



Research Article

Academic Stress and Coping Strategies of Students in Flexible Learning

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has created a drastic change affecting everyone around the globe. The current situation disrupted the normal activities of public and private schools, specifically face-to-face teaching and learning activities. The solution proposed by the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) for this problem is the transition of classes from traditional face-to-face to flexible learning modalities, particularly online and modular learning modalities. However, many problems and challenges occurred among students after implementing the new learning modalities which could result in student academic stress. This descriptive study is conducted to describe the academic stress and coping strategies of students in their chosen learning modality (online learning, printed modular learning, and electronic modular learning). The study's respondents were college students enrolled during the First Semester of S. Y. 2020-2021 in a Private Higher Education Institution in the Cagayan Valley Region. The results revealed that students have a moderate level of academic stress along with academic expectations and a high level of stress along with academic workload, learner support, and self-academic perception. In addition, there is a significant difference in the respondents' academic stress and academic expectations when grouped according to their flexible learning modalities. Finally, the top coping strategies utilized by students were surfing the internet, being more spiritual, making time for relaxation, watching TV or videos, and setting healthy academic goals.

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has created a drastic change that affected all people around the globe (Chandra, 2020). Almost all institutions felt the effect of the virus and the challenges posed in mitigating the spread to the community. Institutions such as businesses, governments, churches, and schools felt its effects and drastically changed their operations. In response to this challenge, the education sector, as a service provider, adopted a policy that allowed its operations to continue, notwithstanding the need to follow protocols and guidelines (Sarwar et al., 2020). All schools and universities were harshly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nurunnabi et al., 2020).

It disrupted their normal operations, specifically the face-to-face teaching and learning activities (Reimers et al., 2020). Hence, the solution proposed by the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in charge of the education sector of the Philippines was the implementation of the transition of classes from traditional face-to-face to flexible learning modalities, particularly online and modular (DepEd, 2020; CHED 2020). With the stated learning modalities, many experts say that online learning is one of the most viable alternatives to the traditional mode of learning due to the undeniable advancements that technology could bring (Mul-



(Muljana & Luo, 2019). It has two classifications, namely, asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous online learning enables teachers and students to access the different learning resources anytime and anywhere, while synchronous is accessible only in real-time meetings or student log-ins (Martin & Poly, 2020). On the other hand, using modular approach is another worthwhile alternative mode of learning which is suitable for learners who do not have the means to access the internet. It involves audio, printed, and visual like TV and radio (Fontanos et al., 2020; Huang, Liu, Tlili, Yang & Wang, 2020).

However, implementing the flexible learning modalities is not mostly preferred by students because of more difficult communication and less learning satisfaction (Amir, et al., 2020). It has also caused many students to face a lot of problems and challenges like self-regulation, usage of new learning technology, slow internet connection, readiness in synchronous learning, finishing worksheets, and learning without guidance due to the unforeseen new normal (Rasheed et al., 2020; Pastor, 2020; Apriyanti, 2020). Nevertheless, even before the pandemic, tertiary students were already experiencing difficulties in school. Based on various research, problems among students involve academic workload, high frequency of examinations, fear of failure, interpersonal difficulties with teachers, and inadequate time to study (Kwaah & Essilfie, 2017; Reddy et al., 2018; Bataineh, 2013). These instances happen when students cannot adjust to challenges that they experience, which could, later on, affect their academic performance. Thus, academic stress could take its place.

Academic stress is considered the leading source of stress experienced by students (Dixit, 2020). This education-related stress might result in concentration difficulties, trouble with completing school tasks, exhaustion, and inefficacy or reduced accomplishment (Humensky et al., 2010; Walburg, 2014). Nonetheless, some ways could help individuals adapt and manage stressful situations and events. Adapting to stressful situations is referred to by Abdulqawi & Brair (2018) as a coping strategy. There are two types of coping. These are the positive and negative coping strategies (Lau, Wang, Kwong & Wang, 2016). Positive coping is the active style that focuses on taking an action by changing the situation that fosters stress. In contrast, negative coping refers to the passive style centered on negative appraisals and emotional expression, escape from stressful situations, and social isolation (Ding et al., 2015). In previous studies, the coping strategies that students commonly apply included emotional support, self-distraction, venting, listening to music, sitting alone in a quiet place, socializing, and time management (Abraham, Navya, & Joshy, 2019; Mazo, 2015; Gallagher et al., 2019; Jahan et al., 2016). A coping strategy is beneficial for students to get rid of the negative effects that stress could bring. It could also be an effective way to divert their minds from having unnecessary thoughts like committing suicide, which is rampant among students nowadays (Mamun et al., 2020). With the different literature gaps presented, it is necessary to conduct a study among tertiary students to investigate their academic stress and coping strategies in the new normal setting. With the problems and challenges that students are facing, this study finds meaning to look into the stress levels and coping mechanisms utilized by college students in the

new normal education setting. This study was then conducted to describe students' academic stress and coping strategies in their chosen learning modality. It is important to note that in flexible learning, students can choose their learning modality, which includes online learning, printed modular learning, and electronic modular learning. Since these modalities vary in terms of academic adjustment and preparation among students, it is then important to determine the academic stresses of students in different learning modalities. Accordingly, student's academic stress varies on the learning modalities during the pandemic because of differences in approach and academic preparations (Talosa, et al., 2021; Hadi, 2020; Cadapan, et al., 2022).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized a quantitative type of research employing the descriptive survey method. The study was conducted in one higher education institution in Northern Philippines. The school implements three learning modalities such as full online, print-modular approach, and electronic-modular approach for the students to cope with the academic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's respondents were the 361 college students of the University enrolled during the second semester of school year 2020-2021.

Table 1: Performance of the BS Psychology Graduates

Learning Modality	Frequency	Percentage
Online Learning	317	87.80
Printed Modular Learning	22	6.10
Electronic Modular Learning	22	6.10
Total	361	100.00

Research Instruments

Academic Stress Questionnaire

Items on students' academic stress were culled from the different studies on academic stress (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; Adom, Essel, & Chukwuere, 2020; Dada, Babatunde, & Adeleye, 2019). The respondents rated the questionnaire from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The tool was modified to suit the needs of the students in the current educational setup. The questionnaire consists of 25 items and is divided into four dimensions which are as follows:

- Academic expectations (3 items) - These are the expectations of parents and teachers toward students' academic performance.
- Academic workload (12) – It pertains to the different activities, examinations, requirements, and other academic-related works given to the students.
- Learner support (5) - It is the academic guidance and support students need in their studies.
- Student's academic self-perceptions (5 items) - These pertain to the students' perceptions about their academic capabilities.

Coping Strategies Questionnaire

Students' coping strategies were based on related studies (Al-Sowry, 2013; Joseph et al., 2020; Prabu, 2015; Dada, Babatunde, & Adeleye, 2019; Adom, Essel, & Chukwuere, 2020). The tool was modified to suit the needs of the said educational setup.

Before data gathering, the questionnaire has undergone expert validation and reliability test to suit

the respondents' situations. Three experts checked the suitability of the questionnaire. Meanwhile, a reliability test was given to 15 respondents from other departments of the university. Based on the results, the reliability values of the three dimensions of academic stress were .800 for academic expectations, .860 for faculty work and examinations, and .780 for students' academic self-perceptions. On the other hand, the reliability of the two dimensions of coping, specifically the positive and negative, are .800 and .750, respectively.

Data Analysis

Mean was employed to determine the level of academic stress of the respondents using the following range and qualitative descriptions:

Range	Qualitative Description
1.50 – 5.00	Very high Academic Stress
3.50 – 4.49	High Academic Stress
2.50 – 3.49	Moderate Academic Stress
1.50 – 2.49	Low Academic Stress
1.00 – 1.49	Very Low Academic Stress

Frequency and percentage were also used to describe the coping strategies of the respondents.

One-way analysis of variance test (ANOVA) was used to determine the significant difference in students' level of academic stress in the different learning modalities.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations such as keeping the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents and seek-

ing communications and endorsement from different offices were strictly employed by the researchers. Since the questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms, target respondents were asked to accomplish the online informed consent before answering the tool. The informed consent consisted of statements regarding the research study and an explanation of the research purpose. More importantly, the participants were given an online copy of the study's results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Academic Stress of Students in Flexible Learning

Table 2a. Academic Stress of the Students along Academic Expectations

Academic Stress along Academic Expectations	Mean	Qualitative Description
Intense academic competition with classmates.	2.71	Moderate
High academic expectations of parents.	3.66	High
Unrealistic academic expectation of teachers.	3.76	High
Category Mean	3.38	Moderate

It can be shown from the results that most of the students have a high academic stress level to the academic expectations of parents. This means that the students are pressured by the high hopes of their parents regarding their studies, and parents' expectations are higher than what the students could achieve. It means that the students are pressured by their parents' expectations regarding their studies, which leads them to high-stress levels. Various literature show that high parental expectations are the common source of high or severe academic stress among students (Calaguas, 2012; Shah, Hasan, & Malik, 2010; Tariq & Jawed, 2020). Hence, students' fear of failing their parents' expectations becomes their reason for a high level of stress.

Moreover, it can also be gleaned from the results that the students have high academic stress when it

comes to the unrealistic academic expectations of teachers. This implies that teachers' expectations do not match the capability of students. Specifically, this pertains to the ability of the students to understand their lessons immediately, even without guidance, finish quality learning tasks and performances on time, and even get high scores during quizzes and exams. Therefore, these unrealistic academic expectations are not helping the students cope and strive harder to improve their academic performance. Instead, it leads them to higher level of stress.

This study's findings are consistent with previous studies claiming that teachers' expectations lead to students' stressful conditions (Calaguas, 2013; Cilingir, Gursay, Hintistan, & Ozturk, 2011). However, this is contrary to the findings of Rubie-Davies (2010), which confirmed that teachers' high academic expectations could positively affect students' academic achievement. Also, the results show that most students have a moderate stress level when it comes to intense academic competition with classmates. It means that having competition in the respective classes of the students does not lead to high academic stress levels since competition in a class is inevitable, and all students, from the moment they have entered the four walls of the classroom experience competition. The results of this study are contrary to the research of Kowalski and Christensen (2019), which states that competition can cause stress among students because they tend to view it negatively. This is why most students do not want to engage with it.

In general, the students' academic stress levels and expectations are moderate. It means that the academic

expectations of the people around them are just right or not so intense to affect their stress levels significantly. Hence, a moderate level of academic stress was revealed.

Table 2b. Academic Stress of the Students along Academic Workload

Academic Stress along Academic Workload	Mean	Qualitative Description
Not enough time allocated to classes and academic work.	4.00	High
Excessive academic workload.	4.36	High
Large amount of work assignments/learning tasks	4.32	High
Difficult examination questions.	4.16	High
Inability to catch up with behind academic work.	3.77	High
Long examinations.	3.93	High
Multiple test and/or learning task due on the same day.	4.08	High
Frequent examinations.	3.58	High
Difficulty in learning the subject matter/lessons.	4.13	High
Meeting deadlines of assignments/learning tasks	4.05	High
Unable to adapt to teacher teaching methods.	3.59	High
Difficulty to assimilate knowledge due to too much data/information provided by teachers.	3.96	High
Category Mean	3.99	High

Table 1b shows that the students have high-stress levels in terms of not having enough time allocated to classes and academic work, excessive academic workload, a large number of work assignments/learning tasks, inability to catch up with academic requirements, long examinations, multiple tests and/or learning tasks due on the same day, frequent examinations, difficult examination questions, meeting deadlines of assignments/learning tasks, assimilating knowledge due to too much data/information provided by teachers. This means that the different tasks assigned by the faculty to the students are excessive, and the time given to accomplish such tasks is very limited, making it really hard for them to catch up and accomplish such things on time. Therefore, they have a high academic stress level regarding these matters. The time given to accomplish such workloads needs to be improved, leading them to high academic stress levels. This is consistent with previous studies stressing that assignments, too much work in some subjects, and inadequate time to study were the main causes of students' high academic stress (Labrague, 2014; Shaban, Khat-

er, & Akhu-Zaheya, 2012; Aedh, Elfaki, & Mohamed, 2015; Arun, Garg, & Chavan, 2017).

Generally, the students' academic stress level, along with their academic workload, is high. It means that students can handle academic workloads, but having an excessive number makes them highly stressed. This is supported by previous studies, which indicate that heavy workload was one of the causes of the student's high level of academic stress (Poon, Lee, & Ong, 2012; Manolova et al., 2012).

Table 2c. Academic Stress of the Students along Learner Support

Academic Stress along Learner Support	Mean	Qualitative Description
Lack of time for relaxation.	4.16	High
Difficulty to adapt to the chosen flexible learning modality.	3.59	High
Inadequate learning resources to do assignment/learning tasks.	3.70	High
Lack of connection with teacher and classmates.	3.65	High
Lack of support and guidance from teachers and parents.	3.17	Moderate
Category Mean	3.65	High

Based on the results, the respondents experience difficulty adapting to the pedagogies of teachers, learning the subject matter/lessons, teacher's teaching methods, adapting to the chosen flexible learning modality, inadequate learning resources to do assignments/learning tasks, and lack of connection with teachers and classmates. This implies that teachers' pedagogies need to be more helpful in providing the learning needs of the students in the different flexible learning modalities. The students also need help understanding their lessons since their teachers' guidance is limited. The learning resources provided are either excessive or inadequate, which could significantly affect their understanding of the different lessons.

Meanwhile, a moderate stress level is reflected in the lack of support from teachers and parents. This

suggests that there is a need for greater learner support for the students to do better and feel better about their learning environment. This is supported by previous literature findings that students preferred face-to-face to flexible learning since it gives greater assurance of support from their teachers (Poon, 2013; Langegård, Kiani, Nielsen, & Svensson, 2021). Meanwhile, Adnan and Anwar (2020) also emphasized that the interaction of students and instructors in flexible learning modalities is limited, and the collaboration among students is different from what is observed in face-to-face learning. Students generally have high academic stress levels because they receive inadequate support from their teachers and parents.

Table 2d. Academic Stress of the Students along with Student Self-Academic Perception

Academic Stress along Student Self-Academic Perception	Mean	Qualitative Description
Inability to make academic decisions easily.	3.69	High
Fear of course failure.	4.59	Very High
Lack of confidence in self to be a successful student.	3.91	High
Anxiety about examination or test.	4.20	High
Personal inclination for self-actualization.	3.74	High
Category Mean	4.03	High

The students have a very high academic stress level towards fear of course failure. The students are afraid to have a failing grade, repeat a certain subject, and even not graduate on time. Thus, they are highly stressed about how they can finish their courses without any failure. The students are highly concerned about the result of their overall academic performance, which makes them highly stressed. The result of this study is consistent with the study of Nasser (2016) that a fear of failure could lead to high academic stress. The study of Coreia, Rosado, Serpa, and Ferreira (2017) also emphasized that students fear failing because they do not want to upset their family members.

On the other hand, high academic stress levels were reflected along with the respondents' inability to make academic decisions easily, lack of self-confidence to be a successful student, anxiety about examinations or tests, and personal inclination for self-actualization. This implies that the students need to be more confident about their academic performance since they struggle too much to trust themselves to do better in their academic standing. This low regard for their capabilities as students is not advantageous and could result in more detrimental effects, such as being less productive and more stressed. This is consistent with Busari's (2017) findings, which indicate that students with low self-esteem are prone to high academic stress and vice versa. Saleh, Camart, and Romo (2017) also mentioned that most students display a high level of perceived stress when they have low self-esteem levels, self-efficacy, and optimism. As a whole, the students' academic stress levels and self-academic perception are high. This means that their academic stress level in the flexible learning modalities was also highly influenced by their negative perceptions and beliefs about themselves. As stated in the findings of Moon (2015), low-level self-efficacy among students could lead to a higher level of stress. According to Vaezi and Fallah (2011), the higher the self-efficacy of a person, the lower is the tendency to be stressed.

Table 2e. Summary Table on the Academic Stress of the Students

Academic Stress	Mean	Qualitative Description
Academic Expectations	3.38	Moderate
Academic Workload	3.99	High
Learner Support	3.65	High
Student Self-Academic Perception	4.03	High
Overall Mean	3.77	High

This study revealed that the students' overall ac-

ademic stress level is high. It means that the implementation of flexible learning modalities as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many struggles and adjustments among the students, particularly on the expectations of the people around them, the excessive work that is assigned to them, and the pressure that comes within themselves that lead them to have a high level of academic stress. These are consistent with various literature findings which state that moderate to high/extreme level of stress was felt by the students after the implementation of flexible learning modalities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (AlAteeq, Aljhani, & AlEesa, 2020; O'Byrne et al., 2021; Raja et al., 2021). In connection, the study of Abdulghani, Sattar, Ahmad, & Akram (2020) also indicated that the students are having severe stress because they do not prefer the flexible learning modality they are utilizing, particularly the online learning modality.

Table 3. Significant Difference on the Academic Stress of the Students when grouped According to their Learning Modalities

Academic Stress	F-value	P-value	Decision
Academic Expectations	3.199	.042	Reject Ho
Academic Workload	.060	.942	Accept Ho
Learner Support	.030	.431	Accept Ho
Student Self-Academic Perception	1.670	.190	Accept Ho
Overall Academic Stress	1.442	.496	Accept Ho

The results show a significant difference in students' academic expectations when grouped according to their learning modalities. This means that the students who are enrolled in online, printed modular, and electronic modular have varied stress levels in academic expectations, specifically having an intense academic competition with classmates, parents' high academic expectations, and teachers' unrealistic academic expectations. Moreover, it can be gleaned from the results that there is no significant difference

Table 3a. Post-Hoc Test Analysis on the Significant Difference on the Academic Stress along Academic Expectations of the Students when grouped According to their Learning Modalities

Academic Stress	Mean	Online Learning	Printed Modular Learning	Electronic Modular Learning
Online Learning	3.41	1		
Printed Modular Learning	3.15	.02*	1	
Electronic Modular Learning	3.14	.04*	.938	1

*significant at .05 level

Table 3a shows the post hoc test analysis on the significant difference in academic stress and the respondents' academic expectations when grouped according to their learning modalities. The results show a significant difference between the students enrolled in the printed modular learning modality and those in the online learning modality. Likewise, there is a significant difference between students in the electronic modular and online learning modalities. The respondents with the highest academic stress levels are those in the online learning modality. This is because the students in the online learning modality interact more actively with their classmates and teachers. Unlike the two modular learning modalities, online learning can still let the students feel the classroom vibe since all information related to their studies can be communicated immediately through the learning management system or any social media platform. The results revealed that students with the highest academic stress levels are those in the online learning modality.

Table 4. Coping Mechanisms of the Students

Coping Mechanisms	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Keep self-busy.	295	81.71	8.5
Set healthy academic goals.	303	83.93	5
Good time management.	247	69.42	12
Good planning and schedule of academic work.	258	71.46	10
Ask advice of parents/friends/classmates.	250	69.25	11
Discuss academic concerns with teachers.	184	50.97	16
Watch TV or videos.	310	85.87	4
Surf the internet (Chat, Facebook, Youtube, etc.) and playing online games	321	88.92	1
Be more spiritual (praying, attending church prayer sessions)	315	87.26	2.5
Try to handle things on my own.	301	83.38	7
Keep problems to myself.	302	83.65	6
Share problems with friends.	227	62.88	13

Coping Mechanisms	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Exercise	207	57.34	14
Try to handle things on my own.	203	56.23	15
Make time for relaxation.	315	87.26	2.5
Stay up finishing homework until midnight.	295	81.72	8.5
Stop caring about school work.	86	23.82	17
Drink alcoholic beverages.	64	17.73	18

Table 4 presents the coping mechanisms of the students. Most respondents coped with their stress by surfing the internet, being more spiritual, relaxing, watching TV or videos, and setting healthy academic goals. On the other hand, drinking alcoholic beverages, not caring about school work, and discussing academic concerns with teachers were the least utilized. This implies that most students prefer doing something to eliminate their academic stressors rather than turning away from them. The study revealed that most students coped with their stress by surfing the internet, being more spiritual, relaxing, watching TV or videos, and setting healthy academic goals. This means that most students prefer to employ positive coping mechanisms in response to the stress they are experiencing. This is consistent with previous research that positive coping strategies were very helpful in combatting academic stress and could lessen suicidal thoughts (Heffer & Willoughby, 2017; Pariat, Rynjah, Joplin, & Kharjana, 2014; Jain & Verma, 2016). Sam, Muttusamy, Yee, Ayapanaido, and Parasuraman (2016) state that positive coping also prepares students for future stressful situations. As reflected in the results, students' top three coping mechanisms were being entertained, so they sought something to relax them. The students also deeply cared about their studies because they set academic goals to improve their situation.

Meanwhile, it was also shown in the study that drinking alcoholic beverages, not caring about school work, and discussing academic concerns with teach-

ers were the least utilized coping strategies. This implies that most students are not using negative coping mechanisms to deal with stress. This finding was consistent with the study of Heffer and Willoughby (2017), which states that negative coping was not mostly utilized because it could lead to more depressive symptoms. Şahin and Hepsöğütü (2018) also stated that negative coping strategies are mostly used by people who have low psychological resilience. The result of the study is also a good indicator that most students are very responsible since they don't engage much in different vices. They are also very independent because they find solutions to their academic problems without asking the effort of anybody to help them with their stressful situations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that students were exposed to various stressors as they continued to learn through flexible learning modalities. Most of them experienced high academic stress regardless of the learning modality provided to them. Meanwhile, students in the online learning modality were more stressed than those accessing their lessons through the printed and electronic modules regarding academic expectations. The students' coping strategies in dealing with academic stress were to surf the internet, be more spiritual, make time for relaxation, watch TV or videos, and set healthy academic goals.

Students must be given adequate attention and support from their teachers and parents since the study strongly revealed that students need support. A collaboration between parents and the school could also be considered, and they should be involved in the

academic counseling that the university provides.

Meanwhile, teachers should develop a more student-friendly approach in dealing with students since the study pointed out that one of students' least utilized coping strategies when faced with academic stress is the discussion of their academic problems with their teachers.

Future studies could utilize mixed methods of collecting data to assess further the other possible causes and factors affecting students' academic stress. Future researchers should consider studying the different factors or reasons why students have a very high academic stress level when it comes to course failure because, as reflected in this study, it is the major source of students' academic stress. Lastly, other researchers could also consider assessing the efficacy of students' coping strategies in improving their academic performance.

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