

Graduate Studies Schooling during COVID-19 Pandemic: Doctorate and Master's Students Experience in a Private Higher Education Institution in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the graduate schooling experiences of the 347 Graduate Students of the University of Northeastern Philippines, Iriga City, Philippines, during the Second Semester of the Academic Year 2020-2021, wherein online learning modality instead of traditional face-to-face classes was implemented. Using a survey questionnaire distributed through Google form, it sought answers to the learning experiences of the Graduate Students with regards to their graduate schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic and their challenges met achieving quality graduate programs during the New Normal School Year. Descriptive survey research was used. All respondents strongly agreed that a sudden transition to a different modality in Graduate School teaching affects the quality of professional learning experiences, and they faced challenges that affect their graduate learning experiences.

Keywords:

Graduate Schooling; Experience; COVID-19 pandemic; Private Higher Education Institution; Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines continues to evolve in its pursuit of technical, sociological, technological, and scientific improvements. Continuing Professional Development, officially known as Republic Act 10912, was enacted (Congress of the Philippines, 2016). The law aims to develop and promote the practice of professions in the country, requiring professionals to improve their competencies by following worldwide norms of practice continuously. Professionals in the country must gain CPD credits, which can be obtained through formal schooling or learning through educational institutions and arrangements, and informal learning through the accreditation of seminars and training attended. This can ensure that the learning outcomes benefit the nation's overall well-being, economic growth, and development.

This research focused on the post-graduate schooling experiences of Doctoral and master's students enrolled in the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Northeastern Philippines, a private higher education institution. This study analyzed how the said graduate school being studied shifted rapidly to online education (Cavanaugh & Dewese, 2020), how the graduate students responded, and how the professors in the graduate education level prepared for the different modalities of remote teaching and learning that were rapidly shifted due to COVID-19 pandemic (Hartshorne et al., 2020). Teaching at all levels, either primary,

undergraduate, and graduate levels, are constantly challenged by the various constraints in teaching and learning that is either blended, remote, online, or modular; the resources and preparation in online schooling should be evaluated (Trikoilis & Papanastasiou, 2020). Thus, the avenues for improving the educational landscapes using innovative information and communication technologies necessitate teachers, educational institutions, and learners to be prepared in this aspect (Avila & Cabrera, 2020, 2021; Trust et al., 2020). Also, as the higher education institutions in the country transition to distance learning, content preparation, access to devices, and internet connectivity, together with the learning management systems applicable for the school year affected by the pandemic, should be instituted (Clausen et al., 2020; Evmenova et al., 2014) in order to attain the components of the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (Gepila, 2020) and other professionals as well as this study can help not just the educators but the graduate students to develop their competencies and skills despite the sudden academic shifts. Graduate school professors, lecturers, teachers, and their administrators need to improve the offered service. Therefore, teachers should be taught to use the learning platforms before their actual integration into their program offering, and their level of ICT competence should also be considered (Avila, Nepomuceno, et al., 2021; Pattnayak & Pattnaik, 2016). As the students enroll in the graduate programs during the pandemic, they believe that distance and online learning are necessary (Avila, Abin, et al., 2021) to continue their professional development. Hence, teachers should consider ways to motivate the learners using motivating language to communicate appropriately their targets included in the syllabi (C. Separa et al., 2020) (Separa et al., 2015).

While much research has been done on online learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, no study has been done to assess the impact, perspectives, and impact of online or distance learning on graduate schooling in the Philippines during the pandemic. As a result, this study aims to understand better that aspect and how Graduate School teachers and students can be fully engaged in utilizing available tools for teaching and serving the best knowledge to their students while also developing themselves.

METHOD

The researchers used a descriptive research design to understand the perspectives and challenges of the graduate students at the University of Northeastern Philippines regarding the quality of professional development they receive from its School of Graduate Studies and Research. During the data gathering process, there were 284 students enrolled in the Master of Arts in Education, 14 in the Master in Business Administration, and 27 students in the Master of Public Administration. At the doctorate level, 16 students took up the Doctor of Education in Educational Management; 4 students enrolled in the Doctor of Public Management, and two students enrolled in Doctor of Business Management. Therefore, the researchers used a total enumeration of the 347 students enrolled in the Masters and Doctorate Programs. To collect the data, the researchers developed their questionnaire that was pilot tested in the teachers at the College of Education of the same university and distributed through the use of Google Forms distributed in a one week that spanned within the third week of July 2021.

This study determined the perspectives of the 347 students at the University of Northeastern Philippines, Iriga City, during the Second Semester of Academic Year 2020-2021. It sought answers to the Perspectives of Graduate Students with regards to the quality of their graduate schooling during the pandemic in terms of quality of learning experiences, development of essential knowledge and skills even during a pandemic, Learning intention and success criteria, professor's adaptation to teaching during a pandemic, and support and change provided to the students; and the challenges met by the students in achieving quality graduate programs during the New Normal School Year. The weighted mean, rank, and verbal interpretation were used to describe the graduate schooling experiences of the Graduate Students during a pandemic. It was interpreted using the following scale: quality of graduate schooling experience during pandemic 5-Strongly Agree (SA), 4-Moderately Agree (MA), 3-Agree (A), 2-Fairly Agree (FA), 1-Not at all (NAA). While for the Challenges of Graduate Students regarding their graduate schooling experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the scale was: 5-Always Encountered (AE), 4-Often Encountered (OE), 3-Sometimes Encountered (SoE), 2-Seldom Encountered (SeE), and 1-Not Affected at all (NAA).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perspectives of Graduate Students about the quality of graduate schooling received during the pandemic.

Quality of professional learning experiences. Table 1 shows the respondents' perspectives about the quality of Graduate Schooling they received from the graduate school being studied.

TABLE 1: Quality of learning experiences

| Indicator | Mean | Interpretation |
|--|-------------|-----------------------|
| Quality of professional learning experiences. | 4.28 | Strongly Agree |
| Development of essential knowledge and skills even during the pandemic | 4.50 | Strongly Agree |
| Learning intention and success criteria | 4.55 | Strongly Agree |
| Professor's adaptation to teaching during the pandemic. | 4.59 | Strongly Agree |
| Integrated instructional activities implemented by the graduate school during the pandemic | 4.57 | Strongly Agree |
| Average | 4.50 | Strongly Agree |

Based on the 4.50 average mean of the data in Table 1, the respondents highly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted the quality of graduate education at the University of Northeastern Philippines' School of Graduate Studies and Research. It also revealed that, despite the abrupt shifts in learning modalities used in Graduate Schools due to COVID-19 restrictions, they strongly agreed that the learning content was informative, the lessons delivered by their professors were engaging, and the feedback helped them improve their competence in their chosen profession. They also felt that the present learning activities are more relevant than those used by their instructors before the epidemic, and that online, blended, or modular learning can help them advance in their careers. As a result, the respondents strongly agreed that the quality of the learning and graduate schooling they received from the Graduate School under consideration is excellent. It can assist them in their professional development, which they desperately require in their chosen professions and fields of specialization.

Also, even during the epidemic, graduate students at the University of the Northeastern Philippines unanimously agreed that they receive regular feedback from their teachers as part of their development of essential knowledge and abilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the latter used it to gauge their understanding and help them understand and explore ways to improve their competence, knowledge, and skills related to their field of specialization by providing appropriate outputs and research, as well as utilizing various ways of gauging the actual learning they received from their online, blended, and modular classes.

As part of the learning intention and success criteria, the respondents strongly agreed that they now had a better understanding of their specialization based on the quality of their self-paced learning. It is further strengthened by their professor's varied teaching strategy, which includes asking the graduate students what they expect from the subject and building their teaching strategies from the students' initial concepts about the subject matter, using online, modular, and blended learning modalities.

Furthermore, the graduate students at the School of Graduate Studies of UNEP strongly agreed that their professors adjusted effectively to the unexpected transition to alternative teaching methods induced by COVID-19 regulations. The respondents strongly agreed that graduate school professors should use student progress as the baseline for teaching the subject, understand how their teaching strategies affect their students, incorporate research in addition to scaffolding activities, and practice providing feedback on reflection papers, case analyses, SWOT analyses, and case studies given to students enrolled in their subjects.

As a result, despite COVID-19 limits and a sudden change to other learning platforms, the University of Northeastern Philippines continues to provide high-quality education, particularly at the School of Graduate Studies, as evidenced by graduate student respondents' perceptions.

Challenges in achieving quality graduate programs during the New Normal School Year

Table 2 presents the respondents' thoughts on the Challenges in achieving quality graduate programs during the New Normal School Year, as provided by the graduate school they are now enrolled in.

TABLE 2: The Challenges in achieving quality graduate programs as perceived by the Graduate Students

| Challenges in achieving quality graduate programs | Mean | Interpretation |
|--|-------------|---------------------------|
| Lack of time to study due to office, field, and paper works. | 2.97 | Sometime Encountered |
| Lack of finances | 2.91 | Sometime Encountered |
| Lack of resources | 2.54 | Seldom Encountered |
| Barriers of communication | 2.54 | Seldom Encountered |
| Difficulty in using new technologies for modular, distance, and blended learning | 2.46 | Seldom Encountered |
| Lack of time balancing family and schooling | 2.42 | Seldom Encountered |
| Lack of instructional support | 2.03 | Seldom Encountered |
| Lack of student's understanding of their disciplinary content and standards | 2.02 | Seldom Encountered |
| Lack of self-motivation to learn | 2.01 | Seldom Encountered |
| Lack of family support | 1.80 | Not Encountered at all |
| Average | 2.37 | Seldom Encountered |

Table 2 shows that a few obstacles prevented the creation of high-quality professional development programs for graduate students at a private university in the Philippines. It was discovered that the Graduate School Students of the University of Northeastern Philippines were primarily affected by a lack of time to study due to office, field, and paperwork, a lack of finances, a lack of resources, communication barriers, difficulty in using new technologies for modular, distance, and blended learning, and a lack of time balancing family and schooling. On the other hand, other restraints are rarely encountered by students who are pursuing Graduate Schooling as part of their Professional and Personal Development.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that the Graduate School students of the University of the Northeastern Philippines, Iriga City, Philippines, represent various variables that may influence their perspectives on why they continue to pursue Graduate Schooling as part of their Personal and Professional Development despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The same factors can impact their graduate study, which has resulted in difficulties in obtaining their Master's and Doctorate degrees. The respondents strongly agreed that a sudden transition to a different modality in Graduate School teaching affects the quality of professional learning experiences, the development of essential knowledge and skills even during a pandemic, learning intention and success criteria, professor's adaptation to teaching during the pandemic, and support and change provided to students thereby affecting the professional development of students enrolled in the Second Semester of Academic Year 2020-2021. It was also revealed that master's and doctorate students faced challenges such as a lack of time to study due to office, field, and paperwork, a lack of finances, a lack of resources, barriers to communication, difficulty in using new technologies for modular, distance, and blended learning, and a lack of time balancing family and schooling, all of which hampered their graduate schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic-affected semesters.

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