School, Work, Life: The Challenges and Strategies of Graduate Working Students

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the challenges and coping strategies of working professionals pursuing graduate studies in the Philippines, employing a transcendental phenomenological research design. Through thematic analysis of narratives from 16 working graduate students, the study identifies three key findings: (1) participants were primarily motivated by career advancement and personal growth, (2) they encountered significant challenges in balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities—particularly in time management, financial strain, and emotional exhaustion—and (3) successful students relied on a combination of personal organizational strategies and external support systems to manage these demands.

The study reveals that Filipino working graduate students experience unique cultural and socioeconomic pressures that exacerbate typical graduate school stressors. While the findings align with global research on non-traditional learners, they also highlight distinct contextual factors in the Philippine setting. Participants emphasized the importance of institutional flexibility, employer accommodations, and mental health support in facilitating their academic success.
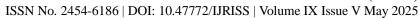
This research contributes to the growing literature on adult education in Southeast Asia by providing empirical evidence on the lived experiences of Filipino working graduate students. The results suggest that academic institutions and employers should implement targeted support mechanisms, including flexible scheduling, financial assistance programs, and wellness initiatives, to better serve this student population. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for systemic adjustments in graduate education structures to accommodate working professionals, particularly in post-pandemic hybrid learning environments.

Keywords: working students, graduate education, work-life balance, phenomenological study, Philippine higher education

INTRODUCTION

The growing trend of professionals pursuing graduate studies while employed full-time reflects Knowles' (1980) andragogical principles, wherein adult learners seek education that is self-directed, experiential, and tied to professional goals. This phenomenon also aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress, as working students appraise academic-professional conflicts through a lens of resource conservation (Hobfoll, 1989).

Recent studies indicate that over 40% of graduate students in the Philippines, balance work and academic commitments (Dela Cruz & Reyes, 2023), highlighting the growing population of working learners. Also, Santos (2022) emphasizes how Filipino working students face unique socioeconomic pressures that compound these stressors, creating a distinct context for examining resource conservation theory where time, finances, and energy are perpetually depleted. This dual role presents both opportunities for career advancement and personal growth, as well as significant challenges in managing time, finances, and well-being. This

phenomenon aligns with global patterns where working learners report higher stress levels but greater career resilience (Park & Sprung, 2022).

This qualitative study examines the experiences of working graduate students through a transcendental phenomenological lens, focusing on their motivations, struggles, and coping strategies. Local research by Santos (2022) emphasizes how Filipino working students face unique cultural and socioeconomic pressures that compound typical graduate school stressors. Meanwhile, international literature (Smith & Johnson, 2023) demonstrates how the global shift toward lifelong learning has increased demand for flexible graduate programs.

By analyzing narratives from 16 working graduate students, this research identifies key themes including: the drive for professional development, systemic barriers to work-school balance, and effective support mechanisms. The study contributes to both local and global conversations about adult education, offering evidence-based recommendations for Philippine academic institutions and employers to better support this growing student population.

The findings aim to inform policy changes that address the specific needs of Filipino working professionals pursuing advanced degrees, while contributing to international discourse on non-traditional student success. This research is particularly timely as Philippine universities increasingly adopt hybrid learning models in response to post-pandemic educational demands (Tan & Lim, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Objectives:

This study aims to explore the narratives of a working graduate student and investigate the challenges they encounter in balancing school, work and life. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What made you decide to pursue graduate studies despite being a working student?
2. What are the challenges you faced in school, work, and life as you pursued your graduate studies?
3. How did you address the challenges you encountered?
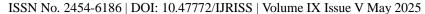4. What are your recommendations for other working students pursuing graduate studies?

Research Design:

This study employed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology to explore the essence of participants lived experiences. The researchers practiced bracketing by documenting preconceptions about work-school balance in reflexive journals prior to data collection. Epoché was maintained through iterative peer debriefing to suspend judgment during analysis. Following Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method, we prioritized participants' unmediated voices through open-ended surveys, allowing themes to emerge inductively. This research design aimed to give significant details and explanation regarding the working graduate students' narratives on how they balance school, work and life amidst hurdles they faced. It also described their experiences of the participants which emphasizes the formation of themes; thus, the research design is deemed suitable to be used in this study.

Participants of the Study

This study included 16 randomly selected working graduate students who responded to an online survey administered via Google Forms. Participants were recruited through open invitations shared on digital platforms and were eligible if they met two criteria: (1) currently enrolled in a graduate program and (2) employed in any professional field. No geographic restrictions were applied, ensuring diverse perspectives.

All respondents voluntarily participated and provided informed consent prior to answering the survey. Demographic details were collected anonymously to maintain confidentiality.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data was collected through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The survey link was randomly distributed to working graduate students through social media and academic networks. 16 eligible participants completed the survey voluntarily.

Ethical Considerations in the Data Collection

Ethical approval was ensured through voluntary participation, anonymized responses, and informed consent. Participants were explicitly notified of their rights, data confidentiality, and the study's purpose before proceeding. No sensitive or identifiable information was collected.

Phenomenological Approach

This study employed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology to explore the essence of participants' lived experiences. Researchers practiced bracketing by documenting preconceptions about work-school balance prior to data collection. Epoché was maintained through iterative memoing and peer debriefing to suspend judgment during thematic analysis.

Data collection prioritized the participants' unmediated voices through open-ended surveys, aligning with Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method. Themes emerged inductively without predetermined categories.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with audit trails maintained to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To analyze and assess the given data from the respondents, Thematic Analysis was utilized. The researchers identify and interpret themes within the qualitative data. The researchers engage in the process of coding, categorizing, and organizing data into meaningful themes that represents the underlying concepts.

Different interpretations were derived from important reactions to key themes during the subsequent phase of analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons on pursuing graduate studies despite being a working student (Emerging Theme: Pursuit of Growth and Opportunity)

The emerging theme on the reason on pursuing graduate studies despite being a working student revolves around pursuit of growth and opportunity, encompassing both career advancement and personal development. Both Career Advancement and Professional Growth and Personal Development and Passion for Learning converge under the broader idea of seeking growth and opportunity, whether for professional or personal reasons. This theme was supported by the responses from the participants.

Participants' extrinsic motivations (e.g., promotions, earning potential) reflect Knowles' (1980) assumption that adult learners are goal-oriented, while intrinsic motivations (e.g., passion for learning) align with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory regarding autonomy and competence development. (Response 2), increasing earning potential (Response 6), and accessing better job opportunities (Response 12). Others highlighted intrinsic motivations, including passion for their field (Response 9) and a desire for self-improvement (Response 16). These responses suggest that graduate studies serve as a strategic tool for professional mobility while also fulfilling personal aspirations for lifelong learning.

This theme aligns with existing research on adult learners, which indicates that working professionals pursue higher education to enhance employability and adapt to evolving job markets (Smith & Johnson, 2020). The dual focus on career and personal growth reflects the concept of "lifelong learning" (OECD, 2019), where

education is seen as both an economic investment and a means of self-actualization. Additionally, the struggle to balance work and studies (Response 14) resonates with studies on work-life balance challenges among graduate students (Brown & Lee, 2021), suggesting that institutions should provide flexible learning options to support working learners.

Whether for career progression or personal fulfillment, all responses reflect a shared motivation, leveraging graduate studies as a pathway to growth, opportunity, and self-improvement.

Challenges faced in school, work, and life as graduate studies is pursued (Emerging Theme: Struggle to Balance Multiple Demands)

The theme identified here is the struggle to balance multiple demands faced by graduate working students. Time and financial pressures exemplify primary appraisals of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), where participants perceived academic-work demands as threats to limited personal resources (Hobfoll, 1989). For instance, many respondents emphasized the difficulty of allocating time effectively, with one stating, "It is not easy to balance work and school actually since school requires much time as work and I cannot neglect any of it" (Response 1). Others pointed to financial strain, such *as* "I also experiencing financial challenge paying my tuition and miscellaneous fee" (Response 7), and emotional exhaustion, as seen in "Financial, Physical and Mental (exhaustion)"*(Response 8)*. These responses illustrate the interconnected pressures of graduate studies, work, and personal life, where deficits in one area often exacerbate difficulties in others.

Analysis of this theme reveals that the struggle to balance multiple demands is not just a logistical challenge but also a psychological and financial burden. The constant negotiation between priorities leads to stress, burnout, and reduced academic or work performance. This aligns with recent literature, which suggests that working graduate students often experience role conflict, where competing obligations create tension and hinder success (Herman & Marlowe, 2020). Additionally, financial strain has been shown to negatively impact mental health and academic persistence, particularly for non-traditional students (Johnson & Smith, 2021). The emotional toll described by participants ("feeling overwhelmed or doubting myself at times"—Response 12) further supports findings that graduate students are at higher risk for anxiety and depression due to prolonged stress (Lee & Brown, 2019).

The implications of these findings are significant for institutions, employers, and policymakers. Universities could mitigate these challenges by offering flexible scheduling, financial aid, and mental health support tailored to working students. Employers might consider accommodating academic commitments, such as adjusted workloads or remote work options. On a broader scale, these results call for systemic changes in how graduate education is structured to better support non-traditional students.

C. Working students' mechanism on balancing work, school and life (Emerging Theme: Balancing Responsibilities Through Organization and Support)

The theme that emerged from the responses is that graduate working students successfully manage their dual responsibilities by combining personal organizational strategies with external support systems. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of time management tools—such as planners, to-do lists, and structured schedules—to prioritize tasks effectively. For example, one respondent stated, "I learned to manage my 'to do list' at work on weekdays so I can focus on studies during weekends" (Response 10), while another highlighted, "I created a structured schedule, setting priorities, and using productivity tools" (Response 14). Additionally, many relied on support from family, friends, classmates, and employers to maintain motivation and flexibility. Responses such as "I leaned on my support system—God, family, friends—who kept me motivated" (Response 4) and "I communicated with my employer to negotiate flexible hours" (Response 14) demonstrate the critical role of interpersonal and institutional support.

This dual strategy aligns with existing research on work-life balance among graduate students. Studies show that effective time management reduces stress and improves academic performance (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2020), while social support mitigates burnout and enhances persistence (DeCastro et al., 2019). The reliance on both self-discipline and external assistance suggests that graduate working students cannot thrive through

individual effort alone; institutional flexibility (e.g., employer accommodations) and emotional support networks are equally vital. Without these, students risk burnout or academic disengagement (Watson et al., 2021).

The findings reinforce that graduate working students must employ both structured self-management and seek external support to thrive. Universities and employers should consider policies flexibility, mentorship, and mental health resources to help this population succeed.

D. What are your recommendations for other working students pursuing graduate studies? (Emerging Theme: Balancing Responsibilities Through Structure and Well-Being)

The theme identified from the responses is "Balancing Responsibilities Through Structure and Well-Being," which highlights the dual necessity of effective time management and self-care for working graduate students. Participants emphasized structured planning through tools like schedules, to-do lists, and prioritization (Responses 2, 9, 10, 14) while also stressing the importance of rest, motivation, and seeking support to prevent burnout (Responses 4, 7, 8, 16). This suggests that success in juggling work and studies depends not just on productivity but also on maintaining mental and physical health.

The findings align with recent research showing that graduate students who practice deliberate time management experience lower stress levels (Pekrun et al., 2022). However, without self-care strategies, such as breaks and social support, even well-organized students risk burnout (Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). This implies that universities and employers should promote holistic support systems, including flexible deadlines and mental health resources, to help working students sustain their efforts.

Recent studies confirm that working students need both organization and self-care to succeed. Time management helps, but without breaks and support, stress can derail progress. Schools and workplaces should offer flexible policies and mental health resources to help students thrive.
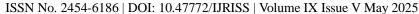
Limitations

This study has three key limitations. First, the small sample size (n=16) limits transferability, though phenomenological research prioritizes depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, self-reported data may introduce response bias; future studies could triangulate with interviews or physiological stress measures. Finally, the Philippine context—while illuminating cultural specificities requires caution in cross-cultural comparisons.

Future research should explore longitudinal designs to track coping efficacy over time (Park & Sprung, 2013) and compare institutional support models across cultures."

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Filipino graduate working students are motivated by both career growth and personal development and navigate role conflict (Herman & Marlowe, 2020) through andragogy-informed strategies (Knowles, 1980) and transactional coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, they face real challenges like lack of time, money problems, and stress from juggling work and school. The good news is there are ways to make it easier. Students who do well use smart time management and lean on support from family, friends, and employers. Institutions should implement flexible policies aligned with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to support this population's unique needs such as flexible scheduling and mentorship programs, to mitigate resource depletion (Hobfoll, 1989).

These changes matter because more and more people are working while going to school. By making graduate programs more flexible and supportive, we can help hardworking students succeed without burning out. Everyone benefits when workers can gain new skills and knowledge while keeping their jobs.

In the future, we should keep studying how to best support these students. With some practical changes, we can make graduate education work better for people who are balancing school with full-time jobs. After all, these working students are investing in themselves, and that's good for all of us.

RECCOMENDATIONS

This study suggests practical ways to help working students succeed in graduate school. First, schools should offer more flexible learning options. This could include online classes, evening courses, and letting students choose how many classes they take each term. Schools should also provide better support, like counseling services, student mentoring programs, and workshops on managing time and stress. Financial help is important too - schools could offer payment plans, emergency funds, and work with employers to help pay tuition costs.

Companies can help by being more flexible with work schedules, especially during exams. They could give employees a few paid days off for school needs and recognize that graduate studies help professional growth. Workplaces might create support groups for working students and adjust workloads during busy school periods.

The government could help by offering tax breaks to companies that support employee education, creating affordable graduate programs, and setting rules to protect work-study balance. More partnerships between schools and businesses would also help, like creating programs that combine work and study.

For future research, we should study how working students do over time, whether men and women face different challenges, and which support programs work best. These changes would make it easier for working professionals to earn advanced degrees without sacrificing their jobs or wellbeing. Schools, employers, and the government need to work together to make this happen.

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