes; 2.60-1.81 Rarely; 1.80-1.00 Never)

Table 1 shows the personal challenges of the respondents in flexible learning. Based on the results, the top three frequently encountered challenges were: (1) difficulty balancing home and school responsibilities simultaneously with a 4.02 mean rating; (2) having emotional and mental breakdowns with a 3.66 mean rating; and (3) finding it hard to adjust learning style in an online set-up with a 3.51 mean rating. These challenges were the underlying factors for the respondents not fully committing their time to academic-related activities. In contrast, the least personal challenges include (1) having conflicts in the family with a 3.00 mean rating; (2) difficulty sustaining load allowance for online meetings with a 3.07 mean rating; and (3) difficulty understanding the learning materials and separating family issues from school-related concerns, both with a 3.19 mean rating.

### **Social Work Students' Institutional Challenges in Flexible Learning**

Table 2 provides data regarding the institutional challenges of respondents. This aspect refers to the challenges on the mode of learning strategies delivery, communication with instructor or professor, and educators' skills in online and flexible learning.

**Table 2. Institutional Challenges of Respondents.**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Verbal Interpretation</b>
Learning materials (lesson handouts, recorded lectures, & others.) were inaccessible.	2.64	Sometimes

There were unclear instructions from professors regarding activities and tasks for the subjects taught.	3.00	Sometimes
Instructors/ professors were unable to respond to student queries.	2.55	Rarely
Instructors/ professors could not provide rubrics as bases for output preparation.	2.21	Rarely
Instructors/ professors were unavailable during consultation hours.	2.20	Rarely
There was no regular communication between the instructor/professor and the student.	2.51	Rarely
Late announcements of class submissions.	2.16	Rarely
Lack of feedback on students' performance.	2.79	Sometimes
Library sources were limited	3.08	Sometimes
Last-minute announcements in changing the type of activity/task.	2.30	Rarely
Activities/tasks from two or more subjects were conducted simultaneously.	3.39	Sometimes
Technological platforms used by the school crashed.	3.15	Sometimes

(Legend: 5.00-4.21 Always; 4.40-3.41 Often; 3.40-2.61 Sometimes; 2.60-1.81 Rarely; 1.80-1.00 Never)

Table 2 presents the respondents' institutional challenges based on weighted mean values. Among the challenges, the top three frequently encountered were: (1) two or more activities/tasks carried out simultaneously in a single subject with a 3.39 mean rating; (2) instructors/professors have limited knowledge in using technology with a 3.15 mean rating; and (3) limited access/availability of library sources with a 3.08 mean rating. In addition, the respondents interpreted these challenges with the highest mean values as 'sometimes' experienced by the respondents during flexible learning. Conversely, the top three least frequently encountered challenges were: (1) late announcements of class submissions with a 2.16 mean rating; (2) instructors/professors were unavailable during consultation hours with a 2.20 mean rating; and (3) instructors/professors were unable to provide rubrics given as bases of the activity/task with a 2.21 mean rating.

### **Social Work Students' Learning Environment Challenges in Flexible Learning**

Table 3 provides data regarding the learning environment challenges of respondents. The learning environment challenges refer to difficulties on the students' surroundings, specifically in their personal learning space, studying and doing school activities, and distractions, such as power interruptions and background noises.

**Table 3.** *Learning Environment Challenges of Respondents.*

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Verbal Interpretation</b>
I did not have enough space for studying.	3.18	Sometimes
There were background noises during online meetings.	3.99	Often
There were background noises whenever I did assignments and offline school activities.	3.95	Often
There were power interruptions.	4.06	Often
I had no constant space where I could do school activities.	3.32	Sometimes



The temperature was too hot for me to focus.	3.55	Often
The temperature was too cold for me to focus.	2.03	Rarely
I was attending the synchronous class outside our home.	2.47	Rarely
I was attending the synchronous class a few meters away from home.	2.14	Rarely
I felt unsecured in my learning space.	2.40	Rarely
My surrounding was too messy, which distracted me during class hour.	2.99	Sometimes
I had no conducive study area for doing my online class.	3.20	Sometimes

(Legend: 5.00-4.21 Always; 4.40-3.41 Often; 3.40-2.61 Sometimes; 2.60-1.81 Rarely; 1.80-1.00 Never)

Table 3 depicts the challenges encountered by respondents related to the learning environment. Based on the results, the top three frequently encountered challenges were: (1) power interruptions with a 4.06 mean rating; (2) experiencing distractions because of background noises during synchronous and asynchronous meetings with a 3.97 mean rating and; (3) experiencing hot temperature in the learning space with a 3.55 mean rating. Alternatively, the top three least frequently experienced challenges in the learning environment were: (1) temperature was too cold for me to focus with a 2.03 mean rating; (2) attending synchronous class in a different barangay/place where the house was located with a 2.14 mean rating; and (3) feeling unsecured in the learning space with a 2.40 mean rating.

### **Social Work Students' Learning Environment Challenges in Flexible Learning**

Table 4 provides data regarding the technological challenges of respondents. This aspect includes the challenges related to technological skills, access to gadgets, and internet connectivity needed for online and flexible learning.

**Table 4. Technological Challenges of Respondents.**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Verbal Interpretation</b>
I had to borrow a computer and smartphone to access the internet.	1.99	Rarely
I had trouble in using online class platforms (Google Meet, Google Class, Zoom, & others)	2.64	Sometimes
Unstable Wi-Fi internet connection.	3.33	Sometimes
Unstable mobile data connection.	3.73	Often
My laptop/ computer/cellphone malfunctioned as I did school-related tasks.	3.09	Sometimes
I was unable to use an editing application to do digital activities.	2.83	Sometimes
My phone battery could not sustain my class schedule for a day.	2.97	Sometimes
I was late for virtual meetings because the gadget I used lagged.	2.74	Sometimes
I received distractions from other online platforms while in synchronous classes.	3.12	Sometimes
Online communication is disrupted and received late because of poor phone signal.	3.35	Sometimes
My messages are hard to deliver.	2.79	Sometimes

I lack the device to participate in online activities.	2.35	Rarely
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(Legend: 5.00-4.21 Always; 4.40-3.41 Often; 3.40-2.61 Sometimes; 2.60-1.81 Rarely; 1.80-1.00 Never)

Table 4 illustrates the technological challenges of respondents based on weighted mean values. The top three most frequently encountered were: (1) having unstable mobile data connection having a mean rating of 3.73; (2) disruption in online communication and late messages because of poor phone signal with a weighted mean of 3.35; and (3) unstable internet connection (Wi-Fi) with a mean rating of 3.33. On the other hand, the least frequently encountered were: (1) borrowing computers or smartphones to access the internet, with a mean rating of 1.99; (2) lack of a device to participate in online activities, with a mean rating of 2.35 and; (3) limited skills and knowledge in using online class platforms, with a mean rating of 2.64.

### Summary of Flexible Learning Challenges

Table 5 presents the summary results of all aspects related to the challenges encountered by the respondents.

**Table 5.** Summary of Challenges in Flexible Learning.

Indicators	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Personal	3.36	Sometimes
Institutional	2.66	Sometimes
Learning Environment	3.11	Sometimes
Technological	2.91	Sometimes

(Legend: 5.00-4.21 Always; 4.40-3.41 Often; 3.40-2.61 Sometimes; 2.60-1.81 Rarely; 1.80-1.00 Never)

The overall data gathered on the challenges frequently encountered by social work students in flexible learning revealed that the Personal Aspect has the highest overall mean rating, with 3.36. Consequently, Learning Environment with a 3.01 overall mean value, Technological with a 2.91 overall mean value, and Institutional with a 2.66 overall mean value. In addition, it shows that respondents interpreted all aspects to be 'sometimes' experienced during flexible learning.

### Discussion

The shift from classroom-based learning to flexible and online classes resulted in multidimensional challenges among social work students, such as personal, institutional, learning environment, and technological aspects. Personal challenges refer to students' difficulties in coping with the demands of flexible learning related to time management, financial capacity, motivation, and participation. In addition, the institutional challenges denote academic and class policies, school resources, learning strategies, and educators' skills in flexible learning. On the other hand, the learning environment pertains to the challenges in personal space for learning, studying, and doing school activities and distractions such as power interruption and background noises. In contrast, technological challenges relate to technological skills, access to gadgets, and internet connectivity of social work students. Flexible learning is still a new concept, which was only introduced in some social work institutions because of the pandemic. The HEIs perceived flexible learning as a mechanism to mitigate the risk of the virus while sustaining the students' education. Therefore, social work schools and students need to adapt to the new learning situation and cope with its multiple challenges.

### Personal Challenges of Social Work Students in Flexible Learning

In terms of personal challenges, difficulty balancing home and school responsibilities simultaneously was the most frequently encountered challenge, wherein the social work students experienced it 'often.' It means that personal commitments such as, but not limited to, caring for younger siblings and other family members, being called out to fulfill a task while attending online meetings, and being tasked to do household chores can affect the students' participation and focus. In addition, there was an issue of personal and academic boundaries, wherein students could not accomplish their school tasks and requirements because they needed to perform household errands.

The findings clearly show that the students were still adapting and adjusting to managing their roles and responsibilities between being part of the household and, at the same time, being a student

at home. The responsibilities were hard for them to manage when they overlapped. The student's involvement in household responsibilities could negatively affect their academic achievement and performance (Amali et al., 2018; Poncian, 2017). Despite CHED's order to observe flexibility for HEIs to ensure equal access to education during this pandemic, the study's findings suggest that the sudden shift from the traditional classroom setting to flexible learning incurred additional responsibilities and challenges among social work students. Furthermore, it implies that some parents caused challenges when they did not set boundaries. Because of the multiple responsibilities, it became difficult for the students to accomplish academic tasks and activities at a given time, affecting their focus and compromising their school performance.

In addition, despite valuing the diversity of learners through the provision of various learning modalities, such as a blended landscape through asynchronous and synchronous classes, the data showed that the new learning mode affected the students' mental health. The study identified that the second most frequently encountered challenge was experiencing emotional and mental breakdowns such as anxiety and panic attacks. Mental health was among the many aspects adversely affected by the onset of the pandemic (Magsambol, 2020). Social isolation, general fear, and uncertainty have affected mental health and increased stress, anxiety, and depression rates. According to the World Health Organization (2020), the pandemic's impact to mental health will be "long-term and far-reaching."

Additionally, the study's findings support what the Council on Social Work Education (2020) articulated: that most social work students indicated that the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health. While lockdown policies were implemented to mitigate virus transmission, still, it adversely affected people's way of life, with severe consequences for mental and psychological well-being, particularly among young people (Marroquín et al., 2020). It is critical to note that COVID-19-related mental health issues, including depression, stress, and anxiety could impact students' motivation online (Tandon, 2020; Rajkumar, 2020; Baticulon et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the third most frequently experienced challenge on the personal aspect was difficulty adjusting to learning styles in the new set-up, wherein the students experienced it 'often.' The content and delivery in face-to-face classes adapted to the new learning mode might not be suitable or compatible with all learners. Also, some students could not cope with the demands of online set-up because they did not own equipment and gadgets, as well as experiencing poor or lack of internet connection to attend synchronous meetings. Relatedly, Fabito et al. (2020) asserted that the abrupt shift in curriculum delivery required a simultaneous adjustment in learning styles, which had been difficult for many students.

Planning, organizing, and reflecting on their learning process was also a significant challenge for students in a flexible study format. The study's finding is a critical hindrance to what Broadbent and Poon (2015) pointed out, where students must be guided in developing self-regulated learning strategies, including time management, metacognition, critical thinking, and effort regulation to achieve academic success. Despite the best effort and interest of the academe to provide more equitable and quality learning experiences for students, various studies asserted that academic staff felt not suitably equipped to engage in online teaching yet. It could be because they were still adjusting and learning to use some online platforms and technology.

### ***Institutional Challenges of Social Work Students in Flexible Learning***

Regarding institutional challenges, the results imply that two or more activities/tasks being carried out simultaneously in a single subject was the most frequently encountered institutional challenge, where students experienced it 'sometimes.' Due to diverse factors such as difficulty in time management, poor internet connection, and limited access to library sources, the students experienced trouble accomplishing activities in two or more subjects. Moreover, due to various tasks that the students had to accomplish along with the identified personal challenges, such as familial responsibilities and commitments expected from the students in their home environment, their time to do school activities was limited, contributing to underachievement. Relatedly, Sundarasan et al. (2020) asserted that university students were stressed about the overwhelming number of assignments required by the teachers. It also revealed that this difficulty had a massive impact on the stress and anxiety levels of the students. In addition, Shafiei-Sarvestani et al. (2019) pointed out that students complain about the extensive volume and many modules they need to answer. However, it is important to note that assignments and tasks given to the students were required and part of course outline to attain course learning outcomes.

Furthermore, challenges such as limited knowledge of the instructors/professors in utilizing technology to deliver lessons and learning materials and limited access to school library resources were among the institutional challenges of the social work students. Teaching using new technologies requires various skills that most educators are unfamiliar with. The educators must be trained to use



these new devices and integrate them into their implementations (Makoe, 2012). As within any educational situation, the instructor can set the tone for learning in an academic environment. An instructor should possess technical skills and the confidence to utilize various technological platforms to deliver students' learning effectively. Social work educators must be adequately trained, equipped, and motivated to become more effective in using technology.

Moreover, the results indicate that social work students faced limited access to library resources during flexible learning. The students might have limited awareness of how to access the online library system at the university due to limited access to information from the library after it shifted to virtual services following the flexible learning adjustments. Proper information dissemination is vital to orient about library resources and services. The social work students experienced unstable data and an internet connection and communication disruption, so important announcements, orientations, and public posts of the University Library could be more likely to be missed by the majority. Proper awareness precedes action; thus, the lack of it contributed to limited access to library resources. The sudden shift to flexible learning involved multidimensional aspects concerning the student's social environment. As Letendre (2020) stated, while schools have access to technology and a better internet connection, many students have no access at home. He also added that access to technology alone is not enough, as the learning experiences of students using technology differ. Furthermore, libraries actively contribute to students' awareness, understanding, and capabilities in using, managing, and working critically with information.

Joaquin et al. (2020) articulated that as the Philippines ventures into a new learning mode, several factors must be considered, including the teacher's capacity, situation, learner context, and efficiency of the learning environment. Furthermore, since the student's access to the internet varies from place to place, delays in the delivery of instructions and submission are apparent circumstances that are unavoidable for both the institution and students. Therefore, there is a need to set clear and mutual understanding between academic administrators, educators, and learners.

This affirms the findings of Fabito et al. (2020), stating that the difficulty of clarifying topics or discussions with professors because of distance learning is one of the top three barriers and challenges for students that cripple their online learning experience. Given this, the study's findings imply that understanding these challenges could help academic institutions design policies to respond to and enhance students' online learning experience, particularly in student and teacher interaction. The institutional challenges of social work students could provide insights to HEIs and social work educators in understanding the student's situation and providing better, practical, and conducive platforms and opportunities for learning during a crisis.

### ***Learning Environment Challenges of Social Work Students in Flexible Learning***

The findings revealed that power interruption was ranked first among the students' learning environment challenges, which they experienced 'often.' During flexible learning in the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021, numerous power interruptions were recorded all over Albay weekly for various reasons, such as pole relocations, optimization/standardization, line replacement, and clearing activities. This affected the synchronous meeting as classes were postponed or rescheduled, causing students to miss lessons and delay discussions. Furthermore, despite the advisories for scheduled power interruptions, there were times that it happened without notice resulting in constraints on the student's presence and participation in synchronous meetings. Most respondents were also from the province of Albay, meaning they experienced power interruptions every week during flexible learning. Also, students from different areas in the country constantly experience electric outages, contributing to an unconducive learning environment at home.

In addition, the study revealed that experiencing distractions because of background noise during synchronous meetings and when doing assignments was the second most frequently encountered learning environment challenge. In online meetings, different background noises could be heard from the students' and the instructors' environments, such as dogs barking, chickens crowing, constructions, and the sound of vehicles. This background noise disrupted students' concentration and motivation to participate. Cua (2020) asserted that the challenges of online learning, such as sudden power outages and background noise contributed to miscommunication that lowers students' academic performance. According to the study by Amir et al. (2020), it was more challenging to communicate in distance learning, which has led to less learning satisfaction among students. Indeed, the issue of the lack of positive learning environments at home and the effectiveness of online lectures was apparent (Bagayas, 2020). Establishing a conducive learning space has long been a problem in distance learning, especially among poor households (Baticulon et al., 2020).

The students have also frequently experienced a lack of focus due to the home learning space's hot temperature. Nevertheless, it could be seen as beyond the student's control. In the Philippines, the

combination of warm and high relative humidity results in high temperatures throughout the archipelago, which sometimes brings much discomfort to the population. This is primarily from March to May when temperature and humidity are at their maximum levels. A study conducted by Park et al. (2021) found that temperature could affect working memory, stamina, and cognitive performance and could lead individuals to reduce time spent engaging in labor activities. The research also revealed that students who went to school during years with additional hot days demonstrated reduced learning and lower test scores. It has significant implications for students who attend classes in buildings without proper ventilation and air conditioning, implying that heat might directly affect students' learning capacity and academic performance.

These circumstances and challenges serve as the current reality of today's education set-up. The respondents also added that the lack of available materials like chairs or tables and having no other conducive home environment where they could study comfortably affected their learning undertakings. As one of the respondents shared: "I have to stay at my relative's place so that I can comfortably attend classes. Moreover, I travel from one province to another, from Camarines Sur to Albay. It is tiring, and I need to adjust and take precautions because of the danger brought by the pandemic."

Findings of learning environment challenge further support the study of Fabito et al. (2020) that out of the top three identified barriers and challenges in online learning, lack of study or working area for online activities in flexible learning was included. Additionally, a poor learning environment was detrimental to students' academic performance. This difficulty has been repetitively revealed in the students' responses.

### ***Technological Challenges of Social Work Students in Flexible Learning***

The technological challenges frequently encountered by the social work students were mainly concerned with stable signal and internet connectivity. The challenge that ranked first was the unstable mobile data connection, wherein the students experienced it 'often.' Most students used mobile data to connect online and attend synchronous activities under flexible learning. Letendre (2020) stated that while schools have access to technology and a better internet connection, many students did not have the same access at home. Specifically, 45% of Filipino citizens (46 million) and 74% (34,500) of public schools did not have access to the internet (Jones, 2019).

The second and third frequently encountered challenges identified were disruption in online communication and late messages because of poor phone signal and unstable internet connection. These challenges hindered the student's participation, resulting in late submission of outputs caused by poor signal or slow internet connectivity. The respondents' challenges present the current reality of internet speed and stability in the country. In the Ookla Speed test Global Index, as of June 2021, the Philippines ranked 75th in mobile internet speed and 62nd for fixed broadband speeds out of 180 countries. The Philippines' biggest problem concerning digitalization remains the lack of ICT infrastructure, resulting in poor coverage across the Philippines, leaving many with weak to no connection signal. The data suggests that the Philippines is among the lowest-ranked countries in the world regarding internet speed, internet accessibility, and information sharing (Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2016). Poor networks were frequently a serious problem in developing countries with telecommunication systems and ICT (Aboagye et al., 2020).

The Philippines' slow internet connection poses a significant challenge among students, especially those from remote places. The slow internet connectivity could interrupt discussion during synchronous classes, leading to the students missing the lesson, not understanding it, and non-participation during online meetings. Relatedly, Adnan and Anwar (2020) discussed that the sudden shift from classroom-based to online learning resulted in a completely different learning experience for students. Since most students could not access high-speed or reliable internet services, they struggled with online learning. Access to internet facilities and ineffective technology were among the significant challenges faced by higher education students. Moreover, using technology in teaching varies, as it depends on the technology used and the curriculum content. It implies that incorporating technology in learning means incorporating considerations of additional factors such as access, engagement, and support (Orlando & Attard, 2015).

### ***Implications for Social Work Education***

Understanding the interrelated factors affecting the individual functioning is integral in social work. Taking a holistic view of the reality creates an opportunity for assessment and intervention. This can lead to designing and creating strategies to improve the student's situation by considering the multiple systems in the students' environment, affecting and hampering the social work students' learning and participation during flexible learning.

The HEIs, particularly social work schools, are encouraged to enhance and design effective learning strategies and mechanisms in collaboration with the students and equally important stakeholders to maintain quality education amidst online and distance learning. It is imperative to examine the student's experiences and then build on those facets of their teaching and learning that work well. To effectively deliver education through distant and virtual methods in social work teaching, there is a need to value and act based on the students' and teachers' clear perspectives and experiences. The conduct of an open forum and needs assessment can be utilized to pinpoint the gaps and challenges experienced by the students and provide the necessary support and actions. Furthermore, Burke (2020) emphasized that if educators can make and give opportunities and spaces for students to build relationships, it might relieve some feelings of isolation among the learners. Therefore, ensuring open communication channels among administrators, educators, and students is also considered.

Furthermore, academic institutions can also strengthen counseling and psychosocial services to support the students' mental health and well-being. For example, they can update the health guidelines and provide online guidance and lectures to offer strategies for managing stress when coping with a crisis such as the pandemic. Furthermore, a referral pathway may be included to provide a clear mechanism for how the service can be accessed or availed by the students. In addition, mental health webinars can be organized to strengthen information dissemination and raise awareness to improve student's mental well-being and prevent mental health problems from aggravating.

Educators can provide a flexible timeframe guideline for submitting outputs and tasks so students can handle activities promptly. Suppose any student cannot attend a course online due to illness or disturbance, universities may design catch-up plans to ensure that social work students will continue to learn despite challenging circumstances. Some academic institutions observe adequate consideration and leniency to students, especially those who are experiencing poor internet connectivity are also recommended.

Forging new partnerships with different media and technology organizations to further enhance and strengthen education technology in the institution by making it efficient for the benefit of the students can also be considered. It is also a way to broaden collaboration to help the students and the institutions cope with the new normal. In addition, social work schools can also strengthen ICT infrastructure by investing more in its development in order to provide more accessibility to students. These implications were drawn from the study's findings and the respondents' perceptions who experienced the challenges directly in the conduct of flexible learning.

## **Conclusion**

The challenges of social work students related to personal, institutional, learning environment, and technological aspects present the realities of education among higher education institutions when they adopted online and flexible learning. The sudden shift resulted in a new set of challenges that students faced, involving a wide range of aspects concerning the student's internal and external environment. The challenges affect the psychological state of the students thus hinder the efficiency of delivering education in flexible learning, as well as students' participation, learning capacity, and level of motivation.

As future social workers, there is a need for holistic support from the institution, stakeholders, government, and society to ensure that flexible learning will become an effective mode of learning in times of crisis and not merely a bandage approach in helping the students learn. Hence, ensuring stakeholders' readiness to implement online learning through capacity-building initiatives, focusing on technology use and other distant learning strategies may be realized.

The roles of social workers as educators are integral in providing and crafting holistic interventions and advocating for policy recommendations, which is crucial in addressing various challenges, thus improving the current situation of the students during flexible learning. It is also a concern of social work educators to effectively deliver concepts through the use not only of technology but various platforms that can be used in times of crisis. Therefore, there is a need to determine and examine various instructional instruments through different platforms to get the information across to all students to deliver learning social work education in times of crisis successfully. Moreover, continuous evaluation of the online and distance learning implementation may be considered among academic institutions to determine its effectiveness and best practices.

## **Acknowledgement**

The researchers would like to thank, Assoc. Prof. Cherry M. Dycoco, Mr. Russ Daniel Baldoza, and Mr. Arman Bueno for their valuable and technical insights and recommendations.

## Authors Brief Bio

**Angelo C. Uclaray**, is a social worker and a faculty member of the Social Work Department at Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. Previously, he worked as a City Link and a Project Development Officer in the Department of Social Welfare and Development Region IV-A for three years, under the implementation of Conditional Cash Transfer Program (*Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program*). In addition, he served as a project staff in the DSWD-funded research project on KALAH! CIDSS- National Community Driven Development Program (KC-NCDDP), particularly on identifying the factors affecting timely completion of the sub-projects in Bicol and the factors influencing the community volunteers to seek elective position in the local government. Among his research interests include social work education, field instruction, mental health, and social work experiences in various fields or settings. His recent publications include, author of the article titled "Stress and Wellbeing of Social Work Students in Field Instruction" published in the *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* and lead author of the article titled "Social Workers' Roles, Challenges, and Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Albay, Bicol" published in the *Philippine Journal of Social Development*.

**Thea Mari M. Magdasoc**, is a registered social worker. She obtained her Bachelor of Science in Social Work from the Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. Presently, she is working as a project development officer in the implementation of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program under the Department of Social Welfare and Development Region V. She believes that strengthening the impact and importance of humanitarian work is essential for the protection of human rights.

**Andrea Joyce A. Noora**, is a registered social worker. She obtained her Bachelor of Science in Social Work from the Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. She began her professional career at the Our Lady of Peace Hospital in Manila as a medical social worker. She worked to ensure that the poor and disadvantaged had access to quality healthcare. Her primary responsibility was to categorize patients through a process of interviews, assessments, referrals, and coordination with partner foundations, granting a total of 39 major and minor surgical operations. At present, she continues to perform her duties as a Social Welfare Officer II under the Department of Social Welfare and Development with the goal of assisting more sectors. Her main responsibility is to provide direct intervention and assistance. With these experiences, she hopes to become a more effective social worker whose main responsibility is to assist community's most vulnerable groups.

**Ma. Vida Teresa O. Sales**, an Associate Professor from the Social Work Department, Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, with a master's degree in social work and a doctorate degree in social development. Her published research is entitled "Core Competencies and Work Performance of Bicol University College of Arts and Sciences Graduates: Basis for Curriculum Re-engineering". Other research involvements include being a study leader in a research about the sustainability of the ESGP-PA in Bicol Region and project staff of the research that evaluated the KALAH!-CIDSS NCDDP in the Bicol Region that looked into the determinants of timely completion of the sub-projects and the motivation of the community volunteers to run for public office. The latter was proclaimed Best Paper for Social Development Category during the 2020 RDE Exemplar Awards of Bicol University. Both researches were DSWD-funded. During the pandemic, she was part of a research that conducted a study about the Perceptions, Experiences, and Needs of Social Work Students on Migrating Classes to Distance Mode during the Pandemic. Her recent research is titled Development and Validation of the Intervention Program on Mental Health and Resilience for BUPC Pre-Service Teachers and Faculty.

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