



Challenges and Opportunities in a Local College in Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

Darwin P. Paguio¹,

Kristin Joy A. Mendoza²,

John Mark R. Asio³

¹ Academic Affairs Office, Gordon College, Olongapo City, Philippines

² Human Resource Management Office, Gordon College, Olongapo City, Philippines

³ Research Development and Community Extension Services, Gordon College, Olongapo City, Philippines

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges and opportunities to higher education institutions all over the world. This paper adds to the growing literature on new perspectives in education amidst the global pandemic. It discusses challenges and opportunities in the context of a local higher education institution. Inputs from teaching and non-teaching personnel were considered. Documentary analysis of proposed transition plans and actions plans from the different departments of the college was made. Recommendations to address these challenges were presented, which served as a basis in the formulation of a transition program in upgrading/sustaining quality education in a local college attuned to the needs of the times.

Keywords: challenges, opportunities, documentary analysis, local college, COVID-19 pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19). One of the most highly hit sectors is the education sector, with the closure of schools in every part of the world. Data from UNESCO show that in April 2020, 192 countries mandated nationwide closure that resulted in the interruption of learning for about 1.58 billion learners (91.4 percent of total enrolled learners). As a result of these closures, almost all education systems were prompted to deploy distance learning solutions. The pandemic was officially acknowledged as a national emergency when the national government declared an enhanced community quarantine throughout the Luzon area in March 2020. All schools were ordered closed to keep students safe in their homes.

The International Labour Organization (2020) described the impact of the pandemic on the education sector as unprecedented, considering how much of the education sector has been disrupted, its implications in the employment of education personnel, and how much the schools needed to transform in response to it. The impact is also considered exceptional because of the rate at which technology, distance, and virtual learning have been adopted to minimize the closure and the use of virtual strategies to address the challenges in education.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly in the Philippines, faced surmounting challenges in their operation, particularly in ensuring continuity of learning despite the community quarantine,

¹ Corresponding Author:

which is still being imposed today. Exploring other innovative learning modalities urgently needed to migrate to flexible teaching and learning methods (CHED Memorandum Order no. 4 s. 2020). These challenges to the education sector opened up new perspectives for HEIs in embracing technology vis-à-vis the need to shift the mode of delivery for operations to remain unhampered. Higher education institutions needed to seize the opportunity to strengthen their evidence-based practices, provide accessible mental health-related services and make the curriculum responsive to the needs of the changing times (Toquero, 2020). Another article by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) argued that online learning is different from remote learning, and these challenges transform into opportunities.

On the other hand, la Velle et al. (2020) provided a framework for a new digital pedagogy for initial teacher education. From a different perspective, lack of direct interaction and sudden setting change strongly affected the learning process (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). In addition, Maatuk et al. (2021) also revealed in their study the four dimensions regarding the implementation of e-learning and showed some promising results afterwards.

When the national government declared the enhanced community quarantine, Gordon College, a local college, was in the middle of the Second Semester, Academic Year 2019-2020. When classes were allowed to open, these were not held in school but through an online mode of instruction. Successive advisories from the Commission on Higher Education served as the guide of higher education institutions. It was a sudden shift from the classroom, face-to-face interaction to flexible learning using a combination of the online and offline learning modes. This shift affected the stakeholders of HEIs, including the students, parents, and faculty.

To address the challenges, Toquero (2020) recommended the migration of courses, alignment of curriculum competencies, and scaling up of teachers' training for online instruction. In addition, Tria (2020) also discussed the "new normal educational policy" in planning and implementing quality education. Moreover, Alea et al. (2020) presented the experiences and perceptions of teachers to distance learning education and the challenges that emerged. With the shift to online instruction from the traditional face-to-face instruction to prevent and control the spread of the virus, there was a need for HEIs in the Philippines to prepare the courses for online migration. This action will prepare the educational institutions for future pandemics and, at the same time, align the competencies that students should learn in the subject courses in an online format.

By strengthening research efforts, data monitoring, and evidence-based practices, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are expected to demonstrate responsiveness to the stakeholders. Ludeman et al. (2020) assert that expectations are higher because of the bars that government entities, accreditation agencies, and other stakeholders are setting for the performance of higher-level institutions. To add, Joaquin et al. (2020) revealed that despite the innovations made by the Philippine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in terms of alternative learning modes and technologies, gaps and challenges still occurs. In the perspective of Cuaton (2020), he argued that the Philippines higher education institutions should create an education continuity plan which applies to pandemics like the current one. Furthermore, Gonzalez (2020) also provided a six-factor from his concurrent triangulation from the readiness and responses of private schools amidst the current pandemic.

Toquero (2020) asserted that schools need to strengthen their medical services and student support services to constant monitoring and implementation of health practices even while academic institutions operate on a flexible learning modality. Due to the pandemic, higher education needs to prioritize academic, career counselling, and even the medical services and programs accessible to the students in the college/university and even through online means.

The changing times globally and the emergence of the pandemic have brought unprecedented disruptions to the way our educational systems should function. Much evidence is needed to determine how higher education institutions should respond to the educational crisis. Gayeta(2020) discussed in his case study the interventions implemented by the Commission, the educational difficulties and opportunities for institutions and the cyber-education risks. The paradigm shift in teaching and learning allows higher education institutions to customize the learning delivery modes to respond to the students' need for access to quality education following the Commission on Higher Education Memorandum (CHED) Order No. 4 Series of 2020 that set the Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning. Thus, education leaders of the different institutions now consider these changes and exert efforts to tailor the existing changes in the education system amidst the global pandemic.

This paper aims to add to the growing literature on new perspectives in education amidst the global pandemic. These new perspectives served as the basis for formulating a transition program in upgrading and sustaining quality education in a local college amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the disruptions that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper aims to provide new perspectives in higher education as a response to the pandemic. It identified the challenges and opportunities in education in a local college vis-à-vis the disruptions in the education sector brought about by the pandemic. The paper served as the basis for formulating a transition program in upgrading/sustaining quality education in a local college amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper used a qualitative type of research. Creswell (2014) mentioned that researchers collected qualitative data in the field or at the site where the materials have, or participants experience the issue or problem. In particular, this study utilized a documentary analysis of transition plans and actions plans submitted by academic and administrative officials as its primary data gathering method. According to Frey (2018), document analysis is a type of research that uses a systematic procedure to analyze documentary evidence and answer a particular research problem or question. The researchers collected the necessary data for the study from a local college located in Olongapo City, Philippines. Before data collection, the researchers first asked permission from the school administration for the documents for this study. The school administration then provided the necessary documents for the researchers, and the analysis of the contents commenced. In addition, the researcher also considered the inputs coming from the teaching and non-teaching personnel.

3. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

3.1. Migration of Courses

The college offers a Senior High School Program, fifteen (15) programs at the undergraduate level, four (4) programs under the graduate level delivered through the traditional residential model of teaching and learning. The average enrollment per semester is 5,000 students. With the global pandemic, recalibration of the courses must be explicitly implemented in light of the paradigm shift of teaching to flexible and online learning. Pastor (2020) concluded in his study that institutions in the Philippines need an additional way of instructional delivery to maintain academic excellence.

Under CMO 4 series 2020, HEIs must review all curricular offerings to make necessary adjustments or modifications in the curricular structure or program of study. Thus, the institution must create a

Curriculum and Instruction Committee for Flexible Learning to review, recalibrate, and modify curriculum and adjustments on the placing or positioning of courses and subjects.

3.2. Alignment of Curriculum Competencies

With the need to recalibrate the curriculum, it is also essential to review the instructional design and delivery of programs, courses, and interventions, focusing on the essential competencies, experiences, and outcomes in implementing flexible learning in the new normal. In the review of curriculum competencies, the following must be considered: the course most essential learning outcomes, learning objectives, topics and key concepts, teaching and learning materials and resources and learning tasks. There is a need to check alternative options in the design, delivery, pedagogy and assessment mechanisms vis-à-vis the various delivery modalities (CMO 4 s. 2020).

3.3. Faculty Readiness and Preparedness

Flexible learning is the appropriate learning technique during this time of the pandemic. It promotes learner control and customizability and at the same time delivers programs, courses and interventions that address the learners' unique needs in terms of pace, place, process and products of learning. With this, the Local College must create programs that will enhance its faculty's growth, which will be suitable for both our faculty and learners. Implementing these programs to address the immediate need must be "consistent with professional standards, must not undermine education quality, and must be thoroughly developed to complement virtual teaching in the long term" (ILO, 2020).

Thus, the institution must design a Functional Faculty Development Program to re-skill and upskill faculty members to prepare them for the shift to flexible learning. The programs are mainly focused on the context of "new normal," to help the institution in strategizing how to disseminate knowledge and make use of flexible learning effectively. Abisado et al. (2020) provided an appropriate concept regarding flexible learning wherein it provides a framework for universities and colleges. Ramola 2021 also added that the current pandemic should be taken as an opportunity to improve and innovate techniques to impart learning and are user-friendly and easily accessible. The faculty development program should focus on:

Applying Online Learning to Provide Flexible Education. Emphasis is given on using a variety of internet-based synchronous and asynchronous such as conferencing, video, audio, chats and other virtual interactions.

Assessing Student Performance Online. This action corresponds to the development of assessment tools in the online environment. Assessing student performance is an essential component of effective teaching and learning in the online environment.

Adopting Suitable Digital Learning Resources. This intervention aims to equip faculty members in utilizing appropriate digital resources that can help increase the learning engagement of the learners.

Learning or Hybrid Learning. This model is an approach in education that combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional classroom-based methods. It aims at the valuable tools that will complement the Blended Learning Strategy.

Creating Online Learning Modules. This activity focuses on developing online and offline learning modules for subjects and courses to deliver instruction using internet-based technologies to the students.

3.4. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Assessment.

The upgrading of the ICT infrastructure of the institution is highly significant to ensure that requirements are met to facilitate the installation and management of the system that the college offers, such as the Online Learning Management System. This action will enable the college to manage online e-books, shared learning material and document and learning apps and others that can be accessed anytime and anywhere by the students and faculty to implement the paradigm shift of teaching and learning amidst the global pandemic.

In support of the different academic programs, the network's development, modification, and upgrading, hardware structures, and software must be implemented. The basic requirements to support flexible learning are an internet connection, website and e-learning applications such as a learning management system. A related study by Almazova et al. (2020) identified the institution's electronic environment and support and computer literacy as two of the significant challenges experienced by university teachers.

3.5. Mental Health and Medical Services

With the shift to flexible learning, the provision of student support needs to be strengthened further. Due to the distance between the support staff and the students, student services can only be made through electronic and online means. As such, several student support programs that include academic, administrative, technical support, and student support staff development must be instituted.

In connection with this, it is highly recommended that healthcare services be strengthened to ensure that students are both psychologically and physically fit to study. To better address the health concerns or needs of students during this time, the institution's health services unit should shift to online health care, a virtual response to a health crisis which will make a significant contribution; enhance access to medical and advocacy services in a manner that is responsive to and respectful of the rich diversity of our college community. Also, online counselling must be highly available and readily accessible to ensure the mental health concerns of faculty and students even outside the institutions. Almazova et al. (2020) also detailed the need for psychological, technological and methodological support and faculty's professional development programs.

3.6. Research Effort and Data Monitoring

Institutions need to demonstrate effectiveness and efficiency in educational administration because the stakeholders demand evidence from the school to support the claims of excellence and effectiveness (Toquero, 2020). Educational systems should function such that many pieces of evidence are needed to determine how higher education institutions should respond to the educational, economic and employment crisis. There is an even greater need to produce research reports on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the institution preparedness and plan of action based on the data gathered. In an article, higher education institutions need to strategize post-pandemic education and research strategies to guarantee student learning outcomes and excellent quality education (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). The following plan of action must be implemented to ensure continuity in providing quality education:

- Spearheading of quick and timely survey and assessment on the institution's needs in the implementation of flexible learning.
- Assessment of the research coordinator's capacity in doing research and publication of a manuscript.
- Assessment of faculty and administrative personnel research productivity and capabilities.
- Strengthening the research capabilities of research coordinators in the new normal
- Provision of training and retooling for research coordinators and faculty with the use of research technology
- Promotion of publication of their research papers among faculty

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled higher education institutions to shift and implement flexible teaching and learn to ensure learners' continuity of schooling. As a leading local higher education institution in Region 3, Gordon College commits to providing quality education even amid the current adversity.

In light of this and consideration of the shift to flexible learning, the institution commits to undertake the following general strategic action initiatives:

1. Inclusion of the needed I.T. infrastructure for flexible teaching and learning in its budget
2. Inclusion of flexible teaching and learning in the institution's Strategic Plan as an alternative delivery model in the future.
3. Strengthening of institution's Management Information System
4. Recalibration of program offerings and alignment of curriculum competencies.
5. The provision of a series of in-service training on flexible teaching and learning, preparation of digital and digitized materials, module preparation assessment and other relevant training for faculty
6. Adjustments on academic operations to make it attuned to the current situation, specifically on policy guidelines about implementing flexible learning, faculty loading, class size, scheduling.
7. Review of academic policies such as grading system, assessment, preparation of Outcomes-Based Teaching and Learning Plan, academic counselling
8. Establishment of online mental health and medical services.
9. Recalibration and strengthening of research activities to adapt to the new normal

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