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### A CASE STUDY OF GRADUATE SCHOOL STUDENTS UNDER NEW NORMAL IN PASSING THE PROGRAM

Arcebido, Marlon P.<sup>1</sup>

Damasco, Mirabelle F.<sup>2</sup>

Engalgado, Recson B.<sup>3</sup>

Campañã, Cherrellyn P. Ph.D.<sup>4</sup>

\*1,2,3,4 College of Development and Management Graduate Program, University of Southeastern Philippines, Mintal Campus, Davao City

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#### ABSTRACT

This case study described the lived experiences of the graduate school students during the new normal. In-depth interviews (IDIs) provided the needed information. which aims to comprehend the challenges, struggles and coping mechanisms by the students to continue in pursuing the graduate school degree program. This study also emphasized the valuable insights that can guide future graduate school students for them to be motivated along its journey in pursuing its dreams. The thematic analysis produced four "key" themes representing graduate school students' lived experiences: Academic pressure, Time Management, Loneliness and Isolation, and Financial Stress. Academic stress such as the rigorous coursework experience, academic stress, and internet connection. In struggling with their situation between work and academic needs, but giving self determination to success and leveraging to virtual tools in collaborating its research and academic requirements and by diverting time to a specific task and setting priorities on the specific objective may be the best strategy. And lived experience without social interaction, during the pandemic due to the restrictions of the health protocols their limited gatherings in the community but the students had collaboration and networking with other students and sharing of its knowledge. And financing is one of the requirements for the sustainability of the students and the students had made their ways in order to sustain their academic status by finding alternatives hence the price of the needs during pandemic is much higher than they expected. The detailed explanations of each subject and participant quotes to back them give their experiences including self-motivation and awareness in passing the graduate school degree program during the new normal.

#### Keywords:

Case Study, New Normal, Academic Programs, Qualitative Method

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#### INTRODUCTION

Academic success is significant since it has a strong correlation with the favorable results that we value and the people with high levels of education and academic success have higher employment rates (J. Regier, 2011). According to the EuroSchool, 2023 the concept of academic achievement is a complex combination of both concrete and abstract elements of growth and learning. It has a dual emphasis on comprehension and performance, developing not only a body of knowledge but also a sharpened intellect capable of analysis, creativity and thought. It is still based on encouraging people to have a lifetime love of learning and to pursue education as a means of continuously pursuing intellectual and personal development.

Academic experiences are educational experiences that will be useful in their future careers in academia and the workplace. This includes any academic credentials, such as degrees, awards, and accomplishments as well as any experiences, including significant projects, that are believed to be pertinent to the future academic or professional endeavor. To be content with time at college and to achieve well academically, students must maintain their academic drive while making good adjustments to the changes in their personal and social lives (A.Pipere and Iliško, 2018).

Struggles are inherent aspects of the human experience, representing challenges, difficulties, or obstacles that individuals face in various aspects of life. These challenges can be physical, emotional, mental, or societal in nature. Ultimately, struggles are an integral part of the human journey, and how individuals navigate and learn from them plays a crucial role

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in shaping their overall life experience.

A coping mechanism is a psychological or behavioral strategy that individuals use to manage, adapt to, or cope with stress, challenges, and difficult situations. Coping mechanisms are employed to handle various stressors and maintain emotional well-being. These mechanisms can be conscious or unconscious, and they play a role in helping individuals navigate the complexities of life. Understanding one's own coping mechanisms and actively choosing healthier strategies can contribute to better emotional and mental well-being, particularly in the face of life's challenges. Professional support, such as counseling or therapy, can also help individuals develop effective coping strategies.

### Statement of the Problem

The term "new normal" has been widely used to describe the societal and cultural changes that have emerged in response to significant events, particularly the global COVID-19 pandemic. It suggests a system of an online learning environment combined with traditional classroom training. With this kind of blended learning, students can benefit from the flexibility and convenience of online learning from home combined with the individualized attention and personal interaction of a classroom setting and a shift in the way people live, work, and interact, often characterized by a blend of continuity with pre-existing trends and the adoption of new practices. It's important to note that the concept of the "new normal" is dynamic and context-dependent. Different regions and communities may experience and define the new normal in unique ways based on their specific circumstances and responses to various events. Additionally, the term is often used beyond the context of the pandemic to describe broader societal shifts and changes in various aspects of life.

The Philippines, like many other countries, was still being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and various measures were in place to adapt to the "new normal" in education. Keep in mind that circumstances may have evolved since then, and it's always a good idea to check for the latest information. It's essential to stay updated with the latest developments from official sources, as the situation and strategies for education may evolve based on the progression of the pandemic and other factors. With this problem, the present study would consider the gap on navigating the lived experiences of the graduate school students during new normal. We believe that studying this can help to improve the life of every affected graduate school student during the new normal.

### Objectives of the Study

This research aims to comprehensively explore the factors influencing graduate school students experiences in passing the program during new normal. The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What is the socio-demographic profile of the participants?
2. What are the lived experiences of the graduate school students under the new normal in passing the graduate school degree program?
3. What is your insight on passing the graduate school degree program under the new normal?

By conducting this study, the objective is to comprehend the immediate challenges faced by graduate school students and to gather qualitative data that can provide information to the incoming graduate school students on its challenges being encountered and on what are their struggles and coping mechanisms during the new normal.

### Significance of the Study

Investigating graduate school students' experiences on its challenges, struggles and how they manage situations during the new normal. The results of the study could provide valuable serves as a provision of awareness and invaluable insights into the following:

**Commission on Higher Education:** The results of the study will serve as the basis for the institutions to executive/memorandum order or any setting policies and standards for the improvement and development in all state universities and colleges on their graduate school programs.

**Administration:** The results of the study will serve as the basis for the institution to executive/memorandum order or any legal document for the encouragement of the faculties for the improvement and development in all state universities and colleges on the graduate school programs.

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**Faculty:** The results of the study will serve as the basis for the improvement and searching for other strategies and new platforms to be delivered for the future students.

**Students:** The results of the study will serve as guide and inspiration in pursuing the degrees.

**Future Researchers:** This will serve as a springboard for further in-depth analysis.

Overall, the study's significance extends various principles in giving insights, guidance and awareness for the development and improvement of the policies, standards and strategies in passing the graduate school degree programs.

### Scope and Limitation

The study will deeply investigate the individual graduated school students on its challenges, struggles and how the coping mechanisms and its insights applied during the new normal.

The research will offer awareness for the incoming and old graduate school students while focusing on the challenges, struggles and coping mechanisms of the students for the enhancement of its strategies in surviving the master's degree program. It will employ qualitative methods such as interviews, surveys, and focus groups to gather comprehensive insights. The study's timeframe will include the recent experiences of the graduate school students who earned a master's degree. Limitations might arise regarding the representativeness of the participant availability or willingness to engage in the study. The study deeply relies on subjective experiences, which can vary widely between individuals. Ensuring a balance between diverse perspectives while acknowledging the subjectivity of experiences will be a challenge by trying to develop initiatives and other mechanisms in order to be literate on the digital platforms, adaptation on the online learning environment and making self-dedicated.

As the study focuses on current experiences, it might not fully capture historical trends or long-term patterns on the graduate school degree program, limiting the understanding of the graduate school students and past challenges. Acknowledging these scopes and limitations allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the study's findings and informs strategies to give awareness and insights to the future students.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Related Literature and Studies

A master's degree, often known as an advanced degree, is the first level of graduate education. Additionally, a master's degree is required in order to submit a doctorate application and according to several analysts, master's degree programs are different from prior educational endeavors in two aspects: academically and psychologically (S. Fadare et. al, 2023). And in order to provide academic output in the form of intellectual output, a master's degree requires completion of area-focused coursework and the performance of multiple demanding research projects. The demands of the educational system are increasing in difficulty and complexity. The range of duties and responsibilities that instructors have enlarged.

Globally, educational institutions are attempting to combat the COVID-19 virus. In an effort to stop the virus's spread, 102 countries have closed all of their schools, colleges and institutions and switched to distance learning and the epidemic affected almost 1 billion students, which resulted in changes to every nation's educational system (R.M. Bangoy, 2022). A vital component of human existence is education; the epidemic affected every facet, including schooling of existence. Nevertheless, given the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector at both the school and institutional levels, delivering education has become increasingly difficult (J. P. Jose et. al, 2023). Furthermore, the emotional strain caused by this new configuration, it was difficult for the students to focus on their academic work. They expressed their feelings of worry, exhaustion, loneliness and longing for home, sorrow and despair. Inadequate communication, insufficient social engagement among students and a lack of ICT tools and inadequate academic performance. Among the mentioned include inadequate technology, unsatisfactory home learning environments, stress among students and limited access to labs and fieldworks.

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Furthermore, insufficient availability of educational resources such as computers and internet connectivity is an additional social detriment that may intensify worry.

According to B. K. Gumarang, Jr., 2022, sufficient psychosocial adjustment and coping skills are essential in a pandemic context to help an individual manage the detrimental effects of the epidemic and maintain their psychological well-being. Thus, strengthening coping skills and developing resilience may help people deal with fatigue brought on by house confinement or lockdown procedures as well as other stressors associated with the inevitable alterations brought on by the Covid-19 virus. Studies examining the experiences of students with the mental health challenges brought on by the epidemic are likewise lacking. Technology resources are data, instruments or gadgets that enlighten, inspire and help students with their inquiries (R.P. Galiendo, 2022) and students are required to become technologically fluent given the current state of technology.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Methods Used

Using a qualitative research methodology, this study highlighted and explored the shared experiences of graduate school students. Qualitative phenomenology research investigates people's first-hand experiences with a phenomenon. According to Creswell (1998), a phenomenological inquiry is the most appropriate method to use when attempting to describe the significance of multiple people's lived experiences concerning a given concept or phenomenon. The phenomenological method, likewise, sought to shed light on the particular by identifying salient experiences as different people in different settings understood them. According to the participants' perspective, this inherently transforms complex information and insight into social events through inductive, subjective methods (Maxwell, 2013).

#### Theory Base

Sanford's Challenge Support theory (CST), Sanford (1962) found that college students go through significant personal growth and development which is mostly influenced by the institutional environment. Finally, the student integration and commitment to the program can lead to the students' success (Dodge et al., 2009; Tinto, 1975; Wells, 2003; Wells, 2007). Those students who did not expect much of the program but have a high motivation believed that they made the right choice and remained into their chosen program (Dodge et al., 2009).

#### Data Analysis

As each interview was conducted, it was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed. The researcher read the transcripts several times, took notes, and then used those notes to look for any recurring themes or ideas. Subsets of concepts known as categories were identified and finally included in the context of the main themes. Conastas (2002) also brought up using a persistent comparison technique and the exploratory nature of qualitative data. Glesne (2000) defined coding as gradually categorizing and describing data pieces according to how effectively they relate to the study's objectives. An alternative name for these is code mines. Similarly, the researcher organized and linked the codes into a conceptual framework that identifies vital, emergent themes in the life stories of the respondents as well as across the data. The study was given appropriate time for analysis and transcription.

#### Source of Data

Students' lived experiences is the ultimate source of all meaning and value in phenomenology. This study approach is appropriate for investigating the lived experiences of graduate school students who are graduated master's degree programs. The researchers conducted random interviews with graduate school degree graduates to learn about their experiences during the new normal. Furthermore, five (5) graduated students were purposefully chosen to be part of the research study's responders. This research was limited to the respondents who were chosen based on the following criteria: they were master's degree graduates of the university.

#### Data Gathering Instrument

The research made use of a semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews are qualitative research that allows the researcher to probe into specific areas of interest by asking follow-up questions. Researchers ask

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questions about the topic under study in the semi-structured interview guide. The interviewer is free to explore, delve into, and pose questions within the areas provided by the guide, claims Patton (2002). By restricting the topics to be covered, the guide makes conducting several interviews more organized and thorough.

The instrument is composed of opening questions to obtain the needed profile of the respondents, the core questions, and the closing questions. During the conduct of the interview, the researcher recorded the conversation for future reference during the data interpretation and analysis. Moreover, aside from recording the interview and survey process, the researcher prepared a recording sheet to answer and record the important points given by the participants. The data collection was done seriously to obtain reliable information from the selected graduate school students.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Socio-Demographic Profile of the Participants in the Study

This study was participated in by 5 MSDA graduate school students who passed the program. As shown in Table 1, the researcher was able to interview 3 male and 2 females, in terms of civil status, 3 participants are single and 2 married participants. Majority of the participants have already graduated from the MSDA program. In terms of age ranges 1 participant ranges from 20-35 years of age, 3 participants ranges from 36 - 45 and 1 participant ranges from 46 - 55.

*Table 1. Profile of the Participants in the Study*

| Sex                            |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Male                           | 3 |
| Female                         | 2 |
| Age                            |   |
| 20 – 35                        | 1 |
| 36 – 45                        | 3 |
| 46 – 55                        | 1 |
| Civil status                   |   |
| Single                         | 3 |
| Married                        | 2 |
| Highest Educational Attainment |   |
| Masters Graduate               | 1 |
| Ph.D level                     | 4 |

In this section, the answers to the qualitative research questions that served as the foundation for the participant data are discussed. Extensive interviews were conducted, copious amounts of text were transcribed, and the official data analysis got underway. The first step was becoming acquainted with the transcripts of the collected and recorded responses. Following that, the transcripts were meticulously translated into English while keeping the original transcript's ideas. Furthermore, several decisions had to be made on which data were relevant to the three research questions and, therefore, valid for the research, and which data had to be eliminated since they were unrelated, as the entire approach was centered around the study's objective. The comparison is done using the three research topics as subheadings. At the first code level, the generated data is compiled into a theme. Four topics emerged from the thematic analysis of the experiences of the graduate school students. The themes were (1) *Academic pressure*, (2) *Time Management*, (3) *Loneliness and Isolation*, and (4) *Financial Stress*.

#### **Lived Experiences of graduate school students in passing the program during new normal.**

Presented in Table 2 are the themes and sub-themes of the lived experiences of the graduate school students in

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passing the graduate school degree program during new normal as well as the supporting statements on the issues during the interview. In this study, I looked for patterns, core ideas, and themes. These patterns were used to generate codes that gave a clearer emphasis on the common experiences of students. All issues are summarized and categorized and do the manual coding. The responses of the participants were extracted from the results of the interview. The thematic analysis was based on the responses of the participants' interviews which were transcribed verbatim.

With the data gathered from the interview, the transcripts used for the extraction of themes were drawn out from the interview conducted by the students are as follows; (1) Academic pressure with a sub-theme, Academic experiences; (2) Time Management with a sub-theme, Balancing coursework; (3) Loneliness and Isolation with a sub-theme, Limited Social Interaction; and (4) Financial Stress with a sub-theme, Financial Challenges due to Tuition, Living Expenses or Limited income.

### Theme 1: Academic Pressure

This theme emerged that as regards the lived experiences of the graduate school students during the new normal based on the interview and data gathered, the results revealed the sub-theme the Academic Stress Experience.

**Academic Stress Experience.** Based on the data gathered, one of the emerging sub-themes found in the study is rigorous coursework experience, academic stress, and internet connection. The participants expressed that during the new normal there is lots of academic stress on the submission of assignments, requirements, research proposals and the internet connection which resulted in pressures and stress.

*“Daghan gyud kayo ug assignment wala pay labot and final requirements mao ng asta gyud ka pressure.” (Kim)*

*“Naay mga restrictions and consideration regarding sa proposal tungod kay online lang kasagaran ang pwede nako ma extract na information.” (Phil)*

*“Unsay hinay kaayo ang internet dili nimo ma catch-up dayon ang instructions kay putol-putol.” (Phil)*

Those statements from the participants realized and applied other alternative activities to coping up their individual struggles and challenges encountered during the new normal such as; breaking and prioritizing their task into smaller and seeking support from the instructors, advisors, and also their fellow students.

*“Ginahinay-hinayan gyud nako siya ug buhat dili gyud ko pwede matulog kung wala nako siya malihuk hangtud sa nahuman gyud siya.” (Kim)*

*“Gina-identify nako ang mga least ug urgent kaayo na mga task para dili ko maipit in the end.” (Phil)*

*“Okey pod ang mga instructor kay nakasabot pod sila ug other option para sa among research.” (Phil)*

*“Adtoon nalang nako ang instructor para ma clarify sa akua or muadto ko ug school para ma enhance pa ang iyang mga instructions.” (Phil)*

**Insights on the Academic Pressure.** Based on the identified statements on the academic experiences of the students, they were trying to develop initiatives and other mechanisms in order to be literate on the digital platforms, adaptation on the online learning environment and making self-dedicated to finish the program.

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*“Kinahanglan naa pud kay nahibal-an sa troubleshooting sa imong laptop kay unsahay magputol-putol gyud ang connection.” (Phil)*

*“Since nag change and mode of instruction ato na time. Gipaningkamutan gihapon nako maka adjust sa new mode of instruction.” (Phil)*

*“Dedication na mahuman gyud nimo ang mga task no matter what happens.” (Phil)*

*“Maski na unsa pa ka apiki ang oras, basta ma focus lang gyud diha na part mahuman gyud na siya, maski na pressure pa kaayo na.” (Occi)*

### Themes 2: Time Management

This theme emerged as regards the lived experiences of the students on how they managed their time in order to cope up their requirements of the programs and their individual jobs. These expressed their motivation on balancing their needs as students during the new normal.

**Balancing the coursework and research.** These statements found during the interview from the participants that during the new normal the students are struggling with their situation between work and academic needs. It emphasizes that during the pandemic they barred and made reasons in delaying their studies requirements. However, they make adjustments in order to get on the path to pass the program.

*“Maski na daghan kaayo ug requirements sa among subject ug nag abot pa gyud ang mga deadlines, gi-tagaan gyud nako sya ug oras para layo pa ang deadline of submission at least gamay na lang ang kulang.” (Kim)*

*“Nakulong ko sa rason nga pandemic pa gihapon nahimo gyud siya nga scape goat sa akoo na side.” (Phil)*

**Insight on Time Management.** Based on the statements of the participants giving self determination to success and leveraging to virtual tools in collaborating its research and academic requirements is not easy but in virtue of hitting its goals, never make excuses for not to perform task but instead diverting time to a specific task and setting priorities on the specific objective is one of the keys in achieving to pass the program.

*“Never your excuse control phase, kung wala gyud time meaning to say you divert other things which is less priority than your own priority.” (Phil)*

*“Kadtong time nga on process nako sa akong proposal gahatag pud ug mga consideration ang akong mga gipang-approach na faculty kay lisod pa gyud mag engage ug pure face to face.” (Phil)*

### Theme 3: Loneliness and Isolation

This theme expresses their lived experiences during the new normal, it emphasizes what are their activities even living in the pandemic time. Especially on the restrictions on the health protocols, the participants are very much concerned about its health since it was a lock down. However, they engage in limited social interaction in order for them to comply with the requirements of the program and materialize its goals to manage the situations.

**Limited Social Interaction.** Based on the interview and data gathered from the participants it expressed how their lived experience without social interaction, during the pandemic due to the restrictions of the health

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protocols their limited gatherings in the community. However, in order to manage its status, the participants are engaging in limited social interaction and building a network by sorting out its burdens and supporting its fellow students in giving encouragement in order to survive and pursue the master's degree program.

*“Kadtong nag lift na sa pandemic, medyo concern pud ko sa akong palibot then gamay ra pod ang mga tao nga gagawas.” (Phil)*

*“Ga-apil me sa mga activities before pero tinabangay me para ma materialized namo ang goal.” (Chum)*

*“Gina-share nako sa akong classmate ang akong mga burdens sa school para in return gina lift pud ko nila nga dili mu give-up at the same time gina encourage pod ko nila.” (Phil)*

*“Ga brainstorming gyud mi permente sa akong friends para naa me idea.” (Chum)*

*“We always support each other para mabawasan gamay ang pressure sa schooling.” (Kim)*

**Insight on Loneliness and Isolation**, based on the data gathered on the live experiences of the students they expressed the insights on attending the challenges pertaining to Loneliness and Isolation. The students had collaboration and networking with other students and sharing of knowledge, also the sharing of burden to others in anyhow the moral support system was developed.

*“Naay collaboration sa amo nga kadtong wala nako nahibal-an maka-learn pod ko sa ilang nahibal-an.” (Chum)*

*“Kadtong time na mu atras na ko since gina-share nako sa akong mga kauban ang kalisud ug pressure sa course, gina encourage gyud ko nila na kaya lagi na nimo and they take example nga nakahuman sila maski na lisod.” (Kim)*

### Theme 4: Financial Stress

Based on the data gathered the participants expressed their lived experience on financial stability. They struggled to build a communication to their linkages since it needs finance to supply their personal and academic needs such as internet connection and transportation. It barred them from conducting their requirements because of the pandemic.

**Financial challenges due to tuition, living expenses or limited income.** Financing is one of the requirements for the sustainability of the students. Based on the statements gathered from the interview emphasizes how the students faced the challenges during the new normal especially during the conduct of its academic requirements. Further, students had made their ways in order to sustain their academic status by finding alternatives hence the price of the needs during pandemic is much higher than they expected.

*“Daghan kaayo kag bayaran since na pending ko last time tungod kay lockdown man ug need pod na hatagan ang mga respondents since bag-o pa gyud na lift ang COVID-19 also lift pod ilang moral.” (Phil)*

*“Naatlan nga mao pud to ang nag hawa nako sa trabaho maong naglisod gyud ko ato na time financially.” (Phil)*

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*“Kadto na time medyo taas pod ang mga presyo sa panaliton.” (Phil)*

*“Nangita gyud ko ug way to find other job. May gani nadawat dayon ko.” (Phil)*

**Insight on Financial Stress**, based on the data gathered on the live experiences of the students they expressed the insights on attending the challenges pertaining to financial stress. The students may amplify the importance of having all out discipline on the financial side.

*“Akoa gayod ginahunahuna kung ang akong ginagastos kay needs pa ba siya or wants nako. akoa pud gina consider ang akong financial capability ug nagabudget jud kog taman”(Kim)*

*“Economical lang gayod ko ato na time kung unsay importante gastos mao lang jud akong ginagastosan” (Phil)*

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary and Conclusion

The researchers concluded from the themes that emerged: academic pressure, time management, loneliness and isolation and the financial stress. Based on the themes identified and interviews gathered, it expressed the lived experiences during the new normal is not easy. There are challenges and struggles being captured such as the academic stresses in complying with the academic requirements while courseworks exists considering the time bound of its submissions. In addition, health protocols restrictions had an impact on delaying the completion of its requirements such as conducting its research and coordinating its participants. Some of the students are experiencing the low internet connection and struggling in dealing on the digital platforms, however they initiated and made alternatives in order to adapt to the situation during the pandemic. Furthermore, financial sustainability is one of the vital needs of the students in order to comply with all the necessary documents.

In addressing these challenges, the student needs to be self-motivated and adaptable in all circumstances during its studying for the master's degree, it also needs to be financially stable. Developing initiatives and other mechanisms to be literate on the digital platforms and the online learning environment. Diversion of time to a specific task and setting priorities is one of the main strategies to cope with the situation and developing a collaboration and networking with other students and sharing its knowledge and giving encouragement to its fellow students can give motivation to pursue the program.

#### Recommendations

In passing the graduate school degree programs, the lived experiences of the students must be self-motivated and dedicated. Develop and adapt new skills that match the current situations such as digital literacy, virtual environments considering the new technologies after the pandemic. Managing time and setting tasks in order to be on track and making less pressure in coping with academic requirements. Building a networking and strong collaboration to gather further knowledge from other sources, such as fellow students, instructors, professors and advisors. Students must be financially stable in order to support sustainability in finishing the program.

The Commission on Higher Education can formulate policies and set new standards for the improvements and developments in the graduate school programs in all state universities and colleges.

The Administration and faculty can execute a memorandum order or any legal documents encouraging the faculties in all state universities and colleges for the development and improvement of new platforms for the graduate school programs. May also search and introduce new strategies and platforms for molding a good quality education for the future students.

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Lastly, the students may adapt the learnings, and be self-dedicated and inspired in taking the graduate school degree programs and it must mentally and financially stable in order to easily adjust during the challenges and struggles they may encounter along the studying the graduate school programs.

These recommendations aim to give insights and awareness of the incoming graduate school students on identifying the possible challenges to be encountered, enhancing its capabilities. Be convenient and have flexible time as to its preparation in taking the graduate school degree programs.

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