Philippine Higher Education Institutions in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

Ginbert Permejo CUATON¹

¹Social Science Faculty, Leyte Normal University, Tacloban City, Leyte, 6500, Philippines, cuatonginbert@gmail.com

Abstract: The year 2020 is plagued with unprecedented problems that challenged the current global and national socio-political, economic, and educational landscapes. In the time of COVID-19 pandemic, the global education system is in the process of transforming and adapting to new and challenging situations which test the conventional learning process of classroom human interaction and capitalize in virtual and online education. This paper tries to elucidate how the Higher Education system of the Philippines experienced and responded to the challenge of providing alternative education and learning services during the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study is divided into three parts. The first part provides an analysis on the policies and guidelines implemented by the country's Commission on Higher Education. The second part interrogates and reflects on the responses, challenges, and best practices employed by universities in implementing these guidelines. Lastly this paper provides general recommendations and argues that Philippine Higher Education Institutions/ HEIs should form an Education Continuity Plan that outlines the procedures and instructions that should be followed in the face of a pandemic.

Keywords: *COVID-19; Philippines; pandemic; higher education institutions.*

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1. Introduction

The year 2020 is plagued with unprecedented problems that challenged the current global and national socio-political, economic, and educational landscapes. Last December 2019, the first official case of COVID-19, a disease caused by a novel corona virus called SARS-CoV 2, was detected and confirmed in Wuhan City in the Hubei province of China (Hua & Shaw, 2020). Just few months after the first infection, the number of COVID-19 cases outside of China has increased drastically (Bedford et al., 2020) and the sustained risk of global spread prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the COVID-19 disease as a pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Available data as of April 14, 2020 from the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) of the Johns Hopkins University indicate that the virus has infected at least 1,935,646 people from 185 countries or territories, and has killed 120,914 individuals. Of those who have contracted the virus since it started, 464,995 people have recovered. Among the infected, Italy has recorded the highest number of casualties at 20,465 deaths, followed by Spain (18,056) and France (14,967). On the other hand, China has recorded the highest number of recovered patients at 78,195, followed by Germany (68,200) and Spain (67,504). In the archipelagic and natural hazard prone country of the Philippines (Cuaton & Su, 2020), 5,223 cases were confirmed, of which 335 died and 295 have recovered (CSSE- JHU, 2020).

In the time of COVID-19 pandemic, the global education system is in the process of transforming and adapting to new and challenging situations which test the conventional learning process of human interaction inside a classroom, and capitalize in virtual and online education through the help of technology. This paper tries to elucidate how the higher education system of the Philippines coped with the challenge of adapting its provision of education services in the time of COVID-19. This case study provides an analysis on the policies and guidelines implemented by the country's Commission on Higher Education to manage the continuity of education in the time of a pandemic.

2. The Philippine Commission on Higher Education

Since the first positive case of COVID-19 in the Philippines in January 30, 2020 (DOH, 2020), the Commission on Higher Education or CHED (referred to as "the Commission" in the succeeding sections) has been active and proactive in its response to give guidance and leadership in the sustained provision of higher education to millions of students in the

country. As of April 15, 2020, the Commission has released six (6) Advisories for the prevention, control and mitigation of the spread of COVID-19 in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country. These Advisories were actively disseminated in the agency's official social media accounts and website, as well as communicated to its regional offices.

2.1. CHED Advisory No. 1

The first Advisory was released on February 12, 2020 which centered on massive a) information campaign, b) prevention and control, c) screening, d) athletic and other concerns, e) travel, and f) the creation of in-house information resource unit/office.

To curb the spread of fake news and manage mass hysteria and anxiety, the Commission emphasized the importance of sharing relevant, correct and verified information related to COVID-19. Such information should only be sourced from the Department of Health (DOH) and WHO and suggested that website links of these information be made available to all faculty members, staff, and students via the respective websites of State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines. Various preventive actions to avoid exposure and prevent the spread of the virus have been mentioned. These include: 1) avoiding close contact with sick people, 2) staying home when sick, 3) practicing proper coughing and sneezing etiquette, 4) frequent cleaning and disinfecting of frequently touched objects and surfaces, and 5) practicing frequent proper hand washing. The establishment of screening protocols for each HEI based on the WHO guidelines for screening and response has also been encouraged. Mass gatherings for sports and other purposes were subjected to conscientious assessment and evaluation by concerned parties in order to avoid attending in, participating in, and organizing events that draw a huge number of attendees. Traveling to China and other countries with confirmed positive COVID-19 cases were temporarily banned. Likewise, students, teachers, and other HEI personnel returning from countries with confirmed COVID-19 cases were instructed to comply with the quarantine procedures (home quarantine or isolation for 2-3 weeks) before returning to work or school. Lastly, HEIs were instructed to establish a central contact person or office that will provide students with information as sourced from health-expert advices. The same person or office is mandated to also provide counsel or psychosocial support to students, faculty members, and staff who experience anxiety over the COVID-19 outbreak.

2.2. CHED Advisory No. 2

A month after the first advisory, the CHED Advisory No. 2 was issued on March 11, 2020. The second advisory was centered on the creation of: a) the individual HEI Emergency Plan, b) the suspension of classes in all levels in Metro Manila (National Capital Region), c) the assistance to students, teachers, staff, and HEI administrators who are abroad, and d) the guidance for HEIs with identified cases of COVID-19 in their respective community.

For the Emergency Plan, all HEIs were encouraged to institute protocols based on the WHO Guidelines for Screening and Response. The possibility of community-level transmission was high, hence, HEIs must be ready to respond appropriately to stop the spread of COVID-19. The Commission highlighted that the plan should:

- Create procedures in handling students, faculty members, staff, and administrators who show COVID-19 symptoms by supplementing existing medical emergency measures of HEIs
- Ensure to update these procedures as changes in HEIs develop and inform the affected community of these updates.
- Perform environmental cleaning and disinfection procedure for all buildings especially those frequently touched surfaces (e.g. desktops, doorknobs, light switches, computers, etc.).
- Prepare HEI clinics for immediate triage and isolation of suspected people infected by the virus.

Following the announcement of President Rodrigo Duterte, a three-day suspension of classes in all levels was implemented in Metro Manila, the National Capital Region of the Philippines. HEIs were advised by the Commission to coordinate with their partner Host Training Establishments (HTEs) for any adjustment of training hours/or consider alternative modalities for the affected On-the-Job Trainees (OJTs), interns, and practicum students.

Students, faculty members, staff, and HEI administrators who were in countries with confirmed COVID-19 cases were instructed to immediately coordinate with the nearest Philippines Embassy or Consulate Office to report their current health status. Lastly, in the case of a confirmed COVID-19 case in their respective schools, HEIs were instructed to collaborate with the regional office of the Department of Health to identify the transmission and conduct contract tracing of the people whom the COVID-19 positive person has interacted with.

Collaboration of HEIs with the DOH and local government units is important in deciding possible class suspension, and postponement or cancellation of any school-related events to prevent further transmission of the virus and ensure the health and safety of all students, faculty members, staff, administrators of HEIs. The regional offices of CHED were on standby to give any necessary support as needed.

2.3. CHED Advisory No. 3

The CHED Advisory No. 3 was issued on the same date (March 11, 2020). The third advisory was in support of the Resolution issued by the Philippines' Inter-agency Task Force on the management of Emerging and Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID). The Commission invoked the exercise of academic freedom and the contextual realities of individual HEIs all over the country to conscientiously decided to: a) exercise flexibility in adjusting the individual HEI's approved academic calendar, b) exercise discretion in the field deployment of students currently undergoing the National Service Training Program (NSTP) and offer alternative school-based service activities, c) facilitate alternative activities for practicum or OJT students to complete their required training hours, d) use available distance learning, E-learning, and other alternative learning strategies in exchange of residential learning depending on available resources, e) evaluate students based on available indicators and waive other curricular activities for the remainder of the semester, f) postpone graduation ceremonies as needed, and g) implement extraordinary and swift measures to address the needs of students, faculty members, and other employees arising from issues related to COVID-19.

Private HEIs were encouraged to coordinate with the regional CHED offices in their implementation of the CHED Advisory No. 3. For public HEIs, specifically State Colleges and Universities, any measures undertaken should be discussed with their respective Board of Regents and communicated to their regional CHED offices. Lastly, the Commission appealed to hospitals with confirmed COVID-19 cases that are serving as training centers for medical and nursing students, to be lenient in this time of pandemic and explore alternative modes that will continue the medical training and education without compromising students' health and safety.

2.4. CHED Advisory No. 4

In light of the sharp increase of COVID-19 cases and the apparent risk of rapid local transmission prompting the Philippine government to raise the Code Alert System to Code Red Sublevel 2, the CHED Advisory

No. 4 was released on March 14, 2020. The 4th Advisory was issued in conjunction to Advisories 1, 2, and 3 that were previously mentioned.

Some important provisions in the Advisory No. 4 highlight the following: a) class suspension in Metro Manila was extended until April 14, 2020 (a total of one-month suspension), b) HEIs should follow the directives of the DOH and DILG imposed under the general and enhanced community quarantine in their respective jurisdictions, c) HEIs in Metro Manila that are still using the old academic calendar (i.e. academic years ends in March or April) were required to cancel or move their graduation ceremonies to avoid mass gatherings, and d) for HEIs using the new academic calendar (i.e. academic year ends in June or July), graduation ceremonies may not be postponed or cancelled but HEIs should adopt alternative modes of teaching and learning to compensate for the month-long suspension. For HEIs outside of Metro Manila, the Commission appealed for the immediate implementation of the guidelines provided in the previous Advisories mentioned.

2.5. CHED Advisory No. 5

Just 3 days after the issuance of the 4th CHED Advisory, another Advisory was issued on March 17, 2020 in support to the decisions of the Philippines' IATF-EID. The community quarantine imposed over Metro Manila was expanded to cover the entire island of Luzon effective until April 13, 2020. This enhanced community quarantine/ECQ entailed wider and stricter implementation of home quarantine, suspension of transport services, regulation of provision of food and essential health services, and heightened presence of uniformed personnel to ensure enforcement of quarantine procedures. It also imposed strict travel restrictions (air, sea and land) to and from Luzon. In terms of education, classes and school activities in all levels were suspended and HEIs were instructed to immediately advise its students, faculty, and staff to arrange for instant departure to their hometowns. With this advisory, resumption of classes was planned to be on April 15, 2020. HEI employees were directed to have a work-from-home arrangement except those who are essential members of the skeleton workforce. These employees process salaries, render janitorial services, and ensure security in school campuses.

For schools located outside of Luzon, the local government units were given the discretion to suspend classes depending on the threat posed by COVID-19. HEIs were also directed to efficiently coordinate with their respective local government units and the Commission's regional offices in

terms of suspending classes, adjusting the semester, and suspending school events.

2.6. CHED Advisory No. 6

Almost a month passed and another Advisory was issued in April 13, 2020. Alongside the extension of the ECQ in Luzon until April 30, 2020, classes and other school-related activities in all levels were suspended. On the other hand, suspension of classes outside Luzon was put to the discretion of the Local Chief Executive of respective local government units. Considerable freedom was given by the Commission to HEIs as they were instructed to deploy available flexible learning and other alternative modes of delivery in lieu of in-campus learning. Students who lacked internet connectivity were given the option of fulfilling class requirements after the lifting of the ECQ. More importantly, the Commission emphasized that class requirements and learning activities should be reasonable, transparent, and outcomes-based.

Other highlights of Advisory No. 6 include the Commission's permission to HEIs using the old academic calendar (June-May) to end the academic year as early as April 30, 2020. However, in-person graduation exercises were discouraged given the need for continued physical distancing. On the other hand, HEIs that are using the new academic calendar (August-July) were authorized to extend their semester for a maximum of one month after the lifting of the ECQ. Modification and reduction of class requirements were also allowed by the Commission in order to lessen the school responsibilities of both students and teachers, and allow completion of all requirements in the limited extended duration of the semester.

3. Implementation of Higher Education Institutions of the Commission's COVID-19 Response Guidelines

Central leadership and guidance is important to provide general steps for HEIs in the Philippines in responding to a serious health threat such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidelines provided by the Commission gave relative freedom and flexibility to schools in terms of implementing them based on the contextual realities and differences they face.

Varying approaches have been employed in implementing the CHED guidelines. Some SUCs provided lectures and conducted information drive about the COVID-19 disease to their students. This was done directly by the Medical Services unit or through the teachers who were capacitated by the aforementioned unit about the medical, social, and psychological

impacts of the disease. Safety measures were implemented through temperature checking upon school entrance and providing alcohol-based hand rub for students, teachers, and staff. Easy-to-understand and catchy information and education campaign/ IEC materials were posted in strategic areas of the school as well as disseminated online through the schools' official websites or student publication multimedia pages in Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

In terms of the provision of education to students, alternative learning activities, case studies, assignments and other activities were done online. These activities were delivered using multimedia learning and teleconferencing platforms like Gmail, Google Hangouts, Google Classroom, Skype, Zoom, and even Facebook. Assignments were given but deadlines were set in two-three weeks upon receipt to give ample time to students to submit. Class topics and discussions were modified to apply theories and concepts relative to the students' lived experiences amidst the COVID-19 crisis. On the other hand, for students and teachers who have limited to non-existent internet connectivity, phone calls and messages were helpful in giving and receiving school-related instructions. In their case, the deadline of reports, projects and assignments was set two to three weeks after the resumption of classes.

Additionally, some schools have decided to use the months of March and April 2020 for summer vacation instead of June and July 2020. Resumption of classes was rescheduled in June 2020. This arrangement provided mental and psychological safety, not only to students but also to teachers who were also burdened by personal and family responsibilities on top of their work deliverables. Some universities even decided to ultimately cut-short and end the semester, citing that health and safety, both physical and psychological, should be the focus of academic institutions in these extraordinary and challenging times.

Online trainings for teachers to conduct online classes were also provided for free by E-learning institutions like the University of the Philippines- Open University. Webinars about providing psycho-social support and psychological first-aid were also offered for free. This was highly needed as both students and teachers are in need of psycho-social guidance due to extreme stress cause by the abrupt disruption of their normal daily routine. In addition to webinars, professional organizations like the Social Work and Psychology practitioners provided online and confidential psycho-social therapy to students and teachers.

In the case of the Philippines, Distance Learning or E-learning is not the ideal or preferred and conditioned choice of teaching and studying.

Teachers of all levels were not technically, psychologically, and I argue, educationally prepared to conduct online classes. In addition, poor and costly internet connectivity has continually beset the country even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Infrastructures to provide fast and reliable internet connection to everyone is scant. In addition, impoverished students whose families could barely provide for their educational needs are further burdened by the high cost incurred in accessing internet connectivity. In the Philippines' context, acquiring good internet connection is not a need but rather a privilege of the few who can afford it.

Lastly, it cannot be denied that the perception on security of teachers for their families' safety has direct and significant impact on their work performance even in a work-from-home arrangement. Thus, some universities released in advance the salaries of teachers, staff, and other school personnel in March-April 2020. This proactive decision was aimed to provide school employees the financial capacity to prepare their families' needs during the prolonged quarantine period.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

Extraordinary times require extraordinary leadership and actions to continuously provide education in pandemic times. This case study illustrates how the Philippines, a developing State in the Southeast Asian region, responded on the need to embrace and adequately provide quality education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic through the implementation of policies and guidelines of the country's Commission on Higher Education. The global significance and policy implication of this article lies on its ability to provide to other education institutions pragmatic and contextual policy guidelines in the development of an Education Continuity Plan (ECP) that outlines the procedures and instructions schools must follow in the face of a pandemic. I argue that creating an ECP will help maintain school functions or immediately resume them in the event of an abrupt disruption in the regular school operations because of a pandemic. Most importantly, the overall goal of such plan should be to resolutely provide quality education while ensuring health and safety of students, faculty members, staff, and school administrators in pandemic times.

The following general recommendations are advised to policymakers, local government units, and school administrators:

1. To foster a supportive policy environment, State policies down to regional and local laws and regulations, should be reviewed and assessed if

they are still adequate to support programs and activities geared toward the improvement of education system to make it resilient in times of pandemics.

2. The education system, through the State's elementary, secondary and tertiary education bureaus and agencies, should be strengthened by putting "Education Continuity Plan in Pandemic Times" as one of its priority agenda.

3. Adequate funding should be allotted to provide capacity development trainings to schools and its stakeholders to competently prepare for alternative modes of teaching and learning in anticipation of abrupt disruptions of regular school operations caused by serious biological hazards like pandemics.

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