

## Graduate Faculty Pedagogical Practices and Challenges in the New Normal

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored on the significant shifts and adjustments brought by the Covid-19 pandemic in the graduate education programs of the University of Eastern Philippines, Catarman, Northern Samar. Using both the quantitative descriptive and qualitative thematic analysis methodologies, the research investigated the instructional practices employed and the academic-related challenges encountered by UEP GS faculty members during the First Semester of School Year 2020-2021. It found out that GS faculty members commonly used mobile phones, laptops, and mobile data and employed online instruction in their classes in the new normal. The faculty-collaborators also considered their internet connectivity as “moderately fast”; however, emphasized that for the flexible learning modalities to effectively work, students also need to have a reliable internet connection. They were “much ready” for flexible learning and considered the flexible learning modalities that they employed to be “highly effective”. Further, the delivery of graduate instruction in the new normal was primarily characterized by the shift to new learning modalities using various educational platforms. Poor internet connectivity was the most prevalent problem while institutional interventions, conduct of classes, and faculty and student personal actions were suggested for the improvement of the educational setup. Almost all faculty-collaborators agreed to hold limited face-to-face classes once approved by the CHED and the IATF.

The study concludes that the UEP GS adheres to the learning continuity plan of the institution with its faculty members using different technologies and the online learning modality to respond to the present academic demand amidst various limitations. GS professors practically chose the most appropriate learning modality/ies for their classes considering their knowledge on and use of technology, the nature of the course, and the flexibility and connectivity aspects.

**Keywords:** pandemic, flexible learning, graduate education, instructional practices, academic challenges

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant changes in almost all sectors of the society. The world is adjusting to the “new normal” wherein innovations and resourcefulness are highly needed. In the field of education, substantial changes and impacts are observed and recorded across the globe. The United Nations (2020) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant changes in the global educational setting affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in the world. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 percent of the world’s student population, up to 99 percent in low and lower-middle income countries. On the other hand, this crisis has stimulated innovation within the education sector. Countries subscribed to innovative approaches in support of education and training continuity: from radio and television to take-home packages. Distance learning solutions were developed thanks to quick responses by governments and partners all over the world supporting education continuity, including the Global Education Coalition convened by UNESCO. The global lockdown of

educational institutions is causing major (and likely unequal) interruption in students' learning; disruptions in internal assessments; and the cancellation of public assessments for qualifications or their replacement by an inferior alternative (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). This crisis has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in our systems – from access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs.

The lockdowns in response to COVID-19 have interrupted conventional schooling with nationwide school closures. While academic communities have made concerted efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period, children and students have had to rely more on their own resources to continue learning remotely through the Internet, television or radio. Teachers also had to adapt to new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of teaching, for which they may not have been trained. In particular, learners in the most marginalized groups, who do not have access to digital learning resources or lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own, are at risk of falling behind (Schleicher, 2020). To mitigate the pandemic's negative impacts on education, schools need resources to rebuild the loss in learning and subscribe to other learning modalities for the teaching-learning process to continue.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has responded to the challenges brought by the pandemic to the delivery of and access to basic education by identifying various learning modalities (e.g., online classes, modular, online-offline modular, offline modular, etc.) in lieu of the face-to-face classroom instruction to protect the learners from the risk of spreading the virus. Distance learning, by practice, is new to both Filipino teachers and students especially in public schools, hence, birth problems specifically on preparedness and connectivity are on the rise (Lluz, 2020). Meanwhile, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) advised higher education institutions (HEIs) to use blended learning (online and offline) for the first semester of academic year 2020-2021 (San Juan, 2020).

These educational impacts have affected almost all levels of instruction, including the graduate level. For this, the UEP Graduate Studies has started to research on the practices and challenges in graduate education in the new normal. This study investigated the instructional practices employed and the academic-related challenges encountered by UEP GS faculty members during the First Semester of School Year 2020-2021.

Specifically, it documented the teaching-related profile of the faculty in terms of gadgets used in the delivery of instruction in the new normal, ways/ modes of accessing the internet, and the learning modalities adopted during the First Semester of SY 2020-2021. It also determined the level of internet connectivity in the areas of residence of the faculty and the level of readiness for flexible learning among GS faculty members. Further, it ascertained the effectiveness of the employed learning modalities as perceived by the faculty and documented the delivery of instruction in the new normal in the GS as practiced by the faculty. Lastly, it identified the problems encountered by the faculty as regards the delivery of instruction in the new normal and derived ways and measures towards the improvement of graduate instruction in the new normal from the perceptions of the faculty; and

With all the significant changes in the academic landscape, higher education institutions across the globe has employed different learning modalities in all levels of instruction. Flexible learning approaches were designed using a full range of teaching and learning theories, philosophies and methods to provide students with opportunities to access information and expertise, contribute ideas and opinions, and correspond with other learners and mentors. This may occur through the use of internet-based tools such as Virtual Learning Environments or Learning Management Systems, discussion boards or chat rooms; and may be designed as a

"blended" approach, with content available electronically and remotely, as well as "face-to-face" classroom tutorials and lectures (Joan, 2013).

According to Shurville et al. (2008), flexible learning is a set of educational philosophies and systems, concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalization to suit the learner. In particular, flexible learning provides learners with choices about where, when, and how learning occurs”.

Naidu (2017) stressed that flexible learning is a state of being in which learning and teaching is increasingly freed from the limitations of the time, place and pace of study. But this kind of flexibility does not end there. For learners, flexibility in learning may include choices in relation to entry and exit points, selection of learning activities, assessment tasks and educational resources in return for different kinds of credit and costs. And for the teachers, it can involve choices in relation to the allocation of their time and the mode and methods of communication with learners as well as the educational institution.

As such flexible learning, in itself, is not a mode of study. It is a value principle, like diversity or equality are in education and society more broadly. Flexibility in learning and teaching is relevant in any mode of study including campus-based face-to-face education.

The determination of the nature and levels of flexibility in learning and teaching in a given context depends on several interacting variables, such as the nature of the subject matter, the level of study, location of students and teachers, and their readiness for flexible learning including their access to technologies and the necessary infrastructure. One size or approach to flexible learning does not, and will not fit all learners, teachers or disciplines.

There is a need for different approaches to learning and teaching, with different levels of flexibility, structure and guidance for different cohorts and learning contexts, while the threshold principles of all approaches remain the same. And these principles are about open and equitable access to learning opportunities, flexible approaches to learning and teaching, and the adoption of open scholarship in its education practices (Naidu, 2016).

Mehrbach & Beingessner (2018) elaborated that modern flexible learning environments also address other elements of the learning environment such as how students are grouped during learning and how time might be used more flexibly during the day. Flexible learning environments imply that the school adapts the use of resources such as staff, space, and time to best support personalization. Personalization means a combination of different structures, instructional strategies, and curricular approaches that allow a learner to have access to what they need when they need it, to know what their next steps are in their learning, and to pursue areas of strength and interest.

One of the learning modalities under flexible learning is blended instruction. It is one of the modes of learning identified by DepEd and CHED. Graham (2006) defined blended learning systems as a combination of face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction while Garrison and Kanuka (2004) defined blended learning as the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences. With this, it is observed that there is general agreement that the key ingredients of blended learning are face-to-face and online instruction or learning.

Allen and Seaman (2010) further defined a blended learning course as follows: “Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has a reduced number of face-to-face meetings”. The definition is quite like the definition proposed by Graham. However, they note

that a substantial proportion should be delivered online. In their paper, they also suggest that the proportion of content delivered online should be 30 to 79 percent in blended learning.

In the graduate education level, an online survey on the impact of COVID-19 of the Council of Graduate Schools (CSC) in Canada and US (Okahana, 2020), roughly three out of four schools (76%) noted that their institutions had formed a campus task force or committee of stakeholders addressing the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduate education. Of the respondents, 64% of graduate deans reported that their institutions had adopted holistic approaches to graduate admissions before the pandemic or have since instructed individual graduate programs to adopt holistic approaches in future graduate admissions decisions. The majority of the heads of these institutions reported that they do not anticipate changes to current policies (18%) or are granting extensions on a case-by-case basis (47%). Fewer institutions (14%) indicated that their institutions have either granted an automatic extension or are granting extensions on a case-by-case basis.

Meanwhile in the Philippines, the study of Joaquin, Biana, and Dacela (2020) asserts that the country needs a clear set of policies and guidelines based on an innovative educational framework. This requires a careful and sincere assessment of the country's readiness to offer learning programs that demand more than the traditional requirements. As the Philippines ventures into a new mode of learning, several factors need to be considered. This includes teacher capacity, situation and context of the learner, and efficiency of the learning environment. These are, of course, on top of the more obvious issues of internet speed, cost of materials, and mode of delivery. The best way to move forward is to take a step back and design a strategy that engages teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and technology-based companies. This collaborative response based on a collective vision is the kind of creative solution this novel problem warrants.

While all these information revealing significant information and viewpoints in the educational setting both in the global and national perspectives, it is undeniable that the present health and climate crises require graduate institutions to prepare for and embrace flexible learning specifically its important principles and varying modes of learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed both the concurrent and embedded mixed methods design specifically the tenets of quantitative descriptive research and qualitative thematic analysis. It is concurrent since both the quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time using the same instrument while it is embedded since the qualitative data provide support to the quantitative responses to vividly describe the features, context and process of UEP graduate education in the new normal. It was conducted during the First Semester of School Year 2020-2021. It made use of an online survey form in obtaining both the quantitative and qualitative data. The form specifically contains the teaching-related profile of GS faculty, level of internet connectivity, level of readiness for flexible learning, effectiveness of the employed learning modalities, delivery of instruction in the new normal, problems encountered, and improvement of graduate instruction.

This study considered a complete enumeration of the respondents, hence, the Google Form was sent to the 79 faculty members who rendered services as professors in the UEP GS, however, only 76 of them had responded. Lastly, frequency count, rank, and mean were used to statistically describe and process the data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Teaching-Related Profile

Table 1.1 presents information on the gadgets used by GS faculty members in facilitating instruction in the current academic setup. The data reveal that mobile phones/ tablets and laptops were frequently used by the faculty-respondents in their graduate classes while there were few who preferred personal computer. This may be attributed to the fact that mobile phones and laptops are more handy and user-friendly hence, one can actually hold virtual classes anywhere as long as there is a stable internet connection. Unlike personal computers, smart phones and laptops are easier to use and operate in a virtual class setting.

**Table 1.1. Gadgets Used in the Delivery of Instruction in the New Normal**

Gadget/s	Frequency	Rank
Mobile Phone/ Smartphone/ Tablet	65	1.5
Laptop	65	1.5
Personal Computer	10	3

Note: Multiple Responses

Table 1.2 reveals data on the ways/modes GS faculty members had accessed the net in their classes during the First Semester of Academic Year 2020-2021. Most of the GS faculty members relied on mobile data and prepaid home Wi-Fi for these are the most available ways in connecting to the internet. Unfortunately, there are only very few existing home unlimited Wi-Fi providers in the province. Recently, the UEP administration inked a contract with a local unlimited Wi-Fi provider for the internet connection in the different colleges and offices of the University. However, it can only allow a very limited number of simultaneous users to maintain its reliable connection. Further, GS classes are held during weekends where offices are usually closed.

**Table 1.2. Ways/Modes of Accessing the Internet**

Internet Access	Frequency	Rank
Mobile Data	48	1
Prepaid Home Wi-Fi	44	2
Home Unlimited Wi-Fi Plans	24	3
Pocket Wi-Fi	9	4

Note: Multiple Responses

Table 1.3 details the learning modalities adopted by GS professors during the First Semester of School Year 2020-2021. Most of the GS professors (58.06%) used online learning while some (36.56%) employed blended instruction. There were four (4) (5.38%) who relied on modular instruction. Unlike undergraduate students, graduate students are more independent in learning and more capable of responding to the challenges of the new academic setup, hence they are more suited for online and/or blended instruction. GS professors would usually provide readings prior to class discussions and presentations. In a graduate class, reading materials like books and articles are more needed than modules which follows a compressed presentation of the lesson, and are usually focused on activities.

**Table 1.3. Learning Modalities Adopted**

<b>Gadget/s</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Online	44	58.06%
Modular	4	5.38%
Blended	28	36.56%

n=76

**Level of Internet Connectivity**

Table 2 suggests that the respondents of the faculty-respondents considered the level of internet connectivity in their areas of residence to be “moderately fast” with a mean score of 3.21. It must be noted that most of the GS faculty members live within the Catarman proper area, the capital town of Northern Samar, where the internet signal is more stable. Unlimited Wi-Fi providers are also available in the area unlike in other places in Northern Samar wherein people solely rely on mobile data and prepaid home Wi-Fi.

Further, for online and blended classes to be more effective, both the teachers and the students should have stable internet connectivity. Although GS faculty members also experience problems on internet connectivity, it is evident in their qualitative responses that internet connectivity issues are prevalent concerns of their graduate students which affect the entire teaching-learning process. This is manifested in the collaborators’ dominant responses:

**Some areas where my students are residing have poor internet connectivity...**

**Last time when we had our zoom meeting, the students are disconnected many times and they are not able to listen to the whole discussion. Interaction is also difficult because of the poor internet connectivity.**

**It is difficult to reach out students specially those who live in remote places where internet connection is very unstable.**

**All my students have access; however, their internet connection is poor.**

These responses manifest that internet connectivity remains a problem in the whole province specifically to GS students.

**Table 2. Level of Internet Connectivity**

<b>Scale</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<b>5</b>	3	Very Fast
<b>4</b>	29	Fast
<b>3</b>	37	Moderately Fast
<b>2</b>	15	Slow
<b>1</b>	2	Very Slow
<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>3.21</b>	<b>Moderately Fast</b>

n=76

**Level of Readiness for Flexible Learning**

Table 3 confers the level of readiness for flexible learning of GS faculty. The mean of 3.62 suggests that GS professors were “much ready” in employing flexible learning modalities during the First Semester of School Year of 2020-2021. It must be noted that UEP’s immediate use of flexible learning modalities was initially implemented during the mid-part of the Second

Semester of School Year 2019-2020 when the country was started to be placed under a series of lockdowns. With this experience, reinforced by various webinars and online trainings on flexible learning modalities, UEP GS faculty were introduced to and given the chance to prepare for this shift in the academic setup.

**Table 3. Level of Readiness for Flexible Learning**

<b>Scale</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
5	8	Very Much Ready
4	39	Much Ready
3	23	Ready
2	4	Slightly Ready
1	2	Not Ready
Mean Score	3.62	Fast

n=76

### **Effectiveness of the Employed Learning Modalities**

Table 4 reveals that UEP GS professors generally consider their employed learning modality/ies to be “highly effective” with a mean of 3.53. This infers that the teacher’s choice of specific learning modality/ies responds to the instructional need of the entire class. Based on the qualitative responses specifically the top most answers of the faculty-collaborators, four (4) major factors affected the perceived effectiveness of the employed leaning modalities.

Access and flexibility are two major aspects that affect the effectiveness of flexible learning modalities. As reflected in their responses, GS professors consider flexible learning modalities to give graduate students the chance to work in their own pace while attending synchronous online sessions. Some GS faculty members also employ asynchronous activities like discussion forums wherein students can participate during their most convenient time.

**The professor can meet students during the online sessions while they can study modules in their own pace.**

**It allows students to learn at their own pace and participate in their most convenient time.**

**Blended instruction caters to the needs of my PNP NSPPO class who have duties on weekends.**

**Students can work on their own pace and will help them to be more analytical.**

These flexible learning modalities are also considered effective in enhancing independent learning skills and time and learning management styles and practices. In this setup, graduate students are allowed to multi-task and perform activities with less supervision from the graduate professor.

**Effective in terms of time and learning management.**

**Since, they have full control over their learning it gives them enough time to digest topics and do their own research before and while class is going on.**

**They are able to practice and enhance independent learning skills.**

As to access and teaching methodologies, this academic setup allows the teachers to explore on various teaching methodologies and strategies with the aid of technology. Further, students, provided they have stable internet connection, can easily access virtual sessions and download

uploaded reading materials. During synchronous virtual sessions, students can present and discuss their assigned topics and interact with their classmates remotely, hence protecting everyone from the risks of being infected by the COVID-19 virus.

**I can gather real time data and use them in the lesson. I can also switch in real time from presentation to online examples.**

**Everyone can access and can be accommodated online.**

**Most of students can attend to Zoom meetings while I conveniently provide them the readings through Google Classroom.**

**I can say that it is effective because my students are able to attend virtual classes on our scheduled time. I'm able to see them, they can present their topics while their classmates listens thru zoom, they submit their other outputs (reaction paper, ctitic paper etc) via email. Everybody are given a chance to interact with the presenter and their classmates.**

The current setup also allows both GS teachers and students to access learning materials and participate in course works using different mediums and platforms at the comforts of their homes. This includes sending and retrieval of learning materials, online classes and discussion, and tracking academic requirements.

**Learning materials were sent to students (E-mail, Moodle, Messenger). The students participate in the online discussion. Tablet serves as blackboard and used for step by step problem solving discussions.**

**Students are able to follow the course work being required of them thru messenger and offline mode of submission of their completed tasks.**

One factor that may affect the success of flexible learning is the knowledge on and the actual use of the technologies needed. It is very evident from the responses of the GS faculty members that effective flexible learning system necessitates the technical know-how in the use of educational technologies of both the teacher and the students. For instance, classes are usually disturbed when there are members of the class who are not that knowledgeable in using applications and soft wares required for online sessions.

**The whole setup is limited by students' ability to adopt and adapt specially the older ones who are not technologically equipped.**

**It was manageable because my students are all professionals who are very efficient in time management. Necessary gadgets as tools for our online sessions were never a problem.**

The restrictions brought by the pandemic has restricted face-to-face sessions hence, flexible learning strategies are limited to offline and online remote sessions. However, some GS professors consider this as a contributing factor in the effectiveness of the learning modality specifically that some courses are better taught in a face-to-face settings like Mathematics courses and other subjects with laboratory works.

**Online classes alone is not very effective especially for Math and Biology classes. Face to face classes for subjects like this are still the best.**

Another concern of GS faculty members is that the credibility of the assessment methods required in their classes is not guaranteed in the current setup. Students have the chance of



sharing or copying answers hence GS professors would go extra-mile of designing new assessment methods appropriate for the present classroom arrangement.

**Lessons delivered but the credibility of the examination result is under question.**

**Assessment of learning may not be accurate or realistic for there is a possibility that answers are shared/copied.**

Lastly, GS professors adhere that the current setup somehow limits the level of participation from the students specifically those with poor internet connection.

**Although, synchronous session is a good alternative, I am not sure if they are even listening to my discussion when their camera is turned off.**

**Comprehension is not much assured due to the absence of a face to face discussions and exchange/ sharing of ideas. Verbal communication is so much absent as one important modality for an effective learning. As if there is always a vacuum in spite of the efforts made.**

**Lessons and tasks are carried out, but participation is not maximized.**

One of the most prevalent issues of the current educational setup which affects the effectiveness of the learning modalities is internet connectivity. Based on the responses, the poor internet connection in the province negatively affects online discussions. It limits active sharing of ideas.

**It could be more effective once provided with good internet connection.**

**Poor internet connectivity disrupts class discussions, and some students could not access the link to the chat room.**

**Poor internet connectivity hampers quality instruction. Too difficult to reach out the students.**

**I find that my students in the online class performed well, although internet connectivity is the primary factor to look into.**

**Table 4. Effectiveness of the Employed Learning Modalities**

<b>Scale</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<b>5</b>	6	Very Highly Effective
<b>4</b>	37	Highly Effective
<b>3</b>	25	Effective
<b>2</b>	7	Slightly Effective
<b>1</b>	1	Ineffective
<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>3.53</b>	<b>Highly Effective</b>

n=76

### **Delivery of Instruction in the New Normal**

Pedagogy in the new normal has required both the teachers and the students to shift from the usual face-to-face setup to newer and more flexible teaching-learning process. The qualitative responses of the GS faculty members on the delivery of instruction in the new normal are categorized into two – (a.) methods and strategies and (b.) assessment and issues.

As reflected in the leading responses of the faculty-collaborators, various platforms for online and blended instructions were used while few faculty members relied solely on modules. From among the educational platforms, Zoom and Google Meet are commonly used for synchronous virtual classes, Email and Google Classroom are for sending and retrieval of requirements, and Facebook (Page, Group, and Messenger) for immediate concerns and updates.

Generally, classes in the new normal start with the reading materials and modules uploaded via email and Google Classroom. Discussion and/ or reporting follows then the accomplishment of class requirements. Attendance is checked via messenger or through Google Forms. There were few professors who used Moodle to post links and activities, and at the same time, retrieve student submissions. As highlighted in a response, most teachers use Moodle only for compliance, but they prefer Google Classroom since it is more user-friendly.

These are reflected in the dominant responses of the faculty-collaborators:

**Reached them out through messenger but eventually continued using LMS. Feedback and consultations done in the messenger.**

**I sent articles/readings/learning materials in the GC..in-class exercises are answered in the GC..class discussions are held in the chat room.**

**Attendance check is done thru messenger (GC), learning materials, assignments and activities are done thru google.classroom, "face to face" meeting is done thru google meet.**

**Using Moodle App, my student s can access all the link posted, they can even submit their activities and complete assignments at any given time.**

**Modules are prepared and uploaded to our FB group and moodle account for them to study. Assessment tasks are given for each topic, to be uploaded by the students to said platforms.Follow up discussion is conducted every other meeting for each topic, together with the presentation of their performance outputs.**

**I employ the flipped virtual classroom approach (blended) – I give readings/modules - students read - I open a discussion forum in FB per topic/module -exchange of ideas - learning activity -online session/ synthesis - submission of the activity.**

Aside from describing the process and the platforms that they use in their classes, GS professors also manifested their assessment and some issues concerning the delivery of instruction. Generally, classes ran smoothly and as scheduled. Both teachers and students were slowly adjusting to the shift from the usual face-to-face setup to the flexible learning modalities designed for learning continuity. For some, the experience was good and different and at the same time challenging. However, internet connectivity and power outages remain to be the prevalent weaknesses of this academic setup.

**We are doing well with blended learning modality, they can discuss topics/raise issues anytime even after the scheduled meeting thru messenger or email. At most, I send them learning materials and references.**

**Effective, I was able to contact my students and discuss the lessons with them. There is always an interaction with my student during the discussion of the lesson.**

**So far, it's going on smoothly, although there are times we get disconnected due to unstable internet connection but we can manage. Communication is not a big problem since most of my students are employed in our campus.**

**It was a good experience to employ such learning modality. We are able to try a different mode of teaching which is very useful in this pandemic time.**

**There are pros and cons in the last few months of online classes. One, exciting in the first and second zoom classes for both the prof. and students. Second, learning new thing is something enriching and third, it gives them full control over their own learning. But then again internet connectivity is the main concern to a point of making it an alibi for why they missed the class.**

**Table 5. Delivery of Instruction in the New Normal**

<b>Major Components</b>	<b>Brief Description of Practices</b>
Methods and Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various platforms for online and blended instructions were used while few faculty members relied solely on modules.</li> <li>• Reading materials and modules were uploaded through Google Classroom.</li> <li>• Online sessions were conducted.</li> <li>• Moodle was used for compliance.</li> </ul>
Assessment and Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classes ran smoothly and as scheduled.</li> <li>• Both teachers and students were slowly adjusting to the shift from the usual face-to-face setup to the flexible learning modalities designed for learning continuity.</li> <li>• Internet connectivity and power outages were the main issues affecting classroom instruction.</li> </ul>

### **Problems Encountered**

The study was conducted during the initial implementation of the flexible learning modalities in the UEP GS, hence the issues and problems identified by the respondents. As reflected in Table 6, poor internet connection is the most common problem experienced by the GS professors. This was followed by issues on the use of technology, availability of the students, passive students, choice of instructional strategies, and power interruptions.

It is very apparent that internet connectivity in the province is unstable, thus graduate students are struggling to attend online classes. On the part of the professors, efforts for online classes are not fully realized since class disruptions are very frequent due to poor internet bandwidth.

**Poor internet connectivity affects access to online classes. As in a face-to-face class, there are still passive students who just turn their cameras off because of low bandwidth which reduces their opportunities for participation. Knowledge of online learning platforms is still wanting.**

**Slow Internet connections or limited access from homes in rural areas can contribute to students falling behind academically. The educational setbacks can have significant impacts on academic success of the student.**

**While my own Internet access/connection was most of the time satisfactory, the situation wasn't the same to some of my students. We had different service providers and at the same time, our proximity to cellular sites differ.**

Another concern is that there are students who do not actively participate in class discussions. Some students would usually turn off their cameras to maximize the connection. This would hinder them to interact with their classmates. Further, some graduate students do not attend classes since some of their work-related activities are scheduled during weekends. For example, PNP public administration and MA Nursing students who are considered frontliners. The Department of Education also schedules in-house trainings and portfolio days during weekends.

**Most students do not participate in the discussion since they are police personnel and at the same time Frontliners for this pandemic**

**Regarding my felt concern about passive students, it was such a challenge to check how they received my instructions.**

**There are students who do not comply or answer within the given time.**

#### **Poor attendance and student participation**

Additionally, some teachers lack the technical know-how in using various technologies and educational platforms. Some would need assistance from others before conducting their classes.

**On my part, I have to ask someone to assist me in conducting zoom meetings.**

#### **Poor skills in the use of the new learning platforms**

#### **Become more literate in using different gadgets & application/ program**

**Table 6. Problems Encountered**

<b>Problem/s</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Poor Internet Connectivity	72	1
Issues on the Use of Technology	33	2
Availability of the Students	28	3
Passive Students	25	4
Choice of Instructional Strategies	15	5
Other (Power Interruption)	4	6

Note: Multiple Responses

#### **Measures towards the Improvement of Graduate Instruction in the New Normal**

With the identified limitations and issues concerning the current academic setup, the qualitative responses of the faculty-collaborators also forwarded suggestions for the improvement of graduate instruction in the new normal. Their answers were categorized into three – (a.) institutional interventions, (b.) conduct of classes, and (c.) faculty and student personal actions.

##### Institutional Interventions

The GS faculty members recognized the role of the UEP administration and other stakeholders in providing support both to faculty and students in this new academic setup. As evident in their responses, the need to resolve internet connectivity in the campus should be the primary

concern of the University while the need for a reliable internet connection in the province should be acted by the local government unit. This will be possible if the provincial government and the UEP administration will communicate with telecommunication companies regarding this concern. Further, UEP, as an academic institution, should start its campus digitalization plans.

**The internet connectivity should be improved by the telcos.**

**Upgrading of internet signal throughout the province in order for all students coming from different municipalities to actively participate in all on-line classes throughout the assigned regular schedules.**

Another concern that should be addressed by the University is the provision of trainings, gadgets, and licensed softwares which will help faculty members improve their flexible learning methodologies and strategies. The institution is likewise expected to improve its University Link policies for it to be more efficient and effective. Further, the GS is also requested to craft policies which will ensure that every graduate student is ready for the intricacies of the current educational setup and for the assessment and evaluation methods to be more credible and reliable.

**Printed modules with flashdrive**

**Efficient and effective distribution and retrieval mechanism**

**Make that U-link useful.**

**Provide data allowance, without asking for too many documents since it is what is demanded now.**

**Provision for materials for module production (as professors have been using their personal computers, printers, and bond papers to print that module, since the university can't)**

**Comprehensive trainings on the use of the new e learning platforms**

**Develop/Institute policies in conducting on line examination to promote authentic evaluation. UEP Graduate Studies should require students the policy during enrolment, No laptop no enrolment.**

**Additional trainings , provision of gadgets- software programs, strengthen by way of upgrading uep wifi accessibility, perhaps establishing an INTERNET HUB for GS students/professors**

Conduct of Classes

Realizing the limitations of the current educational setup, GS professors suggested ways as to possible ways of conducting classes subject for the approval of the GS, the UEP administration, and other concerned government units. Generally, they forwarded the idea of conducting limited face-to-face classes which they consider very significant in maximizing learning. Based on their responses, face-to-face classes may be conducted once a month specifically for small classes. Others also proposed to hold by-batch face-to-face classes for bigger classes.

**Face-to-face instruction even only once a month**

**For small classes like me, permit F2F mode of instruction.**

**Strategize face-to-face (by batch if the number of students is more than 10)**

**On the other hand, one professor suggested to limit synchronous online sessions to give graduate students more time in working on their requirements.**

**Not all sessions should be online so that students could have time working on activities/modules during the offline sessions.**

Faculty and Student Personal Actions

The qualitative responses of the faculty-collaborators also highlighted personal suggestions for both the graduate professors and the students. On the part of the professor, they emphasized the need to innovate and improve teaching strategies corollary to the present academic setup. Others also advised to lessen the course requirements and give students more time in accomplishing performance tasks. Professors were also reminded to stick to their original class schedules to avoid conflicts.

**Innovate strategies that would challenge students to interact in online discussions.**

**Minimize their requirements and give them extra time to submit.**

**Professors should stick to the schedule given to avoid time conflict.**

And to somehow respond to the internet connectivity problem of students, GS faculty members stressed the need for students to look for areas in their locality with a more stable connection. This shall allow them to participate actively in virtual sessions.

**Students should look for areas with good internet connection, not necessarily staying at home if they knew they have a hard time connecting to the internet.**

**Table 7. Measures towards the Improvement of Graduate Instruction in the New Normal**

<b>Major Components</b>	<b>Brief Description of Measures</b>
Institutional Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a need to establish a reliable internet connection in the campus and in the province.</li> <li>• The institution should prioritize provision of gadgets and licensed applications and softwares to faculty members.</li> <li>• More trainings should be conducted.</li> <li>• University Link should be improved.</li> <li>• Craft policies to prepare every graduate student for the new academic setup.</li> </ul>
Conduct of Classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited face-to-face classes should be considered</li> <li>• Online and offline modes of learning should be employed.</li> </ul>
Faculty and Student Personal Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers should innovate to improve teaching strategies.</li> <li>• Course requirements should be lessened.</li> <li>• Teachers should stick to the original schedule.</li> </ul>

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- Students should look for places with stable internet connection.
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Based on the findings of the study, it can be deduced that the UEP GS adheres to the learning continuity plan of the institution with its faculty members using different technologies and the online learning modality to respond to the present academic demand. The faculty-collaborators considered their internet connectivity as “moderately fast”; however, emphasized that for the flexible learning modalities to effectively work, students also need to have a reliable internet connection. This amplifies that internet connectivity plays a significant role in the successful implementation of various learning modalities. Further, it also implies that stable internet connection should be a concern of both the teachers and the students.

GS professors revealed that they were “much ready” for flexible learning. This concludes that the efforts on preparing the faculty for the new academic setup exerted by the UEP administration in partnership with different agencies were effective. The flexible learning modalities employed by GS professors were perceived to be “highly effective” and were influenced by four factors – access and flexibility, use of technology, nature of the course, and internet connectivity. This suggests that GS professors practically chose the most appropriate learning modality/ies for their classes considering their knowledge on and use of technology, the nature of the course, and the flexibility and connectivity aspects. The delivery of graduate instruction in the new normal was primarily characterized by the shift to new learning modalities using various educational platforms. This highlights that the UEP GS has adopted and adapted to the new modes of instruction in the new normal amidst some limitations.

Poor internet connectivity was the most prevalent problem encountered by GS professors in the new setup. This emphasizes that the major problem in this academic setup is something that is “external” and is beyond the control of both the teachers and the students. GS professors outlined some suggestions, including institutional interventions, conduct of classes, and faculty and student personal actions, for the improvement of the present educational setup. This means that the current system of instruction needs to be further evaluated for it to be more responsive to the needs of both the teachers and the students.

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