

Hybrid Modality as a New Norm of Teaching: A Preferential Study for the Now Normal in the Graduate School

Erwin R. Bucjan¹, Mardie E. Bucjan²

¹North Eastern Mindanao State University

²North Eastern Mindanao State University

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: When COVID-19 shook the world in early 2020, schools faced a tough challenge to keep going during this health crisis. Universities worked hard to stay open while following government rules that stopped people from meeting in person and shut down the economy at home. School leaders knew they had to keep teaching so they started new programs to help students learn. This study looks at how graduate school faculty and students at North Eastern Mindanao State University felt about different ways of teaching when Philippine public schools switched to distance learning.

Objectives: The purpose of this study is to determine the different factors that can be considered in educational policies and which learning modalities are adequate for the students.

Methods: This study utilized a survey method to assess the preferences of students and professors, as well as their readiness to continue adopting the hybrid learning model after transitioning from the pandemic-driven online setup to limited face-to-face instruction.

Results: The study revealed that majority of the graduate school students are coming from the different neighboring provinces of Surigao del Sur. It further revealed that enrolment of the graduate school has increased over the past three years during the online/hybrid mode compared to previous enrolment during face to face prior to pandemic era. The students preferred the adoption of the new norm of teaching modality-the online hybrid or blended modality.

Conclusions: The increasing enrollment of students from various regions and even offshore at NEMSU Graduate School highlights the growing preference for flexible learning options. The shift to online and hybrid modalities has not only made education more accessible but has also equipped both students and faculty with the necessary digital tools and training. Furthermore, the hybrid setup has expanded academic opportunities by enabling collaboration with faculty from other universities and NEMSU's satellite campuses, enhancing the overall learning experience.

Keywords: Hybrid Modality, Now Normal, Graduate School.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the academic community was thrown into disarray while attempting to navigate a unique health crisis. Behind the curtains, universities worked to sustain their business while, at the same time, complying with governmental restrictions that allowed physical contact and effectively shut down the domestic economy. Realizing that education and how it was imparted were critical at this point, the academic leaders launched several initiatives to support learning. This research aims to determine the preferred mode of instruction among professors and graduate students at North Eastern Mindanao State University in response to the Philippine public education system's shift to distance learning modalities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the two years' experience in distance learning all over the country; the University has to decide. This paper aims to institutionalize the implementation through a strengthened distance learning modalities into hybrid or blended as a new norm of learning modality and as an optional framework or modality beyond the pandemic. It is imperative that we have a critical discourse to ascertain the alternative courses of action in light of the recent statements of

CHED on limiting face-to-face. Commissioner Popoy de Vera declared that we could not return to the previous normal; instead, the now normal must adapt to the needs of the clients and the passage of time.

Distance learning modalities like Modular Distance Learning (MDL), Online Distance Learning (ODL), Blended Learning, and Face-to-face Learning are the most commonly used avenues to foster the mission of educating the learners. The trend of time is the adoption of hybrid or hyflex as several studies, proved that this is effective to adult learner; however, proven otherwise among the young learners. The Department of Education reported that 8.9 million parents preferred MDL (modular distance learning) as an alternative to traditional face-to-face. classes. However, most students have difficulty answering the self-learning modules on MDL (Pe Dangle & Sumaong, 2020; Itorralba, 2021). Moreover, Bernardo (2020) accounted that over four million parents chose blended learning on the time of pandemic, where students are learning on the combination of modular learning, online class, television, and radio. Albeit on this, online learning negatively impacts students (Wahyu Andi et al., 2020) and costs more than face-to-face classes (Magsambol D., 2021).

Looking back, over two years during the pandemic, advance education in SDSSU now NEMSU was conducted in both synchronous and asynchronous modality which proved that learning was made possible to our Graduate School students. Graduate School students are adult learners who can manage self-paced learning, although as practice both synchronous and asynchronous sessions are adapted in our Graduate School. The LMS Learning Management System is used asynchronously for posting of modular activities and where students submit outputs; while, courses lecture-discussions are conducted via Zoom meeting, Teachmint, Discord and Google meet platforms synchronously for more than two academic years now.

As a result, the current study attempts to close the gap between the hybrid modality, which adult graduate school learners prefer, and the university's policy of continually adopting the current modality to provide better services in light of evolving conditions both now and in the future. This study is deemed significant as it is empirical evidence of the learner's experiences on the learning modalities transitions for the whole school year. In so doing, it determined the different factors that are considered in educational policies and which learning modalities are adequate for the students. This becomes a common ground for adopting policy that would support enhanced enrollment and captive for more potential faculty across borders and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of technology within education has caused traditional learning settings to become older and obsolete, therefore requiring the adoption of new instructional models such as hybrid learning. This revolution seems to have had a broad impact on student performance and learning outcomes in different ways, as students and teachers alike venture into the world of digital tools and online platforms for knowledge acquisition. With hybrid learning comes a great deal of flexibility and accessibility-opportunities that pave the way for student engagement and active participation-but it also poses challenges to motivation, equitable access to resources, and other technical barriers. The challenge is to look at both the challenges and opportunities for optimizing hybrid learning models to improve student experience and make the most appropriate educational choices in light of the developing digital education landscape. This literature review delves into such major strands: the adaptation of technology in education, its impact on academic performance and learning outcomes, student engagement in the hybrid classroom, and the major challenges and opportunities brought about by this new instructional approach.

Adaptation to Technological Advancements in Education

The study of David et al. (2021) provided an insight into how students perceived the transition into online learning in a northeastern North American College. The findings informed that the shift in a fairly successful regime of academic outcomes and instructional quality was not without challenges. Students reported having high levels of stress and anxiety plus difficulties in concentrating. Only a few reported feelings of being ready, willing, and able to continue online learning. While students recognize both the positive and negative sides to online learning, the emotional and psychological toll felt especially due to the lack of social connection and isolation was indeed significant. This research brings to light the necessity of giving attention to the social and emotional dimensions of the online education experience, which is frequently neglected in student perceptions research. The necessity for building online learning environments that heighten social interaction and promote students' well-being in accordance with the community of inquiry framework, emphasizing the essence of social and cognitive presence in fostering mastery within an online atmosphere.

According to Hayeon et al. (2024) the provision of engagement cues increased the instructors' ability to monitor student engagement accurately, reducing the errors associated with this monitoring and allowing instructors to feel more satisfied with their monitoring. This was achieved using simplified individual and class engagement cues, such as colored visualizations in bar graphs. Although instructors felt as if they were monitoring more, the time dedicated to monitoring actually diminished when engagement cues were present, allowing those cues to assess engagement more rapidly and efficiently. Increased accuracy and efficiency helped promote adjustments to teaching practices. According to participants, such incremental awareness made a difference in adjusting during teaching, notably for class members who were suspected to be disengaged. Furthermore, the presence of engagement cues established a greater link between the instructor and the students, thereby suggesting that these cues frequently enhance monitoring of social presence in online learning environments, which generally lack in virtual classrooms.

The study of Haiyun (2022) highlights the three main ways to enhance students' online learning. First, it proposes a tiered online learning system that matches students' workload and includes regular exercise to boost fitness during COVID-19, to strengthen immunity. It suggests shorter class times with more sessions and breaks for physical activities like neck stretches. Second, it calls for more online interaction for younger students, and recommends improving home or dorm learning spaces through better design. It advises creating virtual learning groups and offering personalized mental health support, including counseling. , it recommends bringing traditional classroom strategies into online learning such as limiting screen time using paper materials for interaction, and adding outdoor activities for physical and mental health. These steps aim to boost student involvement learning effectiveness, and overall academic results.

Most students said they adjusted quickly to the switch from online to in-person learning after the pandemic and saw improvement in their study habits, focus and creativity. They said in-person learning allowed for better instructor feedback and communication skills. Many found in-person learning to be more effective because it was more flexible and interactive. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic like technical and social barriers, students who developed flexibility and self-regulation during online learning were better equipped to adapt to in-person instruction. Students and faculty both preferred face-to-face and hybrid models over fully online because of better communication and engagement which supports the effectiveness of blended learning (Chan, 2023).

Gopika (2023) found that students' familiarity and usage of digital learning technologies increased significantly after COVID-19, with digital learning shifting from a weekly to a daily practice. Students using digital learning modality on daily basis (S2) demonstrated greater familiarity with digital learning tools and reported higher satisfaction with digital learning facilities compared to students on a weekly basis (S1) of digital learning. However, despite this increased usage, S2 encountered more barriers and fewer benefits than S1, highlighting the challenges that emerged with the rapid transition to digital learning. These findings emphasize the need for a robust and effective pedagogy to enhance digital learning, ensuring that students engage in efficient and meaningful learning experiences. The study underscores the critical role of digital transformation in education to meet the evolving demands of future generations.

Impact on Academic Performance and Learning Outcomes

As observed by Navarro et al. (2024) the transition to online learning owing to the COVID-19 pandemic brought much friction to the students and teachers in terms of both psychological challenges and technology challenges. Many students were affected by unreliable internet connection, incompatible devices, and the lack of interpersonal communication; feelings of isolation, anxiety, and distraction could result from these latter factors. On the upside, online learning created some safe spaces, increased convenience, and also economic and time-efficient advantages courtesy of the lack of commuting. To add, some of these were, in fact, the same technological issues facing teachers- such as device difficulties, software-related hurdles, and unfamiliar tools- that might've hindered effective lesson delivery or student engagement. Most of the time, those hindrances took away teaching time and sometimes brought up greater complications. In view of all this, the various educational institutions had really no option but to transform their education into remote learning mode when the pandemic broke out.

As mentioned by Parag et al. (2022) on the impact of online learning on the mental well-being and performance of students during the pandemic. Most students face mental concerns such as anxiety, loss of confidence, and concentration issues due to procrastination and laziness. Some students did not state that any negative impact arose. It is equally important to note that family and friends provide an indispensable environment for the students in

coping with the challenges. Shocked by the pandemic, physical and mental health shocks represent social isolation and loneliness. The transition of education to an online format is adding to these problems, thus emphasizing the urgent need for increased mental health awareness and targeted interventions directing students toward coping with these challenges throughout the pandemic and beyond.

Student Engagement and Participation in Hybrid Learning

Eliveria et al. (2019) investigated student engagement in a hybrid learning environment to understand how both online and classroom components contribute to learning. Results revealed a significantly higher emphasis on the online aspect of the environment; this could indicate flaws in either survey design or interpretation in that little consideration was paid to the brick-and-mortar influence. To work effectively, a hybrid environment should integrate the strengths of both the online and in-person experiences. The research urges that in-depth studies be conducted to elucidate the distinction between online and classroom influences, evaluate the impact these may have on student study habits, consider the financial implications for teachers and students alike, and assess the teachers' role in managing the hybrid coursework and delivery of that coursework.

The study of Raes (2022) reported that the differences in conceptual understanding between onsite and remote students were non-significant, yet some very notable affective engagement aspects were found, such as intrinsic motivation, cognitive absorption, and belongingness. It flagged that the design of the learning space plays a very fundamental role in student engagement. Interaction with or visibility to their teachers made a difference in the engagement of remote students: the lower the interaction, the lower the engagement. The design of space regarding set design, social design, and epistemic design is most important for engagement; two-thirds of students cited teachers' actions and the knowledge that they were not alone as the most important factors. Teachers stressed their satisfaction with new learning spaces; they believed that they promoted quality teaching and student engagement, while hoping all learning spaces were equally equipped. The study concluded that careful consideration of pedagogical, social, and technical elements in designing learning spaces is required for effective hybrid learning.

Rawan (2024) sought to investigate the effects of virtual and physical field trips on the engagement of students—emotion, performance, and participation—based on earlier works on experiential learning. According to Rawan's findings, students were emotionally more engaged during face-to-face trips than during virtual trips, owing to their immersive nature of these experiences, which made learning more fun, interesting, and pertinent to students. Although virtual field trips were generally effective, they were still perceived as less engaging by some students since they did not cater to the needs of all learners. Face-to-face students outperformed their virtual counterparts very slightly in performance engagement, possibly due to when the data were collected. In general, students from both formats gained surface-level knowledge, although some did mention learning deeply. Participation engagement was low in both formats because peer-interaction was limited due to COVID-19 constraints. These findings suggest a need for future research to further improve online teaching strategies and, more specifically, further support virtual experiential learning.

Gudoniene (2025) states that hybrid learning has some essential elements for success, from fluid technology integration to innovative pedagogical strategies, academic support, active student engagement, apt instructor-made assessments, and rewards. The study highlighted the need for strong digital infrastructure, continuous teacher professional development, and differentiated instruction to cater to the diverse needs of the students. Effective hybrid learning models, such as blended learning, flipped classrooms, and active learning, involved a focus on student engagement through collaborative activities, interactive discussions, and multimedia resources. Essential for a cohesive learning experience was the establishment of a peer relationship across different learning modes. The research further indicated that for effective integration of tech, from basic video conferencing up to advanced telepresence tools, there needs to be comprehensive training and support provided for educators. Active forms of formative assessment, such as quizzes, peer-reviewed assignments, and project-based assessments, were indispensable in monitoring progress and providing personalized feedback to learners and eventually improving learning outcomes.

Challenges and Opportunities in Hybrid Learning Models

Hybrid learning is characterized by both challenges and opportunities, striking a balance between face-to-face and virtual participation and requiring teachers' pedagogical and technical skills. A major challenge is that, usually for technical issues, instructors will find it more difficult to provide equal attention to both classroom and remote

students, often leading the latter to feel neglected or frustrated. Then, developing student engagement in a hybrid learning environment demands self-discipline, as the instructor is rather challenged with regards to continuously monitoring all learners in real-time. However, hybrid learning has several advantages, including the possibility for flexible learning modes, enhanced motivation, structured data tracking, and the development of crucial soft skills in areas such as communication and problem-solving. Hybrid learning, through the use of educational technology, allows accommodating of different learning styles through synchronous and, equally important, asynchronous methods, and thus supports a more personalized, technological teaching and learning experience. Implementing improved models for effective learning, which resolve the technological-aided learning and pedagogical barriers (Khatun, 2021).

Mayer (2023) presented an opportunity and major challenges for hybrid education regarding flexibility, global connectivity, inclusion, connectedness among people, as well as digital skills. While students appreciate the flexible nature of hybrid learning, balancing work, study, and social lives, they value international connectivity and diversity in their education. Meanwhile, personal connections appear stronger in traditional education. On the other hand, educators indicate the complications of managing hybrid settings and express concerns about possible issues of inequalities regarding learner engagement and/or inclusivity of remote students. Furthermore, differences in digital readiness could contribute to the social and emotional experiences of students in the learning space, underlining the need for better social-emotional technologies. However, these challenges are recognized by the instructors as opportunities for working with students in the development of vital 21st-century skills for digital living. Institutions will have to reconcile these challenges and harness the opportunities hybrid education provides to optimize its potential benefits.

Hybrid learning is said to develop digital literacy in critical thinking, effective communication, digital safety, and independent learning. While students perform well regarding locating, evaluating, and employing information from digital sources, the development of critical thinking skills has almost reached its maturity, attaining 81.33% of the digital literacy score. This skill enables them to filter through various sources to find valid information. Another strength is quite a good percentage (84.57%) on effective communication in digital environments by discussing, sharing, and collaborating using platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. The students showed maturity in the way they were able to carry out safe digital practices and were aware of how to protect personal data, manage online privacy, and promote healthy digital space at 78.27%. The use of digital tools in learning activities promotes grammar skills and improves digital literacy that supports independent learning while they seek education material and interact with it. The use of social networking spaces for collaboration, discussion, and sharing of information also enriches the learning experience. Lastly, digital literacy, reinforced by hybrid learning, endows learners with indispensable skills necessary to navigate through the different technological advances while facilitating their independent, safe, and collaborative learning (Rahmatulloh & Napis, 2023).

OBJECTIVES

This research aims to determine the preferred mode of instruction among professors and graduate students at North Eastern Mindanao State University in response to the Philippine public education system's shift to distance learning modalities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to determine the different factors that can be considered in educational policies and which learning modalities are adequate for the students.

METHODS

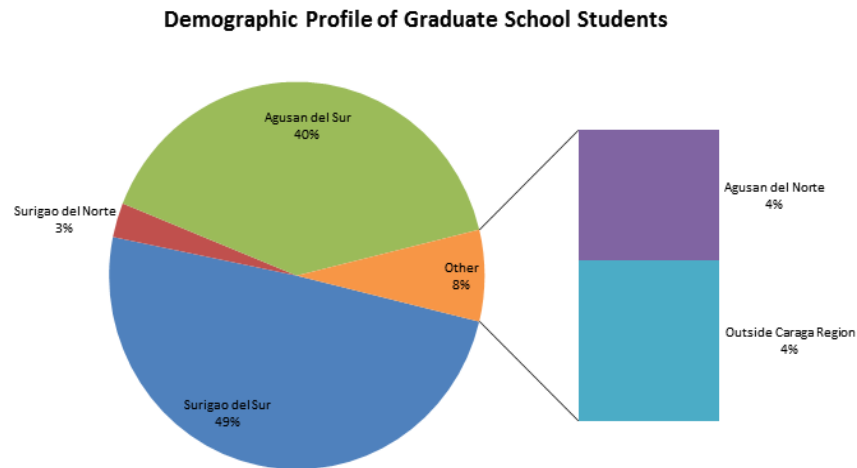
This study utilized a survey method to assess the preferences of students and professors, as well as their readiness to continue adopting the hybrid learning model after transitioning from the pandemic-driven online setup to limited face-to-face instruction. The North Eastern Mindanao State University (NEMSU) Graduate School has been implementing this new teaching modality for the past two years. A total of 300 students were randomly selected to participate in the study by responding to an online survey questionnaire via Google Forms. Their voluntary participation provided valuable insights into the effectiveness, challenges, and future potential of hybrid learning in the institution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results and data, presented through graphical representations, serve as strong evidence supporting the preference for adopting the new norm of teaching modality at the NEMSU Graduate School. These findings highlight

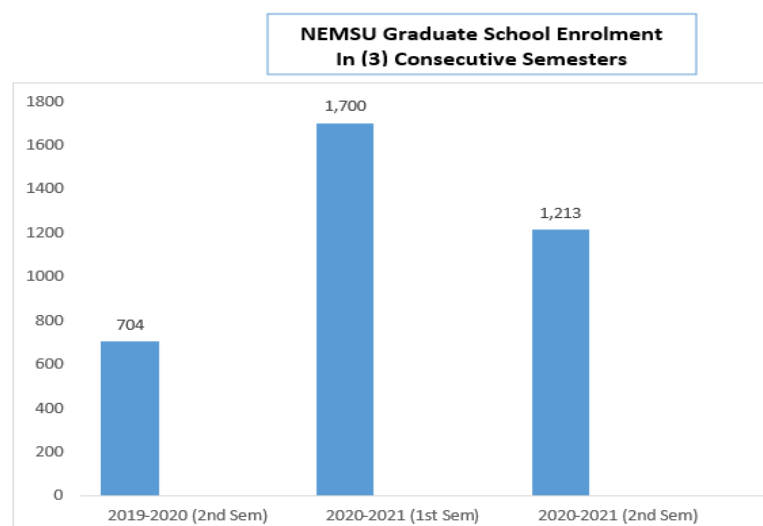
the perspectives of both students and professors, showcasing the effectiveness, challenges, and overall acceptance of hybrid learning. The data further emphasize the need for continuous improvement in technology integration, instructional strategies, and institutional support to enhance the learning experience and ensure the long-term success of this modality.

Demographic Profile Graduate School Students



The new name North Eastern Mindanao State University has been known to its clientele expanding its coverage catering not only students from Surigao del Sur but profile shows, that 49% (926 students) from Surigao del Sur, 40% (752 students) from Agusan del Sur, 4% (640 students) Agusan Norte/Butuan City, 3% (54 students) Surigao Norte/City and outside Caraga) Region 4% (79 students) to include students coming from; Davao Oriental, Compostela Valley, Davao del Norte, Negros Occidental, Davao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, Misamis Oriental, Bukidnon, Coatabato, South Cotabato, Sarangani, Leyte, Bohol, Cebu City, Zambales, Quezon City and Metro Manila for a total of 1875 students all in all.

Comparative Enrollment in (3) three Consecutive Semesters

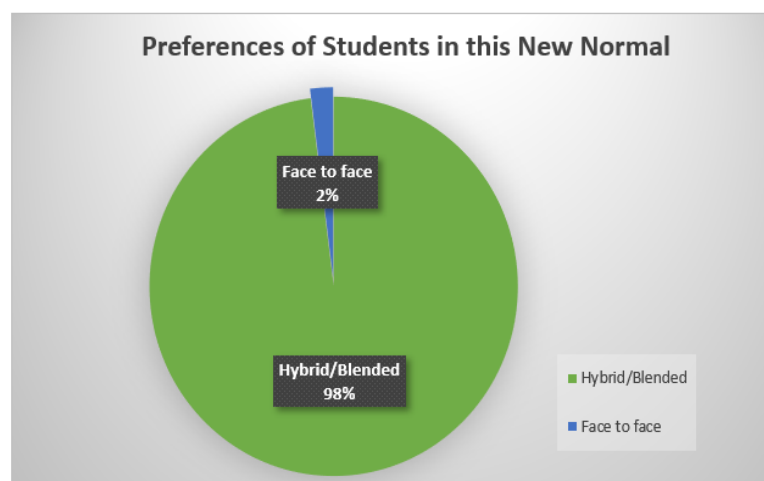


The pandemic has also given opportunity to our Graduate School students who seek to continue advance education in NEMSU through this new modality online which leads to the increase of enrollment. The new name of the University extends its service to advance studies aspirants to be part of NEMSU Graduate School, covering local students from different parts of the country and even offshore (location is outside home country), to enroll in our Graduate School. We have an increasing number of students due to this new modality, as a matter of fact, during the

start of the pandemic in second Semester 2019-2020, the total number of enrolled students tallied to 704 only; however, in the succeeding semester during the first semester 2020-2021 the enrollment increases up to a total of 1700 students, although, this second semester 2021-2022 we have currently 1213 total enrollment in the Graduate School.

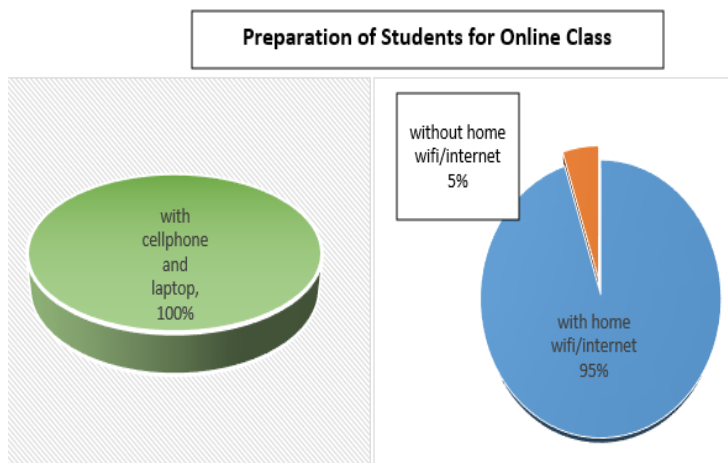
The result is supported in the work of Infante N. D. (2022) that universities have started new online programs to meet this increased demand, and interest in and participation in online learning are both growing. From doctoral students to lifelong learners, more people are using online learning resources to learn and develop new skills. Despite the apparent rise in demand, many providers continue to struggle with developing programs that potential students will find appealing. Walker, E. R. et al. (2021) student ratings of their confidence in meeting the course learning objectives increased from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester in all sections for all courses particularly on hybrid distance learning with a mean of 97.4% and range of 94.1% to 100%. For both the on-campus and executive courses, students, teachers, and ADAPs noted a variety of advantages of the hybrid and online modes. The flexibility of schedules was the most often mentioned strength. Students were allowed to move at their own speed through the materials on Canvas. Additionally, a number of students and teachers remarked on how well the content and materials were organized online and how well the hybrid executive courses were supported by instructional design.

Students' Preferences (Hybrid vs. face-to-face)



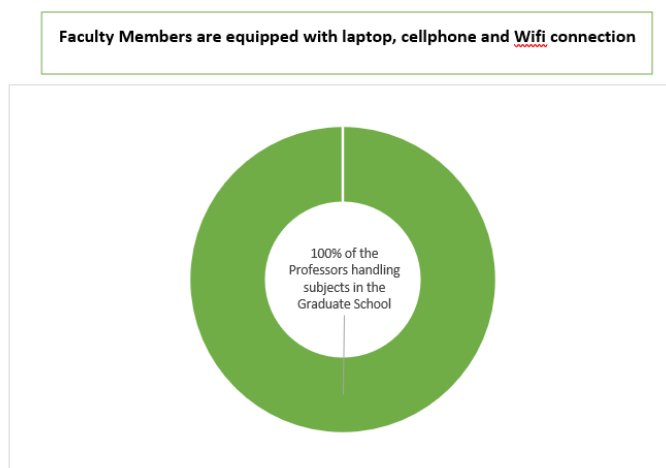
Aside from the idea that this modality attracted more students from all over the country, it will also open to cross borders professors which is aligning to the University's new vision to be a leading university in Asia and the Pacific. The result of this survey revealed that the Graduate School faculty and students preferred this new mode of learning modality and it revealed that (270) 98 % of students in the Graduate School who take part in the survey said, "that they prefer hybrid/blended classes over face-to-face". The students' preference is consistent with the works of Kazu & Yalcin (2022) that hybrid learning has a highly positive influence on their academic progress. Mahmud (2018) discovered that hybrid learning has a favorable impact on academic attainment. Osaili TM, Ismail LC, ElMehdi HM, Al-Nabulsi AA, Taybeh AO, Saleh ST, et al. (2023) revealed that women favoured on-campus learning over online learning, while males preferred both. These findings may be explained by women's capacity for socializing, as opposed to males, who are often less so. Postgraduate students, however, favored online education. Older students may consider online education to be more convenient in the event that they are working or leading a more demanding lifestyle.

Preparations of Students for Saturday Class



The above graphical presentation showed, it came out that students in the Graduate School are equipped with gadgets such as laptop, cellphone and wifi connection at home as their preparation for their online class every Saturday; data support that (300) 100 % have cellphone and laptop and (285) 95 % have their own internet connection at home. These data show that students in NEMSU Graduate School preferred this kind of new set -up or new mode of teaching modality, majority of the respondents agreed that they are now comfortable with virtual class in the Graduate School.

Faculty Preparation for Saturday Class



On the other hand, data from the Professors handling subjects in the Graduate School show that (47) 100% of the faculty members are equipped with laptop, cellphone and wifi connection in order to conduct class every Saturday. They have also attended several webinars, trainings and seminars to equip them with necessary skills in order to navigate online classes during this new normal. The Graduate School office; on the other hand, initiated several capability-trainings in relation to online teaching in the last two years, this is to prepare faculty in the Graduate School with the so-called remote learning/ flexible learning/blended learning as mandated by CHED.

In the last two-years with this new set-up of teaching in the Graduate School, has proven some advantages like that University has saved logistics: electricity and wifi consumption while our faculty handling subjects in the Graduate are conducting classes at home. This hybrid modality has also open opportunity to invite faculty from other University or across borders and even faculty members from the satellite campuses of NEMSU who oftentimes declined to be given load in the Graduate School during the face to face set-up due to distance of travelling from Cantilan, Lianga, Tagbina and Bislig; however, during this pandemic we are able to top these experts to be part of NEMSU Graduate School pool of experts because they are at the comfort of their own home on Saturday as they conduct online hybrid classes.

The Commission on Higher Education has released the memorandum order no.4 s.2020 pertaining to the guidelines on the implementation of flexible learning to all HEIs. In here, flexible learning is clearly defined, stating that it is a pedagogical approach which allows the flexibility of learning in terms of time, place and audience. At the same time, this CMO specifies as blended learning as a combination of virtual or collaborative learning through (LMS) Learning Management System blend with printed modules or with the use of audio/video tapes, storage devices. In this guideline, the HEI or the institution is given the freedom or discretion to adopt its own implementation of the so-called flexible learning modality.

CONCLUSION

The transition to online and hybrid learning modality at NEMSU graduate school has contributed a lot to the increase in enrollment, especially from students who are not based in Surigao del Sur but from other regions of the country and even abroad. Online learning has been the most adopted mode of teaching since both the students and professors are adequately prepared with the equipment, internet connectivity, and workshop necessary for online learning. In addition, the hybrid set up has opened up academic collaboration opportunities for more faculty members from other universities as well as NEMSU's satellite campuses, hence deepening the graduate school experience.

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