



## Earn and Learn: Exploring the Lived Experience of Graduate Working Students during their Academic Journey

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### Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of graduate working students in Metro Manila navigating the dual demands of professional employment and graduate education. The study was anchored on two theories, namely the Time Management Theory of Covery (2020) and Motivation Theory by Deci and Ryan (2000). The researcher conducted a series of interviews using a semi-structured interview guide with five participants (plus one for pilot testing) enrolled in Masteral or Doctorate Psychology programs in Metro Manila, each with a minimum of one year of study and six months of concurrent employment. Using a descriptive phenomenological research design, the study explored the essence of the participants' experiences in balancing study and work. The results revealed four major recurring themes: 1. The overwhelming difficulty of the dual role, 2. The goal of self-growth in graduate study, 3. The interplay between work and academe, and 4. The development of resilience to manage dual role demands. The study recommends that academic institutions and employers implement flexible policies (staggered schedules, remote work) and foster holistic support systems (mentorship programs, peer groups) to ensure the well-being and success of this dedicated population.

**Keywords:** *Academic journey, graduate school, lived experience, working students, work-life balance*

### Introduction

The pursuit of a graduate degree represents a significant investment in one's intellectual and professional future. However, for a growing number of students, this academic journey is not undertaken in the insulated environment of full-time enrollment in their university. Instead, they navigate the demanding dual roles of a dedicated scholar and a committed professional, embodying the identity of a part-time "working student." This population must strategically manage their time and energy across two demanding spheres, constantly negotiating the competing responsibilities of coursework, research, employment, and often, personal and family life (Tinto, 2017). This study is rooted in Republic Act No. 7722, known as the "Higher Education Act of 1994," encouraging all undergraduate students to take a graduate program if they are pursuing positions and roles that require a higher level of knowledge and supervisory skills to enhance their professional growth. Recent studies found that over 40% of graduate students in the Philippines were working at the same time as being enrolled in graduate studies (Dela Cruz & Reyes, 2023). This highlights the growing number of working learners who are pursuing both academic and work careers.

Nowadays, many institutions in the Philippines require their employees to acquire advanced knowledge for promotion and higher positions. This is the reason why the decision

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to "earn and learn" is often driven by economic necessity, career advancement goals, or personal ambition, creating a complex reality that is both challenging and potentially enriching. Santos (2022) states that Filipino working students face socioeconomic difficulties, which led them to pursue both career advancement and personal growth despite having difficulty in managing finances, time, and wellbeing.

While quantitative studies have documented the stressors and time constraints faced by this demographic, there remains a distinct gap in understanding the nuanced, deeply personal reality of their experience (Hovdhaugen, 2015). Statistics can show the number of hours worked and grades achieved, but they often fail to capture the lived essence of this balancing act, the moments of triumph, the profound exhaustion, the strategies for survival, and the personal meaning derived from this arduous path. Therefore, it is essential to give voice to these individuals and to explore the depth of their experiences. Agbayani et al. (2025) shared that Filipino working graduate students experience distinct cultural and socioeconomic challenges that add pressure for them to pursue advanced studies. Moreover, they added the importance of institutions to be flexible in terms of scheduling classes for working students, employer accommodations, and mental health support in supporting their academic success.

These scenarios could lead the graduate school administrator to revisit the graduate school curriculum, particularly the teaching strategy, assessment, and evaluation process that can help working graduate students cope with their academic responsibilities while working. Moreover, guidance administrators can provide activities and programs that can deal with the long-term effects of their experience, such as emotional exhaustion and burnout, while staying in the institution. Lastly, how these experiences will affect their long-term career progression or the actual return on investment to them after getting the degree.

By employing a phenomenological approach, this research moves beyond what happens to these students to understand how they make sense of their journey (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It seeks to uncover the intricate ways in which employment and academic pursuits interact, conflict, and perhaps even synergize. Therefore, this study aims to explore the in-depth, lived experiences of graduate working students as they navigate their academic journey. Through a meticulous exploration of their personal narratives, this research seeks to illuminate the challenges, strategies, sacrifices, and unexpected rewards that define their unique path. Moreover, this situation helps the student to develop the character of self-reliance; they become more responsible and mature in handling various responsibilities in their life. It enhances student support services and creates a more responsive and empowering academic environment that will make graduate students' journey more bearable and enjoyable.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of graduate students who are working while taking their graduate school programs and investigate the challenges they encounter in balancing school, work, and life. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What made them decide to pursue graduate studies while being a working student?
2. What are the challenges they faced in school, work, and life as they pursued graduate studies?
3. How did the respondents address the challenges they encountered?

## Theoretical Framework

Orbilla and Paglinawan (2025) support the time management theory of Covey (2020) that proper time management is essential to increase the productivity and enhance people skills. This model states that a person can prioritize time wisely by categorizing things from least important to most important. This theory may help the person to optimize time and determine the relative importance of each task and manage time by scheduling. Moreover, for motivation, Deci and Ryan (2000) posited that a person has an innate needs to be fulfilled, namely, the needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. These needs must be addressed and satisfied for the person to obtain optimal human functioning.

These two theories will help explain the conditions of the participants and the drive for success of working graduate students, many of whom are still studying in order fulfil their need for competence and sense of accomplishment. These two theories help to recognize both how the participants utilize time management to meet the demands of work and studies and how they find motivation and fulfillment in their two distinct career paths.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study applied qualitative research, specifically a descriptive phenomenological design. This approach was used to understand the essence of the lived experiences of the respondents by exploring how they perceive, interpret, and manage their academic journey while working to earn a living. Howitt (2019) defined phenomenological analysis as a process of examining how people understand their major life experiences and create meaning and insight about them. This analysis will allow an in-depth exploration of factors that influence graduate students to pursue graduate school while also examining their struggles in providing financial support for both personal and academic needs. It also described the experiences of the participants, which emphasizes the formation of themes; thus, the research design used is suitable for this study.

### Participants and Research Locale

The study utilized purposive sampling to ensure that the selected participants met the criteria needed for this study. Cresswell (2018) has stated that while the sample size depends on the kind of qualitative study, 5 - 25 participants for a phenomenological research study is ideal, as this number is under the acceptable sample size in qualitative research. The exact number will depend on data saturation and the complexity of the study. This criterion ensures that the study focuses on individuals who can provide rich, relevant insights about the phenomenon that the researcher wants to investigate. The following criteria are part of the participants: 1. Enrolled in a Master's Program in Psychology, 2. At least 1 year's study, or taking 2 semesters or above, and 3. Working for at least 6 months and above while taking a graduate program. The total number of respondents was five (5) and one (1) for pilot testing. For the research locale of the respondents, they reside in Metro Manila and are currently enrolled in two state universities here in Manila.

### Instruments

The researcher utilized the following instruments to gather information about the participants. First, a personal data sheet was used to gather information about demographic profiles such as age, gender, course, and school of the participants. Second, a semi-structured interview guide was used to ask a series of open-ended questions that were aligned to explore the lived experiences and challenges among graduate students. The questionnaire underwent

content validation from three subject matter experts to ensure the alignment of the questions with the statement of the problem. Moreover, the researcher conducted a pilot test to ensure the consistency of the interview guide instrument.

The main interview questions were as follows:

1. Can you describe your current work role and the graduate program you are pursuing?
2. What motivated you to pursue graduate studies while maintaining employment?
3. What strategies or techniques do you use to manage your workload in both work and Academics?
4. In what ways do you find meaning or fulfilment in your academic journey despite the challenges of working?
5. What positive outcomes or personal benefits have you gained from being both a graduate student and a working professional?

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

The gathering of data began upon gaining approval from the research professor and content evaluators of the interview instruments and the written informed consent from the respondents. After the ethical approval, the researcher conducted a poster posting to look for participants who fit the criteria. The chosen participants were invited to meet online or face-to-face to discuss the informed consent and purpose of the study. The first meeting was used to build rapport with the participants and ask for some information about their work and academic information. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews for each participant and held at least two meetings to ensure that all information was gathered. During each session, participants were asked for permission to record the sessions and informed that the recording would be used to easily access the information for transcription; they have the freedom to refuse the recording if they find it uncomfortable. Each session lasted up to one hour.

After all the interview sessions, all audio recordings were transcribed into a document, and then the data was analyzed to create coding and themes. The researcher underwent bracketing to examine their own biases and reactions to ensure that they would not influence the participants' narrative. Participants' names were coded to ensure the confidentiality of their identities. The audio recording was saved in a protected hard drive with a password for the participants' privacy and confidentiality, and researchers will make use of coding to represent respondents.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using the descriptive phenomenological analysis method. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of an individual's way of making sense of their experience in studying and working at the same time. The approach emphasized the interpretation of data, providing valuable insight into their distinct experiences to gather a comprehensive narrative (Smith, 2020). The researcher engages in the process of coding, bracketing, categorizing and organizing data into meaningful themes that represent the underlying concept that emerged. The themes that emerged from the different answers of the participants were compared to understand commonalities and differences in their accounts and to give meaning to their shared experiences. A direct quote from the participants was properly cited to provide context on the identified themes of the study. The study underwent a three – cycle coding to secure a valid and in-depth procedure. First cycle, initial codes were generated from the statements of the participants, which are significant and meaningful phrases in their narratives. Next is

categorizing and clustering similar codes to identify emerging patterns in their responses. Lastly, the researcher refined and synthesized the themes to ensure that it is aligned with the participants' lived experiences.

### **Data Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness in the outcome of the study, the study applied various processes, such as credibility and confirmability.

To strengthen the accuracy of the findings in terms of the result, the researcher conducted member checking with the participants to establish the credibility of the results. Member checking was conducted by allowing the participants to check the accuracy of the data they shared with the researchers through reviewing and verifying the interpretation of their responses made by the researcher. Moreover, peer debriefing was also conducted by collecting the data interpretation from the co-researchers to establish consistent data results and lastly, conducting data sample triangulation by comparing the responses of the participants.

Moreover, for confirmability, bracketing was also made by ensuring that the researcher set aside their own belief, biases, and assumptions; the selected participants are not the same graduate program as the researcher. The researcher made sure to declare reflexivity where their personal reflections, assumptions, and potential influences on the research process were documented. This process will ensure the results are solely from participants' perspectives and experiences and not influenced by the researcher's bias.

### **Ethical Considerations in the Data Collection**

The study adhered to strict ethical considerations to ensure the safety and confidentiality of all respondents. Before data collection, the researcher asked the respondents to read the informed consent before signing it. This ensures that all respondents are fully informed about the purpose, objective, procedure, risks, and benefits and their role in the study. To uphold the ethical research standards, the study will comply with Republic Act No. 10173 or the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ensuring that all data collected is used solely for academic purposes and will not be shared with third parties.

The answers of the respondents will be kept strictly confidential and solely used for research purposes. All responses/interview recordings were stored in a secure password-protected database, which the researcher is the only one to have access to for 1 year. To ensure anonymity, the researcher did not ask for the names of the respondents, and/or no personally identifiable information was collected.

## **Results and Discussion**

Several themes emerged during the research synthesis. The four major recurring themes about graduate working students from the study include the overwhelming demands between work and school, reasons students pursue graduate studies, the synergy between work and academe, and learning resilience and survival to manage dual roles.

The findings can be used by the graduate working students to apply both structured self-management and seek external support to thrive. Universities and employers should consider revising their policies and making them flexible for the graduate students to make their journey more bearable and prioritize their mental well-being.

**Table 1***Themes and their corresponding sub themes*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
The overwhelming jolt of the dual role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Initial Shock and Overload of the academic demand</li> <li>- Financial Necessity Drives and Sacrifices</li> <li>- Sacrificing Personal and Social Life</li> <li>- Physical manifestation of dual role</li> </ul>
Enrolling to graduate Program as Vehicle of Self Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The quest for professional change and fulfilment</li> <li>- Deepening Professional Competence and confidence</li> <li>- Development of empathy and understanding</li> </ul>
The interplay and synergy between work and academe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Applying school learnings to work duty</li> <li>- Work Experience as a contextualizing tool for study</li> <li>- The Professional Gain from Dual Roles</li> </ul>
Learning resilience and survival to manage dual role demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Internal motivation and self-support</li> <li>- Creating strategic coping mechanism</li> <li>- Importance of creating support system</li> </ul>

**Theme 1: The overwhelming jolt of the dual role**

As one of the main themes, this theme describes the initial challenges that participants experience during the first year they enter graduate school. These challenges they experience give a different view on how they are going to handle due responsibility as they try to reconfigure their life structure and routine.

Participants experienced shock and intense pressure during their first semester due to heavy course loads. This led to a struggle in balancing time and a sudden change in their routine in terms of taking responsibility. Some participants stated that they resorted to doing schoolwork during lunch breaks just to pass their activity. Moreover, because of the sudden change, some of them experience shock in terms of the environment in the school setting since they enrolled in another level, and it will be a different setup in comparison to their college.

The study captures the complex duality faced by working graduate students, which leads them to feel an initial shock reaction towards academic demand. However, due to passion and determination to pursue graduate school, personal sacrifices arise and give way to a deeper sense of purpose and synergy between their roles. Rockman et al. (2022) cited that it is important to understand how graduate students perceive studying and working simultaneously for them to visualize what is needed to expect in the dual role they will be experiencing. Participant 1 stated, *“ung first semester, medyo na-shock na bigla in terms of the schedule kasi full load ako nahirapan akong i-balance yung time since I'm working from Monday to Friday, 6 pm to 5 pm”*. Participants 4 shared also *“And then po so una mahirap mahirap talaga challenging siya lalo na yung pag gising mo ng maaga yung ah sabihin mo yung sabado ko na lang sana itutulog ko na lang yan yung Sunday”*. These claims suggested the existing struggle among the participants in juggling responsibilities of study and work.

In addition, the decision to work while studying is often rooted in financial reality. Participants express a need to be self-sufficient, either because of “financial constraints” or a desire not to “burden” their parents with tuition and expenses. Some of them are taking graduate studies because it is a necessity for their future career and gives better financial stability despite the sacrifices they need to make. Hemmings (2025) shared that a graduate degree is a great option if students want to excel in academia and want to work in a university

because it involves a lot of emerging research work that requires more knowledge and skills. This opportunity will lead them to more career growth and financial stability in the future. Participant 2 said that *"I would pursue, for example, just being, or to pursue my profession as a psychometrician. Unfortunately, I don't think it would be really enough para suportahan yung family ko kasi ano rin ako breadwinner din kasi ako. So, I was thinking if gusto kong mag-progress sa career ko in a profession na gusto ko talaga, then I have to progress din sa academics."* Participant 3 disclosed *"Sa akin kasi to define meaningfulness, you have to endure, you have to sacrifice a lot of things. And I do not want to use the word suffer, but at least if you are to fulfill a specific goal, you really have to encounter problems. So parang pag na-achieve siya, it's gonna be meaningful"*.

Moreover, in terms of the dual commitment necessitates the loss of weekends and personal time. Most of the participants struggle to find time, some of them admitting that they do their schoolwork during work hours, or lunch breaks, and even weekends which meant they lose any rest day. Participants shared *"Oo, pagod and then yun yan, puyat pa. Kasi from Friday, pasok ka tapos kinabukasan sa school ka na magiging ka ulit ng umaga. Imbis na magpapahinga diba?"* Participant 5 also argued, *"Kasi usually, natatapat yung studies ko or yung klase ko dun sa working hours ko."* Due to the demands from work and academic responsibility, some of the participants experience mental and physical exhaustion. Frequently, they go to school or work without getting enough sleep, which affects their performance in both fields. This role conflict is attributed to their neglecting basic personal needs like sleep and exercise, which leads to burnout. The prevalence of burnout among graduate students in health profession programs is quite concerning (Gallea et al., 2021). Moreover, Allen et al. (2022) added that students who are working more than 20 hours per week have a significantly higher risk of lower academic performance and motivation and a higher health risk.

## **Theme 2: Pursuing graduate study as a vehicle of self-growth**

The decision to apply for graduate study is driven by a strong desire for career change, specialization, and long-term commitment and advocacy to fulfill in the field of psychology. This theme explores the deep motivation that sustains the participants, despite the struggle they are facing; they still see this journey as a way to achieve a higher professional growth and find greater life purpose in what they are doing. Taking graduate study was pursued as an "escape" to change from their track from a "routine" to a more productive role. On the other hand, some common aspirations are to enter the academy, and others desire to extend their professional knowledge. Moreover, this is a necessary step for them to have a professional progression, especially if they want to become a practicing psychologist, and a way to secure better financial stability for the family.

Participant 1 shared *"Working kasi sa HR, hindi ko nakikita talaga yung sarili ko na magtatagal sa field na to, to be honest. Kasi for three years pa, ulit-ulit lang yung ginaga ko, which is very redundant na siya for me and then, ayoko nung naka-cage lang ako dun sa isang role na wala akong na-acquire na bagong knowledge."* Hemmings (2025) stated that a graduate degree is a great option if students want to excel in academia and want to work in a university because it involves a lot of emerging research work that requires more knowledge and skills. She also added that most of the students who subject themselves to enroll in graduate programs want to develop their skills and use them as an advantage to more opportunities to get involved in the industry that requires work and academic experience, and promotion to more senior positions. It is the reason why some of the undergraduate students who wish to pursue graduate studies give themselves ample time to decide if they fully decide to enroll or not. This academic journey instills a profound confidence in them. Graduate Studies is seen as solidifying their identity as a professional in the field, allowing

them to know “how to do it”. This journey gives them a stronger sense of “purpose” and fulfillment in contributing to society. *“Actually, dream ko talaga mag-teach on one specific program, and before I was aiming to be part of the medical field”* (Participant 5). Participant 1 added *“Oo. Parang first semester pa lang, naisip ko na siya, bakit ba ako nag-MA? Bakit ko ba pinasok to? Di pa na ganun kadali. Pero kasi meron akong principle na kapag pinasok ko, hindi ako pwedeng mag-back out”*. These responses suggested graduate students often begin with a feeling of being “lost” or challenged, however, followed by re-evaluation of themselves during their academic journey, they transform into more mature and resilient personal identity (Damianakis et al., 2020). Moreover, Deci and Ryan (2000) posited in the theory of motivation that a person who has an innate need to fulfill, and in the graduate student situation, aside from working, they are pursuing advanced study to fulfill the need of competence and to feel a sense of accomplishment in the end.

On the other hand, the results also reported that participants were able to develop a deep sense of understanding to other people, perseverance, and empathetic characteristics after enrolling in the graduate school. Not only have they gained professional growth but the emotional aspect of them has also matured. Participant 5 said, *“Before siguro po masasabi ko nag grow and nag mature ako in terms of patience, understanding, pakikisama kasi paki pakikisama.”* Participant 2 added *“Yun yung mga ganung bagay po eh yung patience yung understanding”*. Ampofo et al. (2025) explained that most of the students who pursue advanced studies develop a counselor-like role and character to prevent them from being emotionally exhausted in the different responsibilities they are taking. It will help them prevent emotional breakdown while maintaining supportive relationships with others.

### **Theme 3: The interplay and synergy between work and academe**

This theme captures the interpretative process where the two roles are not separate conflicts but rather mutually beneficial systems that enrich one another, especially in the field of psychology. Some of the respondents whose work is not aligned with their graduate program they are taking; however, they are still able to see the connection between the two different fields in terms of professional gain and experiences. Moreover, others mentioned that their work is already aligned with the study they are taking; they mentioned that they want to expand their knowledge and capabilities.

According to the responses, most of the participants immediately integrate what they learn in class into their jobs. This includes applying clinical knowledge to handle employee mental health issues, student concerns, and utilizing concepts from guidance counselling to improve communication with other people. At the same time, the work setting provides real-world exposure that enriches the graduate studies. This includes applying industrial concepts to academic reports and gaining valuable knowledge from professionals, like clinical directors, sharing client experiences. Participant 2 mentioned *“Na a-apply ko lang si psych a lot of the times when reading reports, mga psych reports ganyan, mga occupational therapy reports..”* In addition, Participant 3 shared *“na apply ko pa rin naman siya um pag nakakasalamuha ko yung mga bata since um tinuturo din yung different counseling techniques, may course or may subject din naman don”*.

The participants were able to learn that both fields are beneficial for personal growth, both in academe and work. Gallea et al. (2021) mentioned that at first, working and studying may seem difficult, but whether they find it meaningful or stressful depends on how the person organizes their time to finish tasks and how they perceive their journey. Moreover, attitude affects their perseverance. The dual roles increase students experience little by little as they become familiarized with the world of work, and they gain the freedom to be responsible with their lives and feel that they are no longer obliged to anyone. Participant 2

indicated “*So, I think nadagdagan or parang meron kang perspective in terms of knowledge from MA. And then meron kang real perspective when it comes to work.*”

Valparaiso University (2026) reported that graduate students often use their workplace as a “living laboratory”. They apply theoretical learning to work application, vice versa. These strategies will not only make the graduate students knowledgeable but also flexible in terms of work-study management. Moreover, working students benefit from “situated learning,” where the relevance of academic content is deepened by the practical tools and professional environments they inhabit daily (Moore, 2026).

#### **Theme 4: Learning resilience and survival to manage dual role demands**

This theme describes the active strategies – both internal and external – used by the participants to develop different ways of managing levels of stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue. Moreover, despite the challenge they face at the end of the day, they perceive these dual roles as meaningful sources of motivation and personal growth.

Overcoming the initial challenges becomes a source of self-validation. Participants develop a strong internal mindset, recognizing that they must be their “number one supporter” and learning to use time wisely out of necessity. In addition, the findings showed the importance of having a support system that can help boost confidence and fighting spirit, which led the graduate students to develop a sense of resilience, perseverance, and confidence in themselves. Participant 2 cited “*yung tita ko, yung tita ko na nagpaaral akin, tumulong sa akin parang under that. So, parang iniisip ko na lang yung pagtatake ko ng masters para rin, ayun maging proud din sila ganyan*”. Participants 4 also pointed out “*May pagsisikapan mo siya darating din yung panahon na maki claim mo din siya. Makakamit mo din siya so yun yung ilan sa mga motivation ko*”.

The most immediate and relatable support comes from fellow classmates who are experiencing the same pressures allowing them to share burdens and collaborate. In addition, family, co-workers and partners who provide essential support such as emotional and moral support for their decision to pursue graduate study and are currently giving them encouragement to strive further. “*Sa parents ko naman, kung ano yung gusto ko, supportive naman sila*” (Participant 1).

Sarkar (2022) reported that this experience of having friends and family support makes the graduate journey bearable, easier, and fun. Working students can celebrate and share the success they receive in school and work to their peers and ask for assistance and support if they need it the most. Aside from them, mentors are one of the reasons why most working students get inspired to pursue graduate studies. They help students to form the right connections, offer research assistance, and guide them in handling personal and professional life. This implies that work and universities should promote holistic support systems to working students to ensure that they can enjoy the fruit of their labor in these two fields and make sure to priorities self - care for the students to thrive and succeed.

On the other hand, for the participants to prevent burnout, they create different strategic coping mechanisms that are very useful and effective in managing their stress, such as taking a designated day off, pausing for at least an hour after work, and using temporary distractions like social media for quick stress release. Participant 1 shared “*Gusto ko lang matulog. Matulog tapos medyo nagre-rely kasi ako sa stress eating*”. Others, like participant 5, said that “*First, sa work, I always request to have one day off to release my stress or, you know yung burnout as well, so most of the time.*” Participant 2 added, “*Siguro yung medyo healthy naman na technique is talagang ilayo mo yung distractions*”. These phenomena were better explained in the theory of time management of Covey (2020) which states that if a person can allocate time wisely on the things that are least to most important to them, then it will guarantee productivity and enhance management skills for essential activities. It is also

supported by the study of Agbayani et al. (2025), which explained that graduate students often used “compartmentalization” as a strategy to strictly divide their week into work-only and study-only blocks to lessen cognitive load. Moreover, Allen et al. (2022) added that sleep is one of the things that needs to be prioritized, and hygiene plays an important role in lowering levels of exhaustion and burnout. Prioritizing physical health can help working graduate students recharge, produce better performance, and reduce psychological fatigue.

### **Conclusion**

This study reveals that graduate working students were able to develop a sense of grit and resilience in pursuing both career growth and personal development while navigating role conflict. However, despite facing real challenges like lack of sleep, money problems, and stress from juggling responsibilities in two fields, they develop different coping strategies to make it bearable and manageable. Working students learn to use time wisely and ask for moral support from family, peers, and employers. These experiences can be used by institutions and the workplace to revise their policies into more flexible approaches, such as flexible scheduling and mentorship programs to support and address the needs of working students. For future researchers, explore more on the influence of culture and the current situation of the participants, such as being the breadwinner and sole provider of the family, that lead them to work at the same time studying. Moreover, since education is improving and curricula are changing, we can make graduate education work better for people who are balancing school with full-time or part-time jobs. After all, these working students have a dream and ambition to make their lives more meaningful.

### **Limitations**

This study, though providing rich and in-depth insight into the lived experiences of graduate working students, was constrained by several limitations that carried important implications for interpreting and applying the results. First, the relatively small number of participants (five) limited the transferability of the findings beyond the small sample. While small samples are common and acceptable in phenomenological designs, recent methodological guidance cautioned that sample-size decisions should be justified by data richness, participant expertise, and evidence of saturation rather than arbitrary numbers. As a result, the extent to which the findings reflected the broader population of graduate working students—especially those in different universities, regions, or socioeconomic backgrounds—remained uncertain. Stakeholders and future researchers should therefore treat the findings as illustrative rather than generalizable and pursue follow-up studies with larger and more diverse samples.

Second, the study depended entirely on self-reported data collected via semi-structured interviews. This reliance introduced the possibility of subjectivity and recall bias, meaning participants might have unconsciously emphasized certain events or feelings over others, or their accounts could have been influenced by their current mood, workload, or memory. Even though member checking and expert validation were used to enhance the credibility and dependability of the data, such mitigations could not entirely remove the inherent limitations of self-reporting. The themes and patterns identified represented participants' perceptions and interpretations, not necessarily objective measures of stress, workload, or coping efficacy. Thus, readers should interpret the findings as reflecting lived experience rather than measurable or comparable outcomes across time or populations. Moreover, the number of questions set by the researcher is also limited, suggesting additional questions, such as specific institutional policies that help working graduate students in their

situation, and how dual role commitment impacts the quality of their personal and interpersonal relationships.

Third, by employing a phenomenological design, the research prioritized depth and meaning over breadth or causality. That design choice provided a detailed understanding of how participants experienced and made sense of being working graduate students, but it inherently prevented any causal inferences or quantitative generalizations. As recent reviews showed, phenomenological studies often lacked standardized reporting of philosophical underpinnings or methodological rigor, which can affect the transparency and reproducibility of findings. The results offered a valuable but context-dependent snapshot. They should be used for theory generation, program design, or further inquiry — not for drawing broad conclusions about all graduate working students. Future research might combine qualitative depth with quantitative or mixed-method designs to assess prevalence, test hypotheses, or compare subgroups with greater representativeness.

Despite these limitations, the study's strengths — including careful sampling, ethical data handling, and thorough thematic analysis — provided meaningful insights into the complex dual-role experience of working graduate students. Still, the limitations underscored the need for cautious interpretation and encouraged future studies to build on the findings with broader, more rigorous research designs.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations were proposed to support graduate students who balance academic responsibilities with professional work. First, universities and academic institutions were encouraged to develop more flexible academic policies and programs that accommodate the schedules of working students. First, flexible curriculum design allowing students to use their workplace as case study for projects, ensuring coursework is relevant to their career, and modular coursework where subjects are divided into self-learning modules to allow them to accomplish tasks at their own pace. Next was Administrative Flexibility, extended residency to finish the degree up to 1 year extension, and hybrid/asynchronous options, which give them freedom to utilize recorded lectures and online discussion boards after their work shifts. Adjustments such as staggered class schedules, asynchronous learning options, and extended deadlines for assignments could help reduce the initial shock and overload experienced by students, allowing them to manage dual responsibilities more effectively. Additionally, institutions could provide support services such as a peer mentoring program where the students will be given an assigned peer mentor or advisor to check on them and extend help if needed. Moreover, the guidance office can target workshops on time management, stress reduction, and resilience-building, which would equip students with practical strategies to navigate the demanding balance between work and academic commitments.

On the other hand, for workplace policies, financial support can be given by tuition reimbursement/assistance among graduate students who wish to pursue studying, provided that there will be a maintaining a good performance in the company and there is a so-called “retention clause” (staying with the company for 1 – 2 years after graduation), depending on the company's rules and policies. In addition, special benefits such as study leaves and compressed workweeks, allowing the graduate student to work 4 days a week and giving 1 day as a free day to cope with classes and academic activities.

Second, the study highlighted the importance of social and peer support systems in helping students cope with the challenges of dual roles. Therefore, the establishment of mentorship programs, peer support groups, and faculty guidance initiatives was recommended. Such programs could foster a sense of community, reduce feelings of

isolation, and create platforms for students to share strategies and experiences. Employers were also encouraged to recognize the dual demands faced by graduate working students and to consider implementing flexible work arrangements, such as adjusted shifts, remote work options, or academic leave provisions. Collaboration between academic institutions and workplaces could enhance students' ability to sustain both professional and academic performance without compromising mental well-being.

Lastly, future research was recommended to build upon the insights of this study. Expanding the sample size to include students from multiple universities and regions could provide a broader understanding of the challenges faced by working graduate students. Longitudinal studies could also explore how coping strategies, resilience, and academic success evolve, providing evidence for more tailored interventions. Furthermore, employing mixed-methods approaches could complement qualitative insights with quantitative measures, allowing institutions to develop evidence-based programs that address the mental, emotional, and professional needs of this population. Overall, the recommendations emphasized the necessity of a holistic approach, combining institutional support, workplace flexibility, and personal resilience strategies to foster the success and well-being of graduate working students.

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