UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
**PROGRAM ON HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH AND
POLICY REFORM**

Higher Education Interventions During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

Fernando dlC. Paragas
Editor

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Preface

Fernando dlC. Paragas

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed all of us in seemingly unchartered territories. It has thrust us from the comfortable confines of our campuses to virtual spaces which are at once exciting and confounding. It has disrupted our organizational procedures and educational practices. It has made us reflect on our present circumstances and envision a changed future.

While the pandemic came all too suddenly, it surfaced when many of us have already built the foundations, even if unknowingly, on which we are now building interventions and introducing innovations that will define the future of higher education in the Philippines.

In this monograph are seven papers which essay how key sectors and organizations are not only surmounting, but even thriving amid, the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Two papers look at the big picture of higher education during the pandemic. Peter Sy of the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman examines how we can address paucities in online external resources in higher education using lessons we can glean from interventions in basic education in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. Vicente Fabella and Amor Mia Arandia, meanwhile, provide a thorough examination of the challenges that private institutions now face and offer holistic solutions to improve flexible learning experiences. They draw insights from their work at Jose Rizal University (JRU), where Dr. Fabella is President.

Many institutions, meanwhile, have appropriated the pandemic as impetus to expedite and improve upon their previous inroads into alternative modes of learning. President Ester Garcia and her colleagues Melvin Vidar and Roselle Basa write about how the University of the East (UE), one of the biggest private higher education

institutions (HEIs) in the country, has been able to strengthen itself amid the pandemic because of strategic decisions made almost a decade ago. They explain how the many stakeholders of the UE community have moved singularly to surmount the challenges posed by the pandemic. Meanwhile, Paul Anthony C. Notorio, drawing from his experiences at the De La Salle University–Dasmariñas (DLSU–D), explains the pivotal role of an educational technology office during this transition into virtual education. He shares important insights on the need for iterative training and flexibility in program support. Marissa Fearnley and Geronio Ulayao of the De La Salle-College of St. Benilde (DLS–CSB) highlight the value of online education as a flexible approach during the pandemic. They talk about important interventions that empower faculty members and their students in the new normal.

Bert Tuga, Jennie Jocson, Celia Ilanan, and Ruth Alido, writing about the Philippine Normal University (PNU), explicate how the pandemic has hastened a revolution in higher education in which technology helps personalize the learning experience. Their paper balances the promise and the reality of technology as it gets embedded in educational principles and processes. Nicanor Guinto, Brian Villaverde, and Shiela M. Manzanilla discuss the on-ground reality of limited resources and pitfalls in technological infrastructure based on their struggles at the Southern Luzon State University (SLSU). They explain how the strength of their community, built upon and fostered by continuous consultation, is helping them surmount these challenges.

The papers in this monograph indeed capture and document the spirit of innovation that now drives HEIs in transforming themselves amid and beyond the pandemic. Moving forward, our prayer is for their interventions to realize their objectives, for the collective improvement of higher education in the Philippines.

1
Open educational resources for geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas

Peter A. Sy

The quality of Philippine higher education depends on the stream of quality students from across the country. However, paucities in the availability of open educational resources (OER) in basic education in remote rural areas means students there maybe poorly prepared for tertiary education. This paper examines the state of OER in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs), a term coined by the Department of Health (DOH), to refer to "communities with marginalized populations physically and socio-economically separated from the mainstream society" (DOH n.d.). It offers recommendations on improving OER delivery, which also has implications for remote learning during the pandemic across all levels of education.

As it is, the situation in GIDAs is far from ideal. However, physical (e.g., physical isolation, exposure to extreme weather conditions, lack of transportation) and socio-economic (e.g., high poverty incidence, armed conflicts, economic crises) factors worsen the situations in these areas. Moreover, other layers of disenfranchisement could be seen in these areas, not the least of which is technological. Communities in GIDAs lack access to the internet; when they do have internet access, it tends to be erratic and expensive.

The isolation and disadvantages these communities experience are reflected in the lack of opportunities and resources in basic education. Existing inequalities are exacerbated by the "digital divide," with communities in GIDAs often left with outdated analog materials. While poor learning outcomes and achievement scores plague Philippine basic education in general, the situation is far worse in physically isolated rural areas than in more accessible urban locales. "[R]ural educational attainment…continues to lag behind that of urban areas" (Zamora and Dorado 2015, 70).

The current education crisis

Textbooks (whether analog or digital) are just part of a range of essential educational resources (e.g., curricular programs, teacher training and support, classrooms, libraries, science laboratories, water, electricity) that schools need. But nowhere is the lack of opportunities and resources made clearer than in teachers' and students' experiences around textbooks. Despite increased government spending on education in recent years, the availability of good quality textbooks and instructional materials remains limited (World Bank Group and Australian Aid 2016; Hernando-Malipot 2019), and GIDA schools tend to get the rawest end of the arrangement.

In the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, which involves mostly 15-year old students from among 79 participating countries and economies, the Philippines scored the lowest in reading comprehension (OECD 2019). While student performance is never a result of just one, but multiple factors, reading proficiency presupposes adequate access to textbooks and other instructional materials (whether analog or digital). There is simply no getting around it. Failing in such proficiency puts into question our people's ability to navigate through a wide variety of human activities—"from following instructions in a manual; to finding out the who, what, when, where and why of an event; to communicating with others for a specific purpose or transaction" (ibid., 15). As reading is a gateway skill to all of learning, textbooks and other instructional materials are at the core of the current education crisis.

While the PISA study results were disappointing, they were not surprising. Many of our textbooks in basic education, especially those available (if at all) in GIDAs, are "sick books" riddled with errors (del Mundo 2015) or "wow *mali*" textbooks printed on "*papel de lambot*" (Mateo 2019). Where good books should be available, many of these materials—27 million of them in 2018—remain undelivered (Palaubsanon 2019). Moreover, del Mundo (2015) writes:

> Because of the failure of the [DepEd] to deliver essential needs on time, teachers and pupils xerox learning materials at their own expense. They download subject content from the Internet and have them copied and distributed to their pupils.
>
> They must also grapple with textbooks that are riddled with errors—a problem that has persisted through the past two decades as student proficiency in English, math and science deteriorated. Public outcries over teaching materials lost in translation sparked public indignation and well-publicized congressional investigations in the past and were soon forgotten after the TV camera lights went out.

OER and the need for teaching and learning innovation

The enormity of the challenge in textbook production, distribution, and utilization and the larger Philippine education crisis cannot be overstated. The Department of Education (DepEd) pegs the total number of students or learners scattered all over the Philippine archipelago needing textbooks for different classes at about 27 million (DepEd 2018). There is no brute-forcing the challenge that requires a range of innovative solutions.

Part of the solution is the use of open educational resources, especially in GIDAs. These are "teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions" (UNESCO 2012, 1). The production, distribution, and utilization of OER in all levels of education help improve cost-efficiency and contribute to social inclusion and lifelong learning as well as help improve the overall *quality* of instruction (ibid.). While OERs are not inherently perfect, the spirit that produces such materials *is about* open processes and constant, quick self-correction and improvement—at least minimizing "wow *mali*" information and poor quality that tend to linger in the current commercial, poorly regulated market of textbook production. "Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow," states Linus' law, in a similar spirit of open collaboration (Raymond 2001).

The introduction of OER in GIDAs is not just going to be about cost but also about innovation in the overall education experience. OERs are not just about "reaching out" to GIDAs. It is about learning itself from the challenge of having to make quality education work *despite* the paucity of good textbooks and other instructional materials, teacher training, and support services. GIDAs offer teachable moments in innovation necessitated by scarcity and perennial neglect. Given the right encouragement and human agency, GIDA communities provide the necessary condition for innovation to flourish.

OERs *qua* ed-tech innovation must be considered as being multi-faceted. While OERs are tangible, distributable, usable products in education, they also involve processes, designs, pedagogical models, market considerations that when combined properly can effectively address the "pains" in teaching and learning and ultimately satisfy the educational needs of GIDA communities (see Figure 1 on next page). OERs are designed to be part of quality courses and sound pedagogy. They are not standalone solutions, but an integral part of holistic education reform.

OERs themselves generate attendant problems as well (for instance, the availability of access devices). But when framed as part of a larger innovative approach in addressing the education crisis, many of these problems involve unavoidable trade-offs that need to be tackled head on. For instance, the rapid shift to digital and multimedia materials would necessitate the use of readily available quality OER, even

Figure 1.1
The innovation arch

Source: Author's presentation; graphic by MI Medina

as they entail initial upfront cost (e.g., for access devices). The total cost of "ownership" (TCO) of OER would be dwarfed by the total cost and consequences of miseducation and the dearth of quality textbooks and instructional materials in GIDAs. Even the preferences of GIDA students and teachers have increasingly shifted towards the digital (i.e., videos, photos, graphics, texts). Not responding to such a shift deprives GIDA learners of acquiring the requisite digital literacy that simply cannot be catered by analog materials.

The inflexibility in the production, distribution, and consumption of analog textbooks and instructional materials is part of the problem. While they remain the "gold standard," these materials cannot be solely relied upon as response to the changing preferences and needs of their users.

Take, for instance, DepEd's recent initiatives toward indigenization, localization, and contextualization of academic curricula. It would be hard to imagine scaling these initiatives and reaching GIDAs in time without the production, use, and reuse of local digital OERs. With analog textbooks' long production and distribution chains, they cannot be expected to respond to the challenge efficiently. While OERs cannot be expected to replace analog textbooks in a wholesale manner, they have to be part of innovative approaches to the paucity of instructional materials in GIDAs and to the larger Philippine education crisis. With over 70 ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines, the analog textbook economy, primarily driven by profit motives,

cannot be expected to address essentially niche markets of indigenized, localized, and contextualized curricula in the different regions. OERs, on the other hand, are congenial to the latter markets. An OER ethos and practice of open collaboration, reuse, and remix of open contents, methodologies, and community-generated materials can be expected to generate more locally appropriate contents.

These lessons can then be extrapolated in higher education where they may be similar issues in the production and availability of OER. The need for these lessons to inform higher education initiatives is made even more urgent by the pandemic.

OERs and the pandemic

Amidst the current COVID-19 pandemic, the dominance of the analog torments our teachers in GIDA communities more than their counterparts in other areas. In preparation for the school opening in October 2020, schools have been running (for months) day-long operations for printing modules from district offices, scourging for printers, paper, and other printing materials. They have been brute-forcing logistical (not to mention, quality) problems in the production and distribution of instructional materials, despite their physical isolation and economic disadvantages.

To address both the education and health crises, nowhere is the need to innovate using OER more apparent than in GIDA communities. The whole-of-government approach touted by the DepEd and other government agencies is apparently not enough. GIDA schools and teachers would also need a "whole-of-community" approach by leveraging OER communities of practice and stakeholders' interest in basic education.

To supplement efforts in production and distribution of analog modules, OER projects can be initiated in GIDAs with minimal costs, even in areas where access to the Internet is at best spotty. For instance, a 3,000-peso microserver can be fashioned as a WiFi-accessible, no-internet-needed repository of quality digital materials around which lessons in basic education can be run. This credit-card size contraption can already serve hundreds of teachers and students and be carried around easily enough to reach far-flung areas (see, for example, the eLibrary Project (n.d.)). While there is indeed a paucity of access devices in GIDAs (and a school would be fortunate enough if 30 percent of its students have gadgets), the solution to the lack of instructional materials can only be more OER projects. Only increasing the "more of the same" analog textbooks and instructional materials is like using a broken device again and again, hoping it is going to work down the line.

Ways forward to scale and efficiency

Open collaboration is the core of the OER ethos that can drive innovative projects in many levels of education. Collaboration-powered OER "will play an important, if not essential, role" in addressing the world's educational crises (McGreal 2017, 292).

On the part of teachers, "OER, as digital and dynamic resources, have the potential to enhance teaching and learning practices by facilitating communities of teachers who collaborate, share, discuss, critique, use, reuse and continuously improve educational content and practice" (Petrides and Jimes 2006; Frydenberg and Matkin 2007; Geser 2007; Petrides et al. 2008; Casserly and Smith 2009, cited in Petrides et al. 2010, 390). This is in stark contrast to the practice of the DepEd of outsourcing textbook production to invited publishers who submit manuscripts and offer tenders but assume no responsibility to correct errors (del Mundo 2015). Accountability in the OER production model is organic to the iterative processes of teacher collaboration, sharing, and use and reuse of OER. Open collaboration tends to generate more eyeballs that can spot errors and weaknesses. Shortages in textbooks, teachers, classrooms, and other logistical support can be mitigated by a level of efficiency possible only with open collaboration primary among teachers and stakeholders. It is unreasonable to expect that the current way of producing analog instructional materials could be scaled fast enough to meet existing demands that are exacerbated by the current pandemic.

By design, OER projects tend to involve co-management and co-ownership of digital assets and repositories, in contrast with the current top-down approach dominated by a cottage industry of poorly regulated publishers. This kind of arrangement tends to empower local teachers as nodes of an OER production network. In this model, teachers are active innovators as they share and learn from one another, curating OER "products" while actively using and reusing them at the same time.

On the part of students, their exposure to OER and open education has been shown to have encouraged them "to become co-creators [of contents]…[improving] their digital lifelong learning abilities and [inspiring] them to use open education principles or resources in their quest for knowledge" (Andone et al. 2020, 34). The current overemphasis on individual work among students using "closed" specialized contents does not cut it anymore, with complexities that characterize the modern workplace. The latter requires collaborative skills that analog materials and approaches tend to underemphasize. The school experience of the student is just a moment in an otherwise basic mode of thriving: lifelong learning. Not teaching digital learning and collaboration skills at schools is wasted or denied opportunity.

In these educational dynamics by teachers and students lies the need to create an even larger positive feedback loop in institutions and the government. A recommendation of the 2012 Paris OER Declaration enjoins member states to "[s]upport capacity building for the sustainable development of quality learning materials" (UNESCO 2012, 2). This recommendation calls to "[s]upport institutions, train and motivate teachers and other personnel to produce and share high-quality, accessible educational resources, taking into account local needs and the full diversity of learners[; p]romote quality assurance and peer review of OER[; and e]ncourage the

development of mechanisms for the assessment and certification of learning outcomes achieved through OER" (ibid.). Without such programmatic translation of the OER ethos, OER may suffer the same fate as earlier similar educational technologies like learning objects.

The Philippine government needs to have an effective policy to support and expand the current trust infrastructure built by the OER community of practice. Without such trust infrastructure, OERs would just be a short-lived novelty and GIDA communities are never able to capture the full value of OER innovation. *De facto* trusted OER platforms and projects like OpenLearn, Curriki, and RACHEL need to be used more proactively and integrated into our local curriculum development. Focused on indigenization and contextualization, a local counterpart of these OER platforms and projects could be built as "the institution's courseware development policies rather than being used on piecemeal basis" by teachers and students (Issack 2011, 9). So piecemeal, indeed, is the current use of OER in the Philippines that even the DepEd Commons (n.d.) initiative only amounts to a hodgepodge collection of materials barely qualifying as "open." The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) is yet to have a counterpart resource center or a model for individual higher education institutions to emulate.

To systematically expand and enhance existing but otherwise disparate utilization of OER, the government can incentivize, for instance, the release (as OER) of quality basic education materials from established publishers. How such OERs definitively improve learning outcomes in GIDA communities can be measured (for instance, in relation to increased reading proficiency) and incentivized accordingly. If basic education is judged on learning outcomes, why cannot for-profit publishers be assessed similarly? While textbooks are certainly no magical solutions to the education crisis, incentivizing education outcomes (rather than mere (mal)distribution of instructional materials) can propel an innovative mix of OER and non-OER products, designs, processes, and markets toward shared goals in education. Putting government agencies and education movers to task in addressing the education crisis, especially in GIDAs, can bolster the requisite environment for effective innovations in education in communities where they are most needed.

The government can also mandate and support the establishment of low-cost local OER repositories and other distribution media and modalities for GIDA schools and community centers. While the centralization of OER in repositories like the DepEd Commons might help, the real "kick" for OER is its micro-level uses in local communities, most of which may not have access to the internet. Coupled with a government-led OER-first policy, measures can be put in place to ensure that such materials are in fact being used in GIDAs and well-integrated in the teaching and learning process. The discussion of OER concerns in higher education, within and outside of GIDAs, meanwhile, must now commence.

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2
Private education during COVID-19
Challenges and solutions

Vicente K. Fabella and Amor Mia H. Arandia

The COVID-19 outbreak has put many countries around the world, including the Philippines, under a public health emergency (WHO 2020). The pandemic has resulted in a total of 19 million confirmed cases worldwide, with 322,497 positive cases in the Philippines as of October 4, 2020 (DOH 2020). These conditions resulted in a substantial health emergency, loss of lives, economic recession, and a rise in mental health concerns here and abroad (Callueng et al. 2020).

The national government's response to curtail the escalating number of cases, through the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF–EID, or simply IATF), is by creating guidelines and ordinances that promote contact tracing, mass testing, sanitation, social distancing, and wearing of face masks and face shields. Quarantine measures were imposed to temporarily limit people's movements and reduce chances of infection, but they also brought about suspension of classes and activities, work-from-home schemes, closure of non-essential business establishments and of public and private institutions, and restrictions to domestic and international travel (IATF 2020). The loss to the economy due to the pandemic is projected between Php 27.4 billion (best case) and Php 2.5 trillion (worst case) according to the Leontief input-output model (Abrigo et al. 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has also created the largest disruption in the educational system in the world today (UN 2020). In the country, 865 private school closures in basic education have been reported as of September 14, 2020 (*ABS-CBN News* 2020), succumbing to the economic and public health difficulties faced by parents and students due to the pandemic. Schools had to initially close and halt operations in

March, but have turned to work- and study-from-home scenarios in the succeeding months (CHED 2020).[1]

Amidst the pandemic, the DepEd and CHEd focused on using flexible learning options (FLOs) in the absence of face-to-face classes. Flexible learning is a pedagogical approach that utilizes multiple learning delivery modes in which teaching and learning are not bounded by space and time, addressing the individual learning styles, needs, and pacing of students (Enderes and Danao 2020). There are different types of FLOs, such as remote learning, blended learning, distance learning, and homeschooling (DepEd 2020a; CHED 2020). Philippine private schools at this point are thus dealing with a multitude of challenges not seen since perhaps the Second World War, including a significantly dwindling student base, the logistical and pedagogical challenges of FLOs (mostly through emergency remote learning), and work-from-home arrangements. Additionally, all of this is happening after two successive policy shocks to private education: the introduction of the K to 12 curriculum and the passage of the Free Tuition Law.

Because of these, it is a relevant time to review rising issues and concerns regarding student needs, education delivery, and operations in private schools. The focus of this chapter shall be on the operational sustainability (e.g., financial stability, ability to deliver a core set of educational services that meet government standards) of schools, rather than on pedagogical challenges, as they deal with the pandemic and the current economic recession. It should be underscored that through our discussions with private school administrators, any decisions to manage operational costs are always checked against any potential negative effects on student learning.

Challenges to schools and education during the pandemic

Reductions in school funding

The Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities (PACU) conducted an online survey among school heads on student enrollment for the first semester of school year (SY) 2020–2021, covering those which opened classes from June to August (PACU 2020).

Based on responses from PACU member colleges and universities across the country, the results were as follows: for elementary schools, 75% of schools reported enrolment drops of 10 to 50 percent, with the largest group reporting drops of 40 percent; for junior and senior high schools, some 85 percent of schools reported enrolment drops of 10 to 50 percent, with the largest group reporting drops of 30

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1   "Schools," as used here, collectively refer to basic education schools, and higher education institutions (HEIs) such as colleges and universities, unless otherwise noted.

percent; and for college and graduate schools, some 75 percent of schools reported enrolment drops of 10 to 50 percent, with the largest group reporting drops of 20 percent.

The significant drops in student enrollment mean reduced funding for programs and personnel in private educational institutions. A 20-percent drop in enrollment for a private school financially would be like a state university/college (SUC) with a 20-percent budget cut: in either situation, the educational institution would have to consider significantly reducing its expenses.

The worst-case scenario happens when a private school uses up all its sources of funding: collections, loans, and cash reserves. In the long run, closing private schools does not benefit the students and their parents or the economy, because it jeopardizes the student's future earnings and opportunities to achieve their dreams. Private schools account for some 14 to 15 percent of total basic education enrollment, and about 54 percent of higher education enrollment. These numbers also vary significantly from region to region, with a high of 71 percent of tertiary enrollment in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) and 64 percent in the National Capital Region (NCR) (Yee, Ducanes, and David 2018). Such numbers would be difficult for the Philippine government to replicate on its own through the public education system, not just budgetarily, but also in terms of logistics, that is, building the additional infrastructure and talent for replacing private schools.

Flexibility in learning

Flexible learning is the new core; the new educational need due to the pandemic. Many of those shifting to this system are accompanied by fears and doubts since there are many challenges in its use. Private schools, by and large, have incorporated FLOs into their operations. The uncertainty of pandemic resurgences and future lockdowns mean that schools cannot readily assume face-to-face classes. Schools need to be flexible in their educational services, which means, moving forward, a co-existence of face-to-face classes and FLOs.

One of the challenges in implementing FLOs is finding a modality that addresses many aspects related to learning, including the use of learning management systems (LMSs), bandwidth use and quality, lesson format and design, content resources, delivery of lessons, hardware requirements, communication channels, web conferencing, collaboration opportunities, and storage of lessons, outputs, and grades of students.

A second challenge is how to train concerned faculty in flexible learning and use of their schools' chosen learning management systems. Some individuals may have difficulty adapting to change, and the learning curve of an individual faculty may be different from another. There are also challenges pertaining to the preparation of syllabus, content lessons, exams, and activities fitted to flexible learning weeks before

classes begin. These activities take time and more effort for the faculty. They need to be provided with the necessary skills and information to adapt to flexible learning in order to ensure effective and efficient delivery of education.

The successful adjustment of faculty and staff to these new modalities is perhaps the single most important factor for flexible learning success, more than the technology adopted.

Likewise, bandwidth use is also a challenge. There are many places in the country where internet connection appears to be weak or scarce. Adding to this issue is the limited financial capacity of students, making access to the internet difficult. These students need assistance, either through financial or technological means, so that they can be ensured of continuous learning. The lack of assistance from the government is a major disadvantage to students facing these kinds of issues. Private schools have become quite aware of this issue, and national organizations like the Coordinating Council of Private Educational Associations (COCOPEA) have been consistently asking the Congress, the executive, and telecommunication companies (telcos) to improve connections and lower costs since April 2020.

A minority of private schools have tried to work around bandwidth, by designing their instructional material to work exclusively with low-bandwidth solutions: one, as an example, has decided to forego an LMS, and worked through Facebook Messenger and printed packs. The effectiveness of such strategies is, of course, a subject for debate. This is an example of how private schools are individually making decisions that balance between student costs, access, and learning, keeping in mind the needs of their students.

A last one worth mentioning is the larger challenge at the institutional level: scaling. This is how to get all faculty and staff to use flexible learning effectively and not simply as a temporary solution before returning to face-to-face classes. Unless done carefully, too many faculty members may just create digital versions of face-to-face lectures, which in turn may translate poorly as a learning experience for remote-learning students. It is one challenge to have a department successfully transition to flexible learning. It is an entirely different challenge to have an entire college, or even the whole university and beyond, all transition at equal levels of competence.

Examining support systems to school operation and flexible learning

Faculty members are not the only ones who need to step up, as administrators and staff are equally challenged with the shifts in learning modalities. Most schools have processes (and technologies) that are a mix of manual and online modes. In our experience, in thinking about a process—say, the processing of payments or student registration, the existence of a single manual step in the chain has been enough to create a bottleneck in that process. This not only affects the service that a process

is supposed to provide, but often also cascades upon other processes. Not enough attention is given to digitizing these processes, as schools focus on converting courses to flexible learning.

Many of the procedures and activities by private schools that aim to deliver services to their students are built on a face-to-face approach. Private schools may need to examine their current systems, procedures, structures, and human resources, as well as the relevance of services or processes, in terms of enhancing student services, safety, and quality education in an environment with limited access to school facilities. Some services are going to be less vital in the foreseeable future (a library branch, for example, when the library system is now operating online). And if these do not enhance flexible learning experiences and school operations, these might hamper efficiency and effectiveness in delivering quality education, either by being bottlenecks to a process or by incurring unnecessary institutional costs.

Pivots in marketing

Private schools need to reach out to potential students and their parents about how great they are and why they can best serve their educational needs. Marketing is an activity that all schools do at some level. Even SUCs promote key programs (for example, if they wish to establish a new degree program) and scholarships through marketing.

While private colleges and universities have engaged in internet-based marketing for a while, the most common activity for most schools (i.e., their core marketing activity) is to visit and promote in high schools. This is done by setting appointments with public and private high schools that are identified as having students who may be interested in that college or university (geography plays a large role in school selection). Similarly, a private high school might do promotion with elementary schools. Private schools also have worked with these schools to set up career fairs, campus visits, and other events that they feel would give potential students a better idea of whether or not they like their school.

Many private schools have also revisited their pricing (especially their tuition and other school fees, a generally sensitive issue for both schools and students) in part due to the pandemic, but more because of the economic downturn that has ensued. Many, if not most, private schools have reduced their pricing, though the variance in the amount of reductions has been wide.

With the pandemic imposing social distancing and the conduct of activities online, all these face-to-face marketing strategies have become unavailable. Marketing has almost exclusively switched to social media, which, however, a congested informational marketplace. Some schools have been more successful than others in this area, but for many schools, social media expertise has traditionally been a low priority before the pandemic. This difficulty has likely contributed to low enrollment turnouts.

Recommendations for navigating new ecosystems

In response to the new ecosystems in education brough about by the pandemic, the following recommendations are made:

Protect school finances

This is probably the single most important action to take immediately. One of the ways to protect school finances and mitigate the impacts of education disruption is to preserve financial resources. The preservation of financial resources in a school is important because it increases chances of operational survival and continuity in providing quality education. It is important to understand that if private schools run out of financial resources, closure often follows. When this happens, students, teachers, and staff do not benefit at all.

How do schools preserve financial resources? Preserving cash would be the most direct strategy. This means, simply, re-examining finances and reducing or postponing activities and programs that are cash-heavy but would not affect the immediate operations of the school and would not unduly disadvantage students.

Some decisions for cuts may be easier (but no less painful) to justify, such as athletic programs, campus beautification and maintenance, and library expenses (e.g., book acquisition). Unfortunately, these are often not enough, and other programs that get affected are often exactly those needed for the future development of the school: faculty development programs, research, and campus development.

A more painful decision, and one not unique to schools, is the likely need to reduce the number of people employed. Large drops in enrollment do not just mean less teaching opportunities, but also less need for support staff. Changes in how a school provides its services due to the pandemic (for example, the need for a school to have a large campus maintenance staff) also affect such decisions.

These are the challenges facing private schools, in the absence of government support funding—of which none have gone to private schools. It is private schools that are experiencing most of these difficult financial scenarios.

Use online marketing strategies

Marketing strategies in the current context, which focus almost exclusively on social media and its variants, also need to change. The common approach appears to be digital marketing activities: webinars, career talks, the digitization of a face-to-face school visit (i.e., an online 360-degree view of the campus), and online advertisements. To this end, schools have developed a wide range of useful webinars that would have been inaccessible to parents and students prior to the pandemic. Yet more sophistication and understanding of online engagement is a competence schools need to develop, while respecting privacy.

One area that schools are now grappling with is online customer service. Schools have traditionally directed queries to experts or customer specialists within the institution, which usually entails a visit or phone call. What we have however recently experienced is an exponential increase in online queries through emails, Facebook posts, and the like. By our own estimates, the equivalent of a call (with all its follow-up questions) is a chain of seven to ten emails, which gets exacerbated if school officials redirect the query to another department. These have resulted in bottlenecks in communicating with students and parents. Clearly, the traditional structure of student services in schools (often by directing students to experts) needs to be rethought in an online environment.

Innovate

When exploring new ecosystems such as flexible learning, innovation might come as we continuously learn and improve our responses, procedures, and systems and to bring solutions to rising challenges. How schools react to these challenges will be a crucial factor in the innovation process.

Navigating a digital platform in learning is like building a new ecosystem. Since 2006, Jose Rizal University (JRU) has partially implemented flexible learning through the Hyflex learning model. But during the pandemic, we have fully adapted Hyflex from elementary to the graduate school level. Hyflex allows students to choose either face-to-face, online, or distance learning. It is a model that combines online and offline modes of instruction to enhance the learning experience of students. Live classes can be recorded for playback and be streamed by students who need it. Its appeal is its flexibility, in which students can fully participate online choosing either synchronous or asynchronous styles, or employing both. Prior to the pandemic, approximately 96 percent accessed parts of their courses outside the university (after the pandemic, it is 100 percent).

In terms of LMS, we continued using Canvas (one of the largest LMS internationally), having been its earliest adopter in the Philippines. It is costly, however, and thus may not be appropriate for all schools. Our LMS ensures that students can access their lessons, activities, and coursework whenever they need it and according to their own pace. Most importantly, Canvas not only serves as a good base for content lessons, exams, activities, and student outputs, but it also has built-in reporting and analytics and data organization, which can explore key areas vital to school operations such as learning and engagement of students, assessing training engagement, generating real-time reports, and recording success metrics beyond learning. When analyzed, these data can provide a picture of the the best learning experiences possible.

The biggest challenges in innovation though, from our experience, are process-based. Processes that are deep-rooted in face-to-face delivery still permeate schools.

Schedules and alloted time for classes are perhaps the most glaring example. Another are job responsibilities based on a set number of teaching hours. These need to be reviewed deeply by school administrators and faculty to see how they should be adjusted as FLOs become increasingly integrated in education.

Reimagine education and its delivery

According to a COCOPEA survey conducted at the start of the pandemic, 56 percent of private schools reported their readiness to start flexible learning by late April 2020. Their options include full online, distance education, and blended learning classes (DepEd 2020a; CHED 2020).

A key in the shift to flexible learning modes was ensuring the preparation and readiness of faculty and support staff. In JRU, for example, using the Hyflex model, faculty were encouraged to rethink course designs and instructional materials according to bandwidth target, catering to students with wide ranges of connectivity. We also promoted the development of modules weeks before the start of classes, taking time to change and prepare syllabus, content lessons, and activities fitted to flexible learning. The remodelling of syllabi focused on essential student and program learning outcomes. Courses requiring laboratory work were rescheduled to the next semester or were provided with alternative strategies, such as using online simulation platforms. Faculty were given freedom to create new learning schedules or structure class hours, while balancing asynchronous and synchronous activities according to student's needs. Teaching strategies were designed based on categories of immediacy. Assessment strategies were revised not only to maintain integrity, but also to become flexible to students' needs and capacity.

Educators in private schools also need to promote engagement amid a number of online concerns and issues. They are in the best position to identify barriers to student engagement and to offer solutions, implement data, and monitoring of learning. Educators should also reach out the students and not only teach, because this is a time when students need the patience, flexibility, empathy, and understanding of their teachers as they navigate the challenges of online learning. To sum, this is a period of adjustment to changes for everyone.

Examine and assist support systems for flexible learning

As we shift to online learning, private schools need to look into their various offices and processes, including registration, information systems, accounting, library, support services, guidance counseling, and the like. Schools need to respond to online inquiries faster, observe and provide solutions to online glitches, and develop systems necessary for continued operations. This means revising procedures, connecting various programs, and pushing for digital skills needed to deliver online services efficiently.

A key part of online student support is the concept of a single point of contact (SPOC), which is something common in business process outsourcing (BPO) companies. This often means reorganization in an existing school structure, which tends to have non-academic departments according to administrative function, rather than student experience. Straightforward approaches include adopting a call center-like frontline to handle and solve student inquiries; fancier versions would include matrix-type reorganizations that allow teams to handle problems and implement solutions.

Since the pandemic brings about mental health concerns (Fiorillo and Gorwood 2020), the well-being of students should also be considered (DepEd 2020b). Guidance counseling services at JRU, for example, have fully shifted online. Online mental health assessments and webinars on mental health issues and psychoeducation have also been in place. Another strategy we employed to increase the number of students with mental health issues served is through partnerships in order to provide free or subsidized services whenever demands are increasing. This ensures that students are being provided help when they need it.

Collaborate with other private schools

Since all schools are implementing various modes of flexible and remote learning, not only is a lot of trial-and-error happening, but a lot of experiences are being generated as well. In time, the educational sector would be a pool of rich experiences which could be turned into practical knowledge, if the sector can collectively capture and share these.

Consortia arrangements among schools can be used to maximize the attainment of expertise, technology, and knowledge, and hopefully lower delivery costs (for example, an online library or an LMS can service more than one school, if legal restrictions are removed). More-equipped schools can lend technology to others in the provinces since this can be done online. The information technology-based learning (ITBL) activities of one institution can be borrowed by another. Training and development exchanges can also take place, outsourcing whatever it takes to facilitate the shift to flexible learning.

Partner with telcos to support flexible learning

As we pursue online learning, it is essential that private schools communicate, negotiate, and partner with telecommunication companies to increase access to internet connectivity without prejudicing load balances. Associations such as the PACU have gone into extensive negotiations with telcos to create special packages that would benefit students. Price points from telco packages are unfortunately still prohibitive for many students. This furthermore limits the course design options of faculty: lower gigabyte limits (of the cheaper prepaid packages) mean

restrictions on course design, reduced use of video conferencing, and limits to downloads.

Much work needs to be done, with support from the government, on finding ways to lower internet costs for students. Sadly, there have been limited efforts in this area from both the executive and legislative branches of government.

Seek government help

As the pandemic brought about an economic recession, household finances were deeply affected. This challenged parents and guardians financially in terms of supporting the education of their children. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that 192 countries had closed all schools and universities, affecting more than 90 percent of the world's learners (Thomas 2020). Here in the country, as mentioned, 865 schools had suspended operations, creating job loss among faculty and staff and producing uncertainties in these times (*ABS-CBN News* 2020). In these instances, private school teachers and staff affected by the pandemic need the financial assistance of the government. Contractually hired faculty and staff who are under a no-work, no-pay arrangement need the help of the government and of their employers to survive the crisis (Magsambol 2020).

As a way of the government to provide pandemic relief measures for the second time, Bayanihan to Recover as One Act (Bayanihan 2) was made into law last September 11, 2020 (Merez 2020). Unfortunately, the bulk of education-oriented funding (around Php 7 billion) is focused on public education, namely for SUCs and for the DepEd. The SUC budget is particularly ironic: Php 3 billion is allocated for conversion to smart campuses, while private universities and colleges, already equipped with such technologies, stand beside them with excess capacity for their students. Moreover, only Php 600 million has been given to students affected by the pandemic, and no line-item amounts of assistance to private school teachers were identified. The consistent requests of the private sector to include private school teachers in these funding programs remain to be downplayed.

As for students, the provision of financial or stimulus packages in the form of education financing, tuition fee assistance, giving of gadgets to be used in education, and internet subsidies can mitigate the tragic consequences of education disruption that we face today.

We also need to communicate with the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) about the impact of the cessation of board examinations during the pandemic. Board exams have been rescheduled or cancelled, without guidance as to what graduates should do to prepare for the exams. For some, cancellations were announced two months before the exam, at a time when examinees are deeply focused on reviewing. Although it might be necessary, a delay in attaining licenses might incur possible loss of income, costs for repeating review classes, and a delay in professional work. The

PRC needs to mitigate these impacts as these affect the economy and the future of graduates.

The challenges as a call to action
The challenges in education brought about by COVID-19 should be regarded as a call to action and policymaking to mitigate the impacts and costs of education disruption all over the country. It is vital for schools to understand the circumstances of implementing flexible learning and address the challenges it presents. These would include supporting the training and development of teachers, addressing issues in internet connectivity, balancing finances for school operations, and providing public assistance to those affected economically.

Flexible learning is challenging, but schools need to learn by doing, innovating, and redesigning courses, assessments, and activities, and by managing class hours and learning resources. Support systems that enhance flexible learning experience are needed in order to adapt to the online environment.

Lastly, the government needs to help private education just as much as it funds public education. It is important to keep our dialogues with the DepEd, the CHEd, the Congress, the PRC, and other public institutions open, so we can discuss the needs of students and be part of creating guidelines that will address the challenges of education disruption.

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3

FUEL for tomorrow
The University of the East's journey to flexible learning [1]

Ester Garcia, Melvin Vidar, and Roselle Basa

The slogan of the University of the East (UE) is "Tomorrow Begins in the East." But what happens when the future is shrouded by uncertainty because of an unseen enemy: a virus that is quickly spreading across the globe, bringing sickness, death, and fear along its trail, and even leaving powerful and wealthy nations gasping for breath?

Stunned by the sudden turn of events and confronted with the challenge of continuing instruction in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, UE employed careful planning, meticulous research of best practices, strategic use of technology, data-driven decision making, and collective effort of seasoned administrators to recover its bearing. After more than four months of community quarantine, it emerged from the disruptions brought by the pandemic using a three-pronged approach to successfully conduct its very first purely online summer classes. It is now also poised and more confident to offer flexible learning for the first semester of Academic Year (AY) 2020–2021, branded as Flexible UE Learning (FUEL). Just like the fluidity of the pandemic, UE used fluid decision-making to muster its warrior spirit and manage to continue its 74 years of existence as an educational institution.

Early stages of blended and online learning

Our journey with online learning started when UE started experimenting on blended learning sometime in 2011. Two main strategic decisions were made by the President to foster UE's blended learning program:

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1 This chapter was previously published as an article in the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities (PACU) Newsletter, Volume X, Number 1, January–September 2020.

- An ad hoc Blended Learning Committee was appointed to formulate the policy and implementation framework for the program.
- At the same time, UE hired a consultant with previous experience running an e-learning program using the Moodle platform in a university abroad to provide the technical input during the deliberations of the Committee.

UE eventually adopted key policy recommendations that included the following:

- Capacity building seminars and workshops were organized for faculty interested in blended learning.
- Incentives were offered to faculty who undertake course materials development in terms of de-loading at the stage of course materials preparation, and payment of honorarium at the stage of delivery of the course.
- A provision of a maximum of 30 hours for online sessions and 24 hours for face-to-face sessions was set as guide for the faculty as they develop course contents for undergraduate courses within the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS). For graduate courses, considering the presumed higher level of maturity of the students, the minimum time for face-to-face sessions could be as few as 12 hours.
- All course materials developed by the faculty were deemed acceptable for delivery in class only after they had passed a quality assurance system consisting of four stages of review through experts engaged by UE, consisting of (1) an instructional design expert, (2) a course content expert, (3) a language editor, and (4) a technical expert.
- Mindful of their status as an ad hoc committee, the Blended Learning Committee finally recommended as its exit strategy the incorporation of its function vis-à-vis the Blended Learning Program into a new Office of Curriculum Development and Instruction (OCDI) that had long been planned by the President. Thus, when the OCDI was created, blended learning was one of the programs that it had to administer.

In 2018, UE partnered with Instructure, Inc. to subscribe to the Canvas LMS. The senior high school (SHS), college, and graduate levels were the identified users of the LMS. Additional Wi-Fi hotspots were installed for faculty use. Faculty were provided with capacity building training and were encouraged to immediately implement the use of Canvas in their instruction. The use of Canvas was, however, made optional except during class suspensions due to inclement weather. The top administrative officials of UE did not want to impose on the faculty and just allowed them to see the benefits of an LMS for themselves.

In Summer 2019, nine pairs of faculty members developed course materials in Canvas for the eight General Education core courses and for the course on Rizal. Funding was provided in the form of an equivalent of three units teaching load per faculty for summer. National Service Training Program (NSTP) 2 modules were also developed and uploaded in Canvas. In July 2019, UE hosted the second Philippine Canvas User Group that brought together the different partner institutions of Instructure, Inc. A Canvas Caravan was also held in September 2019 to further promote its use to faculty and students. In retrospect, these "small" incremental decisions towards the use of an LMS for blended and online learning proved to be the necessary foundation for a systematic program that will enable UE to face the future of education in spite of the global disruptions caused by a pandemic.

Then the pandemic struck. It struck particularly hard on March 2020, such that Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared extended community quarantine (ECQ) in the National Capital Region on March 15, 2020. By that time, UE had started mobilizing academic officials to swiftly use online learning to finish the remaining two weeks of the second semester (and the school year for the basic education departments). It was a blessing that UE did not modify its academic calendar.

Guidelines were quickly formulated and disseminated to the stakeholders of UE to finish the semester. The use of online learning lasted for only one week due to the limited internet connectivity of students. Final exams were postponed and eventually cancelled. Instead, UE released guidelines instructing the faculty to compute the grades of the students based on the existing class standing, in compliance with several Commission on Higher Education (CHED) bulletins released to address the challenges brought about by COVID-19 to the higher education institutions (HEIs). Moreover, the administration instructed faculty members to instead give a grade of LFR ("lacks final requirement") to students with failing class standings to give them a chance to make up. Under existing rules, they could remove the LFR mark within one year. By April 30, UE was able to conclude the school calendar.

Preparing for purely online Summer 2020 and flexible learning for AY 2020–2021

But while all of these things are going on, the President instructed the OCDI to study a webinar hosted by the American Council of Education (ACE) entitled "Swiftly Pivoting to Fully Remote Campus: Responding to COVID-19." Moderated by Assistant Vice President Sherry Lynn Hughes of ACE, the webinar chronicled the experience of three HEIs in the United States (US) as shared by their top administrators: Gian Mario Besana, Assistant Provost of Global Engagement and

Online Learning at De Paul University; Laura Niessen de Abruna, Provost, York College of Pennsylvania; and Kai Wang, Senior Dean of Strategic Innovations at Wake Technical Community College. These three HEIs in the US were able to swiftly pivot to remote learning because of their existing resources. Nevertheless, we learned a lot from this webinar, and somehow, our initial approach in addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic to UE was partly shaped by their experiences and recommendations.

Based on the recommendations of the abovementioned webinar, we at UE implemented three major courses of action:

- *First*, we prepared the faculty by training them more intensively in the use of Canvas. They needed to produce online modules that could be used for a purely online summer term that UE intended to offer. Due to the shift to online learning, it was imperative that they prepared online modules so they could deliver their lessons under the new modality.
- *Second*, we prepared and informed the students about our plan to offer a purely online summer term. It took some time to allay their fears and convince them that online learning would work. Part of the work also involved convincing them and their parents to still invest in education, even while experiencing the adverse economic effects of the pandemic, wherein some parents lost their jobs either temporarily or permanently.
- *Third*, once the faculty and students had agreed to pure online learning for Summer 2020, the Information Technology (IT) Department prepared the necessary IT infrastructure for the conduct of online learning. Despite the sudden surge of demand for development and modification of online systems, the IT Department took the challenge while employing a skeletal workforce. Online systems were modified to allow remote access by key employees who were working from home.

Eventually, the plan was to offer flexible learning for the next school year. Cognizant of internet connectivity challenges, UE only decided for a pure online summer term because in the past, summer had always been a choice. But UE believes that the regular semester and school year should be more inclusive, hence the use of flexible learning modalities.

Against this background, this chapter expounds on UE's three-pronged approach to combat the adverse effects of COVID-19 on its delivery of educational services. As a disclaimer, this chapter is written from the point of view of academic officials. The authors are cognizant of other preparations that are done behind the scenes by other offices which are not mentioned in this chapter.

Preparing the faculty

Because of the pandemic, UE faced the prospect of cancelling summer classes. There were even calls to defer schooling for one year. Still feeling the effect of the K to 12 reform, this looming possibility would spell doom for the university, especially its faculty. The standing policy for faculty salary payment is "no load, no pay."

Looking beyond this problem, UE took the opportunity to use the pandemic as a catalyst to initiate reforms, especially in the use of technology in education. With the availability of the Canvas LMS, the council of deans and chancellors suggested to the President that a student survey regarding a pure online summer term be conducted immediately. After a series of deliberations, the survey was deployed during the Holy Week. A simple questionnaire was constructed via Google Forms and was emailed through the official UE emails of the students. The survey had three questions: (1) "Are you willing to enroll for purely online summer classes?;" (2) "Do you have stable internet connection?;" and (3) "What course(s)/subject(s) do you intend to enroll?" The survey instrument was customized per college. It was the perfect time to pray and decide to be a part of a trailblazing journey towards online learning.

The results were collated and summarized by April 8, 2020. Of the 13,507 emails sent, 2,730 responded, with a response rate of 20 percent. Among the 2,730 who responded, 1,224 (45 percent) expressed their willingness to enroll in the summer term. Of those who are willing to enroll, 903 (74 percent) have stable internet connection. With these results, the council of deans and chancellors of UE decided to offer pure online summer classes. The summer school calendar was prepared and revised several times by the Registrar's Office because of the extension of the ECQ in Metro Manila. Eventually, it was finalized that the pure online summer term would be held from June 8 to July 15, 2020. These decisions were all arrived at with the active participation of UE's Academic Council, which provided collective wisdom almost daily via a chat group in a messaging application.

With this development, the OCDI was tasked to prepare the faculty for the conduct of a pure online summer term. A self-paced and video-based capacity-building online training was conducted in Canvas for all faculty intending to teach for the summer term. The objective of the training is to help the faculty develop and update their instructional materials using the Canvas LMS. Initially, there were 253 participants coming from the 11 colleges of UE Manila and UE Caloocan, the two basic education departments, and the NSTP and Physical Education (PE) Departments. It started running on April 22, 2020.

The self-paced online Canvas training for teachers enabled the faculty to develop modules for purely online classes. A few were able to finish their modules. But most faculty finished their modules while Summer 2020 was ongoing. More than 1,500 college students enrolled for the pure online summer term. SHS students also enrolled in remedial programs to address their deficiencies. In addition to the usual student

evaluation of faculty, an evaluation was conducted on the following: instructional design, learning materials, activities and assignments, and assessments. On the average, the students rated the conduct of the pure online Summer 2020 as either very good or outstanding. While summer classes were ongoing, more faculty members enlisted in the online Canvas training, bringing the total participants to more than 600. The OCDI also deployed another online survey for the faculty and the students in preparation for flexible learning for the first semester of AY 2020–2021.

An important component of our approach was the effective use of timely communication. Before undertaking the abovementioned online Canvas training, the OCDI released a letter of appeal dated April 30, 2020 to the faculty through their respective Deans. Part of the letter reads:

> [U]nder normal circumstances, the use of a novel mode of learning should have been regulated by an academic circular. However, the urgency of the matter, the unpredictability of COVID-19 (which to date has now infected more than 3 million people worldwide, with no available vaccine yet), and the feasibility of using Canvas LMS, convinced the council of Deans and Chancellors to recommend to President Garcia that we offer pure online summer classes and flexible learning modalities for the first semester of AY 2020–2021.

> In relation to the above development, President Garcia instructed us (OCDI) to also inform the faculty, through their respective Deans to prepare their instructional materials for flexible learning modalities for AY 2020-2021. Due to the uncertainties that the community quarantine brings, we have to anticipate and prepare for various means of instruction delivery: residential (traditional classroom-based), online, blended, or drive-thru. Online, blended, or drive-thru strategies fall under distance learning mode of instruction. Faculty should be encouraged by their respective Deans to prepare carefully selected viable instructional materials—be they printed handouts, books, e-books, CDs, USBs, digital copies, coupled with teaching-learning methodologies that will enable our students to "learn from home." Drive-thru distance learning necessitates that University should have a system where the students may pick up the instructional materials in UE or a depot during designated days and hours. Many colleges opted to use our Canvas LMS for the development of their instructional materials for the first semester of AY 2020–2021, realizing that the materials will easily

be transported in various forms conforming to whichever flexible learning modalities arise. President Garcia is willing to give the faculty some leeway to use a teaching strategy that he/she is most familiar with. However, because of the community quarantine, it will surely involve distance learning, so an internet connection will be needed. Moreover, quoting from Dr. Padolina, President of CEU and former UPOU Chancellor, "[w]hatever type of flexible instruction we engage in, we must prepare a study guide even if it is a simple one in an outline form."

To summarize, since the entire UE teaching community will deliver instruction under peculiar circumstances, the faculty members and the administration officials will have to work hand in hand to ensure the students receive the "goods in good condition." Our office will be coordinating with other colleges, especially with those who have the technical capability so that they can collaborate with other colleges in preparing for the eventual distance learning mode for the first semester.

The above letter effectively communicated the plans of the university for Summer 2020 and the coming school year. Its release generated a healthy dialogue among the faculty and academic officials of UE. Soon, the Academic Council approved a policy for faculty attendance that was drafted by a committee composed of directors of the OCDI, Internal Auditing, the IT Department, Department of Human Resources and Development (DHRD), the Comptroller, and a representative from the Data Privacy Office. Moreover, the faculty members of all 11 colleges, the two basic education departments, and the PE and NSTP Departments enthusiastically joined the online Canvas training. Eight of them proposed their own instructional materials development project with funding sourced from their faculty development and instructional fund (FDIF).

Preparing the students

While equipping the faculty for online and flexible learning, the UE, through its different departments involved in student services, was also busy engaging the students, communicating to them its plans, and doing consultations with them. To address the growing uncertainty of the students and their parents due to the pandemic, a series of open letters by the UE President and the Chancellors were posted in the UE website and its official Facebook page. Will the school year push through? Will there be face-to-face meetings? How come there are still miscellaneous fees? How about laboratory subjects? How about dentistry clinics?
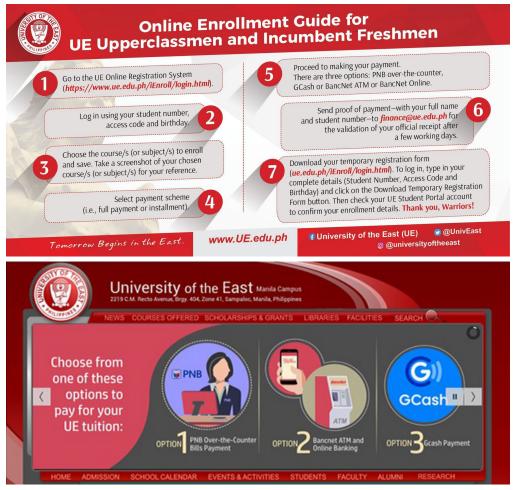
As mentioned earlier, a survey was sent to them regarding the pure online summer term and another one for student readiness for flexible learning. The results of the former were used as inputs in conducting a successful pure online summer classes, while the results of the latter were used to guide the Academic Council in crafting some guidelines for the conduct of FLOs for the first semester of AY 2020–2021. Specifically, we learned that 97 percent of our current students had smartphones, but only 61 percent had laptop or desktop computers. These findings convinced us that we could still use online learning for most students, provided we address their connectivity problems. But the most challenging aspect was how to communicate to them and their parents that UE would be using mostly online procedures for admission, processing of records, instruction, payment of tuition fees, and purchase of books. Another major concern was the conduct of laboratory for the Natural Science, Computer Science, Engineering, and Dentistry programs. All these interventions were done under the total student care policy of UE. In other words, while some of the interventions of UE were new, most of them were derived from existing policies, but were just contextualized to address the challenges posed by the pandemic. The pandemic forced us to be resilient, even as we reexamined our core beliefs and practices. Even in our shift to online and flexible learning, UE was careful not to disenfranchise students who lacked the gadgets but were willing to continue their schooling.

It is fortunate that UE has a University Relations Office (URO). The URO manages the website of UE, as well as its official Facebook page. Amid the uncertainty brought by the pandemic, the URO strategically releases statements and guidelines from different offices to the students in order to answer their queries.

For concerns regarding how the second semester of the last school year would be finished, the URO released an open letter from the UE President informing the students about the guidelines for computing their grades, the deadline for the posting of grades, online enrollment, schedule for the pure online summer term, and the shift of the school calendar to August, among others. Some helpful suggestions were also given regarding social distancing and the need to "keep going, keep learning, and keep investing" in the future by venturing into knowledge pursuits like catching up on their offline reading, while anticipating with "a prayerful hope what's next for the coming weeks and months." On top of its usual function of posting updates and congratulatory articles for student and faculty achievers, the URO has become a "centralized communication center" for UE, providing clear and relevant updates to its constituents.

For concerns regarding enrollment and payments, the URO collaborated with the Finance Department, the Comptroller's Office, the IT Department, and the Registrar to develop guidelines and procedures for payments of tuition fee via over-the-counter payment (via Philippine National Bank), GCash, and online banking. They posted

Figure 3.1
Infographics on enrollment and tuition payment

Source: University of the East website and Facebook page

infographics on the UE website and the UE official Facebook page (see Figure 3.1 above).

When the enrollment for the first semester began on June 1, 2020, the OCDI, the Registrar, and the IT Department collaborated to conduct another simple survey which was incorporated into the enrollment system consisting of three questions:

(1)   Choose the most appropriate sentence that reflects the quality of the internet connection that you have at home.

☐   I have stable and fast internet access at home.
☐   I have irregular and slow internet access at home.
☐   I don't have internet access at home.

(2)   Choose all options that reflect the availability of computer and portable devices that you can use for studying.
  ☐ I have a laptop and/or a desktop computer.
  ☐ I have a smart phone.
  ☐ I have a tablet.
  ☐ I don't have a computer or any portable device that I can use for studying.

(3)   Choose the most appropriate instruction delivery modality for you.
  ☐ Online & Distance Learning (OnlineDL): Instruction is delivered through internet technologies
  ☐ Blended Learning (BL): OnlineDL and the traditional face-to-face interaction in the classroom are combined
  ☐ Use of printed materials: Materials will either be sent or picked up at designated areas

These outputs illustrate the effectiveness of ad hoc committees and small teams working hand-in-hand to address emerging issues and concerns. We use the word "team" since most offices have been reduced to skeletal workforces. Only those who are involved in essential day-to-day operations can report for work, many of whom are on a rotating schedule to avoid contracting the virus. Others work from home, while others are on forced leave.
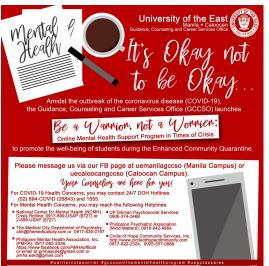
Another team composed of Admissions Office and Registrar's office developed guidelines for online admissions and URO came up with this announcement (see
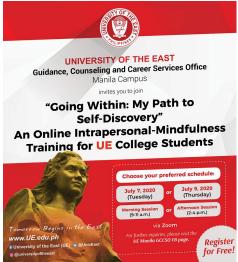
Figure 3.2
Online announcement of admissions and registration procedures

Source: University of the East Facebook page

Figure 3.3
Online counseling sessions and webinars

Source: University of the East Facebook page

Figure 3.2 on the opposite page). Meanwhile, the Guidance Counselling and Career Services Office (GCCSO) was also busy conducting online counselling sessions and webinars (see Figure 3.3 above).

These are part of their general strategy to improve the student profile, which consists of the following actions:

- Promote the respective Facebook pages and respective UE emails of the office as platforms to communicate with students and vice versa and to post useful infographics and videos (e.g., tips for applying jobs online, self-care, safeguarding children's online activities, how to be a successful online learner, online test–taking skills, etc.);
- Conduct a mental health monitoring for students (i.e., K to 12, college) and parents of basic education learners and a career survey for industry partners to further contextualize the services to be offered to students and parents given this situation;
- Organize online counseling (on academic and other concerns) through the preparation of standard implementing guidelines and reformatting of some assessment tools to be used online;
- Continue to design psycho-educational programs based on the needs of students, which can also be delivered online;
- Prepare some guidance forms to be available online (e.g., cumulative records of students, counseling notes);

- Coordinate with the ITD, the Student Affairs Office (SAO), and the OCDI with regard to the preparation of Freshmen Orientation (Proposed date: August 6 or 7, 2020); and
- Provide the faculty an orientation on psychosocial response to students.

The SAO also modified its systems to allow online transactions. Realizing the need to communicate to students so that support services are still possible even when UE is still effectively closed per guidelines of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF), the SAO announced that all requests for certifications, renewal of ID, and clearances should be sent by email, including submission of project proposals by student organizations. They also got busy assisting foreign students in the renewal of their student visas and in answering queries from interested international students. On top of these, they also collaborated with the GCCSO in preparing for the Freshmen Orientation during the first week of classes. Meanwhile, arrangements were also made with University of the East Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Medical Center, Inc. (UERMMMCI) for online medical consultations for the UE constituency.
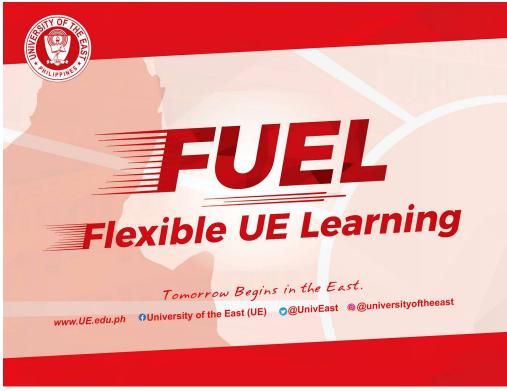
Preparing the IT infrastructure

Going back to the early part of our preparation, when the faculty members started to undergo Canvas training for the online summer term, and when the students finally accepted the final summer term schedule, the President informed the IT Department that it was their turn to prepare the needed IT infrastructure for online learning.

UE has an existing Data Center housed in one of its campuses and a backup storage and server at the other campus. The total bandwidth that UE is using stands at 1,100 Mbps (megabits per second), with 700 Mbps coming from its primary provider and 400 Mbps from the secondary or backup provider. The IT Department develops the IT systems for administrative and academic operations. It also develops systems for activities related to finance, accounting, human resources, admissions, enrollment, posting of grades, and teaching load, among others. It also manages the UE website that houses the different portals for students, faculty, and parents. There is also an existing system for online encoding of grades and online viewing of payslips.

But the pandemic offered unique challenges. Suddenly, the demand for the use of technology more than doubled. Procedures related to admissions, enrollment and tuition fee payments needed to be fully online. Key personnel working from home had to be granted remote access to various IT systems. Access to the student, faculty, and parent portals needs to be upgraded to improve communication and flow of information, while complying with data privacy protocols. These demands were satisfactorily addressed by the IT Department. Other requests like automated enrollment system for basic education and online selling of books were scheduled for next year.

Figure 3.4
UE's FUEL branding

Source: University of the East Facebook page

The Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) of the Department of Libraries was also either integrated in Canvas or added to the existing online access at the UE website. Moreover, a framework for curating open educational resources was developed by the Department of Libraries, in collaboration with the OCDI.

With all these modifications in the operations of UE, one pressing concern remained: the conduct of laboratory classes. The Computer Science, Natural Science, Hotel and Restaurant Management, Multimedia Arts, Engineering, and Dentistry programs all require different types of laboratory activities. This concern was addressed partly by doing an inventory of the licensed software acquired by the university, the use of open software, and more recently, the subscription of UE to Labster, which was facilitated by Dr. Ynna Bautista of University of Baguio and by the PACU. UE reviewed the existing licenses for software used in the computer laboratories, negotiated their renewal or purchase, and looked into the possibility of making these available directly to the faculty and students. In cases where direct access of the students to the software is not possible, we are negotiating for the purchase of a software which allows remote access by the students to software in our computer

laboratories. Video materials of laboratory experiments were also prepared by the faculty for "virtual laboratory" use. The lab courses that are not amenable to online learning were postponed to a later date.

A pleasant development occurred in the last Academic Council meeting. The branding for the UE FLOs was finalized, care of the College of Education, the URO, and the OCDI. UE's FLO was branded as FUEL (Flexible UE Learning) (see Figure 3.4 on previous page). The FUEL branding was expanded to the slogan "fuel your brain, fuel your dreams, fuel your life."

FUEL encapsulates our own brave but humble attempt to face the crisis brought by the pandemic. With these developments, especially with the successful holding of the pure online summer term, we are slowly gaining confidence that we can pull it through. We are still receiving lots of comments from concerned parents and students, but our latest enrollment figures are very encouraging. To date, we now have a total enrollment of more than 17,000. Let us end by quoting an old Chinese saying: "For every crisis, there is an opportunity." Without explicitly articulating it, we at UE are determined to turn this crisis brought by a virus that originated from China into an opportunity to reform our systems, and hopefully contribute to the different efforts aimed at righting the sail of our entire educational system.

Tomorrow begins in the East!

4

Online education as a flexible approach to learning during a pandemic
Lessons from De la Salle–College of St. Benilde

Marissa R. Fearnley and Geronio G. Ulayao

The scale with which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of human life is unimaginable (Rasmitadila et al. 2020). In addition to significant economic and political ramifications (Demuyakor 2020), this outbreak has caused tremendous disruptions in the global education landscape, putting school sessions to a halt in over 140 countries and affecting more than 1.1 billion students in all educational levels (UNESCO 2020).

While teaching and learning are significant concerns during a health crisis, the welfare and well-being of individuals, especially learners, remain to be of paramount importance (Doucet et al. 2020). Nationwide lockdowns were put in place and school campuses were closed to help control viral transmission (Toquero 2020). Moreover, guidelines on safe distancing (i.e., physical and social) were recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) to prevent further spread within communities (Rasmitadila et al. 2020). Such measures consequently posed difficulties for learning systems to carry on as normal in these critical times.

All over the world, higher education institutions (HEIs) are recalibrating their delivery strategies to include distance education programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Toquero 2020). In addition to online instruction, other flexible modes that sought to promote continuity in the education sector include correspondence learning and use of massive open online courses (MOOCs) (Rasmitadila et al. 2020).

The Philippine context

In the Philippines, there are 194,252 total COVID-19 cases recorded as of August 24, 2020, with 59,200 cases being active ones (DOH 2020). Over 28 million students were affected when lockdown and community quarantine measures in response to increasing incidence of COVID-19 infections were implemented (UNESCO 2020).

Academic leaders and relevant government agencies are forced to come up with solutions that will address the disruptive shift brought about by the pandemic (Doucet et al. 2020). As the world awaits the development of a vaccine against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a short-term response demands that education continue to move forward and adjustments in formal learning systems be made (Doucet et al. 2020; Tria 2020). To maximize learning opportunities amidst the health crisis, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) advised the utilization of flexible delivery schemes using educational technology and other available means (Pelmin 2020), and gave colleges and universities the option to carry out institution-specific policies regarding the resumption of classes (Tria 2020).

In a country where the majority of households lack ownership of computers and have no stable access to the Internet (*Reuters* 2020), alternative modes of instruction using an online mode may prove to be challenging. While online learning has the potential to mitigate the problems of the new normal, many HEIs, both private and public, were unprepared for the demands of this unconventional learning system (Toquero 2020).

A call to action

Learning outside the confines of the physical classroom may take on many forms (Doucet et al. 2020), yet online learning is a viable approach to help students continue their education while limiting their exposure to and risk of infection (Ali 2020). Learning in an online setting does not require the physical presence of both teachers and students because virtual sessions may replace traditional face-to-face meetings (Ni Shé et al. 2019). Online sessions may be facilitated either synchronously or asynchronously, with each mode of delivery posing both benefits and limitations. Synchronous meetings using videoconferencing tools enable real-time communication and feedback. On the other hand, asynchronous learning sessions offer flexibility in terms of the pace with which learners can accomplish assigned tasks (Doucet et al. 2020). While both delivery formats bridge the geographical gap between learners and instructors, online teaching requires a considerable amount of planning to potentially benefit all stakeholders (Pelmin 2020; Tria 2020).

Transitioning to online education necessitates modifications in teaching and learning practices (Rasouli, Rahbania, and Attaran 2016), and capacity building opportunities are required for teachers who are not used to incorporating the use of technology in their classrooms (Doucet et al. 2020). Recognizing that not all HEIs

have the capacity to implement online learning strategies, the CHED launched the Higher Education (HiEd) Bayanihan Program in July 2020.

HiEd Bayanihan was conceived with HEI teachers in mind, specifically those who work in institutions with limited capabilities to equip their faculty with the knowledge and skills required to facilitate flexible learning strategies. It is a partnership with six HEIs, namely Central Luzon State University (CLSU), De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde (DLS–CSB), Far Eastern University (FEU), Manuel S. Enverga University Foundation (MSEUF), Philippine Normal University (PNU), and Tarlac Agricultural University (TAU), together with International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), British Council of the Philippines, and the Philippine Society of NSTP Educators and Implementers, Inc. (PSNEI) (CHED 2020b). This initiative is a collective action that endeavors to update the competencies of HEI faculty in view of the move towards more adaptive teaching and learning practices. By calling upon the "bayanihan" spirit of the six HEIs and leveraging on their strengths in the utilization of educational technologies, the CHED aimed to provide a thoughtful response to the current challenges besetting tertiary academic institutions.

Benilde's borderless response

As an HEI, the De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde is not new to the integration of technology for teaching and learning purposes. In fact, it has continuously utilized online platforms such as Moodle (Rodriguez and Anicete 2010) and Brightspace of D2L (Fearnley and Amora 2020) for over a decade. As a pioneering partner of CHED's HiEd Bayanihan Program, Benilde offered a free training course to help capacitate tertiary education faculty with competencies that are integral to online teaching as a flexible approach to instructional delivery in the new normal. In order to facilitate a borderless response, a full online modality and a procedural approach was conceived. As per the recommendation of CHED Chair J. Prospero de Vera III, colleges and universities which are not current users of any online learning platform, or which have no capacity to facilitate a similar capacity building at the institution level need to be prioritized in these types of initiatives.

Tagged as "Learning Online Teaching for the New Normal: An Online Training Course for HEI Teachers," this capacity building activity sought to achieve the following learning outcomes: (1) describe the new roles of educators in an online learning environment; (2) determine courses that are suitable for online delivery; (3) revise the course syllabus to include elements that are essential to online teaching and learning; (4) create a workable online course with Google Classroom; (5) relate good teaching practices in an online setting; and (6) apply guidelines related to intellectual property and data privacy in online teaching.

Online teaching is not as easy as migrating existing course materials into an online setup. This far from traditional delivery format calls for an additional set of

skills to ensure successful learning. In an online learning environment, instructors are expected to perform pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical roles in order to promote academic success among learners (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiague 2017). The pedagogical role of the teacher involves the practice of teaching methods that are anchored on sound principles that will foster optimum student engagement such as active, collaborative, and authentic learning. As a manager, the instructor takes charge of managing all aspects of course delivery, including organizing course content into a format that will facilitate better understanding among learners. The social role pertains to the ability of the teacher to establish a positive learning climate that will engender student participation and minimize undesirable behaviors. Finally, the technical role refers to instructor competencies on the use of educational technologies (e.g., learning management systems, virtual tools, etc.) and how they support student utilization of the same (Ni Shé et al. 2019).

A good understanding of the new roles that online educators will have to take on is not sufficient because not all courses lend themselves to online transfer. In general, lecture classes are the most feasible for online teaching. Some skills-based courses that will require supervised demonstrations to meet intended learning outcomes or use equipment that are only available on-campus, however, will need further review and exploration. A systematic approach to the selection of courses for online delivery accounts for considerations inherent to the characteristics of the institution such as delivery infrastructure (i.e., whether an online learning platform is available in addition to a physical classroom space), support services for users of the technology (i.e., helpdesk, tutorials, training), institutional climate and culture (i.e., guidelines on the mandatory use of educational technology), and characteristics of the student population (i.e., student ownership of required devices for online learning and their access to the Internet) (Brinthaupt et al. 2014). All these considerations are likely to influence the final decision on course delivery mode.

Just as it is in traditional education formats, the new normal in teaching and learning needs to pay considerable attention to the learning outcomes that need to be satisfied in any given course. While the use of educational technology is encouraged, its selection should neither detract from intended purpose nor create any mismatch with delivery options (ibid.). One of the readily available platforms that can be used for online delivery is Google Classroom, which provides a suite of tools for course management, communication, and assessment, among others (Iftakhar 2016). As a cloud-based application, it offers flexibility for users who may opt to work using their mobile devices instead of personal laptops or office desktops.

The type of device being used notwithstanding, the nature of the teaching and learning process should put learners' needs at the forefront. Inequities in terms of device ownership and internet access are challenges faced by both students and teachers (Bao 2020; Doucet et al. 2020), however, much more is expected from

educators who are the driving force behind any learning or innovation that happens in a classroom (Alharbi and Drew 2014). While an online approach to instructional delivery offers flexibility, it also increases the vulnerability of all stakeholders. Once again, educators are called upon to remain mindful of the important considerations related to protection of students' privacy (Prinsloo and Slade 2016), as well as uphold respect for intellectual property.

In extraordinary times that put the education sector in tremendous disarray, it is important to recognize that teachers are key to the implementation of any collective action. Distance education via online learning is not a panacea, but it is a promising alternative to traditional, face-to-face sessions (Doucet et al. 2020). Professional advancement is necessary so that teachers are given adequate opportunities to enhance their competencies in designing the learning experience of students in a new learning environment using a wide range of virtual tools for instruction.

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5

Emergency distance learning mode and the role of the educational technology office
The case of De La Salle University–Dasmariñas

Paul Anthony C. Notorio

The year 2020 has proven to be particularly challenging for educational institutions because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has exacerbated the already difficult situation for institutions in Southern Luzon—particularly in some areas in the provinces of Cavite, Batangas, and Laguna—that have already been contending with the repercussions of the eruption of the Taal Volcano in January 2020. These institutions have had to consider worst-case scenarios to mitigate undue impacts on them by the pandemic and the volcanic eruption.

To ensure that education continues amid the crises brought about by the pandemic and the eruption, online learning has been identified as a viable course of action for various institutions. Murphy (2020), for one, argues that online learning is an appropriate crisis response measure. Indeed, it is not the first time that many universities have resorted to prolonged online learning due to crisis. The AH1N1 outbreak in 2009 led top universities in the United States to quickly shift to online learning. Policies were made to manage safety and uncertainty. Online learning was a way to protect students from the harm brought about by the crisis, while ensuring continuity in education. Although Chick et al. (2020) still argue that face-to-face learning is still invaluable, they also argue for the need to mitigate the loss of learning exposure amidst crises.

In a typical scenario, classes are suspended during disasters. These suspensions typically last from half a day up to several days at the most. However, because of

the pandemic, classes have been suspended since March 10, 2020 and face-to-face classes are probably not resuming for the rest of 2021. Several memoranda and announcements have been issued by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) that have encouraged alternative and flexible learning and advised due discretion in the conduct of school activities (CHED 2020). With the suddenness of the eruption and the pandemic, the academic community has been caught unprepared. It now contends with two important questions: How do academic institutions adapt to these crises, and what changes in the school operations should take place?

The DLSU–Dasmariñas case

As their immediate response to the crises, some institutions either stopped or continued operations, while others decided to mass promote. De La Salle University–Dasmariñas (DLSU–D) decided to continue classes in distance learning mode. This was possible because DLSU–D had adapted a learning management system (LMS) since 2010, way before the pandemic.
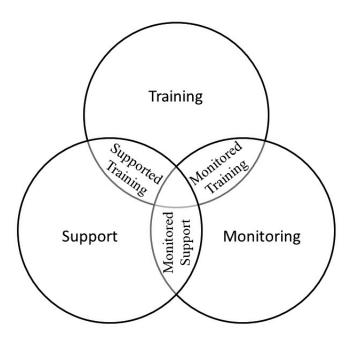
In 2012, an office was created—the Educational Technology Center (ETC)—to directly manage the University's e-learning initiatives. The office was later renamed into the Center for Innovative Learning Programs (CILP) as its functions were widened. A training system, comprised of three levels, was established. Faculty members needed to complete Level Three to be able to deliver blended classes. Since 2012, about 80 percent of all faculty members have completed this level. Moreover, since 2017, DLSU–D has been a Microsoft Showcase School.

Additional policies have also been instituted at DLSU–D, including the use of the LMS up to the delivery of fully online classes. Measures have also been put in place since January 2020 with the looming threat of an even worse eruption of the Taal Volcano and the possibility of an outbreak of COVID-19. Because of these institutional interventions, DLSU–D was indeed prepared and able to deliver online learning.

However, many factors have impeded the smooth transition to distance learning. The training of faculty members has not automatically translated into utilization. Though more than a majority of faculty had been trained, only an estimated 20 percent of them did conduct blended classes as of the first semester of School Year (SY) 2019–2020. The rest of the trained faculty either forgot the lessons about or lacked confidence in using the LMS because of lack of practice, as well as unreliability or absence of internet connection at home. This observation aligns with the findings of Dlalisa and Govender (2020) which state that while many accept the LMS, few use or intend to use it.

Increasing the utilization of the LMS has thus been one of the primary goals of the CILP. To do this, the core services of the educational technology office (ETO) (such as the CILP) were designed to focus on training, support, and monitoring

Figure 5.1
Core services of an educational technology office and their confluence

(see Figure 5.1 above). These core services are repeatedly identified in the e-Learning Maturity Model (Marshall 2007). These services are evenly distributed among the personnel of the CILP team where two are responsible for training, three for support, and two for monitoring. The demand for each service varies depending on the season in the academic calendar, but most of these changes are within a manageable range.

Before the pandemic, training was both delivered online and face-to-face using an established learning path within the LMS. The learning paths were delivered in modules that included a comprehensive discussion and practical assessments on how to utilize the LMS for an effective delivery of blended class. In the area of support, technical assistance was provided that could be accessed via walk-in sessions, phone, email, and Jivochat. There were also messaging and helpdesk functions within the LMS itself. Monitoring was conducted on the use of the LMS following a framework based on the utilization of the features. Utilization was ranked in five levels from "very low utilization" (Level 1) to "very high utilization" (Level 5). This also served as a success indicator where the goal was to utilize majority of the features of the LMS. Monitoring was to be done periodically, and it must be done by an independent unit within the institution. Other interventions were put in place to promote utilization.

Supported training mechanisms, which included private synchronous consultations, were established to augment core training services. A system for monitored training

was initiated to facilitate the generation and analysis of skills utilization among trained faculty members. There was an expectation that training may need to be reinforced or even repeated. Educational training officers were thus given administrative accounts for all subscribed education technology tools to perform training monitoring.

This system requires that an institution must have a premium subscription to education technology tools. If the institution is not yet using an LMS, they must purchase one (Soegoto, Narimawati, and Saputra 2020). This LMS is to be used universally and the use of other educational technology tools by individual faculty members is highly discouraged. After all, if institutions aspire for quality, procedures must be standardized (Hutchison 2019).

Administrators can incentivize the usage of the LMS to encourage its utilization. The overlapping of monitoring and support suggests that the support team needs to be monitored as well. The goal is to measure how effective the support platforms are. This also gives the ETO an idea on the prevalent problems and concerns of the community. The confluence of the training, support, and monitoring comprises the core services of an ETO.
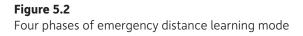
Phases of emergency response

The transition from traditional learning to distance learning brought about by the pandemic has led to a disruption in the demand for the services of the CILP. The CILP has had to transcend its initial job description to adapt to the crises and address the needs of its stakeholders. These changes are summarized into four phases as seen in Figure 5.2 (on the opposite page).
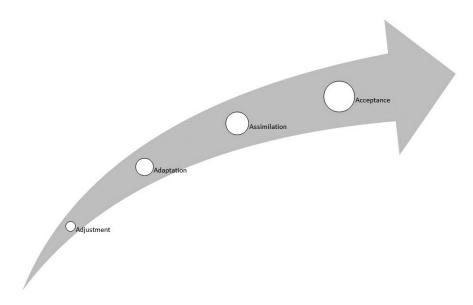
Adjustment phase

The adjustment phase is the first phase in any emergency crisis response. This phase is characterized by an extremely high number of problems resulting to high demand for support services. The need for training and monitoring is extremely low.

In the case of DLSU–D, the demand was so high that, at one point, the CILP was receiving fifty chat requests in an hour. Everyone in the team had to function as technical support. Most of the technical problems were about log-in and account errors. Some of the account errors included multiple accounts, archived accounts, and lack of accounts. The support platforms were expanded to include Facebook Messenger, Microsoft Teams live support, and social media platforms that included Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. These were distributed among the members of the team. Many of the sources of the problems came from those who were not regular users of the LMS, student and faculty alike. This phase lasted for around two weeks, with the peak occurring during the first week.

The CILP addressed these concerns in two steps. The first was root cause analysis. The second was information dissemination. The root causes of the problem

Figure 5.2
Four phases of emergency distance learning mode

were identified as quickly as possible. If the problem was rooted within the system, the system was configured to prevent similar problems from happening again. Subsequently, the information was disseminated via social media and as a canned response to the inquiries in all support platforms. All readily accessible platforms were activated to ensure that the demands of the academic community were addressed and learning was not disrupted.

Moreover, it proved ideal to provide live online support, where the technical support staff or the client could share screens, particularly for those having difficulty in following text instructions. The CILP also made sacrifices to address inquiries that came outside working days and hours. In such cases, the school administration could opt to provide additional people to respond to the concerns.

Adaptation phase

After two weeks from the start of the first phase, the demand for training and attendant services slowly decreased. In fact, there was a point that no one was using the technical support platforms anymore.

To be productive, the CILP started to host daily webinars that focused on how educational technology tools help the academic community to adapt to the situation. The webinars were conducted daily as a substitute to the daily live online support. Specifically, the goal of the webinars was to equip the faculty with the knowledge and skills in delivering distance learning effectively. Accordingly, the CILP focused on a

different topic daily for its webinars. These included topics on LMS, Microsoft tools, using videos in teaching, and educational tools, among others. Training sessions under these topics were based on the current needs of the academic community and focused on teachers as conduits of distance learning.

The webinars were recorded to provide teachers with poor internet connection the opportunity to view the training at their own pace. Collaboration with other departments and units of the institution was also considered, with the CILP also serving as a conduit for learning that connected various offices to the end users.

The adaptation phase can be described as the phase where the community begins to familiarize themselves to the situation. This phase requires a lot of training. If the ETO were to be successful in addressing the problems in the adjustment phase, there would be a low need for technical support. It is also in the adaptation phase where monitoring systems may be put in place.

Assimilation phase

After around three weeks of holding webinars, the CILP noticed that many teachers seemed to be overwhelmed by all the information and new ideas. Thus, a time to absorb everything learned from the webinars was in order.

The assimilation phase allowed for faculty to practice what they had learned. Hence, the training services were reduced and a balance among training, monitoring, and support was restored. The training schedule was shifted from daily to twice a week. The trainings also increasingly focused on the pedagogy of distance learning and were grounded on institutional policies. However, the most important component of this phase was monitoring.

Monitoring was conducted to see if the trainings were applied in their respective classes. The basic principle was if you trained them, then the trainees must be monitored.

Monitoring is an essential component in this phase because this measures the success of the actions taken. It also contributes to and informs approaches to pedagogies (Duin and Tham 2020). In a study conducted by Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020), the success of the transition from traditional to online learning is measured based on the adaptation and utilization of the platform. If the utilization is the benchmark for success, then DLSU–D's institutional LMS adaptation of almost 90 percent as of April 2020 can be considered successful.

However, utilization still did not automatically translate into satisfaction and quality. Some students voiced out their concerns and expressed polarizing situations. Some complained about too many synchronous sessions and overloaded assessments. Others, meanwhile, complained about the lack of content and the absence of personal communication between them and their teachers. Clearly, the issue of satisfaction was within a balance of many factors. However, each student had a different perception

of such balance, and the challenge for teachers and administrators was to find the right balance that is acceptable to all stakeholders. To find such balance, surveys must be deployed in order to produce meaningful data and analytics from stakeholders. Decisions must then be made based on these data.

In summary, the assimilation phase is a time for school administrators to determine how effective are their emergency policies. This extends beyond the ETO, as this requires a concerted effort from all other offices, led by the top-level administration.

Acceptance phase

When distance learning started, everyone was talking about the "new normal," even though many were still believing and hoping that things would go back to normal. Some of the initial assessments were to be submitted when face-to-face classes resumed. But sadly, face-to-face classes never resumed. As the number of COVID-19 cases steadily increased, everyone became apprehensive to go back to class. Some were even pushing to cancel the opening of classes until there was a vaccine (Ratcliffe 2020). However, this move was not seen as beneficial, especially for private schools whose primary source of income come from tuition fees. Hence, there was no other choice but to deliver distance learning in SY 2020–2021.

As the opening of classes was moved, institutions had months to prepare. New policies were instituted regarding the preparation and delivery of distance learning. Afterwards, training followed. In the case of the CILP, a training curriculum was created. The previous three-level training was changed into five levels. Upon completing Level 5, the teacher was deemed equipped to create modules and deliver a fully online class. Thus, the acceptance phase was characterized by a bulk of training and moderate need for support. The monitoring, if done comprehensively during the assimilation phase, is not needed in this phase. The acceptance phase is the last stage of the emergency crisis response. From there, the phases could revert to the adjustment, the adaptation, or the assimilation phases, depending upon the need of the academic community, as well as various external forces.

Moving forward with an ETO

This chapter examined the experiences of an ETO since the emergency distance learning mode was conducted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The context of the experiences is from a private higher education institution. Thus, this may not reflect the same situation for public or basic education institutions. Further study must be conducted in these areas.

The work of an ETO is extremely important, especially this school year. If a school does not have such department or office, creating one to manage the program properly is highly suggested. Such office shall support the overall improvement of online instruction (Iwasaki, Tanaka, and Kubota 2011) and improve the overall

experience and satisfaction in distance learning (Khan, Hameed, Yu, and Khan 2017). This must be separate from the information and communication technology (ICT) office in charge of maintaining the school's information technology systems. Furthermore, as the DLSU–D experience has shown, there should be flexibility in the functions of the office and in individual job descriptions. It is therefore important for all members of the educational technology team to be able to perform the function of each other in the areas of training, support, and monitoring.

This chapter is beneficial for school administrators to guide them on what to expect and what response can be made in emergency situations. Administrators can use this chapter to lobby, organize new, or reorganize existing ETOs. Existing ETOs can use this chapter to predict and prepare the shift in the demand for services for this school year and prolonged emergency situations in the future.

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6
(Un)thinking the "new" in the new normal
Reflections on ways forward from the Southern Luzon State University[1]

Nicanor L. Guinto, Brian D. Villaverde, and Shiela M. Manzanilla

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented widespread disruption in different industries around the world. After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, the Philippine government, in a bid to contain its spread, decreed to place strategic areas of the country with rising number of COVID-19 cases on community quarantine. Since March 15, 2020, many parts of the country have been placed on varying degrees of restrictions, abruptly halting normal day-to-day activities, including academic activities. In the case of higher education institutions (HEIs), the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has given HEIs ample discretion on how to continue operations based on their realities on the ground.

This chapter reflects on the ways that HEIs, specifically state universities and colleges (SUCs) outside of Metro Manila, can move forward amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from our experience at Southern Luzon State University, this chapter argues that SUC stakeholders (i.e., administrators, teachers, staff, students, and the wider community) may be able to adapt proactively to these challenging times by *thinking new* and at the same time, *un-thinking* the *"new"* in the "new normal"

teaching and learning environment. In what follows, we review the key struggles we faced while attempting to develop solutions and strategies following a two-pronged approach. We conclude by suggesting that now, more than ever, stakeholders must work together as one united "village" amidst this pandemic.

What COVID-19 did last summer: The struggles of SUCs

At the time the nationwide community quarantine was declared, most HEIs in the country were in the middle of the second semester, leaving them uncertain about how or whether the semester would proceed. In the following weeks, without clear sight of the situation easing out, the CHED let HEIs decide their course of action based on their institutional capacities and needs. These differing policies, however, were met with much ambivalence from the public, as they demanded solutions in which no student would be left behind. Further exacerbating the problematic situation was the need for the national government to realign the national budget, including that of SUCs, towards its pandemic response (see Republic Act No. 11469). While the funding for essential operations is untouched, the realignment, in effect, would stymy the operations of SUCs which were already under-resourced as they were (Manasan and Revilla 2015).

Despite issues brought about by the current health crisis, HEIs in the country were encouraged to continue operations by adapting flexible teaching and learning approaches to the so-called "new normal" (CHED 2020). While few colleges and universities were relatively prepared due to their early adoption of the blended learning model (i.e., online and face-to-face), others, especially those that are under-resourced, had been caught off guard by the situation.

The Southern Luzon State University (SLSU), not unlike other SUCs, initially eyed online learning as it was thought to be the most reasonable action if person-to-person contact were to be avoided. The SLSU is a government-funded university composed of ten satellite campuses in Quezon province and its main campus in the municipality of Lucban. Although SLSU has aggressively upgraded its infrastructure through the years, modern communication technologies essential for teaching and learning have remained scarce primarily due to the province-wide lack of infrastructure for such technologies (see Placino et al. 2017). Through open lines of communication from all sectors, SLSU opted for flexible strategies uniquely tailored to empower our teachers and students.

Our survey (done online and through text and call) conducted by different constituent units of SLSU illuminated the so-called "digital divide" (cf. Paragas n.d.).

First, we knew that not everyone had the capacity for online distance learning primarily since we did not receive our targeted 100-percent response rate. Primarily, the geographical locations of the municipalities where students are residing are the biggest challenge in learning delivery. Some campuses are located in islands and

high-terrain areas. There are faculty members and students who live in areas with intermittent signals, and there are those who live in areas where electricity is rationed.

Second, while at least half of faculty and students report having internet connection that is fast enough for online learning, many of them do not have devices with the right technical specifications needed for seamless online teaching and learning. A fraction reported that they do not know how to work around certain applications or navigate certain websites. If our mantra is that "no student will be left behind," how could we ensure that everyone would have equal access to teaching and learning offered by SLSU despite the apparent digital divide?

If indeed online distance classes were to be pursued—in case the minimum resources were provided—doing so in the same number of contact hours for in-person classes would prove to be counterproductive. In the SUCs, the minimum teaching hours per week is 21 hours. The online teaching mode initially sounds more convenient due to the wealth of possible teaching materials available. Nevertheless, this mode demands a different set of skills, preparation, and monitoring that, while possibly not a problem to the so-called "digital natives," can pose as a hindrance for others. Those who are not used to looking at their computer screens for longer than an hour, for example, are at risk of being overfatigued. Research shows that increased screen time can have adverse effects on academic performance (Adelantado-Renau et al. 2019) and health (Knell et al. 2019).

Aside from these issues, the uncertainties caused by the pandemic arguably makes mental health an important issue to seriously consider. Studies show the negative effects of the pandemic on the mental health of adults in the Philippines (Buenaventura, Ho, and Lapid 2020) and school-age children worldwide (Fegert et al. 2020). Abraham Maslow's (1943) classic theory of the hierarchy of needs suggests that when people's sense of security is compromised, such as when they know that their life, livelihood, and family are in danger, self-actualization would not necessarily be the priority. Not unlike teachers, Filipino students are prone to mental health problems. Often, this gets undetected arguably due to a culture that dismisses mental health issues as "just a stage in life one has to overcome" or an instance that just needs "more prayers," leading to experiences of stigma (Tanaka et al. 2018) and reluctance to seek help (Martinez et al. 2020). Just as medical conditions, mental health issues demand specialized attention.

Finally, as a work-from-home arrangement (WFH) becomes the "new normal," separating the home and school or workplace in the same space would prove to be another challenge. For some, having these two distinct spaces gives them the security of escape. But this distinction has since collapsed due to the pandemic. Given these struggles, it would be worth taking proactive approaches of considering that this is normal, in the process innovating our ways ahead, while not forgetting the risks posed by the global health crisis, as we discuss further below.

(Potential) ways forward

Unthinking the "new" in the new normal

As of this writing, COVID-19 has been around for roughly half a year—long enough for us to realize that this might not be resolved anytime soon. Though unsettling as it may sound, we might invoke novelist Arundhati Roy's (2020) statement: "Nothing could be worse than a return to normality." To act as if there is no health crisis is risky, if not deadly. To go back to what was even after the virus is contained would be counterintuitive at best. While indeed there is nothing to celebrate in this health crisis, it is nonetheless worth noting that it brought specific issues to the fore that would not have received swift actions otherwise. Among other things, these include, as we stated earlier, the digital divide, mental health, and the security of a home-workplace separation—issues which are by no means more significant than others, but we found to be important priorities in crafting our course of action.

In the education sector, the issues of modern communication infrastructure and mental health are nothing new. Slow internet speeds and inadequate telecommunication infrastructure that could have eased the burden of continuing teaching and learning, especially in the provinces, have suddenly been given much attention. The digital divide concerning class and age has suddenly become a vital conversation topic for policy development. We suddenly realize that not all teachers are ready for the swift adoption of different modes of teaching despite various educational technologies being (made) available years prior. We also see that on our students' end, although their generation is dubbed as "digital natives," not everyone has the resources in their homes to carry out online learning. We see how much the abrupt change of environment and the uncertainties it caused—the likely loss of freedom to travel, jobs, or even lives of people we know—unmasked our vulnerability to mental health problems that, in the past, we may have almost always dismissed.

The reality is that, even before the pandemic, there are students (or people for that matter) who are left behind. Perhaps, we sometimes do not know—or we refuse to know—this fact, as we have become comfortable with and comforted by the "old" system. This was, is, and will be the normal: not everyone stands on equal footing; not everyone is born with the same kind of resources and support. Nonetheless, for policymakers in HEIs, making sure no one is left behind (not just students, but also teachers and staff) could work best as a goal, rather than an unattainable ambition. While there will definitely be students (or teachers) who will be left behind, thinking this way will, at the very least, actually minimize the number of those who may get left behind. Notwithstanding the ongoing health crisis and its unfortunate consequences, to a certain extent, we can say that in certain respects, there is nothing new the pandemic has brought about, except that it has brought to the fore, if not exacerbated,

certain prevailing norms. This leads us to our next point: keeping a mindset of innovation.

Thinking "new" in the new normal

Since the pandemic has indeed abruptly brought about the need for change that would have otherwise taken years or decades to take effect, some of what we do in the "old normal" may have to be rethought or dismissed altogether. In educational institutions, "from-above" policymaking has been the standard practice. But given the complex and differential realities faced by students and teachers, it may be worth employing a *more democratic policymaking practice* if our goal is to include as many stakeholders as possible. Again, this is not new in educational management (see Sant 2019). However, we suggest a bottom-up, participatory approach to policy development where the initiative emanates "from below" and channeled through an open, collaborative line of communication between teachers and administrators. Through this, the policy-practice disconnect could be minimized, if not eradicated. Given the dearth of resources for uninterrupted teaching and learning, *pooling resources* through partnerships and consortia with other departments, schools, or institutions could maximize our limited and limiting capacities. Our specialists in mental health at SLSU, for example, have become part of a region-wide consortium for telecounselling services. Now more than ever, we must *talk to each other* and *learn from one another*. This is not the time for competition.

At our level as teachers, we can make our students (and their parents) as our *partners* (Freire [1970] 2005). This can be done by maintaining a communication line where we are transparent of each other's current circumstances and, from there, develop workable strategies that could make teaching and learning possible. An aphorism goes thus: "It takes a whole village to raise a child." It may be time to take this to the literal level by working together as one united village for the education of our young.

When it comes to maintaining a balance between home and work in the same space, setting up routines (see also Taylor 2020) could offer a semblance of separation, not in terms of space but in time. This could come in the form of setting specific *time blocks*[2] set for typical home- or work-related tasks. For example, particular times during the day could be set as time for work, while specific time towards the end of the day through the night could be set for leisure such as checking social media. This is, of course, easier said than done, especially when we consider that not everyone has

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2 We are indebted to Dr. Paolo Niño Valdez of De La Salle University for this idea, which he shared in a webinar he gave to the faculty members of the College of Arts and Sciences of Southern Luzon State University.

a house big enough to allow different activities and when the size of the household would make it extra challenging to set such routines. A sense of "normalcy" in the "new normal" can stabilize our mindset, reassuring a supportive learning environment among our students.

New ways to move forward

In this chapter, we suggested that to think in new ways on how to move forward despite the difficult situation would be to "un-think" the newness of some aspects of the situation. However, dismissing the newness of the situation does not mean we act as if there is no health crisis going on. While continuing to demand from our government to do a better job, it would be best to do whatever it is in our capacity to innovate and make the best out of our limited resources.

As a final point, we wish to comment on what seems to be the "war" metaphor that has been associated with the pandemic (Musu 2020; see also Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018). Since words are actions and are thus powerful enough to affect change in human behavior (Fairclough 1989), we must begin by veering away from what seems to be a prevailing discursive association that removes the ongoing health crisis from the discourses on health and crisis. Now, more than ever, we need to work together and not be on either side as if we are in a battlefield. While maintaining physical distance from one another, we must remain socially glued, rather than socially distant from each other. In doing so, we may be able to work together in our pursuit to raise our young as one united "village" amidst this trying time.

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7

The great reset
CHED-HiEd Bayanihan online training
on flexible training at the
Philippine Normal University

Bert J. Tuga, Jennie V. Jocson, Celia M. Ilanan, and Ruth A. Alido

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a new normal characterized by physical distancing and stringent safety and health protocols to prevent the spread of the virus. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes that this situation will prevail for a much longer time until an effective vaccine becomes available. Not only does the pandemic require adapting to the new normal, but the shift also becomes imperative as it abruptly changed the context and familiar systems for work, travel, entertainment, and education.

In the education sector, the new normal merely hastened the advent of Education 4.0 as the desired learning approach that aligns teaching with technological advancement and the development of a more personalized way of learning for the students. Here, learning takes on a more networked approach, allowing students their own access to information and the option to learn virtually in various platforms that connect them with faculty and other students. Where technology becomes an integral part of the curriculum, it is essential to change the teaching and learning methods to be more relevant to the present scenario.

There appears to be no going back to the pre-COVID setting. Hence, universities need to adapt to these new realities. In March, the abrupt cancellation of classes and the cutting short of the school calendar on account of the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) in the country compelled universities into finding alternate modalities to complete the curricular requirements for the current school year. For

many, this meant conducting virtual classes and using various online platforms and the learning management systems (LMS). However, not all teachers were prepared for the hasty transition to online learning and neither were the students ready. In addition, internet connectivity was a major concern for both teachers and students.

Recognizing these challenges, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) encouraged higher education institutions (HEIs) to "exercise their judgment in the deployment of available flexible learning and other alternative modes of delivery in lieu of in campus learning *if they have the resources to do so* (emphasis added)" (CHED 2020a). In allowing variability in the HEIs' responses to the situation, the CHED recognized that HEIs have disparate resources available. The HEIs were likewise authorized to determine how to best meet the contact hour requirements and undertake alternative assessments for their courses. Thus the previous school year ended with varying levels of preparedness among the HEIs, which was largely dependent on their respective internal/institutional capacity.

In response to this situation, the CHED launched the HiEd Bayanihan initiative, which tapped industry partners and organizations to retool faculty as higher education shifts to flexible learning and teaching modalities. Six universities partnered with the CHED for this initiative: Far Eastern University (FEU), De La Salle–College of St. Benilde (DLS–CSB), Manuel S. Enverga University Foundation (MSEUF), Philippine Normal University (PNU), Tarlac Agricultural University (TAU), and Central Luzon State University (CLSU). Similar to The Great Reset initiative of the World Economic Forum, education stakeholders need to act simultaneously and actively collaborate for capacity building and resource sharing amidst the disruption caused by the pandemic.

PNU as service provider and collaborator

The Philippine Normal University, the National Center for Teacher Education, is a specialized university for teacher education, which aims to nurture innovative teachers and education leaders in the country. Likewise, the PNU aims to transform the university as an internationally recognized leader in teacher education. Among its strategic directions is "responsiveness to stakeholders," which seeks to effectively and innovatively address the needs, demands, and requirements of different stakeholders in pursuit of excellence through innovation, influence, and impact. CHED's HiEd Bayanihan thus provides PNU an opportunity to share with other universities its best practice in flexible and blended learning as it prepares for the challenges of the new normal.

Transitioning to online delivery

Three modules were proposed for PNU's online training on flexible and blended learning:

- Module 1: "Gearing Towards Remote Teaching-Learning"
- Module 2: "Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in a Flexible and Blended Setting"
- Module 3: "Module Writing for Flexible and Blended Setting"

Upon CHED's approval of the training request, the participating college or university selected one of the modules relevant to their needs and context.

Module 1 provides an orientation on the three main methods of delivery in distance education, namely internet-based online education, offline digital education, and the printed modular approach, to help the participating institution determine the distance learning method most suited to their demographics. Participants examine various designs of online activities and digital resources and tools for different types of learners, along with student-centered assessment.

Module 2 covers the review of the institution's course syllabi by streamlining the course learning outcomes (CILOs) with program outcomes in the context of the new normal. Appropriate teaching-learning activities and assessment tools and strategies for flexible (synchronous and asynchronous) and blended (face-to-face (F2F) plus remote) settings are designed alongside identified essential content. Participants explore online tasks and applications using various platforms.

Module 3 focuses on designing engaging digital and print modules or self-learning kits by considering the nature, functions, and elements of module writing. Participants consider self-directed activities and identify key topics that help realize the CILOs.

In all three modules, content and strategy are customized to the status and need of the HEIs for a more flexible, more focused, and optimized training.

Salient features of the online training

The online training on flexible learning is characterized by three important features, namely customized content, remote training delivery, and relevant output, as summarized in Figure 7.1 (on the next page).

To ensure that it was meaningful, the training was customized to meet the specific learning needs of the institution and linked back to their shared perspective of the situation. Moreover, adapting content and strategies to the participating institution's context helped bridge the gap between the overall goal of the capacity building initiative and the impetus for transition to online delivery.

First, the customized content considered the vision, mission, goals, and objectives of the institution. It also factored in the level of work that it has done with regard to the development of an outcomes-based curriculum, as well as the strategies it has put in place for migrating to online delivery. The review of CILOs, which articulated what students were expected to know and be able to do because of their engagement

Figure 7.1

Features of online training on flexible learning

in the learning process, was the suitable first step in the migration process. Given that the pandemic has drastically altered realities in all aspects of life—leading to a new normal, it became necessary to reassess which among these outcomes were significant and to consider the competencies and the assessment strategies that remained valid and relevant in the present times. As the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres (2020) aptly said: "Everything we do during and after this crisis must be with a strong focus on building more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate challenge, and many other global challenges we face."

Second, the remote training delivery necessitated by the pandemic served both as the medium of and practice for the online training. Three-hour synchronous lectures were conducted in the mornings, followed by another three-hour asynchronous offline workshops in the afternoon. The synchronous lectures were delivered by trainers from PNU through the preferred online platform of the participating institution (either Zoom or Google Meet), which also hosted the conduct of the training. On the other hand, the asynchronous offline workshops that followed the lectures were managed on location by the training team of the participating institution. Online critiquing of the workshop outputs also ensured that the participants received feedback for further revisions of their work. Thus, the virtual training, which was collaboratively managed by the training and participating institutions, highlighted what CHED envisioned as a sense of community among HEIs, the *bayanihan* in action among education partners.

Third, relevant output in terms of a flexible learning syllabus and/or module lessons were targeted at the end of training in all the three modules. As the participants explored online resources for flexible learning and teaching modalities, hands-on practice on various online applications was also included in the training to allow

participants to choose what can work best in their context. Each of the topics in the three-day training, along with the workshop tasks, built incrementally towards a final output, which the participants could use to start the school year. The participants could continue to enrich this output as needed for teaching in online modalities.

Challenges and opportunities

The CHED HiEd Bayanihan initiative on a virtual training for capacity building and resource sharing among HEIs illustrates an innovative response to challenges brought about by the pandemic to education. Apart from addressing the need for retooling for the shift to flexible learning and teaching modalities, the initiative strengthened partnerships and mutual cooperation among educational institutions, particularly between leading HEIs with expertise in flexible learning and smaller institutions that need the most help. The online training likewise confirmed the common challenges that HEIs have to face in the conduct of flexible learning such as internet connectivity, access to online resources, and faculty preparedness.

In all the trainings conducted, internet connectivity proved to be the litmus test for the future success or failure of online learning in the country. Training sessions were slowed down by power interruptions and intermittent internet connectivity, which also affected access to online resources for some of the participating institutions. Thus, despite the availability of free and varied technology applications, their use in flexible learning could potentially be limited at times, especially in far-flung areas. A welcome alternative is the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Messenger for online learning as these appear to be the most accessible and affordable for both teachers and students.

Faculty preparedness is yet another obstacle given the demands for identifying essential content and appropriate materials and assessment strategies when the regular face-to-face classroom interactions are migrated to flexible learning. Other specific faculty concerns include designing activities and writing syllabi and modules for online content.

Despite the challenges, the quality of engagement among the faculty of the participating institutions was focused and productive. As only one module could be offered for each institution, there was a collective request for continuing in-service training using the other modules during the school year. Moreover, there was a need to reach out to more HEIs around the country, not only as participants, but also as providers and collaborators for future online trainings on flexible learning.

At a time when HEIs need to transition towards an online modality for teaching, the collaborative efforts of the community are crucial in achieving the targeted goals. The process of migrating to flexible learning, especially at this time, requires taking joint responsibility for planning and implementation of policies and programs. It is imperative for HEIs to take on shared ownership, resources, and accountability to

make the work ahead less daunting than if it were to be done individually. In the words of CHED Chair J. Prospero E. de Vera III, HEIs will be able to address the disruption in education caused by the pandemic "only if we altogether educate and learn as one" (CHED 2020b).

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About the contibutors

Dr. Ruth A. Alido is Dean of the College of Teacher Development (CTD) at the Philippine Normal University (PNU). Prior to this designation, she served as Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Languages (FAL) and Technical Assistant to the Vice President for Academics. She also previously headed the University Curriculum Management and Instructional Materials Office (UCMIMO) and the Department of English and was assigned as Chief-of-Staff at the Office of the University President.

Amor Mia H. Arandia is Chair of the Department of Psychology, Jose Rizal University (JRU). She teaches different psychology courses, including Abnormal Psychology and Research. She is also a member of the Ethics Review Committee of JRU. During her days off from school, as a licensed psychologist, she conducts online counselling and therapy among adolescents and adult victims of trauma, anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder at the Haven for Optimum Psychospiritual Empowerment (HOPE) Clinic of St. Scholastica's College and at the HealSpace Psychological Clinic at Lipa City, Batangas She is also a Co-Case Manager and Research Coordinator at the University of Santo Tomas Graduate School (UST GS) Psychotrauma Clinic. She graduated with a BS Clinical Psychology degree from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP), an MA in Psychology (Major in Clinical Psychology) degree from UST, and a Masters in Divinity degree from the Asian Seminary for Christian Ministries. She has published research papers locally and internationally. Her research interests include education, psychology, and psychological disorders and their treatment.

Roselle S. Basa is Program Coordinator for Instructional Technology at the Office of Curriculum Development and Instruction (OCDI), University of the East. She is likewise a faculty member of the College of Computer Studies and Systems (CCSS) in the same university. She also holds the position of Compliance Officer for Privacy for the university's Manila campus.

Dr. Vicente K. Fabella is the President of Jose Rizal University, the oldest business education college in the Philippines. JRU was founded in 1919 and holds multiple quality distinctions, including Autonomous Status by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) (the highest award given to universities and colleges) to recognize its commitment and contribution to the promotion of quality education. Its Master in Business Administration (MBA) and Master in Public Administration (MPA) programs have been recognized as among the top ten programs in the Philippines. It is a CHED Center of Excellence in Management Education. In addition, it is ISO 9001:2008 Certified, enjoys Institutional Accreditation, and Level IV Accreditation for its business administration, liberal arts, and education programs.

Dr. Fabella is the former chair of the Coordinating Council of the Philippine Educational Associations (COCOPEA), the umbrella association for private education in the Philippines. He was a two-time president of the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities (PACU), a national association of about 200 colleges and universities, of which he is currently a board member. He became president of the Philippine Association of Colleges and Schools of Business (PACSB), the oldest national organization for business education in the country. He was also a former president of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) and currently a member of its Board. He was Vice President of the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) and a member of the Board of the Academy of International Business (AIB). He sits on the Board of Advisors of the Philippine Business in Education (PBED) and heads the Finance Subcommittee of the Private Educational Retirement Annuity Association (PERAA), the largest retirement fund for private education in the country. He is also currently a member of the Investment Advisory Group (IAG) of Private Education Assistance Committee (PEAC).

He was a member of the CHED Task Force on Pre-Baccalaureate Year, the CHED International Conference on Research in Higher Education, and chair of the CHED Technical Working Group of K to 12 Implementation and Transition, among others. He was a resource person for President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's Presidential Task Force in Education and was a member in the Department of Education (DepEd)'s K to 12 Research Studies and K to 12 Transition Management. He is currently a member of the CHED Unified Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education Act (UNIFAST) Governing Board.

Dr. Fabella is a recipient of the Ulirang Mandaleño Award for Education, the highest recognition given by the City of Mandaluyong for its residents. He was the first Ph.D. in Business Administration graduate from the University of the Philippines College of Business Administration (UP CBA), has an MBA and an MPA from Columbia University, and has an AB in Development Studies and Economics from Brown University. His research interests include public policy, game theory, and industrial economics.

Marissa R. Fearnley is a full-time faculty of the Natural Science Area of the School of Multidisciplinary Studies at the De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde (DLS–CSB), where she also serves as Director of the Center for Faculty Advancement (CFAd). Ms. Fearnley graduated with BS Biology and Master of Public Health degrees from the University of the Philippines Manila, where she previously worked as Instructor from 1997 to 2002. She obtained her second master's degree in Learning and Teaching (MaLT) from De La Salle University Manila, where she is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Science Education (Major in Biology). Her research interests focus on technology-supported learning and science education.

Dr. Ester Albano Garcia is President, Chief Academic Officer, and Board Member of the University of the East (UE). She is also a Board Member of the UE Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Medical Center, Inc. (UERMMMCI) and member of the Steering Committee of the Presidents' Forum of Southeast Asia and Taiwan Universities (SATU Presidents' Forum). Dr. Garcia was former Chair of the Commission on Higher Education. At the University of the Philippines, she had risen through the ranks until becoming Vice President of the UP System. Dr. Garcia's awards include the National Research Council of the Philippines (NRCP) Achievement Award in Chemistry, the Philippine Federation of Chemistry Societies (PFCS) Achievement Award in Chemical Education, and the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) Chemistry Professional of the Year, all awarded in 1996. She was awarded as one of the Outstanding Women Chemists of the Philippines in 2011.

Nicanor L. Guinto is an Associate Professor of Communication and Applied Linguistics at Southern Luzon State University (SLSU). He is currently finishing his Ph.D. at the University of Hong Kong and King's College, London. His research interests include language and migration studies, media discourse studies, and critical pedagogy.

Dr. Celia M. Ilanan is the Dean of the College of Flexible Learning and ePNU (CFlex) at the Philippine Normal University. She was former Associate Dean of the Faculty of Education Sciences (FES) and the Head of the then Department

of Elementary Education (DEE) of PNU Manila. At present, she serves as the President of the Philippine Association for Teachers of Educational Foundations–United Professionals for the Development and Advancement of Teacher Education, Inc. (PATEF-UPDATE).

Dr. Jennie V. Jocson is currently the Vice President for Academics of the Philippine Normal University. She was former Deputy Director at the Philippine National Research Center for Teacher Quality, a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)–Australian Aid-funded research center based at PNU. She leads the national high-impact research aimed at improving teacher quality in the country. She currently holds the Venancio Mendiola Professorial Chair in Literature for her work on teaching literature in the country. She is a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) consultant on assessment and has worked with education ministries in Uzbekistan, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Mongolia to develop assessment tools to assess teacher competencies against the ICT Competency Framework for Teachers.

Dr. Shiela Maderal–Manzanilla is Associate Professor and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) of Southern Luzon State University, where she teaches graduate and undergraudate courses in applied linguistics, communication, and language. As former chairperson of SLSU's MA Applied Linguistics and BA Communication programs, she spearheaded studies in the field of applied linguistics and communication in the university. She has presented papers in international conferences including the Asian Conference on Education, the Center for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, University of Southampton, and the Pan-Asian Consortium of Language Societies. She has also co-authored technical writing books and published a paper in the *Journal of International Education and Business*. She is currently completing studies on women empowerment, production of instructional materials, and adoption of flexible learning options in the academe in the midst of COVID-19 and is spearheading webinars on language/flexible learning.

Paul Anthony Notorio is the Director of the Center of Innovative Learning Programs (CILP) at the De La Salle University–Dasmariñas (DLSU–D), where he is also an Assistant Professor and former Chair of the Tourism Management Department. He has a BS Tourism and Travel Services Management degree (magna cum laude) from Air Link International Aviation College and a master's degree in Business Administration from the Philippine Women's University.

Peter A. Sy is Co-founder of the UP Social Innovations Lab (UP SILab) and Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman.

He chairs the Privacy Experts Group of the eHealth Initiative of the Department of Health (DOH) and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), as well as the UP Diliman Ad Hoc Committee on Open Data. Sy is convenor and co-organizer of TRIZ (Theory of Inventive Problem Solving) Certification Training Workshops at the university. He has been Program Director of the Ethical, Legal, Social Issues (ELSI) Program, Philippine Genome Center (2011–2014); Director of the Diliman Interactive Learning Center (DILC), UP Diliman (2008–2014); and Executive Officer of the International Association of Bioethics (IAB) (2003–2014). He has also been a research consultant at the Public Assessment of Water Services (PAWS) of the UP National Engineering Center (UP NEC); research fellow at the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS); and Research Fellow in Ethical Issues in International Research at the School of Public Health, Harvard University.

Dr. Bert J. Tuga is the 11th President of the Philippine Normal University, the National Center for Teacher Education. Prior to his current post, he has occupied the following positions at PNU: Vice President for Finance and Administration, Vice President for University Relations and Advancement, and Executive Director and Provost of PNU Visayas. Outside PNU, Dr. Tuga serves as Executive Director of the United Nations Association of the Philippines (UNAP), Board Member of the Philippine Association for Teachers of Educational Foundations–United Professionals for the Development and Advancement of Teacher Education, Inc. (PATEF–UPDATE), and a member of the Core Team of the Asia-Pacific Network on Global Citizenship Education.

Geronio G. Ulayao is Vice Chancellor for Academics at the De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde since 2015. He served as the Dean of the DLS–CSB School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Institution Management (SHRIM) from May 2013 to August 2015 and as Program Chair of the school's Hospitality Management and Travel and Tourism Management programs for eleven years. He earned his bachelor's degree in History, minor in European Studies and master's degree in Industrial Relations Management from De La Salle University Manila. He also serves as a Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU) accreditor for hospitality and tourism programs and was a resource person for CHED's Technical Panel on Tourism and Hospitality.

Dr. Melvin A. Vidar is Director of the Office of Curriculum Development and Instruction, University of the East. He was former College Secretary of the UE Graduate School. He had teaching stints at UP Manila, De La Salle University, and at the UE College of Arts and Sciences.

Brian D. Villaverde is an Assistant Professor of Communication and Applied Linguistics at Southern Luzon State University. He is currently finishing his Ph.D. in Communication at the University of the Philippines Diliman. His research interests are social media and communication and gender studies.