Experiences and Challenges of Graduates in Open Distance Learning at Ifugao State University, Philippines

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Abstract

Open Distance Education (ODE) in the Philippines was institutionalized through Republic Act Number 10650. Ifugao State University started offering distance education in the graduate programs in 2006. The study focused to determine the experiences and challenges of the graduates of the university's ODE program, and how they hurdled the challenges they encountered as students. The phenomenological method was applied with an unstructured interview guide as a way of gathering data. Follow up questions were asked through online communication among the participants until data saturation. There were 11 graduates coming from Africa, Lao PDR, Ireland, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, United States of America and Vietnam who participated in the study. Data gathered were analyzed and interpreted. Results disclosed that the graduates experienced a very well-designed, learner-centered, research-based, and relevant curricular programs; the instructional delivery mode was innovative, learner-oriented, technology based, and flexible; there was evident cooperation, collaboration and complementation between IFSU and its partners; the professors were excellent, experienced and competent. The challenges encountered by the students were timeframe, research works, deadline, overlapping of schedules and internet problems. These constraints were managed through hard work, planning, dedication and motivation.

Keywords: Blended learning, curriculum, distance education, graduates and instruction

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has become the choice of instruction of many students across the globe. It has turned to be the trend of teaching and learning in recent times (Simonson, 2012). Distance education is a way of providing those who are underrepresented and are from remote areas to have opportunities for equal access to education. This explains why distance education is regarded as a more democratic form of education because its purpose is to reach out to all types of learners from across the globe (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Many advanced higher education institutions have changed from traditional classroom teaching to online learning. The method of teaching whereby the teacher faces the students during classes all the time throughout the semester or the year was innovated in a way classes are done online or offline. There are many methods and definitions of distance education that have been used from the time it has been developed. Various forms of computer aided instruction and teaching strategies were likewise employed along with the societal changes that have influenced how distance education is viewed and practiced making ways for different generations of distance education (Saykili, 2018). A high percentage of enrollees in distance education is from India, United States and Turkey (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The surge in enrollment in Asia was noted to continue in the coming years (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013). The World Bank identifies higher education as the key towards economic development of developing

countries (Brenton & Lambert, 2006). The demand for higher education is determined by the increasing economic growth especially in developing nations and demographic trends in the globalization era (Alam et al., 2012). The number of international students will continue to increase by 2020 (Calderon, 2010). The United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia and other English speaking countries are the leading countries with many students. It is vital to upscale online courses in order to meet the needs of learners (Çinar & Törenli, 2010). It is therefore important to take note that institutions making use of online learning must upgrade the technologies they are using in order that learners are able to acquire the desired knowledge, skills and competencies in all the subjects they are enrolled in the various programs.

Transnational education is now the superhighway being adopted around the globe because it offers world class education that is very accessible and friendly among its clients (Alam et al, 2013). It is generally recognized as a new delivery model of education with political, economic and cultural implications (Gu, 2009). Transnational education is a bedrock for international cultural exchange especially in the areas of research and teaching (Altbach & Knight, 2007); that strengthens the programs of higher learning institutions with sensitivities to multicultural and cosmopolitan globalization effects. The four ways of rendering services according to General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) are cross-border trade, consumption abroad, commercial presence, and presence of natural persons as pointed out too by the World Trade Organization (2015). In 2013, schools in the United Kingdom had an enrollment of about 400,00 transnational students from different countries of the world. The University of Maryland had more than 200,000 overseas students every year in its online programs (Waters & Leung, 2013).

There are problems on cross border deliveries of higher education in the area of education systems and practices. There are challenges encountered in defining the transferability of academic units because there are various frameworks or standards being used (Mayer et al., 2011). This urges the creation of clear global standards among institutions worldwide that offer open distance education with quality delivery and practices, international accreditation and recognition (Breton, 2006). Accreditation and assessment of programs are among the problems encountered by private and foreign providers (Fellesson & Mählck, 2017). The awareness of faculty members has a bearing on the success of distance education. There are teachers who are questioning the quality of online learning which may involve time and technical challenges (Hung, 2016). Berge & Muilenburg (2000) analyzed that the hindrances to distance education are: increased of time commitment, insufficient funds, resistance to change, lack of cooperation, lack of manpower. Distance education is being offered by many educational institutions in order to address the needs of students through the use of emerging technologies. The result of a study on distance education in higher education institutions in Portugal, UAE and Ukraine revealed that the problems of the undergraduate students are on time management, motivation, and English communication skills (Fidalgo et al., 2020). Ko & Rossen (2010) stressed that in selecting media and instruction for online education, resources of the institution should be met. Budget, workload and evaluation should be considered in online teaching (Meyer & Barefield, 2010). Bannier (2016) disclosed that cultural and quality assurance challenges in transnational education continue. Nguyen (2015) noted that technology has made online learning possible and it is a strategy of improving learning outcomes. In his findings, he stated that there is strong evidence to justify that online learning is as effective as the traditional form of learning. Blackmon and Major (2012) claimed that there are experiences of learners about online learning that could be related to themselves as students or to their professors. These are: ability to balance educational access and family life because some students have to attend to their domestic concerns at the same time follow the schedule set for their academic activities; time management since they need to allot time for communication in attending to online classes; taking responsibilities of doing independent learning; availability or unavailability of instructors or professors had a great influence in the learning process of students; and through digital learning, students were able to connect with friends or classmates under similar learning circumstances.

IFSU College of Open Distance Education and Transnational Education (CODETE)

There are various legal bases used by the university in the operation of its Open Distance and Transnational Education programs. Memoranda from the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) like Memorandum Order Number 62, series of 2016; Memorandum Order Number 2, series of 2008; Memorandum Order Number 27, series of 2005; other communications and Republic Act 10650 that ushered the offering of open distance learning in the university.

Ifugao State University has six campuses located in different municipalities of Ifugao. It was founded in 1920 as Nayon Settlement Farm School (NSFS) by the American Educators. It has undergone gradual metamorphosis from its humble beginnings to a globally competitive higher education institution. On October 14, 2009, it was converted from Ifugao State College of Agriculture and Forestry (ISCAF) to its university status through Republic Act Number 9720 or "An act converting the Ifugao State College of Agriculture and Forestry and all its existing campuses located in the province of Ifugao into a University to be known as the Ifugao State University and appropriating funds therefor". IFSU has been actively participating and collaborating with local and international private and government agencies to pursue development projects to improve the living conditions of the rural community, particularly in the province, and to further improve its research and development capabilities in various fields.

The University is also firmly extending its wings towards achieving an international caliber education by internationalizing its educational standards. IFSU is continually putting up more academic linkages to service both faculty and student foreign exchange exposures and to foster talents in young people.

The university started to offer academic programs through Distance Education in 2006 under Board of Trustees (BOT) Resolution Number 824 series of 2006 that formally approved its offering at the Institute of Graduate Studies. In 2009, the conversion of lfugao State College of Agriculture and Forestry (ISCAF) into a comprehensive University ushered the university to become more confident to offer programs around the globe through a learner-centered blended learning approach. ln 2011, the University entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with EDS Business School, Malaysia as confirmed by the IFSU Board of Regents (BOR) as per Resolution Number 103, series of 2011. ln 2012, the university signed other Memoranda of Understandings (MOUs) and MOAs with Muhammadiyah University, Indonesia confirmed as per BOR Resolution Number 215, series of 2012 for similar purposes. IFSU also entered into a MOA with St. Robert's Training and Management Center (SRTMC) confirmed as per BOR Resolution Number 222, series of 2012. The MOA with SRTMC was renewed in 2015 and confirmed as per BOR Resolution Number 504, series of 2015. In 2020, the university signed various MOAs with CNM Study Links, Koronadal City, Mindanao with BOR Resolution Number 87, series of 2020; with Career Opportunities and Development for Professionals Educational Marketing Services Seminary, Kalinga with BOR Resolution number 89, series of 2020; with Hagat Management Consultancy Services, Baguio City with BOR Resolution number 90, series of 2020; and with Saint Robert's Training and management Center, Iloilo City with BOR Resolution number 91, series of 2020.

In April 2016, the College of Open Distance and Transnational Education (CODETE) was created as a separate college in the University to manage its open distance education programs and was approved as per BOR Resolution Number 585, series of 2016. lfugao State University is Level III as a state university and also has gained Level III accreditation in most of its program offerings. For more than two years, the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) had been coaching and mentoring IFSU being one of the recipients of UPOU's support to HEIs which offer programs via ODE/TNE under Republic Act Number 10650. Various activities between IFSU and UPOU were undertaken to improve the services being offered by CODETE.

Purpose of the study

1. To identify the experiences of the graduates of the College of Open Distance and Transnational Education in the university.
2. To ascertain the challenges hurdled by the graduates during their students' lives.
3. To determine how the graduates managed the challenges they experienced.

METHODOLOGY

Method

The researcher made use of phenomenology as a method. The focus of the study were the graduates in the graduate programs of CODETE at the Ifugao State University. Unstructured interview guide was used to gather data and follow-up questions were sent to the participants through emails and messenger. Secondary data gathering was used to collect information about the historical information of the college which include the phases and development of the Open Distance Education programs.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical soundness of the study is very important thus, before commencing it, prior and informed consent of every participant was obtained. The participants had the freedom to participate or discontinue to be engaged during the course of the study and they were not forced to be involved. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants. They were coded and their names were not reflected in the reports. There were no risks identified in the study. Consent from participants, interview recording with transcription, data analysis and confidentiality were observed throughout the process of data collection.

Participants

The criteria in selecting the participants of the study were as follows: 1. The graduate should have earned his/her masters or doctorate or both degrees at the university, 2. The graduate should be currently working in a field vertical to the degree finished, 3. The graduate should be willing to participate in the study, and 4. The participants should come from different countries. There were 11 participants in the study who finished their Masters or Doctorate degree programs from the University's CODETE programs offered in Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. The graduate respondents were from seven countries which included Africa, Lao PDR, Ireland, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, United States of America, and Vietnam. To be a participant in the study, the graduate student should have earned a master or doctorate degree or both degrees at the university and should be currently working in a field related to the degree finished.

Data analysis

The participants were first asked to describe their experiences at the graduate programs while they were enrolled in the university. Significant statements were mined from the responses of the participants and meanings were formulated that were integrated to form themes. The participants were asked to validate the result of the analysis if it means the same with what they have originally expressed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of graduates

The graduate participants spotlighted that the curricular programs of the university are very well designed, learner centered, research based and relevant.

A respected senior lecturer and a graduate expressed that, *"the curriculum for the Master of Arts in Teaching was designed with the goal of producing competent educators who are able to function well in most educational environments."* It was further stated that the curriculum was specifically executed where the professors often use collaborative and or authentic tasks which placed the learners at the center of the educational process. Another participant who was promoted and became a head teacher after graduating from our university pointed out that *"there was really learning in spite of the environment, distance and mode of delivery".* It was also stressed by a graduate and a university lecturer that the courses offered by IFSU were very relevant to the current trends and demands of education. *"I was under the TNE program, flexibility, and practicality were very useful and helpful for an overseas worker and a student like me. Reaching out to Filipinos abroad via TNE program can really change their lives."* Research skills were honed, writing a research paper was more fun than before and hands on to theses and dissertations by the professors were noted by majority of those interviewed and that according to them, IFSU means standard. One participant further indicated that the curriculum is comprehensive. A head of a school participant expressed that *"the most important outcomes from my doctoral research, is not just only the increase of my knowledge, but also the benefit it brought to the children in Lao to learn English, with fun as well. My bilingual book has been published as a result from my dissertation, and my program also broadcasted through the Lao National Television Channel every Monday at 6:00 a.m. - 6:15 a. m. and 6:00PM-6:15PM". It is called: "My Little Star", in Lao language namely: "Lai Kan Dao Duang Noi Khong Khoi" Please see the following link: https://youtu.be/waY2u2mD_ik,https://youtu.be/msaumRqqm2c,https://youtu.be/proG761sOZw."*

Chugh et al. (2017) noted that it is very necessary that outcomes are delivered and that contemporary educational practices are adapted in curricular designs. As suggested by Simonson et al. (2009), distance education courses should be carefully designed. There are standards or formal or informal opportunities that students acquire as they go through the teaching and learning processes (Kommalage, 2011).

The instructional delivery is innovative, flexible and uses technology in the teaching learning process. The university practices a blended learning approach where 70% is spent through the use of technology like learning online, e-learning and other electronic forms. The 30% is spent for traditional face to face where the professor discusses or facilitates class activities with the students.

A participant explained that *"the approach of the university on instructional delivery is innovative. This approach created the spirit of independence in students. It was also a way of creating the culture of research among students. This is because students were compelled to search literature and look for the information they need."* From another participant's point of view, *"in this generation, information is everywhere and learners are predictably busier than it was ten years ago. Making the program more of an autonomous learner oriented helps students become responsible of their own learning. They took ownership in their learning and it does change everything."* One remarked that *"the best practice on the mode of instructional delivery for me is the online part, where you can study online and only met once a month with the right professor. I love it! I am loving it when a technology is utilized to make people's life easy. I am a person who loves to study independently and with experts."* From an official who now holds the highest position in their organization, he said, *"the online program of IFSU has empowered me to become an educational innovator and reformer that can achieve massive improvements in practice and evaluation. This program is "management-embedded." It allowed me to continue working while studying, applying learned methods in teaching and management at the same time. It also provided more time for engagement and interaction with other leaders in the field."* A participant who is now a Filipino manager and a university professor in the United States enthusiastically

replied saying that, *"Well, one of the best practices that is undebatable is the time friendliness of the programs, which is why a lot of working professionals are able to enroll and be successful in completing the program. Basically, it removes the barrier between time and education."*

A study revealed that students in online classes perform better than those who use face to face learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). On the other hand, another study concluded that students are easily confused, take a wrong turn in online classes, with difficulty in interacting that is why researchers suggest the preparation of simple and standardized course designs that will motivate and engage students in online learning (Lee, 2008).

Coordination, collaboration and complementation between the university and its partner agencies are very evident. Coordination and collaboration has positively influenced students' performance, outcomes and success. Complementation has allowed both the university and the partner agencies to have worked well, reached out to mostly overseas workers, and motivated them to finish their degrees.

One participant stated that *"collaboration among learners was very evident that fostered better performance"*. Another participant said, *"the very strong partnership, coordination and collaboration between IFSU and its partner organization helped me finish my master's degree on time."* From another graduate, he said, "*I think the partnership of the university and its partner best complement each other. One was able to reach out and create awareness to most overseas workers and at the same time, IFSU was able to provide quality and legal programs. Both are very professional and dedicated partners and their concerns with the students are in the same degree."* This was confirmed by another graduate in her account saying that "*IFSU values partnership with other agencies and likewise recognizes the impact of tying up with other agencies for best service among its students."*

Ifugao State University has been in partnership and collaboration with Saint Roberts' Management and Training center with an approved Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) approved by the Board of Regents (BOR).

Kennedy & Duffy (2004) emphasized that the successful implementation of distance education programs is the collaboration among the key participants or stakeholders. The key participants are the administrators, instructor/professors, staff personnel, librarians and students.

The professors of the program are excellent, experienced, competent in their fields and committed public servants. According to a participant, *"IFSU provides excellent professors/instructors and quality education."* This was continued by one respondent when he said *"the professors from IFSU are highly qualified, experienced and updated with the current affairs and trends having not only educated students but also inspired them to think big and move forward in their careers."* An additional remark was given by another graduate emphasizing that *"competent professionals of IFSU are committed public servants."*

Researchers claim that faculty members are the key players in the attainment of learning outcomes in online setting (Armstrong, 2011). Bates & Khasawnehb (2007) stated that the constant feedback of instructors and professors are helpful in improving the performance of students.

Challenges of graduates

When the participants were asked about the constraints they experienced while studying at IFSU, they identified timeframe, completing the research, submission deadlines, internet connectivity and overlapping of schedules. A participant mentioned that *"the main challenge for me actually was the timeframe. However, sometimes, my knowledge can be pretty narrow about the goals and lack of understanding about the benefits of education and miss a very inventive step in each lesson."* Another said that *"completing the research was so difficult for me because I was doing a lot of new things that time and it was really hard to finish my research. My goal was to have the best research and I did not meet it but I finished it. I was not so happy though."* It was continued by another that, *"as a student and being a health program manager at the same time, the challenge was for me to be able to submit all outputs of every subject on time." "Overlapping of schedules, agenda like seminars, schooling, reunions, and special occasions." "I must say that the majority of my study undertakings with IFSU was quite comfortable so mentioning any minor concerns would seem futile."*

In a study by Musingafi et al. (2015), they have cited that the problems of the students for open and distance learning were limited study time, difficulty in accessing and using information and communication technology, ineffective feedback and lack of study materials.

Constraint management

The participants managed their constraints or challenges through hard work, proper planning, dedication and motivation. The participants remarked that "Nothing *in this life is placed in a golden carpet; you have to work hard, plan properly and dedicate yourself to your career in order to overcome problems and constraints." "Well, St. Roberts helped me a lot on my research process, the staff was amazing in helping me with my schedule. The panel members are helpful and because of it I was encouraged to finish my research even if I was not the best but I did finish it." "Of the few minor issues I faced, the management of the partner institutions and IFSU successfully managed to solve the issues."*

CONCLUSION

The graduates had various experiences associated with the curricular programs where they noted that the curricula of the university respond to the needs of the students; the mode of instruction is innovative, technology driven and flexible. It follows a blended learning approach that is very practical, appropriate and addresses the needs of students; coordination, collaboration and complementation among the partner agencies influenced the success of the students; and the professors are excellent, experienced and competent in their performances. These experiences of graduates indicate that the university provides quality education through its distance education programs relevant to the needs of time. The graduates experienced delays in the completion of their degrees because they needed to cope with time, deadlines, and overlapping schedules while they are working and studying. However, because of their hard work, planning, determination and motivation, they were able to succeed in their careers. It is recommended that the university continues to offer updated and contextualized programs while it continues to innovate and enhance its curricular programs by strengthening its technology resources.

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