Making Higher Education Truly Inclusive

Policy Options for the Philippines

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Introduction

The integration of ICT in education in the Philippines is suboptimal. While there are several programs and projects intended to strengthen digital literacy across the different levels of education, the lack of a unified framework resulted in a fragmented and less strategic approach to teaching and learning systems for digital education. This problem is confounded by weaknesses in ICT infrastructure and the lack of access to useful devices to serve the needs of students and teachers alike.

In 2020, it was reported that only 20% of public universities were ready for online learning, with the majority having limited ICT infrastructure. Private higher education institutions (PHEI) that charge fees do not necessarily fare better than SUCs in terms of investments and quality. PHEIs are left on their own to implement ICT innovations to aid the learning process. Given differences in endowments and resources, some are able to excel and compete with other schools in the ASEAN region, while others are lagging. IT infrastructure deployment is limited by annual budgetary allocation, internet bandwidth, and human, technical, and conceptual skills of its human resources.

COVID-19 and Inclusion in Higher Education

The COVID 19 pandemic amplified this situation. Following the suspension of classes, several measures were instituted, including transitioning to flexible learning and other alternative modes of delivery in lieu of on-campus learning. At the same time, Commission on Higher Education authorized HEIs to determine how to best meet the contact hour requirements for completing a subject or degree program. HEIs were also allowed to undertake alternative assessments and remediations and consider student assessment and computation of grades to be based on current student records and school academic policies.

CHED has also allowed the use of appropriate alternative learning platforms (e.g., electronic and non-electronic learning methods, modules, self-directed learning activities, simulations, and case-based scenarios, among others) in exchange for the required contact hours to achieve the course outcomes/program outcomes including evaluation and assessment based on the HEI's assessment of its instructional capabilities. At the same time, HEIs are given the flexibility to modify or reduce program requirements in order to meet the requirements for graduation/promotion during this interim period. Finally, CHED has encouraged the adoption of a flexible learning strategy by ensuring appropriate (1) facility delivery system, (2) faculty complement, and (3) student support.

While lockdowns and the subsequent closures of schools provided favourable opportunities for both students and teachers to stay at home and rest momentarily, the corresponding shift to flexible learning delivery created competency shocks on the part of teachers. While the majority of teachers had intermediate computer competency, most had no training in online teaching.

The dominant mode of face-to-face delivery causes pedagogical problems in the design of learning activities and assessment outcomes as schools transition to flexible learning. Poor instructional design, ineffective teaching strategies, low quality of teaching materials, and excessive class requirements, as evidenced by vague learning contents and overloaded lesson activities that resulted in poor learning outcomes.

The transition to flexible learning imposes strains on learner preparedness. Technological (hardware, software, and internet connectivity); individual (students' learning styles, physical, and mental health); and domestic (home and family concerns, including financial distress) constitute learner preparedness barriers impacting the ability of students to participate meaningfully in flexible learning modality. Access to a computer and other devices is limited, and a stable internet connection in some areas is a luxury.

Undergraduate students reported high levels of disease and consequence-related COVID-19 anxiety. Disease-related anxiety refers to students' fears of contracting COVID-19, while consequence-related anxiety refers to students' fears of not being able to attend class because of several reasons, including access and connectivity. The level of psychological impact is negatively impacted by access to information and the positive belief in health care providers' ability to combat the pandemic's impact.

But the pandemic has differentiated impact across several sectors of the population. This is also true in the case of the teaching and learning environment. Several studies have indicated that the pandemic impacts the poor and marginalized more. The same is true in the case of HEIs. Better-resourced private universities had the option to devise systems and procedures to make flexible learning more adaptive to student needs. Well-resourced universities could efficiently pivot to flexible learning modes of delivery using technology and various platforms. But other universities were not able to do so.

Education response during the pandemic also was biased against learners with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Students with disabilities experience social exclusion in the design of learning activities, difficulty in communicating with peers, challenges in adapting to new modes of delivery, and limitations in using assistive technologies. It has

become quite apparent that school systems and processes have not been adapted well to suit the context of students with SEND.

Policy Recommendations

The case of the Philippines suggests that the capacity of institutions and individuals to adapt to, cope, and mitigate the impact of COVID 19 on teaching and learning is significantly differentiated; well-resourced, well-connected, and strategically-located actors were more ready to transition to new modes of education delivery.

The following policies are recommended for higher education to be truly inclusive.

a. **ICT infrastructure and access**: In a context where access to technology, not only to the internet but also to devices, governments should strengthen broadband infrastructure, on the one hand, and access to learning devices, on the other. Policies and programs in higher education should help eliminate the digital divide among private and public educational institutions, whose capacities to access technology are differentiated, and among students whose material endowments prevent them from accessing digital learning devices.
b. **Learning pedagogy**: From a pedagogical perspective, there is a need to formulate policies and programs that transition teaching, learning, and assessment from a highly collectivized and traditional system to one that allows individual learning journeys aided by technology. This should consider differences in individual learning processes as well as contextual barriers to learning. This includes ensuring that flexible learning is adaptable to learners with SEND.
c. **Teaching competencies**: The increased use and reliance on digital technologies in education during the pandemic has highlighted capacity deficiencies on the part of teaching staff. The competency framework for higher education teachers should include using digital technology to design, deliver and assess teaching and learning outcomes. The government should provide public support for training to attain these competencies, focusing on public universities and higher education institutions with limited resources.
d. **Targeted education support**: Higher education policies and programs should provide targeted education support to institutional providers, teachers, and students based on income and/or deprivation levels to transition towards better use of technology in education. This can take the form of technical assistance, funding support, capacity building, or low-cost loans.