Quality of Study Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic of UPLB Students

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Abstract

The University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) met an unprecedented health crisis as it faced the global COVID-19 pandemic. Academic institutions including UPLB were forced to adjust to a sudden change in the mode of learning through a remote distance learning (RDL) setup. This study, guided by the Four Pillars of Supporting Student Success framework (Roddy et al., 2017), aimed to investigate the remote learning experiences of UPLB students to recommend gender-sensitive policies. A total of 350 randomly selected UPLB students were surveyed on the challenges, coping mechanisms, and views on RDL.

Similarities and differences were observed in several areas. It is worth noting that, regardless of sex, most of the respondents felt uncertain about the future and that they needed information and services that could help them cope with these feelings of uncertainty. Both male and female respondents thought that counseling could help but only female respondents were willing to attend counseling sessions.

Respondents reported academics as their main source of stress with workload and lack of consideration by the professors as the main issues. Most respondents indicated the need for orientations about academic and library services. There was a strong association between sex and feeling comfortable with remote learning as female respondents were more comfortable with the RDL setup compared to the male respondents.

Keywords*: gender, policy, higher education, student support, remote learning*

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented health crisis and the University of the Philippines Los Baños, as an academic institution, was not spared of its negative impacts. Experienced in countries all over the world, the pandemic negatively affected the Philippine educational system as schools were unprepared for this scenario. Given the uncertainties and vulnerabilities created by the pandemic, it is important to understand the various situations and experiences of students at home and the implications of various gender factors during online or remote learning, whether synchronous or asynchronous mode.

The pandemic has brought the country under quarantine which greatly affected the students. The change of teaching and learning to an online format or into Remote Distance Learning (RDL) has impacted many. The predominant concerns and issues that arise are the lack of equipment to participate in online or blended learning for students to engage in such learning activities (Plakhotnik, et al., 2021). In addition, the students may have been placed in a learning environment whereby they would have to engage in different roles, such as participating in doing house chores on top of their classes and other distractions that may be barriers to doing their classes online (Locion, et al., 2022).

Objectives

This study investigated the status of UPLB students on RDL during the pandemic and determined the factors affecting the quality of study during RDL implementation. In particular, the study aimed to:

1. Describe the socio-demographic characteristics of UPLB students;
2. Document the experiences, challenges and coping strategies of UPLB students on remote learning;
3. Analyze the perspectives of UPLB students on RDL within the context of the Four Pillars of Supporting Student Success; and
4. Investigate gender-related factors that affect study and productivity during the RDL implementation.

Review of Related Literature

Academic Needs and Situation

With the transition to remote learning, students began accessing educational resources delivered via digital platforms, posing novel challenges for both students and educational institutions. Despite encountering technological barriers, Indian students were reported to effectively utilize online learning resources (Khan et al., 2021), a trend similarly observed among students in Saudi Arabia (Mahyoob, 2020). Concurrently, students sought academic services online, with particular emphasis on library resources. A study involving Chinese and Italian students found that the majority utilized library services more frequently during quarantine, predominantly for accessing free educational content, instructions on network library services, and off-campus

digital resources. Many students acknowledged the crucial role of libraries in facilitating distance learning (Zhou, 2021). However, there was a possibility that students were not fully cognizant of available library services. In a comparative analysis of library usage across three American universities, Connell et al. (2021) contended that the upsurge in digital library resource utilization during the pandemic was partially hindered by students' lack of awareness. Similar observations were made among Chinese students, who expressed a desire for enhanced support from libraries to fulfill their academic requirements. Moreover, students encountered difficulties in navigating library resources due to technology-related obstacles (Shi et al., 2021).

In addition to library services, university students encountered challenges in seeking academic guidance and tutorials for their courses. While seeking assistance from teachers and utilizing university tutorial services was relatively straightforward before the pandemic, the shift to remote learning exacerbated the difficulty in accessing such support, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds (Salmi, 2020). A survey among university students in Spain revealed that tutoring models requiring minimal bandwidth, such as email and instant messaging applications like WhatsApp, were most frequently utilized. Despite the availability of video conferencing applications for tutorials, which necessitated better internet connectivity, students still preferred face-to-face tutorials. Video conferencing was deemed the least satisfactory among tutorial models, with students reporting it as less effective in enhancing awareness of university resources, study habits, motivation, sense of inclusion, academic and professional planning, and teacher-student relationships compared to other tutoring methods (Perez-Jorge et al., 2020).

Interacting with peers or fellow students proved to be as crucial as engaging with teachers in the educational setting. At Indiana University, students experienced reduced interactions with both teachers and peers during the transition to remote learning, resulting in detrimental effects on their academic performance and sense of belonging (Indiana University Pervasive Technology Institute, e-Learning Research and Practice Lab, 2020 as cited in Cavinato et al., 2021). Beyond the decreased frequency of interaction, the absence of peer-to-peer engagement limited opportunities for collaborative learning through inquiry and clarification (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Moreover, the quality of communication among peers raised concerns. Students in Hong Kong reported difficulties in meeting group requirements due to the necessity for active feedback from peers, which was hindered by technical constraints and functional limitations of video teleconferencing. Establishing connections with peers and leveraging peer learning in a virtual classroom environment proved to be challenging (Wut & Xu, 2021).

Technological Needs and Situation

Addressing technology-related needs and understanding students' situations concerning technology emerged as a paramount concern in the context of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kelley & Columbus, 2020). A survey conducted among medical students in the Philippines revealed that one out of five students did not possess a laptop, and reliance on prepaid internet

for connectivity remained prevalent. While a majority had access to postpaid internet, the availability of learning materials was still affected by inadequate infrastructure, power outages, and internet expenses (Baticulon et al., 2021).

Technological barriers were particularly pronounced among students in rural areas of the Philippines. Gocotano et al. (2021) observed that the majority of students in rural settings owned only smartphones and relied primarily on mobile data. Consequently, they faced challenges in fully engaging with remote learning due to intermittent network availability and uncertain economic circumstances affecting their ability to purchase mobile data. Additionally, many students lacked the digital literacy skills and proficiency required to effectively utilize remote learning applications.

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Health and Wellbeing Needs and Situations

Amidst the pandemic, concerns regarding both physical and mental health emerged prominently across various age demographics. A global survey conducted among academic staff and students across 41 countries identified COVID-19-induced lack of motivation and social isolation as primary concerns (Filho et al., 2021). Similarly, students at an American university reported experiencing diminished motivation to engage in discussions, interactions, and academic pursuits (Shin & Hickey, 20210). Beyond issues of motivation, students expressed feelings of uncertainty regarding their future prospects (Sahu, 2020). Notably, students from a university in the Philippines voiced apprehensions about their career prospects in light of perceived employer biases against remote learning compared to traditional methods (Cleofas, 2021). Furthermore, the implementation of lockdown measures contributed to heightened anxiety and depression among Italian university students (Villani et al., 2021).

Likewise, Omani students reported experiencing moderate to high levels of stress associated with e-learning, with stress levels showing a significant inverse correlation with academic performance (Malik & Javed, 2021). Similarly, American university students experienced heightened pandemic-related stress and anxiety, stemming from fears of contracting the virus, disruptions to sleep patterns, reduced social interactions, and academic concerns (Son et al., 2020). Conversely, the majority of students from Hubei Province, China, reported normal anxiety levels during the earlier stages of the pandemic when COVID-19 was still considered an epidemic. However, anxiety levels were found to be significantly correlated with economic status, concerns about academic delays,

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and disruptions to daily life. Factors such as residing in urban areas, living with parents, having stable family income, and receiving social support were associated with lower levels of anxiety symptoms (Cao et al., 2020).

College students expressed significant impacts of COVID-19 on various aspects of their lives, including heightened stress or anxiety, feelings of disappointment or sadness, experiences of loneliness or isolation, financial setbacks, and relocations. Additionally, they struggled to maintain adequate levels of physical activity. Despite these challenges, many students remained hopeful or extremely hopeful about the future (Active Minds, 2020a; Active Minds, 2020b). This sentiment was echoed in interviews with Filipino students conducted by Cleofas (2021), who expressed optimism and hopefulness despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, reflecting a common theme of resilience and self-reflection among respondents.

Sense of Community

According to a survey conducted among university students in the United States, the majority expressed feelings of disconnection and a lack of attachment to their institution. They also noted a greater sense of connection with teachers compared to fellow students (Blankstein et al., 2020). As remote learning was perceived as less engaging and inferior to traditional face-to-face instruction by American students, they appreciated the efforts made by their universities and professors to enhance the quality of the remote learning experience (Top Hat, 2020 as cited in Kelley & Columbus, 2020). Students emphasized the importance of various avenues for connection, including virtual events, digital gatherings, phone conversations, and even face-to-face interactions, as well as the creation and maintenance of virtual social networks and involvement in campus groups, as essential means to cope with and support their mental well-being during the pandemic (Active Minds, 2020a; Active Minds, 2020b).

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Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

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The basis of the study is Roddy and colleagues' (2017) Four Pillars of Supporting Student Success.

Considering student support services is paramount in an online environment where technology interruptions and lack of support services can be significant barriers to student involvement in learning. Students who are enrolled in remote learning face more challenges in accessing support services than students who are on campus with fewer barriers to avail university services (Lee, 2010).

The "Four Pillars" that support student success (Figure 1) are often intangible assets that educators take for granted when offering complete online courses. These pillars include online friendly academic support (Coonin et al., 2011; Huwiler, 2015), navigation technology support (Lee, 2010), health and wellness facilities (Anderson, 2008), and attribution or community (Kumar & Heathcock, 2014).

Figure 1
Four Pillars of Supporting Student Success
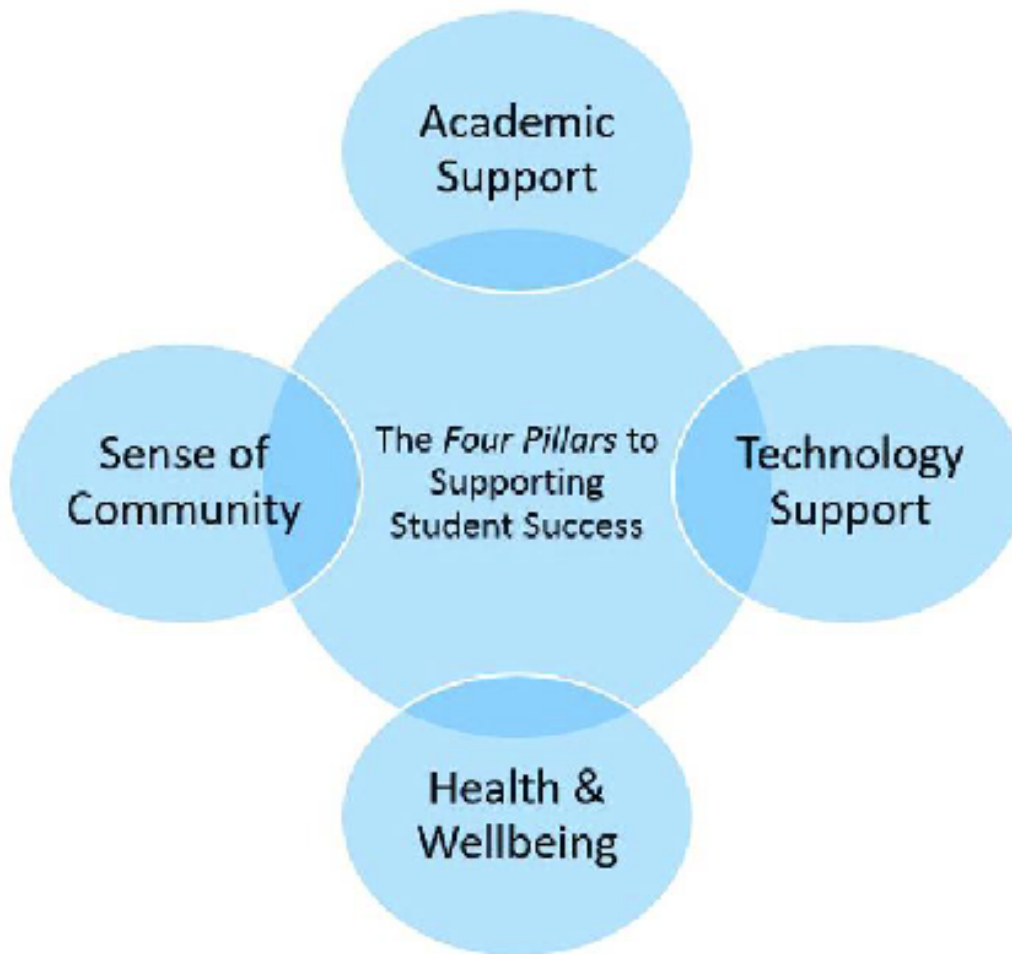
The first pillar, and perhaps the most important support that any institution can provide to students online, revolves around online-friendly academic resources and opportunities for student teacher interaction (Cannady, 2015). Obtaining an online higher education degree depends largely on the ability of students to work independently and manage their time effectively (Wang et al., 2013). As mentioned earlier, in addition to the personal qualities students need to have to succeed in an online course, the institution offering the course must have a suitable online-friendly academic scaffolding that can accommodate and support students throughout their learning (Lee & Choi, 2011). This includes detailed orientation offers and a wealth of library resources. Providing orientation services, especially for online students, is essential for the proper integration of incoming cohorts into the new online learning environment (Cho, 2012).

The second pillar is one of the most direct and unique hurdles faced by online students, providing the right technical framework to enable students to study in an online-only environment (Shea et al., 2005). Universities that offer fully online courses need to clearly inform students of all technology requirements before starting the course and provide ongoing technical support to reduce delays in meeting the expectations of the course. This is especially important for intensive forms of online learning. Evaluation deadlines leave little or no

room for technical hurdles. A strong correlation between student technology adoption and their perceived satisfaction with online courses is also important. This is because it may present additional hurdles to the next cohort that is unfamiliar with learning in an online environment (Lee, 2010). The lack of professional skills required on the part of students or faculty presents significant and sometimes insurmountable barriers that can contribute to student dropouts. Therefore, introducing an easy-to-use learning environment and flexible online technical support for intensive online courses is important for increasing student retention and engagement.

Apart from the need to overcome technical barriers, academic performance pressure, transition to college life, and time management are also concerns. Everyone benefits from the third pillar of health and welfare support. College student groups were found to have worrying rates of mental health problems (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Hjeltnes et al., 2015), and online student groups, especially those adapted to the intensive learning regime, face challenges. In response, universities have worked to support students and promote positive mental health and well-being in order to combat the growing psychological distress (Regehr et al., 2013). One example is an effort to expand the online student support programs which are already available to students on campus, such as personal and career counseling. (Dare et al., 2005; Lapadula, 2010). However, this solution often bypasses the large number of online students who are not in the geographic area to access these services, in person because of such these are done by phone.

The final pillar needed to support student success is that in a fully online cohort, attribution and community are priorities. Facilitating open dialogue between students, faculty and staff, and fellow students is essential for online learning. This is often taken for granted when conducting online courses (Coomey & Stephenson, 2001).

Methodology

To address the research objectives, the questionnaire was structured into 13 sections: informed consent, socio-demographic information, socio-economic information, home set-up, academic support, mode of learning preferences, class interaction and orientation, technological support, connectivity and equipment, health and wellbeing, UPLB support during the pandemic, sense of belonging, ways to communicate, and feedback. The questionnaire was designed to incorporate the conceptual framework of Rody's (2017) four pillars of supporting student success. These pillars served as the basis for structuring the questionnaire, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and experiences faced by UPLB students during the pandemic.

Data gathering was conducted through the distribution and administration of the survey questionnaire utilizing the online platform Qualtrics. Participants were given the option to respond either visibly through emails directly sent to them or anonymously through links disseminated by their respective offices across various communication platforms. The questionnaire consisted of 146 questions presented in diverse formats such as open-ended, multiple-choice,

multiple-choice matrix, checkboxes, and linear scales. Pre-testing of the survey questionnaire was conducted before the beginning of the survey enumeration period.

A two-way stratified random sampling design was used to ensure the widespread data collection across the different colleges of UPLB while also ensuring the representation of students at different academic levels. In the first stage of the stratification, the student population was divided into high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels. The high school student population included the UP Rural High School (UPRHS) students, which was further stratified by grade level. The undergraduate students were stratified by college and year level, and the graduate students were stratified by degree program. The questionnaire was distributed to 1,557 randomly selected students – 142 high school students, 1,105 undergraduate students, and 310 graduate students. However, following the end of the survey enumeration period, data cleaning, and verification of responses, only 350 were considered viable. Such responses include only those who completed answering at least 94% of the questionnaire.

Given the extremely low response rate equating to only about 5%, the survey results were considered as deriving from a non-probability sample. Consequently, the findings drawn from the data were considered applicable solely to the respondents and not representative of the entire UPLB student population.

Results and Discussion

Socio-demographics

The study took into account the socio-demographics of the respondents in terms of age, sex at birth as well as other variables such as health insurance coverage and membership in student organizations.

Most respondents (64%) were female while only 36% were male. The highest number of male and female respondents were between the age range of 18 to 24 years old, accounting for over 70% of the respondents. Meanwhile, there were very few male and female respondents aged 35 to 64 years old or graduate students, accounting for less than 10%. Thus, there were more undergraduate student respondents and very few graduate student respondents. More male respondents reported having health insurance coverage, while more female respondents did not have such coverage.

The majority of both male and female respondents were members of at least one student organization in UPLB. Further analysis also revealed that there is a weak relationship (V = 0.0186) between sex and membership in a student organization. This suggests that sex may not be a good determinant of whether a student is a member of a student organization.

During the pandemic, the recruitment activities of most student organizations were conducted online. For many students, extracurricular activities were not prioritized, particularly given the challenges of remote learning and the overall

impact of the pandemic. The demands of the current situation were deemed overwhelming, leaving little room for additional commitments.

However, for a few students, joining an organization served as a means to socialize and cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic. Some organizations adapted by conducting virtual activities to engage members during this period.

Socio-economic Status

The socio-economic status of the students such as scholarship, thesis support, and employment were also profiled. Regardless of sex, the majority of respondents did not have scholarships aside from those provided by Republic Act 10931, also known as the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act. Under RA 10931, students can afford college without needing additional scholarships, especially with the shift to remote learning which allows them to save on expenses like dormitory or apartment fees, food, transportation, and other costs. Only a small number of students availed scholarships or other financial assistance specifically for internet/Wi-Fi, computers, or laptops needed for remote learning.

Similarly, the majority of respondents did not receive thesis support. Due to the pandemic, thesis activities were suspended for many students, resulting in a lack of thesis support. Approval for thesis grants was typically based on the quality of research proposals, but students faced challenges in crafting their research proposals or adjusting their methodologies due to limitations on fieldwork. Further, travel restrictions and other requirements (such as insurance and medical certificates), led students to pursue research projects that did not require experimentation, field observations, or interviews for data collection. Among the few respondents who were employed, more females have full-time jobs, while more male respondents engaged in freelance work. Additionally, only a relatively small proportion of respondents reported having part-time jobs. Those students who needed to work often came from families heavily impacted by the pandemic. Many families experienced reduced income when a parent or guardian lost their job, which was rampant during the pandemic as most companies either downsized or were forced to close.

Home Setup

Examining students' home setups can provide insights into the environments they experienced during RDL. Based on the survey, most respondents reported residing in Region 4A, followed by NCR and Region 3. The majority of the respondents were living with their parents and only 20% were not staying in the same house as their parents. While many respondents reported not living with other relatives, most of them were living with siblings. It is worth noting that most of both male and female respondents reported that they have their own room or space for RDL in their respective houses. This means that they have a quiet study environment, even in shared living situations.

Furthermore, this study also sought to understand the gender roles during

RDL. Survey results revealed that washing dishes, cleaning the house, and running errands were the most common household tasks undertaken by male respondents, whereas a little more than 50% report doing these chores most of the time or always. Similarly, more than half of the female respondents reported that they were also washing the dishes, cleaning the house, and running errands most of the time or always. Additionally, they were also regularly taking care of their pets. These findings suggest that students, regardless of sex, tend to contribute to household chores.

Academic Support

The majority of male respondents had access to course materials in the Learning Management Systems (LMS) and learning resources from online platforms, as instructed by the faculty-in-charge. However, they had limited access to UPLB's academic and library resources and services, which were primarily available in face-to-face settings. Similarly, the majority of female respondents could access course materials in the LMS and learning materials outside the LMS. They also reported having access to UPLB's academic and library resources and services.

The data for academic support show that regardless of sex, respondents could access academic resources online. This aligns with findings among university students in India (Khan et al., 2021) and Saudi Arabia (Mahyoob, 2020). Additionally, there may be room for improvement in awareness about services offered by UPLB's Learning Resource Center, Interactive Learning Center, and library services, as a lack of familiarity with these services could lead to underutilization, consistent with the findings of Shi and colleagues (2021) among Chinese university students.

Mode of Learning Preference

Respondents were also asked about their preferred mode during RDL, and it showed that both male and female respondents preferred a blend of synchronous and asynchronous delivery across different types of courses.

The preference to have both synchronous and asynchronous sessions for classes regardless of sex could be attributed to technological barriers. Similar to Spanish university students (Perez-Jorge et al., 2020), respondents likely acknowledged that synchronous sessions using video-conferencing applications required a reliable and high-speed internet connection. If done all the time, this could be challenging, especially for those belonging to low-income households (Salmi, 2020), where access to high-end equipment may be limited. Hence, respondents would also appreciate having asynchronous sessions that did not demand too much bandwidth.

Class Interaction and Orientations

Class interactions that students experienced during RDL and the interactions they would want to happen were also examined. A majority of the respondents expressed a desire for reorientations about academic and library resources and

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services, with around half of them indicating a need for reorientation regarding their plan of study. Moreover, while male respondents were able to have interactions with their classmates and professors, the majority also reported difficulties with group work. Most students also studied their learning materials independently during RDL.

Students expressed a need for assistance in navigating virtual library services, especially considering that some were not very familiar with online library access even before the pandemic. With limited access to physical libraries, students relied heavily on online library resources (databases, e-books, journal subscriptions) and services (iLib, Open Athens, Turnitin).

Curricular changes and adjustments affected the students' plans of study. Courses were adjusted in terms of their offering and mode (e.g., from lecture-recitation to lecture only). Also, the regular academic load was adjusted from 15 to 12 units to cope with remote learning. This prompted the students to revise their plans (e.g., changing their electives and choosing those without fieldwork or taking midyear courses to fulfill the total number of academic units required for timely graduation).

Regardless of sex, interactions between students and their classmates and instructors/professors are necessary for academic support as fewer interactions could possibly affect academic performance and sense of belonging (Indiana University Pervasive Technology Institute, e-Learning Research and Practice Lab, 2020 as cited in Cavinato et al., 2021). Moreover, respondents having a hard time dealing with group work and their preference to digest learning materials on their own resonated with the findings of Wut and Xu (2021) among university students in Hong Kong. Moreover, the need for reorientation about academic and learning services, plan of study, and scholarships could be attributed to the adoption of remote learning which drove Italian and Chinese university students to seek and use services, particularly library services, more than usual (Zhou, 2021).

Technological Support

The perceived technical support available to students was also examined. A majority of respondents reported using at least two gadgets for RDL, with smartphones and laptops being the most commonly used devices. Over 80% of the respondents owned the gadgets that they used for RDL, aligning with findings from a survey among Filipino medical students (Baticulon et al., 2021).
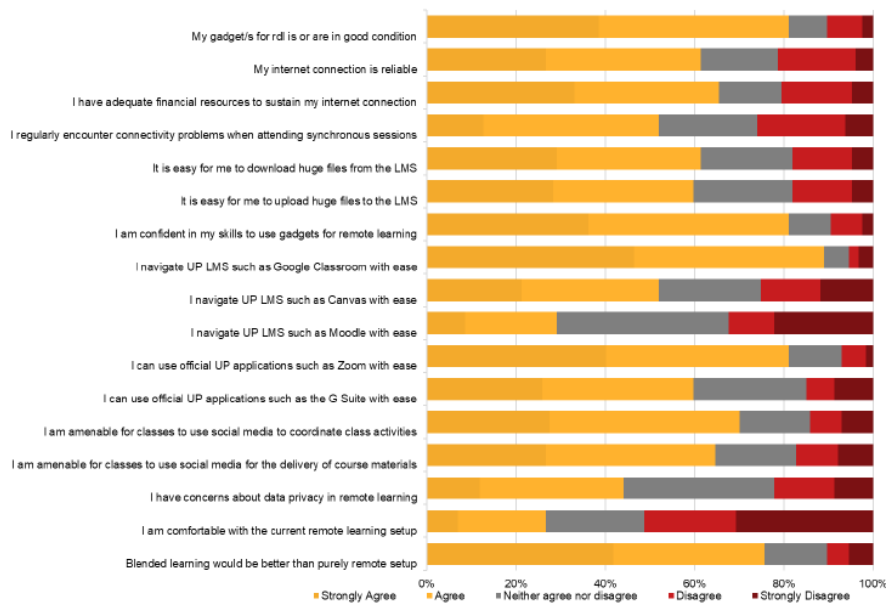
About 65% of male respondents reported having fiber-optic internet. Around 45% also utilized mobile data, either as an alternative or as their primary internet connection. While fiber-optic internet is preferred for its speed and reliability, some areas may not have access to upgraded internet resources, leading students to rely on mobile data. The majority of the female respondents also had access to Wi-Fi connections, although some still relied on mobile data. These results were in contrast with the results of the survey conducted by Gocotano et al. (2021) among rural university students wherein majority relied on mobile data for remote learning.

Connectivity and Equipment

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the majority of both male and female respondents answered positively for most of the questions, except for navigating Moodle with ease wherein most respondents were neutral. However, male and female respondents differ in their perspectives regarding the current remote learning setup, wherein female respondents were more comfortable in this setup than male respondents.
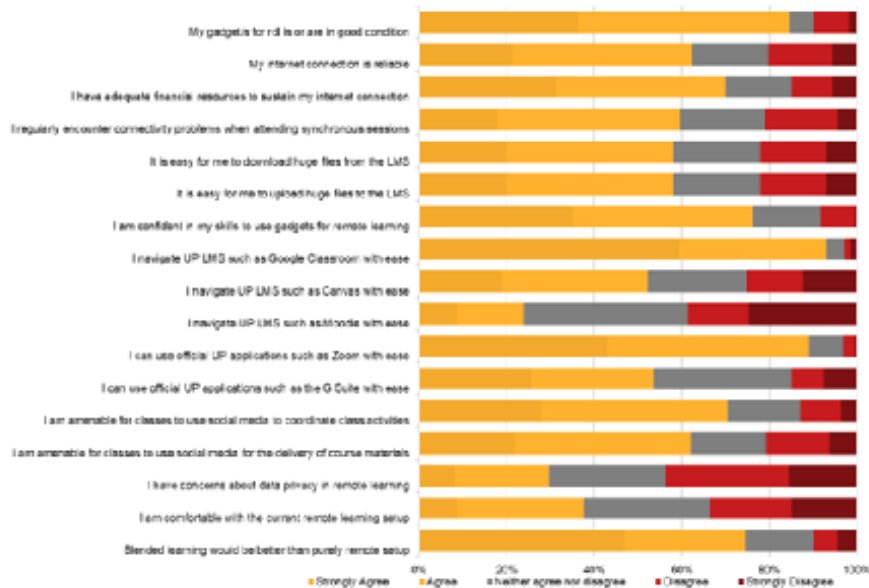
Figure 2
Status of connectivity and equipment of male students

Figure 3
Status of connectivity and equipment of female students

Sairah Mae R. Saipudin, Louise Antonette S. Villanueva, John Lorenzo A. Yambot, Czarlina May E. Magnata, Liza A. Cabrera, Marcelina Miranda, Mark Kevin L. Movillon, Rachelle A. Espinosa & Nelson Jose Vincent B. Querijero

Compared with rural university students, the respondents considered themselves proficient in the use of technology and official university remote learning applications except for Moodle. This could be attributed to the fact that Moodle was the least used LMS in UPLB as the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs encouraged the use of Google Classroom and Canvas. Meanwhile, female respondents were less concerned about data privacy in remote learning. Further analysis revealed that a strong association exists between sex and data privacy concerns. A study by Alnjadat et al. (2019), revealed that females have fewer data privacy concerns and social media platforms tend to influence their academic performance.

Health and Wellbeing

In terms of health and wellbeing, more than 80% of male respondents and more than 90% of female respondents reported that they lost motivation to do academic work in the past academic year. For male students, around 75% were looking for information about possible sources of income and felt uncertain about their future. Meanwhile, 65% said they needed information about health services available for students and wanted to learn ways to cope with the pandemic. While around 50% of male respondents thought that counseling could help, only around 40% would want to attend a counseling session and were able to manage their stress and anxiety.

Most female respondents (80%) also felt uncertain about their future. About 70% would also want access to information about possible sources of income and health services available for students. Similar to the male respondents, around half of the female respondents thought that counseling could help them. However, in contrast with the male respondents, most female respondents reported that they would want to attend counseling sessions. Only around 40 percent can manage their stress and anxiety well.

Source of Stress

Academics in general remained the main source of stress for both male and female respondents. Both male and female respondents reported that workload and lack of consideration of the professors were the main sources of stress. For male respondents, other sources of stress were difficulty of courses and isolation from the class. Female respondents, on the other hand, reported more sources of stress including difficulty in accessing resources, lack of interest in the course, pressure from peers, scholarship, lack of field work and difficulty in the conduct of thesis, lack of slots in some courses, and inadequate performance.

Male respondents voiced concerns that they could not understand the course materials and felt like they were not learning at all. In relation to academics, their environment was considered not conducive for learning. These coupled with erratic weather conditions that could affect the quality of internet connection were sources of stress.

Unreliable gadgets were a significant stressor noted by respondents, impacting

both academic performance and daily routines. For male respondents, additional stress stemmed from various sources including unrealistic expectations, financial issues, family obligations, and family problems. Work obligations also contributed to their stress levels, particularly in balancing work with other responsibilities. Physical and mental health concerns were prevalent, with burnout and fear of COVID-19 exacerbating these issues. Emotions played a crucial role in stress, as male respondents reported feelings of doubt, insecurity, being overwhelmed, uncertainty, lack of confidence, and perceived lack of progress. General life stressors included poor time management, exposure to other people's toxic positivity, excessive smartphone use, and broader societal issues such as government and pandemic-related politics. Some male respondents were unable to pinpoint specific stressors, simply stating they were stressed by personal matters or were uncertain about the sources of their stress.

Female respondents identified additional stressors related to their educational experiences. Independent learning, lack of interaction in class, and learning difficulties were significant sources of stress. Outside the virtual classroom, extracurricular activities, particularly those related to student organizations, added to their stress. The remote learning setup, heavily reliant on the internet, exacerbated stress due to power outages, unreliable internet connections, and malfunctioning gadgets.

Family-related stress was more explicitly detailed by female respondents. They emphasized their obligations to take care of their families, including children, aging parents, and pets. Some female respondents were also primary breadwinners, adding another layer of financial and emotional stress. Like their male counterparts, female respondents also faced stress from work obligations and financial issues.

Stress was also surfaced by health-related concerns. Female respondents pointed out that COVID-19 in the family was quite stressful, along with mental health concerns, burnout, and fatigue. In addition to these, female respondents were stressed by their feelings of overwhelm, sadness, isolation, and uncertainty about their future careers. Aside from these emotions, female respondents' lack of coping skills, focus, motivation, and time management also cause them stress. There was also a female respondent who said that comparison was her main source of stress, while others cited overthinking or personal stuff that they would rather not mention as well as uncontrollable issues pertaining to the government, politics, and pandemic.

Stressors for both male and female respondents were multifaceted, encompassing technological challenges, family and work obligations, financial issues, and emotional health concerns. These stressors were compounded by the unique pressures of remote learning and the broader impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems to address these diverse and intersecting sources of stress.

Challenges Encountered due to RDL

Male respondents considered academics in general as challenging, but they also emphasized inadequate or lack of access to academic resources and laboratories, lack of clear implementation of remote learning policies, communication-related problems (i.e., lack of feedback from professors and classmates), and the mediated nature of remote learning). Likewise, they found it difficult to consult advisers, deal with inconsiderate professors, and work in groups. They also said that the quality of modules made it challenging for them to digest the lessons and that they were not learning. Moreover, thesis-related concerns, workload, and performance preoccupied male respondents. Adding to the challenges were their inadequate high school background and stress. Aside from these academic-specific challenges, male respondents also had to deal with lack of a conducive environment for learning, poor internet connection, unreliable gadgets, inclement weather, and power outages.

Some male respondents mentioned that the status of their health could be challenging to deal with. They were mindful of COVID-19 and COVID-19-related concerns, mental health issues, burnout, sedentary lifestyle, insomnia, and stress. More than the health-related challenges, male respondents also reiterated on emotional toll in the past academic year as they experienced fear, grief, motivation loss, laziness, and uncertainty. They also lacked focus, routine, discipline, clarity, and balance between school. Aside from these, male respondents specified lack of social interaction, support system, and time management. Many of them also had to work on family problems and obligations, finances, and legal issues.

Similarities could be observed between female and male respondents. Female respondents were also challenged by academics in general. Some female respondents could not adjust well to remote learning and found independent learning and asynchronous activities to be difficult. Likewise, they also cited communication-related issues (lack of feedback from classmates and professors), group work, difficult courses, and access to academic resources and libraries as common challenges. Aside from these, female respondents also dealt with an immense amount of workload, thesis-related issues, performance, unclear policies and instruction, as well as not learning in general. The environment also remained a big issue as female respondents had to make do with the lack of conducive space, natural disasters, and relatedly, poor internet connection and power outages.

Like male respondents, it was challenging for female respondents to tackle their health concerns, particularly COVID-19, those related to COVID-19, burnout, stress, and sedentary lifestyle. Mental health also became paramount for female respondents. They lost their sense of time and day and felt isolated, anxious, avoidant, restless, stuck, unmotivated, lonely, and lazy. They were also trying their best to process repressed emotions and stop overthinking. Female respondents found it challenging to be lacking in discipline, time management, work-school balance, home-school balance, and social interactions.

Female respondents also cited difficulty in dealing with family obligations and problems, finances, miscommunication, and work in general. In contrast with male respondents, female respondents said that the government and politics made the past year even more challenging for them. Nonetheless, there were also female respondents who opted not to specify personal problems, while others also mentioned that they did not have challenges or were spared from difficulty specifically because they were already in the thesis stage of their respective programs.

Female respondents reiterated that remote learning was ineffective, and scholarship programs were unreliable. It was also important to know the degree program well, extend understanding toward professors, and recognize the role of privilege in the current remote learning setup. Lastly, female respondents focused on physical health, mental health, and wellbeing. They recognized the need for boundaries and mental health services on campus.

It could be said that despite the high levels of stress, motivation loss, and challenges experienced by respondents, they were still prompted to reflect and learn from the pandemic much like those who participated in the Active Minds surveys (2020a; 2020b) and those interviewed by Cleofas (2021).

Sense of Belonging

Being in a remote setup, over 70% of the respondents felt that the support provided by family and friends was enough for them to succeed, while only 50% felt that the support of their college and the university was enough for them to succeed. Less than 50% wished to join organizations, but both male and female students thought that there should be non-academic activities and information on extracurricular activities for students. Lastly, just around half of the respondents felt that they were part of their college community during the remote setup.

According to the data, the majority of the respondents regardless of sex already had organizations prior to the administration of survey questionnaires. This could explain why fewer respondents were interested in joining a new organization. Although, around an equal number of students felt they were part of a college community less than half felt that the support given at the university was enough. This mimics the findings from Blankstein and colleagues (2020) among American university students who did not feel a sense of belonging toward their institution at the height of the pandemic.

Since there was also no significant difference in the sense of belonging of male and female respondents, the results differed from those found among Irish students were male students who did not identify as part of a minority group showed a significant drop in their sense of belonging (Mooney & Becker, 2021).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Through a cross-sectional survey guided by Roddy et al.'s (2017) Four Pillars of Supporting Student Success, this study sought to determine the remote

learning experiences of UPLB students. Questions particularly centered on challenges, coping mechanisms, and views of remote learning. Likewise, the data were also disaggregated based on students' sex at birth to recommend gender-sensitive policies. A total of 350 randomly selected UPLB students served as respondents.

By delving into the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of students during the pandemic, UPLB can gain a deeper understanding of their needs and concerns. This understanding can inform the development of support systems and resources tailored to address specific challenges faced by students, both during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period.

Similarities and differences were noted in several areas. It was found that regardless of sex, respondents indicated the need for orientations about academic and library services. There was a moderate association between sex and knowledge of library services as well as the respondents' ability to tap the services of the Learning Resource Center and their need for orientation about these services. A higher proportion of female responders compared to male respondents reported being employed full-time while enrolled but despite these, more female respondents said they were comfortable with remote learning. Moderate association was found between sex and class interactions particularly in terms of consulting with instructors synchronously, consulting with instructors asynchronously, synchronously interacting with classmates outside of class, having difficulty in doing group work, studying materials alone, and liking to interact with instructors outside of class and consultations. Likewise, moderate association was also noted between sex and the need for financial resources for internet, skills to use gadgets, proficiency, and ease of use of learning management systems, Meanwhile, there was a strong association between sex and feeling comfortable with remote learning as well as having concerns with data privacy.

For students to succeed in remote learning, their academic, technological, health and well-being, and sense of belonging needs should be determined and understood, and policy recommendations should be crafted based on the data provided by the students.

Given that respondents' awareness of services could still be improved, it is recommended for the University Library and the Learning Resource Center to continue their information and dissemination activities about their services and how these could be availed as students adapt to blended learning. Moreover, the Interactive Learning Center could continue training students on learning management systems, while at the same time, they could also emphasize on the need to protect privacy and confidentiality of information. The use of social media to complement face-to-face learning must be explored, and its effects must be studied. While the majority of the respondents said they were already equipped with the knowledge and tools to support remote learning (and blended learning), attention should also be given to outliers relying on mobile phones and mobile data connection. Strengthening UPLB's policy on safe online spaces is also recommended. Understanding students' preferences for modes of learning, as explored in the study, can inform decisions regarding

instructional delivery methods. While UPLB may primarily offer face-to-face classes, insights from the study can support the implementation of hybrid or blended learning approaches that incorporate elements of both face-to-face and remote instruction. This can provide students with greater flexibility and accommodate diverse learning preferences and circumstances.

Likewise, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs could consider separate programs for male and female students. The office could further expand its Oplan Kumustahan and other initiatives under the Office of Guidance and Counseling since health and wellbeing concerns such as motivation loss, high levels of stress, physical and mental health problems, and others surfaced during the pandemic. Programs must have gender-sensitivity at the forefront. These will help address the issues and challenges in the students' health and well-being. Financial literacy workshops and networking activities could also be conducted, especially for students in need of income and financial support. Programs tackling finances, income, and scholarship could also be rethought to introduce gender components so that gender-based nuances could be considered in providing financial support and awarding of scholarships. Scholarship criteria could also consider familial obligations to support students, mostly women.

This paper provided insights and recommendations based on the results, but more could still be done in future research studies. Actual academic performance and, physical and mental health measures, among others could be tested in relation to other factors. Having a larger sample size would also pave the way for generalization. While this paper took on a more quantitative approach, future research studies could use qualitative methods to come up with thick descriptions. Narratives and participant observations could enrich the knowledge of students' needs and further improve student support guided by gender perspectives. Overall, while conceptual and methodological improvements could be made, this paper showed that students' success in remote learning must have a more holistic approach that all pillars support students' success. Support across pillars would be more beneficial. The conduct of surveys like these must also be done periodically to document changes in students' needs. Investigating student life during the pandemic can serve as a catalyst for UPLB to enhance its support systems, infrastructure, and instructional approaches, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being and academic success of its student population.

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