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Emerging Opportunities in the Philippine Higher Education Institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract – COVID-19 has had a global impact, affecting every higher education institution. Gaps and challenges in the Philippine educational system have been identified, including inadequate technological infrastructure and a preference for in-person classroom instruction over the effective use of online technologies and resources. The crisis has provided opportunities for reflection. Many lessons come from the many responses. The impact of innovation and approach refinement are effective determinants of the country's educational program's resiliency in a crisis. This article addresses emerging opportunities such as increasing the number of training activities and broadening participation, integrating an online learning management system into teaching, recognizing the benefits of a community internet hub, strengthening psychosocial health programs in schools, and strengthening cross-sector collaborations. As a result, higher education institutions are constantly challenged to find new ways to thrive in the face of a pandemic in terms of providing quality instruction and services. Further studies on how higher education institutions responded to the needs of the stakeholders in the new reality are recommended.

Keywords – Emerging Opportunities, Higher Education Institutions, COVID – 19, Pandemic, Philippines

I. INTRODUCTION

The Philippine government proclaimed a state of national calamity after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Because of the quarantine and distancing protocol, the calamity changed routines and procedures. Schools, churches, commercial malls, recreational facilities, private clinics, and shops were closed, except for hospitals, pharmacies, and other establishments that provide essential commodities and services. The imposed quarantine has constrained mobility, preventing people from going about their daily routines.

In more than 190 nations, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected 1.57 billion students, or 90 percent of the world's student population [80]. From primary to higher education, the education sectors, which were closed during the pandemic's peak, have now used a variety of techniques and approaches to reduce the effects and continue the learning process. In the history of education, the closure of learning institutions has been regarded as a major threat. According to the COVID-19 tracker (dated September 23, 2020) published by John Hopkins University and the Southeast Asian Health Ministries, the Philippines ranks fifth among Southeast Asian countries in terms of infection rates. Despite this study, education advocates continued to campaign for the school's reopening. Administrators, instructors, staff, students, and parents, however, have a challenge in pursuing this goal.

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Due to the pandemic, a series of granular class suspensions, affecting classes at all levels across the country, were eventually implemented. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued a COVID-19 advisory to all higher education institutions (HEIs) and CHED central and regional offices in response to the Philippine President's Proclamation No. 922 series of 2020. The memorandum provides a plan for implementing classes during the pandemic as well as the use of flexible learning in lieu of the face-to-face setting. Flexible learning guidelines establish the arrangements, delivery of programs, and the demands and dimensions of learning of diverse learners [22]. The flexibility of implementation is in accordance with Republic Act 7722, often known as the Higher Education Act, which provides universities autonomy beginning with the start of the school year, based on Board of Regents' approval and the semester structure of a college or university.

The pandemic causes changes in several aspects of life. Individuals were compelled to adjust to the circumstance by studying and remaining at home, as well as the work - from - home scheme. As a result, there has been a significant increase in mental health problems [38], even though psychological problems were caused by individual dissatisfaction with quarantine control measures rather than the quarantine itself [82]; [51]. Further, [8] and [68] mentioned that COVID – 19 pandemic has impacted the educational system and mental health. University students are stressed due to changes in their academic routine [45]; [84]. It has exacerbated pre-existing mental disorders in the general population as well as college students around the world, prompting a call for immediate public health measures [78]; [85]; [9]; [14]; [42].

Different types of mitigations have been used by higher educational institutions to deal with various mishaps. As a result of the diverse responses of higher education institutions, several recommendations emerge. To scaffold the use of the synchronous platform, it is recommended that technology not be used in the asynchronous delivery framework. Remote learning [30] and flexible learning [41] are both considered. Mail and courier services are designed for people who do not have access to the internet or electronic devices. Traditional media such as television and radio are also considered.

Forging linkage with the local government unit to facilitate the distribution of the printed learning materials is one of the recommendations. Increasing parental involvement [55] and continuing to monitor and evaluate the distant learning education program [3] were further suggested. Moreover, identifying the needs of the students and faculty members through conducting a survey [1]; system-wide planning [7] that would include the development of health management protocols and community-wide environmental health practices [77]; and planned future directions of the country's educational system [17] are among the recommendations.

Even before the pandemic, there were research being conducted on the use of technology in education. Although the benefits of using an online management system (OLMS) for learning management have been demonstrated, many teachers still refuse to use technology as a teaching tool [10]; [43]; [60]. There is also a need for government assistance [2]. Students are encouraged to use online technology for learning rather than just for socializing, entertainment, or passing idle time [19]. Higher education institutions are also getting into the module production. While higher education institutions tried to establish better infrastructure and resources to accommodate online instruction, research and academic paper publications increased [29]. Concerns about assessing and evaluating student performance, as well as other student-related difficulties, surfaced [68].

Teachers confront numerous challenges. Readiness is a key aspect in integrating technology and innovative modes of instruction into the classroom [62]; [73];64]. Experience with technology [43]; preference for traditional ways; and instructor confidence all have an impact on readiness. Teachers would compete with their family members who are also confined to do their engagements at home while adjusting to the use of technology and new work environment [67]. At home, the family would most likely share gadgets and internet connections. As a result, working from home will be a difficult challenge for the teachers. Another issue that may arise because of this arrangement is that the Philippines' internet infrastructure lags other nations with average internet speeds, ranking 104 out of 160 countries [70].

The outcomes of research on teacher preparedness for online learning are varied [66]; [75]; [58]; [4]; [73]. Two recent studies point to two different outcomes. Teachers are ready for online interaction, according to [3]. Another study found that teaching faculty have mixed feelings about online learning [56]. Teachers' fears of academic dishonesty, a lack of personal engagement, and difficulty managing technology were all mentioned in the same study. Digital literacy gaps are reflected in a lack of confidence in using new technology and a preference for conventional learning modalities. The number of years spent teaching cannot be used to determine online teaching readiness. Because of their training, advanced facilities, and teaching and learning equipment, college teachers are considered ready to deliver online learning.

Several factors influence the successful implementation of a new learning system [12]; [71]. As a sudden re-calibration of curriculum and migration to online courses became the immediate option, opportunities clashed with challenges [25]. This study looked at the emergent opportunities that have come because of the challenges that government-owned and funded higher education institutions have had in embracing standard method of learning delivery.

II. Emerging Opportunities

Humankind has been confronted with many crises of varying magnitudes since the beginning of time. After each crisis, there are changes. These changes can be transformed into opportunities, whether they are part of the process; natural, unintended, and spontaneous; or they are the result of society's response. The current situation invites everyone to adopt multi-faceted solutions to problems. Experiments are designed by higher educational institutions to test various options. The crisis allows for revisiting of techniques and exploration of specific practices that were previously overlooked or deemed unattainable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light several challenges that affect the country's higher education institutions. Emerging issues present opportunity for introspection. Smart work, or working anywhere and at any time, is one of the most recent innovations [39]. It is currently working from home. Even though smart work is not a new concept, the pandemic has reignited the use of technology to manage work disruptions and space utilization during the crisis [40]. While emergency planning and readiness are critical in any crisis, innovation, particularly non-traditional methods to problem solving, is a critical component of preparedness.

The country's higher education system has been put to the test by the pandemic. Though the educational sectors' reactions are largely determined by government policies, institutions can implement their own unique approaches. Primary initiatives aim to safeguard educational stakeholders' health and increase the capacity to continue providing education even in the most remote areas. There is no such thing as a perfect educational system. Even though catastrophe mitigation measures have been put in place, the pandemic's extraordinary consequences posed fundamental hurdles for educational reform possibilities. The COVID - 19 pandemic has consequences for the economy. It has influenced everyone in society, resulting in significant changes in how businesses and consumers behave themselves. This challenge is part of a global effort to address some of society's pandemic-related challenges [31].

The pandemic posed significant problems in schooling, including a lack of technological infrastructure and unstable internet connectivity. Curricula are also insufficient to handle new learning issues. Teachers' and support personnel's career stability, like a university's financial capabilities, is a challenge. During the pandemic, students' emotional and physical health, as well as unexpected expenses and costs resulting from the use of technology, make a huge impact. Technically, state universities and colleges are not completely equipped and prepared due to plenty of other challenges that affected the educational system even before the pandemic. Some of these problems have been exacerbated by the crisis. The disadvantages of the quarantine and stay-at-home measures have received more attention than the opportunity the situation provided for students to improve their learning. On the positive side, school closures and the transition from face-to-face to online learning have created opportunities. Universities and colleges have improved instructional platforms despite a lack of resources and contingency measures. Universities were able to move courses to the online, adapt curriculum, and train professors through a series of webinars on online learning and module development, as well as implement the essential priority of reaching students and reopening classrooms at all levels. Teachers and administrators in the Philippines have been more productive because of the pandemic.

2.1. Increasing Number of Training Activities and Broadening Participation

There are obstacles to face when it comes to online learning on the height of the COVID – 19 pandemic. Some students who do not have dependable internet access or equipment find it difficult to participate in digital learning; this gap exists across nations and between income brackets within countries [50]. With this situation, teachers need to be trained to address varied needs of the students. The number and frequency of training and instructions on introducing new pedagogical approaches, ICT skills training, various online applications, and platforms; psychosocial/mental health, intellectual property, and data privacy are like those in other nations. Webinars and live telecasts, for example, have boosted the number of participants and geographic reach of online training. Most of the training and conferencing software can support over a hundred people. Seminars and conferences which are difficult to attend because geographical distances are now within reach of every teacher. Teachers might participate in training that is held in different regions or even nations. Technology has made it easier to enroll in training, and

online registration has made it easier for training providers to accommodate registrants. Those who are unable to register may view the recording or watch the event live on a different site, such as Facebook Live.

Even before the pandemic, online learning technology training was recommended. To scaffold online teaching programs, [74] recommend technology integration training. Some teachers confessed that they are unprepared to use digital teaching strategies in their curricula [24]; [81]. Some state universities and colleges have adopted mentoring systems to address daily teaching issues and effective classroom technology use [20]; [28]; [59]; [86].

In addition to training in integrating technology, the institution ensures data privacy protection and the prevention of ownership and confidentiality breaches [15]. Many educators, particularly those from higher education institutions, are now using the learning management system (LMS) and other social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube for educational reasons. Data privacy policies are likely unknown to some teachers. The current circumstance calls for data protection and management training that will protect both the teachers and the institution's reputation. In certain universities, teachers are increasingly being trained on data privacy and intellectual property.

2.2. Integrating Online Learning Management System in Teaching

Some students are unable to benefit from remote learning due to a lack of internet connection and technological tools [65]; [5]; [54]. As a precaution against the spread of the coronavirus infection (COVID – 19), most educational systems throughout the world have switched to remote learning. This tendency is producing a lot of problems, especially in underdeveloped nations, as students have expressed [17]. Some students and teachers, according to [2], still prefer print resources, which limits their knowledge, efficacy, and resourcefulness in terms of time. Teachers and even students were forced to use new learning technology because of the pandemic as seen by the rise in internet subscriptions and purchases of online learning gadgets and software. According to [27], the number of computer-equipped households will reach 11.5 million by 2025. Presumably, the current crisis foresees the coming new normal of education.

A self-contained program with an inbuilt instructional tool that allows teachers to organize learning content and engage students in their learning is known as an online learning management system [49]. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the efficacy of the Online Learning Management System (OLMS) was explored [63]; [72]. It has now become a catchphrase for all educational institutions. The crisis provides an opportunity for educational institutions to experiment with various online learning solutions. Work and study from home have become possible due to OLMS. It promotes self-directed learning. It also meets students' demands for flexibility and convenience [6]; [13]; [37] by avoiding traffic and long commuting times [46]. An online learning management system improves learning tool databases and makes use of repositories that can be accessed from anywhere. Desktops, mobile phones, smartphone apps, or a mix of these platforms can now access resources. As [26] mentioned that gadgets are needed by teachers in blended learning modality. Also in studies, the quantitative reasoning was more common among students who were learning online [32]. COVID-19 confinement also increases Spain's learning performance, according to a study [35]. In the Philippine context, [33] suggest that higher education institutions should develop innovative teacher training programs that would enhance teacher education faculty members' ICT pedagogy knowledge and integration.

2.3. Recognizing the Benefits of a Community Internet Hub

Apart from gadgets, internet access became a significant concern for students when the semester began. COVID-19 caused in-person schooling to be interrupted; higher-income regions experienced twice as many internet searches for online educational materials as lower-income areas [11]. They've combined evidence to show how the COVID19 is more disruptive to underprivileged students at all levels of education, a finding that could have long-term implications for intergenerational mobility, income inequality, and health disparities, among other things.

Information technology can be used to empower communities [34]. The country's remote communities have limited or no access to the internet. As the pandemic progressed, students from low-income communities reduced their involvement in online learning [21]. The establishment of internet hubs where students and teachers can connect and use Internet technology for free is an example of empowerment through outreach. Because teachers do not have devices that can be used for online learning, establishing the internet or online hubs is a suitable technological and sustainable community development project. Others have devices but are having trouble learning how to use the school's new software or learning management system. As a result, teachers are compelled to invest personally in technology-enhanced education [44].

Because the government wants to promote and empower the local community, programs should be based on current situations in the area. A school in the country has leased internet cafes where students can use the internet for free. Local government units or districts may also establish an internet hub in areas under their jurisdiction. The crisis emphasizes the importance of long-term online technologies. Considering the current situation, it is necessary to strengthen technology and assess its long-term viability. While academic rank is the primary goal, higher education institutions should encourage teachers to engage in research-based and expanded extension initiatives that will have a positive influence on the community during the COVID – 19 pandemic.

2.4. Strengthening Psychosocial Health Programs in Schools

The pandemic perpetuates the country's long-standing psychosocial issue. Various disasters had already struck the country before COVID-19 became a crisis. Eco-anxiety is a growing concern, particularly given the country's frequent climate and environmental disasters. Apart from the pandemic, the country has also been preparing for the typhoons that have hit it. Technically, not only has the coronavirus crisis exacerbated some pre-existing mental diseases, but it has also triggered prevalent and co-morbid symptoms brought on by other calamities, just as it has in other regions of the world [16]. As [65] found in their study that many students have been affected by COVID-19 pandemic. These students experienced challenges like adaptability struggles, lack of motivation, and physical and mental health issues. Thus, schools are encouraged to revisit their formation programs to address the psychological issues of the students in all levels.

The Philippine Mental Health Law was passed in 2018 to encourage businesses to invest in mental health services [48]. As a result of the current scenario, the academic institutions have decided to implement health reforms. The wellness of the teachers and support staff has also been evaluated by guidance and counseling services division. The COVID – 19 pandemic has served as a wake-up call for higher education institutions, as well as a turning point for future digitalization. Telehealth must be included in the investment package, in addition to campaigning for increased internet connectivity.

2.5. Strengthening Cross - Sector Collaborations

Learning institutions should consider the World Economic Forum's (2019) recommendation that private sector operators be educated. With their combined efforts, they may assist in the development of solutions, the creation of platforms, and the provision of connection and equipment to students, teachers, and even families to improve management and workplace needs [61]. The importance of cross-border sharing of knowledge and information, as well as innovative ideas capable of overcoming the crisis and generating progress, is demonstrated by this collaboration between the public and private sectors [23]. Higher education institutions that rely solely on tuition as a source of revenue should expand their funding sources [52].

The COVID-19 crisis provided chances for cross-country collaboration, complementarity, and information, resource, and capability sharing between public and private stakeholders [36]. Apart from the institutional linkages that existed before to COVID – 19 pandemic, higher education institutions require additional collaboration between public and private entities to increase public and private services and products. Reaching out to new companies based on evolving needs results in a stronger partnership that allows knowledge, experience, and expertise to be shared and exchanged [18]. To accommodate students who live in remote areas, schools collaborate with telecommunication firms such as TV and radio stations, as well as local government units.

III. Implications to Further Studies

As already indicated, the COVID – 19 pandemic presented various opportunities. Statistics on the number of published research papers in higher education institutions have increased, demonstrating that the work-at-home program boosts teacher productivity. Demands for a flexible and cost-effective learning system existed even before the pandemic. Hopefully, the crisis fosters a paradigm shift in how people in the Philippines view the importance of e-learning for higher education [2]. To address the gaps and challenges, pedagogical and practical innovations emerge, particularly during the class opening. Long-term goals must be prioritized over short-term goals, the most immediate and reactive responses to the situation. After the COVID – 19 pandemic, these short-term goals are likely to be ineffective. Alternative learning research endeavors are currently saturated in essential information and solutions for addressing the gaps in the current educational crises and future difficulties. Without a doubt, the current situation is loaded with learning opportunities that can promote academic innovations and transformations in thriving in the new reality. Further, the conclusions of [69] study establish the notion of change as essential in education from a

management perspective. They have noticed changes in national curriculum, as well as teaching techniques and equipment, all around the world.

IV. Conclusion

Different prospects for reflection come from the current situation. Higher education institutions innovate by repurposing existing resources and establishing unique programs that might be regarded best practices for addressing alternative learning challenges not only during the onset of the COVID – 19 pandemic but also in the new normal. On the other hand, the pandemic has been regarded as a major threat to Philippine education throughout its history. On the positive side, the many events and circumstances drive educational institutions to investigate alternate learning systems. Online learning, which was an option prior to the pandemic, is currently the most popular method of instruction. Other previously overlooked learning methods, such as remote and modular learning, are now regarded acceptable alternatives. Alternative learning platforms are undeniably more advantageous and promising learning management systems that government higher education institutions must implement as a long-term learning system than traditional learning platforms.

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