A Phenomenological study on the experiences of stop-out students input for the reintegration in state university and colleges in the Philippines

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A B S T R A C T

Dropout rates in recent years in the Philippines have reached alarming levels in higher education. This reflects one of the problems in the education system in the country. Among this population, there are students known as stop-outs, who temporarily pause their studies and eventually return to school within five academic years. This study explores the experiences of stop-out students at State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines, focusing on their reasons for pausing their studies, motivations for returning, and the challenges they face upon re-enrollment. The research aims to enhance understanding of the factors influencing this marginalized population and advocate for effective strategies to support stop-outs. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used, entailing in-depth semi-structured interviews with six participants (one male and five females) who had taken a break from classes for at least one semester and returned within the last five academic years. The data collection process adhered to ethical standards, including informed consent and confidentiality measures. Thematic analysis was utilized to evaluate interview transcripts, research memos, and observation notes, revealing significant insights into the participants' lived experiences. The findings indicate that financial difficulties and personal circumstances were primary reasons for students becoming stop-outs. Motivation for returning to school is their personal aspirations that includes social environment, support, helping others, finishing academics and career progression. Upon returning, participants faced challenges adjusting to the school environment and expressed a need for support, including orientation programs, counseling services, and peer support groups to facilitate their reintegration. The insights gained from this research can inform policies and practices within SUCs aimed at enhancing student retention and success. By understanding the specific needs of stop-out students, educational institutions can develop targeted interventions that promote a smoother transition back to academic life, ultimately improving academic success and retention rates in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

As per the Philippine Business for Education (2023), the completion rate for bachelor's or equivalent degrees is 24.4%, indicating significant problems in the country's education system when it comes to the completion of higher education. The Philippine Statistics Authority (2023) reported that obligations beyond academic pursuits, such as employment, personal interests, high costs of education, or financial difficulties, compel some students to pause their studies. Wigginton (2017) noted that students who experience interruptions in their studies have a higher likelihood of returning to school. This phenomenon, termed 'stop-outs' by James (2020), refers to students who temporarily withdraw from their colleges or universities and may re-enroll within the next five academic years. Wu (2018) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the impact of stop-out departures, as neglecting this issue can result in ineffective policies and practices that fail to engage these students in their educational journeys.

Stop-Out Phenomenon

The prevalence of stop-out behaviors among undergraduate students is a significant concern in higher education. Recent studies indicate that approximately 38% of degree-seeking students withdraw at least once during their academic journey within 8 years (Hanson, 2024). Despite this statistic, there remains a considerable gap in grasping the underlying reasons for these interruptions. Research suggests that while various factors contribute to stop-out behaviors, few studies have critically examined how these interruptions impact students' perceptions of educational quality (Cox, Reason, & Gillman 2016). Most existing literature tends to conflate stop-out behaviors with dropout phenomena (Xavier, Meneses, & Fluza, 2022), indicating a need for more focused research that distinguishes between these two experiences.

Challenges Stop-Out Students Encounter

In the Philippines, recent studies conducted by Mendoza (2023) and Bulawat (2022) reveal that stop-out students face considerable challenges in time management as they juggle academic responsibilities with new life commitments. These studies highlight how changes in academic environments—such as new curricula and teaching methods—further complicate their reintegration. Financial pressures also emerge as a critical barrier to academic success. The Stander Symposium Projects (2019) emphasize that these challenges not only affect individual student performance but also have broader implications for institutional retention rates. This systemic issue calls for targeted interventions within educational frameworks to better support stop-out students.

Motivation for the Return of Stop-Out Students

Understanding what motivates stop-out students to return is vital for creating effective support strategies for their population. Research indicates that motivated individuals perceive tasks as valuable, which enhances their academic performance (Fadilah Noah et al., 2019). Common motivations for returning include securing employment, pursuing further education, and personal development (Van Rhijn et al., 2016). In the Philippine context, family obligations and intrinsic motivation are particularly significant factors (Mendoza, 2023). However, there exists a notable lack of comprehensive research on the reintegration process of stop-out students, with many studies favoring quantitative methods over qualitative insights (Boika, Chen & West, 2024; Franca & Saccaro, 2020). This gap underscores the necessity for in-depth qualitative investigations that explore the lived experiences of these students.

Education and State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines

Education is recognized as a human right and serves as a critical catalyst for development, significantly contributing to poverty reduction, health improvement, gender equality, and the promotion of peace and stability which enhances individual employment prospects, fosters social cohesion, and strengthens institutions (World Bank Group, 2024). In the Philippines, while state universities and colleges (SUCs) offer free tuition to facilitate access to higher education, many students still encounter barriers that lead to dropout rates as high as 35.15% projected for the

academic year 2023-2024 (Weissman, 2022; Sevillano, 2024). Factors such as poverty and inadequate infrastructure continue to challenge educational attainment since 1946 (Bai, 2023). The Commission on Higher Educaion (CHED) has initiated various programs aimed at addressing these issues; however, ongoing research is needed to evaluate their effectiveness and adapt strategies that cater specifically to stop-out populations.

Conceptual Framework

The study utilizes Schlossberg's Transition Theory (STT) to thoroughly look into the experiences of stop-out students at State Universities and Colleges (SUC). This approach acknowledges that each student's transition is unique, shaped by individual circumstances and demographic characteristics, which significantly impact their perspectives and motivations during the reintegration process (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 2012)
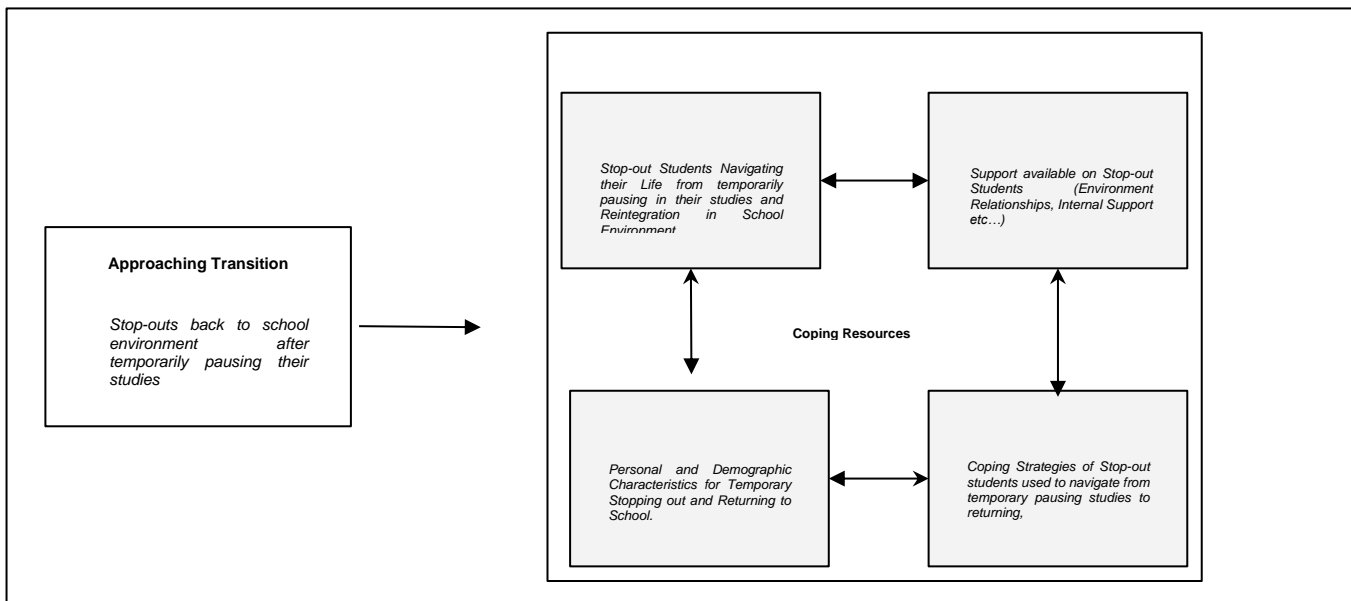

Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework of How Schlossberg Transition Theory will play on explaining the Lived Experiences of Stop-out Students.*

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study explores the experiences of stop-out students at State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the country. This research aims to produce knowledge that will help improve the educational system in accommodating different populations of students wherein the focus on this study; the stop-outs. The main objective of this study is to thoroughly investigate the experience of students who pause their studies and return to an academic setting.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore and comprehend the experiences of stop-out students, utilizing a phenomenological framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) to delve deeply into a smaller group of subjects. The rationale for choosing a phenomenological approach lies in its ability to uncover the essence of participants' lived experiences, allowing for a rich understanding of their motivations for returning to school and the challenges they face during reintegration. This method is particularly suited for capturing the nuanced perspectives of stop-out students, as it emphasizes individual and shared experiences in their educational journeys. Ethical considerations were ensured throughout the study; informed consent was obtained from all participants, certifying they understood their rights and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Additionally, confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to protect participants' identities, and ethical approval was secured from the

Research Management Office of Philippine Normal University (code REC-2024-194). By adhering to these ethical standards, the study ensured that participants felt safe and respected, thereby enhancing the integrity of the research findings.

Participants

The study employed a purposive sampling method, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2023), to ensure that the selected individuals could provide rich, relevant insights into the experiences of stop-out students. The sample size consisted of six participants, a decision supported by previous research utilizing phenomenological approaches (Morse, 1995).The inclusion criteria for participants were meticulously defined to ensure a focused and relevant sample. Specifically, participants were required to meet the following criteria: 1) they must have taken a break from their studies for a minimum of one semester; 2) they must have returned to classes within the last five academic years (James, 2020); and 3) they must currently be enrolled in any State University and Colleges (SUC). This careful selection process aimed to capture the lived experiences of individuals who had navigated the complexities of pausing and resuming their education. To preserve the participants' anonymity and privacy, pseudonyms were assigned throughout the study. The final sample comprised six individuals, including one male and five females, all of whom met the established inclusion criteria. The participant's average age is 22 years, with a standard deviation of 1.32, reflecting a relatively homogenous age group that allowed for a focused exploration of their shared experiences.In conducting the phenomenological analysis, the study followed a systematic approach to data collection and interpretation. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect detailed qualitative data, allowing participants to openly express their thoughts and feelings. The interview questions were validated by experts to ensure alignment with the research objectives, and the sessions were recorded (with consent) to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis.

Instruments

This study used semi-structured interviews to collect detailed qualitative data about participants' life experiences. The interview questions were validated by experts to ensure alignment with the research objectives, allowing for flexibility while capturing detailed descriptions within 30 to 60 minutes per participant (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Additionally, research memos and computerized observation notes enhanced the trustworthiness of the design (Wigginton, 2017). Triangulation was employed to establish validity by integrating various theories, methods, and observations to mitigate researcher biases (Heale & Noble, 2019). Member checks were also conducted to verify the accuracy of participants' responses (Wigginton, 2017).

Procedure

The data collection process adhered to ethical standards and methodological rigor. It began with purposive sampling to recruit participants via social media, ensuring they met inclusion criteria. The voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and the right to withdraw without penalty were all enumerated in informed consent forms. Interviews followed a phenomenological approach, with face-to-face sessions recorded (with consent) and online interviews captured through the platform. An interview protocol guided the process, supplemented by research memos for additional insights. Finally, debriefing sessions were held post-interview to prioritize participant well-being and provide closure to the research experience.

Analysis

The interview transcripts, research documents, and observation notes acquired during the study were systematically evaluated using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A number of crucial phases were engaged in this process: getting to know the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating themes, defining and labeling themes, and creating the final data. By immersing themselves in the data,

researchers identified patterns and recurring concepts that illuminated the factors influencing stop-out students' decisions to return to university and their reintegration experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

This section presents the findings from a study on factors influencing respondents' decisions to temporarily pause their academic journeys and their experiences upon returning to state universities and colleges (SUCs). To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the six participants (one male and five females), who had a mean age of 22 (SD = 1.32).

Reason of Stop Out Students to temporarily pause their studies at the SUC's

The data received from the participants is discussed in the following tables and paragraphs to determine the Lived Experience of Stop Out Students who temporarily suspend their studies at the SUCs.

Research Question 1: What are the underlying lived experiences that lead stop-out students to temporarily pause their studies at the SUCs?

Table 1. The Participants lived experiences underlie the decision of stop-out students to temporarily pause their studies at the SUC's.

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	DESCRIPTION	# OF RESPONSES
Lived Experiences of Stop Out Students to Pause their Studies	Personal Circumstances	Personal Circumstances encompassing various aspects of participants' lives that influenced their educational decisions during the pandemic. This theme highlights how external factors, such as family responsibilities, and internal factors, like mental health concerns, shape the educational journeys of the participants.	4
	Financial difficulties	Financial difficulties during the pandemic made it challenging for some participants to continue their studies	3

Table 1 depicts the collected data, which is classified into one main theme: Lived Experiences of Stop Out Students to Pause their Studies. Within the theme, there are specific sub-themes that represent the participants' perceptions and experiences.

A. **Lived Experiences of Stop Out Students to Pause their Studies** have emerged as one of prominent reasons in the responses, highlighting significant challenges faced by participants during the pandemic.

a. *Personal Circumstances* as a sub-theme encompasses various aspects of participants' lives that have influenced their decisions regarding education.

"I need to prioritize the child, who is in my womb (Jace, F)."

The subtheme of personal circumstances is explored through family responsibilities, particularly how participants prioritize this over education. This phenomenon can be analyzed using Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which emphasizes the "situation" component that reflects how unique circumstances, like Jace's maternal obligations, can influence decisions. Such external pressures often overshadow educational goals. Participants' responses illustrate that their transitions are significantly shaped by personal circumstances and external factors, highlighting the complexity of navigating educational aspirations amidst familial duties (Schlossberg et al., 2012).

b. *Financial Difficulties* as a subtheme was particularly evident among the participants, as the pandemic worsened existing financial pressures and led to difficulties in meeting educational expenses.

"One of the reasons is the financial problem, because we are just a middle-income family. And my sibling is still studying. So it might be difficult for my family to manage expenses if both of us are studying at the same time, even if I am studying in a State University. My sibling will be the priority during that time (Chel, M)"

Financial difficulties exemplify the critical link between financial stability and educational attainment, particularly during crises like the pandemic. Utilizing Schlossberg's Transition Theory, we can view the economic challenges faced by participants as a significant transition phase, where the pandemic's unforeseen impact disrupted their established routines and academic expectations (Schlossberg et al., 2012). This disruption not only highlights the immediate financial strains but also reflects deeper systemic issues within the educational framework that hinder students' ability to persist in their studies. The interplay of personal circumstances and economic pressures necessitates understanding of how these factors collectively influence students' decisions to pause their education, thereby emphasizing the need for targeted support systems to facilitate their reintegration into academic life.

Inspiration for returning to school

Based on the participants' explanations and experiences, the following section will discuss their inspiration and reasons for returning to school.

Research Question 2: What are the motivations of stop-out students to inform their decision to return to the SUCs.

Table 2. The Participants Motivation to inform their inspiration to return to the SUC's.

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	DESCRIPTION	# OF RESPONSES
Personal Aspirations as Motivation to Return	Social Environment Support	The influence of friends, family, and peers in motivating participants to return to academics.	5
	Helping Others	Motivation to contribute positively to society and assist others.	4

	Finishing Academics	Desire of the participants to prove oneself and complete the studies.	4

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	DESCRIPTION	# OF RESPONSES
Personal Aspirations as Motivation to Return	Career Progression	The participants aim for a specific career and the skills needed for it upon completing the studies.	4

Table 2 categorizes the collected data into one primary theme: personal aspirations. The theme encompasses specific sub-themes that reflect the participants' perceptions and experiences, revealing influences on their decisions to return and continue their school after the pause of their studies.

A. **Personal Aspirations as Motivation to Return** as a theme have emerged as prominent reasons in the responses, highlighting that individual goals and dreams motivate people to pursue certain paths in life.

a. Social Environment Support as a sub theme explores the impact of social relationships on the participants' decisions to return to academics.

"I have this group of friends; there are three of us. Those two pushed me to study (Pat, F)."

Social environmental influences play a crucial role in motivating returning students, as support from friends, family, and peers fosters emotional encouragement and strengthens commitment to educational aspirations. This phenomenon aligns with social support theory, which posits that robust interpersonal relationships significantly shape individual behaviors and decision-making processes (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Students who perceive strong social support are more inclined to engage in constructive behaviors, such as continuing their education, as they feel validated and encouraged by their social networks. Thus, the interplay between social support and educational commitment underscores the importance of fostering supportive environments for returning students to enhance their reintegration into academic settings.

b. Helping Others, as a sub theme reflects a deep-seated motivation among participants to make a positive impact on society. This motivation manifests in their career aspirations, where they seek roles that enable them to provide support and assistance to others.

"I want to be a counselor because I want to help others like me who are struggling, especially in schools (Jan, F)"

The subtheme of Helping Others reveals that participants are motivated by an intrinsic desire to excel, deriving satisfaction from their capacity to assist others. This is consistent with the Self-Determination Theory, which holds that the satisfaction of the three fundamental psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy is the source of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Through this framework, it becomes evident that individuals are genuinely driven to create a positive societal impact, reflecting their autonomy in choosing careers that resonate with their values and passions. Their commitment to helping others not only fulfills personal aspirations but also enhances their sense of competence and connection within their communities, ultimately contributing to their overall well-being and fulfillment in life

c. Finishing Academics was a particularly evident answer among the participants. Four out of the six participants emphasized the importance of completing their academic degrees and graduating. Some key quotes illustrating this sub-theme are as follows;

"I want to prove something to myself. Because it feels like I have this notion that I am nothing without academic achievements. So if I don't have any academic accomplishments, what am I? Who am I? How will I view myself? I can't accept that I won't achieve anything and won't graduate (Kate, F)."

The desire to return to school among participants is closely linked to their aspirations for Finishing Academics, which signifies a pursuit of competence that enhances self-worth and personal identity. This motivation is deeply intertwined with their hopes for future opportunities and the well-being of their families, underscoring the significance of relatedness in their educational ambitions. According to self-determination theory, these motives arise from the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Thus, the participants' educational goals reflect not only individual aspirations but also a broader context of familial responsibilities and social connections that drive their commitment to academic success.

d. Career Progression, as a subtheme, explores the participants' ambitions for specific careers and the skills they believe are necessary to achieve these goals upon completing their studies.

"I want to be a teacher. You know, I realized it late, but deep down, even though I used to say I didn't want to be a teacher because there are a lot of tasks involved, I know within myself that I really want to be a teacher. Teaching is truly meant for me (Rm, M)".

Career progression emerges as a vital subtheme, acting as a catalyst for individuals to return to education and acquire the skills necessary for their desired careers. This aligns with the concept of prosocial motivation, which encapsulates the intrinsic desire to contribute positively to society and assist others. Individuals motivated by prosocial factors often make career choices that reflect their commitment to social betterment, thereby influencing their educational pursuits and professional aspirations (Liao, Su & Nielsen, 2023). This interplay between career advancement and prosocial motivation underscores the importance of understanding how personal aspirations and societal contributions shape the educational trajectories of students, particularly those who pause their studies to realign their goals with their values.

Challenges faced by the Participants upon their return to School

Based on the insights shared by the participants and their personal experiences, this section will delve into the difficulties encountered by the individuals upon their reintegration into the school environment.

Research Question 3: What challenges do stop-out students encounter when they return to school after a period of interruption, especially within the context of the SUCs?

Table 3: The Participants challenges encountered by stop-out students upon their return to school after a period of interruption, particularly within the context of the SUC.

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	DESCRIPTION	# OF RESPONSES

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Count
Adjustment Challenges in Navigating School Environment	Socialization Difficulties	Struggles with interacting and forming connections with new or existing classmates	5
	Educational Modality Shift	Challenges related to transitioning between different modes of learning (e.g., online, hybrid).	3
	Learning and Memory Issues	Difficulties in learning and processing information after a period of interruption	3

Table 3 categorizes the collected data into one primary theme: Adjustment Challenges. The theme encompasses specific sub-themes that reflect the different challenges faced by the stop-out students upon their return to school.

A. Adjustment Challenges in Navigating School Environment have emerged as the primary theme in the responses, highlighting challenges faced by participants in adjusting to the school environment.

a. Socialization Difficulties as a sub theme explores the challenges of socializing and building relationships with peers in the school setting.Here are a few quotes that highlight this particular sub-theme:

"The most difficult experience I had was when I returned to my studies. It was really challenging to connect with my classmates and people at the university because I'm not naturally a talkative person. When I don't understand something (in online class), that's when I struggle the most because I have no one to ask for help; I don't know anyone closely (Chel, F)."

Socialization difficulties arise from personal responsibilities and the nature of online interactions, creating a challenging environment for forming connections. This phenomenon can be understood through the framework of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which highlights the essential skills needed for effective interpersonal relationships. Students grappling with socialization challenges often endure increased stress due to these responsibilities and their online engagement, complicating their ability to foster peer relationships (Garibaldi & Josias, 2015). The interplay of these factors underscores the importance of SEL in addressing the emotional and social needs of students, ultimately facilitating better integration into their educational communities.

b. Educational Modality Shift as a sub-theme pertains to the challenges related to transitioning between different modes of learning (e.g., online, hybrid).

"Everything happened at the same time, so it became a challenge for me because I wasn't used to the online setup then. I was accustomed to in-person classes when I was in Manila; it was easier back then before I took a break. When I returned, everything suddenly happened at once, and it was online, plus I had a baby, so it was a huge adjustment for me (Jace, F)."

The second subtheme, Educational Modality Shift, highlights the challenges posed by the transition from online and hybrid learning modality, forcing students to quickly adapt to new technologies and learning strategies while also managing personal difficulties. This shift can lead students to attribute their struggles to external factors, such as the sudden change in learning modality or technological issues, potentially resulting in decreased motivation and engagement, as suggested by attribution theory (Weiner, 1985). The implications of this transition are significant,

as students' perceptions of their educational environment are shaped by their ability to navigate these changes effectively, underscoring the need for supportive measures that address both technological and emotional barriers during such critical transitions.

c. Learning and Memory Issues as a sub-theme pertains to the participant's difficulties in learning and processing information after a period of interruption.

"The most evident struggle I had at that time was really struggling to review. You know, I had a hard time getting the lessons into my head, especially after coming back from the break (Pat, F)."

Participants in the study expressed notable challenges with learning and memory, often feeling overwhelmed by the influx of new information and the necessity to reacquaint themselves with academic systems after interruptions in their studies. This disruption negatively impacted their cognitive functions, complicating the retrieval of previously acquired knowledge. Cognitive load theory elucidates this phenomenon, asserting that the brain's limited capacity for processing information can hinder learners when confronted with an overload of new content while simultaneously needing to revisit familiar material (Sweller, 2011). Thus, the interplay between cognitive load and academic reintegration underscores the need for tailored support strategies to facilitate smoother transitions for returning students, ensuring they can effectively manage both new learning and previously mastered concepts.

The suggested support of the stop-out students to SUC'S for their reintegration

By examining the insights provided by the participants and their personal experiences, this write-up will explore how SUCs can assist stop-out students in transitioning back to school after a break.
Research Question 4: In what ways can the SUCs support the smooth transition of stop-out students returning to school after a break?

Table 4. The Participants suggestion to SUC's for the ease of reintegration to School Environment

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	DESCRIPTION	# OF RESPONSES
Need Support for Adjustment and Transition	Conducting Orientation	Providing clear guidance and information to help stop-out students adjust upon their return.	4
	Counseling Services	Offering personalized sessions to help students process their feelings and experiences.	4
	Peer Support Groups	Creating groups and spaces for stop-out students to connect and share their experiences.	2

Table 4 presents the categorization of information under the primary theme of Need Support for Adjustment and Transition. The theme covers various sub-themes that capture the diverse suggestions made by participants to SUC's in order to facilitate the reintegration process following a period of study interruption.

A. Need Support for Adjustment and Transition, the primary theme that emerged in the responses is the need for support during the adjustment and transition. It was highlighted that participants require support from the SUC's to reintegrate successfully into the school environment after a pause in their education.

a. Conducting Orientation explores the need of stop put students to provide guidance and information to help stop-out students adjust upon their return.

"To have an orientation program, every term when students return. It's a way to help them during the adjustment period, to better cope with new experiences or environments. Some students really struggle to adapt to these new situations. So, I see this as one way to support them (Chel, F)."

The necessity for comprehensive orientation programs for stop-out students can be understood through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which emphasizes the importance of addressing emotional and psychological factors in educational settings. By focusing on these needs, orientation programs can foster a sense of belonging and support among stop-out students, ultimately enhancing their academic success and personal development. This approach not only validates their experiences but also encourages reintegration into the academic environment, thereby addressing the challenges they face upon returning to school. Such initiatives are crucial for improving retention rates and ensuring that these students feel valued within the educational system (Maslow, 1954).

b. Counseling Services explores the need of offering personalized counseling sessions to help stop-outs to process their feelings and experiences.

"Counseling Session because, you know, suddenly you're going back into a setting that is enjoyable but challenging. So, it's like another adjustment that you need to make. It's important to set your mind that you're back here, that you're studying again, and these are the things you need to do. This way, you won't be left guessing about what you need to do or what to expect. At least, you'll have a clear understanding of what's required, and you know that there's guidance from the higher-ups who support you in your return to school (Jace, F)."

The second sub-theme, Counseling Services, highlights the critical need for processing the experiences of stop-out students, whose diverse reasons for pausing their education necessitate a flexible counseling approach tailored to their unique backgrounds. This perspective aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which posits that fulfilling basic needs is essential before individuals can pursue higher-level aspirations, such as educational success (Maslow, 1954). By addressing these foundational needs through targeted counseling services, institutions can better support stop-outs in their reintegration process, ultimately fostering a more conducive environment for academic achievement and personal growth.

c. Peer Support Groups explores the need of creating spaces and groups for stop-out students to connect and share their experiences.

"I think it would be great to have a community for those who have stopped out, like me. I wonder who else can relate to my experience because, from what I've seen, when I know someone who has also stopped out—though for different reasons—it feels comforting. I think if we could build a community of students who have stopped out, it would help us accept our reality better. It's comforting to know that I'm not alone in experiencing this (Jan, F)".

The sub-theme of Peer Support Groups underscores the necessity of fostering safe environments for students to share their experiences, particularly for stop-out students. This initiative aligns with social support theory, which posits that social relationships significantly influence emotional well-being (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). By establishing peer support groups, educational institutions can facilitate meaningful connections among students, enabling them to navigate challenges collectively and enhancing their reintegration process. These support networks not only mitigate the emotional and psychological obstacles encountered by stop-out students but also foster a feeling of belonging and community, essential for their academic achievement and retention.

While State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) are crucial in providing educational services, there are notable deficiencies in effectively communicating available student resources, leaving many students uninformed about essential support options necessary for a successful return to their studies (Arangote, 2018). This information gap not only hinders students' ability to navigate their reintegration into academic life but also underscores the need for strategic interventions that align with Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which emphasizes the impact of individual circumstances on students' educational journeys. By addressing these gaps and enhancing communication regarding available resources, SUCs can better support stop-out students in overcoming barriers and achieving their academic goals.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study offers significant insights into the experiences of stop-out students in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines, highlighting the interplay between the obstacles they encounter and their academic ambitions. Key findings indicate that financial challenges and personal circumstances are substantial barriers leading students to pause their education. Upon contemplating a return to their studies, these individuals face adjustment difficulties, including social integration and adapting to new educational modalities. Understanding their motivations for returning, such as support from their social environment, the desire to complete their education, and aspirations for career advancement is essential for enhancing their educational persistence.

To effectively support these students, SUCs must implement tailored reintegration programs that facilitate smoother transitions back to academic life. The study emphasizes the necessity for institutional responsiveness in this process, advocating for initiatives like orientation sessions, academic counseling, and peer support networks. Such measures can create an environment that acknowledges the unique experiences of stop-out students and promotes their successful reintegration. Although the main focus of this study is student perspectives, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations, such as the absence of faculty and administrative perspectives and the pandemic-influenced contextual relevance that may not apply to other educational settings or future cohorts.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed:
SUCs School Administrators and Faculty Members:

Enhance Information Dissemination: Implement targeted programs to inform students about available services, focusing on the specific needs of stop-out students, including comprehensive orientation sessions, accessible counseling, and the establishment of support groups.

Empathy Training for Faculty: Provide professional development workshops for faculty to better understand the challenges faced by stop-out students, enabling them to offer empathetic guidance and tailored academic support.
Commission on Higher Education (CHED):

Develop Institutional Frameworks: Create and promote guidelines that facilitate the reintegration of stop-out students, addressing their adjustment concerns through structured support systems.
Future Researchers:

Broaden Research Scope: Conduct studies with larger, more diverse samples and employ a multi-stakeholder approach that includes insights from faculty and administrative staff to enrich understanding of stop-out experiences.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATION

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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