

Learning Competencies, Experiences and Problems Encountered in the Implementation of Graduate Programs of Visayas State University during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Anabella B. Tulin¹, Catherine C. Arradaza², Wenifreda T. Oclinaria³, Analyn C. Regina³, Debra Jean M. Dalin-as³, Maricar B. Posas³, & Mark Joshua S. Quevedo³

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented ongoing global problem which affect different people in different ways. The study aimed to know the effects of the world wide pandemic to graduate students in VSU and to look into the problems they encountered as well as the various coping mechanisms especially in dealing with the virtual delivery of instructions. This would provide vital information for institutional planning in the implementation of graduate programs in the university during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study was conducted through an online survey involving 200 graduate students as part of the graduate tracer studies of the university. Majority of the problems identified include the following: no stable internet connectivity; inaccessibility of laboratory facilities because of restrictions in entering the university campus; difficulty in conducting thesis analysis; unable to meet the deadlines in submitting required printed copy of reports because of delayed shipment; inaccessibility of books in the library necessary for the preparation and discussion of thesis; laboratory exercises were difficult to accomplish due to inaccessibility of laboratory equipment and facilities; and difficulty in understanding some complex lessons with virtual mode of delivery.

In addition, they also emphasized that online mode of learning is more stressful and causes anxiety. The online discussions were quite difficult and laboratory principles could not be well understood in the absence of actual practical laboratory activities in technical courses, distractions and noise in students' surroundings with the virtual mode of teaching delivery, difficulty in searching for resources, and many requirements and activities to comply.

The respondents likewise gave some suggestions to improve the online delivery of instruction. These include the provision of recorded class discussions, longer hours in taking online exams, transparency of grading system, and healthy relationship between the teacher and students.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, online survey, virtual learning

¹University Professor, Office of the Dean of Graduate School, Visayas State University, Visca, Baybay City, Leyte

²Associate Professor, Department of Horticulture, Visayas State University, Visca, Baybay City, Leyte

³Office of the Dean of Graduate School, Visayas State University, Visca, Baybay City, Leyte

*Corresponding Author : Anabella B. Tulin **Address:** Office of the Dean of Graduate School, Visayas State University, Visca, Baybay City Leyte
E-mail: anabella.tulin@vsu.edu.ph

INTRODUCTION

Graduate education is an integral part of human development that can provide leadership for the country's socio-economic development. With adequate resources, new technologies, good socio-economic and institutional conditions, graduate education molds an individual towards his/her development. Thus, real education offered in an institution of higher learning is the driving force of human development and should continuously serve to rekindle and sustain people's imagination, creativity, and innovation (Najukho, 2020).

Lincoln et. al. (2011) noted that education and research that takes place in universities, in particular, help prepare learners to deal with the unexpected, the imaginative, the creative, the unusual, the deviation, and the messiness- all of which are unpredictable and simultaneously desirable characteristics of human life and activity (Najukho, 2020).

However, in 2020, universities throughout the world had to implement major changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One of these universities is the Visayas State University (VSU) located in Baybay City, Leyte, Philippines. The university started to offer graduate degree programs in 1979 when it was then the Visayas State College of Agriculture (ViSCA). In August 11, 2001, ViSCA attained university status when it became the Leyte State university (LSU). In recognition of its wide mandate, LSU was renamed the Visayas State University (VSU) on April 27, 2007. At present, VSU is offering several graduate degree programs.

For better understanding of the extent of graduate students learning during the pandemic, the university conducted a study on the learning competencies, experiences and problems encountered in the implementation of graduate programs. In the context of education testing, Messick (1984) defines competence as what an individual knows and can do in a subject area however that knowledge and skill is acquired whether through instinct or experience or what a person knows and can do under ideal circumstances. Furthermore, they functionally relate to situations and demands in specific domains.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

The study was conducted from December 2020 to March 2021. A survey questionnaire was sent to 400 graduate students enrolled in the graduate program of VSU during the 2nd semester, AY 2020 - 2021 with active email accounts. The respondents had to fill all the required information in the questionnaire including their socio-demographic characteristics, their motivation in enrolling graduate degree programs of VSU, the competencies they learned, their learning experiences, and the challenges they encountered while taking graduate program in VSU during the COVID-19 pandemic and other pertinent questions that would answer the aim of this study.

Participants

About 400 graduate students with active email accounts were requested to answer the survey questionnaire sent to them via email. Out of the 400 graduate students, 200 responded and sent back the answered questionnaire to the graduate staff. Participants informed consent was obtained in this study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Tool for Agricultural Research version 2.0.1, from which the descriptive statistics including frequency counts, percentages, and means were obtained and presented using graphs, tables, and narrative description.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents socio-demographic characteristics

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the 200 respondents who participated in this study. A large percentage of respondents were single (73.5%), majority were female (66%) and one-half (50%) of them were at the age ranging 20-24 which classified as early working age (The World Factbook 2021).

Table 1. Percentage distribution of the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics.

	Frequency	%
Civil status		
Single	147	73.5
Married	35	17.5
Legally separated	1	0.5
Single parent	1	0.5
Prefer not to tell	16	8
Total	200	100
Sex		
Male	68	34
Female	132	66
Total	200	100
Age		
20-24 early working age	100	50
25-29 prime working age	62	31
30-34 prime working age	5	2.5
35-39 prime working age	17	8.5
40-44 prime working age	12	6
45-49 prime working age	2	1
50-54 prime working age	2	1
Total	200	100

It is shown in the figure that respondents came from different parts of the country (Figure 1). The respondents' permanent address was distributed in the three main islands of the country: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. However, a large percentage of the respondents came from the Visayan islands particularly Region 8 (70%) where the university is situated. A small percentage were from Luzon and Mindanao, particularly NCR (0.5%) and BARRM (0.5%). There were also a relatively high number of respondents from Region 7 (27%) and 6 (21%).

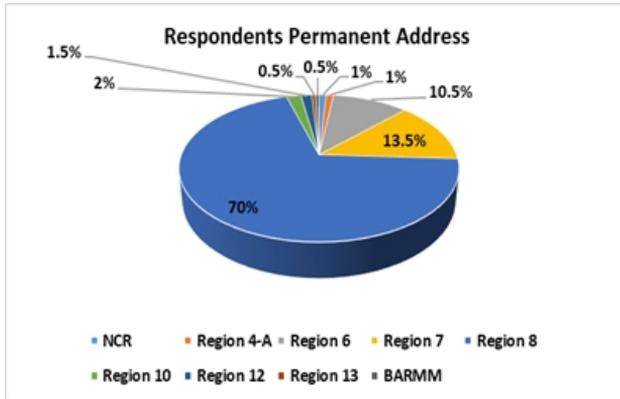


Figure 1. Respondents permanent and present address

Respondents' Motivation in enrolling in Graduate degree programs of VSU

Respondents were asked what their motivation was in enrolling in VSU's graduate degree programs. There were four motivations listed/provided in the questionnaire, i.e., enjoyment of learning, career considerations, financial consideration and desire to help to others. The respondents scaled the motivation from being not important to very important. As shown in Table 2, career consideration was the primary motivation of the respondents in enrolling masters/doctoral degree programs in VSU, followed by the desire to help others, enjoyment of learning, and financial considerations.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of the respondents' response to their motivation in enrolling in graduate degree programs of VSU

MOTIVATION	NO. OF RESPONDENTS WHO GAVE RATING					AVE. RATING
	1	2	3	4	5	
Enjoyment of Learning	1	3	9	57	123	4.54
Career considerations	1	0	3	33	158	4.78
Financial considerations	3	2	18	67	96	4.35
Desire to help others	1	0	8	45	135	4.66

*Qualitative description of the ratings: 1=not important, 2=minimally important, 3=somewhat important, 4=important, 5=very important.

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Anticipated effects in enrolling the degree programs

Respondents were also asked about their anticipated effects in enrolling their selected degree program. There were three options provided, i.e., entry into new career, advancement in current career, and career change. Figure 6 shows that a large percentage (59 %) of the respondents said that they enrolled in a masters or doctoral degree program to advance in their career once they have finished their degree. Moreover, less than half of the respondents (46.5 %) answered that enrolling in a masters or doctoral program could help them enter a new career after they have finished their degree program. A small percentage of the respondents (7.5 %) indicated that finishing their degree program could change their career in the future.

Table 3. Percentage distribution of the respondents anticipated effects in enrolling masters or doctoral degree program

ANTICIPATED EFFECTS	FREQUENC	%
Entry into new career	93	46.50
Advancement in current career	118	59
Career change	15	7.50

*multiple response

Scholarships enjoyed in VSU

Figure 7 shows that more than half of the respondents (56 %) were enrolled in VSU with scholarship and 44 % without scholarship. Of all the respondents who had a scholarship, 87.5 % of them were DOST-ASTHRDP scholars. Next were the scholars of SSCEBU Foundation, the VSU undergraduate students who availed the university scholarships intended for those who graduated with Latin honors, and the CHED scholars. Others were graduate teaching assistants (GTA) or had fellowship grants and assistance from the company they were working for (Table 4).

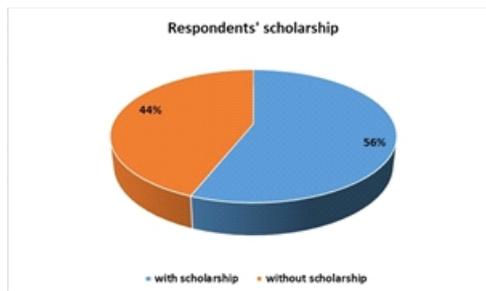


Figure 7. Percentage distribution of the respondents with and without scholarship while enrolled in their graduate degree program in VSU

Table 4. Type of respondent's scholarships

SCHOLARSHIP GRANT	FREQUENCY	%
DOSTASTHRDP	98	87.5
Fellowship Grant	1	0.90
SSCEBU Foundation	3	2.67
Company Assistance	1	0.90
Scholarship for Honor VSU Undergraduate	3	2.68
Graduate Teaching Assistant	2	1.78
CHED	3	2.68

Effects of scholarship on academic performance

Respondents were asked concerning the effects of scholarships on their academic performance. A large percentage said that their scholarships enabled them to comply their requirements on time (87.5 %) and helped them provide for their personal needs (87.5 %). Meanwhile, 85.71 % said that their scholarships encouraged them to get good grades and few (0.9 %) gave other responses such as the scholarships enabled them to support their siblings' education.

Table 5. Percentage distribution on the effects of scholarship on their academic performance

EFFECTS OF SCHOLARSHIP	FREQUENCY	%
It helps me to accomplish my requirements on time	98	87.50
It helps me to provide for my personal needs	98	87.50
It encourages me to get good grades	96	85.71
Others:		
It helps me to support my siblings financially	1	0.89

*multiple response

Mode of study delivery

The Covid-19 pandemic forced the university to modify the study delivery from largely traditional, face-to-face classes to flexible learning (FL) in order to continue delivering quality education. The implementation of FL in the university is in accordance with CHED Memo No. 45. 2020 which ordered the suspension of face-to-face classes in all levels to contain the spread of Covid-19.

At the graduate school, FL along with limited face-to-face classes were implemented at the height of Covid-19. The FL included modular, online synchronous and asynchronous and the combination of modular and online learning. According to Win (2020) FL is a great learning system for HEIs to meet students' diverse needs and preferences most particularly with the threat of Covid-19. This learning system allowed the students to adjust and be prepared for the new challenges in their learning environments. Specifically, synchronous and asynchronous learning are student-friendly learning modalities, however these

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require resources and technical skills in online platforms. Oztok et. al. (2013) described synchronous learning as a real-time online or remote education that follows a set of schedule and login times. This includes video conferencing, live chats, and live-streamed lectures. Asynchronous, on the other hand, occurs at one's favorable time (Finol, 2020). This includes reading materials/modules. The study of Arciosa (2022) on the effectiveness of FL in teaching college students amidst the Covid-19 pandemic revealed that FL is important in terms of the students' academic learning competencies.

Meanwhile, the limited face-to-face classes were implemented merely with students who opted to stay in the university during the lockdown. These students were about to finish their graduate studies and were conducting their thesis and required minimal supervision from their graduate academic advisers, thus they were allowed to see and discuss their studies personally with their thesis advisers.

As shown in Figure 10, a large percentage of the respondents (70 %) pursued their graduate study through online classes. Twenty percent (20 %) of them were through the combination of online and modular and 14.5 % were through face-to-face classes. However, the 14 % respondents who chose the face-to-face classes as their mode of study delivery were those who had finished their regular subjects by the time of the enhanced quarantine and were only retained because they were not able to conduct their thesis as required to graduate.

Table 6. Percentage distribution of the respondents according to the mode of learning they have in VSU at the time of pandemic.

	F R E Q U E N C	%
Face to face	24	12
Online (synchronous/asynchro	133	66.5
Modular	2	1
Combination (online and modular)	41	20.5

Competencies/Skills in their graduate degree programs with FL

Messick (1984) defines competence as 'what an individual knows and can do in a subject area however that knowledge and skill is acquired, whether through instruction or experience or 'what a person knows and can do under ideal circumstances.' Asfani et. al. (2016) delineated the factors that influenced the competence level of a student. These factors are the students themselves, the teachers, and the supporting environment. Teachers' teaching performance, students' learning satisfaction and students' achievement motivation have a considerable influence on and relation to students' competence achievement.

In this study, respondents were asked about the competencies/skills they learned while pursuing their graduate studies with their mode of study delivery. The top leading competencies/skills learned by the respondents were communication skills (86 %), critical thinking skills (74.5 %) and information technology skills (65 %). Communication skill refers to the ability of the students to express their thoughts and ideas in the class. Taking graduate programs in VSU

enhance graduate students' communication skills as they are required to do individual oral presentation and other activities that hone their skills in communicating. In terms of critical thinking skills, graduate students accorded the freedom to think independently. They were trained to conduct research on their own with minimal supervision from their academic/thesis adviser. With the global threat of Covid-19 and the advent of high-ends technology, most of the transactions are done electronically at the university. This enabled the graduate students to get familiarized and became well-oriented with ICTs. The other learned competencies/skills are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Competencies and skills learned by the respondents in their graduate education

COMPETENCIES AND SKILLS	FREQUENCY	%
Communication skills	172	86
Entrepreneurial/Managerial skills	48	24
Problem solving skills	120	60
Human relation skills	115	57.50
Information technology skills	130	65
Critical thinking skills	149	74.50
Teaching skills	101	50.50

*multiple response

Major strengths and weaknesses of the graduate degree programs pursued by the respondents

The respondents were asked to give ratings based on the strengths and weaknesses of the degree program they pursued in VSU. There were seven criteria provided as shown in Table 7. The highest ratings given by the respondents was on the relevance of the program to professional requirements (4.75 %). This implies that the degree program enrolled by the respondent was very important and highly relevant to their job and career that they will pursue in the future. Respondents also positively responded to the teacher-student relationship which had an average rating of 4.40 followed by teaching/learning environment (4.36), quality of delivery (4.34), range of course offered (4.27), and number of optional subjects (4.10). Meanwhile, school facilities including library and laboratory and extracurricular activities of the degree program earned relatively low average ratings, 3.81 and 3.45, respectively. This implies that these areas should be given attention to improve students' satisfaction.

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Table 7. Major strengths and weaknesses of the graduate degree program

	GAVE RATING					AVE. RATINGS
	3	4	5			
Range of course offered	0	2	25	87	81	4.27
Number of optional subjects	2	1	34	98	60	4.10
Relevance of the program to professional requirements	0	1	6	34	154	4.75
Extracurricular activities	10	18	64	81	22	3.45
Work placement/attachment	5	5	27	75	78	4.14
Teaching/Learning Environment	1	3	20	73	99	4.36
Quality of Delivery	0	6	13	84	91	4.34
Teacher Student Relationship	1	3	15	75	100	4.40
Library/Lab etc.	9	11	42	76	54	3.81

*Qualitative description of the ratings 1=very weak, 2=weak, 3=can't decide, 4=strong, 5=very strong

Level of interest in pursuing graduate degree program

Respondents were asked to rate their level of interest in pursuing master's/doctoral program in VSU (Table 8). The Master of Science program was rated 4.73 by respondents which means that they were interested to very interested in this degree. Next to MS is the MM which respondents indicated that they were interested in. On the other hand, the PhD and Med programs had low average rating, 3.83 and 3.72, respectively. This means that most of the respondents were only somewhat interested in pursuing these degree programs.

Table 8. Interest levels of the respondents in pursuing masters/doctoral degree program in VSU

DEGREE PROGRAM	RESPONDENTS' INTEREST LEVEL					AVE RATING
	1	2	3	4	5	
Master of Science	2	1	1	24	110	4.73
Master of Education	8	3	6	7	23	3.72
Master of Management	1	1	9	4	18	4.12
Doctor of Philosophy	4	5	3	11	18	3.83

*Qualitative description of the ratings: 1=not interested, 2=minimally interested, 3=somewhat interested, 4=interested, 5=very interested

Most important factors for the selection of a graduate degree program

According to Hegarty (2011) understanding the motivational factors behind a students' reason for selecting a graduate program of study can serve to aid educators and program administrators in the design of education programs. Hoxby (2004) emphasized three important factors in the selection of a graduate program. These factors were financial, peer relationships, and ease in the application process.

Respondents were asked about the most important factors that influenced their selection of a graduate degree program. There were ten criteria provided as shown in Table 9. Respondents gave importance to the program academic

Table 7 Major strengths and weaknesses of the graduate degree program reputation (4.68). VSU is a prestigious university in the county known for its excellence in academic endeavors with many educators having degrees obtained from international universities. The respondents trust the schools' academic reputation (4.67). They also approved the class availability (4.60), convenient schedule (4.45), and student support services (4.28) offered to them under the graduate programs they selected. On the other hand, the factors that were less considered as important was the cohort system. It means that respondents enrolled their degree program without much influence from their peers. The other factors are enumerated in Table 9.

FACTORS IN SELECTING GRADUATE PROGRAMS	NO. OF RESPONDENTS WHO GAVE RATINGS					AVE RATING
	1	2	3	4	5	
Schools academic reputation	0	2	3	53	38	4.67
Programs academic reputation	0	0	4	55	138	4.68
Preference for a faith-based university	7	0	22	69	84	4.12
Convenient schedule	1	4	13	63	112	4.45
Student support services	1	3	5	138	78	4.28
Personal attention from faculty	0	13	15	78	85	4.23
Small class sizes	4	13	37	74	65	3.95

*Qualitative description of the ratings: 1=Not important, 2=Minimally important, 3=Somewhat important, 4=important, 5=very important. Respondents were asked to rate their level of interest in pursuing master's/doctoral program in VSU (Table 8). The Master of Science program was rated 4.73 by respondents which means that they were interested to very interested in this degree. Next to MS is the MM which respondents indicated that they were interested in. On the other hand, the PhD and Med programs had low average rating, 3.83 and 3.72, respectively. This means that most of the Desirability of the graduate degree program characteristics.

Table 9 shows levels of the respondents in pursuing graduate degree program based on program characteristics. Except for the cohort system, all of the program characteristics were considered as desirable to very desirable by the respondents. Particularly, the top five program characteristics that the respondents find desirable to very desirable were the school's academic reputation, programs academic reputation, convenient schedule, class availability, and student support services. The other program characteristics are listed in table 10.

Table 10 Qualitative description of the ratings: 1=not interested, 2= minimally interested, 3=somewhat interested, 4=interested, 5=very interested

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS	NO. OF RESPONDENTS WHO GAVE RATINGS					Ave. ratings
	1	2	3	4	5	
Schools academic reputation	0	2	3	53	38	4.67
Programs academic reputation	0	0	4	55	138	4.68
Preference for a faith-based university	7	0	22	69	84	4.22
Convenient schedule	1	4	13	63	112	4.45
Student support services	1	3	5	138	78	4.28
Personal attention from faculty	0	13	15	78	85	4.23
Small class sizes	4	13	37	74	65	3.95
Class availability	0	1	15	64	109	4.49
Cohort system	4	13	40	61	71	3.10
Accelerated program completion	4	6	17	68	98	4.30

*Qualitative description of the ratings: 1=Not desirable, 2=Minimally desirable, 3=Somewhat desirable, 4=Desirable, 5=Very desirable. Respondents were asked about the most important factors that influenced their selection of a graduate degree program. There were ten criteria provided as shown in Table 9. Respondents gave importance to the program academic

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Respondents' learning experiences while taking a graduate degree program in VSU during the pandemic condition

Respondents identified major learnings acquired from the new mode of learning. These are as follows:

The virtual mode of learning was challenging and interesting. Due to the global pandemic, VSU heavily relied on virtual mode of teaching and learning to continue serving its stakeholders. According to respondents, virtual mode of learning was challenging and at the same time interesting. It was challenging because of the many difficulties they encountered such as poor internet connectivity causing disruptions in online classes; power interruption particularly during weekends; areas were not conducive to learning due to many distractions; difficulty in submitting requirements especially those needed in printed copies due to longer duration of shipment; laboratory exercises and field activities were not accomplished due to lack of resources and students were also not allowed to enter the campus to conduct the laboratory and field activities. On the other hand, respondents also cited advantages of virtual learning. According to them, this new mode of learning was very interesting to them because it further helped them pass the master's doctoral program in VSU (Table 8). The Master of Science program was rated 4.73 by respondents which rather than that they were interested to that further caused them to graduate in time and in six years.

Developed self-discipline, self-motivation, self-programming, became more attentive, creative, and more patient. Respondents indicated that they were interested in the discipline, self-motivation, self-programming, became more attentive, creative, and more patient. Respondents said that virtual learning taught them to be more patient. Instead of quitting, they chose to persevere for levels of the coding to them, they had instructors and professors who understood the VSU situation and were considerate enough to give them chances whenever they missed out on some activities or learning tasks. Both teachers and learners had trouble with the new mode of learning. In addition, the good thing about virtual learning is that it shaped them into a better individual. It helped them to learn how to set priorities and focus on the things that matters to them, their career and future.

Learned many techniques in finishing all the needed course requirements. According to the respondents, studying while at home is quite challenging. Aside from distractions, staying at home also divided their time between doing household chores and school activities. However, despite the additional task and responsibilities, respondents were able to find ways to finish all their needed requirements by developing many techniques or approaches. While they studied at home, respondents were also productively helping inside their respective homes.

Most important factors for the selection of a graduate degree program
According to Hegarty (2011) understanding the motivational factors behind a student's reason for selecting a graduate program of study can serve to aid educators and program administrators in the design of education programs. Hoxby (2004) emphasized three important factors in the selection of a graduate choice but to be more resourceful. According to them, virtual learning provided insufficient learning compared to face-to-face classes. Browsing the internet was very helpful to them as it helped them maximize their learnings and prepared them for the new learning topics making them more equipped in answering the learning tasks and more knowledgeable.

Respondents were asked about the most important factors that influenced their selection of a graduate degree program. There were ten criteria provided as shown in Table 9. Respondents gave importance to the program academic

Developed self-learning and assessments of the learning modules. For the respondents, virtual learning helped them develop self-learning. They did not rely solely on what the professors taught in lectures. Furthermore, respondents said that they become more independent learners.

Learned to regularly keep in touch and not to hesitate to communicate with the professors. Whenever there were confusions on the delivery of learnings, respondents could directly communicate with their professors to clarify vague matters.

Developed skills in using Online Learning Platforms. Virtual learning did not just develop their personalities but also their skills in using modern technologies. The confinement due to COVID-19 led to the full use of ICTs. Although there was already continuous evolution of the learning process, this was heightened with the presence of the coronavirus wherein all levels of learning (primary – tertiary) were introduced to the different online learning platforms.

Problems encountered/concerns encountered by respondents while taking graduate program in VSU during the COVID-19 pandemic

Laguador (2020) investigated the challenges in flexible learning among college students in rural and urban areas in the Philippines during the pandemic. Among the challenges encountered by college students living in rural areas were the achievement of learning outcomes and attendance to synchronous learning class because of low internet connectivity and loss of electricity. Students from rural areas have also expressed significantly higher challenges in terms of limited communication with teachers while there were moderate challenges on the delivery of instruction and achievement of learning outcome regardless of location. Gocotano et. al. (2021) determined that difficulty in internet access was the root cause of the struggles experienced by students during the implementation of flexible learning, as well as other factors such as lack of gadgets, load, etc.

In the United States, Son et. al. (2020) studied the effects of Covid-19 on college students' mental health. Their findings ascertained a considerable negative impact of the pandemic on a variety of academic, health and lifestyle- related outcomes. They found that majority of the participants were experiencing increased stress and anxiety due to Covid-19.

In this study, respondents were asked to list down the challenges they encountered while taking their graduate courses during the pandemic. The slow and low internet connectivity was the highest among their problems. This is in accordance with the findings of previous studies conducted in the Philippines (Laguador 2020; Gocotano et al 2021). There were also respondents whose mental health were negatively affected. In particular, the problems encountered by the respondents were as follows:

No stable internet connection. Philippines ranked 104th based on the world's average connection speed of internet (Salac and Kim 2016). There are two main challenges in the provision of internet infrastructure and connectivity in the country according to Salac and Kim (2016). These are the Internet Service Provision Market and the Internet Infrastructure and Geographical Settings. The Internet Service Provision Market pertains to the ownership of the internet

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Table 7. In the Philippines, the activities of the graduates in providing internet connection are owned by private companies, which according to Akue-Kpakpo (2012), as cited by Salac and Kim (2016), can result to imperfect competition. The second cause is the Internet Infrastructure and Geographical Settings. The geographic location of the country is a great challenge as it requires large investment because not all islands are interconnected to the grid (Salac and Kim, 2016). Based on the permanent and present address provided by the respondents, most of them were living in the provinces of Visayas and Mindanao where internet connectivity is mostly low (Casillano, 2019).

Inaccessibility to laboratory facilities. Because of restrictions in entering the university campus, conducting thesis analysis and laboratory exercises were difficult. While some of the experiments/laboratory exercises given to respondents were doable in their homes, they still found it difficult to accomplish due to limited resources.

Unable to meet the deadlines. Respondents also had a hard time in submitting their requirements particularly those required in printed copies due to long and delayed shipment.

Inaccessibility of library facilities. Some of the respondents said that they have encountered problems in the preparation and discussion of their thesis due to inaccessibility of library facilities where they can find references.

Difficulty in understanding some complex lessons with virtual study delivery. According to respondents attending virtual classes with unstable internet coverage makes learning very difficult, especially with some complex lessons. This respondents were only somewhat interested in pursuing these degree programs.

Stress and pressure caused anxiety and mental illness. Being unable to catch up with the less levels of the respondents in the graduate program added more pressure. Son et. al. (2020) had similar findings in their study where they found that online learnings contributed to depressive thoughts of college students. According to them, the major contributors of depressive thoughts included the loneliness, insecurity or uncertainty, powerlessness or hopelessness, concerns about academic performance and overthinking (Son et al., 2020).

Discussions were quite difficult and laboratory principles could not be well understood because of the absence of practical laboratory activities in technical courses. This is true for the degree programs which require actual/hands on experience, particularly with the courses that have laboratory and field activities.

Most important factors for the selection of a graduate degree program
Many distractions and noises. According to the respondents, learning while at home was quite challenging because of many distractions and noises. Some of them said that sometimes their neighbors irritated them by playing music very loudly. There were also respondents who said that they cannot concentrate in their homes because of the noise coming from the design or education programs. They were doing an additional work or job which is distracting them from graduate program. In addition, some of them were compelled to spend the basic needs of their time.

Hard time searching for resources needed to comply certain requirements. Because students were not allowed to enter the campus as shown in Table 9. Respondents gave importance to the program academic where they could have access to the library, they had a hard time looking for

Table 7. Sources of gifts and weaknesses of the graduate degree program from the internet, their trust and level of satisfaction were not that as high compared on what the book from the library can provide them.

Many requirements and activities to comply. Though there were some respondents who said that virtual learning provides them more time to accomplish their tasks, there were also those who said that they had difficulty in accomplishing requirements and learning activities within the allotted times because there were so many.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results obtained from this study, the following conclusions were drawn:

- *Qualitative description of the ratings 1=very weak, 2=weak, 3=can't decide, 4=strong, 5=very strong
- 1. Majority of graduate students enrolled in VSU were single, female with age level that ranges from 20-24 years old classified under early working age. **Level of interest in pursuing graduate degree program** Majority were unemployed and residing in the Visayas and Mindanao regions. More than half of the respondents were scholars funded by the Philippine government and were already in the (second) year of study of pursuing the Master of Science degree programs and different fields of specialization.
- 2. The identified gaps in the MS started by the graduate students indicated that they were interested to do on the other hand the PhD candidates had by average ratings 3.183 and 3.77 respectively. This means that most of the respondents were only somewhat interested in pursuing these degree programs.
- 3. The learning experiences of the graduate students amidst the Covid-19 pandemic were as follows: they find virtual mode of learning as challenging and at the same time interesting. Students realized the importance of self-discipline, self-motivation, and self-determination. They became more attentive, creative, courageous, initiative, innovative, focused, hardworking, resourceful, study independently, flexible and patient in trying times and to never lose hope. They learned techniques in finishing all the needed course requirements on time, learned to browse in the internet to know the background of the topics discussed to be able to answer the learning tasks, they developed self-learning and assessments of the learning modules, learned to regularly keep in touch and not hesitate in communicating with their professors, and developed their skills in using online learning platform such as Google Meet and Zoom.

Table 8. Interest levels of the respondents in pursuing masters/doctoral degree program in VSU

Qualitative description of the ratings 1=not interested, 2=minimally interested, 3=somewhat interested, 4=interested, 5=very interested

Most important factors for the selection of the graduate degree program According to Higgins (2015) not understanding the leading factors behind a student's decision for selecting a graduate program is a common problem. Hoxby (2004) emphasized three important factors in the selection of a graduate program. These factors were financial, peer relationships, and ease in the application process. Respondents were asked about the most important factors that influenced their selection of a graduate degree program. There were ten criteria provided as shown in Table 9. Respondents gave importance to the program academic

Learning Competencies, Experiences and Problems Encountered by Graduate Programs

Tables 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.

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Level of interest in pursuing graduate degree program

Respondents were asked to rate their level of interest in pursuing master's/doctoral program in VSU (Table 8). The Master of Science program was rated 4.73 by respondents which means that they were interested to very interested in this degree. Next to MS is the MM which respondents indicated that they were interested in. On the other hand, the PhD and Med programs had low average rating, 3.83 and 3.72, respectively. This means that most of the respondents were only somewhat interested in pursuing these degree programs.

Table 8. Interest levels of the respondents in pursuing masters/doctoral degree program in VSU

*Qualitative description of the ratings: 1=not interested, 2=minimally interested, 3=somewhat interested, 4=interested, 5=very interested

Most important factors for the selection of a graduate degree program

According to Hegarty (2011) understanding the motivational factors behind a students' reason for selecting a graduate program of study can serve to aid educators and program administrators in the design of education programs. Hoxby (2004) emphasized three important factors in the selection of a graduate program. These factors were financial, peer relationships, and ease in the application process.

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