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The Philippine Higher Education Sector in the Time of COVID-19

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This paper reports the policy-responses of different Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs) to the novel coronavirus, COVD-19 pandemic. It compares these responses with those made by HEIs in Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Publicly available data and news reports were used to gauge the general public's reaction to these policies and how the Philippines' responses fare with its Southeast Asian neighbors. The paper observes that despite the innovations made by Philippine HEIs in terms of alternative learning modes and technologies for delivering education, there are still gaps and challenges in their responses. It recommends that policy-responses and learning innovations should be grounded on a deeper understanding of distance education and should be sensitive to the call of the times.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has become a global health crisis. As of October 6, 2020, almost 36 million people have been infected and over one million have died. In the Philippines, this translates into almost 325,000 infected and 6,000 deaths (Worldometer, 2020). To curb the spread of COVID-19, most governments have opted to employ quarantine protocols and temporarily shut down their educational institutions. As a consequence, more than a billion learners have been affected worldwide. Among this number are over 28 million Filipino learners across academic levels who have to stay at home and comply with the Philippine government's quarantine measures (UNESCO, 2020).

To respond to the needs of learners, especially of the 3.5 million tertiary-level students enrolled in approximately 2,400 HEIs, certain HEIs in the country have implemented proactive policies for the continuance of education despite the closure. These policies include modified forms of online learning that aim to facilitate student learning activities. Online learning might be in terms of synchronous, real-time lectures and time-based outcomes assessments, or asynchronous, delayed-time activities, like pre-recorded video lectures and time-independent assessments (Oztok et al., 2013). Case in point are top universities in the country, viz., De La Salle University (DLSU), Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU), the University of Santo Tomas (UST), and the state-run University of the Philippines, Diliman (UPD).

DLSU has resorted to remote online learning, which combines both synchronous and asynchronous activities. For students who cannot participate in online learning, there are flexible options for completing course requirements throughout the academic year (De La Salle University, 2020a). ADMU has suspended synchronous online classes but continued asynchronous online learning so that "all students can learn at their own pace" (Villarin, 2020). UST, like DLSU, has opted to continue with synchronous and asynchronous online classes, and a flexible grading of

student outputs and assessments (University of Santo Tomas, 2020). Other private universities and institutions such as STI College, St. Scholastica's College, Adamson University, Far Eastern University, the University of the East, Ateneo de Davao University, and the University of San Carlos have continued with their online classes as well.

Arguably, the HEIs' pivot to modified forms of online learning attempts to concretize the government's stance to continue learning despite the pandemic. As the Philippine's Department of Education (DepEd) Secretary, Leonor Briones quipped, "Education must continue even in times of crisis whether it may be a calamity, disaster, emergency, quarantine, or even war" (Department of Education, 2020). The Philippines' Commission on Higher Education (CHEd), on the other hand, advised HEIs to continue the "deployment of available flexible learning and other alternative modes of delivery in lieu of on-campus learning" (Commission on Higher Education, 2020). These pronouncements aim to encourage the continuance of learning. Without implementing rules and regulations, however, private HEIs are left to make their own policies.

THE GENERAL PUBLIC'S INITIAL REACTION

For varying reasons, however, different sectors have chastised the proactive online learning measures by these HEIs. For example, through an online petition based on student and faculty sentiments, student governments from different universities urged CHEd to mandate the cancellation of online classes, stating that "while we understand the need for learning to continue, the different circumstances of students across universities are not ideal and conducive for such." The petitioners argue that "access to the internet connection and learning devices continued to be a privilege up to this day, placing those with poor internet access at a disadvantage when it comes to online classes." [For a better picture, 45% of Filipino citizens (46 million) and 74% (34,500) of public schools do not have access to the internet (Jones, 2019)].

Furthermore, "adding more workload for the students increases their burden and contradicts the purpose of the lockdown, which is to help their families prepare and adjust to the situation at hand." Finally, there is an issue about the "lack of environments conducive to learning at home and the effectiveness of the online lectures" (Bagayas, 2020). Social media hashtags like, #NoStudentLeftBehind, #NoSchoolLeftBehind, #EndOnlineClasses, #EndTheSem, and #NoToOnlineClasses strengthen these sentiments further.

In consideration of such petitions, the state-run University of the Philippines-Diliman (UPD) suspended all modes of online learning. In his message to the academic community on March 17, 2020, UPD Chancellor Fidel Nemenzo announced the cancellation of online classes due to (i) emergency concerns as "caring for our families and for ourselves comes first," (ii) "unequal access to personal computers and the internet exists among our community," and (iii) "the shift to online classes has also not been smooth for our faculty, who have had to learn new skills and revise their syllabi overnight" (Nemenzo, 2020).

It is quite understandable that some of the backlashes stem from the stresses caused by the pandemic. The other concerns, however, have already been noted by experts in the field of distance education. First, there is the issue of social integration and peer culture, and the possibility of transmission of values in a "virtual" classroom. Since there is a lack of human interaction in the learning process, students may learn less in such a set-up as opposed to those in the traditional classroom (Edge and Loegering, 2000; Gamage et al., 2020). Second, there is also an issue on the unnaturalness and the results of online learning, since it goes against how natural teaching and learning supposedly take place (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt, 2006; Adnan and Anwar, 2020). The lack of face-to-face human interaction in the online learning space and process appears disconcerting to both educators and learners alike.

On top of these concerns, however, there are deep socio-economic concerns for online learning in a developing country like the Philippines. Students in far-flung areas in the country do not even have roads or electricity, let alone access to computers and the internet. Moreover, given current internet infrastructure, even students in urban areas may have limited internet access. This then results in a "digital divide" between those who do have access and those who do not.

Furthermore, there is also an issue of social policy. The Philippines does not have a national policy dealing directly with online platforms such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Open Distance e-learning (ODel), and Open Educational Resources (OERs). While there are laws, like the *Open Distance Learning Act* (Sixteenth Philippine Congress, 2014), which provide legal bases for funding such platforms, they are not enough as "some national policies will have to be put in place to sustain the growth" of these online platforms (Bandalaria, 2019).

THE IDEA OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

At the time of quarantines and viral outbreaks, it would seem that online learning is the only viable way to continue learning at a distance. This, however, seems to rest on a mistaken assumption. It should be emphasized that online learning is just one mode of distance education.

Distance education is broadly characterized as *any* form of learning experience where the learner and the instructor are physically separated from each other (not only by place but also by time). Arguably, such a dislocation is "the perfect context for free-flowing thought that lets us move beyond the restricted confines of a familiar social order" (hooks, 2003). Moreover, this type of education is a way of providing learning opportunities to every learner, whatever their circumstances might be. This means that distance education may extend access to education through distribution and economies of scale (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Owusu-Agyeman and Amoakohene, 2020).

One may claim that the main thrust of distance education is to bring education to those who are unreachable, under-resourced, less-privileged and inaccessible (Biana, 2013). Taken as such, distance education "reaches out to students wherever they live

or wish to study" (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005). This kind of flexibility gives students more freedom to actively participate in learning (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Daniel, 2016). Students learn even if they are separated from their instructors by space and/or time (Edge and Loegering, 2000). In the time of COVID-19, distance learning became a necessity for learners and educators all over the world (Ali, 2020).

Such a form of education, however, need not be limited to online learning (Baggaley, 2008). Some have suggested using cell phones and (SMS) texting technology to facilitate learning (Flores, 2018). Others urge to employ TV programs, radio broadcasts, and other non-internet based media (Punzalan, 2020). Perhaps, some teachers might go back to basics and distribute annotated physical textbooks to their students through courier services. As long as the education sector is engaged, teachers and students have ample support, the curriculum and content of the learning modules are well-defined and personalized, technological limitations are acknowledged, and user-friendly and enjoyable materials are present, education will continue one way or another (Ramos et al., 2007; Ali, 2020). Such support presupposes a collaboration between teachers and policy makers and authorities to develop the relevant referenced programs as well.

Notwithstanding the various stresses it brings, the outbreak of COVID-19 not only forced us to think about the technologies for delivering education (Kim, 2020), it also compelled us to rethink the very nature of education itself. The government should create and implement concrete policies that will support a new breed of distance educators. Educators in turn need to innovate to ensure that education remains inclusive and accessible, and that distance learning is not limited to pure online learning.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Several months after the initial backlash in March 2020, CHEd Chairperson, Prospero De Vera qualified the idea of flexible learning as "more encompassing than online learning." De Vera explains that while online learning requires internet access, flexible learning does not necessarily require connectivity. Instead, it "focuses on the design and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions that address the learners' unique needs in terms of pace, place, process, and products of learning" (Parrocha, 2020).

Similarly, DepEd sets a distance learning approach that utilizes three methods: (1) delivery of printed modules to students, (2) access to *DepEd Commons*, an online education platform DepEd developed to support alternative modes of learning, and (3) delivery of lessons or self-learning modules via radio and television. The specific guidelines on the implementation of distance learning, however, are still under review (Magsambol, 2020).

Private universities and institutions have likewise adapted to the limitations imposed by the pandemic and are poised to go either fully online, blended learning, or scheduled in-person classes in case the government lifts quarantine measures. In July 2020, DLSU adopted an alternate mode

of education that is technology-enabled dubbed Lasallians Remote and Engaged Approach for Connectivity in Higher Education (R.E.A.C.H). R.E.A.C.H emphasizes the importance of engagement between faculty and students and offers three different delivery modes: (1) fully online (synchronous and asynchronous), and whenever possible (2) hybrid (blending of online and face-to-face), and (3) face-to-face. All online academic tools and materials are organized and made accessible via the university's learning management system (LMS), *AnimoSpace* (De La Salle University, 2020b).

Similarly, ADMU piloted the Adaptive Design for Learning (ADL). ADL combines three different modes of delivery: (1) online, and, whenever possible, (2) blended, and (3) face-to-face; and offers uniquely designed courses that suit faculty style and respond to learner's needs and contexts. The curricula materials are hosted in *AteneoBlueCloud*, an online platform branded as the university's *virtual campus* (Ateneo de Manila University, 2020).

Meanwhile, UST through its learning management platform, *UST Cloud Campus* implemented an *Enriched Virtual Mode* (EVR) that combines both online (synchronous and asynchronous) and offline strategies to ensure accessibility and flexibility in learning. Other than team-teaching, the approaches in EVR include a combination of the following: (1) complementing of professional competencies with industry partners and alumni interactions, (2) collaborative online learning with foreign partner institutions, and (3) remote encounters with community partners (Alejandrino, 2020).

Finally, the University of the Philippines System shifted to blended learning using already existing platforms like University Virtual Learning Environment (UVLE), and UP Open University (UPOU). UPOU maximizes online learning and distance education and also offers free special courses in online learning. UP College of Education presented an Education Resilience and Learning Continuity Plan (ERLCP) to help schools transition to an alternative learning environment. ERLCP recommends enacting flexible learning options that are learner-centered and are made available in various modes of delivery such as face-to-face instruction, remote learning, and blended learning (University of the Philippines - College of Education, 2020).

THE RESPONSE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN HEIs

The Philippines is not the only country facing these problems. Its Southeast Asian neighbors have creatively responded to the same challenges and started to pivot to a new era of education. Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam have initiated some form of distance learning as early as May 2020. Thailand's Education Ministry originally planned to implement a learning program using a Distance Learning Television (DLTV) platform. Seventeen television channels were set up to broadcast educational courses, vocational education, non-formal and informal education (Praphornkul, 2020). The approach combines television or on-air learning and online learning. The rollout, however, was met with criticisms due to broadcasting problems and poor connectivity (Bangkok Post, 2020a). The

ministry adjusted its plan and focused instead on preparing for schools to reopen nationally after a survey found that 60–70% of students are not ready for TV education (Bangkok Post, 2020b).

As Thailand universities move their operations online, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) provided more than 60,000 educators and 2 million students access to Microsoft applications (Microsoft, 2020b). Universities have also taken key initiatives and partnerships to ensure that the transition to digital is successful. Chulalongkorn University has launched its own learning platform called the Learning Innovation Center (LIC) which contains resources, information, tools, and methods to support online learning (Chulalongkorn University, 2020). Mahidol University has partnered with Siam Commercial Bank to create an improved virtual platform for both students and teachers (Siam Commercial Bank, 2020). Thammasat University partnered with Skilllane to launch a degree program on data science. Some universities like Chiang Mai University also offer MOOC to encourage online learning (Phongsathorn, 2020).

Indonesia's Education and Culture Ministry, in collaboration with TVRI, a state-owned broadcaster, released their own distance learning program called "Learning from Home" (Jakarta Globe, 2020). The program focuses on improving literacy, numeracy, and character building for all levels of elementary and high schools. The implementation, however, proved to be challenging given issues like uneven access to the internet, the disparity in teacher qualifications and education quality, and the lack of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills (Azzahra, 2020). A survey of 1,045 students found that a majority of students who responded, 53.7%, cited concerns about online learning due to poor streaming, limitation in network quota and reception. Though the reactions are mixed, in general, there seems to be a positive response to online learning in Indonesia (Yamin, 2020). Ninety five percent of Indonesian universities carry out online learning using the Online Learning System Program (SPADA) (Yamin, 2020). SPADA supports LMS across all tertiary education hosting online lectures and course materials made freely available to students.

Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) hosted a national online conference with 300 live meeting hubs to find ways to improve online learning before launching its educational program (Nguyen and Pham, 2020). The conference was attended by HEI leaders, technology and technical service providers including Viettel Group, VNPT, MobiFone, Vietnamobile, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, and FPT (Nguyen and Pham, 2020). MOET reported that 110 out of 240 HEIs in Vietnam had initiated online training. However, not all HEIs have a fully developed LMS (Nguyen and Pham, 2020). Recognizing that they are presented with a unique opportunity to work together and enhance digital teaching and learning, the delegates started working out plans to implement online education long-term and not simply as a response to COVID-19. Notable partnerships and initiatives seemingly inspired by this collaborative discourse include MOET's partnership with Microsoft which equipped education institutions with digital tools to implement remote learning (Microsoft, 2020a), Viettel's offer of free 3G and 4G data to teachers and students using their e-learning platform called Viettel Study, and VNPT's launch of its online learning solution called VNPT E-Learning which also comes with free 3G and 4G data (Lich, 2020).

After months of experimenting, online teaching is now recognized as a formal method in Vietnam, an interesting development considering that any proposal to formally conduct online learning before COVID-19 had been poorly received by the country's academic community (Nguyen and Pham, 2020). Minister of Education and Training Phung Xuan Nha admitted, however, that issues like connectivity problems, especially in remote areas, as well as some pedagogical concerns, like management of student performance, need to be sorted out for the program to succeed.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia are on the same economic and socio-cultural boat and are now facing the same COVID-19 challenges in education. What comes with these problems, however, is the opportunity to improve the way we think about education and implement permanent and sustainable changes that will enhance the quality of our educational systems.

Moving forward, the Philippines needs a clear set of policies and guidelines based on an innovative educational framework. This requires a careful and sincere assessment of the country's readiness to offer learning programs that demand more than the traditional requirements.

As the Philippines ventures into a new mode of learning, several factors need to be considered. This includes teacher capacity, situation and context of the learner, and efficiency of the learning environment. These are, of course, on top of the more obvious issues of internet speed, cost of materials, and mode of delivery. The best way to move forward is to take a step back and design a strategy that engages teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and technology-based companies. This collaborative response based on a collective vision is the kind of creative solution this novel problem warrants.

As the new academic year begins this October, CHEd seems confident in its prescribed flexible learning mode. Stressing the "spirit of bayanihan," or the unique Filipino value of communal unity, De Vera states that we must find ways to cope with the pandemic during these challenging times and ensure that while "learning must continue," "we learn as one, we are ready" (De Vera, 2020b).

In support of such statements, CHEd together with HEIs sought to provide the following mechanism: (1) free training and capacity building for faculty members on flexible learning, (2) launch of the online resource PHL CHEd CONNECT, and (3) putting up of the CHEd Hi-Ed Bayanihan digital community of educators to "explore innovative responses in the context of Philippine HEIs." The CHEd Hi-Ed Bayanihan is a partnership between the government and various HEIs in the country -it is said to be the first of its kind in CHEd history. Through this

effort, De Vera claims that the challenges in education brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic may only be surpassed "if we altogether educate and learn as one" (De Vera, 2020a). These learning innovations, however, should be grounded on a deeper understanding of distance education and should be sensitive to the call of the times.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JJ and HB conceptualized the study and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. MD validated the data used and edited the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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