

## Challenges and Adaptation Mechanisms of International Students Amidst Flexible Learning

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**Received:** 6 April 2022

**Revised:** 2 May 2022

**Accepted:** 7 July 2022

**Available Online:** 30 July 2022

**Volume I (2022), Issue 3, ISSN: 2945-3577**

### Abstract

**Aim:** International students find it interesting and motivating to pursue tertiary education abroad. However, students living far away from families and friends often encounter unprecedented and complex challenges which need to be addressed. Moreover, there are limited studies accounting for this population's experiences specifically during this pandemic period when schools were forced to deploy flexible learning. This study was conducted to determine the challenges and adaptation mechanisms of international students amidst flexible learning at Cavite State University.

**Methodology:** This quantitative research study was participated by 37 foreign students 18 years old and above enrolled at Cavite State University A.Y. 2020-2021. The study employed simple random techniques to select the respondents. Data were gathered through an online survey using a valid and reliable questionnaire to collect insights from the students concerning their experiences in flexible learning modalities. Additionally, data were statistically analyzed using frequency distribution, percentage, mean, Fisher's Exact Test, and the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient.

**Results:** Results revealed that the majority of the respondents belonged to the 18-24 years old age bracket, male, single, with Seventh day Adventist religion, with monthly family income bracket of below \$10K, taking BSN nursing and with African origin. Furthermore, results revealed that international students, irrespective of their demographic profile, experience numerous challenges during flexible learning in terms of teaching strategies, mode of learning, completion of requirements, social relationships, communication/connectivity, graduation, and other ceremonies. In response to the challenges, the participants used different adaptation mechanism approaches like, task oriented, emotion oriented and avoidance to cope with different challenges. Moreover, when the challenges increase, the use of adaptation mechanisms increases. Additionally, there is no significant relationship between the challenges of the respondents to flexible learning. Finally, there was no significant relationship between the adaptation mechanisms of the respondents to flexible learning. However, a moderate positive correlation between the adaptation mechanisms and the challenges of the respondents was noted.

**Conclusion:** It was concluded that the number of international students in the Philippines has increased in the recent years. Most of the students who enroll in the Philippines higher institutions are young adults whose transition from adolescence to adulthood while studying takes up a larger part of the life more than ever. This study affirmed that students tend to go to school longer and marry later. Likewise, male foreign students from Africa and other Asian countries dominate in enrolling as international students in Philippines more than the females. The study revealed that foreign students tend to enroll in health-related courses, such as medicine and nursing. In addition, these students experience a number of challenges during flexible and use different adaptation approaches to cope with the challenges. A number of the students use religion and spirituality for a sense of community and belonging, strength, comfort and hope.

**Keywords:** International students, flexible learning, online learning, and challenges

### INTRODUCTION

The world's demand for internationalization and globalization has caused the number of international students in the Philippines to more than double recently (Hou, & Du, 2020) commission on Higher Education (CHED) reports that as of April 2016, there are 8,202 foreign students from 115 different countries enrolled in the Philippines Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) with 5,199 males and 2,912 females. The number comes from India (2,083), Korea (1,207) and Nigeria (1,046).

Only privileged and wealthy students are encouraged to participate in international education

experiences due to the cost and other restrictions related to access to education in general (Choudaha, 2017).

Similarly, Hussain et al, (2019) found out that international students who are far away from their families and friends often encounter numerous challenges including cultural, social, psychological and psychological.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, face to face components, tutoring, Laboratory classes, related learning experience, and on-job-training were suspended to aid curb the spread of the virus.

However, flexible learning: synchronous electronic components, audio-video, conferencing, online classes, instant messaging, asynchronous modules, e-mail, handouts/articles/books, chatting and other computer-based instruction were accepted.

According to CHED, (2020), flexible learning involves a combination of digital and non-digital technology, which does not necessarily require being connected to the internet. 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. In conjunction to that, CHED has classified flexible learning into three modes online, offline and blended mode

There are limited studies accounting for international students' experiences in the Philippines specifically, during flexible learning modality. Hence, the relevance of this study which aimed to determine the challenges and adaptation mechanisms of international students amidst flexible learning.

### **Significance of the study**

Findings of this study may stimulate international students to be aware of the challenges and encourage them to come up with ways of coping, making them more in tune with their emotions, surroundings and self to become physically and psychologically independence.

Filipino students, to maintain pleasant Filipino attitude like the trait of being hospitable, welcoming foreign visitors, willingness in helping one towards any situation, and easy to be friends with.

The faculty members may address the concerns of international students in the flexible learning environment. Results may enable the family members to be sensitive, supportive and understanding in keeping the big picture in mind so they can cope with changes together. This can be an eye opener to health care providers to document the present mental condition of international students that need help in order to foster additional opportunities for their wellness. It may be used by an administrator as a guide in identifying gaps or problems that need to be addressed and intervened. This may serve as a reference and a lead for inquiries of those future researchers who will utilize the same topic.

Hence, the relevance of this study that intended to determine the challenges and adaptation mechanisms of international students, its relationship towards flexible learning in Cavite State University A.Y. 2020-2021.

### **Objective**

Generally, this study determined the challenges the challenges and adaptation mechanisms of international students amidst flexible learning.

Specifically, the study described the socio-demographic profile of the respondents in terms of

age, sex, civil status, ethnicity, religion, and monthly family income. Moreover, it determined the respondent's challenges in the flexible learning; identified the adaptation mechanisms of the respondents to flexible learning; determined the significant relationship between the challenges of the respondents and flexible learning; adaptation mechanisms and the challenges; and finally, the challenges and adaptation mechanisms of the respondents to flexible learning.

### **Hypothesis**

**Ho1:** There is no significant relationship between the challenges of the respondents and flexible learning.

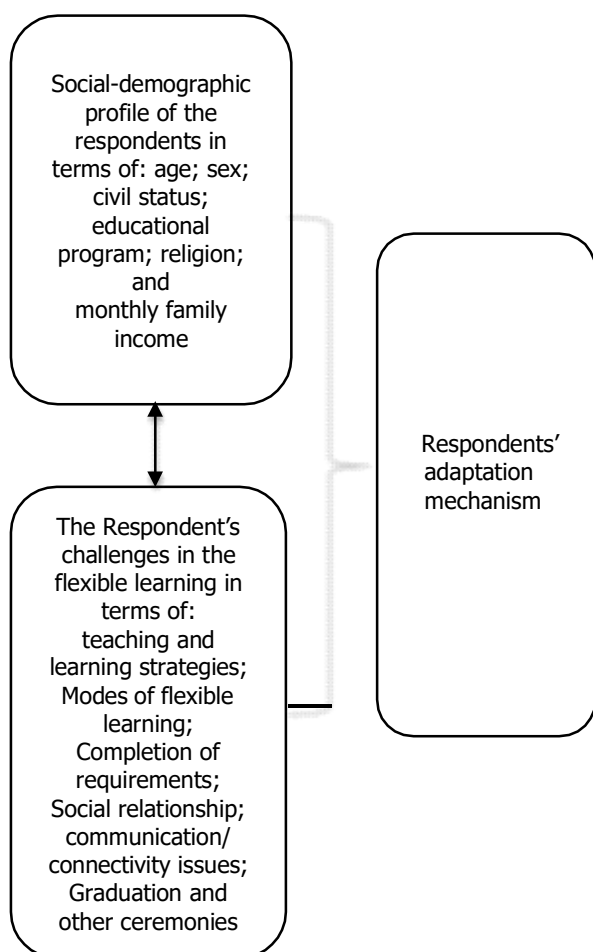
**Ho2:** There is no significant relationship between the adaptation mechanisms of the respondents and flexible learning.

**Ho3:** There is no significant relationship between the challenges and the adaptation mechanisms of the respondents to flexible learning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was anchored on Callista Roy's adaptation model (1976). This theory assumes that a person is a bio-psycho-social being in a relentless interaction with a varying environment which consists of people as individuals, as well as in groups such as families, organizations, communities and the society as a whole.

### Conceptual framework



**Figure 1.0:** Conceptual framework

## METHODS

### Research Design

This study employed quantitative descriptive correlational method research design.

### Scope and limitations of the Study

The study focused on the challenges and adaptation mechanisms of international students amidst flexible learning.

The scope includes international students aged 18 years old and above; willing to participate in the study by e-signing the written consent; currently enrolled in the Cavite State University AY 2020-2021; able to read and speak English. Due to the emergence of a global pandemic the researchers considered this scenario as one of the limitations of the study.

### Population and Sampling

The researchers surveyed 37 foreign students between the ages of 18 and older enrolled at Cavite State University A.Y 2020-2021. The study was

conducted through an online survey using the questionnaire to get insights from the respondents.

Simple random sampling was utilized in selecting the participants. This sample method provides equal opportunities for all members of the population selected for the study.

### Instrumentation

The main instrument of this study was a questionnaire adapted and modified from Saubert (2014) study; also based on previous literature related to study. It had three parts: Part I, the respondent's socio-demographic profile showing age, sex, civil status, educational program, religion, monthly family income, and school affiliation. Part II, the challenges faced by international students in flexible learning and Part III, the adaptation mechanisms of the respondents. Pilot testing was done to 15 international students in a university before the actual implementation with good reliability result and Cronbach Alpha of 0.913.

### Ethical Consideration

Before conducting the study, the research paper was submitted and approved by the Ethics Review Board. Research instrument was checked and validated by experts: one from University of Minnesota Physician; one from Luther Seminary University USA, and one Statistician from Cavite State University; a certified Psychologist, a Filipino teacher and three faculty members form the College of Nursing.

### Data Collection

Before conducting the study, the researchers obtained an approval from the dean of the College of Nursing at the Cavite State University and the Office of Student Affairs. The University President of the Foreign Student Association was contacted to share a link to the respondents. Then the researchers contacted the participants individually through social media (Facebook, and WhatsApp), introduced self, greeting each one, explained the nature, process, purpose of the study, and shared the link to the survey. The respondents signed the informed consent form through the electronic signature on the Google form before conducting the research.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, percentage, weighted mean, describing the socio-demographic profile of respondents according to age, sex, social status, education system, religion, and monthly family income.

Frequency distribution is a systematic order of data classified according to the magnitude of the observations. By creating the frequency distribution, the researchers summarized the data completely. It is a way of presenting information in a concise manner about the demographic profile.

The Fisher's Exact Test was used to determine any significant relationship between the challenges and the respondents and an important relationship between the adaptation mechanisms and the respondents. Fisher's direct testing was used in the analysis of small samples like in this study but was actually applicable to all sample sizes.

The Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to determine any significant relationship between the adaptation mechanisms of the respondents and the challenges. While the Pearson Correlation Coefficient measured the frequency of the relationships and the variables.

## RESULTS and DISCUSSION

### Socio-demographic profile of the study

Table 1. shows that majority (63.7%) of the international students age belonged to 18 – 24 years which implies that the transition period from the adolescent period to adulthood while studying now occupies a greater part of the life course more than ever. Also, 33.3% belonged to 25-34 years old while 3% belonged to 35-44 years old. It was confirmed that the most (60.6%) of the international students were males while 13 (39.4%) were females. Majority (97%) were single which implies that young people generally go to school longer and get married later (Sale, 2020). Also, there were 32 (97%) African students. Commission on Higher Education (CHED)'s April 2016 report as used by Ramirez, V. (2017) affirmed that Africa is among the leading senders of international students to the Philippines (1516).

In terms of educational program, seven (21.21 %) international students belonged to nursing program, while six (18.18%) industrial engineering students and four (12.12%) in medical technology program. Others were enrolled in different 4years courses in the university. Ramirez, V (2017) said that international students are mainly studying in health and related subjects. Mostly were Seventh day Adventist (39.5%). This affirms the positive influence of religion as a source of strength, comfort, hope and a sense of community and belonging (Malone, 2018). The 15 (45.5 %) respondents' family earned \$10K and below monthly

**Table 1.** The respondents' socio-demographic profile in terms of: age; sex; civil status; educational program; religion; and monthly family income

<b>SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY N=33</b>	<b>Percentage (100%)</b>
<b>Age</b>		
18-24 years old	21	63.7
25-34 years old	11	33.3
35-44 years old	1	3
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	13	39.4
Male	20	60.6
<b>Civil Status</b>		
Single	32	97
Married	1	3
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Africa	32	97
African American	1	3
<b>Educational Program</b>		
BS Architecture	2	6.06
BS Nursing	7	21.21
BIT-AT	1	3.03
BS Agriculture	1	3.03
BS Biology	2	6.06
BS Criminology	1	3.03
BS Economics	1	3.03
Industrial Engineering	6	18.18
BS Information Technology	2	6.06
BS Civil Engineering	1	3.03
BS International Studies	1	3.03
<b>Religion</b>		
Roman Catholic	7	21.2
Iglesia Ni Kristo	1	3.0
Jehovah's Witness	1	3.0
Muslim	1	3.0
Other, (please specify)	10	30.3
Seventh Day Adventist	13	39.5
<b>Monthly Family Income</b>		
\$50k-\$100k	6	18.2
100k- \$150k	1	3.0
10k- \$50k	8	24.2
Below \$10K	15	45.5
I don't know specifically	1	3.0
N/A	1	3.0
Over \$150k	1	3.0

### Challenges of International Students in Flexible Learning at Cavite State University

Table 2. shows a summary of perceived challenges of International Students to flexible learning in Cavite State University. The grand mean (3.09) implies that the international students in Cavite State University were highly challenged in terms of completion of requirements mean (3.10), social relationship mean (3.07), teaching strategies mean (3.03), and mode of learning mean (3.00). Moreover, the students faced challenged regarding delay of graduation which means increasing time spent in college. Additionally, students were challenged on communicating with community, classmates and instructors with connectivity issues mean (2.90). These findings were supported by Baticulon (2021), who mentioned that the biggest challenge of flexible learning was the difficulty in adapting to learning styles, having to perform duties at home, poor communication or lack of clarity with educators, lack of physical space conducive to learning, and mental health difficulties. In addition, the availability of fast and reliable internet connections became another challenge.

The study further revealed a grand mean score of 3.03 which implied that the international students in Cavite State University were highly challenged on how they perceived the teaching strategies that they had experienced from their teachers in the flexible learning. In terms of the mode of learning, a grand mean score of 3.00 revealed that the respondents were "highly challenged" on how they perceived the mode of learning in the flexible learning experience. The respondents received instructional materials for their subjects asynchronously and synchronously studies.

However, the students enjoyed flexible learning modality and believed that they gained a lot via online classes. Dhawan, (2020) study revealed that some students find online teaching to be boring and unengaging.

Furthermore, in terms of completion of requirements, a grand mean score of mean (3.10) inferred that the international students in Cavite State University were highly challenged on how they perceived completion of requirements in the flexible learning. The students agreed that they had insufficient time to submit their outputs and other requirements Moore (2017), recommended that online students needed to do their best to comply and work independently.

Concerning social relationships, the mean score of mean (3.07) signaled that the international students in Cavite State University were highly challenged socially. Some of the students preferred to study on their own time and communicated with their family members about their studies. Besides, the respondents' teachers instructed them to follow guidelines on effective communication and interaction in an online class. This shows that students were facing a high degree of social challenges in the flexible learning modality. Similarly, a

study by Novikov, P. (2020), analyzed various socio-cultural, technical and other challenges faced by international students after a seamless transition to distance learning in one day and their impact on attendance records, motivation, and their academic performance.

The results further indicated that the respondents were "highly challenged" in terms of communication/connectivity during flexible learning modalities, grand mean score of mean (2.90). Some international students agreed that they faced difficulties understanding the main languages used by people in the community and also able to communicate effectively with others using online technologies like email, chat, discussion board. The majority of the respondents attended their classes using their cellphones and laptops and connected to Wi-Fi for both synchronous and asynchronous. Also, the respondents agreed to be connected to unreliable internet connection with limited access to e- books and online learning material from the university. The results of this study were aligned with that of Mejri, S. (2018) which asserts that traveling abroad to pursue a tertiary education was interesting, but encumbered by unprecedented and complex challenges. Mejri, S. (2018) again affirms that international undergraduates experience various challenges which impact their success at American and Asian universities.

Results inferred that the international students in Cavite State University were highly challenged in terms of graduation and other ceremonies in the flexible learning, grand mean score of mean (2.99).

**Table 2.** Summary of perceived challenges of International Students to flexible learning in Cavite State University.

CHALLENGES	MEAN	VERBAL INTERPRETATION
Teaching Strategies	3.03	Agree
Mode of Learning	3.00	Agree
Completion of requirements	3.10	Agree
Social Relationship	3.07	Agree
Communication/Connectivity	2.90	Agree
Graduation and other ceremonies	2.99	Agree
<b>Grand Mean Score</b>	<b>3.09</b>	<b>Highly Challenged</b>

Legend	Interpretation	Adjectival Equivalent
	3.40- 4.00 Strongly agree	Very Highly Challenged (VHC)
	2.60- 3.39 Agree	Highly Challenged (HC)
	1.80- 2.59 Disagree	Less Challenged (LC)
	1.00- 1.79 Strongly disagree	Not Challenged (NC)



### Adaptation Mechanism of International Students to Flexible Learning in Cavite State University.

Table 3. shows the mean distribution of the adaptation mechanism of the International Students to flexible learning in Cavite State University. The grand mean score of 3.22 above implied that the international students in Cavite State University were able to highly adapt to flexible learning modalities that they have experienced from their teachers in the Cavite State University.

The respondents were able to accept responsibility as a student when they always stick to a study schedule of the online course ( $\bar{x} = 3.67$ ). International students always listen to other online tutorials when they do not understand the textbook and other instructional materials from their instructors ( $\bar{x} = 3.64$ ), and always respected the opinions and information provided by others in online communities ( $\bar{x} = 3.58$ ), though they always preferred time alone when overwhelmed with demanding activities ( $\bar{x} = 3.45$ ). This implies that the international students in Cavite State University were very highly adapting to flexible learning modalities by being responsible, self-independent, creatively using available learning resources and coping through self-reflection. Furthermore, they often used different adaptation mechanisms with mean score ranging from ( $\bar{x} = 2.85$  to  $3.33$ ). The international students often preferred concentrating to their lectures online and often seek help from others to understand their assignment. They also discussed with their course mates the hard-to-understand topics and often cooperated well with in doing assignments virtually. However, they were seeking social support when stressed with flexible learning styles ( $\bar{x} = 3.09$ ), while other respondents often used their leisure time to study in advance hard topics. Some international students responded high adaptation but they often became tired in studying in the online modalities ( $\bar{x} = 2.85$ ). This indicated that the respondents felt that the workload during flexible learning outweighed them compared to face-to-face learning.

Table 3. The mean distribution of the adaptation mechanism of the International Students to flexible learning in Cavite State University

STATEMENT	MEAN	VERBAL INTERPRETATION
I accept responsibility as a student	3.67	Very High Adaptation
I like concentrating to my lectures online.	3.33	High Adaptation
I can collaborate well with a virtual team in doing assignments	3.21	High Adaptation
I seek help from others to understand my assignment.	3.33	High Adaptation
I feel tired in studying in the online modalities.	2.85	High Adaptation
I think of withdrawing from the flexible learning program.	2.39	Low Adaptation
I respect opinions and information provided by others in online communities	3.58	Very High Adaptation
I seek social support when I feel stressed with flexible learning styles.	3.09	High Adaptation
I use my leisure time to study in advance hard topics	3.06	High Adaptation
I discuss with my course mates hard to understand topics	3.24	High Adaptation
I prefer time alone when overwhelmed with demanding activities	3.45	Very High Adaptation
I listen to other online tutorials when I miss to understand instructional materials from my instructional materials.	3.64	Very High Adaptation
I stick to a study schedule of the online course	3.67	Very High Adaptation
<b>Grand Mean Score</b>	<b>3.22</b>	<b>High Adaptation</b>

Legend	Interpretation	Adjectival Equivalent
3.40- 4.00	Always	Very High Adaptation (VHA)
2.60- 3.39	Often	High Adaptation (HA)
1.80- 2.59	Rarely	Low Adaptation (LA)
1.00- 1.79	Never	Very Low Adaptation (VLA)

### Relationship between Challenges of the International Students to Flexible learning in Cavite State University

Table 4. shows the Relationship between challenges of the International Students to flexible learning in Cavite State University. The Results of the Fisher's Exact Test.  $p$ -value of 0.662 with  $> 0.05$  level of significance for challenges of the international students to flexible learning in Cavite State University. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. This means that even there were more challenges experienced by the international students, this does not affect the flexible learning of the respondents. Contrary to the study conducted by Dabalos, (2021) in the Philippines, revealed that challenges in flexible learning pose risks of not coping with the new normal setting in the teaching-learning process. The immediate transition from the face-to-face delivery to flexible learning also brings out the resiliency in the management, faculty and students in coping with the new normal (Dabalos, 2021)

**Table 4.** Relationship between challenges of the International Students to flexible learning in Cavite State University

INDICATOR	FISHER'S EXACT TEST $p$ -value	DECISION
Challenges of the International Students to Flexible Learning	0.662*	Accept Ho

\* The level is greater than 0.05 of significance

### Significant relationship between adaptation mechanisms and challenges of the International Students to Flexible learning in Cavite State University

Table 5. shows a relationship between adaptation mechanisms of the International Students to flexible learning in Cavite State University Results of the study showed that the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient of 0.615\* with 0.000\*\* significant at 0.05 level. The results indicate that the relationship between the adaptation mechanisms and the challenges are significant at 0.05 level. Hence, the null hypothesis, there is no significant relationship between the adaptation mechanisms and the challenges was rejected. This implies that the adaptation mechanisms influenced the challenges of the respondents to flexible learning. This means that the higher the adaptation mechanisms of the international students in Cavite State University, the lower the challenges experienced.

**Table 5.** Significant relationship between adaptation mechanisms and challenges of the respondents to Flexible learning

INDICATORS	SPEARMA NRANK CORRELATION COEFFICIENT	P-VALUE	INTERPRETATION
Challenges and Adaptation mechanisms of International Students to Flexible learning	0.615*	0.000**	Reject Ho

\*the value is greater than 0.05 level of significance

### Relationship between Adaptation mechanisms of the International Students to Flexible learning in Cavite State University

Table 6. Significant relationship between adaptation mechanisms and challenges of the respondents to Flexible Learning the Fisher's Exact Test  $p$ -value of 0.2946\* with  $> 0.05$  level of significance for the adaptation mechanisms of the International Students to flexible learning in Cavite State University. Therefore, the null hypothesis "there is no significant relationship between the adaptation mechanisms of the respondents to flexible learning" was accepted. This means that the adaptation mechanisms used by the international students, does not affect their flexible learning.

**Table 6.** Significant relationship between adaptation mechanisms and challenges of the respondents to Flexible learning

INDICATOR	FISHER'S EXACT TEST $p$ -value	DECISION
Adaptation mechanisms of the International Students to Flexible Learning	0.2946*	Accept Ho

\*\*The value is a moderate Positive correlation

\*\*the value is less than 0.05 level of significance

## CONCLUSIONS

It was concluded that the number of international students in the Philippines has increased in the recent years. Most of the students who enroll in the Philippines Higher institutions are young adults whose transition from adolescence to adulthood while studying takes up a larger part of the life more than ever. This study affirmed that students tend to go to school longer and marry later. Likewise, Male foreign students from Africa and other Asian countries dominate in enrolling as international students in Philippines more than the females. The study revealed that foreign students tend to enroll in health-related courses, such as medicine and nursing. In addition, these students experience a number of challenges during flexible and use different adaptation approaches to cope with the challenges. A number of the students use religion and spirituality for a sense of community and belonging, strength, comfort and hope.

## Recommendations

The researcher recommends that:

The University/colleges may host seminars to aid international students familiarize with Filipino colloquial English, basic *Tagalog* and other commonly used *slang* words for them to adapt in terms of communication during flexible learning. The University administrators and faculty members may start online counseling services where international students can set up appointments to talk about their concerns and be advised accordingly.

It is recommended that students should find creative ways to reach out and interact with classmates, instructors, family and other friends using online podiums.

Newly admitted international students may be encouraged on orientation day to join student associations, the on-campus writing center, recreational clubs, Filipino students' social media groups for interaction and practice of the local language. Students and faculty members may develop

healthy routines such as healthy eating, exercise, and adequate sleeping to upkeep their mental and physical health.

Instructors should alternate online podiums, for better synchronous learning, that do not deplete limited data. And to secure strong internet connections at an affordable price. Updating the instructional materials for International Students and Filipino students on flexible learning modalities to be more in tune with students' self-dependence and lifelong learning.

Future researches may be continued in other developing countries with focus on a vast sample to allow further analysis of data.

## Acknowledgment

The researcher would like to extend his deepest and sincerest appreciation to the following who significantly supported the success of this research study:

Dr. Evelyn M. Mundo, thesis adviser, the dean of the CvSU's College of nursing, for imparting her interminable professional guidance, supervision throughout the period of this the research study, and for trusting in the researcher's competencies and the strong suit that obliged as his courage in conducting the study;

Mr. Rolando P. Antonio, technical critic and the college research coordinator, for tremendous recommendations and crucial insights that momentarily contributed to the improvement of the study; for his persistence and understanding all through the study;

All the respondents of this study for patiently accepting to be the informants of the study and cooperating to make this research probable

Pr. Simeon M. Momanyi and his family for moral, spiritual, and financial support;

And above all, to our The Almighty God for granting each of the above and good health for the possibility of this research study.



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