# Seize the day or seize theses? The challenges in undergraduate thesis writing

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Thesis writing is an endeavour that many undergraduate students have to surmount coupled with its inevitable challenges. Consequently, this study was conducted to investigate the diverse thesis writing challenges experienced by arts and humanities students enrolled in Bachelor of Arts degrees in Communication, English Language, and Filipino Language in a state university in the northern part of Luzon, Philippines. A descriptive phenomenology was utilised via focus group discussions to collect data. Through thematic analysis, three main themes or facets of the diverse challenges in thesis writing have been identified. The facets are (1) student-emanating; (2) adviser-emanating; and (3) pandemic/emergency remote teaching-emanating. This research adds to the literature on the challenges in undergraduate thesis writing during emergency remote teaching, provides an input towards pedagogical implications, and recommends future research directions.

## Introduction

In the realm of academia, it is difficult to contest the essential role of thesis writing. In fact, it is so important that it is a prerequisite for students to graduate from many degree programs (Ballena & Liwag, 2019). Writing theses in a general sense of the world is a herculean endeavour. It is mostly the result of adequate direction and excellent training (Komba, 2016). As a result, the research of Rauf (2016) clearly demonstrated that students' hard effort, active involvement, and drive are critical in completing theses on time.

The intricacy and level of research required for theses might differ depending on a country, a university, or a training program (Jain et al., 2021). Surprisingly, Ekpoh (2016) found that 92% of students claimed they had difficulty with their research and thesis writing, while just 8% stated they had no difficulty. This indicates that there exist a number of challenges students will face in the conduct of their theses, one of which is facility with the English language. Jeyaraj (2018) espoused that students are required to be familiar with academic writing standards, have disciplinary knowledge and technical vocabulary mastery, and possess fluency in English. Grammar, word choice, proper structure, translation, and conjunctions, to name a few, have also been added in the cart of students' challenges (Çetinkaya & Yılmaz, 2017).

The findings in the research by Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) showed that a majority of students, including those who were proficient, were unable to synthesise, evaluate, or explain the literature in their writing. There were also issues regarding depth of knowledge in research designs (Donohue et al., 2021), issues in accessing relevant and reliable sources such as scholarly journals and textbooks (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2015; Sukandi & Rianita,

2020), as well as financial matters in the process of thesis writing (Natividad-Franco, 2021).

A proportion of challenges arises because thesis supervisors do not provide adequate guidance. Hence, many students confront several problems during their thesis writing process, such as dissemination of innovation, unavailability of advisors for consultations, unfavourable supervisor remarks, limited time to create the paper, and a lack of coordination (Bulling, 2020; Manchishi et al., 2015; Tiwari, 2019). The first thing to do according to Yousefi (2015) is that the quality of supervisor and student relationships must be examined, so that supervisors can be in charge of guiding students through thesis drafting and revision processes and helping students improve their research skills, generally speaking (Han, 2014; Puspitasari, et al., 2020).

Other kinds of problems existing in the corpus include, but are not limited to, the following: choosing topics for research, construction of research titles, deficient knowledge of research methodology, a lack of interest in research, a lack of time, cooperation of respondents, analysing data using *SPSS* or other statistical software, paraphrasing, thesis formatting, inability to expound ideas, organisational challenges, stress management (Bocar, 2009; Ebadi & Pourahmadi, 2019; Fatahipour & Nemati, 2016; Hamzaoui, 2021; Qasem & Zayid, 2019).

Working on theses during the pandemic has been difficult because it has thwarted thesis completion, especially for those who worked from home (*Rizqiyyah, et al., 2021*). Notwithstanding, Suparman (2021) straightforwardly mentioned that many students and advisors in universities had to find a convenient time for both sides to meet due to their own affairs, even before emergency remote teaching; the pandemic exacerbated this problem. A number of roadblocks with online thesis supervision in consequence emerged during emergency remote teaching, namely difficulty transitioning from offline to online thesis supervision, ineffective interactions between advisors and students, having less time available to constantly access online media, being hampered in the field data collection process, suffering from a decrease in the number of students completing their theses, communicating with their group mates, and writing the entire theses all in all (Prihandoko, et al., 2022; Subia et al., 2022).

## Context of the study

According to the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in the Philippines, thesis writing is a required course that every student has to undertake in order to graduate from Bachelor of Arts in Communication (CHED Memo Order, Number 35, Series of 2017), Bachelor of Arts in English Language (CHED Memo Order, Number 24, Series of 2017), and Bachelor of Arts in Filipino Language (CHED Memo Order, Number 22, Series of 2017). In the college where the data were collected, there are two allotted semesters, three units per semester, also known as Thesis 1 and 2, for students to embark on their thesis journey. Students are divided into dyads for BACOM and BAEL students, while students are divided into two or three members per group for BAFIL students. BACOM and

BAEL students enrol Thesis 1 in their third year, second semester, and Thesis 2 in their fourth year, first semester. Meanwhile, BAFIL students enrol Thesis 1 in their third year, first semester, and Thesis 2 in their third year, second semester.

With this information, this paper argues that research studies have been conducted to explore the challenges faced by students in the conduct of their thesis activities in the graduate school (Ballena & Liwag, 2019; Donohue et al., 2021; Ebadi & Pourahmadi, 2019; Ekpoh, 2016; Fatahipour & Nemati, 2016; Jain et al., 2021; Jeyaraj, 2018; Komba, 2016; Manchishi et al., 2015; Rauf, 2016; Shahsavar & Kourepaz, *2020;* Suparman, 2021; Yousefi et al., 2015). However, exploration of the challenges experienced by undergraduates in the Philippines in progressing their theses during emergency remote teaching seems to remain uncharted. This study aims to shed light on the ongoing development of pedagogical interventions to support college undergraduate thesis writing, that can be applicable in both national and international educational contexts. The guiding question for this research is: What are the facets of the challenges experienced by Bachelor of Arts in Communication (BACOM) students, Bachelor of Arts in English Language (BAEL) students, and Bachelor of Arts in Filipino Language (BAFIL) students in the conduct of their research endeavour?

## Method

In order to qualitatively analyse the multifaceted difficulties that BACOM, BAEL, and BAFIL students encountered throughout the course of their thesis writing, this study utilised descriptive phenomenology, specifically Martirano's (2016) *Transcendental methodology.* The steps followed were identifying the phenomenon to study, creating a sense of epoche, collecting data from a sample of the population of persons who have experienced the phenomenon, analysing the responses through horizontalisation, and developing textural description (what) and structural description (how).

### Site and participants

The informants were purposively recruited through the following inclusion criteria: (1) enrolled in the College of Arts and Humanities in the selected university; (2) enrolled in Thesis 2 at the time of the study or who just finished Thesis 2 in the previous semester before the conduct of the study; and (3) willing to participate in the data collection. A total of 40 arts and humanities students were recruited, 19 from the Bachelor of Arts in Communication, 12 from the Bachelor of Arts in English language, and 9 from the Bachelor of Arts in Filipino language. The university from which the participants were drawn is one of the leading state universities in the Cordillera Administrative Region in the Philippines.

### Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview protocol for focus group discussion (FGD) was devised to gather data for analysis. In this case, the researcher followed the steps of Majid et al. (2017) in conducting a pilot test. The first step was to clearly determine the interview

questions which included an introductory question, key questions, and a closing question. The second step was to have the interview questions reviewed by experts. In this study, a language expert was requested to validate the interview protocol. The third step was to select participants, so the researcher asked for BACOM volunteers through consent letters approved by the dean of the college. After the approval, seven BACOM students were invited to join. The penultimate step was to pilot the interview guide via Zoom video conferencing which lasted for 73 minutes. The final step was to integrate modifications in the interview protocol based on the result of the pilot FGD.

**Procedure and analysis**

The focus group discussions (FGD) with the participants provided the main corpus of data. Six focus groups were created with 6-9 members through the use of Zoom and Google Meet video conferencing, and the researcher served as the facilitator. According to Del Rio-Roberts (2011), 6-12 people should be in a focus group since fewer than 6 may not lead to enough discussion and more than 12 may make it difficult to follow the topic. Prior to the FGDs, consent letters were distributed in the students' respective group chat rooms approved by the dean of the college and the year level advisers of the students. The researcher explained how the interview would go and asked the informants' permission to record the meetings. Each recorded session lasted for approximately 70-100 minutes, which was transcribed thereafter. The recordings and the transcripts of the focus group discussions were sent to the participants for feedback or member check (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) via Facebook Messenger. After some time, the participants gave no comments nor suggestions on the transcripts, so the data analysis ensued.

The data sets were analysed using the process of thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology of Sundler et al. (2019). The process starts with the initial data and moves on to the discovery of meanings (achieve familiarity with the data through open-minded reading), grouping them into patterns (search for meanings and themes), and writing the conclusions of themes relevant to the research goal and the actual setting (organising themes into a meaningful wholeness). Sundler et al. (2019) added that the findings are reported and described conversely (i.e., starting with the themes and the descriptive text, illustrated with quotes), so that the meanings gleaned from participants' experiences are articulated in an insightful prose structured around themes.

**Findings and discussion**

Three main themes, known as the *facets* of the various challenges in thesis writing, have emerged from the series of FGDs, which are as follows: (1) student-emanating facet; (2) adviser-emanating facet; and (3) pandemic/emergency remote teaching (ERT) emanating facet. The themes are portrayed in Figure 1 which highlights how these facets are interlinked, and how these were constructed from the categories explored in more detail below.
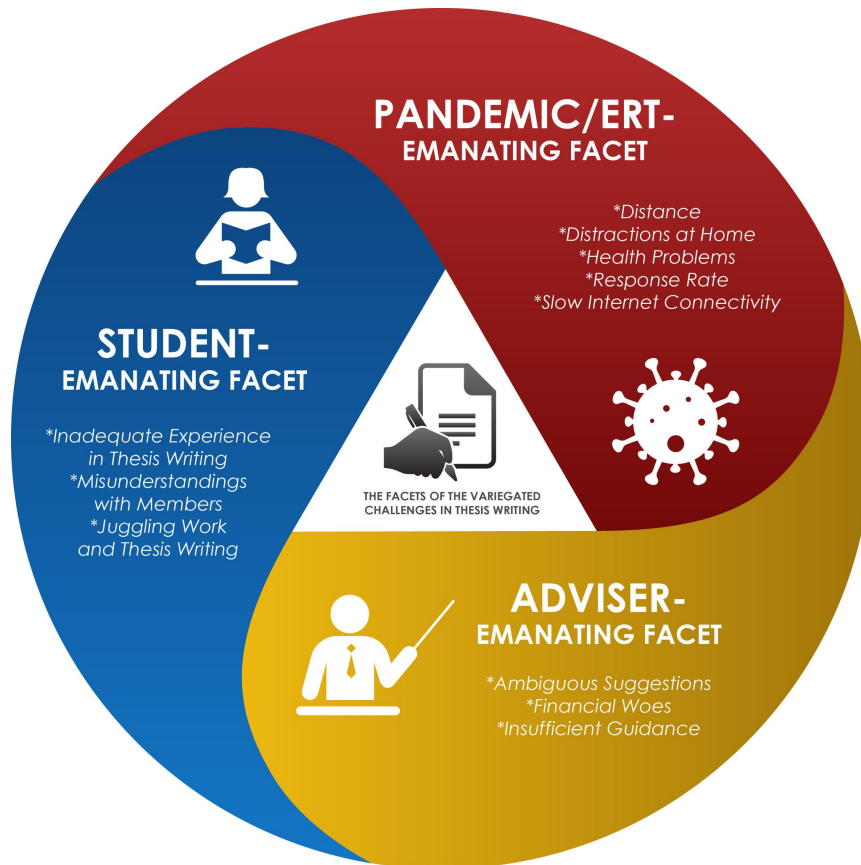
Figure 1: The facets of the varied challenges in thesis writing

**Student-emanating facet**

The first facet of the students' challenges in thesis writing is student-emanating. These are challenges that students face as regards their inadequate experience in thesis writing, misunderstandings with members, and juggling work and theses.

In terms of inadequate experience in thesis writing, students pinpointed specific parts of their theses that they found challenging such as writing the introduction in general, what specific information to write in the methodology, how to discuss the results/ findings of the study, and formatting their theses.

Hamzaoui (2021) shared that in general students lack prior knowledge of what constitutes research. Despite the fact that some courses help students get ready to write theses, there are still many issues that supervisors and students must deal with during the writing process (Thabran & Fajaryani, 2016). Regarding the specific content of the introduction, Komba (2015) said that students' explanations of what was known and what was unknown about their research topics were unclear. Qasem and Zayid (2019) mentioned

that students lack a bird's eye view of what to put in the methodology section, while the vast majority of students in the study by Komba (2015) did not include justifications when selecting methodology areas, as they lacked in depth knowledge of research designs (for example Çetinkaya & Yılmaz, 2017; Donohue et al., 2021). Another problem area is how to discuss the results/ findings of a study. It appears in the research of Komba (2015) that students' analyses of data were inadequate. The majority of students merely gave the results without explaining what the results meant. Finally, issues were raised with regard to formatting theses (Fatahipour & Nemati, 2016). In this regard, undergraduate students may need assistance in writing their theses, especially in the areas of the introduction, methodology, the results/ findings, and the format of the paper.

Aside from the above-mentioned, student participants expressed their forms of misunderstandings with their group members. Their issues revolved around proper distribution of tasks because some members dominated others, various interpretations of the feedback of their advisers resulting in confusion, offensive remarks from group members, uncooperative group mates, conflicts of ideas, unacknowledged effort from members, demanding elected-leaders in the groups, misinterpreted messages on Facebook Messenger because they did not see one another face-to-face, and group members being unresponsive when their contributions were needed the most.

One of the most popular and well-studied teaching strategies in college classrooms is group work (Wilson et al., 2018). However, studies support the findings of this research especially with disrespectful leaders, a lack of respect among team members, the imposition of the opinions of more aggressive members, a disregard for other people's opinions, potential conflicts among group members, an uneven task distribution, an uneven level of engagement, workload, and responsibility, and members not communicating when submissions are fast-approaching (Ferdous & Karim, 2019; Šerić & Garbin Praničević, 2018). Interestingly, what this research brought out anew were misunderstandings such as misinterpreted messages on Facebook Messenger because they did not see one another face-to-face, and various interpretations of the feedback of their advisers resulting in confusion. These misunderstandings transpired because students used Facebook Messenger as their medium of communication, which may not perfectly present clear communication between and among people. In the end, the barrier is not being able to meet the group members face-to-face.

Lastly, some of the participants found it challenging to juggle work and their theses because the former affected the latter. Since students were under emergency remote teaching, flexibility in studying and submission of assignments was paramount. Nevertheless, two students unveiled:

> For me, sir, one problem that I encountered in Thesis 1 was my job. I had to work from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. at a photocopy centre, so I admit that I had to put some activities aside. (Andy)

> It is really difficult to balance work and studies. Whenever my partner instructed me to accomplish big research tasks, I had to be absent from work for a day or two. As a

> cashier, I could not just leave the counter if I had to submit tasks to my research partner.
> I was just lucky because my boss was not at the store most of the time, so I could do
> some activities in between. (Les)

The research by Berry and Hughes (2020) indicated that online learning can improve work-life balance for most students, especially when compared to the traditional fixed time and place classroom setting. For this reason, thesis students ventured on work because they relied substantially on their employment revenue to support their education, especially in light of Covid-19 and its effects on developing countries like the Philippines (Ebardo & Wibowo, 2021). For the same reason, their overall performance in thesis writing was negatively impacted. This finding is supported by multiple studies which report that juggling work and school is not conducive for academic success (Coral et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2020; Salamonson et al., 2020).

## Adviser-emanating facet

The second facet of the students' varied challenges in thesis writing is adviser-emanating. Three components build up the themes under this facet, which include ambiguous suggestions, financial woes, and insufficient guidance.

One challenge pointed out by thesis students is ambiguous suggestions from advisers. According to them, they became confused by the suggestions because they were unsure as these suggestions differed when they had consultations. They tried to incorporate them in the paper, but it appeared that they were incorrect. This, in turn, restrained the completion of their manuscripts. Hershey boldly stated that:

> When we asked our adviser, she suggested this and that, and we followed her lead. But
> then, what we did was wrong the next time we had a consultation. The adviser said we
> should do this and that. We incorporated the suggestions, and the cycle just continued.
> We felt like we could not fully comprehend what our adviser meant, and it cost delays in
> the thesis writing. It was confusing. (Hershey)

Commentary about ambiguous suggestions from advisers is already available in the literature. Silinda and Brubacher (2016) remarked that some students expressed concerns about not understanding their supervisors' feedback, not knowing how to write, and not knowing whether their written work would be accepted. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the advisers/supervisors to make sure that the students are aware of their expectations. This will indirectly lessen how much the expectations of the advisers and the students' demonstration of discipline knowledge are 'out of sync' (Singh, 2017).

Unfortunately, students suffered from financial woes as another challenge in their thesis writing. These financial woes seem to root from requests from their advisers. Despite being in emergency remote teaching, some advisers requested printed manuscripts which cost students a certain amount of money for printing and [jeepney] fare going to school. Three participants reported:

> Our adviser and panel members just wrote a few corrections which meant we had to print the manuscripts all over again to be given back to them. I think it is a bit of a waste for very minimal corrections. (Josh)

> To be honest, sir, our adviser did not allow us to submit our manuscripts online because she said that she has a poor eyesight, and she is not used to checking manuscripts online, so she required us to personally submit them to her. (Cher)

> Besides the cost of printing, the fare and the effort to go to school were challenging. (Jay)

It is a grim reality that students lack the financial resources necessary to fulfil the costs associated with writing theses (Asogwa et al., 2014; Khozaei, et al., 2015; Natividad-Franco, 2021). But then, being asked for printed manuscripts for a few corrections and reprinting them, and delivering these manuscripts to school amidst emergency remote teaching may have worsened the financial instability of students, not to mention putting them in more health risks.

Of all the varied challenges in thesis writing, insufficient guidance generated the greatest number of remarks from student-researchers. The insufficient guidance may take the forms of students' generally feeling left in the dark due to delayed replies, 'unseen' messages on Facebook Messenger, a lack of step-by-step instructions, and advisers unavailable for consultations, which may have adversely affected the motivation and confidence of the students in the conduct of their theses. One student narrated:

> Our adviser was hard to reach. I would contact her on Messenger, but she would not 'see' my messages even if she was online. It would take days before we received her answers. There was a time when I chatted her because we were running out of time. I did not know what to do and how to go about the results and discussion. Since I did not receive a reply for days, I was losing my motivation and confidence. When she replied, she said not to stress her out because she was busy, and she advised us to simply apply what we knew. I really wanted to cry at the time, but I had no choice but to proceed without her guidance. (Cher)

Studies have already shown that thesis students suffer from insufficient guidance from their advisers (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020; Qasem & Zayid, 2019; Silinda & Brubacher, 2016), in spite of the fact that supervision has a discernible effect on the outcome of a bachelor thesis and is most effective when it focuses on guidance according to Strebel et al. (2021). Unfortunately, students experienced delayed replies and 'unseen' messages on Facebook Messenger from their advisers, which entailed delayed revisions of assignments (Asogwa et al., 2014). Furthermore, students reported that their advisers did not provide step-by-step instructions, whereas participants in the research of Taylor (2018) favoured a structured approach to the advisory process, which was deficient according to the participants in this study. Ultimately, the researcher found that advisers were unavailable for consultations. Scheduled meetings with thesis students is crucial because these are the moments in which feedback and instructions are given (Singh, 2017), but in general it remains a challenge in the thesis writing process (Matin & Khan, 2017).

## Pandemic/Emergency remote teaching-emanating facet

The third facet of the students' challenges in thesis writing is pandemic/emergency remote teaching. Five constructs comprised this facet, namely (1) distance; (2) distractions at home; (3) health problems; (4) response rate; and (5) slow Internet connectivity.

*Distance*
One particular challenge is distance from one group member to the other. Cent mentioned:

> A specific difficulty in the pandemic was not being able to meet and discuss with my group members face-to-face because of geographical differences. It was really difficult to be far from one another especially when reaching decisions, what to do next, among others. (Cent)

The participants in Biçer (2021) believed that interpersonal interactions improved the efficiency of research, which resonates with the belief of the thesis participants in this research. In fact, thesis writing cannot be carried out remotely since it requires extensive discussion and interactive communication among members (Asogwa et al., 2014; Slamet et al., 2021). Regrettably, the pandemic paved the way for emergency remote teaching to take place with no alternatives.

*Distractions at home*
Since students were required to stay at home, another challenge that arose was distractions from home. Students were asked to do household chores and run errands during class hours. Sometimes, family members did not understand why students were on screen most of the time. Two students reported:

> One challenge is being at home. There was a time when my parents thought that I was doing nothing since I was just staring at my screen or surfing the net. As a result, they would ask me to do household chores, and the tasks would consume my time for school work. Sometimes, they would ask me to do something while in the middle of an academic work. (Mina)

> Another challenge is performing my responsibilities at home. Since my sibling is working, I am left to do chores and run errands when asked by family members. My parents or my aunt would also ask me to help at the convenience store [sari-sari store], so my attention was really divided. (Maria)

It has been established by respondents in studies that they suffered from interruptions and did not have a quiet period studying at home due to gadgets, social media, and all-day screen time that resulted in role stress and strain (Aljedaan et al., 2021; Kostaki & Karayianni, 2022; Wallace et al., 2021). On top of these, thesis writers in this study may have consumed a lot of their academic time doing household chores or running errands. The worst part is that parents may be dubious whether students are truly doing their academic work because of prolonged periods of screen time.

*Health problems*

During the global pandemic, health was a primary concern, so another challenge in thesis writing was being afflicted by the Covid-19 virus. Two students explained:

> Sir, since my partner had the virus, I had to do the data gathering alone at the onset. It was supposed to be headed by my partner because she was familiar with the population and locale of the study, so it was one problem that I encountered because I felt some pressure doing it alone. (Mina)

> I had a health problem, sir. I tested positive of Covid-19, so my partner and I had to put our thesis on hold. I had to be under quarantine [cleared her throat and cried]. I could not think clearly because I was thinking of my health and my research. I had a lot of stress at the time, sir. (Keena)

Two teenage, female participants in this research became Covid-19 patients, so they had to be under quarantine which took a toll on the conduct of their research. The situation resulted in unplanned delays, added pressures, and more stress not only on them but also on their group members. This is consistent with the results from Kowal et al. (2020), who claimed that younger individuals were under greater stress than older people, and women were under more stress than men during quarantine.

*Response rate*

One of the challenges faced by undergraduate students is gathering research data (Dewi, 2022). The reason for this phenomenon is response rate. The set up for gathering data changed because of the pandemic and emergency remote teaching. Previously, many undergraduate students gathered data in a face-to-face manner. However, participants in this study needed to communicate and deal with data gathering online, and this constituted to a challenge in the conduct of students' theses due to response rate. The participants realised they were 'seen-zoned' on Facebook Messenger, received no replies from their emails and follow-ups, and experienced delayed responses which took weeks. Jay shared:

> The problem is that the respondents took a lot of time before their responses were collected. Since they live in the outskirts of town, they checked their messages late due to connectivity problems. In consequence, we had to wait for 2 or 3 weeks for the responses. (Jay)

Donohue et al. (2021) construed that target participants are less accessible, which has an influence on recruitment and response rates, even though online delivery of the data collection methods may be adjusted. By and large, lack of cooperation of research samples is a major factor in how difficult it is for students to complete their theses (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020).

*Slow Internet connectivity*

Lastly, slow Internet connectivity was identified as a challenge, especially to those students who resided in far-flung areas in the Northern part of Luzon, Philippines. At times,

students needed to find network signal outside their houses or on the roofs of their houses. Maria described:

> And then another challenge, sir, is the Internet connection. Sometimes, the signal is erratic in the province, so I had to search for signal outside the house. I also experienced putting the 'pocket wifi' on the roof for stronger connection. Despite having enough signal at times, the connection would snap in the middle of submission or in the middle of research work. It was stressful, sir, because I had deadlines to beat. (Maria)

Poor Internet connectivity appears to be a recurring challenge heightened by the pandemic (Ferri et al., 2020; Hamzaoui, 2021). In the same fashion, achieving dependable Internet access is still a long way off in the Philippines, despite the country's overall development in Internet infrastructure, particularly in metropolitan areas (Abel Jr., 2020). It is worse in far-flung areas in the country mainly because of geographic locations (Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). Participants in the study by Quinto (2021) remarked that the biggest challenge that students have faced since moving to their respective provinces has been Internet access. Therefore, thesis students in this research experienced the same fate due to unreliable Internet to the point that they had to find places where signal is accessible, like outside their houses or on top of their houses.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This research paved the way for the creation of the facets of the challenges in thesis writing by undergraduate arts and humanities students taking Bachelor of Arts degrees in Communication, English language, and Filipino language. The facets are (1) student-emanating; (2) adviser-emanating; and (3) pandemic/emergency remote teaching-emanating.

With regard to student-emanating challenges, advisers could explain the 'nitty-gritty' details of thesis writing from introduction, methodology, results/findings and discussion, to conclusions; could monitor students' contributions by letting them specify their work in the whole process, and could require self and peer evaluation to further assess their contributions in the writing process. Adviser-emanating challenges may be mitigated by ensuring that students are aware of the advisers' expectations after every consultation, by letting students submit their manuscripts online so that students do not have to print them for every consultation period, and by following schedules agreed upon by all parties involved. Lastly, advisers and advisees should blend in-person and virtual meetings to allow more flexibility in the midst of emergency remote teaching.

Contributing to the existing literature on challenges faced by students in thesis writing, this study finds commonalities in students' struggles with thesis writing, both prior to the pandemic and during emergency remote teaching. This research identified roadblocks in the conduct of research which were pandemic/emergency remote teaching emanating. This is an imperative and a valuable insight, especially given that in-person classes in the higher education may not be certain to take place in all the coming semesters in the

Philippines. Overall, the pandemic aggravated challenges facing undergraduate students in thesis writing, which may be crucial for their success in academe if left unaddressed.

Similar to other research endeavours, there are limitations in this study, so some future directions are suggested. This research was conducted qualitatively in a newly-established college in one of the leading state universities in the Philippines. Specifically, it included the experiences of thesis students taking Bachelor of Arts in Communication, English language, and Filipino language, so generalising the findings to other contexts should be undertaken with caution. In the future, quantitative studies can be done in other contexts, using the themes and categories generated in this study. Since this research 'zoomed in' only on the experiences of students, other researchers could investigate the experiences of thesis advisers and the challenges they face, comparing their experiences with the student experience in thesis writing.

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