

Graduate Students' Experiences, Issues, and Concerns during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *To ensure its survival in a world of rapid globalization and the COVID 19 Pandemic, a graduate school must improve the quality of its teaching and learning. According to the literature review, students worldwide faced problems and challenges following the closure of schools due to the pandemic. On this basis, it is deemed necessary to investigate post-graduate students' experiences during disruptions and their issues and concerns. Graduate students were identified as participants in the study. The interview was conducted using a specially designed open-ended interview form. The study found that most of the students stated that they have many issues and concerns. They need to enroll in post-graduate programs to remain competitive and differentiate themselves when competence in the job is required, such as being promoted to work or preparing for new work. It is difficult for them to learn everything in school; however, to improve their conditions and provide the best services to their clients, they must prioritize what benefits them. Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that their professional development may not have been hampered despite difficulties in time management, work-life balance, and stress management.*

Keywords: Graduate students, Issues and Concerns, Time Management, Work-life Balance, Stress Management

1. Introduction

A graduate school needs to improve the quality of teaching and learning to ensure its survival in a world of rapid globalization and the COVID 19 Pandemic. In March 2020, nearly 25 million students were unnecessarily out of school after the government closed schools one month before the scheduled end of the school year (Bangayan, 2021). Due to the growing number of cases, only distance education is available (UNICEF, 2020). In a report published by World Health Organization (WHO) and Morin et al. (2020), they claim that fear and anxiety about health, job prospects, financial struggles, and uncertainty regarding the future were fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic and social confinement. Our school system is profoundly affected by this virus, according to Walker (2021). As a result of the closure, the schools started using the internet instead of the traditional methods.

As a result of the epidemic, Guiamalon T. et al. (2021) cited that it is exceedingly difficult for students to engage in face-to-face education or blended learning. Nevertheless, education officials should rethink and regulate the use of technology to allow students and teachers to benefit from distance learning in an emergency. Thus, even if emergency remote teaching has either negative or positive results, the educational systems worldwide have no choice but to understand, experience, and accept the great and rapid changes in embracing the concept of remote emergency teaching (Hung, Chou, Chen & Own, 2010) (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Bangayan et al. (2020) have listed several factors, including Biological Aspects, such as headaches and muscular pain; Psychological Aspects, like depression, loneliness, and longer screen time; and social aspects, like family conflicts and disagreements and loss of vital contacts.

Learning is now seen as a lifelong activity in many settings and purposes (European Commission, 2011). Universities should expect students to prove their knowledge and these expectations digitally. The institute or university recognizes that through this step, learning is everywhere, and it is consistent with the bigger picture of where learning is coming from today (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2012). The research by Susi et al. (2010) explains how work-life balance and employee engagement are becoming a visible benchmark for high-performing companies. Effects of workplace culture and supervisors Support employees' efforts to reconcile work and family. The colleges/universities also face challenges in equipping students with all the needed skills for different cultures/countries, especially when they require their instructors to teach abroad or at home to learners from other countries (Rodrigues, 2005). Learning management systems are used by educational institutions, for example, blackboards, Schoology, etc. Navarro, et al. explained that this data is based on a literature review.

Studying post-graduate students' experiences during disruptions and their issues and concerns is the purpose of this study.

Objectives

- 1) To explore the post-graduate students' experiences of the Graduate School, Cotabato State University.
- 2) To know how the students cope with the challenges during the pandemic.

2. Literature Review

COVID19 has brought a variety of stressors into modern life, including fear of contracting the virus, concern for loved ones, economic instability, social distancing, and other major lifestyle changes (Pfefferbaum and North, 2020). The COVID19 crisis has exacerbated these concerns as many

universities have suspended non-essential operations, pushed students off-campus, and closed university advisory centers (Zhai and Du, 2020). The global lockdown of higher education institutions due to COVID-19 has resulted in significant changes in how education is delivered. Torales et al. (2020), as cited by Guiamalonet al. (2021), opined that the mental health problem associated with the COVID 19 pandemic has rapidly increased with the onset of global development burden public health. According to Wang et al. (2020), COVID 19 has identified a heightened prevalence of moderate-to-severe self-reported depressive and anxious symptomology among the public. While students were enrolled in traditional learning environments before the pandemic, delivery modes quickly shifted to online or remote learning environments at the start of the coronavirus mid-semester. As a result of the disruption, many students experienced various emotions and challenges. As more universities transition to distance learning after spring break, some students are experiencing mental health issues due to the disruption to academic life (Agnew et al., 2019). The COVID19 pandemic impacts universities' mental health, underscoring the urgent need to understand these challenges and concerns to inform the development of public health policies and messages that can better support university students during this crisis (Zhai, Y. and Du, X (2020).

The Covid-19 Pandemic triggered higher education's digital transformation. As a result of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic, novelties in higher education that would normally take many years due to differing managerial regulations were presented quickly within a limited number of days (Strielkowski, 2020). The use of the internet and other important technologies to develop materials for educational purposes, instructional delivery, and program management is referred to as online learning (Fry, 2001). According to Hrastinski (2008), the two types of online learning, namely asynchronous and synchronous online learning, are heavily compared; however, for online learning to be effective and efficient, instructors, organizations, and institutions must have a thorough understanding of its benefits and limitations. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) added that the consistent increase in technological innovation and internet accessibility had increased motivation for online learning since the turn of the millennium. Still, Joshi et al. (2020) concluded that the instructional achievement of online learning is debatable due to the absence of face-to-face relationships among learners, learners, and instructors. Hodges et al. (2020) distinguished appropriately planned online learning experiences from crisis-response courses.

The good-to-have narrative has changed due to the global closure of schools as part of measures to maintain social distance to curb the rapid transmission of Covid-19. Schools decided to switch instructional activities to remote learning platforms with several logistical challenges. One major issue is that migration has caused a compulsory modification in the attitudes of education administrators, instructors, and learners on the significance of education (Ribeiro, 2020). According to Guiamalon (2021), the main goal of Higher Education Institutions is to improve the quality of graduate education. One method of determining quality is to assess the appropriateness of graduate education programs and the work competencies of graduates in the workplace. It

will assist higher education institutions in receiving feedback and determining their position in terms of providing knowledge to students. It will be used for curriculum development and reform and to determine the appropriateness of the education curriculum to improve the work performance of its graduates.

Additionally, Blankstein et al. (2020) found out in their study about the students' experiences during the pandemic that often, the most significant challenges that students faced during the spring semester were those that they had already faced in the months before the pandemic, such as balancing multiple schoolwork, work, and family obligations. It was particularly difficult to adjust to the unexpected shift to online learning while also finding a quiet place to complete work assignments. Students reported that the most difficult assignments to complete were collaborative, technical, and specialized in nature. The assignments that were completed the most frequently were also the ones with which they had the least difficulty, which was a good sign.

On the other hand, it was discovered that international students enrolled in Master's and Ph.D. programs at various institutions were forced to switch to online learning due to the pandemic, and their learning experiences and challenges were investigated. In particular, through phenomenological interviews, the study investigates the experiences and perceptions of seven international graduate students who are not native English speakers and came from six different countries and studied at six different education schools. According to the authors, the study results provide insight into these students' online learning experiences and identify factors that contributed to the mixed quality of these learning experiences. Overall, students attempted to adjust to the "new normal" while dealing with academic and emotional difficulties due to the harsh conditions created by the pandemic in the United States and their home countries. Particularly important factors influencing students' learning experiences were instructors' readiness for online teaching, and the additional support provided to help students cope with the sudden change in the learning environment, both of which were provided by the institution. The findings lead to several recommendations for practice in graduate-level online learning environments and suggestions for additional research. There are also broader considerations of what the case suggests about the broader implications of digitalization for international education (Yesul et al., 2021).

In contrast, in the study conducted by Omar et al. (2021) on the Graduate Students' Experience and Academic Achievements with Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic that graduate students were actively involved in the learning process during their online and distant sessions, using a variety of methods and instruments to facilitate teacher-to-student contact and the transmission of ideas, skills, and knowledge. Student happiness and good views about their involvement in virtual classes have been linked to interactions between faculty and students. During the COVID-19 epidemic, student involvement was cited as one of the most important variables in determining success and the good impact of online and distance learning. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, graduate students had conflicting feelings about how easy it was to communicate with

teachers and other students in online and distance learning. Furthermore, the data revealed that participants in synchronous sessions found it simple to communicate with the instructors.

However, they had trouble communicating with the other students during online classes. Students may have the opportunity to interact directly with faculty members during teaching and learning sessions or virtual office hours. The online platforms or learning systems did not provide this freedom for students to engage with one another. Several class sessions may have been planned for the faculty-to-student relationship using the institution's learning management system. Only a few academic members, on the other hand, may have used discussion threads or blogs to facilitate student involvement. These contacts are critical for students' and teachers' social presence. During the COVID-19 epidemic, students' social presence significantly impacts their learning and growth in higher education, particularly when adopting online and distance education as a style of learning.

3. Methodology

The study is a qualitative method in nature. It is a method that enables the exploration of phenomena within their context. The study was conducted at the Graduate School, Cotabato State University. To collect data for the study, the researcher developed an interview form with open-ended questions. The form's questions were as follows: The form questions were as follows: 1. What are your experiences in graduate school during the Covid-19 Pandemic? 2. Do you have any issues or concerns about your graduate studies? What was it, if so? 3. How do you deal with the challenges? Purpose Sampling in identifying the participants of this research. The participants were composed of thirty-five (35) Doctor Philosophy in Educational Administration students during the first semester of the school year 2021-2022; twenty (20) were male, and fifteen (15) were female.

Content analysis was performed on the data obtained from the interview form. Content analysis is described by Stember (2001) as a systematic, repetitive method for converting words from a large number of texts into a smaller number of texts. In analyzing the content of this study, in the recorded interviews, each student was assigned numbers such as S1, S2, and S3 in the order of the interview, and the audio recordings were word-processed by the researcher. After the transfer, all data was written, the data were read again, and a consistency check with the voice recordings was performed. Then, coding was performed according to the terms collected from the collected data. All created codes were collected by examining the common points. Research protocols were observed and followed as embodied in the research ethics throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussions

The data collected from the interview were transcribed and audio recorded. From the transcript, it was analyzed to form a pattern, identifying significant utterances to form a thematic cluster. Three (3) themes and 22 codes were

revealed concerning the students' experiences: time management, work-life balance, and stress management.

Table 1: Themes and Codes in Relation to the Graduate School Students' Experiences

Themes	Number of Codes
Time Management	30
Work-life balance	25
Stress Management	10

As gleaned in Table 1, the time management theme has ten codes, the work-life balance theme has eight codes, and the stress management has five codes, which were revealed as a result of the analysis. It makes a total of 22 codes.

Issues and Concerns Related to Time Management

The time management theme obtained as a result of the data analysis represents the issues and concerns related to the time management of graduate school students. There are four codes under this theme. Frequency indicates the number of participants revealing the relevant code. Table 2 demonstrates the graduate school students' issues and concerns such as excessive workload and school requirements (f=25), Lack of time spared in preparing assignments and other requirements (f=20), limited interaction due to poor internet connections (f=13), and Lack of time for research work and consultation (f=11).

Table 2: Themes and Codes in Relation to Time Management

Theme	Code	Frequency
Time Management	Excessive workload and course requirements	25
	Lack of time spared in preparing assignments and other requirements	20
	Limited interaction due to poor internet connections	13
	Lack of time for research work and consultation	11

Some of the opinions of graduate school students on their issues and concerns are presented below.

S1. "Aside from our school work such submissions of reports, preparing and distributing modules and others, most of our professors had given us numerous course requirements, and we found it difficult to meet the deadline."

S2. "On top of our regular classes, our professors assigned us literature reviews, written assignments, case studies, and webinars." "It was difficult to catch up because my school heads assigned me to prepare our school reports for the division office."

S3. "Being enrolled in graduate school requires an additional level of commitment." Whether we like it or not, we must manage our time to do our jobs and course requirements."

S4. "There are times when I am unable to attend our online session due to official obligations, and the internet access in the location is inadequate."

Issues and Concerns Related to Work-life Balance

The work-life balance theme obtained as a result of the data analysis represents the issues and concerns related to the work-life balance of graduate school students. There are five codes under this theme. Frequency indicates the number of participants revealing the relevant code. Table 3 demonstrates the graduate school students' issues and concerns related to work-life balance, such as Work, school time and study time (f=30), social obligation (f=25), relaxation (f=10), Health (f=8), and responsibilities (f=5).

Table 3: Themes and Codes in Relation to the Students' Work-life Balance

Theme	Code	Frequency
Work-life balance	Work, school time, and study time	30
	Social Obligations	25
	Relaxation	10
	Health	8
	Responsibilities	5

Some of the opinions of the graduate school students regarding the specified themes:

S5. "I have difficulty balancing work, school, and study time because I am at work from Monday to Friday, then I have graduate school classes on Saturday, and sometimes we have special classes on Sunday."

S6. "Because our classes are on weekends, we rarely attend our social obligations such as family gatherings, conversations with close friends, etc. This leads to the misunderstanding that we have been avoiding them."

S7. "I don't have time to relax right now. Previously, I attended Zumba every Saturday morning and ate lunch or dinner with my family on Sundays."

S8. "Me? I'm always tired, suffering from lack of sleep, and now and again irritable. That is how I make sure that I take my vitamins every day. I need it because I am overloaded with work and class requirements."

S9. "I have many responsibilities as a graduate student. my work obligations, class activities, family, and even myself, but I need to finish my Ph.D. to be competitive and advance in my career because today's jobs require a higher level of education."

Issues and Concerns Related to Stress Management

The stress management theme obtained from the data analysis represents the issues and concerns related to the stress management of graduate school students. There are three codes under this theme. Frequency indicates the number of participants revealing the relevant code. Table 4 demonstrates the graduate school students' issues and concerns related to stress management on transitions (f=28), poor internet connectivity (f=28), and school activities (f=15).

Table 4: Themes and Codes in Relation to the Students' Stress Management

Theme	Code	Frequency
Stress Management	Transitions	28
	Poor Internet connectivity	28
	School activities	15

Some of the graduate students' perspectives on the topics above:

S10. "Enrolling in graduate school while also working is a transition. Many firsts occurred to me, including a new way of life, classmates, and school friends with diverse perspectives."

S11. "What stresses me out is the poor internet connections because I am from Maguindanao, where the connections fluctuate. Most of the time, there are current disconnections; my cellphones' free data can't guarantee a connection, which is why I sometimes can't attend my class."

S12. "Loaded with school requirements and class activities makes me stressed. at the end of the day, I feel so tired, but I still can't sleep at night because I'm preoccupied with the things that need to be done to pass the course."

S13. "We have several issues and concerns. Despite difficulties, we need to enroll in post-graduate programs to remain competitive and differentiate ourselves when competence in the job is required, such as being promoted to work or preparing for new work. It is hard for us to learn all knowledge; however, we must prioritize what benefits us to improve our conditions and provide the finest services to our clients."

The study's first finding determined the students' experiences in graduate school and revealed three themes. Most Ph.D. students stated that they struggled with time management, work-life balance, and stress management education in these themes. The participants stated that they found it difficult to manage their time with their workloads, school activities, and requirements, a lack of time spared in preparing assignments and other requirements, a lack of interaction due to poor internet connections, and a lack of time for research work and consultation. According to a study on students' time management skills, the participants' mean of time planning was low, and thus they could not manage their time well (Başak, Uzun, & Arslan, 2008). Similarly, another study that looked at students' time management skills on academic performance discovered that time management skills effectively achieved performance (Tanröen & Işcan, 2009). Also, according to Alharbi (2020), there is a significant and positive relationship between time management, time planning, and academic performance. Furthermore, Gortner Lahmers and Zulauf (2000) discovered that students with time management skills could use their academic time more efficiently. could make better use of their academic time between time management

In the study's second finding, five codes were created based on students' experiences with work-life balance: Work, school time, study time, Social Obligations, Relaxation, and Health Responsibilities. As graduate students, the student

participants stated that they have many responsibilities. They have obligations at work, in their classes, in their families, and even within themselves. However, they believe that they must complete their Ph.D. to be competitive and advance in their careers, as today's jobs require a higher level of education. Creating a work-life balance is especially important during stressful times, according to Loreto (2019). It is well known that a high incidence of illnesses occurs in college when students are under additional stress, such as when studying for exams or completing the numerous papers and presentations required by professors. Dr. Michele Vancour, Associate Professor of Public Health at Southern Connecticut State University, discusses in his published articles that there are numerous ways for students to balance their lives while also meeting the daily demands of college.

In the final finding, where opinions were gathered to determine the participants' issues and concerns about stress management, three codes emerged: transitions, poor internet connections, and school activities. While most of the students stated that they have a number of issues and concerns, they need to enroll in post-graduate programs to remain competitive and differentiate themselves when competence in the job is required, such as being promoted to work or preparing for new work. It is difficult for them to learn everything in school; however, to improve their conditions and provide the best services to their clients, they must prioritize what benefits them. Kelci Lynn discusses ways for college students to reduce stress in her article *How to Reduce Stress While in College*. She recommends that students get plenty of rest, exercise, social time, quiet time, and make time for the fun to balance the many demands of college life. Kelci offers ten tips in her article for dealing with stress and learning how to relax when life becomes too stressful. According to Hilary Silver, M.S.W., as cited by Loreto (2019), "students experience many firsts, including new lifestyle, friends, roommates, exposure to new cultures, and alternate ways of thinking." Also, In her article, Tartakovsky (2016) cited Harrison Davis, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Counseling and Coordinator of the Community Counseling master's program at North Georgia College & State University, who stated, "Students who do not feel appropriate or ready coping with the new environment, they could easily become prone to depression and anxiety."

5. Conclusion

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that their professional development may not have been hampered despite difficulties in time management, work-life balance, and stress management. It is recommended that Graduate students should consider scheduling their time. They may arrange their to-do list so that their priority tasks are completed at night if they can work better at night than in the morning. They may also consider where to draw the line when it comes to learning and how to establish rules to stay on track.

6. Future Scope

Further studies may explore learning gains and their contribution to developing skills and competencies needed for the workplace. It will serve as the basis for graduate

school to enhance the teaching-learning process, curriculum mapping and review, and improvements of auxiliary services. The limitations of this study should be addressed in future studies. One limitation of this study is that it exclusively focused only on students' experiences, issues, and concerns. Future studies may widen the investigation, including teachers' performance, management aspect, leadership and extent of resources, and others. This pandemic has undoubtedly changed the educational system and pushed it to its boundaries. However, this unprecedented event is exactly what we need to strengthen the education system to withstand future challenges.

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