

## New normal experiences of VSU-Isabel students living in the mountainous areas

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### ABSTRACT

Amid the widespread Covid-19 pandemic in the Philippines, the educational landscape has undergone a significant transformation. In response, national government officials and educational institutions nationwide implement lockdown measures, necessitating a shift in education provision. This leads to the adoption of online distance learning as the primary mode of instruction. However, this transition poses challenges, especially for students in remote mountainous regions dealing with issues like limited Internet connectivity and resource constraints, making module completion and online class participation daunting. This study delves into the experiences of students in these areas, exploring the challenges they face and the coping mechanisms employed. Using a qualitative and phenomenological research approach, the cohort includes 11 participants identified through snowball sampling. The collected data undergo rigorous analysis using Collaizi's method, revealing multifaceted challenges such as poor Internet connectivity, financial constraints, adverse weather conditions, a lack of quality electronic devices, and comprehension difficulties with lessons and the VSU E-learning portal. Additionally, students describe the lengths they go to in search of Internet signals, involving activities like climbing trees or venturing to elevated terrains. Despite these challenges, students exhibit resilience, adopting strategic approaches to overcome difficulties and drawing valuable life lessons, ultimately internalizing that adversities are stepping stones to success and surrendering is not an option.

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### 1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving realm of education, recognized as a pivotal investment for both individuals and society (Republic of Kenya, 2010), the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Philippines has brought about seismic shifts in the educational landscape. Responding to this unprecedented global challenge, national government authorities and educational institutions swiftly implemented extensive lockdown measures, propelling a paradigmatic transformation in educational delivery methods. This pivotal evolution heralded the era of online distance learning, a transformative approach in the new normal.

Online learning, an evolutionary progression from distance education (Benson, 2002; Conrad, 2002), has been lauded for offering enriched educational opportunities, particularly benefiting nontraditional and marginalized students (Moore et al., 2010). Defined by

Gunawardena and McIsaac (2013) as a structured learning approach characterized by geographic and temporal separation between students and instructors, online education provides unprecedented flexibility in terms of location and timing (Erihovna, 2016).

However, amid the challenges imposed by the pandemic, such as inadequate Internet connectivity and limited resources, students residing in mountainous regions encountered formidable obstacles in accessing instructional modules and participating in online classes. Additionally, financial constraints exacerbated the situation, preventing some students from enrolling due to the additional costs associated with Internet access and load credits.

In response to these multifaceted challenges, the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) introduced blended learning, presenting students with diverse learning avenues encompassing online platforms, television broadcasts, and printed materials. Despite the innovative solutions offered by blended learning, students in mountainous areas continue to face unique hurdles, warranting an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences and challenges.

In this study, our primary objectives were to comprehensively establish the experiences of students residing in mountainous areas, to identify and analyze the specific challenges encountered by these students, to explore the coping mechanisms employed by them to navigate these challenges, and to elucidate the significance and lessons derived from their experiences. Through these aims, we aimed to offer a thorough understanding of the unique circumstances faced by students in mountainous regions, providing valuable insights that could inform support strategies, educational policies, and interventions tailored to their needs.

## **2. Objectives of the study**

The study focused on the experiences of VSU-Isabel students living in the mountainous areas of Isabel who are enrolled this first semester, school year 2021 - 2022. Specifically, the study aimed:

- a. To establish the experiences of students living in the mountainous areas;
- b. To find out the challenges encountered by the students living in the mountainous areas;
- c. To discuss the coping mechanisms used by students to counter those challenges and
- d. To figure out the meaning of their experiences and the lessons they had learned from those experiences and challenges.

## **3. Review of literature**

In the realm of education, the traditional pedagogical model of face-to-face lectures prevailed as the norm for schools and educators until the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). This pivotal event necessitated a profound transformation in the educational landscape, compelling educational institutions to embrace blended learning modalities as a responsive strategy (Dhawan, 2020). Blended learning, characterized by the amalgamation of conventional teaching methodologies with technological tools, witnessed widespread adoption across the globe. Educational institutions in rural contexts mainly, were tasked with crafting strategies aligned with their unique circumstances (Justice & Zhu, 2015).

However, as this novel approach to teaching and learning unfolded, numerous challenges associated with the implementation of online education surfaced, significantly impacting

educators and students navigating this unfamiliar terrain. These challenges included technical glitches, installation issues, and login difficulties arising from modern technology (Dhawan, 2020). In response, educators sought to adapt by exploring alternative teaching methods, such as creating recorded video lectures and uploading quizzes, tasks, and assignments (Khan, 2021). Nevertheless, the digital divide became glaringly apparent as students faced hurdles in this transition, with only specific households possessing the requisite computers, Internet access, and other essential devices, compounded by the financial constraints experienced by parents (Iqbal et al., 2021).

On the flip side, online learning brought about unique benefits, offering students flexibility and convenience in tailoring their study routines to align with their schedules. This eliminated the need for commuting and the associated costs (Yang & Cornelius, 2004). Despite these advantages, students faced various challenges and encountered negative experiences in the online learning environment. These challenges included delayed feedback from instructors, limited technical support, issues related to self-regulation and motivation, feelings of isolation, monotonous instructional methods, and poorly designed online course content (Yang & Cornelius, 2004). Interestingly, the absence of immediate instructor responses paradoxically heightened students' motivation, especially when dealing with complex subjects or unclear instructions.

Ensuring equal access to technology emerged as a significant hurdle for students and educators in developing nations, particularly in remote, rural, or mountainous regions (Nadiahan & Cabauatan, 2021). The identified challenges included unreliable Internet connectivity, insufficient instructional support, limited technological resources, financial constraints, difficulties in navigating various online teaching-learning platforms, burnout, and a tendency to prioritize meeting academic requirements over-delivering quality instruction, further intensified by time constraints due to excessive workload (Nadiahan & Cabauatan, 2021). These complex challenges highlight the urgent need to bridge the digital divide and enhance support structures for ensuring equitable and effective online education delivery (Nadiahan & Cabauatan, 2021).

Alviora (2021) emphasized the establishment of a robust health system through the Universal Health Care (UHC) law, supported by key stakeholders, healthcare leaders, and the government, preceding the pandemic. While these preparations facilitated the implementation of Covid-19 response measures, the vulnerability of rural communities, especially schoolchildren, was exposed during the pandemic. Insufficient infrastructure, a shortage of qualified educators, and limited educational alternatives became apparent challenges (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019). Consequently, students were frequently forced to endure daily commutes or opt for boarding schools to access education.

Rajan (2019) highlighted the intricate challenges within rural education, encompassing teacher commitment, textbook quality, in-class instruction, and access to quality education. These challenges were magnified by the profound impact of the pandemic on the lives of rural students, introducing psychological, emotional, economic, and social difficulties. The repercussions of these challenges were tangible, manifesting in the mental and physical exhaustion experienced by students (Dvalishvili, 2020).

Within the challenges posed by online learning, noteworthy concerns for students, as highlighted by Baticulon et al. (2021), revolved around adapting to diverse learning styles, navigating household responsibilities, and establishing effective teacher-student communication. The transition to home-based learning brought about struggles as students juggled academic pursuits with domestic obligations. Meanwhile, educators encountered difficulties in providing

timely responses to student inquiries, as their teaching responsibilities became more demanding, occasionally resulting in student confusion regarding instructions and lesson content.

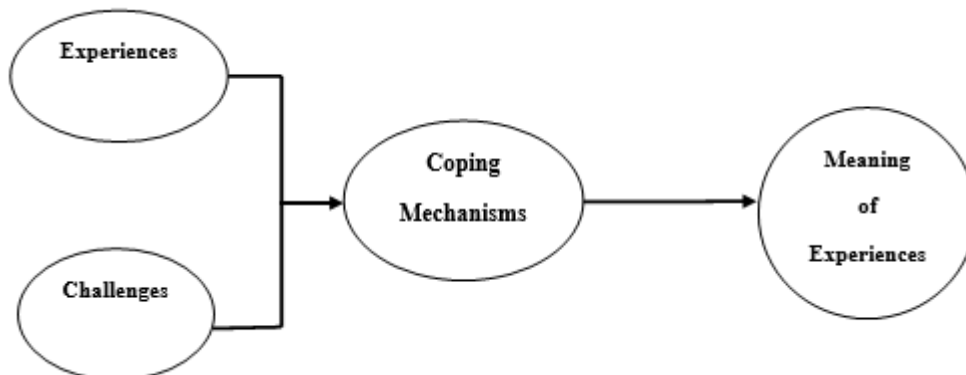
The investigation carried out by Rotas and Chapay (2020) comprehensively addressed various challenges faced by students, including unstable Internet connectivity, insufficient learning resources, power interruptions, ambiguous instructional materials, overwhelming academic demands, limited teacher guidance, restricted peer interaction, household responsibilities, suboptimal learning environments, financial constraints, and physical and mental health issues. Some students encountered a sense of despondency, particularly when confronted with an excessive academic workload compounded by limited Internet access. Recognizing the students' experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms holds immense significance for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in the education sector. This understanding is particularly crucial for students residing in mountainous areas, where ensuring quality education during the pandemic remains a top priority (Rotas & Chapay, 2020).

The transition to online learning in the Philippines, as emphasized by Magsambol (2020), presented formidable challenges, requiring students to undertake demanding journeys, including scaling mountains to submit class requirements. This transformative shift could have been more inclusive, especially considering the diverse student populations. Furthermore, some students resorted to ascending iron roofs to access a stable Internet signal, illustrating the significant hurdles associated with the adoption of online classes and self-learning modules, particularly in a nation where Internet access and mobile devices are not universally accessible (Lopez, 2021). These challenges are pervasive and reflect a shared experience among students, particularly those residing in remote mountainous regions with limited connectivity.

#### 4. Conceptual framework

**Figure 1**

*The Conceptual Framework*



Source. The Authors

The conceptual framework provides a visual representation of the intricate processes and interconnections involved in collecting comprehensive information about the lived experiences of VSU Isabel students residing in the mountainous areas of Isabel during the new normal. The researchers sought deep insights into the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by students, aiming to understand how these experiences influenced their learning approaches. Subsequently, the study identified and analyzed the diverse coping mechanisms employed by students, which played a crucial role in facilitating their progress in managing academic

responsibilities amidst challenges. Furthermore, the framework encompasses an exploration of students' expressions regarding the meaning of their experiences, contributing to a nuanced understanding of their academic journey in the new normal. By highlighting the interplay between students' experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and the meaningful insights derived from their struggles, this conceptual framework serves as a comprehensive guide to navigating the complexities of the research study.

## **5. Methodology**

The research design of this study adopts a qualitative approach, in line with Trochim (2005), Creswell (2007), focusing on probing the inherent nature of students' experiences at VSU-Isabel in the mountainous regions of Isabel, Leyte, during the pandemic. This qualitative and phenomenological approach enables a comprehensive exploration of various dimensions of the students' experiences, including challenges faced, coping mechanisms utilized, and the profound meaning underlying their encounters. By employing this research design, the study aims to gain in-depth insights into the intricacies of participants' lived experiences within the context of the pandemic.

The research targets students enrolled at VSU-Isabel during the initial semester of the academic year 2021 - 2022, specifically those residing in the mountainous regions of Isabel, Leyte. The participant selection deliberately avoids imposing specific demographic criteria, aiming for a diverse and representative sample of students navigating challenges in mountainous areas during the designated academic period. Utilizing the snowball sampling method, participants are selected based on referrals, allowing for flexibility in sample size and ensuring data saturation. The respondents, residents of mountainous barangays in Isabel, are chosen for their known challenges related to poor and unstable Internet connectivity, providing targeted insights into unique challenges and coping mechanisms.

A meticulously crafted interview guide, reviewed by experts for alignment with study objectives, is developed to elucidate the lived experiences of VSU-Isabel students in mountainous regions during the pandemic. The guide encompasses sections capturing general demographic information, pandemic experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and the profound meaning attached to lived experiences. Participants are given the option of virtual or face-to-face interviews, with social distancing protocols observed during in-person sessions. Post-interview, responses are transcribed, rigorously evaluated, and analyzed using Collaizi's method, ensuring thorough analysis and interpretation of data.

Research ethics, as emphasized by Pubrica (2018), are paramount throughout the study, with informed consent obtained before interviews to uphold principles of transparency, confidentiality, and respect for respondent autonomy. This commitment to ethics underscores the integrity and responsibility of the study in its treatment of participants and the data collected.

## **6. Results and discussion**

### ***6.1. Participant demographics***

The research findings illuminate diverse facets of the lived experiences of VSU-Isabel students within the new normal. The age distribution, concentrated between 18 to 22 years, aligns with the typical university student age (Johnson & Kuh, 2007), indicating shared challenges within this demographic. Geographical diversity across barangays like Consolacion, Honan, Can-andan, Monte Alegre, and Cangag enhances the study's comprehensive

representation (Smith, 2020). Academic diversity, spanning programs like BSEd-English, BSME, BEED, BSAB, and BPED, enriches exploration across diverse courses and academic stages (Johnson, 2019).

Participants unanimously highlight the crucial role of Internet usage, aligning with existing studies on technology integration in education (Brown & Jones, 2018; Smith et al., 2020). Weekly expenditures of 50 to 300 pesos underscore participants' financial commitment, addressing challenges identified in studies on economic hurdles during the shift to online learning (Garcia & Smith, 2020; Wang & Chan, 2019). These disparities underscore variations in Internet service providers, data plans, or financial capacities, emphasizing students' resilience in overcoming the digital divide.

The dataset not only portrays demographic characteristics, academic pursuits, Internet usage behaviors, and financial commitments but also provides profound insights into challenges faced by VSU-Isabel students. These insights are pivotal for shaping educational policies, fostering support initiatives, and advancing efforts promoting equitable access to quality education, aligning with research on context-specific interventions (Johnson et al., 2021; Smith & Rodriguez, 2020).

## ***6.2. Experiences of VSU-Isabel students living in the mountainous areas of Isabel***

From the experiences of the students, three emergent themes were created. These themes were Education Effectivity Barriers, Problems in Establishing Knowledge, and Environmental Adversities.

### **Theme 1: Barriers to educational effectiveness**

This thematic analysis revealed the multifaceted challenges faced by students amidst the pandemic, which can be categorized into two interrelated sub-themes: Connection Issues and Financial Constraints. The findings underscored the profound effects of these challenges on students' academic experiences and well-being. Connection Issues encompassed difficulties in accessing reliable Internet connectivity, limited interaction with peers and educators, and feelings of isolation, significantly hindering students' engagement in remote learning. On the other hand, Financial Constraints highlighted the economic hardships faced by students and their families, including job loss, reduced household income, and challenges in meeting educational expenses. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms to address the adverse effects of the pandemic on students' educational pursuits and mental health. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of equitable access to resources and financial assistance to mitigate the impact of socioeconomic disparities on students' academic success and overall well-being.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Connection issues**

Students consistently grappled with the need for a more reliable Internet connection, essential for staying updated on class announcements and deadlines. The inherent instability of the signal, compounded by challenges with Piso Wi-Fi services, contributed to disruptions in their learning journey, impeding access to crucial information.

"Issues revolve around the instability of Internet signals, a significant concern for us residents in this area." [Transcript 2, page 02, lines 26 - 27].

"Seeking additional knowledge from modules becomes challenging for us due to the lack of a stable Internet connection." [Transcript 11, page 03, lines 01 - 02].

### **Sub-theme 2: Financial constraints**

This cluster theme illuminates the financial struggles experienced by students. Limited financial resources, stemming from their parents' minimum wage and unpredictable earnings, posed constraints on their ability to consistently purchase mobile loads. Furthermore, the requirement for hard copies by some instructors exacerbated the challenge, especially for students grappling with monetary issues.

"I can't afford to buy load all the time because my parents' income is just enough, barely meeting our needs." [Transcript 6, page 03, lines 02 - 04].

"Financial difficulties arise as we need to use money for various expenses." [Transcript 1, page 02, lines 31 - 32].

These findings echo the multifaceted challenges students encounter during remote learning, emphasizing the pressing need for targeted interventions to address connectivity and financial barriers. The identified themes underscore the intricate interplay between technological accessibility and socioeconomic factors, underscoring the importance of holistic support strategies for students navigating the complexities of the new normal in education.

### **Theme 2: Challenges in knowledge acquisition**

This thematic analysis unveils the significant barriers encountered by students in accessing educational resources and acquiring knowledge across various subjects. It delineates two interlinked sub-themes: Educational Instrument Issues and Curriculum Adaptation Challenges. The findings illuminate the profound impact of these impediments on students' learning experiences and academic performance. Educational Instrument Issues encompassed a range of challenges such as inadequate access to digital devices, unreliable Internet connectivity, and insufficient educational materials, exacerbating disparities in learning opportunities among students. Furthermore, Curriculum Adaptation Challenges highlighted the difficulties faced by educators in modifying teaching methodologies and adapting curricula to remote or hybrid learning environments, resulting in decreased student engagement and comprehension. These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address the digital divide and enhance educational infrastructure, ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of professional development initiatives for educators to effectively navigate the complexities of remote teaching and optimize student learning outcomes in the face of unprecedented challenges.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Challenges with educational instruments**

This cluster theme underscores the students' struggle to grasp lesson content due to limited information sources in the absence of face-to-face classes, posing challenges in comprehending various subjects.

"I find it really hard to come up with ideas. It's not like before in face-to-face classes, where we can readily ask questions when we struggle." [Transcript 3, page 02, lines 20 - 22].

"Accessing information is also difficult, making our academic situation quite challenging." [Transcript 3, page 03, lines 02 - 03].

#### **Sub-theme 2: Deficiency in technological devices**

This cluster theme highlights the difficulties students face due to the inadequacy of gadget quality, hampering their ability to engage effectively in online learning.

“It’s really tough, especially since I don’t have a proper phone. I do have a phone, but if it stays online for too long, it shuts down.” [Transcript 6, page 02, lines 32 - 33].

The research underscores challenges in knowledge acquisition during online learning, emphasizing the drawbacks of lacking face-to-face classes and inadequate technological devices. This necessitates prompt attention to optimize interactive learning and ensure students have access to quality technology, aligning with concerns raised in previous research on the effectiveness of remote education.

### **Theme 3: Environmental adversities**

This thematic analysis illuminates the environmental adversities that students face, impeding their ability to attend classes and submit assignments punctually. It delineates two primary sub-themes: Climate-related Challenges and Location-specific Issues. The findings underscore the profound impact of these environmental factors on students’ educational experiences and academic performance. Climate-related Challenges encompass a range of issues such as extreme weather conditions, natural disasters, and seasonal disruptions, which disrupt students’ access to transportation and Internet connectivity, exacerbating educational inequalities. Location-specific Issues highlight the geographical remoteness and infrastructural limitations faced by students residing in rural or isolated areas, further hindering their access to educational resources and support services. These findings emphasize the urgent need for proactive measures to mitigate the impact of environmental barriers on student learning outcomes. Implementing resilient transportation systems, improving digital infrastructure, and providing targeted support to students in remote areas are crucial steps to ensure equitable access to education and promote academic success for all students, irrespective of their geographical location or environmental circumstances.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Weather-induced hindrances**

This set of experiences reveals students face challenges attending classes due to weather conditions and unreliable Internet connections.

“Weather conditions cause the loss of Internet signals.” [Transcript 4, page 02, lines 24 - 25].

“When there is a thunderstorm, the student will go home and leave the classes because he is afraid of being struck by lightning.” [Transcript 7, page 03, lines 05 - 07].

#### **Sub-theme 2: Location-related challenges**

This group highlights how students grapple with difficulty in finding suitable locations due to the unavailability of a stable signal.

“The student climbs mountains to find a signal and attend classes.” [Transcript 11, page 02, lines 25 - 26].

“Student need to climb trees to be able to find Internet signal.” [Transcript 7, page 03, lines 02 - 04].

These findings resonate crucial role of educational instruments and technological devices in the success of remote learning initiatives. The identified themes underscore the intricate relationship between the accessibility of educational tools and the overall learning experience, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges comprehensively.

### ***6.3. Challenges encountered by VSU-Isabel students living in the mountainous areas of Isabel***

Three emergent themes were created from the challenges encountered by the students during the new normal. These were Barricades on Educational Efficacy, Knowledge Acquisition Dilemmas, and Ecological Conflicts.

#### **Theme 1: Hindrances to educational effectiveness**

The theme “Hindrances to Educational Effectiveness” unveils the multifaceted challenges confronting students in the new normal, encompassing two interrelated sub-themes: Financial Availability Concerns and Connection Insufficiency. These sub-themes resonate with established research highlighting the profound impact of financial constraints on educational pursuits. The Financial Availability Concerns align with findings by McFarland et al. (2017), emphasizing the pivotal role of financial support in students’ educational success. Additionally, Connection Insufficiency resonates with studies by Eom et al. (2016), underscoring the critical importance of reliable Internet connectivity for effective online learning experiences.

Understanding these barriers is imperative for crafting targeted interventions aimed at enhancing educational effectiveness in the new normal.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Financial availability concerns**

Students grapple with financial or monetary challenges, making it difficult to meet essential needs. The inability to afford transportation fares and the unstable earnings of parents, often minimum wage earners, further exacerbate students’ concerns. Financial constraints hinder compliance with academic requirements, including outputs and attendance in online classes, showcasing the intricate link between financial availability and educational participation.

“I don’t have money for the fare, so I can’t immediately comply with the requirements given by our teachers.” [Transcript 6, page 03, lines 22 - 21].

“The financial aspect is not always stable; our family’s income is not sufficient, and expenses are significant.” [Transcript 10, page 02, lines 29 - 30].

“I’m worried about whether I can continue using the Internet because, of course, it requires money to load and attend classes.” [Transcript 1, page 93, lines 06 - 08].

#### **Sub-theme 2: Connection insufficiency**

This cluster encapsulates the connectivity issues encountered by students, primarily focusing on slow Internet connections that impede attendance, timely submission of outputs, and access to announcements. Students face challenges in participating actively in online classes due to interrupted Internet signals, hampering their cooperative engagement with the class.

“Sometimes, the signal is slow, and I can’t attend class because it requires a strong Internet connection when entering Google Meet. I can’t cooperate well in class because my responses are often cut off.” [Transcript 1, page 03, lines 09 - 12].

“Being unable to go online and receive announcements from the instructor causes delays in submissions and updates about classes.” [Transcript 9, page 03, lines 07 - 09].

These findings underscore the intricate relationship between financial constraints, connectivity issues, and the overall effectiveness of online education. Addressing these challenges requires varied interventions informed by a comprehensive understanding of students’ lived experiences in the new normal.

## **Theme 2: Knowledge acquisition dilemmas**

The Educational Dilemmas theme delves into the myriad challenges students encounter in their educational journey, comprising three interconnected sub-themes: Technological Instruments Inadequacy, Mastery Inadequacy of Educational Tools, and Academic Instruction Difficulties. These sub-themes align with existing research highlighting the intricate challenges posed by technology in the realm of education. Technological Instruments Inadequacy resonates with Selwyn's (2011) findings, emphasizing the pivotal role of suitable technological infrastructure for effective learning. Mastery Inadequacy in Educational Tools is consistent with Hsieh et al. (2017) research, underscoring the significance of students' mastery of digital tools for academic success. Furthermore, Academic Instruction Difficulties align with Bloom's (1984) studies, emphasizing the crucial role of effective instructional methods in the learning process.

Understanding these educational dilemmas is paramount for educators and policymakers to address students' challenges effectively and optimize the learning environment.

### **Sub-theme 1: Technological instruments inadequacy**

Students grapple with connectivity issues related to their technological devices, particularly laptops, hindering their ability to participate actively in class and respond to instructors' queries. The importance of a seamless Internet connection for comfortable engagement in virtual classrooms is highlighted.

"My laptop won't connect to wifi, so that's a problem because when I answer, I need to search or do something during class to ensure my answers are accurate and I am comfortable." [Transcript 1, page 03, lines 14 - 17].

### **Sub-theme 2: Mastery inadequacy in educational tools**

The emergence of online distance learning introduces challenges in utilizing educational tools, such as the VSU-Elearning portal. Students express the need for assistance in navigating the portal's features, particularly during exams, emphasizing the learning curve associated with these tools.

"We also struggle to adjust when taking exams on the VSU-Elearning portal because it's challenging." [Transcript 7, page 03, lines 18 - 19].

### **Sub-theme 3: Academic instruction difficulties**

Students encounter difficulties in understanding lessons, struggling to comprehend instructions promptly. Instructors' considerations vary, with some accommodating connectivity issues and others lacking flexibility when students face challenges.

"Some instructors consider it when we submit outputs without a load, but others don't, and once we're late, we're considered late." [Transcript 7, page 03, lines 15 - 17].

"In terms of modules, I find it challenging. There are times when I have difficulty understanding because the instructions are not straightforward, and I need quick assistance." [Transcript 8, page 02, lines 14 - 16].

These findings underscore the pressing need for tailored interventions to address the technological, mastery, and instructional challenges students encounter in the new normal of education. Educators and policymakers can use this understanding to implement strategies that enhance the overall learning experience for students.

### **Theme 3: Ecological conflicts**

This thematic exploration delves into the multifaceted challenges that students encounter due to environmental factors, particularly focusing on the theme of Climate Issues. The findings illuminate the diverse range of environmental challenges students confront, including extreme weather conditions, natural disasters, and environmental degradation. These challenges significantly disrupt students' daily routines, academic pursuits, and overall well-being. Moreover, the analysis underscores the interconnectedness between environmental factors and educational outcomes, highlighting the detrimental impact of climate-related disruptions on students' access to learning resources, attendance, and academic performance. These findings underscore the pressing need for proactive measures to address environmental challenges in educational settings. Implementing sustainable infrastructure, disaster preparedness programs, and climate resilience initiatives can help mitigate the adverse effects of environmental factors on student learning experiences and promote a conducive learning environment for all learners. Additionally, fostering environmental awareness and promoting eco-friendly practices can empower students to become resilient and adaptable in the face of environmental adversities, equipping them with essential skills for navigating future challenges.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Climate issues**

The inclement weather emerges as a significant impediment to students, particularly affecting their ability to meet assignment deadlines. Persistent rainfall and strong winds hinder students from promptly traveling to Isabel and complying with the given tasks.

"I can't meet the deadline, especially these days. It's been raining a lot, and the wind is strong, so I can't easily come to Isabel and comply with what they've given us." [Transcript 6, page 03, lines 15 - 18].

These ecological conflicts underscore the influence of climate conditions on students' academic pursuits. The findings align with previous research on the impact of weather-related challenges on educational activities (Smith, 2020). Recognizing and addressing these ecological conflicts is crucial for educators and policymakers to implement adaptive measures and support mechanisms for students facing such environmental hindrances. The insights gained from this theme contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges encountered by students in the new normal of education.

#### ***6.4. Coping mechanisms of VSU-Isabel students living in the mountainous areas of Isabel***

The analysis unveiled two prominent themes encapsulating students' coping mechanisms during the new normal: Support System Reliance and Versatile Outlooks on Educational Adversities. Within the Support System Reliance theme, students exhibited a reliance on various support networks, including family, peers, and educators, to navigate the challenges posed by the transition to remote learning. This finding underscores the crucial role of social support in bolstering students' resilience and well-being amidst educational disruptions. Conversely, the theme of Versatile Outlooks on Educational Adversities highlights students' adaptive and flexible approaches to overcoming obstacles encountered in the new learning environment. By embracing a proactive mindset and leveraging innovative strategies, such as online resources and self-directed learning techniques, students demonstrated their ability to adapt to evolving educational landscapes. These findings underscore the importance of fostering both interpersonal support networks and individual resilience skills to enhance students' capacity to thrive in the

face of educational adversities. Additionally, they underscore the need for educational institutions to provide comprehensive support systems and cultivate a culture of adaptability to ensure students' success in the new normal.

### **Theme 1: Reliance on support systems**

The initial theme, Reliance on Support Systems, sheds light on how students navigated challenges by leaning on their support networks. Research literature reinforces the crucial role of social support during adversities. The Leap of Faith sub-theme aligns with Cohen and Wills (1985), emphasizing how social support acts protectively during stressful periods. Locale Dependence resonates with Kawachi and Berkman's (2001) studies, highlighting the impact of community and surroundings on individual well-being. Furthermore, Support Sources align with House's (1981) research, showcasing the diverse support outlets contributing to individual resilience.

Understanding the reliance on support systems becomes imperative for educators and policymakers aiming to bolster students' coping mechanisms in challenging circumstances. The nuanced insights derived from these findings provide specific details on the aspects of support that students find instrumental in overcoming obstacles.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Leap of faith**

This cluster of themes reveals that students overcome adversities through prayer, trusting in a higher power, and maintaining self-belief.

"Above all, through prayers and continuous efforts." [Transcript 1, page 03, lines 23 - 24].

"The most important thing to do is to trust. Trust in yourself, trust in God." [Transcript 10, page 03, lines 06 - 07].

#### **Sub-theme 2: Locale dependence**

Due to Internet connectivity issues, students seek locations or travel to town centers to attend classes, take exams, and fulfill online activities.

"We just run somewhere with a signal to be able to attend the class." [Transcript 5, page 03, lines 17 - 18].

"Every time there's an exam, we go to town to catch up." [Transcript 11, page 03, lines 20 - 21].

#### **Sub-theme 3: Support sources**

This cluster illustrates students' strategies, such as borrowing their father's phone for communication, relaying messages to teachers about submission delays, utilizing the Internet for additional information, and seeking guidance from seniors.

"I can text my dad because his phone has a keypad. So, there's a signal. I would text my friend, and she would explain to the teacher why I couldn't submit on time." [Transcript 6, page 03, lines 27 - 29].

"Searching the Internet or asking older students for clarification." [Transcript 8, page 02, lines 22 - 23].

The research underscores the important role of support systems in students' resilience. Recognizing these reliance mechanisms is crucial for educators and policymakers

to enhance students' coping strategies, offering nuanced insights into the support aspects aiding obstacle overcoming.

### **Theme 2: Versatile outlooks on educational adversities**

Versatile Outlooks on Educational Adversities, the second theme, delves into students' techniques for addressing activities, completing outputs, and coping with difficulties. This theme resonates with existing research on adaptive coping strategies in education. The sub-theme Strategic Mindset aligns with findings by Fredrickson (2001), emphasizing the importance of positive emotions in building resilience and problem-solving skills. Additionally, Optimism Techniques are consistent with Scheier and Carver's (1993) optimism theory, highlighting how a positive outlook contributes to effective coping.

Understanding these versatile outlooks is crucial for educators and policymakers in supporting students facing educational challenges. The findings contribute nuanced insights into specific techniques that students find effective in overcoming adversities.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Strategic approaches**

To adhere to deadlines, students employed strategic practices, downloading all activity files, answering them at night, and submitting collectively in the morning for a stable Internet connection.

"Student downloads all files and submits the outputs altogether on the deadline." [Transcript 9, page 03, lines 13 - 15].

"The student woke up early to submit the output and project due to a fast Internet connection." [Transcript 7, pages 03 - 04, lines 28 - 31].

#### **Sub-theme 2: Optimistic practices**

Facing numerous challenges and pressure, students adopted optimism as a coping strategy.

"The student chooses to relax when encountering difficulties and pressure." [Transcript 3, page 03, lines 11 - 12].

"The student chooses to stay positive and find ways when the connection is not stable." [Transcript 4, page 03, lines 14 - 16].

The identified themes underscore the important role of support systems and versatile outlooks in navigating challenges, shedding light on adaptive coping strategies. This insight is invaluable for educators and policymakers, guiding them in developing targeted interventions to bolster students' resilience. By recognizing the varied techniques that students find effective, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on fostering adaptability and positive outcomes in the evolving landscape of education.

### ***6.5. Meaning of experiences of VSU-Isabel students living in the mountainous areas of Isabel***

Upon analyzing students' interpretations of their experiences, two salient themes emerged: Encouragement Techniques and Educational Burnout. Within the Encouragement Techniques theme, students articulated various strategies they employed to maintain motivation and resilience amidst the challenges of remote learning. These included seeking support from peers and mentors, setting achievable goals, and practicing self-care activities. This finding underscores the importance of fostering a positive learning environment that promotes

motivation and well-being among students. Conversely, the theme of Educational Burnout sheds light on the pervasive feelings of exhaustion and overwhelm experienced by students due to the demands of online learning, academic pressures, and disruptions to their usual routines. This highlights the urgent need for educational institutions to prioritize mental health support services and implement strategies to mitigate burnout among students. Overall, these findings underscore the complex interplay between students' emotional experiences and their academic performance, emphasizing the importance of holistic support systems to address the diverse needs of students in the digital learning landscape.

### **Theme 1: Encouragement techniques**

Encouragement Techniques, the first theme, capture positive learning by students in online distance learning. Aligned with Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) positive psychology, fostering a Positive Mindset enhances well-being and academic performance. Dweck's (2006) growth mindset emphasizes perceiving challenges as opportunities for growth, resonating with the sub-theme of Aspirational Outlooks. Lenient Methods align with Vygotsky (1978), highlighting a supportive environment's importance for optimal learning. Goal-driven practices, consistent with Locke and Latham (2002), stress that setting specific and challenging goals enhances motivation and performance.

Understanding these techniques is vital for educators and policymakers to foster positive learning experiences. The findings contribute insights into specific techniques that benefit students in navigating challenges, aiding institutions in promoting a supportive learning environment.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Positive mindset**

This theme encapsulates the students' optimistic outlook amid challenges, viewing difficulties as stepping stones to achievement.

"The student learned that the difficulties faced were only a stepping stone to achievement." [Transcript 1, page 04, lines 04 - 06].

"The student learned to be optimistic about the problems encountered in schooling." [Transcript 10, page 03, lines 14 - 17].

#### **Sub-theme 2: Aspirational outlooks**

This sub-theme depicts students as fighters pursuing goals despite adversities, embodying determination and goal orientation.

"The student learned to be goal-oriented even when faced with obstacles in each endeavor." [Transcript 4, page 03, lines 24 - 28].

"The student learned to be a fighter in the face of oppression to fulfill goals and dreams." [Transcript 5, page 03, lines 23 - 24].

#### **Sub-theme 3: Flexible approaches**

In this sub-theme, students adopt patient, strategic, and progressive methods to navigate challenges, emphasizing the importance of adaptability.

"The student learned to be patient in dealing with challenges." [Transcript 11, pages 03 - 04, lines 31 - 35].

"The student learned to be strategic to be able to surpass challenges in schooling." [Transcript 6, page 04, lines 10 - 12].

#### **Sub-theme 4: Motivational practices**

The students' pursuit of education despite trials demonstrates a goal-driven mindset, highlighting the importance of motivation in overcoming life's hardships.

"The student learned to be determined and pursue education even if he experienced trials to get out of the hardships in life." [Transcript 7, page 04, lines 10 - 14].

"The student learned to be motivated in every hardship situation they come up against." [Transcript 8, page 02, lines 30 - 33].

The identified themes and sub-themes reveal profound effects on students' learning experiences in the context of online distance education. The Encouragement Techniques theme indicates a positive impact, fostering resilience and goal-oriented mindsets. Versatile outlooks unveil adaptive coping strategies, positively influencing students' problem-solving skills. These findings imply that promoting a supportive learning environment, emphasizing positive mindsets, and encouraging adaptive strategies can enhance overall student well-being and academic success. Educators and policymakers can leverage these insights to design interventions that optimize learning environments, offering tailored support for students navigating educational challenges.

#### **Theme 2: Educational burnout**

Educational burnout, a prevalent theme, explores students' emotional experiences in online distance learning, aligning with prior research on the psychological impact of remote education (Smith, 2017). Smith indicates that online learners may face heightened stress and emotional fatigue due to factors like prolonged screen time and the absence of face-to-face interactions. Additionally, Jones and Czerniewicz (2010) highlighted demotivation in digital learning environments. This study contributes varied insights, particularly in the sub-theme of Lack of Engagement, unraveling sentiments of detachment and reduced motivation. Understanding educational burnout is crucial for addressing its impact on student engagement and academic performance. The findings offer valuable contributions to existing knowledge, enabling educators and policymakers to design targeted interventions for students' well-being in online learning environments (Jones & Czerniewicz, 2010; Smith, 2017).

#### **Sub-theme 1: Lack of engagement**

Some students found online classes less enjoyable, contemplating quitting due to the challenges presented by this new educational format.

"The student reaches the point of wanting to quit with the current education setup." [Transcript 2, page 03, lines 12 - 13].

The research findings illuminate the multifaceted challenges students face in online distance learning, ranging from educational burnout to versatile coping mechanisms. The effects suggest a need for targeted interventions to address emotional well-being, engagement, and academic performance. Understanding the varied strategies employed by students provides valuable insights for educators and policymakers in designing more effective and supportive online learning environments. Implementing Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) positive psychology principles, fostering a growth mindset, and acknowledging the significance of a supportive community are crucial implications for enhancing the overall online learning experience and promoting student resilience.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study identifies significant challenges faced by students during the transition to online learning, emphasizing issues with Internet connectivity, financial constraints, and access to quality devices. These obstacles hindered effective participation in online classes and academic fulfillment. Despite these challenges, students displayed resilience, seeking conducive environments for stable Internet, and strategically planning activities. Their determination and perseverance were evident, viewing challenges as stepping stones to success. The study underscores the need for improved support, emphasizing the importance of addressing connectivity issues and financial limitations to enhance the overall online learning experience for students in mountainous areas.

## 8. Recommendations

The study recommends a multi-faceted approach to enhance the educational experiences of students in mountainous areas during the new normal. Firstly, there is a call for collaborative efforts between educational institutions, government agencies, and telecommunication companies to invest in telecommunication infrastructure, such as building towers and expanding network coverage. Financial support programs, including scholarships and subsidies for Internet expenses, are proposed to alleviate the financial burdens of underprivileged students. Faculty development programs focusing on online teaching skills, streamlined online learning resources, and a compassionate approach from instructors are suggested to enhance the overall online learning experience. Encouraging student resilience, parental engagement, and expanding research initiatives to include a broader geographical scope are also recommended for a comprehensive and inclusive educational approach.

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