Bridging Educational Gaps Among University Students During the New Normal through the *Kumustahan Project*: A Focus Group Discussion Initiative for Higher Education

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I. Introduction

A year after World Health Organization declared Covid-19 as a global pandemic, most universities across the world are still struggling to face the new normal. Online learning has become the means universities have in continuing education. While most progressive universities are digitally prepared, there is another gap that these universities have to deal with – the continuing divide between those who are able to study digitally, and those that are left behind due to economic factors.

In a recent study by Grishchenco (2020), most of the students living in rural areas have been greatly affected by the sudden shift to full digital learning due to the limitations of technology. Beaunoyer, Dupéré, and Guitton (2020) pointed out that the digital divide has already been existing even in the pre-pandemic days. It, however, exacerbated when students were left with no other means but through online learning.

The series of lockdowns caused a lot of limitations to the students. From technological limitations to financial and even social challenges (Lassoued, Alhendawi, & Bashitialshaaer, 2020; Peters, et al., 2020), students are also challenged when it comes to their mental health and psychological wellness (Cao, et al., 2020), causing greater issues on inclusion – both academically and socially.

In the Philippines, the readiness of students in a fully-digital learning space remains low on students' demographics who belong to lower income and rural areas (Alipio, 2020). Approximately 2,400 Higher Education Institution in the Philippines are challenged to bridge the gap between the economically-able students and those who are being left behind. Prior to the 2020 Pandemic, Oztok et al. (2013) surveyed different means of conducting digital learning to alleviate such gap, through synchronous and asynchronous learning. Years later, the acceptance of synchronous and asynchronous mode of online learning has become a staple in the New Normal set-up of education.

Joaquin, Biana, & Dacela (2020) pointed out that major universities in the Philippines have implemented the different modalities of learning, giving more options for inclusion. De La Salle University and University of Santo Tomas, among many, offers both synchronous and asynchronous modalities, while Ateneo de Manila University suspended synchronous learning during the first semester of the Pandemic to focus on fully asynchronous mode of learning (Joaquin, Biana, & Dacela, 2020).

In Far Eastern University, an additional mode of learning was offered during the entire 2020, on top of synchronous and asynchronous. The Total Analog Learning (TAL) serves as a more independent, less technological, and fully modular learning modality. This is with the intention of reaching even those students who cannot access the internet. TAL comes with a complete Course Information Booklet, complete reading materials, complete list of assessments, other reference materials, and a well-planned calendar guide. Students enrolled in TAL received a couriered flash drive with complete learning materials, which students accomplished and returned at the end of the semester.

Despite these intentions to fully bridge the gap on inclusion, a significant number of students in Far Eastern University continue to express the challenge of digital learning even after a year in the new normal. In a private university like FEU who continues to experience challenges on access to technology and other platforms for digital learning, the conjecture is that significant number of students from other private universities are also experiencing the same situation. Much so, those who are in remote places, public colleges and universities, and other economically-challenged communities may have been confronted with the same problems.

In this paper, we will narrate the accounts of the students as well as the findings of a university drive called *Kumustahan Project*, a campaign to open conversations with students about their over-all wellness during the Pandemic. The accounts were gathered through Focus Group Discussions conducted by volunteer professors. During the first semester of online learning, 76 university students from different year level, courses and specialization, participated in the project, while 224 students took part in

the second semester's project. More so, the discussion revolves around the issues of technology and economic challenges. Lastly, the intention of the project is to create sustainable online education policies and guidelines that the university, and other institutions may be able to adopt and further develop even in the post-pandemic times.

Purpose of the Study

This paper discusses the condition of the students taking online classes from Far Eastern University – Manila during the first two years of COVID-19 pandemic, and the gap between the economically-able students and those who are being left behind due to the limitations they experience in the implementation of full digital learning. Likewise, the paper aims to further the discourse on digital learning in the pandemic and post-pandemic era. Students, as co-constructor of learning, should be heard as source of empirical studies for further improvement of HEI's implementation of digital learning, not just here in the Philippines, but in other developing economies. Lastly, the study can be a basis for the development of teaching and learning platforms for the post-pandemic times.

II. Literature Review

Online Learning in Higher Education

The emergence of online learning has provided students and teachers with a new, adaptable, and collaborative way to study and work together. Whether or whether online courses are bad for students, teachers, or the educational system as a whole is a passionately debated topic in the 21st century. Supporters of online education claim that students in the twenty-first century need the internet's capacity for renewal and development to thrive, while opponents point out that asynchronous interactions are neither engaging or strict enough for higher education. A well-rounded virtual experience will include a variety of synchronous and asynchronous means of communication between students and teachers (Reese 2015). Also, as Nassoura (2020) pointed out, e-learning has developed into a worldwide collaborative tool. Both corporations and universities are increasingly turning to online courses as a means of reducing tuition costs and maximizing the educational opportunities available to their employees.

A large number of colleges throughout the globe have canceled in-person classes due to concerns about the spread of COVID-19 and requests to contain the virus. New security flaws at academic institutions throughout the world have been revealed by the virus. The need for flexible and resilient educational institutions is becoming more apparent in light of the present climate of uncertainty (Ali 2020). Moreover, that includes you, Sison et al (2021) Given the scope of the current pandemic, online courses are among the most practical solutions available. Due to the benefits of online education, students might still benefit greatly from this rollout. Still, some students are reluctant to engage this academic year because they are not confident in their own academic talents or their ability to succeed in traditional classroom settings. In light of the worldwide pandemic, the Philippine government decided to implement a lockdown, canceling all scheduled business, school, and other activities. The students are unable to study since they have contracted an illness. As a result, the government, in conjunction with the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), devised a new standard educational system for students and teachers alike during the COVID-19 era. Distance learning over the internet seems to be the only practical solution in this age of precautions and extremely infectious epidemics. But there seems to be a false assumption supporting this. It's important to remember that online instruction is only one kind of distant education. The term "distance learning" refers to a broad category of educational interactions in which the learner and the teacher are physically and temporally separated from one another (Joaquin et al 2020).

Students Challenges in Online Set-up

While this fresh approach to education is gaining popularity, it is essential that studies be conducted on the structure and execution of online courses. We can provide objectively verifiable recommendations if we understand the challenges instructors face and highlight effective practices that have been proven in this context. Evaluation of student progress in learning is a complex and nuanced process. Formative and summative assessments, the distribution of assessed activities within a program, the challenges of delivering useful feedback, and the strategies used to overcome them are all part of the discussion (Kearns 2012). Furthermore, Slykerman et al. (2022) claims that universities are at a turning point in their history since students nowadays are expected to begin their careers with self-instruction, often at a transitional time in which they have progressively more freedom to choose their own trajectories. The need of recognizing the impact on students' mental health and academic performance of the rapid shift to online teaching techniques in response to COVID-19 containment measures cannot be overstated. The emotional and social effects of the pandemic on students are also seldom considered. Today, it is generally accepted that traumatic events, such as the COVID-19, may leave their mark on students, leaving them with PTSD and despair. As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 has been shown to negatively impact social well-being, and the epidemic has also highlighted students' educational weaknesses (Akdoan and Ergin 2021).

The most obvious challenge of online education is still the aim of technological elements. Humans have long attempted to devise creative uses for emerging forms of instructional technology. In addition, the educational process is made useless and

nonexistent if the student is unable to get access to the class learning materials via the use of modern technology due to physical or economic limits (Chen 2012). In addition, Toquero et al. (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the focus of students all over the globe due to anxiety, isolation, and other mental and emotional health difficulties. Students' thoughts were affected by the deadly virus's presence in the classroom. During this unprecedented time in their lives, students confront exclusion, melancholy, and fear about the future, all of which may contribute stress, anxiety, and depression. In addition, the importance of online learning in the world's educational institutions has grown substantially in the years since the epidemic began. While the number of online courses continues to rise, there is growing concern about the quality of education offered and the obstacles encountered by both instructors and students. For example, when classes were held online for long periods of time, students experienced fatigue, exhaustion, and a loss of concentration. Additionally, when Wi-Fi connectivity was unreliable at times, students worried that their work would be lost in the middle of an assignment or assessment (Dung 2020).

Lack of family support or assistance is one of the factors that makes schooling more difficult during times of crisis. Education in the Philippines is through a period of transition as the country adapts to the global norm. Students' ability to learn, work together, and even stay alive are all being adversely affected by the current epidemic. Adjusting a school system predicated on physical buildings is one of the biggest obstacles brought on by the epidemic. As stated by Esterson (2021). In addition, the expanding phenomena of the sickness has shaken the worldwide population's mental and physical health, as reported by Blanco et al. (2020). In addition to the numerous lives lost, pandemic instances have also done irreparable damage to each learner's mental health, undermining their sense of competence and confidence. To add to this, Galanza (2021) argued that students' financial restrictions are related to both their good and bad mental health, while students' poor mental health is linked to their fear of the pandemic. Psychological health treatments are needed to help college students cope with the emotional fallout of the epidemic, which includes the more fundamental financial difficulties experienced by some students and their families. Finally, Calugan et al. (2020) suggested that, despite the benefits of online virtual classrooms, challenges exist for both students and teachers. Online classes lack face-to-face interaction, making students vulnerable to disruption from things like mobile phones, pets, and package delivery. Students are not expected to be engaged in a virtual classroom because of the lack of personal interaction. In addition, they found that students may feel more comfortable withdrawing, participating passively, or just not showing up in an online course because of the anonymity provided by the platform. Learners' uneasiness in an online setting was shown by these hypotheses, leading to reduced engagement.

III. Research Methodology

The study titled *Kumustahan Project* was conducted through Far Eastern University's Student Academic Concerns Office – a unit under the Academic Affairs Office. The *Kumustahan Project* contributes to the university efforts at creating a nurturing community. It enables the university, through its faculty to systematically find out about student concerns, experiences, and insights on matters other than academic discussions. The initiative utilized Focus Group Discussion (FGD). It is a small group discussion method which aims to discuss a specific topic or subject. It involves asking set of questions to selected participants to gain their different perceptions, beliefs, experiences, ideas and attitudes towards the topic being discussed. In FDG, a moderator / facilitator is significant in leading the flow of the conversation without personal biases and prejudices.

The purpose of this research is to describe the theoretical and methodological steps used in a multi-center focus group study to develop information categories that are suitable for classification statistical analyses. Nonverbal communication, process-based articulation, task-oriented or problem-centered gestures, emotive gestures, and personal attributes all factor into the final result. Qualitative research has the added advantage of yielding a large amount of data. Furthermore, this data must be viewed and classified in a lawful and trustworthy way, such as via qualitative content analysis, for the research to be useful. By dividing the information gleaned from interviews into manageable groups that accurately depict themes, qualitative content analysis techniques aim to make the data more accessible and useful. (Moretti et al, 2011) Also, the focus group (FG) technique has lately made a comeback in the field of social research. There have been many systematic discussions about it, and it is currently seen as a promising new method of inquiry. However, it looks that FG has been widely used as a research approach. Many researchers utilize FG without questioning whether or whether it is the most efficient means of achieving the study's perceptual aims, or vice versa. However, it seems that the FG is widely employed simply because it is thought to be a simple and inexpensive method (Acocella, 2012). In addition, "exercises" or action questions, which are helpful and pleasant additions to surveys, may be included into the focus group project as a means of accomplishing the aforementioned aim. For more introspective responders like students, exercises provide a unique data collection tool. They may help keep the team focused on the study at hand and streamline analysis. When dealing with pupils or having important conversations, they may also be helpful (Colucci, 2007).

Because it may survey a large number of people at once, focus groups are a time-efficient way to collect detailed information on a targeted audience's opinions and actions. Focus groups provide researchers a substantial advantage over other survey tools, such as questionnaires, since they let them to go more deeply into the subject topic and glean in-depth, supplementary knowledge. When it comes to the success of focus groups, the facilitator is essential. In order to achieve this goal, the researcher has to choose a subject who exemplifies the qualities thought to underpin effective self-control. Focus groups should be moderated

by someone who is not involved in the study to maintain objectivity (Masadeh, 2012). Nyumba et al. (2018) conclude that the most urgent reason to employ FDG is to foster dispute or conversation on a subject of interest that calls for a variety of views and the importance that lies behind those perspectives and beliefs. Talks in smaller groups may be utilized as a research method at any stage. FDG, in contrast to more conventional methods like personal surveys and interviews, enables the investigation of issues that are not fully understood or for which there is insufficient previous study. Researchers should think about this restriction while preparing and designing questions for focus groups. It is possible to use a mixed techniques strategy in these situations, with focus group talks being one of the ways.

The participants of the study were three hundred and ten (310) university students from Far Eastern University in Manila, Philippines. Eighty-six (86) students from the first year (2020) participated, while two hundred twenty-four (224) participated during the second year (2021) of the *Kumustahan Project*. All students came from Far Eastern University (FEU), a private, non-sectarian university established in 1928. It is located at Nicanor Reyes Sr. St., Sampaloc, Manila, Philippines. The university is composed of six institutes, namely, Institute of Accounts Business and Finance (IABF), Institute of Arts and Sciences (IAS), Institute of Architecture and Fine Arts (IARFA), Institute of Education (IE), Institute of Nursing (IN), and Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (ITHM).

The gathering of responses from the student-participants followed the process of focus group discussion: First, the researchers determined the scope of the topic. Two sets of questions were prepared:

Year 1

1. How did you access the internet in the months of March to May? Did you have difficulty accessing the internet?
2. Was there a change in the financial circumstances of the person who provides you with financial support? If yes, how did you cope?
3. How would you describe your mental state during the quarantine? How did you cope? Did you find a need to go out? Did you go out?

Year 2

1. How would you rate your online class experience after one year?
2. What are the advantages of online classes compared to face to face classes for you?
3. What negative experiences have you had in doing online classes?
4. Self-evaluation: How would you rate yourself as a student regarding your learning modality?

In the actual focus group discussion, teacher-facilitators were instructed to ask for the consent of the students to participate in the project, informing them that the narratives will be used for further studies. The questions were asked and processed organically to the thirty-nine (39) teacher-facilitators, who selected eight (8) students from among their classes, randomly. By organically, we mean that while there are guide questions, the facilitators may ask clarificatory or follow up questions, as well as raise certain points that may come from the students, which is deemed significant in the discussion. The student-participants were assured that everything they said would be confidential and that their names are not included in the report. During the focus group discussion, the teacher-facilitator listened attentively and took down important notes. Note taking were free of the facilitator's own interpretation. Follow up questions were asked by the teacher-facilitator for clarification on statements that were ambiguous.

After the session, teacher-facilitators were asked to submit the notes to the researcher for interpretation of results.

IV. Research Findings and Discussions

This section of the paper presents the research findings from the 310 student-respondents based on the set of questions given in each semester. The presentation of research findings is divided into two (2) parts:

Year 1 FGD Questions

1. How did you access the internet in the months of March to May? Did you have difficulty accessing the internet?
2. Was there a change in the financial circumstances of the person who provides you with financial support? If yes, how did you cope?
3. How would you describe your mental state during the quarantine? How did you cope? Did you find a need to go out? Did you go out?

Findings

1. Internet connectivity

Fifty-four (54) of the responses (62.80%) narrated their specific difficulties encountered during semester in terms of internet access. Below are the summary and sample responses from students:

Students' Mode of Access

    a. Wifi (52)
    b. Wifi and Mobile Data (15)
    c. Mobile Data only (8)
    d. Outside Home/ No Private Connection (1)
    e. No response (10)

Sample responses:

"There were times where my internet wasn't able to cope up with the minimum capacity needed for using video calls and that lead to me missing some parts of a lecture."

"May wifi kami sa bahay pero hindi sya ganon kabilis kaya nag kakatechnical problem ako pagdating sa online class. Then minsan gumagamit ako ng mobile data kasi minsan nawawala talaga ang net pero hindi ganon ka useful ang data kasi mabagal din siya." *(We have wifi at home but it's not that realiable, that's why I often have technical problems during online classes. Sometimes I switch to mobile prepaid data but it is even slower.)*

"Nag access ako ng internet sa bahay po ng tita ko since wala po kaming internet sa bahay. Yes po may difficulty po kapag mag connect since, marami po kaming nagamit, bumabagal po and minsan nawawala." *(I access internet in my aunt's house since we do not have our own. Yes, I experienced a lot of difficulties in connection since a lot of us connect to the same source of internet, hence, it is often slow – at times even inaccessible).*

"There were times where my internet wasn't able to cope up with the minimum capacity needed for using video calls and that lead to me missing some parts of a lecture."

"I have problems with signal which causes interruption during video conferences. I often lose connection and get disconnected from the conference which can be troublesome when we have discussions."

Discussion

    Internet connection in the Philippines has had a significant impact on online learning during the pandemic. According to data from the Philippine Statistics Authority, as of October 2020, only 22.7% of households in the Philippines had access to the internet. This limited access to the internet has made it difficult for students to participate in online classes and access learning materials. Additionally, the quality of internet connection in the Philippines is often slow and unreliable, which further compounds the difficulties faced by students trying to learn online. In a survey conducted by the World Bank, 87% of respondents in the Philippines reported experiencing connectivity issues while participating in online learning. These connectivity problems have had a particularly severe impact on students in rural areas, where internet access is even more limited. According to a report by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, only 7% of households in rural areas have access to the internet. The impact of limited internet access on online learning in the Philippines has led to calls for the government and private sector to invest in improving internet infrastructure in the country. The Department of Education has also implemented measures to address the issue, such as distributing printed learning modules to students who do not have access to the internet.

2. Status of Family Finances

Forty-three (43) out of eighty-six (86) or 50% of students said that there is no change in financial status during the lockdown. (See selected responses below). The remaining 50% narrated financial difficulties encountered during the semester. Fourteen (14) students stated that at least one of their parents/guardians temporarily lost his/her job during the lockdown. Five (5) stated that at least one of their parents/guardian permanently lost his/her job or got terminated. One (1) respondent said there wasn't any problem with employment of parents, but salary/income was delayed. The rest did not specify their parent/guardian's employment status.

Below are the summary and sample responses from students:

a. Temporary Loss of Work

Responses:

    "Yes. My father is the only one working. Since, He worked in a Cruise, he has no job now. We are depending on the apartment rental and store. We already sold one of our apartments just to cope with our financial situation."

    "There are changes po, my brother had to stop for working because there were no flights po (he works in the airport po). So, my sister had to shoulder the financial expenses…"

"Yes, my mom works in Dubai and she is the one who financially supports me. She sends money every month however because of the lockdown in Dubai her work had to stop for a while. The situation forced her to cut down monetary support for a few months…"

b. Permanent Loss of Work

Responses:

"Yes po. Syempre po it's hard, ang provider po kasi is si lola so medyo mahirap pero kasi sya na mismo ang nagsabi na since last two years nalang naman, tapusin na po. Closed na po sila, she works in a lumang sinehan sa Quiapo and since may mga guidelines na bawal, di na po sila nagreopen po. God will provide naman po." (Yes, of course it's hard. Grandmother is the provider, but since she encouraged me to finish studying since it's the last two years of college. Her workplace in the old cinema in Quiapo already closed due to the new guidelines. They cannot reopen. Though [I believe] God will provide.)

"This pandemic my dad lost his job then my mother is sick and my brother's salary is not enough because their company also needs to adjust employees…"

"Yes. My grandfather was terminated from his job in the UAE. I had a difficulty with regards our financial stability and the fact that I still have one semester to graduate. I didn't want to be a burden to my grandparents so I struggled mentally."

c. Decrease in Income

Responses

"In my situation, being in a broken family the income of my family is split. My mother is an OFW in Dubai. The company decreased their income. In my father side, being in the line of politics, we are all considering not just our family but other families as well."

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on family income in the Philippines. According to a survey conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) in April 2020, around 87% of Filipino households experienced a decrease in income due to the pandemic. The same survey also found that 15.5% of households had at least one member who lost their job. The impact of the pandemic on family income has been particularly severe for low-income households. A study by the World Bank found that households in the bottom 40% of the income distribution were more likely to experience a decline in income and were less likely to have access to government assistance programs. The Philippine government has implemented several measures to address the impact of the pandemic on family income, such as the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) which provided cash assistance to low-income households. However, the effectiveness of these programs has been limited by challenges such as the identification of eligible beneficiaries and the distribution of aid. The pandemic has also highlighted the need for more comprehensive social protection programs in the Philippines, which can help to mitigate the impact of future crises on household incomes and well-being.

3. Mental Health Concerns

Twelve (12) out of eighty-six (86) or 13.95% of the responses said that they do not have problems with their mental health during the lockdown. Some factors included staying with the family, devotion, and other religious expressions, and maintaining a positive outlook in life. The remaining seventy-three (73) students (84.88%) narrated negative mental health concerns during the semester, while one (1) student has no response due to internet problems.

Below are the summary and selected responses from students:

"Instead of worrying about the pandemic or our supplies, I had to worry about assignments, projects and quizzes. All I could do was comply and finish it before the deadlines, which took a toll on my mental health. With me as an only child, I relied on seeing my friends on a regular basis to become less stressed. That advantage was not available during quarantine which made me more stressful."

"I felt unmotivated to do my school activities. When I'm at school, I used to be more productive in terms of school activities and I could easily accomplish my requirements. I consider my home as a place for relaxation and rests. But, this online classes made me unmotivated to do my school activities because of the many interruptions I need to do at home like chores, errands, and others."

During one focus group session, a student was not able to express her thoughts completely due to being overwhelmed and emotional. Hence, the teacher-facilitator narrated her interpreted narrative:

"She is quite overwhelmed and disturbed sometimes because of "too much" online requirements that needs to be submitted on a specific date. She expressed that one of her subjects may require more than the usual or allotted number of hours a day to just to finish reading or viewing a module."

From the same 73 students (84.88%) who narrated negative mental health concerns during the semester, a significant number pointed out the issues of online learning adjustments and low level of preparation. The sudden shift to online mode of learning has caused the students to worry about their future, greatly affecting their mental health wellness. Below are the summary and selected responses:

"Instead of worrying about the pandemic or our supplies, I had to worry about assignments, projects and quizzes. All I could do was comply and finish it before the deadlines, which took a toll on my mental health. With me as an only child, I relied on seeing my friends on a regular basis to become less stressed."

"Parang ang fuzzy po for now, diko po alam kung paano po magaccept dun sa pag aaral online, may mga subjects po na diko kayang intindihin by myself, nastress po ako, napaisip po ako kung tama po ba yung course na kinukuha ko. Tapos yung mommy ko po, natigil pa sa work pero tiwala naman ako sa mommy." (It's so fuzzy for now; I don't know how to accept [embrace] the online mode of learning. There are subjects I cannot comprehend alone, which stresses me. I'm beginning to doubt if I'm taking the right course. Then my mother had to stop from work, but I have full trust on her.)

Discussion

In a survey by the Department of Education, it was found that 7 out of 10 students experienced stress and anxiety due to the pandemic. The same survey also showed that 9 out of 10 teachers reported that their students' mental health had been affected by the pandemic. A study published in the Philippine Journal of Psychiatry found that the pandemic had a significant impact on the mental health of college students, with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. The study also noted that students who had limited access to mental health services were at a higher risk of developing mental health problems. The Philippine government has recognized the need to address the mental health concerns of students during the pandemic. The Department of Education has implemented several measures, such as providing mental health support services and conducting online psychosocial interventions. The government has also passed the Mental Health Act, which aims to promote mental health and provide mental health services to all Filipinos.

Year 2 FGD Questions:

1. How would you rate your online class experience after one year?
2. What are the advantages of online classes compared to face to face classes for you?
3. What negative experiences have you had in doing online classes?
4. Self-evaluation: How would you rate yourself as a student regarding your learning modality?

Findings:

How would you rate your online class experience? (Scale of 1 to 10)

10/10 – 2 students

9/10 – 4 students
8/10 – 29 students
7/10 – 61 students
6/10 – 51 students
5/10 – 36 students
4/10 – 11 students
3/10 – 10 students
2/10 – 3 students
1/10 – 1 student
No response – 15 students
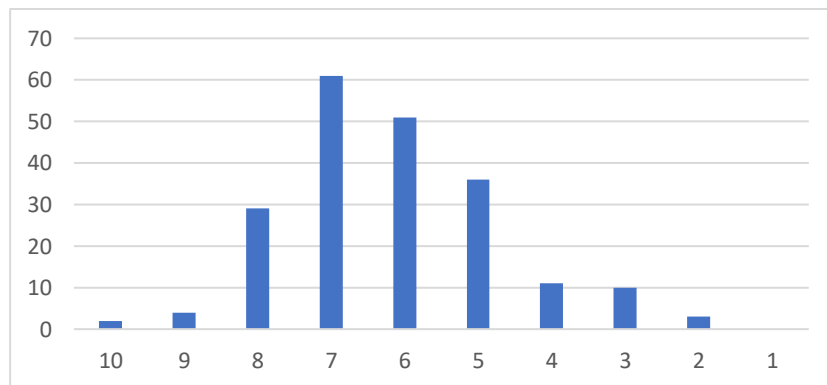
After doing online classes for one year, majority of the students assessed their online learning experience, following the scale of 10 as highest and 1 as lowest, between the range of 8 to 5, with 177 over 223 students (52.46% of the total number of respondents). From high 8 to low 5, sixty-one (61) students rate their experience at 7, while fifty-one (51) gave their experience a rating of 6. These findings show that more than half of the respondents believe that their online learning experience in a year is above average.

To better see these figures, translate to students' real life accounts, the next two questions were asked to help students narrate both their positive and negative experiences in online learning.

What are the advantages of online classes compared to face to face classes for you?

In this question, students were encouraged by their moderators to reflect on their positive experiences from the start of their online learning journey last year, until the semester. Interestingly, five (5) common themes surfaced: developing professional skills (90 responses), Flexibility in learning (51 responses), Convenience (48 responses), Personal advantages (26 responses), and Practicality (8).

Below are the sub-themes and sample responses from students:

a. Skills and Professional Development (90)

Time management and discipline (42), Being an independent learner (38), Digital Literacy (8), and Develop creativity (2)

"There was a moment of self-discovery. I discovered that there is more that I can do than in face to face classes. I became more digitally literate."

"I believe it makes me more future-ready. Since the world is fast progressing, this "forced" mode of learning might be a huge preparation already for where companies and work force is heading. I feel like this one year of online class prepared me to be more professional in the 21st century set-up."

"I could learn at my own pace and be more independent when it comes to learning."

"Online classes make students independent learners."

b. Flexibility in Learning (51)

Access to recorded session (17), Flexible deadlines of quizzes, submissions, activities (15), Accessibility of resources like google, articles, online materials, etc (14), Consideration given in valid situations (3) and No attendance policy (2)

"I think the advantage of online class is the time. Being in online class, I can opt to manage my classes and have more time because of the only once a meeting protocol for every classes. For Asynchronous activities, I can do it at my own pace and can think about the best time I can do my activities."

"online lectures can be recorded, archived, and shared for future reference. This allows us students to access the learning material at a time of our comfort."

"kapag nakarecord ay pwede balikan unlike kapag tapos na ay bahala ka makagets. Fixed ang deadline at may canvas at hindi nawawala ang papers and nabibigay ang rubrics and yung advance ang activities and prof ay nagcocomment, paperless so eco-friendly."

c. Convenience (48)

No travel stress in travel/commute (32) and Comfort of home (16)

"There is no wasted time on the road or commute."

"Learning while at the comfort of our home is an advantage. I feel safer and less stressed from the daily commute before."

"I can take naps in between, whenever I needed it. In school, I have long breaks and I cannot sleep in the classrooms and in the library. Here at home, I can take advantage of the proximity and comfort of my room in between classes."

d. Personal (26)

Quality time with family (13), Safety from Covid-19 (11), and Less pressure for introverts (2)

"Personally, one of the advantages of online classes is that I am living under the same roof with my family. Their presence for is of utmost important in my education."

"For me as an introverted and silent learner, it is easy for me to concentrate whatever classes I have. And also, a room for me to freely think on what to discuss in the deepest thought of what I can offer."

"With the continuous rising of Covid-19 cases, I know I am in a safer place, learning at home. I don't need to worry about getting infected outside."

e. Practicality (8)

Multitasking and other responsibilities (part-time job, house chores, hobbies, etc) (4), and Save money like dorm expenses, allowance, etc. (4)

"It can be an advantage in terms of time availability, wherein students can choose appropriate time that is compatible for us. Because some are working students it's a big help for them that they can study and work at the same time."

"napapagsabay ko po ang ang aking small business and mas hawak kopo ang oras ko at kung paano ko gawin ang aking mga gawain bilang isang student."

"Before going to college, I was actually planning to rent an apartment in Manila since I live in Bulacan and it is quite a hassle to commute everyday especially if you have classes until evening. Because classes are held online this academic year, I think that I saved a lot of money that could have gone to monthly rents and bills if ever I rented a place in Manila. I can also spend more time with my family because I am just staying at the house."

What are the disadvantages of Online Classes compared to face to face classes?

In this question, students were encouraged by their moderators to reflect on their perceived disadvantages of online classes from the start of their online learning journey last year, until the current semester. Students pointed out several issues and challenges, which can be categorized into six (6) themes: Limitations of the learning environment (109 responses), Personal challenges (50 responses), Teacher-factor (43 responses), Technology-related issues (41 responses), Limitations on instructions (20 responses), and Health concerns (8 responses).

Below are the sub-themes and sample responses from students:

Limitations of the Learning Environment (109)

Not conducive learning environment (47) and Home-School boundaries are compromised (12), Lack of social interaction (31), Not learning, just complying (9), Lack of focus and poor attention span (7), and Lack of motivation (3)

"My only concern in my chosen learning modality is that it is hard to focus especially I get distracted in my environment wherein I conducted my online class."

"groupworks is something really hard kasi I find it hard to find groupmates kasi you never really met and communicating on them are not always online, different schedules, different courses. Distractions and temptations, when at home, to feel lazy."

"My only concern in my chosen learning modality is that it is hard to focus especially I get distracted in my environment wherein I conducted my online class."

"I am starting to lose some interest in going to synchronous meetings. It is because it seems like that attending some synchronous session will be going to be a waste of time. The time that I put on attending my synchronous meeting should be lending to answer all of my formative assessments and quizzes."

Teacher Factor (43)

Too much assessment, less teaching (20), Lack of consistent feedback from teachers (19), Teachers' ability to teach in an online platform (2), and Too much leniency, grades are very high (2)

"There are still professors who are requiring their students to attend their classes even though some chose AOL because there are always group presentations. In addition, our internet connection is very slow that is why I always have a hard time keeping up with the lessons. Lastly, there are professors who only open quizzes on certain time and sometimes our internet connection during that time is very slow that is why sometimes, I encounter problems during quizzes."

"Some recorded discussions aren't uploaded by the teachers."

"The amount of workload in a week is too much. It is heavier than what I expected. Some professors are giving us 1 FA per week with 1-2 prerequisite activities. 3 activities for 1 subject is too much for a week. Recently, we found out that these prerequisites are not graded which made us feel frustrated because we allotted time and effort for those activities only to find out that it has no bearing on our grade."

Technology-related issues (41)

Poor internet connection (24), Prolonged screen time (13), No personal computer / gadget (3), and Too much notification causes stress (1)

"For my learning modality, I have chosen the mixed online learning/MOL because I think our internet connectivity works well but then I was wrong. There are still times that I am having some internet issues that results me to not attend synchronous classes sometimes. Especially if it's raining here in my hometown, which makes it slower, and sometimes not work."

"My laptop sometimes had problems when it comes to using some software that we are using in doing the plates and so I need to be more patient on this and make my best to pass my assignments in time."

"I am having a hard time understanding the lessons on my own. Therefore, I chose MOL as my learning modality. Despite how slow my internet is. Moreover, my internet usually doesn't work due to the place I am staying, which is too rural. I did try to consider my internet connectivity, but I still chose depending on how I will be able to keep up with the lessons."

Limitations on Instruction (22)

No laboratory and field work (15), and Group work and collaboration is challenging – 7

"I am never effective as a student in remote set-up. It's hard for me to learn due to the limitations on direct feedback and communication with the professor."

"Some of the things that require laboratory experiments were adjusted to video clips on YouTube. It is different when you do it on actual laboratory."

"In my class in speech, some of the workshops that require public speaking and collaboration were altered to activities that are less personal, like recording myself do a speech."

"Learning from fellow students is now challenging because there is no guarantee that they have the same schedule or good internet connection."

Health concerns (8)

Mental health issues (5) and Fatigue (3)

Self-evaluation: How would you rate yourself as a student regarding your learning modality?

10/10 – 9 students

9/10 – 19 students

8/10 – 62 students

7/10 – 42 students

6/10 – 33 students

5/10 – 9 students

4 and below – 7 students
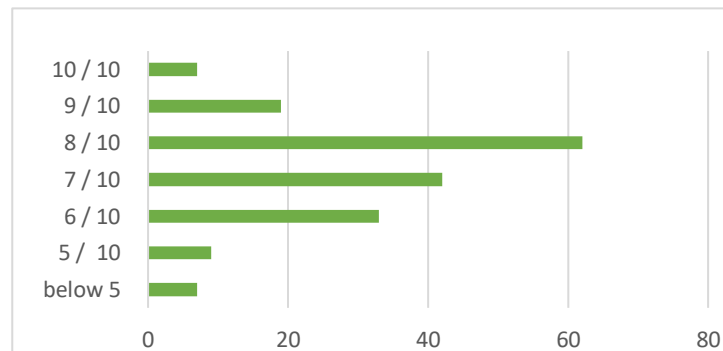
Discussion

As shown in the data gathered, the challenges of our students in coping with online learning continue to affect their overall academic and personal developments. These challenges are reflective of the challenges of online learning in the Philippines as a whole particularly in 2021 and 2022. Some of the common themes based on the FGD are the following:

Increased use of digital technology: Students have become more familiar with digital technology, and many have acquired new skills in using online platforms and tools for learning. This has allowed them to participate more actively in online classes and access learning materials more efficiently.

Collaboration with peers and teachers: Students have formed online study groups, created online chat groups, and communicated with their teachers through various online channels. This has helped them stay connected and motivated despite the challenges of online learning.

Balancing academic and personal responsibilities: Many students have had to juggle their academic responsibilities with household chores, family obligations, and personal challenges brought about by the pandemic. To cope, they have developed time-management skills, prioritized their tasks, and sought support from their families and communities.

Adaptation to alternative modes of assessment: To accommodate the limitations of online learning, teachers have introduced new forms of assessment such as projects, online quizzes, and take-home exams. Students have adjusted to these alternative modes of assessment and have been able to demonstrate their learning in different ways.

V. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many aspects of life, including education. With schools and universities in the Philippines closing their doors to prevent the spread of the virus, many institutions have turned to online education as an alternative. This shift has presented a unique opportunity for researchers to study the effectiveness of online education and its impact on students' learning outcomes. The *Kumustahan Project* of the far Eastern University Manila served as a significant platform for researchers and students to account their current realities through focus group discussion (FGD) It allows researchers to gather rich data on students' experiences. By bringing together a group of students who have experienced online education during the pandemic, researchers can gain insights into the challenges and opportunities that this mode of education presents. Participants can share their perspectives on the effectiveness of online teaching methods, the level of engagement they experienced, and the challenges they faced in accessing resources and support.

The *Kumustahan Project* of FEU explored the impact of their personal experiences, family concerns, and readiness in technology. By asking students about their academic performance and their perceptions of their own learning, researchers gained a better understanding of the effectiveness of online education in promoting student learning. This information can be used to inform the development of online teaching methods and to identify areas where additional support is needed to ensure that students are able to succeed in an online learning environment, especially in the post-pandemic times. It also allows the researchers to explore the social and emotional dimensions of learning. The pandemic has had a significant impact on students' mental health and well-being, and this is likely to have influenced their experience of online education. By allowing students to share their thoughts and feelings about their experience of online learning, researchers can gain insights into the social and emotional dimensions of this mode of education.

In conclusion, the *Kumustahan Project* is a valuable focus group discussion method for studying online education during the pandemic. By bringing together a group of participants to share their experiences, researchers can gain rich insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by online education, and explore the social and emotional dimensions of learning in this context. This information can be used to inform the development of effective online teaching methods and to ensure that students are able to succeed in an online learning environment.

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