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Continuing The Distance Learning Modality of Graduate Studies in Post-Covid Philippines: A Survey

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Cover Page Footnote

The authors would like to thank the graduate students, colleges, and universities that participated in this survey. Without your participation, this would not be possible.

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CONTINUING THE DISTANCE LEARNING MODALITY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN POST-COVID PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

Getting a graduate education is one of the most important parts of a professional in a field. It allows them to climb higher in the professional rankings or even get higher pay for their academic work. All graduate students are adults and self-directed due to their past experiences in work or practice. However, when the pandemic hit the world, these self-directed learners were not spared from shutting of schools. In the Philippines, most graduate schools deliver their lessons through the traditional mode or face-to-face until the pandemic that they shifted in the emerging online learning modality. Using the mixed method of quantitative and qualitative type of study the researchers were able to gather 419 graduate students from various regions of the archipelago to take part in the study. The researchers found out that upon experiencing the benefits of online learning, graduate students want to continue this modality even in the future. More than a third of the respondents also claimed that they want the blended or hybrid type of graduate studies as opposed to going back to the more traditional face-to-face classes. The reasons for these can vary on each learner's situation.

Key words: graduate studies, post-covid, distance learning, online learning, Philippines, higher education, emergency remote learning

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Introduction

The year 2020 has brought humans unprecedented events that would change most of how people live their day-to-day lives. So much so that the learning process totally shifted from four walls of classroom to bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms, or any spaces where the digital network can be accessed. The rapid increase in demand for the most convenient type of learning created a new era of digital learners from all levels of education (Gula, 2022). However, as humans win the battle against the unseen and start to go back to normal schooling, the question remains whether humans are still going back to what they used to in getting an education.

Thus, to further the data available to the research community this study aimed to present the views of graduate and post graduate students in the Philippines about going back to traditional schooling after experiencing the benefits and convenience of online and distance learning for more than two years now.

During pandemic, such as the current era when the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus has infected the entire world, online teaching emerged as major teaching deliver. As proven by its significance during the 2020 pandemic, online education enables unparalleled access to learning possibilities and educational innovations (World Bank, 2022). The innovation of video conferencing and web applications have required learners to actively participate during the teaching processes. Role play, interactive mobile and web programs have been developed that are focused on student-centered education allowed teachers and educational institutions to contribute to optimum learning experience regardless of distance. With the use of ICT (information and communications technology), the online learning process may be done by mixing recorded videos and live classes with more online engagement, which can help mitigate the effects of unreliable networks and promote active participation (Ionescu et al, 2020).

Online education provides students with fresh courses and engaging learning techniques while also allowing them to study at their own speed and enjoy the challenge, flexibility, and independence that this educational process provides. Course materials in digital format are always up to date and may be changed at any time. Teachers or tutors can use the production of digital courses to do research and experiment with various teaching methods, technology for content display to enhance their digital abilities, and to keep up with the expectations of their customer students (Jamisal & Núñez, 2022).

Because online education is not constrained by geography, students can study from the finest professors no matter where they live and attend the top schools in the world, regardless of where they reside (Núñez & Cuisia-Villanueva, 2020). Small courses (groups) are developed in online education so that the teacher can facilitate individualized learning, collaborative knowledge, and student-centered engagement. Individual learning differences must be always kept in mind when crafting an instructional plan or layout for online learning. Understanding learning styles and how to effectively address them in the online environment is necessary for developing the techniques needed for successful online teaching and learning. All involved in the teaching process benefit from this mode of education, however the quality of delivery shall always be held (Ionescu et al, 2020).

Practically, online learning opened a new wave of affordable and accessible way of learning (Saunders & Kirkham, 2021). Within the comfort of homes or apartments, learners can access their course materials with just internet connection. As compare pre-pandemic, most of the graduate schools in the Philippines utilized the face-to-face type of learning. Thus, online learning, increased the access to graduate education to more professionals locally or abroad (Nuñez & Cuisia-Villanueva, 2020).

Connectedness in Distance Learning

In the context of many modern information practices, learning outcomes can be linked to connectedness through online networks and open online information sharing. Because of interaction and connectivity, the learning process may be regarded as a social network relationship, an interpersonal relationship, and a result of interaction and connectivity, and how network connectivity can be utilized as input for developing new learning environments (Haythornthwaite, 2019). However, connectivity over the internet while the learners are physically separated can cause the feeling of isolation once the transaction is over (Núñez and Cuisia-Villanueva, 2020).

If a good learning environment is developed and maintained, multicultural learning communities are formed, timely feedback is offered, and suitable technology is utilized to deliver course content, the online learning experience becomes more appealing to online learners. Because there is an obvious similarity between students' cultural features and organizational, technological, and pedagogical components of distance learning, that may aid the experience and quality for all learners and the environment, hence it shall be inclusive. Through the lens of care theory, this article examines the function of emotions in the online learning process. The TLC (tender loving care), even in the online learning environment will enable to establish a caring culture when it is established by the teachers and educational institutions (Robinson et al, 2020). Online education cannot totally replace conventional education, it can complement it by giving students and teachers a more nuanced experience.

The use of LMS or Learning Management System had also eased the burden of both learners, teachers, and the school itself, it allowed them to manage seamlessly the transactions required to process the learning goals (Pappas, 2016). Students' performance in online education is influenced by the quality of the platform utilized in the educational process. The quality of data as well as the quality of learning units, systems, and services, as well as their compatibility with students' needs and expectations, can all help to boost user satisfaction and effective use of the online education system, as well as acceptance of the opportunities presented by the online learning process.

Moodle activities promote a constructivist approach to learning (constructivism is a way of knowing in which students interact, reflect, and utilize their own experiences to generate new knowledge) and can give students many sorts of learning. The teacher's participation in developing and leading the online learning experience has a significant impact on the success of online activities (Jordan, 2013). Learning analysis helps teachers reflect on online teaching and interactive learning, causing them to concentrate on the most important teaching and learning activities (Han et al, 2015). The results shows that technological innovation that allow teachers to communicate with learners and back are more significate and considerable to students than merely using tools that would just let the learners do it themselves (Small et all, 2012). Collaboration, idea comparison, platform usability, group planning, and task management are all factors that contribute to happiness when using a collaborative e-learning module (Biasutti 2011).

It is worth noting that a collaborative learning strategy utilizing Google Docs enhanced learning outcomes, increases teaching interest, and lowered cognitive load and that mobile learning's collaborative learning approach is more successful than personal learning (Huang et al, 2020). Incorporating augmented reality (AR) into the e-learning process has several benefits, including support for kinesthetic (tactile) learning, collaborative learning, student-centered learning, and creative learning. At the same time, AR helps students become more engaged and motivated, pay attention in class, participate verbally, and concentrate (Alzahrani, 2020).

Emergence of Blended Mode

Simultaneously, the existence of a hybrid educational model, in which the finest online and offline approaches are combined, may provide stakeholders with an ideal experience (Gupta & Jain,

2017). The instructor may be more accessible, supportive, expect and encourage high educational standards, present difficult tasks that can produce diverse interactions, and stimulate the growth of more elevated to increase the quality of the educational process using a blended learning system (Gula, 2022). Students' engagement, the quality of their learning, and their educational experience all receive help from the blended learning system (Wdowik, 2014). The effectiveness of distance education is built on the employment of smart technology and a self-adjusting learning technique, according to studies. In addition, the blended mode allows learners to physically interact inside the classroom and allow them process non-academic requirements such as document processing and other related processes (Oost, 2021).

Although online education has many advantages and the ability to bypass traditional educational boundaries in terms of time and geography, techniques to stimulate student participation and lessen feelings of social isolation (Núñez, 2022) must be created. Collaboration, organizational and instructional structures, philosophical assumptions, and educational environments may all be utilized to alleviate one of the most significant obstacles of online education, namely distance, which leads to a sense of social isolation (Ionescu et al, 2020).

A study conducted by Snyman and van den Berg (2021) in a South African university mentioned that graduate students with prior knowledge about the method of study students were prepared to take further undertakings in their studies. Prior knowledge made learning visible, acknowledged, and thus created awareness to continue. On a global scale, UNESCO (2020) has compiled a list of applications, platforms, and educational resources aimed at assisting parents, teachers, schools, and school administrators in helping student learning and supplying social care and interaction during school closure periods, which are divided into three categories based on distance learning needs: psychosocial support resources, digital learning management systems, and systems built for use on basic mobile phones.

Graduate Studies in the Philippines

The Philippines is one of the countries that has liberal and open policies around the world. Getting higher education is free to all citizens at all government institutions. Graduate studies, on the other hand, are not free but it is very affordable, especially in public universities, some public universities can offer a master's degree with less than 100 USD per year. There are also scholarships for public school teachers to take further education which can be funded by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). There are also many choices among private institutions for which prices may vary.

To ensure the quality of graduate education in the country, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) along with groups of approved accrediting agencies oversee the graduate schools of different colleges and universities. University courses are ranked from Levels 1 to 4 with level 4 as the highest. While in private education, institutions are classified as regulated, deregulated, and autonomous. Achieving these accolades, higher education institutions (HEIs) both private and public need rigorous scrutiny of accrediting agencies. Each accredited institution will enjoy privileges once accreditation is achieved. One of the privileges is offering distance learning.

Prior to covid19, there were only a limited number of public and private institutions that offer distance modes of delivery that are approved by CHED. Aside from stand-alone open universities such as the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Central Luzon State University – Distance, Online, and Transnational University (CLSU-DOT), and CAP College Foundation, there are also universities that offer online programs. However, those programs do not stand alone as a separate unit from the university. An example of this is the Visayas State University – Online Program or the University of Northern Philippines Open Learning program.

Universities are much inclined toward the traditional or face-to-face delivery of lessons in all levels of study. The use of a Learning Management System (LMS) was not as popular as it was during the pandemic. Graduate students needed to learn new digital skills to cope with the new setup in graduate studies. As basic education and undergraduate levels can cope with fast digital skills adaptation, graduate students may have found it challenging to adjust in the new computer applications to be used for each class (Scarpetta & Quintini, 2020).

Research Objective

The study aimed to elicit information from Filipino graduate students about continuing the flexible, distance, or online learning modality of taking their master's or doctorate courses or go back to traditional face-to-face learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted mixed methods of descriptive quantitative and thematic qualitative studies. To prove, this research presents the graduate and post-graduate students' perspectives in going back to face-to-face learning or continuing to the use of distance learning in their graduate studies now that schools have started welcoming back learners to traditional learning in the classroom

Data Collection

The researchers who come from different parts of the country were tapped to contribute and gather pertinent data. Using a self-made questionnaire through Google Forms, a structured close-ended set of questions plus three open-ended questions will be crafted and sent through emails, QR codes, Facebook Messenger groups chats, and other social media sites. Using stratified sampling, researchers were divided into different parts of the group from different parts of the country to select participants (graduate students) as the final sample of the population (Simkus, 2022).

The survey question included simple questions:

1. Which region are you from?
 - 1.1. Choices were Regions 1 through 13, plus NCR, CAR, and BARMM
2. Which degree are you currently enrolled in?
 - 2.1. Master's Degree
 - 2.2. Doctorate Degree
3. What type of institution are you enrolled in? Private HEI (Higher Education Institution) or SUC (State University/College)?
4. Did you have any training on online learning or ICT skills improvement training? Yes, or No?
5. After two years of doing remote learning both professionally and as student, do you still prefer to: (CHOOSE ONLY ONE)
 - 5.1. Continue online and distance learning? Why?
 - 5.2. Go back to full face-to-face classes? Why?
 - 5.3. Implement flexible or blended type of learning? Why?

Study Locale and Limitation

Participants of the study are Filipino graduate (master's) and post-graduate (doctorate) students, currently enrolled in a special distance learning mode started by CHED in the school year 2021-2022. There is no limit on the number of participants who want to undergo the study if they qualify for the intended population of the study however with a timeline of one month from April 2022 to May 2022. Respondents are divided into three as per the island groups of the archipelago Luzon (north), Visayas (central), and Mindanao (south), as shown in Table 1. Researchers were tasked to cover as many regions as possible.

Table 1. Respondents from different island groups.

Island group	Master's (N=338)	Doctorate (N=81)	Overall (N=419) Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Luzon	170	51	221	52.74%
Visayas	46	13	59	14.08%
Mindanao	122	17	139	33.17%

Data Analysis

In interpreting quantitative data, the researchers used a descriptive way of measuring data by ranking and sorting them. Whereas thematic analysis using themes and codes (Jamisal and Núñez, 2022) were used to analyze qualitative data from the responses. The themes are named based on the most recurring responses among the qualitative data gathered from the responses and presented in quoted statements translated in English.

Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data which usually comes from interviews, texts, scripts, using themes, codes, and patterns that are repeated and recurring among the population (Caulfield, 2022). In the research, researchers presented only one qualitative question which aimed to seek wide range of perspectives among the respondents all over the Philippines. On the other hand, the quantitative data gathered is treated through descriptive statistics which primarily supply a simple summary of the samples and the measures by simply describing the data and then conclusions are drawn (Trochim, 2022). After identifying the recurring themes during the analysis (Caulfield, 2022) among the responses, the researchers used focused coding (Saldaña, 2009) to narrow them down into categories.

The researcher opted to do descriptive statistics to analyze the numerical data using random stratified sampling (Thomas, 2021). Descriptive statistics describe and present the summary of the data gathered from the samples. When doing research, calculating descriptive statistics is a critical initial step that should always be completed before performing inferential statistical comparisons. Descriptive statistics contain measures of frequency, central tendency, dispersion/variation, and location, as well as several types of variables: nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio (Kaur, Stoltzfus, & Yellapu, 2018). While stratified sampling is a technique when a bigger population is divided into sub-groups and samples are taken into smaller groups called strata

Ethical Consideration

To be able to gather data from the target subjects, the authors sent letters of request to conduct the study to individuals, schools, or organizations that need them. Data gathered were strictly hidden and visible only to the authors as per the Philippine Data Privacy Act 10173, researchers are not permitted to divulge any single personal data of the respondents without their knowledge and consent. Hence, it was stipulated in the questionnaire before they took part in the study.

Funding, Interest, and Limitation of the Study

No funding was received or granted from any individual or organization to conduct this study. No conflict of interests was recorded or seen during the conduct of the study. In addition to not receiving any funding, constraint to some other regions which were difficult to access due to location of researchers hindered to gather pertinent data to balance the distribution of the respondents, hence the study is does not represent the entire population of the graduate students of the country.

Discussion

During the month-long data gathering, the researchers were able to collect responses from 419 graduate students all over the country. These students are currently enrolled in different graduate schools in either public or private HEI (higher education institution) in different regions in the country (see table 2).

Table 2. Respondents from different regions of the country.

Region	Distribution (n)	Percentage (%)
Luzon - Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR)	32	7.64%
Luzon - National Capital Region (NCR)	35	8.35%
Luzon - Region 1 - Ilocos	57	13.60%
Luzon - Region 2 - Cagayan Valley	2	0.48%

Luzon - Region 3 - Central Luzon	22	5.25%
Luzon - Region 4a - Calabarzon	62	14.80%
Luzon - Region 4b - Mimaropa	6	1.43%
Luzon - Region 5 - Bicol Region	5	1.19%
Visayas - Region 6 - Western Visayas	20	4.77%
Visayas - Region 7 - Central Visayas	10	2.39%
Visayas - Region 8 - Eastern Visayas	29	6.92%
Mindanao - Region 9 - Zamboanga Peninsula	2	0.48%
Mindanao - Region 10 - Northern Mindanao	15	3.58%
Mindanao - Region 11 - Davao Region	3	0.72%
Mindanao - Region 12 - Soccsksargen	30	7.16%
Mindanao - Region 13 - Caraga	3	0.72%
Mindanao - Bangsamoro (BARMM)	86	20.53%

A total of 419 graduate students participated in the study, 221 (52.74%) from Luzon group, 59 (14.08%) from Visayas, and 139 (33.17%) from Mindanao. Luzon is where the capital Metro Manila is located and where most many big public and private national universities are situated. While the Visayas group, which was only composed of three regions and sporadically distributed through islands, only got the lowest participants. Mindanao, on the other hand, is the southern island group which is also large in land area.

Table 3. Summary of higher institutions that respondents are currently enrolled in.

Type of Institution	Luzon (N=221)		Visayas (N=59)		Mindanao (N=139)		Overall (N=419)	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Private HEI	95	42.99%	15	25.42%	39	28.06%	149	35.56%
State College/University	126	57.01%	44	74.58%	100	71.94%	270	64.44%

During the study, participants were asked about the type of HEI they are currently enrolled in. Overall, 64.44% or 270 mentioned that they are enrolled in a public or state-run HEI while 35.56% or 149 of all participants are matriculating in private HEIs. According to the Philippines' Commission on Higher Education, in 2019 there were 672 government funded HEIs and 1,721 private HEIs. In the table, though private education is more than half the number of the publicly funded institutions, graduate students tend to choose to matriculate to state owned HEIs one of the reasons could be the tuition fees. On average tuition fees in graduate school run around Php 25,000 (500 USD) to Php 50,000 (1,000 USD) per five-month semester (coins.ph) and an average employee salary range from Php 20,000 to Php 30,000 a month. While in public HEIs, graduate school fees range only from Php 5,000 to Php 10,000 per five-month semester.

Table 4. Participated in digital skills training before enrolling.

Participated in digital skills training?	Luzon (N=221)		Visayas (N=59)		Mindanao (N=139)		Overall (N=419)	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Yes	144	65.16%	37	62.71%	90	64.75%	271	64.68%
No	77	34.84%	22	37.29%	49	35.25%	148	35.32%

The table above shows above that the majority of all the respondents participated at any digital skills training in one way or another that would improve their skills during the online study of graduate school. Its importance allows learners to streamline their presence while increasing their capabilities gearing themselves towards more digitally inclined types of learning. The continuous disruption of digital technology gives the learners opportunities to be more productive while staying at home. Moreover, it allows the education sector to be more flexible in terms of delivery of their lessons (Morris, 2021) giving learners wide range of access to learning opportunities and not left behind the digital natives.

Table 5. Preference of the modality in lesson delivery

Type of delivery	Luzon (N=221)		Visayas (N=59)		Mindanao (N=139)		Overall (N=419)	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)

Pure distance mode	80	36.20%	23	38.98%	41	29.50%	144	34.37%
Hybrid / Blended	59	26.70%	22	37.29%	61	43.88%	142	33.89%
Face-to-face	82	37.10%	14	23.73%	37	26.62%	133	31.74%

Among the 221 respondents from Luzon, 82 or 37.10% preferred to go back to traditional or face-to-face type of learning, while 80 or 36.20% desired to continue in the current setup of pure online and distance mode. On the other hand, 59 or 26.70% of the 221 Luzon respondents wanted the hybrid or blended mode of learning delivery. The Visayas group of islands is the smallest group among the three. Among the 59 respondents from three regions, 38.98% or 23 of which wanted to continue the current setup of pure and online mode of learning, while 37.29% or 22 of the Visayas participants are eager to try the blended or hybrid mode of learning. And only 14 or 23.73% want to go back to traditional face-to-face type of learning. The third island group gathered a total of 139 responses and of which 43.88% or 61 want to try out the blended or hybrid modality, while 29.50% or 41 of all Mindanao respondents preferred to continue the current setup. The rest of the participants, 26.62% or 37 wanted to go back to traditional classroom setup. With detailed responses from different island groups, 34.37% or 144 out of 419 wanted to continue the current setup of learning while not lagging with 142 responses or 33.89% are willing to try the blended or hybrid approach. Meanwhile, 133 or 31.74% expressed their desire to go back to classroom setup.

As the data show, the sample population both chose to be more flexible in attending their classes. The pandemic has opened an opportunity for them to experience the benefits of online classes. However, as it is shown, the data can be remarkably close to each other this is due to the learning style (Gülbahar & Alper, 2004) factors that adults may have in terms of acquiring the knowledge. According to the of US Department of Education (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones 2010), older learners who attended the online classes have performed modestly as compared to those who participated in face-to-face classes. In the same study, the use of combination of online and face-to-face had larger advantage on both purely delivered separately. Similarly, Filipino adult learners also felt the benefits of online learning as it was shown on Table 6 that they cannot just become more productive but also the economic value that online learning could give to learners.

Furthermore, there was only one open-ended question put in the questionnaire, it is if they want to back to face-to-face type of learning or continue the current setup which is the online studies and soon adapt the blended or hybrid mode which will be the combination of online and face-to-face. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis and focused coding to refine and categorize the themes that recurred among the participants' responses. The three themes identified were: flexibility, emerging and existing needs, and personal connection. Under each theme, a specific code was identified to group the responses. See table 6.

Table 6. Summary of themes and codes identified among the answers of the respondents.

Theme	Initial Codes	Sample Responses
Flexibility	economy	<p>"It is simply saving me a lot of money for travel, accommodation, food, and most of all time."</p> <p>"Online classes would allow me to save more than half of my daily expenses, especially for gasoline."</p>
	convenience	<p>"We are far and having a face-to-face class would require finances and it would be very difficult since we are also full-time government workers."</p> <p>"I live in Cebu, but my university is in Metro Manila. I could get the best training just in the comfort of my home."</p> <p>"Better delivery of learning. No need to prepare computer and depend on internet."</p> <p>"There is too much work and reading in online classes. In face-to-face we just sit and listen to professor."</p> <p>"University is very accessible to me."</p>

Emerging and Existing needs	professional work	<p>“I am a school head, and we report most of the time during Saturdays. Online mode allowed me to pursue my higher education and hoping to become principal soon.”</p> <p>“I am an SBM member in our municipality. Online learning is okay for me.”</p>
	family	<p>“I get to spend more time with my kids during weekends, instead of going to graduate school on Saturdays.”</p> <p>“The pandemic opened an opportunity for me to pursue my graduate studies even if I am a stay-home mom who takes care of my small kids.”</p>
	virus	<p>“The virus is still here. I do not want to compromise my health and my family’s.”</p> <p>“I am not yet fully vaccinated.”</p>
	technology	<p>“The internet signal in our home is not strong that’s why I prefer to go back to face-to-face.”</p> <p>“Blended learning is good, with the situation of our digital infrastructure, my university is not ready.”</p> <p>“We need better LMS if my university will opt to push for this option, pure distance.”</p> <p>“Online class is very convenient, from enrollment, payment, to examination. I do not need to visit the school.”</p>
Connection	personal interaction	<p>“Face-to-face classes are much better understood by the students since teachers can explain well the methods & expound more about the topic during lesson discussions.”</p> <p>“I find face to face classes more fun and interesting. Physical interaction among my classmates is still the best. I miss going to school.”</p> <p>“Face-to-face classes will help us improve our social skills and increase the network of connections.”</p>

1. Flexibility. Under this theme, responses were grouped regardless of whether they favor face-to-face, online, or hybrid. These methodologies all offer certain types of flexibility depending on each learner. The codes identified under this theme were economy and convenience.

a. Economy. Distance education is always touted as a cheaper alternative to schooling (Becheru, 2022) because it allows learners to study at the comfort of their homes without attending the physical school that requires travelling and additional expenses to the learners. Here are some salient responses under this code:

“Lesser time/money to spend in traveling going to school especially that my school is 70 km away from my house.”

“It’s more convenient and less expensive for my part. I don’t have to travel to Tacloban every weekend if my university will continue with distance mode of learning.”

“The use of technology-assisted applications/programs has shown results that online/distance education can be affordable, effective, and efficient.”

b. Convenience. Aside from its economic value of doing distance education, the convenience it offers to those who live far from where they enrolled overshadows the reasons for going back to school.

“I live in the province of Davao del Sur, and I can’t go to Manila to finish my studies. My family depends on me, and I am also the SBM coordinator of our school”

“I chose hybrid because considering the busy schedule of both the students and professors, it will be more convenient to conduct classes in both online and face-to-face setting whichever the class chooses.”

“Implementing hybrid/blended mode of teaching supports future proofing of the current educational system therefore prepares us for future

pandemics and other unexpected events that will stop students from coming to schools.”

“Since online class has proven its 100% accuracy in delivering information to students, I strongly recommend continuing this thing because it is very beneficial to us working, and other working abroad that want to continue their masters or PhD.”

However, some viewed the convenience of face-to-face in terms of physical access to the university and its other features.

“I live near the university. I can come and go very easily especially if I need to do research and access the library for references like theses or dissertations.”

“I chose to attend the face-to-face because the internet signal in our place is very poor and it is difficult if we have a synchronous online session in Zoom.”

“My university does not accept online bank transfer and it is always hassle to go visit the school just for payment. So, might as well go back to face-to-face.”

2. Emerging and existing needs. The theme talks about the existing needs of the graduate students in their studies, professional work, family, and personal. In addition to this, the emerging needs code grouped responses that deal with digital and 21st century needs of new generations of learners. It also mentioned the need to deal with the current pandemic situation globally. The codes identified under this theme were:

a. Professional work. Most of the graduate students who participated in the study were all working professionals. Prior to the pandemic, they were at the traditional method of schooling, which is usually weekends, now the conduct of online classes has become norm to them. And these are their responses:

“With the heavy loads in school as a school head, it's better to have online class because it is very practical.”

“I do not want to go back to regular schooling because I have invested my resources like home internet and computer. I do not want to waste them just by attending classes sitting and listening when I can do it at home remotely.”

“I work six times a week and it would be impossible for me to attend the graduate classes if it is face-to-face. The asynchronous method that my university offers allows me to study at my most convenient time.”

b. Family. When the pandemic hit, people were forced to stay at home and spend more time with family. During this time, people realized the value of spending time with loved ones (Mayol-Garcia, 2022) should be always the priority because time is unpredictable, and we may not know if another deadly pandemic will hit the world. Here are some responses:

“The distance mode of learning that my university offered allowed me to spend more time with my family during the weekends instead of travelling to school.”

“The pandemic opened an opportunity for me to pursue my higher education even if I am at home taking care of and spending time with my small kids.”

“Since I work most of the time during the day, I spend little time with my family so I want to make sure that the weekends will be with them. The distance learning mode is suitable for me, and I hope it will continue until I graduate.”

- c. **Virus.** It is public knowledge that the fear of the virus still exists in all of us. As people continue to battle against it the need to proceed in everyday lives, alternative methods to delivering education have been amplified to boost provide the system with trained individual in specific fields. The respondents mentioned:

“Even though we are slowly going back to normal, it is still evident that the virus is still here. So, for our safety I would rather have blended learning (having face-to-face and distance learning).”

“It's for my health safety. Going to school with a substantial number of population and travel using public vehicle might be a way to acquire virus.”

3. **Connection.** The theme talks about the interpersonal need of human beings to connect in person. The pandemic sent us to do our professional tasks at home and spend most of our time sitting in front of the monitor. The codes that mostly occurred under this theme were personal interaction and convenience.

- a. **Personal interaction.** People are innately built to personally communicate with each other. Before the pandemic it was our day-to-day routine until we all pulled back to face-the-screen mode instead of face-to-face. The respondents felt the need to go back to traditional studying and these are their reasons:

“I can ask for more information and richer understanding through teacher and other students. The presence of my professor with classmates who are also professionals is different. I can grow more within a group of people learning together, students can interact with each other.”

“Having face-to-face classes would allow students to have hands-on and personal actual experiences on doing activities essential for the development of skills. Moreover, students would have ample time to communicate with their instructors and advisers without any hindrances coming from slow internet connection. I believe that such things would have a significant impact to the learners to be more competitive with innovative knowledge.”

“To focus more on your learning and less distraction during online learning such as household chores, work, internet connections, electricity power interruption and more.”

Conclusion

Graduate students are all professionals in their careers seeking improvement and betterment in the craft they are in. The delivery of graduate studies varies depending on which university someone is enrolled in and the accreditation that the university must qualify for distance education modality, at least in the Philippines. Before the pandemic, students who wanted to go further education attended mostly during weekends when the professional jobs are off and sometimes at night after their 9-to-5 job making it inconvenient to some who works at night or at the weekends. Sometimes, if they do enroll, they would be bombarded with bulks of assignments reducing the time they spent with their families (Coleman, 2021). Another challenge that a graduate student in the Philippines could face is the geographical location and the state of transportation. It is a public knowledge that the country is composed of thousands of islands and access to big universities could be limited to those only nearby this gives restrictions to learners to broaden their access to other graduate schools around the country,

plus the transportation situation, like chronic traffic and inefficient public services that hinders them to conveniently attend their classes.

When the pandemic hit the world, all schools in the Philippines had to shift to online delivery of lessons, including graduate studies, this allowed learners from different parts of the country to have access and to enroll to universities of their choice due to the situation. To add, the situation allowed those who live in far islands to finish their schools without leaving which gave them more savings in time, money, and spending more moments with their loved ones. As many students and institutions have already invested in technologies to be able to deliver the lessons online, many graduate students wish that the mode of study would continue even when the pandemic is over. The benefits they had would always outweigh their experiences prior to covid. The special learning mode of graduate schools has opened a new era to the Philippine education system to embrace the modality by utilizing the blended mode of delivery which will give more opportunities to the learners to pursue their education at the most convenient way.

Furthermore, with recent developments and continuous improvement in the Philippines' digital infrastructure it will not be in the far future the country would excel in flexible learning that would cater not just those living in the archipelago but also to Filipinos around the world. While the pandemic is not fully eradicated, the special online classes delivery of graduate studies continues (ABS-CBN News, 2022) or at least adapt the flexible way which will allow learners to attend both online and face-to-face at the most convenient time.

Lastly, with more than 60% of the total sample, majority of the Filipino graduate students, prefer the more flexible mode of learning or attending their graduate studies whether pure online or blended. Given the reasons mentioned such as convenience, affordability, and safety from the virus Filipino adult learners prefer to have attending their classes at a distance to spend more time with their families or be more productive in their respective chosen careers.

Recommendations

Seeing the results of the nationwide survey, the researchers recommend:

- HEIs to continue the conduct of full distance or online mode of delivering graduate studies. With this, it will allow more learners to access schools which are far from their vicinity.
- Related government institutions should provide support in improving the university's capacity in delivering the flexible method by providing stable infrastructure and qualified and trained staff to service distance learners. By providing reliable digital infrastructure only this modality will become successful and thriving in a particular country, especially the archipelagic setup of the Philippines.
- The emerging number of distance learners and proliferation of institutions offering courses must be take into consideration to maintain the highest quality of distance learning in the country. By setting up new standards in accreditations HEIs will have guide to navigate their programs that would be delivered on either online, face-to-face, or blended.
- This research can be used as future literature to educational managers, administrators, businesses, and researchers in drafting their policies or future studies in relation to these results.
- The new era of learning opened new possibilities and opportunities to the universities to access the vast pool of global learners. With this, HEIs should be able to adapt to more global standards by providing more relevant courses that would suit to foreign learners.

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