

Quo Vadis?: A Reflection on the Challenges of Curricular Reforms in the Philippine Higher Education

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Abstract

The continuity of education must be seamless. Hence, adjustments in the basic education curriculum also calls for adjustments in the higher education curriculum to ensure the continuity of the learning process after transitioning from senior high school to tertiary education. Philippine Higher Educational Institutions is challenged everyday with the series of developments happening in the country. As such, adapting to these developments must be captured though curricular reforms in the PHEI curriculum. This short reflection deals with the adjustments made by the higher education in the Philippines in order to align themselves with the curricular reforms made in the basic education.

Keywords: Curriculum, Curricular Reforms, Higher Educational Institutions, New Normal, Philippines

1. Introduction

Curriculum is central to the idea of education, since it gives us the general notion of what is taught, what is learned, and what is acquired in school. These three important ideas of curriculum are anchored on the relationship embedded in the three aspects of learning – Content, Learner, and Teacher. The involvement of these three elements is essential in the development of education. What is taught, what is learned, and what is acquired must also be taken into consideration whenever we do curricular reforms, because will serve as the backbone of an effective educational management and delivery. It is quite a challenging task to point out some of the curricular reforms in the Philippine Higher Education since a lot of resources found in digital libraries and public search engines were focused on the recent curricular reforms done by the Philippine basic education – the Enhanced Basic Education Curriculum Act of 2013 or RA 10533, most commonly known as the K-12 curriculum. Nonetheless, this paper found ways to present the curricular reforms done by the Philippine Higher Education. Curricular reforms in the Higher Education will always be influenced by the movement of the Basic Education Curriculum. We need to take into consideration the current setup that we are facing, that is why, reading the signs of the times is very much important in implementing reforms in the curriculum.

2. The K-12 and Philippine Higher Education

The K-12 Curriculum will not be developed without the help of research and development, primarily done by the Higher Education (Commission on Higher Education, n.d.). The Commission on Higher

Education were tapped to help the Department of Education in order to develop a better curriculum that will gear towards the development of the 21st century skills among students (Briones, 2017). The students' readiness and competitiveness to face the "new world" while maintaining their identity as Filipinos is a goal that is embedded in the enhanced curriculum. This idea should not stop in Senior High School, the two additional years of Basic Education. That is why, the General Education Curriculum (GEC) of the Philippine Higher Education was also revised in order to cater to the needs of students (Licuanan, 2017). While several General Education courses were brought down to the Senior High School Curriculum, students who will continue their collegiate education still need to take 36 GE courses, 9 elective courses and 1 course dedicated for the life and works of Rizal. GEC's goal is aligned with the goal of RA 10533, and that is to develop competencies among students that will help them in developing the 21st century skills while retaining and advancing their Filipino Identity (Licuanan, 2017). This same goal of DepED and CHED is manifested in the application of the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in both basic and higher education.

3. Developing Higher Education in the Philippines

One important curricular reform in the Philippine Higher Education is the aspiration of CHED to make all public higher education attain a certain level of global competitiveness. This is the goal of the 2011-2016 Public Education Road Map which identified three fundamental and long-running weakness of Philippine Education: (1) lack of overall vision, framework and plan for higher education; (2) deteriorating quality of higher education; and (3) limited access to quality higher education by those who need it most and have potentials to maximize its benefits (Commission on Higher Education, 2011). In order to address these concerns, the Public Higher Education in the Philippines must step up in order to be more globally competitive in the realm of education. Several programs were initiated by CHED in order to attain the objectives stated in this road map, including realignment of program offerings, enhancement of Research and Development Centers, Accreditation Program Certification (as Centers of Excellence and Development), program levelling among schools, reevaluation of curriculum and phasing out of substandard programs (programs that cannot attain institutional passing rates among national examinations). Aside from the financial aspects of this roadmap, these objectives are key factors in reforming the curriculum offered by the Public Higher Education (Commission on Higher Education, 2011).

4. Higher Education Adjustments in the New Normal

The pandemic has changed significantly the landscape of quality education in the Philippines. Because everyone is scared of getting infected with the virus, fear has escalated quickly. Moreover, the COVID-19 affected the psychological and emotional well-being of students. Thus, the Philippine Higher Education was greatly affected.

The new normal has brought a lot of adjustments to the education system in the Philippines, particularly to the Higher Educational Institutions in the country. Several drastic measures were imposed in order to keep and secure the well-being of students, professors, administrators, and other stakeholders while providing continuous and effective transmission of learning to each individual. Further, various academic

interventions were implemented to ensure the quality of learning among students. During the first months of lockdown, when fear of infection is at its highest point, several student government bodies advocated for immediate suspension of the academic year, leading them to call for an academic freeze to ensure the safety of students. However, this call for academic freeze did not materialize. The learning process must continue even during the pandemic. This underlying principle fueled among several PHEIs to do a leap of faith migrating of education to online platforms. Many of these schools, most especially the private higher educational institutions were successful in this kind of curriculum intervention. The University of Santo Tomas for example, came up with an Enhanced Virtual Mode in order to carry on with the learning process. Using the UST Cloud Campus powered by Blackboard and Zoom, the UST students were able to update themselves with their unattended lessons and were able to avail of the benefits of remote learning. Other schools like De La Salle University, Ateneo de Manila University and University of the Philippines also came up with alternative solutions to promote learning amidst pandemic. However, problems have arisen following the slow internet connectivity in the Philippines. Furthermore, the biased perception of Filipinos to online curriculum has been a key contributor to the inefficiency of the online remote learning. Nevertheless, the silver lining that this pandemic has given to the Philippine Higher Educational Institutions is that they were able to their capacity for new modes of learning to provide more effective curriculum intervention for the coming school years.

5. Reflection

As we have seen in the brief presentation above, reforming higher education curriculum is not easy, but it is unavoidable especially in these trying times when the Philippines is still fighting against the threats of COVID-19 pandemic. Technology and educational development are the key aspects which influence the need for a curricular reform. The signs of the times would tell us if the curriculum we are using is already passé or outdated. In today's setup, what we need is a flexible curriculum that is equipped with the basic elements and skills needed for the 21st century. Furthermore, the landscape of Philippine Education will be left behind if we do not cope with the global trend. Carrying out the necessary curricular reforms in Philippine Higher Education has never been an easy task even with the help of its stakeholders. Rationalization of Education, improving its quality and standards, and expanding its access most especially to the less fortunate are challenges that all of the educators need to face. Moreover, the pandemic has given a very challenging task to the Philippine Higher Education. Despite the innovations made by Philippine HEIs in terms of alternative learning modes and technologies for delivering education, there are still gaps and challenges in their responses. Perhaps educators and school administrators of higher educational institutions need to pause for a while in order to find a more suitable solution to deliver more effectively the necessary strategies in promoting the Philippine education's quality in these trying times. As a possible suggestion, Philippine educators may focus on the policy responses and learning developments in order to have a greater understanding of distance education and responsive to the times (Joaquin et al., 2021). Nevertheless, all of the people who are actively engaging in the necessary adjustments and reforms in the higher education curriculum in our country most especially in the new normal brought about by the

pandemic can advance the chance to change how we think about education and make permanent, long-term improvements that will increase the efficiency of our educational systems.

6. Conclusion

In order for the Philippines to level up its educational reforms in higher education, our help as stakeholders of education is needed in order to satisfy the aims of transforming not only the PHE curriculum per se, but the whole educational system of the Higher Education in the Philippines. Furthermore, despite these realities, higher education in the Philippines still strives to be more competitive day by day, because of its openness to growth and development, primarily in the internationalization and globalization of our educational system. Aside from full commitment to quality higher education brought about by the curricular reforms that were made, what the higher education needs the most is the proper execution of their programs aligned with CHED's provisions, mission and vision, the desire to be more competitive in terms of accreditation requirements, standards and quality and the passion to produce more academic researches that is critically analyzed and scrutinized to contribute to the international competitiveness of our Philippine Higher Educational Institutions.

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