

Sailing through the Waves: The Lived Experiences of Working Students Amid Covid-19

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Abstract

Being a working student is challenging as they must balance school and work responsibilities. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of working students in a private higher education institution in the province of La Union, Philippines, during COVID-19. The study is qualitative research, specifically descriptive phenomenology. A purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of participants. A semi-structured interview was used to generate data from 10 participants. Further, thematic analysis was utilized where three major themes emerged: (1) Experiencing the Tidal Rise and Fall of Work-Study Balance, (2) Anchored Expectations and Pressure, and (3) Coping Up and Sailing with the Wind. Ethics were strictly observed in the study. The study revealed that their circumstances form valuable experiences as young adults as they learn to become responsible individuals. They cope by making the necessary adjustments to their schedule, perspective, self-management skills, and formation of support they get from people. They continue the odyssey with burning motivation to strike a work-study balance, hence, highly commendable.

Keywords: Lived Experiences of Working Students, Self-Management Skills, Work-Study Balance

INTRODUCTION

One of the most valuable things a person can have is education. It's not just that it teaches people how to be informed, accurate interpreters of the world, and law-abiding citizens. Additionally, since pursuing one's chosen careers or specializations requires knowledge, it serves as the cornerstone for improving one's life. That is why many students choose to study and work simultaneously to continue their studies, get into college or a master's degree, help their families, and save money (De Guzman & Francisco, 2021). But access to education for working students is a difficult problem made harder by the COVID-19 pandemic. The learning community is experiencing a crisis as a result of higher education institution closures, mobility restrictions, and the threat of infection. As a result, significant adjustments to the way education is provided are required (Brand, 2020; Joaquin *et al.*, 2020; Wilcha, 2020). This abrupt change in the learning environment presents a chance to close this gap since it will enable students to continuously learn and work at the same time (Aboagye *et al.*, 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

Government financial aid is commonly provided in industrialized economies, allowing university students to continue their studies (Barada *et al.*, 2020; Helin *et al.*, 2020). These chances are scarce in emerging economies, though, and as a result, some students drop out of school for financial reasons (Auger *et al.*, 2020; Onyema, 2020). However, students who want to pursue their education can take on loans, get a job, or do both; thus, the term "working students" is used.

According to a research by Soria *et al.* (2020), working students were more likely than non-working students to experience financial hardships as a result of the pandemic, including greater living and technology expenses, lost revenue from on- or off-campus employment, and missed pay from family members. According to the same study, working students are more likely to experience mental health disorders, have a harder time switching to online learning, run into problems with a shortage of study spaces and the technology needed to complete the assignments, and are less likely to show up for regularly scheduled virtual classes. Thus, the most affected group of students during the pandemic are the working students who struggled to meet their daily ends, as stated in a study conducted by Aucejo *et al.* (2020).

Furthermore, an article published by Study with Us identified the challenges of working while studying. Balancing work life and studies can be pretty hard. Work is exhausting and demanding (Balacuit & Lopio, 2020). They work about 8 to 12 hours and feel depleted when they get home (Pedroso *et al.*, 2022; Hall, 2010). This can be the biggest challenge for most people, often causing them to slack on their work or books. According to a Tiffany Garcia feature article in the Garcia (2020), students who worked during the pandemic struggled to balance their employment and academic obligations. A few students who were employed stated that the pandemic had made their professions more stressful and obligated, requiring them to adjust to new "chaotic" environments with extra safety precautions. Their desire to finish their education around their work shifts has led them to ask their lecturers for assignment extensions due to additional responsibilities. To counteract the negative consequences of studying and working simultaneously, some students also successfully used various coping mechanisms, such as time management, seeking out social support, and engaging in leisure and non-leisure activities (Antipolo, 2021; Kwadzo, 2014; Rockman *et al.*, 2022).

In the Philippines, According to a previous study, working students have the following benefits: (1) they are responsible enough to balance all of their priorities; (2) they can earn money even while studying and working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) they face challenges with mental health, health risk, and time management; and (4) they are able to overcome these issues by organizing their schedules, managing their time well, knowing their priorities, and exercising self-discipline (De Guzman & Francisco, 2021; Faizuddin, 2017).

Another study conducted in the Philippines found that Filipino working students face barriers and struggles in terms of work, academic, financial, and personal adversity, which implies the different obstacles that Filipino working students go through when they decide to work part-time

while studying. Students who work for themselves also acquire early work experience, hone abilities, and make money. Nonetheless, difficulties are anticipated to develop once they are employed. As a result, students gained a lot from the responsibilities that came with having two jobs in addition to being students (Efren *et al.*, 2022).

It is important to realize that the expectations placed on working students to balance job and school during the epidemic are very different from those that existed during more regular times. Working students have a unique mix of tensions between their professional lives, their academic pursuits, and their personal relationships, so it's critical to examine not only their biggest worries and anxieties but also the strategies they employ to manage them. As an alternative to poverty, working students look to education for their escape. In the end, one of the several reasons students decide to work while they are in school is to become independent or financially free.

Over the years, the concept of "work-study balance" has been an ongoing struggle for working students even before the pandemic strikes. Henceforth, the researchers firmly believe that the current study is timely and relevant. In its practical essence, exploring the experiences of working students and how their encounters are in school and the workplace is the main purpose of this study. Next, compile pertinent information about the challenges and difficulties faced by working students. Finally, to enable the students comprehend what it takes to work while studying and to completely comprehend the experiences of a working student. The goal of this study is to understand the complete picture of a working student's life. It is hoped that the study would help future scholars, politicians, educational institutions, and working students.

METHOD

The study is qualitative research, specifically descriptive phenomenology. The researchers made use of a purposive sampling technique to qualify participants. The researcher utilized a set of screening criteria to rule in or out the targeted participants in the study. In qualifying a participant: (1) they must be a working student for at least three months in any industry; (2) must be enrolled at LORMA Colleges in La Union, Philippines under any of its undergraduate or bachelor's degree offering during any of the following school years: 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023; (3) must be of legal age; (4) can voluntarily provide their informed consent and is willing to participate in the study. The data gathering tool used is a semi-structured interview based on the interview development guide (IDG) constructed by the researchers. The researchers employed thematic analysis, performing familiarization phases, coding, generating, reviewing,

naming the themes, and finally writing up. The study was subjected to an ethical review and was approved before the data-gathering process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analyses of the transcribed responses of the participants, done through intelligent transcription, revealed the lived experiences, challenges encountered, and the coping strategies employed by the working students during COVID-19. From these, the researchers formulated the Holo Moana Model to highlight the significant themes from the working students' responses. The themes were presented concerning the questions asked during the interviews.

Three major themes emerged about the research area, which includes Experiencing the Tidal Rise and Fall of Work-Study Balance, which talks about the lived experiences of the working students, Anchored Expectations and Pressure, which is about the challenges encountered, and Coping Up and Sail with the Wind where coping strategies are emphasized to balance work and study tasks.



Figure 1. Holo Moana Model

Major Theme 1: Experiencing the Tidal Rise and Fall of Work-Study Balance

The first theme, Experiencing the Tidal Rise and Fall of Work-Study Balance, describes the working students' experiences balancing school and work amid the pandemic. The theme represents their unique experiences, revealing that as working students, they experienced difficulties that challenged their self-management skills and time management and revealed the joys and triumphs they had encountered throughout their journey as students and employees. They are dedicated, and they love what they are doing. This lifts their spirits and morale to continue being a working student.

Being a working student could be challenging but rewarding as they must balance school and work responsibilities. As they are working students, they could be caught in a challenging situation or could see those instances as a part of the overall journey. In other words, working students could find moments where they feel they are at the bottom, and there could also be moments when they are lifted. Thus, experiencing the ideal rise and fall of work-study balance as a theme shows the lived experiences of the working students of LORMA Colleges amidst the pandemic.

The study participants were asked, How would you describe the circumstances you went through as a working student during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do you feel about these circumstances? And what do you think caused those feelings? Their rich responses yield a general theme which gives rise to sub-themes. With this, the sub-themes that emerged from their robust responses include: (1) Being in Deep Waters, (2) Sailing on Two Boats while beating the clock; and (3) Waves of Positivity.

Sub-theme 1: Being in Deep Waters. Many college students attempt to balance employment and school, which leads to a range of issues for them, including poor self-management, a drop in academic performance, health issues, and social and personal issues (Student Working And Non-Working Students In The Philippines |Ipl.Org, n.d.).

To explore how the working students caught themselves in deep waters, Participants reported that working during the pandemic was different from the normal setup and was a little more complicated than before. One participant was alarmed knowing that COVID-19 was still present and could risk herself, especially being in the fieldwork. Six participants articulated that the situation is challenging, demanding, hard, not easy, difficult, stressful, tiring, and exhausting to adjust to the new normal. Indeed, these statements show that the participants, as working students, were placed in a situation that made them vulnerable to different risks, such as health, personal, social, and emotional issues. In consonance with this, a study showed that One of the drawbacks of being a student and working at the same time is that you frequently find yourself strapped for time, with little time for studying, sleeping, or maintaining a good diet (Gorgulho *et al.*, 2012).

Sub-theme 2: Sailing on Two Boats while beating the clock. A working student needs to perform the roles of being a student and an employee. Hence, it can be said that they are sailing on two boats. It's challenging for a student to manage employment and school obligations because of this. Due to their struggles between work and school, students may wind up giving their studies their all. Since working students are assumed to dedicate less time to school needs and hence cannot

give their classes their full attention, the issue is not so much the work as it is the time spent on it (Vicencio & Banaag, 2019).

A few elements that impact juggling employment and school obligations are time, money, and academic standing. Researchers discovered that students can better regulate and manage their time by setting out specific days of the week for work or school, or by segmenting their days so that classes take up one part of the day and work takes up the other. Even while it's necessary for them to divide their time, this leads to a lot of students facing difficulties including not having enough time to finish schoolwork, stress, sleep deprivation, and little family time (Beer & Bray, 2020). Some students decide to forgo sleep in an effort to manage the demands of work, school, and family (Chiang *et al.*, 2020)

To prove that the participants were sailing on two boats while beating the clock, they claimed that they had difficulty prioritizing what was necessary to prioritize between academic requirements and work. They have difficulty working and studying simultaneously because work and studies require much time. Five of the participants struggle with time management. Doing two things simultaneously could affect work and study balance, wherein participants claimed difficulty in navigating through schedules, causing stress and poor school performance.

This sub-theme of the study can be anchored to one of the frameworks listed by the researcher - Theory of Allocation of Time. Academic concerns: according to Becker's Theory of Allocation of Time, students who collaborate while studying may not achieve as much as they could because working may take up time that could be spent on learning and other academic pursuits (Buscha *et al.*, 2012). Managing job and health during a health crisis might also cause one to pay less attention to their studies.

Further, this shows that the working students need to perform their roles, duties, and responsibilities as students and employees while there's a need to maintain sound and quality output. However, it can be drawn from the responses that problems with schedules and time management could affect the output of the working students in school and their employment. Deadlines could be missed; outputs are of low quality, failure to attend to duties and responsibilities, and lack of personal and social time are just some of the possible consequences of this scenario. Henceforth, this only proves that working students are sailing on two boats while beating the clock.

Sub-theme 3: Waves of Positivity. Working while studying could also become beneficial, fun, and exciting. According to research results from an investigation, the majority of working

students were happy with their work-life balance and education. While working while in school can increase stress, it can also have positive effects by fostering a support system of individuals who can assist in achieving both professional and personal objectives (Mahler, 2020).

To claim that there are waves of positivity while working and studying simultaneously, three participants claimed that they felt happiness as working students because they discovered that they could still perform well in school while working. They are learning and earning independently, helping to reduce their family expenses. In addition to the happiness they felt, the working students are also grateful for the opportunity, the experience, and the people around them.

One participant expressed gratefulness for having a boss who provided enough time to accomplish the participant's school requirements while not decreasing the salary. Three participants drew encouragement and support from their classmates and instructors. At times, they felt weak and weary. This finding is in parallel with the study of Chu (2021), establishing that improved employability, academic success, and well-being were all correlated with family support. On the other hand, improved academic success was linked to employment support. Participants are also grateful for the opportunity and experience. Their situation as working students imparted valuable life lessons that may not be confined to the traditional confines of a classroom. One claimed that he grew and learned more about life, and another learned to appreciate giving service to people who are in need (Cui *et al.*, 2017).

A study by Payusan *et al.* (2022) cited Childress (2014) that found that Students who both worked and attended school had positive attitudes as well as excellent time management, critical thinking, and self-reflection abilities. Working kids could learn to prioritize, develop self-confidence, and be upbeat, according to Magno & Magno (2022). Students do, in fact, gain from having dual roles as employers and students (Burgos *et al.*, 2020).

These findings have a positive impact on the prospective outcomes for the labor market in the future since they give students the chance to obtain useful work experience early on and apply their talents learned in school. Increased pay and higher-level jobs are associated with skills like time management, organizational engagement, workplace conduct, punctuality, self-regulation, and future professional success (Graves *et al.*, 2017). Although a student's ability to study and work concurrently may suffer, there may be long-term benefits that may help them in their future careers (Pusztai & Kocsis, 2019).

Major Theme 2: Anchored Expectations and Pressure

Another theme is called Anchored Expectations and Pressure. This theme highlights the intrinsic and extrinsic factors resulting in expectations and pressure on working students. The working students feel expectations and are pressured by their family, relatives, and friends. Further, they also have high expectations of themselves, resulting in self-imposed pressure. They were pressured to perform and accomplish things while managing expectations from within and from the people around them, which could be an anchor that either helps them become stable and secure or prevents them from moving forward. It can serve as a great fuel for motivation, or it can cripple a person. In a study conducted in Malaysia, researchers found that fully working students understood working while studying and considered it a financial necessity and self-improvement. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the informants saw working while in school as a means of pushing themselves to grow and gain the skills required for higher jobs (Tumin *et al.*, 2020).

Georgetown University's findings are corroborated by Garcia (2020). Some students who were employed stated that the epidemic had made their employment more stressful and obligated, requiring them to adjust to the "chaotic". They claimed that having more responsibilities had inspired them to finish their schooling in between work shifts (Students Working during Pandemic Struggled with Workload, They Say – The GW Hatchet, n.d.). Expectations result in feelings of being pressured. The working students are not excused from such experience. The expectations and pressure may come from the people around them or can be self-imposed.

Major Theme 3: Coping Up and Sailing with the Wind

Finally, Coping Up and Sailing with the Wind is another theme where coping strategies are emphasized. Working students cope by making the necessary adjustments to their schedule, perspective, attitude, formation of habits, and the recruitment of support from people.

Students' ability to successfully manage their studies, careers, and personal lives appears to be influenced by their coping mechanisms, the type and caliber of the support they receive from their families and employers, as well as their own self-motivation. It's interesting to note that a study found that these pupils successfully used a variety of coping strategies, such as seeking out social support (Logel *et al.*, 2021), engaging in both leisure and non-leisure activities to counteract the detrimental impacts of working and studying at the same time (Kwadzo, 2014). This is parallel with the study of Cox (2017), where employed students adopted strategies such as communication, building relationships, and exercise.

The working students realized that to cope with their situation, something had to be done. They understood they needed to improve their self-management skills, including time management, stress management, social support, and habits. The results of Ceneciro (2023) study on working students demonstrated that self-management enhances students' ability to be resilient, self-sufficient, and schedule adaptive. The answers provided from the interviews with the participants revealed that coping strategies serve an important role in working with students to keep them moving forward. They cope by making the necessary adjustments to their schedule perspective, setting goals, and the formation of support they get from other people.

Indeed, the coping strategies included their attitude, thoughts, habits, and emotions. They use these coping strategies to adjust and to overcome the challenges that they experience. It can be derived from their statements that they had to improve their self-management skills to strike a work-study balance.

CONCLUSION

The researchers could make conclusions based on the results of the intelligent analysis conducted from the participants' responses. (1) As working students, they experienced being in difficult situations and faced challenges as far as the circumstances are concerned and their lack of self-management skills. Therefore, they need to improve their self-management skills, particularly in stress management and emotion control, to overcome being in deep waters. (2) The working students struggled with their time management skills, as reflected in their difficulty finding balance in accomplishing tasks required in school and their workplace. Therefore, they need to work on their adaptability, schedules, routines, and habits as part of time management to prove that they can sail on two boats while they beat the clock. (3) The working students felt happiness, contentment, satisfaction, and a boost in their confidence, for they found a support system, are dedicated, and love what they are doing. Therefore, they manifest this positive trait as young adults, which is highly commendable. (4) The working students were pressured due to high expectations from the people around them and their selves. This could motivate them or could potentially cripple them. Therefore, working students should know how to handle such expectations and pressure through self-motivation and goal alignment. (5) The working students were able to develop coping strategies to overcome the challenges they faced through improved self-management skills in stress management, time management, adaptability, goal alignment, self-motivation, decision-making, and personal development; hence, highly commendable.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the researchers' findings, these are the forwarded recommendations: (1) The working students may improve their self-management and time-management skills. They should accept their needs (physically, emotionally, and mentally). (2) Academic institutions may develop programs for working students to foster academic success, including forming support systems and developing special programs to enhance the student's time and self-management skills. (3) School administrators, managers, and policymakers may create policies and procedures to help and support the working students, such as (a) Minimize unfulfilled financial needs. Raising financing from national and local legislators can aid in maintaining affordable tuition. In the meanwhile, colleges and universities can make the most of funds. (b) Inform the pupils about loans. Schools should provide financial counseling to underprivileged kids to help them finish or rectify their understanding of debts and job opportunities so they may make decisions that are best for themselves. (c) Assure that students apply for and are awarded financial assistance. Assist students in comprehending financial aid details (d) Expand the number of jobs available on campus and in majors. (e) Offer working students high-quality academic support for working students. By providing night classes, weekend courses, online courses, planning tools, virtual advising, child care alternatives, and weekend office hours, educational institutions can contribute to the success of working students.

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