

# Graduate Education during COVID-19 Pandemic: Inputs to Policy Formulation in the New Normal

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## **Abstract**

*This qualitative research describes the experiences of Filipino graduate students as they continue with their schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Particular challenges faced are related to technology and internet access. As graduate work is expected to be about research tasks, subscribing to paid resources is seen as an issue. It is also crucial to recognize how the experience has caused stress for students. The experienced challenges are resolved by augmenting students' technological capacity, realigning personal values and perspectives, and resorting to free and open access journals to sustain research activities. The COVID-19 experience has taught graduate students the importance of technology, the significance of revisiting one's values, and the reflection on their quest to finish their graduate studies. Lastly, assistance to graduate students can be done by proactively offering infrastructure assistance, socio-emotional support, and institutionalizing responsive and flexible communication mechanisms.*

*Keywords: challenges, COVID-19, Filipino, graduate education, policy inputs*

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## **1.0 Introduction**

It is indeed unfortunate to worry about graduate school attendance amid a pandemic. Zhang and Ma (2020) noted that COVID-19 has created a mild stressful impact as the health crisis posed serious challenges to the nation's economy, one's socio-emotional aspects, and lifestyle, and concerns related to academic pursuits are inevitably the last things one would like to worry at the onset of COVID-19. Calhoun et al. (2020) described the pandemic's destructive impact on education as "severe and unprecedented." With

never-ending lockdowns and quarantine protocols implemented, processes in the academe surely find its way to feel the effects of delay, backlog, and disruption.

Deciding to enroll in graduate school entails careful planning, particularly in terms of the period of stay, resources, and priorities. As graduate students assume full-time work, they are confined to juggle classes, research, and academic-related tasks with a limited amount of time left after they attend to their respective jobs. With work-from-home schemes being mandated, the challenges

faced by graduate students as they study and work are now squeezed at home.

Graduate education and the experiences of students in the pre-COVID-19 era has been a subject of research in various literatures. O'Meara et al. (2017) have recognized the significance of "professional relationships" when it comes to the sense of belongingness of students in the graduate level. Similarly, graduate school attendance is seen as an avenue to impact the entirety of their chosen profession and its underpinning "gendered practices" (Colgan, 2017). Graduate students have also been found to be facing the challenges of mental health issues (Evans et al., 2017). In the context of the United States of America, training on the graduate level is considered to be a contributory factor towards "economic inequality and elite formation" (Posselt & Grodsky, 2017). Moreover, according to Ramos (2018), internationalization is becoming a constant variable in higher education institutions through drastic shifts to research, international student population, and institutional policies.

As the Philippines rolled out institutionalized community quarantine protocols as early as March 2020, most higher education institutions are left with a few steps before finally ending the semester. As physical interactions are limited, worsened by the paralyzed public transportation and threat of COVID-19 virus exposure, the shift to online and flexible modality was seen to ensure that learning continues. Closing schools has been considered effective in decreasing the number of COVID-19 cases even in temporal scenarios (Auger et al., 2020). This has been supported by Askitas et al. (2020), who recognized that prohibiting mass gatherings has lessened the actual number of COVID-19 cases. According to Machado et al. (2020), the transition toward an online teaching

and learning process has been an after-effect of perspectives concerning the alteration of physical interaction, social isolation, and others.

The effort to sustain the new education setup is met with various challenges both by the professors and graduate students in all aspects, particularly concerning technology. Going online to facilitate teaching and learning in a country notorious for expensive but slow internet service is indeed a herculean task to accomplish. Even Piryani et al. (2020) have acknowledged how the countries in the Southeast Asian region have faced struggling experiences regarding internet connection in education. The time element is also one crucial factor to consider as teachers are left with no choice but to "adapt to the entire curriculum and evaluation methods" given the limited preparation time (Wu, et al., 2020). It is also crucial to note how the pandemic has contributed to heightened engagement in cyberbullying due to increased online interaction (Das et al., 2020).

The pandemic has provided avenues for discourse in integrating internet-based learning as well as recognizing education models appropriate for the current scenario (Keswani et al., 2020). Crafting responsive education policies, especially in the time of COVID-19, is crucial since the pandemic does not only entail academic concerns. Other aspects should also be given great consideration in designing these policies, such as economic, social, cultural, and health factors. As these policies are created and eventually implemented, these are expected to affect a more systematic, organized, and equitable approach to education in the context of a health crisis. While statistics would be essential feedback to policy decisions and pathways, a more in-depth and direct query to stakeholders would justify a research-based and bottom-to-top contribution. The safety and security of learners

and personnel are also central to policymakers in case schools will physically cater to serve during a pandemic (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020). A related study by Mogaji and Jain (2020) even sees the currently held online learning landscape as an appropriate timing for learning institutions to accommodate the needs of those prospective students unable to fly out of their own countries to pursue international education.

This research captures the experiences of Filipino graduate students as they continue with their schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher finds these inputs to be crucial in crafting policies and programs for students in preparing for and during the new normal. The context of the Philippine education landscape is emphasized to provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences of Filipino graduate students. The findings of the study will be used as inputs to crafting responsive education policies in the new normal. A study by Li and Bailey (2020) affirmed how medical students confront stress-related issues of their studies and prospective profession. It is indeed imperative to consider the views of graduate students so the approach towards equitable and quality graduate studies becomes responsive to their actual needs. In Taiwan, a task force is created that “coordinates implementation of online learning, supervision of facilities for quarantine and isolation, and regulations on public assembly” (Cheng et al., 2020).

The contemporary times have seen efforts to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic, and the education sector is not exempted from these initiatives. This study is an attempt to contribute to evidence-based policy formulation and decision making, particularly in the context of graduate education in the Philippines. As the country gradually shifts to the new normal

in education, the findings of the research present significant insights in forming the contemporary knowledge base. With the presence of inquiries and pandemic narratives of students from other parts of the globe, this study captures the specific contexts of Filipino graduate students.

Specifically knowing the narratives of graduate students on how they deal with the tasks during the pandemic provides an idea of the extent of the health crisis. It showcases numerous issues faced by students as their creativity is highlighted to accomplish various school-related tasks despite uncertainties and other concerns. Presenting how students resolve challenges that they face opens the discussion to institutionalizing applicable mechanisms to provide help and support. As students successfully address challenges at hand, it is imperative to note which problems can be considered a personal-level issue and which ones need a more general and extensive approach to solve.

### **Literature Review**

The dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic has signalled inquiries on various societal aspects affected by the health crisis. The impact of the situation is not only confined to medical and health factors alone. Several studies have also delved into the economic impact, as Nicola, et al. (2020) have noted how the food sector and manufacturing industries have suffered dramatically. Specifically, in Italy, Bonaccorsi et al. (2020) scrutinized lockdown mechanisms with socioeconomic factors. Due to COVID-19, “service-oriented economies” experience disadvantageous effects, putting employment in danger (Fernandes, 2020).

In terms of school attendance, the pandemic has caused great disruption in facilitating the teaching and learning process worldwide.

Masonbrink & Hurley (2020) have underscored how poor children, who depend on school services for their needs, are seen to be at high risk because of the pandemic. A similar opinion is made by Van Lancker and Parolin (2020), who noted that the number of affected children has reached 80 million worldwide.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, graduate education has seen seemingly springing opportunities in terms of online recruitment interviews, which Bernstein et al. (2020) identified as "leading to new practices and opportunities." Similarly, Sullivan et al. (2020) shared the same statements that point to the COVID-19 experience as responsible for the innovation and challenges in the education sector. In the context of post-graduate education in Pakistan, Shahzad et al. (2020) stated that the emergence of virtual teaching has been a solution to address closures of schools. Bal et al. (2020) recognized how the pandemic has prompted graduate students to manage numerous roles in their professional and personal lives.

Policy attempts have been made to provide directions to a systematic and organized COVID-19 response. Part of the recommendations of Qui et al. (2020) is to focus on society's vulnerable sectors when crafting policy during the pandemic. Dave et al. (2020) have analyzed how various implemented policies, particularly those that mandate people to stay at home, have contributed to successful efforts in combating the spread of the virus.

As the world battles COVID-19, more and more studies have delivered promising inputs on the mechanism to efficiently and effectively address the health crisis. Researchers have also documented how various sectors have been seriously affected as recommendations are put in place to respond to these challenges.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, the proponent of the study has strictly followed ethical research protocols. All participants accomplished an online informed consent form concerning their voluntary participation in the research, which posed no ethical and safety risks to both the researcher and the participants. As part of the ethical standards, adequate level of confidentiality of the gathered data is ensured as these are used only for the sole purpose of this study.

### **2.0 Methodology**

This study uses a phenomenological design that employed open-ended survey questionnaires. This form of qualitative research describes a particular group's (graduate students) shared meanings and the commonality of their lived experiences (graduate education in the midst of the pandemic), which is also an interpretation, according to Creswell (2007). Through the identified design, the voices of graduate students are given the avenue to be heard in the time of the pandemic. The researcher prepared a free-form instrument which captures the participants' personal view and understanding of various aspects (dealing with academic courses, challenges, addressing identified challenges, lessons learned, and the needed support mechanisms) on their attendance in graduate school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the use of an online survey generator, the collection of data was conducted via the internet since the conduct of research was restricted by community quarantine protocols. Each response has been flagged with a code that provides a summary of the participant's idea. These codes serve as a category for the response. Key themes were then determined based on the generated

codes. In the discussion section, a few direct quotations for the participants are presented to specifically present the themes.

Twenty-two (22) responses were gathered through purposive sampling from graduate students of MA Programs 1 and 2, and PhD Programs 1 and 2 of a higher education institution based in Manila, Philippines. This sampling method is utilized since the researcher possesses prior knowledge about the purpose of the study, thus, eligible participants can be chosen as they fit a particular profile.

The following table presents the demographic profile of the participants of the study:

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of the participants

<b>Gender</b>	Male	10	45.5
	Female	12	54.5
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Program</b>	MA Program 1	5	22.7
	PhD Program 1	6	27.3
	MA Program 2	1	4.5
	PhD Program 2	10	45.5
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Length of stay in graduate school</b>	1 - 3 terms	10	45.5
	4 - 6 terms	8	36.4
	7 - 9 terms	3	13.6
	10 above	1	4.5
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.0 Results and Discussion

This section presents the data collected and the analysis to systematically address the questions of the study. The discussion is divided into five clusters: (1) how Filipino graduate students deal with their academic work during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) the challenges faced and (3) how

these are addressed, (4) the lessons learned during the pandemic and how they impact their future stay in the graduate school, and (5) the perceived support mechanism they would need as they continue their graduate studies.

#### 1. How Filipino Graduate Students Deal with the Pandemic: Ways and Means

As most Filipino graduate students are taken by surprise with the abrupt and drastic changes brought about by the health crisis, migrating to online transactions is seen as the sudden and most optimal way to continue with their academic and research tasks. Talidong and Toquero (2020) have recognized that despite the fact that Filipino teachers exhibited affirmative perspectives in time of the COVID-19 pandemic, their vulnerability cannot be underscored since the outbreak is still being experienced. While classes are put on hold and restrictions to physical access to school are in place, academic tasks never stopped, as supported by P-11's response, "Since going to libraries are impossible during this pandemic, I utilized the use of e-learning resources from different websites, journals, and other online libraries."

Going online does not only work for research as an available internet connection also facilitates other graduate-school-related tasks. According to P-12, "We cannot carry out the usual face-to-face lectures in class; we inevitably have to adapt to the online lecture system. This is something new, but we must be able to carry out this lecture by utilizing technology." The online setup is a "cheap and feasible method" despite the fact that this does not replace the typical traditional classroom setting (Verma et al, 2020).

To address the need for a stronger and stable internet connection, some students also had to upgrade their internet subscription to comply with

the demands of schooling. As stated by P-6, "I had a stronger and more stable internet connection installed at home to be able to do my research work." Also, P-17 mentioned how effective communication plays a crucial role in accomplishing whatever needs to be done. According to him, "Constant communication with the professor helped so much in the accomplishment of the task. Clear, precise, and comprehensive instructions also helped a lot. Internet connection has been very significant, too." The faculty's professional development should also be given priority, particularly on teaching methods, whether online or not (Rapanta, et al., 2020)

Different strategies are also employed by graduate students as they work online, just like P-1, who "maximized the use of internet-based research and web searches." He further added, "Social Media is also a great help to accomplish tasks during the outbreak." Similarly, P-15 said, "I made use of online references/resources available for free from open-access sites and university subscriptions." One of the "five high-impact principles for online education is to be prepared with a contingency plan to accommodate the occurrence of unanticipated online education episodes (Bao, 2020).

On the other hand, some graduate students see the pandemic as an occurrence that dictates them to just proceed with their usual routine. For graduate students like P-18, the timing has been treated as a period to just proceed with their usual tasks. She said, "I grabbed the opportunity to read books and other academic papers."

P-20 also shared, "Since I was able to have my reports early in the semester, I was only asked to accomplish the final class requirement, which is to contribute to the compilation of all the class reports and write-ups for the whole semester, which was done through our group chat and submitted through email." In order to gauge the

effectiveness of currently employed learning schemes and desired learning outcomes, rigorous and regular evaluation is central (Khalil, et al., 2020)

It is also worthy to note how P-10 considered graduate school experience during lockdown as "self-paced," and as for P-15, he said, "The lockdown became an opportunity for me to focus more on my coursework. I had ample time to accomplish those."

P-2 also said, "In one of my courses, I have organized well our class portfolio, and thankfully our professor was considerate about the situation that we can no longer compile the hard copies." As the education sector continues to struggle with the impact of COVID-19, Filipino graduate students are dealing with the pandemic with a mindset that showcases undying spirit and persistence, believing that education should continue under whatever circumstances. A study by Yen (2020) noted that the teacher's sense of humor and class climate contribute to beneficial gains for online flipped classroom.

Lastly, dealing with the pandemic has also been characterized as a period to be classified as either a challenge or an opportunity. According to P-21, "As a student, I still do my requirements needed in every course," while P-19 said, in terms of class requirements, "I put them on hold."

The pandemic has prompted being confident, aside from having the technical know-how, for online teaching to work effectively (König et al., 2020). The situation has also posed concerns on the emotional state of Filipino graduate students. According to P-14, "Honestly, it is very challenging to divide the time in my work as a teacher and student." P-9 also shared a similar sentiment, saying, "I am still not done with my school research task that was given before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, I thought that it would be easier

for me to accomplish such a task since I would be staying home most of the time. It is in the latter part of the community quarantine when I realized that I am having a hard time focusing on my research task!" P-13 also shared that the pandemic experience is challenging because "focus was an issue."

On the other side of the issue, some graduate students see the experience as something that leads them to discover advantageous gains, just like what P-7 mentioned when she said "I have dealt with my graduate school research with optimism through finding ways to finish my proposal." Meanwhile, according to P-3, the experience was "challenging but still worth it."

Meng et al., (2020) suggested that students be encouraged to be involved in self-learning activities, along with available resources online, in the time of the pandemic. Three themes have been identified as to how Filipino graduate students deal with their studies during the pandemic: going online, proceeding with assigned tasks, and recognizing the pandemic as a challenge and opportunity. These concepts reflect how graduate education continued amidst community quarantine and lockdown. These are also central to the narrative and experiences of Filipino graduate students as they marry personal and professional know-how to succeed in the pursuit towards the achievement of a higher academic degree.

## **2. The Biggest Hurdles: Internet Connection, Stress, and Access**

Five issues are classified when it comes to the challenges faced by Filipino graduate students as they deal with their academic tasks during the pandemic. These classifications include (1) internet connection problems and technological issues, (2) absence of face-to-face interaction, (3) access to

online resources, and (4) stress.

The main challenge faced by P-2 was submitting online due to poor internet connection in their area. She said, "I doubt whether my professor has received the papers or not." Majority of the responses points to the students' subscription to poor internet services. To some, this issue breeds more undesirable consequences, as shared by P-1. He said, "The poor internet connection and lack of accessibility to important readings that can be helpful in any coursework" are the biggest hurdles that he faced. P-12 pointed out, "The particular challenge faced is that we cannot help but be able to utilize technology optimally, and to be optimal, we must have adequate internet connection." A study by Pastor (2020) found out that Filipino students are not yet prepared to study using the synchronous mode of learning and recognized the need to look for other means of learning modalities.

Since other modes of learning delivery have not been explored in the Philippines, the impact of the pandemic has been challenging and distinctive (Toquero, 2020). The gravity of the impact of the internet problem is summarized by the response of P-17. "Whenever there is a problem in internet connection, everything is also affected." This has been supported by P-15, who argued, "Weak internet connection makes it hard for me to download files and to do some online works/tasks." On the other hand, requesting an acceptable internet service for P-6 has been a struggle. "I had to do a series of follow-ups with my request for internet connection." Lastly, for P-20, the using a particular online platform has been listed as a hurdle. "As a millennial, I am not familiar with the use of email as a platform in sending, receiving, and editing materials online. I am more experienced in using applications such as Facebook Messenger, Telegram or Google sheets/drive." In a study

by Sunasee (2020), it has been found out that synchronous sessions yield favorable gains when it comes to the delivery of the subject content, active learning, and increasing student's engagement.

Another issue discussed under the challenges faced during the pandemic has something to do with the availability of online resources needed to conduct research and write academic papers, which P-7 refers to as "access to online educational journal sites." The accessibility issue has been expounded by P-11. He said, "Most of the comprehensive resources and references online require membership fees." Similar findings on resources concerns are identified by Li et al. (2020), who found out that South Asian and Southeast Asian students in China possessed inadequate Chinese linguistic facilities to address their crisis communication needs, which led them to resort to using translation apps.

Online learning cannot be explicitly likened to successful instruction (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020). COVID-19 has caused stress among Filipino graduate students, and this becomes a challenge towards attending to their respective academic work, along with their full-time job commitments. P-19 explained, "We got too focused on school matters, especially on the abrupt ending of the previous school year, so we had to plan as a school on how to deal with the situation and assist our students." P-9 also has a similar sentiment, saying, "One of the challenges I faced was the numerous chores at home, like tending to my children and taking care of the household. With what's happening around, it is a sad reality that I am not inspired to do my research task." Among the issues identified by Garbe et al. (2020) in relation to parents' COVID-19 experiences are difficulties with balancing responsibilities, learner motivation, accessibility, and learning outcomes.

Other stress-related concerns from Filipino graduate students include stress from the long hours of staying in the laptop and conflict in terms of the expected deliverable at work," stated by P-16. P-13 struggles juggling work and studies and said, "Our work-from-home setup clashes with the requirements due for submission." P-10 has had issues with self-motivation, while P-14 is worried about submitting the requirements for the particular term. According to Mohammed, et al., (2020), consideration should be given to provide flexibility for assignments' due dates within modules, department policies, and overall institutional policies in line with the transition to emergency remote teaching.

### **3. First Things First: Resolving Problems Brought by the Pandemic**

Addressing the challenges as a result of the health crisis has shown innovative and creative strategies of Filipino graduate students so they could continue with their academic works. Three main categories are identified under this discussion: augmenting technological needs, refocusing personal values and perspectives, and resorting to open-access materials.

The majority of the responses to the sudden shift to distance modality are adjusting one's technological capacity to meet the demands of the situation. To do this, P-22 "brought some prepaid Wi-Fi for contingency," while P-17 addressed this by "having a backup internet source, like data through the phone." P-8 and P-4 responded with "upgrade of internet connection and search for free e-resources," and "upgraded internet source/provider," respectively. With the investments made pertaining to online resources and technologies during the pandemic, Watanabe and Omori (2020) noted the possibility that this "consumption is



likely to fall away as COVID-19 subsides.”

Suryaman et al. (2020) believed that it is the responsibility of the teachers to look for avenues that support learning both academically and socio-emotionally. Since being serviced by a reliable connection is crucial, P-1 made the needed improvement by changing their internet speed package into a more suitable one and creating a more wide-ranged research, similar to P-6 who called and asked for referrals to be able to get a slot for internet connection. One response from P-15 clearly stated a personal strategy. “I was patient, mostly doing my paper works late at night so I will be the only one using the internet connection at home.” The entire experience of facing technological problems brought P-20 into a realization, saying, “The learning process was fun and made me realize how difficult it was to interact online without the modern apps that we use today. It was like bridging the early users of computers with modern users.” It echoes the statement of Tran and Ravaud (2020), who opined that “it is challenging to address the enduring effects of COVID-19 on teaching and learning activities.”

A study by Gonzalez et al. (2020) concluded that the pandemic has prompted students to develop “a more continuous learning habit,” which eventually contributes to their productivity. For P-19, adjustments made on one’s approach to studies and research works have made it possible to get through the challenges of the pandemic. She stated, “I refocused on another aspect and set the limitation of the study to complete the said course requirement.” Social networking has also been helpful to P-14, who worked with other people to get things done, by chatting and messaging her professor and asking some her classmates about the things needed to be accomplished in their class.”

To some Filipino graduate students, responding to the pandemic is not only confined to satisfying technological requirements alone. It is interesting to note how some have found the remedy for pressing concerns linking them to their values and perspectives. According to P-9, “I am trying to address the challenges that I mentioned by convincing myself to focus. I try to think of positive things, such as the benefit that it may cause me once I finish the task.” A similar realization is shared by P-10, who relied on self-discipline and, at the same time, updates from her adviser.” Revisiting personal values can be considered a timely approach in this challenging era, especially when the time of the pandemic is dubbed as “being at war with an invisible enemy” (Phelps & Sperry, 2020).

“Patience and trust. Follow up is a must,” according to P-2. Meanwhile, P-5 said, “I had to wait patiently for the responses of my teachers and classmates. I just had to rely on research when dealing with urgent matters.” To both P-16 and P-21, efficient time management is the key, like finding enough time to rest, proper scheduling of activities, and prioritizing things. The situation may be a bit of a hurdle to satisfying academic requirements, but with all these approaches shared by Filipino graduate students, P-13 still managed to accomplish the tasks.<sup>2</sup>

The emergent responses of higher education institutions in light of the pandemic encompass social isolation strategies and rapid curriculum redevelopment in accommodating academic offerings (Crawford et al., 2020). Since graduate school work is mainly characterized by research tasks and assignments and students had to deal with online access and subscription issues, some resorted to looking for available free access to materials online. According to P-18, “I consulted

websites through the sites provided by the university library and Facebook shares of other academic enthusiast members." Both P-11 and P-7 worked on the same scheme, saying they utilized the free resources since funds are crucial during situations like this and they explored the web with sites that offer educational journals.

#### **4. Graduate Studies and COVID-19: This Is What We Have Learned So Far**

When Filipino graduate students were asked regarding the lessons the COVID-19 pandemic has taught them as they pursue higher studies, their responses can be classified into three main categories: realizing the importance of technology, rekindling personal values, and refreshing the will to finish schooling. These aspects reflect truly positive images and spirit in the middle of a crisis.

"The lesson that COVID-19 taught me is the value of time, the importance of social media and mass media in the context of academic work," shared by P-1. A similar thought was expressed by P-12. She said, "The lesson that I can take from the COVID-19 pandemic is that, at this time, we have to be ready with the development of information technology." P-16 noted that "it is necessary to learn the use of various learning platforms and applications." P-18 learned about "maximizing the use of available materials." Jena (2020) has also recognized the efforts of higher education institutions that guarantee the uninterrupted process of teaching and learning, research activities, and other deliveries employing technological strategies.

On the other hand, P-20 did not only respond with the lessons learned but on how the experience became a wake-up call in the light of pursuing graduate studies right in the middle of a pandemic. "Since some of my professors are

still using email as a way of disseminating and receiving documents online and not all of us were ready and equipped for online teaching and learning, I realized that I should not only keep up with the current technologies but should also be ready to learn to use whatever platform is needed for certain situations."

While it is challenging to imagine how the post-COVID-19 era would shape the educational realm (Murphy, 2020), the pandemic has also been instrumental for Filipino graduate students to revisit personal values and virtues. According to P-15, "It taught me to be patient, to be creative, and to be knowledgeable in maximizing the capabilities of the internet to my advantage." This is also similar to the response of P-4, which is "to be patient, take one day at a time, and never give up." P-22 and P-3 recognized that the pandemic taught them how to "be proactive despite the pandemic" and "to foster positivity in all the challenges that arrive." Positivity is also the gist of the response of P-9, who shared, "I just look at the bright side of life and anticipate happiness, health, and success. I just tell myself that, at the right time, I will achieve my dream of finishing a doctoral degree!" When it comes to completing the academic program, P-10 noted, "I learned that goal setting is important. Your focus and motivation play an important part in finishing graduate school." The goal to finish graduate school is crucial, especially when, at this particular period, Psacharopoulos et al. (2020) opined that the shutdown of education institutions create an effect on the earnings of future workers.

The particular values and character a graduate student should possess have also been mentioned under this discussion. For P-13, one should "listen to and follow instructions for our safety, which is somehow related to following instructions of the school and SOPs of the professors," This is also

similar to the statement of P-11: "Resourcefulness is an important quality that a graduate student should possess." Moreover, flexibility and resiliency were mentioned by P-6 and P-14, respectively: "I believe that in this new normal, I have to be flexible and be resourceful in addressing the many challenges along my journey at the University." She also added "being resilient and having a strong faith. When studying, establish a routine." P-8 also added that "collaboration and sharing online is good, and flexible learning options are available." Angelova (2020) opined that the adaptive and flexible characteristics of the students in the context of online schemes are facilitated since online communication has been a part of their habits.

In ensuring that no one gets left behind, Aliyyah et al., (2020) called for a collaborative community effort involving stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed Filipino graduate students to strive harder in their quest to finish graduate school. According to P-21, "The urge to finish my studies does not stop me since the University is doing its best for the success of every student." This has been supported by P-19, who stated that "it is best to be prepared with global concerns and how it could change the education setting." Though struggling, it is significant to note the efforts of students to continue with their studies. As P-17 puts it, "Education/research must continue, whatever the situation is."

### **5. Students in Need of Socio-Emotional Support, Infrastructure Assistance, Flexibility**

Helping the students address their concerns is central to facilitating an equitable learning experience during a pandemic. Knowing that students truly need means assessing the situation in a bigger picture and scrutinizing ways to

practically address each problem. True enough, addressing the concerns and impact due to COVID-19 calls for urgent and systematic actions (Lackie, et al., 2020). Under this section, Filipino graduate students particularly need assistance in three aspects: socio-emotional, infrastructure, and communication, and flexibility.

Attending classes online yields further expenses and these need serious attention as P-1 puts it "mental and financial support. As the pandemic continues to be a threat to our health and society, it also becoming a threat to every aspect of our lives," which is similar to the response of P-10 saying "follow up and motivation from your adviser. I'm blessed to have a very caring and mindful adviser."

The support that they need also encompasses the perspective of those involved in the teaching-learning process during the health crisis. According to P-6, "I hope professors would be more understanding and considerate in this new normal." P-5 shared a related sentiment saying "the motivation and empathy of the teachers will surely be of great help for me to continue attending classes." P-3 and P-5 also appealed to their professors on how students can be helped during these times: "I would appreciate if the university/professors would be emphatic to us graduate students," and "support and understanding from the professors." Similarly, Rana et al. (2020) have identified "transparent communication" as an aspect that could possibly lessen the negative impact brought about by the health crisis.

Sáiz-Manzanares et al. (2020) recognized the advantages of using technologies in teaching and learning as these contribute to "self-regulated learning". Since the biggest chunk of hurdle face by the students has something to do with technological and infrastructure aspects,

as P-7 suggests “support on the free access to educational journals,” while according to P-12 “the mechanism to support students in carrying out their final project or research.” P-18 called for “easier and more convenient access to educational websites,” and similarly, P-15 asked for “more online subscriptions for references and an effective learning management system.”

Lastly, Filipino graduate students would like to seek help on aspects related to communication and flexibility. According to P-21, “the communication system must be at its most convenient way to relay or receive the message better.” In the context of medical schooling, Byrnes et al. (2020) recommended that “enhanced virtual coursework and advising support” may possibly address the challenges brought about by the pandemic. An idea is also conveyed by P-16 saying “flexibility in terms of learning options and requirements,” while P-17 asked for “continued assistance from the professors and open communication with them.” P-14 also believed that concerns will be addressed by “giving proper dissemination of information from offices and professors.”

Filipino graduate students deal with their academic work during the COVID-19 pandemic through various mechanisms that reflect personal and professional strategies. As challenges are faced by graduate students, the discussion above shows how these are addressed accordingly. The discussion also presented lessons learned during the pandemic and how these experiences impact their future stay in the graduate school. Lastly, perceived support mechanisms were underscored by graduate students based on their needs as they continue their graduate studies.

### **Inputs to Policy Formulation in the New Normal**

Based on the findings of the study, the following policy inputs are proposed about the

experiences of Filipino graduate students during the health crisis. It is expected that policies crafted based on the practical and authentic inputs of Filipino graduate students would lead to a more equitable, responsive, and efficient educational environment. Sustaining positive results also impact a more aggressive approach towards combatting the effects of COVID-19.

It is imperative that numerous options should be provided so different needs will be addressed. A measure to accommodate students who have issues going online should be established. Graduate education should not solely depend on online interaction. Blended modalities may also be explored, equipped with synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Providing graduate students the option on how they would like to continue with their studies offers a more responsive and equitable education access.

Specific resources must be identified to adequately provide ways and means in achieving desired academic outcomes. Provision of adequate resources serves a prerequisite to address the challenge of the pandemic in the context of graduate education. To facilitate research activities, it is recommended that free or open-access databases for students are made available. It would be beneficial to offer university subscriptions so students can still remotely work on their research. With available resources at hand, students may now focus their time and energy on other concerns they can resolve.

While technology and the internet appear to be the critical mode to facilitate teaching and learning because of the current setup, the overall health of students should be at the core of every policy attempts, and policies that safeguard students’ mental health is vital at this time. Socio-emotional support should be provided to students. Programs and projects that deal with graduate

students' mental well-being should be a priority. A solid student services mechanism should be made available to deliver specialized services to students.

Policies should be revisited to make them appropriate in the contemporary times are underway. The new normal requires new mindset that is timely, efficient, and responsive. Reviewing and augmenting policies that directly hamper the current situation should be institutionalized. Bureaucratic transactions must meet the standards and protocols to efficiently meet the needs of stakeholders, particularly the students. Revisiting office functions would also impact how the entire institution operates during the pandemic.

Addressing the challenge brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic starts with informed and vigilant stakeholders. A great deal of policies, programs, services, and projects that aim at raising awareness on sensitivity and pandemic response should be central to detailed actions related to education processes during the pandemic. Once stakeholders are aware and have accepted the reality of the current situation, the next vital step would be providing them with ideas on how they can contribute to efforts in successfully delivering education in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis.

Policy inputs presented in this section are informed by the findings of the study. It is assumed that when these inputs are utilized as a springboard for the crafting of policies in relation to the graduate education of Filipino students, more proactive, responsive, and effective policy mandates will emerge. These policy inputs are not typically anchored on the top-to-bottom direction of policy planning, creation, and implementation. They integrate the bottom-to-top perspective (awareness and information), which could eventually create a synergy on policy makers' and stakeholders' participation, given the challenges

brought about by the pandemic.

The inputs mentioned in this section reveal that addressing the needs in time of the pandemic is not bounded on health and medical attention alone. As the study reveals, it greatly impacts mental health and technological support to graduate students.

#### **4.0 Conclusions**

It is indeed a challenge to continue graduate education while the entire society is preoccupied by the effects of COVID-19. The economy has already suffered, and the health system has been struggling since the outbreak of the pandemic. Sustaining the education system through mechanisms that address the needs of the students surely creates significant milestones.

Filipino graduate students have explored numerous ways and means in dealing with the effects of the pandemic. While some just took the situation as a usual occurrence as they proceed with their usual tasks, the majority of them migrated to online means and platforms. It is also worthy to know how some view the experience as a source of opportunity. Particular challenges faced are related to technology and internet access. As graduate work is expected to be about research tasks, subscribing to paid resources is seen as an issue. It is also crucial to recognize how the experience has caused stress for students. The experienced challenges are resolved by augmenting students' technological capacity, realigning personal values and perspectives, and resorting to free and open-access journals to sustain research activities.

The COVID-19 experience has taught graduate students the importance of technology, the significance of revisiting one's values, and the reflection on their quest to finish their graduate studies. Lastly, assistance to graduate

students can be done by proactively offering infrastructure assistance, socio-emotional support, and institutionalizing responsive and flexible communication mechanisms.

The findings of the study are sound and effective springboard in crafting policies for graduate education in the new normal. As these inputs are aligned with the experiences of Filipino graduate students, it is expected that these could contribute to sustaining equitable access, given the current situation. The inputs demonstrate a clear, transparent, and consistent approach to deliver the goals of graduate education.

The narratives of the participants serve as crucial springboard in potentially situating the inquiries of the study in other contexts. As the pandemic continues to shape the education landscape, teaching and learning mechanisms have shifted to common directions, thus creating similar and overarching experiences and challenges among teacher, students, and other stakeholders. While different levels of education require specific and unique strategies to effectively deliver lessons and anticipate essential learning outcomes, this study has established potential transferability to other education levels and involved stakeholders.

### Limitations and Future Research

The findings presented in this study have to be taken in light of some identified limitations. Since the present study deals with the experiences of graduate students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the research presents limitations in terms of the sampled population and availability of cited literatures concerning actual mechanisms implemented during the health crisis. Also, due to the nature of the study being a recent phenomenon, particular literatures are also considered to be limited. As community quarantine protocols are

still in effect, the online data-gathering procedure has also contributed to the manner the data are collected.

Future researchers could explore the narrative of graduate students covering larger and complex academic programs (for example, those that require practicum courses). It is also worthy to examine the narratives of students in relation to their household chores and other social roles that they assume. Moreover, it would also be worthy to highlight how higher education institutions have implemented strategies and mechanisms to address the concerns of graduate students. Lastly, investigating how the pandemic experiences of students could impact the landscape of graduate education in the country would also serve as a timely and promising inquiry.

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