



Towards a Flexible Learning Ecosystem in Philippine Tertiary Education

Introduction

The Philippines has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by implementing a lockdown in an effort to suppress the spread of the disease. This measure has led to unprecedented disruption in many sectors of the economy. Educational institutions have similarly been affected. As schools are the ideal breeding ground for “super spreader” events, the suspension of face-to-face instruction is an important control measure from a public health perspective. Physical closures may need to be maintained even after the lockdown is eased. This situation poses a challenge on how to maintain continuity of the Philippines’ human capital development during the pandemic.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) throughout the world responded to lockdowns by switching to online learning on short notice. These moves have been criticized as non-optimal from a pedagogical perspective due to the emergency nature of the transition (Hodges et al., 2020) and to network infrastructure limitations (Favale et al., 2020). Physical closure of HEIs will become a necessity in the coming months; even when face-to-face classes resume, the prospect of recurring closures to control small outbreaks will remain until an effective vaccine is developed and commercialized. Thus, it is imperative for Philippine HEIs to respond to this crisis by navigating the learning curve of using technology-enabled flexible learning.

Policy Recommendations

This policy brief examines the highlights of a recent survey of HEIs administered by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). We then formulate recommendations on how CHED can capacitate Philippine HEIs to transition to flexible learning systems (FLS) in a cost-effective manner. These recommendations fall under four general categories:

- Programs to provide financial and technical support to families of students.
- Measures to improve faculty proficiency in FLS.
- Mechanisms to capacitate HEIs to overcome policy and physical infrastructure constraints.
- Regulatory measures to enable the cost-effective use of FLS.

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CHED will need to establish programs to provide financial and technical support to students and faculty from low-income backgrounds and modest means. Given the reduction or cancellation of scholarships due to realignment for COVID-19 efforts and cost-cutting measures across many HEIs, students and faculty from low-income backgrounds will struggle with FLS, which will require internet connection and computers, mobile phones, or capable gadgets.

CHED will have to consider providing incentives or government support for the establishment of a consortium. The development of open educational resources (OERs) and learning resources can be costly for HEIs. Given the decline of student enrollment across many HEIs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, private HEIs have been hit especially hard in terms of finances. Even SUCs have had to realign and give up a substantial portion of their unutilized budgets in line with the Bayanihan Heal as One Act to contribute to the government efforts to deal with COVID-19. Incentives or government support for the development of OERs (e.g., subsidies, grants) can encourage HEIs to develop and share their materials for the use and benefit of other institutions. These materials should also be designed to be useable even by students with poor internet connectivity, for instance, by emphasizing asynchronous learning. It will also be more cost-effective for CHED to provide grants to highly capable HEIs to develop materials for common courses and to share these in an open and publicly accessible repository using an open license. Such subsidies will be a cost-effective investment. Despite the high initial cost, any material already developed can be used in future years with a minimal incremental cost.

Finally, there is a need to enhance the regulatory framework to allow flexible learning to be an effective strategy. Increased flexibility is necessary to give students the option to select delivery modes that are suited to their circumstances. The option to earn credits from other HEIs should also be encouraged if their home institutions are unable to provide adequate FLS content. Such cross-enrollment can be done within a consortium structured to account for institutional requirements and expectations, as well as differences in tuition fees among HEIs. The disparity in fees can be managed through a socialized fee structure, coupled with subsidies from CHED. Quality assurance is also a critical issue. Delivery of flexible learning will be done in crisis mode, which runs the risk of poor educational outcomes that will only manifest after the students earn their degrees and begin their careers. Thus, an effective quality assurance mechanism for flexible learning needs to be

developed and implemented by CHED to ensure that the cohort of students enrolled in HEIs during the pandemic are not relegated to second-class status in the future. Table 1 summarizes these recommendations.

Table 1
Summary of Policy Recommendations

Focus of Intervention	Policy Measures
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial and technical support for hardware, software, and connectivity Access to financial support for cross-enrollment as needed
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial and technical support for hardware, software, and connectivity Capacity building programs on flexible learning pedagogy
Institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subsidies or grants for flexible learning infrastructure Subsidies or grants for faculty training and capacity building Subsidies or grants for OER content development Incentives for the formation of HEI consortia
Regulatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible policies for tertiary education stakeholders Quality assurance framework for flexible learning

Highlights of CHED Survey

These policy recommendations are based on a survey conducted by CHED involving 1,239 HEIs. These institutions have a combined student population of 2,284,538 at the undergraduate level and 247,480 in graduate programs, and employ a total of 123,571 faculty members. The geographic distribution and classification of these HEIs are shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

Figure 1
Geographic Distribution of Surveyed HEIs

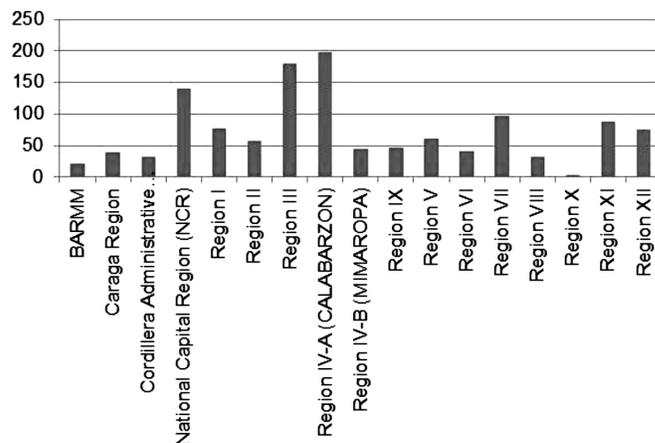
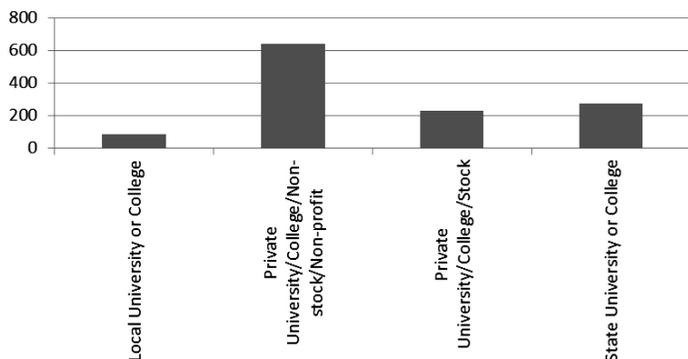


Figure 2
 Classification of Surveyed HEIs



In the CHED survey, the most common ideas for “flexible learning” involve online classes, blended learning, distance learning, and a combination of online and offline learning and even face-to-face classes. The survey data shows that the majority of respondents from HEIs intend to hold classes after the lockdowns are lifted. Majority expressed the intention to hold classes using FLS. However, the interpretation of FLS varies across HEIs. For most, it involves a diverse mix of different modalities.

Figure 3 shows the length of experience in using FLS among HEIs. Most respondents (827 out of 1,239 or 66.7%) have less than one year of experience in using FLS. This suggests that the vast majority of HEIs are relative newcomers to the use of FLS and may require further training and experience to fully develop their capabilities to utilize this modality of teaching and learning.

Figure 3
 Duration of FLS Experience of Surveyed HEI

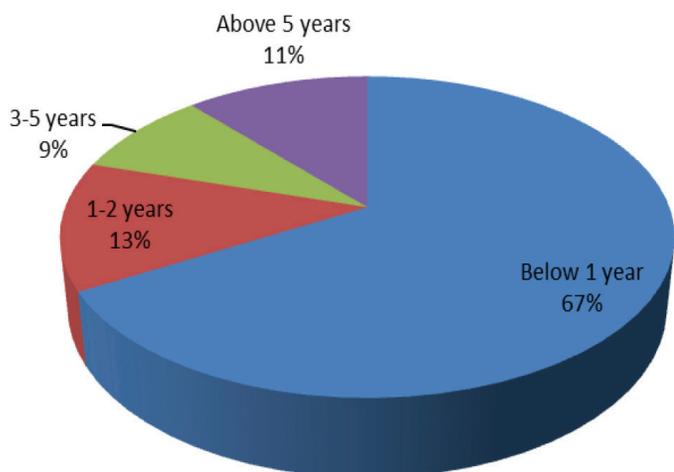
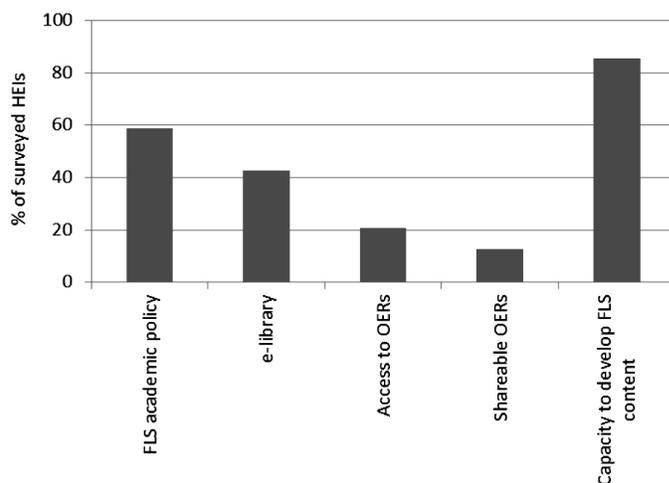


Figure 4 shows the percentage of surveyed HEIs giving affirmative responses to queries on specific institutional capacities and resources. Nearly two of five HEIs do not have FLS as part of their academic policy. Only 727 (58.7%) have indicated that their HEIs have FLS as part of their academic policy. Majority of respondents have no e-libraries. Only 529 (42.7%) have indicated that their HEIs have an e-library in their institution. A small minority of 258 HEIs (20.8%) have indicated that their HEIs possess or have access to open educational resources (OERs). Also, there is a dearth of HEIs that can freely share their OERs with other Philippine HEIs. Only 158 (12.8%) indicated their capacity and willingness to share their OERs. This figure is 61.2 % (158 out of 258) of HEIs that have their own OERs and can freely share it for the use of other HEIs. On the other hand, a large majority (85.6%) have indicated that their HEIs have the capability to develop instructional materials that can be used for FLS.

Figure 4
 Percentage of HEIs with Affirmative Responses to Selected Queries



The capability to deliver FLS is also correlated to institution size. Only 11% of all HEIs with total enrolment sizes lesser than 3,000 students have expressed a lack of capability in developing instructional materials for flexible learning. The most notable is the high incidence (96 out of 430) of HEIs with very small total enrolments at 500 or less expressing a lack of capability to develop instructional materials for flexible learning. However, five out of 15 large

HEIs with total student populations of over 10,000 also expressed that they had no capability to develop materials for flexible learning. These HEIs may require special intervention to build their capacity or to provide access to materials.

In summary, the survey data shows that the majority of HEIs have limited experience with FLS and that only a slight majority have FLS as part of their university policy. Among those with their own OERs, the majority expressed willingness to share these for the use of others. Many respondents from various HEIs expressed that they have the capability to develop materials for flexible learning, with capability being greater in larger institutions. Majority of HEIs are also willing to join a consortium of different HEIs and other support agencies to be able to deliver online teaching and learning.

Conclusion

CHED has prepared a draft document on flexible learning in HEIs. The document provides guidelines for the creation of consortia among HEIs for the purpose of sharing resources and know-how for flexible learning. Membership in such consortia can capacitate HEIs to overcome physical infrastructure and human resource constraints. The consortia can be led by HEIs, which may be autonomous, deregulated, or those with identified CHED Center of Excellence or CHED Center of Development. This policy brief proposes specific measures to operationalize the different aspects of CHED's draft guidelines to ensure cost-effective and equitable intervention.

References

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