Available online at ijci.wcci-international.org

International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction 16(1) (2024) 31–51

IJCI
International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction

Learning Activities, Platform, and Support in Online Cohort Graduate Programs

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Abstract

During the pandemic, higher educational institutions in the Philippines were given a good amount of latitude in innovating new ways to deliver education. The research suggests that the combination of having excellent OBE-based learning activities and assessments, easy-to-use learning platforms for synchronous and asynchronous engagements, and availability of learning support systems are crucial in the success of online cohort programs, especially for graduate students who, for whatever reason or several constraints, are only able to pursue further studies remotely. The study also concludes that online cohort educational models (OCEM) are viable and feasible for Filipino students, regardless of employment status (full-time or part-time), age, and gender. Areas that require improvement in successful OCEMs include student access to online academic resources and responsive staff from the various academic support offices of the University.

Keywords: cohort educational system, synchronous, asynchronous, professional degree program, online education

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1. Introduction

Because cohort programs are designed in such a way that the same group of students begin and graduate in the program together over a period of time while taking the same learning path (Tisdell et al., 2004), they address the need for mutual support which increases the likelihood of student retention and completion. When they are offered online, the potential of greater admissions

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increases because they provide a way for students to pursue their educational goals despite constraints related to geographical distance, temporal difficulties, family-related issues, and other restricting circumstances (Northup, 2002). In fact, in as early as 1990s, online or distance programs have proliferated to attract students—particularly industry practitioners—who need to pursue further degrees for professional advancement but are hindered by their employment commitments and the demanding cost of traditional face-to-face education (Sherron & Boettcher, 1997). The problem is that there has been little research on the online cohort experience (Tisdell et al., 2004, p. 115).

This research, therefore, contributes to the discussion concerning the combination of two great educational innovation: online education and cohort system, particularly in how it is perceived by students. The study has three objectives: (1) to describe the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, (2) to describe the experiences of the students in a cohort-based graduate program, and (3) to determine the significant difference of the experiences of the students in a cohort-based graduate program when grouped according to their socio-demographic profiles.

The pandemic caught all educational institutions by surprise. Traditional modes of instruction became irrelevant overnight because of various physical and social restrictions meant to curb the spread of the corona virus. Administrators and educators were forced to either close their operations (UNESCO, 2020) or innovate methods that are practical and convenient, using tools such as recorded video lectures, online libraries, printed modules, streamed channels, video conferencing, and others (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). Because of the exigencies of the sudden state of affairs, "emergency remote teaching (ERT)" was the default solution to the challenge of non-proximal teaching, but this often entailed merely importing materials normally used in physical classrooms to the online environment (Al-Freih, 2021, p. 9).

The stressful shift to online teaching modality is now well-documented (Boivin & Welby, 2021; Johnson & Seaman, 2020). Given that it was an entirely different method that requires an accompanying significant shift in thinking and practice, faculty apprehensions about online teaching were evident early on (Sinacori, 2020). Overtime, however, the satisfaction of educators increased along with their immersion in the online environment (Wingo, Ivankova & Moss, 2017). Fortunately, the rapid advancement in communication technologies made the transition to online teaching modality conveniently feasible (Wang & Wiesemes, 2012). Whether it is called "blended synchronous learning" (Szeto, 2015), "hybrid learning" (Okita, 2013), or "synchronous learning in distributed environments" (Warden et al., 2013), the pedagogical process entails the combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities that include online components and utilization of online tools. The opportunity to learn online, however, marks a

great advantage for many. Learning in the comfort on one's home and saving finances and time related to travel is a huge consideration (Gillies, 2008). Bower et al.'s study (2015) even suggests that the online environment offers the same learning experiences as those in traditional physical classroom set-up, since students are able to engage in meaningful exchange of ideas as if they were in the classroom (Anastasiades et al., 2010).

Blended learning in the traditional semester-type educational system is employed by many educational institutions in the world with varying degrees of success. Students enroll in a number of courses whose learning outcomes they have to accomplish over a period of 10 to 18 weeks, depending on the country and number of semesters in a school's academic year. The focus of our research, however, is on the implementation of online synchronous and asynchronous teaching modalities in a cohort education model (CEM). CEM emerged as a solution to issues of admission, retention, and completion in graduate programs because of changing student demographics, particularly among employed master's and doctoral students (Freiberg-Svoboda, 2003; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). Educational cohort models, Pemberton & Akkary (2010) wrote, are "purposefully grouped students entering and pursuing a program of study together, characterized by social and cultural processes, shared experiences and interactions, collective efforts, and mutual commitment to an educational goal" (p. 180). The CEM also stems from social research conclusions that people learn best by interacting with others in close-knit relationships and sharing experiences (John-Steiner & Mahn, 2003; Wesson, Holman, & Cox, 1996).

Pemberton and Akkary (2010) lists several benefits of cohorts, especially in the enrichment of students' learning experiences: (1) improved academic performance because of emotional and psychological support from peers, (2) networking with fellow students for career opportunities and advancement, (3) higher rate of persistence and completion of students, (4) and increased participation of students in program delivery (p. 181). Bell & Mitchell (2000) add the comfort and convenience of CEM to students and professors alike (p. 6). Unzueta & Donet (2008) note that CEM benefits include "inter-student support, a flexible learning model, support for CLD learners, opportunities for building trusting relationships, ease in class scheduling, and opportunity for maturation" (p. 2).

Since the entire program and its accompanying course works are taken by a group of students together (Barnett et al., 2000; Potthoff et al., 2001), issues may also arise. CEM is difficult to students if the delivering higher education institution manifests "structural and organizational rigidity" (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010, p. 182). Bell & Mitchell (2000) argued that the cohort system is geared towards addressing the collective needs of a whole group, which may lead to the neglect of individual learning needs (p. 6). Barnett and Muse (1993) point

out the negative impact of one student's issues to the entire group's performance and the potential competition and jealousy within the cohort. The greatest challenge, however, is when a few students begin to exert dominance over the entire group. Mandzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert (2003) note that "organizing students into cohorts may exacerbate the influence of students who already dominate class discussions" (p. 170). Student empowerment in cohort systems is disadvantageous (Maher, 2005). Students may experience "stifled growth as individuals because the dominant personalities in their cohorts unduly influence them" (Mandzuk, Hasinoff & Seifert, 2003, p. 180). Moreover, because "students acquire increased power to sway others because of their continual contact with the same peer group," "this power may create negative norms that can work against instructors" (Mandzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert, 2003, p. 170).

2. Research Method

Because of the opportunities brought about by the flexible learning modality encouraged by the Philippines' Commission on Higher Education, the Graduate School started offering online cohort programs during the pandemic. The trend is that professional programs choose cohort system (Mandzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert, 2003, p. 169), and the University followed this by offering two professional degree cohort programs in January 2021. This meant that target students are mostly practitioners in education: teachers, administrators, and heads. Students were required to join weekly synchronous meetings (on Saturdays) and were tasked to finish asynchronous learning activities during the week. Professors were free to use any virtual conferencing tool they preferred, although most used Google Meet or the BigBlueButton available through the University's learning management system: Canvas. Students submitted their assignments and performed various learning tasks through Canvas. Professors were required to follow the OBE-based i-LEAP syllabus format for their courses. The online cohort programs were designed in a way that a 3-unit course is offered in four weeks of intensive synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. Students were expected to complete all their assignments within the four weeks, which meant that students had to spend around 30 learning hours per week to successfully complete their course works. The master's programs have 33 units, which meant that ideally, students should have finished their academic requirements in a year. However, because the administration opted for flexible scheduling and open negotiations with students, the first batch of graduates finished all their academic requirements in 18 months. The data-gathering for this research happened as they were preparing for their Comprehensive Examinations.

The researchers employed the survey method to collect data that may be interpreted concerning the evaluation of our students about the online cohort program they are a part of. The survey method is employed because it provides quantitative descriptions of perceptions, attitudes, and analysis of targeted respondents. The contents of the questionnaire stem from various researches that enumerate components of good cohort and online education systems. Twenty-six questions were categorized into five major sections: (a) about the student, (b) instructional methods, (c) assessment methods, (d) learning platform, and (e) support system. Apart from three open-ended questions that required short narrative responses at the end of the Google Form, all items used a Likert scale with 1-5 ranges, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The interpretation of the gathered data is as follows:

4.20 – 5.00 Strongly Agree

3.40 – 4.19 Agree

2.60 – 3.39 Neutral

1.80 – 2.59 Disagree

1.00 – 1.79 Strongly Disagree

The research employed non-probability sampling, particularly voluntary response sampling. The online questionnaire was distributed to all students, but they were not required to respond to the survey. Of the total 55 online cohort students, only 40 responses came back before the announced deadline. Students are all Filipino citizens. Gathered data were tabulated with the help of a research assistant. Mean, percentage, and rank were particularly singled out. To verify the validity of the data analysis, a statistician was consulted, who confirmed the validity of the treatment of the data. Narrative comments, which were part of the survey questions, were included in the findings and discussion.

3. Results and Discussion

Demographically, the participants were only required to reveal their sex, age, and employment status. As to sex, an overwhelming majority of the participants are female (71.43%). Concerning age, there is a good distribution of students aged 21-50, but only 3 students come from the ages 51+ category. Most of the students are 21-30 years old (34.29%), followed by 28.57% each for 31-40 years old and 41-50 years old. In relation to employment, 85.71% of the participants are full-time employees.

The result of the research suggests that the difficulty of running cohort programs a decade ago, evidenced by low graduation percentage, seems no longer true today (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010, p. 180). The overwhelming positive feedback from the participants of our study indicates that online cohort programs

are viable alternatives to traditional semester-type programs, especially to students challenged by geographical distance. The changed educational landscape caused by significant strides in technology and instruction methods provide contemporary students with a radically different cohort experience. Of course, this does not imply that the cohort system is as perfect as it can be. It continues to face challenges. However, because the program provides an avenue for students to pursue a master's degree which otherwise would have been impossible, the benefits outweighed unspoken concerns (Unzueta & Donet, 2008, p. 2). This is perhaps why, when asked to describe the program, top word that emerged was "blessing" (7 times), followed by "meaningful" (5 times), "excellent" (4 times), and "great," "helpful," "challenging," and "empowering" (3 times each). Table 1 provides the result of the survey, showing that the students rated the online cohort programs quite highly.

Table 1

Learning experiences of students in a cohort-based graduate program

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS	**Mean**	**SD**	**Verbal Description**
1. The instructional methods/techniques used by professors during the synchronous sessions are conducive to learning.	4.26	0.66	Strongly Agree
2. The various asynchronous learning activities (readings, papers, forum discussion, etc.) are effective and relevant.	4.29	0.71	Strongly Agree
3. The weekly amount of learning activities to complete is appropriate.	3.97	0.82	Agree
4. I have learned a great deal in the program.	4.51	0.66	Strongly Agree
Overall Weighted Mean	**4.26**	**0.60**	**Strongly Agree**
ASSESSMENTS METHODS			
5. The syllabus is clear about expectations on course requirements.	4.29	0.75	Strongly Agree
6. The requirements for the courses led to learning.	4.57	0.56	Strongly Agree

7. The requirements are aligned with the course outcomes.	4.51	0.66	Strongly Agree
8. The due dates of the requirements are reasonable.	4.09	0.85	Agree
9. There is a good amount of collaborative/group assignments	4.37	0.77	Strongly Agree
10. The professors provide feedback to my submitted papers that help me become a better student.	4.06	0.87	Agree
Overall Weighted Mean	**4.31**	**0.59**	**Strongly Agree**
LEARNING PLATFORM			
11. I have good internet connectivity to join synchronous sessions.	3.86	0.94	Agree
12. The video conferencing tools the professors utilize for synchronous sessions are easy to use.	4.34	0.64	Strongly Agree
13. Using Canvas for our asynchronous learning activities has been easy.	4.23	0.77	Strongly Agree
14. I have access to the online resources (e-books, e-journals, etc.) provided by WU-P.	3.77	0.94	Agree
Overall Weighted Mean	**4.05**	**0.65**	**Agree**
SUPPORT SYSTEM			
15. The professors are accessible and responsive to my communications.	4.14	0.73	Agree
16. The staff are accessible and responsive to my communications.	3.80	0.80	Agree
17. The Deans, program heads, and faculty members are open to negotiations about schedules and requirements.	4.54	0.70	Strongly Agree
18. The University offices (Registrar, ICT, Library, etc.) are accessible and responsive to my communications.	3.60	0.81	Agree
Overall Weighted Mean	**4.02**	**0.63**	**Agree**
ABOUT STUDENT			
18. I have developed deeper relationships with my classmates in the cohort program.	4.23	0.88	Strongly Agree

20. I am highly motivated to study and to graduate in the program.	4.54	0.66	Strongly Agree
21. I have always prioritized my studies whenever competing responsibilities emerge.	4.06	0.80	Agree
22. The cohort educational model fits perfectly to my learning preferences.	4.40	0.69	Strongly Agree
Overall Weighted Mean	**4.31**	**0.64**	**Strongly Agree**
OVERALL EXPERIENCE			
23. Rate your overall experience as a student at WU-P's online cohort program.	4.31	0.63	Strongly Agree

The participants showed general enthusiasm about the online cohort program. They rated a high level of motivation to study and finish. Narrative comments included, "I am eager to learn," and a student admitting "willingness to learn more." The students exuded "mutuality of purpose," which means that the students shared "a mutual commitment to an educational goal" (Pemberton and Akkary, 2010, p. 180). This is mostly achieved when meaningful personal and professional connections are present among students in a particular cohort program (Pemberton and Akkary, 2010, p. 180). Overall, the participants revealed that the online cohort model of education for graduate programs perfectly suits their learning preferences. One of main challenges of the abrupt shift to online learning during the pandemic is the persisting problem of using teacher-centered approach to learning (Hanson, 2021), but this was not the case for the cohort program, which for a student afforded a "self-paced learning" experience.

Although there are no significant differences in the ratings of the participants in the various categories of the research, as shown in Table 2, there are still nuances that need to be explained. First, male students have slightly higher rating of the online cohort program. They also rated the amount of learning they gleaned from the program higher than their female counterparts. Moreover, ages 31-50 students rated the online cohort program higher than the rest of the classmates. The same age groups also rated highest the amount of learning they got from the program, followed closely by those aged 51+. Students aged 31-40 consistently rated the program the highest compared to the others in all the questions. The overall mean of the age group is 4.47, compared to 4.18 of ages 41-50, 4.13 of ages 51+, and 4.01 of ages 21-30. A major factor is perhaps the fact that the 31-40 aged students experienced good internet connectivity throughout their study (4.4 mean), something that not all of their classmates

enjoyed. This suggests that although the online cohort system is suited for all ages, older millennials would thrive better.

Table 2

Significant variations of students' experiences in the light of socio-demographic profile

SEX	**Instructional Methods**	**Assessment Methods**	**Learning Platform**	**Support System**	**About Student**	**Overall**
Male	4.42	4.5	4.00	4.15	4.42	4.6
Female	4.19	4.24	4.07	3.97	4.26	4.2
t value	t = 1.211; p>0.05	t = 1.40; p>0.05	t = -.272; P>0.05	t = .820; p>0.05	t = .748; p>0.05	t = 1.922; p>0.05
AGE						
21 - 30 years old	4.04	4.12	3.85	3.92	4.10	4.00
31 - 40 years old	4.52	4.17	4.47	4.10	4.70	4.50
41 - 50 years old	4.30	4.37	3.80	4.07	4.22	4.50
51+ years old	4.08	4.53	4.25	4.00	4.08	4.33
F value	F = 1.308; p>0.05	F = .963; p>0.05	F = 2.775; p>0.05	F = .175; p>0.05	F = 2.026; p>0.05	F = 1.662; p>0.05
EMPLOYMENT						
Full-time	4.24	4.29	4.04	4.00	4.33	4.30
Self-employed	4.35	4.47	4.10	4.10	4.15	4.40
t value	t = -.420; p>0.05	t = -.648; p>0.05	t = -.222; p>0.05	t = -.369; p>0.05	t = .584; p>0.05	t = -.367; p>0.05

In the next sections, the findings will be grouped in three categories: (a) learning activities, (b) learning platform, and (3) learning support. This is beneficial in highlighting specific components of the online cohort model that

deserve attention. The learning activities refer to both synchronous and asynchronous learning engagements of students. The learning platform will focus on the instruments utilized during synchronous and asynchronous engagements, including internet connectivity and the like. The learning support looks at the other essential services of the University that are related to the completion of the degree program, including available educational resources, communication with University offices and staff, and program structure.

a. Learning Activities

The item students ranked highest in the entire questionnaire is the relevance of papers and assignments that led to learning (Q6, 4.57 mean). The learning activities, according to a student, led to "new perspectives" and "new learning skills." This is consistent with their assessment that the learning activities are aligned with the stated learning outcomes of their courses (Q7, 4.51 mean). It helped that the syllabi distributed by professors had very clear expectations about virtual meetings and out-class learning engagements. The i-LEAP format that the University requires faculty members to use makes sure that syllabi are OBE-consistent. This provided academic transparency and clarity that both professors and students enjoy. As our study shows, clearly defined outcomes with aligned learning activities, especially in vocational or professional degree programs, contribute to the success of fast-paced online cohort programs (Bell & Mitchell, 2000, pp. 5, 7). The study proves that Dixon et al. (2008) and Beaumont et al. (2009) are correct that success in online programs hinges on clearly communicated expectations to students. Following this, it is not surprising that the participants of our study judged that one of the strengths of our cohort program is the content of our courses, which were "very relevant" and "very informative and effective," because they were designed "not only to inform but to equip, empower and prepare [sic] for leadership." Students appreciated their experiential learning, in which they reflected, interpreted, and translated knowledge to meaningful projects (Compton & Compton, 2016, p. 28). This goes well with the common suggestion of the participants of Bell & Mitchell's study (2000) that cohort programs for professional degrees must emphasize practical knowledge and hands-on experience (p. 12).

Even prior to the pandemic, there is no scarcity of literature recommending the combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities to support student learning (Giesbers et al., 2014; Hrastinski, Keller, & Carlsson, 2010; Wei, Peng, & Chou, 2015). Our participants noted that their online synchronous learning activities were conducive to learning (Q1, 4.26 mean). Virtual classes were held once a week for three hours each. Though short, these synchronous learning environment provided opportunities for lectures, student presentations, and live exchange of ideas. Although some of the participants noted the challenge of internet connectivity, because students were allowed to keep their camera turned

off, they were at least able to access the audio. For Wang, Huang, & Quek (2018), the clarity of the audio is essential to the learning experience; issues in audio drastically affect the quality of the learning process (p. 11).

As students in a professional master's degree, they were required to perform tasks related to their learning to real world scenarios for their asynchronous learning activities, which they performed during the week. These were perceived by the students to be effective and relevant (Q2, 4.29 mean). Two things merit attention. First, male students rated the amount of work required more favorably than women (Q3, 4.4 mean over 3.8 mean). Second, there is very little difference of opinion about this between full-time and part-time employees. It must be noted that 85% of the students are full-time employees. Furthermore, students are required to devote 20-30 hours each week for their studies, which for one student was "hard on my schedule." Research papers and projects needed to be submitted at the end of each course, which meant that students were due to submit weekly assignments and a culminating output each month. Understandably, students with part-time employment rated the reasonableness of due dates higher than students with full-time work (Q8, 4.4 vs. 4.03 means), but overall, the participants judged that the fast-paced nature of the cohort program was reasonable (Q8, 4.09 mean). The cohort system simply demands a significant amount of time and commitment to ensure success. This is quite challenging, especially when unanticipated events emerge in the middle of the study (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010, pp. 187-188). When asked whether they prioritized their studies when competing responsibilities emerge, the participants rated "Agree" (Q21, 4.06 mean). Indeed, the participants were highly motivated to study and finish (Q20, 4.45 mean).

Because an integral component of any cohort program to succeed is to have collaborative activities, professors made sure that students engaged in group work. The respondents indicated that there were indeed a good amount of collaborative assignments (Q9, 4.37 mean) throughout the program. Fortunately, despite the program being fully online, the cohort system managed to address the social component of learning, which is an integral part of Filipino values. As Tisdell et al. (2004) noted, collaborative assignments are opportunities to develop friendships and build relationships (p. 121). Group cohesion is important in cohort programs (Unzueta & Donet, 2008, p. 3). When asked whether they have developed deeper relationships with their classmates in the program, the respondents strongly agreed (Q19, 4.23 mean). Overall, the benefits of cohorts in professional collaboration and personal relationships with peers (Slater & Trowbridge, 2000; Potthoff, et al., 2001) were not missed out by the students. This contributed to the success of the program because it helps sustain communal motivation (Christman & McClellan, 2008; Morris, Rogers, & Ketelhut, 2004). The empathy, support, and camaraderie formed in close-knit students working

together from the beginning of their education journey create academic stability (Unzueta & Donet, 2008, p. 9). As confirmed by other studies, "social presence" is correlated with learning satisfaction and improved quality of learning experience (Jaradat & Ajlouni, 2020; Alsadoon, 2018; Horzum, 2017; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2017).

b. Learning Platform

The participants affirmed that video conference tools were easy to use (Q12, 4.34 mean). Given that Zoom and other virtual conference software were used by almost everyone since the beginning of the pandemic, students joining the online cohort program were already well-versed with the set-up. Their familiarity with the features and capabilities of Zoom made it easier for them to transition to a fully online program. Nevertheless, because of low internet bandwidth and other unnamed reasons, students mostly had their video cameras turned off. Wang, Huang, & Quek (2018) asserted that this indicates that students have left their computers and therefore failed to give concentrated effort to join in the synchronous learning activities (p. 7). Similar studies have revealed this phenomena (Cunningham, 2014; Karal, Cebi & Turgut, 2011; Gillies, 2008). Moreover, students used Canvas, the University's learning management system. Studies emphasize the use of asynchronous learning tools to facilitate learning outside of classroom interactions (Warden et al, 2013). The participants deemed Canvas the easy to use (Q13, 4.23 mean). This is most probably because most of the students are digitally proficient. Of the respondents, only 3 (8%) were 51+ years old, and although this age group rated their proficiency of Canvas the lowest, they still rated it with a 4.0 mean.

Several interlocking factors contributed to the high rating of students of their use of the synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms. First, an essential ingredient of the success of a cohort program, Tisdell et al. (2004) found out, is the implementation of an opening residential when students are oriented about the program and receive training in the use of various learning platforms (p. 120). The Graduate School did have orientations and trainings at the beginning of the cohort and every beginning of the semester, along with various consultative meetings held by the program heads with the students. Second, the user-friendliness of the platforms meant that the cohort program provided an environment that did not require a big learning curve to make sense of the pedagogical tools, which then reduces student anxiety (Sisco, Woodcock, & Eady, 2015). Thirdly, the participants seem to exude what Jaradat & Ajlouni (2020) calls high "online learning self-efficacy." This means that the students have a high evaluation of their proficiency in the use of the digital platforms (Hong et al., 2017). As various studies have shown, this has positive effects on the overall learning experience of students (Wei & Chou, 2020). The better their perception of

their learning self-efficacy, the more they experience satisfaction (Alqurashi, 2019; Alqurashi, 2017; Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016).

The difficulty, shared by almost every Filipino, is the intermittent internet connectivity that affects the communication process in synchronous sessions. This seems to be a common challenge in online learning experiences (Nortvig, 2013; Higgins & Harreveld, 2013).

Interestingly, however, agreed that they have good internet connectivity to join synchronous sessions (Q11, 3.86 mean). It must be noted, however, that most students in synchronous sessions have their video camera turned off to reduce the needed bandwidth to connect. Given that Zoom only requires 1.5mbps to have seamless video conferencing, it may be surmised that most of the students have slow connectivity that is sufficient only to join with audio. Unfortunately, this problem is not within the control of students. In the Philippines, particularly in many provinces, the issue is not the inability of the students to pay for connectivity; the problem lies in the internet providers themselves having insufficient cell sites to support far or huge geographical areas. It merits our consideration that although they rated their experience and learning highly as well, those in ages 21-30 rated the program the lowest compared to the other brackets (Q23). This is most probably because younger millennials are accustomed to fast internet connectivity and a great deal of independence in information-gathering.

c. Learning Support

Our study shows that the performance of faculty members plays an important role toward the success of the online cohort program. Coppola, Hiltz & Rotter (2002) highlighted that professors in e-learning environments must possess good cognitive, affective, and managerial roles. In a similar study, Bawane and Spector (2009) added that online teachers should possess pedagogical, professional, evaluation, social, technological, administrative, research, and advising competencies. It would seem that our faculty members performed well. When asked what the primary strength of the online cohort program is, 27.5% of the participants pointed to "excellent," "competitive," and "well-prepared" professors who exhibited mastery of their fields and craft. A good professor who can facilitate learning is crucial in online platforms (Eady, Woodcock, & Sisco, 2017, p. 14). Moreover, students affirmed that professors provided timely feedback to submitted assignments (Q10, 4.05 mean). This helped the students become more familiar with the academic standards of graduate programs and subsequently grow as writers and scholars. We did not conduct a follow-up interview to dig deeper into the feedback mechanism that professors employed, but it would be interesting to test, in a future study, if students prefer feedback embedded in submitted documents, as in Wolsey's study (2008).

That the professors were also "responsive" and "considerate" garnered high praise from the participants. As Bell & Mitchell's study (2000) has already shown, "a teacher should have time for the student, to answer student questions" (p. 18). Since physical interaction is not plausible, communication mostly happens through e-mail and chat. That each course has a Messenger Group Chat helps, because students may send their questions to their professors in the group or privately. The openness of communication channels was religiously maintained by the Dean and program head. Because of all these things in place, the respondents rated the accessibility and responsiveness of professors highly (Q15, 4.14 mean).

The positive response of the administrators and program heads to student negotiations is equally ranked high by the participants of the study (Q17, 4.54 mean). Ideally, a cohort has a fixed schedule and learning path that they must follow to graduation. However, personal circumstances and other events beyond the control of anyone makes strictly imposing the announced schedule untenable. As Barnett et al (2000) asserted, "Inflexible structure may restrict students' options and their ability to enter and finish programs" (p. 273). Five of the participants noted in their narrative assessment that the flexibility of the program was a key component that enabled student success. They are appreciative of the openness of the administrators and professors to concede to their requests for re-scheduled classes and extended assignments. Our study thus confirms other existing studies which conclude that "lock-step, closed cohort models" are incompatible to most students who face intrusive complications (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010, p. 2000; Barnett et al, 2000; Maher, 2005). Consistent but flexible cohorts that are open to negotiations is an essential ingredient in the success of cohort models (Tisdell et al, 2004, p. 121).

Interestingly, although the overall weighted mean of support systems is 4.02, which means that students agree to their effectivity, the three questions that gathered the lowest scores in the entire questionnaire fall under this category. This merits discussion.

Table 3

Lowest ranking questions in the survey

		MEAN	SD	VERBAL DESCRIPTION
14	I have access to the online resources (e-books, e-journals, etc.) provided by	3.77	0.94	Agree

	WU-P.			
16	The staff are accessible and responsive to my communications.	3.80	0.80	Agree
18	The University offices (Registrar, ICT, Library, etc.) are accessible and responsive to my communications.	3.60	0.81	Agree

First, it appears that the University needs to (a) provide more online academic resources and (b) conduct repeated orientation and training regarding access to them. Since students have reside outside the city and have no way to access the printed books in the Library, they are completely dependent on e-sources available through our University's subscription to EBSCOHost, JSTOR, and GDTL. Students, however, have no access to e-books related to educational leadership. This proved to be a weakness (Cavaleri & Tran, 2022; Connell & Comeaux, 2021; Merande, Mwai & Ogalo, 2021). Second, the accessibility and responsiveness of office staff and the other University offices need to improve. Frustrations related to needs which must be provided by non-teaching personnel may easily exasperate those who are geographically constrained to come in person to the University.

4. Conclusions

A few studies show negative student perception on fully online learning (Sathwara, Joshi & Sasha, 2021). It would seem, however, that online cohort education, even with its intense demand for time, worked well with our enrollees. For one of the respondents, having one class in four weeks, "is a major strength" of the program. Another student commended the fact that "students can focus on one course at a time" and that "the mode of learning is very beneficial" for those geographically distant from the campus. Seven of the respondents noted the convenience of the program since they did not need to travel to attend classes. Especially during the pandemic, when various constraints could have prevented the students from pursuing master's degrees, the program was a good way to bring education to the homes of eager learners. The accessibility of a graduate-level program to full-time employees made the program very inclusive, since, according to a student, it "caters to people from various locations and background to build up their academic credential."

The combination of having excellent OBE-based learning activities and assessments, easy-to-use learning platforms for synchronous and asynchronous engagements, and availability of learning support systems are crucial in the success of online cohort programs, especially for graduate students. The difficulty

of motivating and retaining students, which is one of the greatest challenges in online learning during the pandemic (Smith & Kaya, 2021; Ibnu, Zainodin, & Din, 2021), was almost non-existent among our participants. The developed relationships over time provided mutual support and encouragement. What needs to be strengthened, and is probably unintentionally neglected, is the existence of good support systems to students. Distance learning students must have access to excellent online academic resources—both e-books and journal articles. In addition, higher education institutions that offer online cohort programs need to revisit, review, and revise the existing policies and procedures of their Library, Registrar, ICT and other support services to cater to distance learners.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded through the research grant program of the Wesleyan University Philippines, which is under the oversight of the University Research Council. Ms. Romielle Joy Sanglay served as the research assistant who tabulated data, and Dr. Ali G. Mamaclay assisted in the statistical analysis.

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