Learning through Lenses: Graduate Students' Perspectives on Educational Experiences in a Regional Program

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Manuscript received September 24, 2025; revised October 21, 2025; accepted November 6, 2025; published March 17, 2026

***Abstract*—This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of graduate students in a regional Graduate Education and Professional Studies (GEPS) program in the Philippines to identify institutional barriers and areas for improvement. Guided by Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Knowles' Theory of Andragogy, data were gathered from ten purposively selected students through written narratives and a focus group discussion. Thematic analysis identified five key challenges: limited course offerings, difficulty balancing work and study, technological constraints, administrative lapses, and irregular faculty support. Despite these difficulties, students valued mentorship and peer collaboration, which sustained their motivation. The study presents the INSPIRE Framework, composed of Institutional Support, Sociocultural Engagement, Practical Adaptation, Integration, Retention, and Excellence. This framework provides a practical model for improving institutional responsiveness and promoting learner success in regional and resource-constrained higher education settings.**

***Keywords*—graduate education, student perspectives, qualitative inquiry, thematic analysis, regional universities, online learning, institutional support**

I. Introduction

Graduate education serves as a cornerstone of intellectual, professional, and societal advancement. In the Philippines, it fosters knowledge creation, research innovation, and the development of globally competent professionals. However, regional institutions continue to face persistent challenges, including limited resources, administrative inefficiencies, and underdeveloped digital infrastructures that constrain educational quality and accessibility [1]. To address these limitations, the Graduate Education and Professional Studies (GEPS) program of Romblon State University was established to provide equitable access to advanced education for working professionals in remote provinces. The program offers degrees in education, business, public administration, and agriculture, thereby reducing relocation barriers and contributing to local development. Yet, issues such as outdated learning materials, limited program offerings, and slow digital adaptation remain unresolved. Ergül and Taşar [2] emphasized that effective blended learning requires strong institutional responsiveness to evolving learner needs. In line with this, Fig. 1 presents the INSPIRE Framework, which highlights how institutional support, retention and excellence, sociocultural engagement, and practical adaptation collectively shape holistic learner development and institutional effectiveness. This framework provides an initial lens for understanding the interplay between institutional and learner domains in regional graduate programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed systemic weaknesses in regional higher education, including unstable internet access, limited faculty guidance, and difficulty balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. These observations are consistent with Dinu *et al.* [3], who reported that online learners experience reduced interaction and digital fatigue. Similarly, Mendoza and Mendoza [4] and Osea [5] identified the need for stronger institutional and emotional support for graduate students facing increased academic demands. In accordance with CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, Series of 2019, which promotes rigor and innovation, the GEPS program shifted to flexible modalities to ensure academic continuity. However, inefficiencies in course scheduling and weak digital infrastructure continue to hinder research productivity and learner satisfaction, a challenge also reflected in the findings of Jacobsen *et al.* [6], who emphasized that graduate students in online education require structured research-based learning experiences and active mentorship to sustain engagement and scholarly growth.

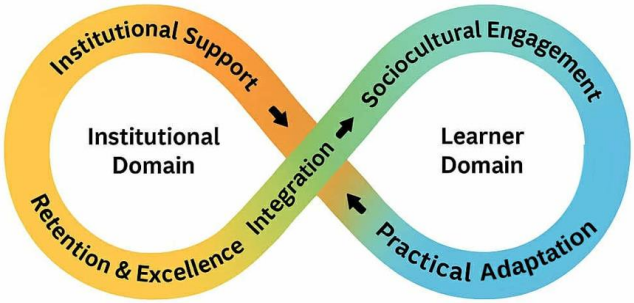

Fig. 1. The INSPIRE framework.

While existing studies have examined challenges in online and blended learning, few have focused on the context of regional graduate programs in the Philippines where geographical isolation, limited institutional capacity, and adult learner needs converge. This study fills the gap by exploring the lived experiences of graduate students in a regional state university to understand the institutional, technological, and pedagogical factors influencing their learning and persistence. It also aims to propose a context-based framework that strengthens institutional responsiveness and learner engagement.

Guided by Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Knowles' Theory of Andragogy, this study investigates (i) the challenges students encounter in coursework, scheduling, and technology; (ii) their perceptions of faculty and administrative support; (iii) their suggested improvements for institutional reform; and (iv) a proposed framework for enhancing graduate learning and services. These theories collectively provide a multidimensional lens for analyzing graduate education as

both a social and individual process. Tinto highlights the role of institutional structures such as course offerings and academic advising in student persistence. Vygotsky emphasizes learning through social interaction and mentorship, while Knowles focuses on the autonomy and self-directedness of adult learners. Integrating these perspectives allows a comprehensive understanding of how institutional, social, and personal factors interact to shape graduate student success. Fig. 2 presents the schematic framework of the study, which illustrates how Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Knowles' Theory of Andragogy intersect to explain the institutional, technological, and pedagogical dynamics influencing graduate students' learning experiences and persistence.

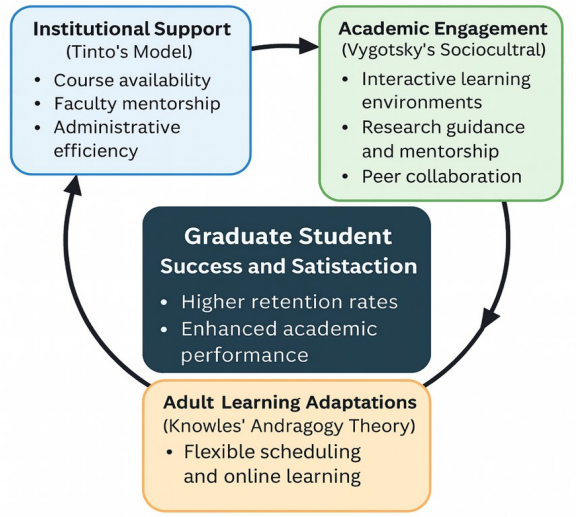

Fig. 2. Schematic diagram for enhancing graduate student success and satisfaction.

II. Literature Review

Graduate education literature consistently highlights the importance of institutional support, program quality, and adaptive learning environments in shaping student engagement and academic success. Keengwe and Onchwari [7] emphasized that inadequate technical infrastructure and limited faculty engagement significantly hinder effective online learning, particularly in developing regions where issues of access, equity, and digital readiness persist. Their findings reinforce the need for graduate programs to strengthen technological capacity and pedagogical support systems to sustain learner participation and improve educational outcomes.

A. Institutional and Programmatic Challenges

Institutional factors such as administrative efficiency and the proper use of resources have a strong influence on students' graduate learning experiences. Guerrero and Sancho [8] explained that well-organized academic programs that offer clear pathways, supportive cohorts, and active research mentorship help students stay motivated and committed to their studies. Their work reminds us that when institutions create an environment where students feel guided, supported, and valued, graduate learners are more likely to succeed and persist in their academic journey. However, Bohl *et al.* [9] revealed that nontraditional graduate students continue to face systemic obstacles, including time constraints, limited institutional flexibility, and unclear academic expectations. These concerns are echoed by Damoco *et al.* [10], who noted that compliance with publication requirements and rigid academic structures often adds pressure to already overextended adult learners.

B. Learner Experiences and Adaptive Needs

Studies focusing on learner experiences highlight the importance of balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Çepni *et al.* [11] reported that graduate students encounter difficulties related to institutional communication, research supervision, and peer collaboration, which directly affect their learning satisfaction. Collectively, these findings align with global concerns about how higher education systems respond to the evolving needs of adult learners who juggle multiple social and occupational roles.

C. Support Systems and Faculty Engagement

The effectiveness of faculty mentorship and administrative support plays a central role in student retention. Randall *et al.* [12] explained that student narratives provide valuable insights into how mentoring relationships and institutional support influence confidence, engagement, and overall academic experiences. Their findings show that when learners feel guided, acknowledged, and supported by faculty and administrative staff, they are more likely to stay motivated and persist in their studies. This highlights the importance of listening carefully to student voices when evaluating the quality and responsiveness of support systems in graduate education.

D. Research Gap and Study Contribution

While these studies provide valuable insights into graduate education, most were conducted in urban or technologically advanced contexts, leaving regional programs in the Philippines underexplored. There remains limited understanding of how geographically isolated universities manage graduate education amid resource and infrastructure constraints. This study fills the gap by examining the lived experiences of graduate students in a regional state university, focusing on how institutional, technological, and pedagogical factors influence their learning trajectories and academic persistence. It further contributes by proposing the INSPIRE Framework, a context-specific model designed to strengthen institutional responsiveness, enhance faculty and administrative support, and improve overall learner achievement in regional graduate programs.

III. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of graduate students enrolled in a regional Graduate Education and Professional Studies (GEPS) program. Anchored in the interpretive tradition, this approach allowed an in-depth understanding of how adult learners construct meaning within academic, administrative, and technological contexts. Phenomenology was selected because it captures the essence of participants' shared experiences, particularly in understanding the structural and pedagogical challenges encountered in regional graduate programs. As noted by Randall *et al.* [12], synthesizing narrative-based evidence enables a deeper

appreciation of complex educational realities. In the context of digitally mediated learning, Radianti *et al.* [13] highlighted that digital design and institutional support critically influence learners' experiences and engagement.

A. Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that participants possessed direct and meaningful experience with the phenomenon under study. Ten graduate students from Education, Business Administration, and Public Administration participated. All had completed at least one semester in the GEPS program and voluntarily provided informed consent. Although the number of participants appears limited, such a sample size is considered methodologically appropriate in phenomenological research where the goal is depth rather than breadth of understanding. Melián *et al.* [14] confirmed that a range of 6 to 12 participants is adequate for achieving thematic richness and interpretive validity. This small cohort enabled extended dialogue, reflective inquiry, and detailed contextualization of experiences. Moreover, it reflected the diversity of learner profiles within the GEPS program, consistent with the recommendation of Núñez *et al.* [15] to include heterogeneous adult learners to portray the breadth of regional educational realities.

B. Data Collection

Data were gathered through two complementary methods: (1) written narrative reflections, which elicited individualized accounts of learning experiences, and (2) a semi-structured Focus Group Discussion (FGD) via Zoom, which allowed collective validation and refinement of emerging insights. Five participants joined the FGD to ensure manageable interaction and depth of exchange. This two-phase strategy provided triangulation of data sources and facilitated both personal reflection and shared meaning-making. The procedure aligns with Centillas *et al.* [16], who underscored the importance of methodological variety to capture contextual depth and authenticity in higher education research. Participants represented various academic stages, from coursework to thesis completion, ensuring that both early- and advanced-stage experiences were reflected. This diversity strengthened the interpretive range of findings.

C. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework [17], integrating both deductive (theory-informed) and inductive (data-driven) approaches. Initial codes were derived from the research questions and theoretical lenses of Tinto, Vygotsky, and Knowles, while emergent codes surfaced from participants' direct statements. Codes were collated into categories, then refined into themes that represented shared meanings across the dataset.

A codebook containing code definitions, sample excerpts, and analytic notes was developed to ensure consistency throughout the process. To strengthen credibility, two independent researchers participated in the coding and resolved differences through careful discussion.

Data saturation was reached after analyzing the ninth participant's responses, since no new patterns or insights appeared in the subsequent transcripts. This closure aligns with Braun and Clarke's explanation in [17] that saturation reflects the point at which thematic patterns become fully developed and sufficiently supported by the data to represent the phenomenon under study.

To ensure trustworthiness, member-checking was performed at two levels. During the FGD, participants verified preliminary interpretations in real time, clarifying ambiguities. Subsequently, a summary of findings was emailed to interested participants, who confirmed the accuracy of thematic representations. This validation process, supported by Birt *et al.* [18] and Castulo *et al.* [19], reinforced credibility and co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants.

The interpretation of results was guided by De Leon *et al.* [20], who emphasized that the quality of institutional support services and responsiveness to graduate student needs play a critical role in sustaining engagement and persistence in higher education. Their findings informed the institutional and pedagogical recommendations that emerged from this study. As illustrated in Fig. 3 (Thematic Flowchart), the themes were derived through iterative coding, categorization, and synthesis following Braun and Clarke's analytical phases.

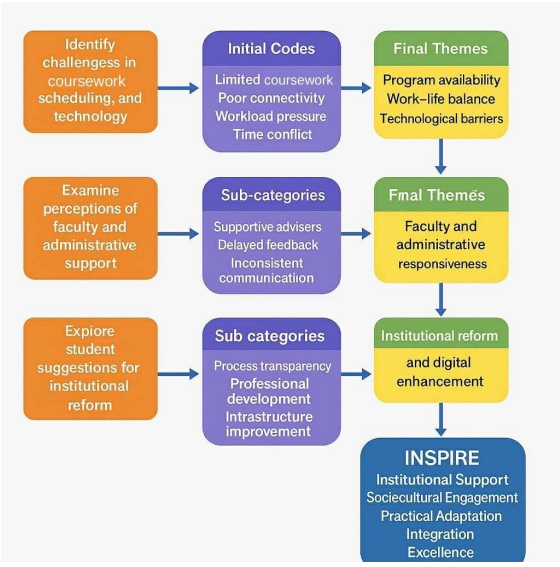

Fig. 3. Thematic flowchart.

D. Ethical Considerations

All research procedures adhered to established ethical guidelines in Philippine higher education. Participants received information sheets and signed informed consent prior to data collection. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure storage of all transcripts. In the absence of a formal institutional ethics review board, the study protocol was evaluated based on national ethical standards for qualitative research. Voluntary participation, respect, and transparency were observed throughout. These practices align with ethical principles discussed by Castulo *et al.* [19] and De Leon *et al.* [20], who stressed participant protection, ethical responsibility, and contextual sensitivity in educational research.

IV. Result and Discussion

This section integrates results and discussion based on narrative reflections and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

The findings are presented according to the research objectives and are supported by relevant theories and empirical studies.

A. Participant Profile

Ten graduate students participated in the study, representing programs such as the Master in Business Administration (MBA), Master of Arts in Education major in English (MAED-English), Master in Educational Leadership and Management (MELM), Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Management (DPELM), and Master in Public Administration (MPA). Most participants were working professionals between 30 and 40 years old, representing adult learners engaged in flexible or hybrid learning. As presented in Table 1. Profile of GEPS Graduate Student Participants, the participants varied in age, occupation, and program enrollment, highlighting the diverse profile of graduate students in the GEPS program.

Table 1. Profile of GEPS graduate student participants

Characteristic	Description
Age Range	30–40 years old
Occupation	Working professionals (teachers, administrators, and public servants)
Program Enrolled	MBA, MAED-English, MELM, DPELM, MPA
Learning Modality	Hybrid (face-to-face and online)
Enrollment Status	Active, at least one semester completed

The hybrid modality was a key enabler for accessibility but also revealed persistent issues with connectivity and scheduling. These patterns reflect challenges commonly experienced by adult graduate learners who balance multiple responsibilities. Dinu *et al.* [3] and Lucero *et al.* [21] noted that inconsistent digital access reduces engagement and satisfaction in blended and online learning environments. The findings further confirm the importance of flexible learning support and mentorship, as discussed by Li and Xue [22], who emphasized the role of supervision and guidance in sustaining academic success among graduate students.

B. Institutional and Academic Challenges

Five dominant challenges emerged from the data: limited program availability, difficulty balancing work and study, technological limitations, administrative inefficiencies, and academic demands. Participants mentioned that irregular subject offerings delayed progress and reduced motivation. This reflects Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure [23], which explains that disjointed academic structures affect persistence. Collier and Blanchard [24] reported similar challenges in graduate education, emphasizing that limited flexibility and weak support structures reduce student retention.

Participants also struggled to balance professional, academic, and personal commitments. Knowles' Theory of Andragogy [25] explains that adult learners thrive in flexible environments that recognize competing life roles. Dalka and Zwolak [26] emphasized that structured scheduling and coordinated support systems strengthen persistence. Furthermore, Fearnley *et al.* [27] observed that technological barriers and limited digital access hinder engagement and performance in remote and blended learning contexts.

Administrative delays, unresponsive communication, and unclear guidelines were also noted. These inefficiencies create frustration and affect trust in institutional systems, consistent with findings by Martin *et al.* [28] and Than and Khaing [29], who highlighted that learner motivation, engagement, and effective instructional delivery are closely linked to institutional responsiveness and timely academic support.

As summarized in Table 2, *Institutional and Academic Challenges*, the key issues identified include irregular course offerings, work–life imbalance, technological limitations, and administrative inefficiencies. These challenges highlight the need for stronger digital infrastructure, clearer communication systems, and better scheduling coordination to support graduate learners.

Table 2. Institutional and academic challenges

Category	Illustrative Issues	Supporting Studies
Limited Program Availability	Irregular course offerings	[29]
Work–Life Balance	Time management and exhaustion	[30]
Technological Barriers	Connectivity and access limitations	[31]
Administrative Inefficiencies	Slow communication and unclear procedures	[32, 33]
Academic Demands	Difficulty maintaining focus and quality	[25, 26]

These findings collectively point to the need for improved digital infrastructure, administrative efficiency, and scheduling coordination.

C. Faculty and Administrative Support

Faculty support was consistently identified as a strength of the GEPS program. Participants described instructors as competent, empathetic, and supportive mentors who provided guidance beyond academic instruction. These experiences illustrate Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, where social interaction and guided learning foster growth. Consistent with this, Bohl *et al.* [9] and Damoco *et al.* [10] found that nontraditional and graduate learners benefit from mentoring relationships that balance academic rigor with personal support.

In contrast, administrative support was perceived as inconsistent. While some participants cited efficient staff assistance, others reported confusion about procedures. This finding supports Tinto's perspective that weak institutional integration undermines commitment. In the Philippine higher education context, De Leon *et al.* [20] noted that responsive administrative systems directly influence learner satisfaction in regional universities.

Moreover, active faculty engagement was found to enhance learning satisfaction and persistence in hybrid environments. Dinu *et al.* [3] confirmed that instructor presence and responsiveness play a critical role in sustaining student motivation and engagement.

Students also shared that while research seminars were informative, individualized research guidance was lacking. From an adult learning perspective, Knowles *et al.* [25] emphasized that adult learners benefit from self-directed yet scaffolded mentorship, particularly in advanced academic tasks such as research and thesis completion.

D. Student Recommendations and Institutional Reform

Participants proposed four major recommendations: clearer communication, structured mentorship, improved digital tools, and hybrid modality enhancement. Communication improvements included transparent advisories and regular updates. This corresponds with De Leon *et al.* [20] and Tinto's assertion that institutional communication strengthens academic integration. Students also recommended the institutionalization of mentorship programs, consistent with Vygotsky's theory on social learning. Collier and Blanchard [25] found that structured mentorship builds confidence, while Bohl *et al.* [9] demonstrated improved completion rates among guided adult learners.

Participants further requested modern learning platforms, accessible materials, and flexible scheduling. Their insights align with Dinu *et al.* [3], Lucero *et al.* [21], and Than and Khaing [29], who concluded that digital tools and blended learning arrangements enhance learner autonomy and engagement. As shown in Table 3, *Summary of Student Recommendations*, the suggestions centered on communication improvements, mentorship support, enhanced digital tools, and strengthened hybrid learning arrangements.

Table 3. Summary of student recommendations

Recommendation Area	Proposed Action	Supporting Studies
Communication	Regular announcements and prompt feedback	[20]
Mentorship	Formal mentorship pairing	[9, 25]
Digital Tools	Learning management system and online consultation	[3, 21]
Hybrid Learning	Balanced online and in-person activities	[29]

E. Motivation, Resilience, and Learning Engagement

Despite structural challenges, students demonstrated persistence and motivation, driven by mentorship, research exposure, and peer support. Faculty encouragement played a major role in sustaining morale. This finding reflects Vygotsky's [33] emphasis on sociocultural interaction in developing confidence and learning capacity. Dinu *et al.* [3] reported similar results, showing that continuous instructor engagement improves resilience and satisfaction among adult learners in hybrid and online settings.

Students also valued opportunities for academic conferences and collaborative activities, confirming Knowles' principle that adult learners are motivated by relevance and application. Li and Xue [22] found that authentic academic engagement fosters learner autonomy and self-efficacy through meaningful supervision and mentorship. Furthermore, positive relationships with peers and faculty reinforced commitment, consistent with Tinto's assertion that belonging and institutional support predict persistence. Relatedly, Collier and Blanchard [24] emphasized that inclusive mentoring cultures and equitable support systems strengthen motivation and retention among graduate students.

F. Institutional Needs and the Emergence of the INSPIRE Framework

Participants collectively emphasized institutional reform in three domains: infrastructure, administrative systems, and curriculum design. Calls for better facilities, reliable communication, and flexible scheduling align with Roman *et al.* [34], De Leon *et al.* [20], and Tinto [23], who found that institutional adaptability, responsive administration, and coherent academic structures enhance student satisfaction and retention.

These findings form the empirical foundation of the INSPIRE Framework, which captures six interrelated domains: Institutional Support, Sociocultural Engagement, Practical Adaptation, Integration, Retention, and Excellence. The framework represents the synthesis of participant experiences rather than a pre-established theory.

The framework is further supported by recent studies that validate its institutional and learner-centered components. Collier and Blanchard [24] connected resilience with inclusive mentoring practices. Dalka and Zwolak [26] showed that continuous institutional feedback promotes stronger integration, while Albornoz Toyohama *et al.* [30] explained that institutional trust plays an important role in student success. Barnes *et al.* [31] highlighted the value of co-designed systems that strengthen academic support, and Kassab *et al.* [32] found that inclusive academic communities improve engagement and students' sense of belonging. As illustrated in Fig. 4, *Empirical Derivation of the INSPIRE Framework*, these findings collectively align with the institutional support, sociocultural engagement, practical adaptation, integration, and retention components presented in the model.

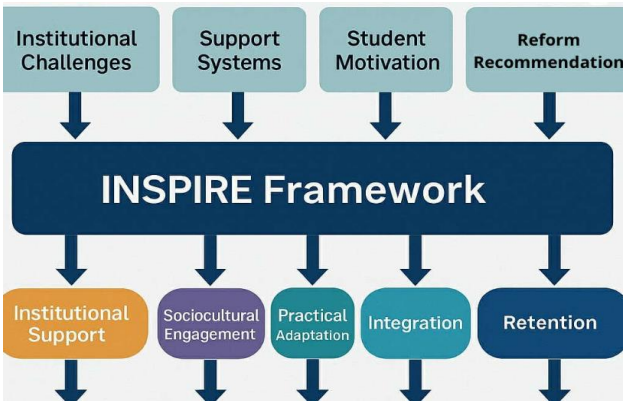

Fig. 4. Empirical derivation of the INSPIRE framework.

G. Summary of Integrated Themes

Table 4 presents the integrated themes and theoretical linkages that emerged from the qualitative analysis. The table summarizes how institutional, faculty, and learner experiences are grouped into thematic clusters aligned with supporting theories and representative studies. These clusters, including Institutional and Academic Challenges, Faculty and Administrative Support, Motivation and Institutional Reform, and Resilience and Engagement, highlight the multiple factors influencing graduate student learning. Collectively, the synthesis in Table 4 reflects how the participants' insights correspond with the guiding frameworks of Tinto, Vygotsky, and Knowles, forming the foundation of the proposed INSPIRE Framework.

Table 4. Integrated themes and theoretical linkages

Thematic Cluster	Core Subthemes	Supporting Theories	Representative Studies
Institutional and Academic Challenges	Scheduling gaps, workload issues, administrative inefficiencies	Tinto, Knowles, Vygotsky	[4, 9, 10, 11, 20, 23, 25]
Faculty and Administrative Support	Mentorship, responsiveness, guidance	Vygotsky, Tinto	[12, 20–22]
Student Recommendations and Institutional Reform	Communication, mentorship, digital tools	Knowles, Tinto, Vygotsky	[20, 21, 26, 29, 31]
Motivation, Resilience, and Engagement	Collaboration, autonomy, relevance	Vygotsky, Knowles	[22, 27, 28]
Institutional Reform and INSPIRE Derivation	Infrastructure, flexibility, inclusion	Tinto, Systems Theory, Andragogy	[20, 24, 26, 30–32]

H. Implications

The integrated analysis highlights that the experiences of regional graduate students are influenced by institutional efficiency, sociocultural engagement, and adult learning principles. Institutional transformation should thus address both systemic and human dimensions of education. The INSPIRE Framework provides an evidence-based guide for regional universities to enhance responsiveness, academic continuity, and learner achievement.

V. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of graduate students enrolled in a regional Graduate Education and Professional Studies (GEPS) program in the Philippines. The findings revealed that limited course availability, administrative inefficiencies, work-life imbalance, technological barriers, and inconsistent mentorship continue to challenge student engagement and persistence. Despite these issues, students expressed strong motivation and appreciated faculty support and peer collaboration, underscoring the importance of responsive institutional systems and supportive learning communities.

Grounded in Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Knowles' Theory of Andragogy, the study contributes theoretically by demonstrating how academic integration, social interaction, and adult learning autonomy intersect to influence graduate student persistence in regional universities. Methodologically, it offers a qualitative model that integrates written narratives and focus group discussions to capture the collective voice of learners. Practically, the study introduces the INSPIRE Framework, which can be operationalized by enhancing institutional support, strengthening mentorship programs, improving digital infrastructure, and fostering a culture of engagement and retention.

For policy and practice, institutional leaders should prioritize streamlining administrative processes, sustaining flexible learning modalities, and developing faculty capacity for adult-centered mentorship. Policymakers and higher education agencies may also use the INSPIRE Framework to guide reforms that promote inclusivity and equitable access to graduate education across geographically isolated regions.

While this study provides valuable insights, its scope was limited to a small group of graduate students within one regional institution. Future research may expand the participant base across multiple universities, employ mixed-method approaches, and explore how institutional reforms guided by INSPIRE impact learner outcomes over time. Through these efforts, higher education institutions can continuously align their systems with the evolving needs of adult learners and contribute to a more resilient and inclusive graduate education landscape.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was supported by Romblon State University through Fund 102 and 164.

Acknowledgment

The author extends sincere appreciation to the Romblon State University Graduate Education and Professional Studies faculty and staff for their invaluable support throughout this research. Special thanks are due to the graduate student participants for their time, openness, and insights, which greatly enriched the study. Gratitude is also expressed to colleagues who provided constructive feedback during the development of the manuscript. This work did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors, but it was made possible through the institutional support of Romblon State University.

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