

Exploring the Lived Academic Experiences of First-time Filipino Graduate Students Teaching Abroad: Towards A Mindful Practice

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Abstract: Studying in other countries reinforce academic, intercultural, and scientific competence of students (Maharaja, 2018). But despite the many possible positive opportunities and experiences' students from other countries, they may also encounter challenges and difficulties during their studies. This study explored the academic experiences and challenges of the Philippine Normal University (PNU) Bachelor in Early Childhood Education (BECED) alumni who are teaching abroad and decided to enroll at PNU for the first time to pursue Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education (MA ECE) through the Kaway Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan in SY 2021-2022. This phenomenological research method purposively selected 15 participants. The data were collected through online survey questionnaire that included open-ended questions, individual, and focus group interviews. Participants lived experiences were considered, transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed. Findings from the study indicated that the students encountered challenges and pointed out how they addressed these challenges. The main themes that emerged include psychological readiness, practical method, and application (duties at work and studies, schedule at work and studies, learning management system, positive attitude) and functional social support. It is important to investigate the academic experiences of first-time graduate students who are based on other countries to provide the essential support and services for less hassle transition and to provide inputs to policy makers to create or enhance existing policies on admission and program delivery.

Keywords: lived academic experiences, students from other countries, first-year graduate students, online studies

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities around the world have been enriched by the enrollment of students from other countries who are carrying valuable experiences and views. These students significantly contribute to the promotion of cultural diversity in the classroom and on campus, enriching the academic environment and adding educational value to it. Most universities are offering educational programs through pure online modality specifically social media platforms and universities' own platform. Online distance learning has been one of the modalities for flexible delivery in many universities worldwide (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Allen & Seaman, 2014; KO & Rosen, 2017). It has gained popularity since 2003 to present for graduate students (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Allen & Seaman, 2014; Tootoochi, 2016; Harasim, 2017). In the study conducted by Leem, Moon, & Larke (2018) revealed that most students considered their flexible learning experience

positive in terms of its flexibility, convenience, and provides multiple engagement and resources in both synchronous and asynchronous modalities.

However, on March 11, 2020, Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). Thus, most educational institutions all over the world have shifted the learning delivery to online distance education to get rid of the effects of Covid-19. In the Philippines, the shift to flexible learning delivery was mandated by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in April 2020 since the usual face to face classes were no longer possible. The flexible learning delivery focuses on design and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions needed to address students' learning needs (Cervantes, 2020 in Tuga, Jocson, & Mabunga, 2021). Pursuant to CHED requirement to develop university continuity plan on the implementation of the flexible learning, PNU's circular modification and implementation is translated as Kaway-Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan. The term kaway-aralan came from the Filipino words for bamboo (kawayan) and a place for studying (aralan). The bamboo was considered because of its flexibility when it sways or wave-like movement (kaway). Bagong Kadawyan a local concept, is a PNU's translation of New Normal. The PNU's Kaway-Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan introduced a framework for transitioning all academic programs from face-to-face learning to flexible learning delivery which is based on the principles of online and distance learning, and blended learning through guided study and facilitation (Tuga, Jocson, & Mabunga, 2021). The ePNU is PNU's own flexible learning delivery system. The e-PNU online platform is utilized for the uploading of course syllabi and content related to the teaching-learning activities, asynchronous activities, assessment activities, and other activities designed by faculty (Kaway Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan: PNU Flexible Learning Delivery Handbook). The components of the learning structure given emphasis in the Kaway Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan framework include curriculum (most essential learning outcomes), teaching and learning activities and delivery mode, and assessment. The Kaway-Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan has its pilot implementation on Term 1 in SY 2020-2021. This modality provided opportunity not only to prospective Filipino graduate students from different provinces in the Philippines but also to teachers working abroad to enroll at PNU.

However, the transition that happens in enrolling to a higher degree for the first time may create a different kind of perspective and feeling among prospective students from other countries. Results from the study of Schramm-Possinger & Powers (2015), the commonly challenges encountered by first-time graduate students include managing time, handling asynchronous tasks and outputs, comprehending what they have read, writing on the graduate level, handling concerns about academic self-concept, motivating oneself, and lack of support. Based on the same study, it was recommended that an intervention should be developed to address the challenges by the beginning graduate students to reduce attrition. Similarly, according to Rawling and Sue (2013) students from other countries are experiencing difficulties since they are exposed to new routines, new context leading to feeling lonely and depressed.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance that university professionals continue to identify and address the needs of students from other countries based on their initial experience in the graduate education. University support increase the academic-life satisfaction and success of students from other countries and reduce psychological stress (Cho and Yu, (2015). Universities, like PNU need to address the adjustment issues and academic challenges students face in pursuing their degree. This study also hopes to provide inputs towards mindful practice.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist classroom supports that learning takes place in authentic environment such as online distance modality that permits compliance to requirements and policies and allows social interaction amidst time and location. Online classes have provided students opportunities for flexible learning, collaboration, and reflection. It provides students with the opportunities to be mindful of their learning experiences, share them with others through multiple formats. Adult learning theory (Bruner, 1966) furthered influenced constructivist theory in which education is described as an active process. Any program provided should capitalize on the unique learning styles and strengths to adult learners. While Knowles' (1968) theory of adult learning identified five assumptions that teachers should make about adult learners: self-concept, past learning experience, readiness to learn, practical reasons to learn, driven by internal motivation. Kanuka and Anderson (1999) in Pitsoe and Maila (2012) note that each of the 'schools' of constructivism have four central beliefs in common: a) that new knowledge is built on the foundations of previous learning; b) that learning is an active rather than passive process; c) that language is an important aspect of the learning process; and d) that learning environments should be learner centered. Therefore, adult learning theory provided a relevant perspective to look at the experiences of first-time graduate students through a qualitative design.

II. METHODOLOGY

Design: The current study is a qualitative research design employing phenomenological method. Highlighted in the study were the shared lived experiences of PNU BECED alumni who are teaching in Singapore and enrolled at PNU MA ECE program were highlighted in the study. The emphasis of the inquiry was the academic experiences of the participants on their first term in the graduate program.

Research Locale: All participants were based in Singapore where they teach in the early childhood settings.

Sampling Procedure: Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the participants of the study. The following are the inclusion criteria: (1) enrolled at PNU MA ECE program for the first time in SY 2021-2022, (b) currently teaching in Singapore handling ECE levels, (c) finished undergraduate BECED program at PNU, Manila.

Participants: Creswell (1998) recommends 5 – 25 and Morse (1995) suggests at least six number of participants. For the current study, 15 MA ECE students enrolled at PNU for the first time in SY 2020-2021 through the Kaway Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan through PNU's LMS dubbed as ePNU volunteered to participate. Saturation was also sought from the participants. Their first enrollment at the College of Graduate Studies and Teacher Education Research (CGSTER) of the participants was in Term 2, SY 2020-2021 and have been enrolled for at least two terms. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of the participants. The fifteen participants were PNU BECED alumni who graduated from 2011 - 2015. They have been teaching in Singapore for 5 - 10 years. The participants first time experience in the graduate college provided the researcher with substantial data in addressing the research objectives of the study by sharing the challenges they encountered from admission to their views about the Kaway Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan delivery. The researcher was not one of the course professors of the participants when the study was conducted.

Data collection: Upon signing and returning the consent form, the participants were given time to answer the open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire provided information about the participants profile and lived experiences with focus on teaching and learning activities and delivery mode, and assessment during first time enrollment and attendance in online classes. There were 12 open-ended questions in the data gathering tool. The questionnaire utilized in this study provided participants the opportunity to share more detailed and infinite range of information and give authentic insights of their experiences. The questions were logically arranged and non-threatening to increase the response rate. Following the completion of questionnaire, the researcher also asked follow-up questions to clarify some answers through group and individual interviews. The validation of the tools was sought from experts.

Data analysis: The researcher employed the open coding approach to code the data by analyzing line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph, and by using constant comparative analysis. The researcher examined the participants' statements and quotes that conveyed experiences as first-time graduate students in online modality and some course documents through content analysis. Keywords were highlighted and relevant statements were quoted under each research question.

Ethical Consideration: Voluntary participation of the participants was assured. Full consent was obtained from the participants prior to the study. All information collected as part of the study were stored securely on password protected computer. The researcher ensured that during the actual data collection phase, the participants were not the researchers' students. Adequate level of confidentiality and anonymity of the individual and their institutions was ensured.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic experiences of PNU BECED alumni who are first-time students of MA ECE through the PNU Kamay Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan program. Towards the course of the study, several interrelated and significant themes emerged from data analyses. The major themes are psychological readiness, practical method, and application (duties at work and studies, schedule at work and studies, learning management system, positive attitude), and functional social support.

1. *Psychological readiness*

Psychological readiness for professional life according to Bochelyuk, Bilousov, Goriyani, 2007 pp. 1-4 (2007), in Uryn (2013) includes the existence of professional aptitudes: professional knowledge, expertise and skills; and personal attributes: emotional, moral, mental, beliefs, interests, skills, attention, and performance that contributes to successful high performance. It can be gleaned that participants experienced mixed emotions of excitement, fear, and anxiety when academic activities are done for the first time.

Generous, Dolli, and SG (pseudonyms) shared that they were very excited to be in class but as a student again and not as a teacher, and the opportunity of seeing different faces and meet new people and classmates even through online modality. They have shared that their interest in enrolling to graduate education was through the invitation of their former professor in their undergraduate program. Prior to admission, an orientation was organized for them to get familiar with the curriculum, programming, and processes in the graduate college. This gave them the opportunity to clarify the education system in the graduate college and to assess themselves of their readiness for a higher degree. G and EK (pseudonyms) testified that:

G: It was mixed emotions as I am unsure of how this mode of learning will take place. Honestly speaking, I have tried UP Distance Education few years ago and I gave up on my first term. However, I am glad and excited that I've tried online classes (again) because I met different people and at the same

time, it feels surreal that you have the chance to study MA in this kind of set-up. Online Education/Distance Learning is something that we should continue not just in ECEd but in general. It is not just helpful for us to attain master's degree but also it is good for our professional development especially if we have decided to go back to Philippines.

EK: The biggest challenge I faced before enrolling at PNU for graduate studies is ensuring that I am really ready to start studying and doing course works again. I thought about it long and hard before submitting my requirement on the very last day of applications. As I am doing all the application, assessment, and payment online, I was worried and skeptical if I am doing it correctly as it was my first-time doing transactions online through the PWEBSS.

Most of the participants shared that they experienced the feeling of always looking forward to each online synchronous session. The expressions of excitement denoted readiness and enthusiasm and alacrity towards class attendance. According to Uryn (2013) well-developed psychological readiness for professional self-development is essential components of students' self-enhancement and self-actualization. In terms of teaching and learning activities, participants shared that before the term starts, they were given the chance to view and explore the class's e-PNU room and course orientation was provided during the first day of classes. In terms of assessment, participants revealed that they were also being prepared to accomplish outputs by providing them with similar activities and clear instructions. In the other hand, participants also revealed that they were saddened with the decision of the other classmates to discontinue their education. They started twenty-five and was down to sixteen on their second term. According to them, some got overwhelmed with the requirements, others had difficulty managing time, while others got promoted.

2. *Practical method and application*

The acquisition of knowledge and development of skills can come through practical experience by providing opportunities for the students to practice what they acquired and developed. This is the challenge for online learning. The curriculum of the MA ECE program is based on the Graduate Education Framework that describes the qualities of its graduates: as expert practitioner, research scholar, and educational leader. According to the participants the courses they have taken were integrated, job-embedded learning activities with research components for evidence-based learning and with practical application in the field. According to them, they were able to examine and investigate the status of their center or ECE setting vis-à-vis their lessons on children's learning and development, and the policies and standards in ECE. However, the participants also revealed that studying in the graduate level for the first time through online distance modality while you are also performing your work as a teacher is a real challenge.

a. Demands from work and studies

Most of the participants shared the difficulties they have encountered while they are performing both their duties as a teacher and as a student and how they are able to cope. Participants articulated their thoughts.

G: Managing my workload and paperwork during my online education were a bit challenging. Sometimes, I need to juggle everything just to meet the deadlines.

M: I had a hard time in balancing my work life and study life. I realized that workloads and academic submissions was pilling up at times. I realized that I had to give up my social life to accommodate all the necessary tasks for both study and work.

Graduate school could be stressful at times. But if students have practical ways to put the challenges they experience from the overwhelming demands at work and studies, they can go back on track.

b. Class and Work Schedule

Most of the participants articulated that the classes schedule conflicts with their work duties abroad. Classes in the PNU graduate college are scheduled at 5:30 to 8:30 PM on Thursdays and Fridays, and 7:00-10:30, 12:00-3:00, and 3:30-6:30PM on Saturdays. While the ECE teachers abroad particularly in Singapore usually reaches their accommodation at 7:00PM and they have some work-related activities on Saturdays.

EM: Conflict with our work shifts abroad. There are times where we need to work closing shifts which are 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM. Even with an 8:30 AM to 5:30 PM schedule, it is still a challenge to listen and participate in online class when we are still on the bus, MRT, or even just walking home from work. Lastly, there are also days where we need to report to work on a Saturday Shift. In this case, I cannot attend the scheduled online synchronous classes.

M: Balancing out work tasks and academic tasks was a challenge. My work schedules also affect my online education. I had to schedule all my classes on a Saturday since I cannot attend weekday classes.

Kay: I think the PNU College of Graduate Studies and Teacher Education Research should establish a curriculum that is easy to adapt for those who are working full time.

Bliss, Upward, Dream, and Amazing (pseudonyms) shared similar academic experiences that whenever they can't attend classes due to personal reasons and work-related demands, they rely on the recorded meetings which are uploaded in the class google drive folder for them to catch up. They also had the chance to verify concepts and activities with their course professors and classmates. The participants also revealed that they were able to practice multi-tasking as there were basically things that they need to attend to at the same time. According to Szumowska, Kossowska, & Roets (2018) one's performance in multiple tasks do not only depends on one's

ability but also on contextual factors. So, contextual factors like programming and scheduling may play an essential role with people who are goal-oriented and could always find ways to adhere to the rules and norms. From the study of Amponsah, Kumi-Yeboah, AAdjapong, and Omorogie (2020) titled *Coping experiences of graduate students on full-time employment and full-time academic programmes*, it is recommended that flexitime arrangement be considered to support graduate students in performing their dual roles as teacher and student.

c. Learning Management System – ePNU

The ePNU is the official learning management system (LMS) of PNU faculty and students. It is a Moodle-based learning platform where online are supervised by the PNU College of Flexible Learning and e-PNU office. All of the participants of the study agreed that they have not encountered any difficulty in managing the system of ePNU and accessing the course contents. Participants had shared their stories.

EM: The online class works well for me as I can manage my time to do my tasks during asynchronous classes. The internet also is not a hindrance.

Bliss: The ePNU system is student friendly. I can access it through my cellphone, tablet, and desktop computer. I was able to maximize the use of the ePNU system during the term because multiple activities were provided. We can access the class's main resources and materials, utilize tool for plagiarism check, answer online quizzes, upload outputs easily, participate asynchronous chats and forum.

M: MA program was a great help for teachers who wish to have a further study on their field. It was an accessible way even for teachers abroad. I do hope MA online program can continue and help not only the PNUans but also teachers who graduated in different state universities.

SG: Our professors were consistent in providing us with comprehensive and easy to follow asynchronous activities in our ePNU room. References, activities, and evaluation materials were provided and can be accessed easily.

The participants also appreciated the university's adoption of alternating scheme for online synchronous and asynchronous meetings. This practice allowed students to focus on their job and perform the course flexible learning activities and outputs on a later time without sacrificing the required competencies. It can be gleaned from this study that distance online modality is an accepted form of delivery by the graduate students abroad. The structure ePNU system by section allows for logical organization of course contents and delivery which aid the students on the management of their learning processes. The favorable learning environment, such the virtual learning environment of ePNU, academic success can be sought by the students.

d. *Positive Attitude*

Majority of the respondents from the study of Fedynich, Bradley, & Bradley (2015), strongly agreed that students should have positive attitude and self-motivation to be successful in their online classes in the graduate program. Fortunately, the participants in the current study were able to exhibit positivity in their academic endeavor amidst many challenges they encounter at work and studies.

EK: As I am working full-time, I must be responsible to ensure that my quality of work doesn't get affected just because I started studying part-time. I must stretch myself during "busy" seasons in the academic year such as holiday celebrations in school, graduation, and mid-year and year-end meetings. It was very hard to find a good balance, especially when I am physically and mentally exhausted and time restrained.

G: Online Education/Distance Learning is something that we should continue not just in ECEd but in general. It is not just helpful for us to attain master's degree but also it is good for our professional development especially if have decided to go back to Philippines.

M: It is a real challenge on how to juggle work, studies, and no helping hand to do personal stuff. If I may add, this grad school made me admire those working students more.

3. *Functional social support*

From the study of Fedynich, et.al. (2015) revealed that one of the positive components on students learning and satisfaction of students in online environment is the instructor's support. They further emphasized that instructor's role is vitally essential to students' satisfaction in the graduate college.

M2: I think the biggest factor that can affect is the professor assigned to the course. Grad school is not a piece of cake, it is challenging and something that really needs hard work, time, and treasure. However, if the professor assigned is someone that knows how to empathize with the students, of course without putting the "quality of education" at stake, is a breather for me.

EM: During my first term, I was overwhelmed with all the requirements that my subjects required me to but during the duration of the course I was able to cope up because our professors are always there to guide and assist us.

M: The first term was a good start for me. The two course professors were very helpful in guiding us how to embrace the grad school with so much hope. They did not "sugar-coat" what is to be expected in a grad school especially under PNU. I think the biggest factor that can affect is the professor assigned to the course. Grad school is not a piece of cake, it is challenging and something that really needs hard work, time, and treasure. However, if the professor assigned is someone that knows how to empathize with the students, of course without putting the "quality of education" at stake, is a breather for me.

Kay: As an MA student, I encountered a problem with the schedules since I am working as a full-time teacher. So, the class schedule that was given to me had a conflict with my work schedule. Although, I am thankful that the professor in charge of this program was very accommodating to my concern and tried to understand my situation.

My overall experience in the first term was great. The professors were competent in delivering the lessons. They are also very considerate of our schedules and submission of the requirements.

Since the participants are at the same time full-time teachers, another layer of support is needed to be sought. One of the roles of the school principals is to provide support for teachers' professional development (Fatih, 2021). According to Bautista (2019), ECE teachers need to be retooled and retrofit to remain updated, enhance knowledge and skills on content and pedagogy which could be achieved with continuous professional development. However, it was emphasized on the same study that the administrators support, and assistance are essential to lessen challenges in managing demands from both work and studies.

EK: After my enrolment, I must talk to my superior to ask for support in terms of scheduling my shifts and providing me extra time to do paperwork as I know I won't have enough time to do it outside my working hours. I am grateful that they were very supportive and gave me all the support to complete my course requirements and assignments.

M: On some events I was not able to attend said classes due to work commitments on Saturdays. I also had a hard time in convincing my school to let me out early whenever classes are scheduled on a weekday.

Since it was the participants first time to enroll, they also had stories about the admission and enrollment experiences.

Dee: We were guided throughout the whole process. What to submit, where to submit, and who to submit. However, if we are not guided, I think it will be challenging to get into the university. The university still needs hard copies of documents. If the person enrolling from abroad does not have anyone to help them out, I don't think they will be able to submit everything on time. The payment was another issue; the enrollee couldn't use international linked cards and had someone who could make the payment on their behalf. I had one transaction that was not acknowledged, though I paid in full, and of course, I didn't get a refund.

EM: During the enrollment, we are very grateful that one of our former professors during our undergrad was able to guide us through the whole enrollment process. Questions were answered and they were also very accommodating and understanding since we are working abroad.

EK: I think the Registrar's Office can make some arrangements easier for overseas-based students to accommodate requests for university documents. Provide orientation on what is required to graduate. A schedule of

seminars, talks, or trainings should also be given at the start of each term, so it'll be easier to plan our schedule and request for time-offs in advance.

Kay: The enrollment process was not as efficient and convenient. The processing of documents should be easier and there should be more options for payment.

G: Before enrollment, it was a bit difficult to request and collect our documents which I am not sure if it was already transferred successfully. It is a bit hassle to make payments as well during enrollment. Since we are living abroad, I suggest that we could enhance our IT system making it more convenient for the students abroad.

It was highlighted on the study of Ospina and Medina (2020) that lack of support from school administrators is one of the common difficulties that teachers from other countries experience. Absence or lack of support may elevate students' stress and can be a hindrance for the students to pursue or finish their education.

Implications

There are several factors that shape the academic experiences and challenges of first-time graduate students in online learning modality, some of which are personal, technological, and social. Thus, there are some recommendations based on the findings of the study.

Students should be able to self-reflect and assess their readiness and confidence in pursuing a higher degree to establish a smooth professional development transition. The decision to enroll to a higher degree requires a high level of conceptual understanding. Students should be able systematically think about the processes underlying realities of enrollment to higher degree and the program delivery before their final decision. They must act on preparing themselves by defining their strengths vis-à-vis the demands of graduate education. Subjecting oneself to a self-readiness test and devising a plan or checklist of the things they need to prepare and accomplish are great tools in building up readiness and confidence. They should also be able to make a commitment to successfully finish the graduate program. The participants were able to share that an orientation meeting was provided for them to accommodate their queries about the graduate program. But it is recommended that an orientation program should provide at the university-level, graduate college-level, faculty-level, and specific program-level to address the transition needs and the understanding of the policies, procedures, standards, expectations, and services for students. Psychological readiness is not the only ingredient to thrive as graduate studies is not an easy endeavor to take. Students must be practical and strategic in facing the challenges and difficulties they encounter during their studies. Students need to balance their time for work and studies, settle conflicts in time for work and studies, demonstrate essential to advance technological skills for online learning, and sustain positive attitude towards studies, peers, and professors. Familiarizing and understanding the requirements of ones

work as an ECE teacher in another country, students may take the minimum number of units to enroll that can fit their schedule. They should also have a good time management and self-regulation skills for the smooth flow of planned activities. Even if students are adult learners, they also need cumulative guidance and support from the host university, their college, faculty, and the administrators of the ECE centers they are employed abroad. It can be deduced from the participants that the faculty members of the program were with them along the process. But the establishment of a developmental guidance and counseling program for group and individual student psychological processing might also help. These programs and services will make student feel that there is an additional layer of support in their studies that will give them the tenacity to thrive. It can greatly contribute to the overall mental health and well-being of the students. The selection of graduate adviser exclusive for the students from other countries who can develop contextualized and personalized supervision and monitoring program up until graduation can provide a safe padding of support. This can help address not only the academic needs of the students but may also include the multiple aspects of student development. Graduate professors must adopt enhanced pedagogical practices and tools for online learning and provide job-embedded learning experiences. In terms of non-supportive employers, it is recommended that the host university can intervene even to a minimal extent.

IV. CONCLUSION

Online education will continue after covid pandemic. However, the most pressing issue with online courses is meeting the academic needs and expectations of students from other countries. Thus, the host university should adopt a responsive mechanism to address the students' concerns and challenges during the critical period of their first enrollment at the graduate college.

The results, implications, and recommendations of the study should be considered with the understanding of the limitations. It should be noted that participants were alumni of the same university where they are pursuing a higher degree for their education. Just like other international students, culture is not an issue. Thus, familiarity with the academic personnel and with the processes in the university on students' concerns might influence students' experiences but can be beneficial during the entire enquiry process. Nonetheless, the study yielded themes on the experiences, challenges, and support among the participants which can provide inputs to universities and first-time graduate students.

Graduate students from other countries have unique needs that must be addressed to lessen the impact of student's challenges and difficulties to stay motivated, focused, and resilient. The host university should be able to develop a framework that will unify the purpose, actions, and outcomes of the graduate program to attract more students from other countries.

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