

Edtech lessons and innovation after COVID

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to higher education, it has also highlighted and ushered in research, infrastructure and practices related to the use of information and communications technology (ICT). Often challenging events bring about innovation and such is the case in the Philippine higher education sector.

It invested in innovative approaches including the Smart Campus initiative, promoting and institutionalising flexible learning and incorporating virtual mobility and delivery of courses and programmes within its strategy for enhancing the internationalisation of Philippine higher education.

Edtech initiatives due to COVID-19

In 2020, under the Bayanihan Act 2 – a law passed appropriating and-or realigning funds to address the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic – three billion Philippine pesos (roughly US\$60 million) was allocated for the digital transformation of state universities and colleges and the development of smart campuses through investments in ICT infrastructure and the acquisition of learning management systems and other equipment to implement flexible learning delivery.

The pandemic has forced higher education institutions to shift from the traditional to online or flexible delivery of higher education courses.

Surprisingly, in spite of the infrastructure, capacity and human resource challenges in most higher education institutions in the Philippines, there was only a short learning curve and most professors, students and researchers adapted to the new reality of hybrid or full digital teaching and learning and to a more online research environment.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has been advocating for flexible learning – allowing flexibility of time, place and audience with or without the use of technology.

CHED, in collaboration with other agencies and universities, has been conducting capacity-building activities (particularly regarding ICT skills and competencies and the use of edtech) and established PHL CHED Connect to promote and provide access to higher education course materials that are useful for teaching, learning and research.

In September 2020, CHED issued guidelines on the implementation of flexible learning to complement the Philippine higher education sector's outcomes-based teaching and learning approach.

Furthermore, the CHED panel of experts on the internationalisation of Philippine higher education is currently reviewing and revising its policies and strategies on internationalisation to incorporate virtual mobility and delivery of courses and programmes and other innovative approaches to address internationalisation-related challenges that were highlighted as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

Challenges for the future

Although edtech-related initiatives brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic partly address the sudden shift from traditional to digital higher education, there are issues and challenges that need to be revisited, particularly in relation to access, equity, relevance, quality and governance.

As stated, the Philippine government Smart Campus initiative targets state universities and colleges. However, as of the academic year 2019-20, 1,729 of the total 2,396 Philippine higher education institutions – including satellite campuses of state universities and colleges – are private institutions and thus are not included in the Smart Campus initiative.

These private higher education institutions will need to find funding to upgrade their infrastructure and capacity to continue improving the delivery of higher education courses and programmes and research in what is possibly a hybrid higher education environment during and in the post-pandemic era.

Also challenging are internet connectivity, infrastructure issues and the capacity of lecturers and researchers to engage and deliver quality courses and programmes as well as to do research. Only a select group of Philippine higher education institutions have started using digital technology and incorporating digital pedagogies in their design, delivery and assessment of courses and programmes in their respective institutions.

The stop-gap measure of delivering lectures, attending conferences and publishing research online was required due to the sudden need to shift to an online and-or hybrid delivery approach. However, the learning, knowledge exchange and even published research that resulted tend to be more quantitative than qualitative.

Delivering online lectures, attending online courses offered by internationally recognised universities, and publishing in international (but questionable) journals may or may not improve teaching capacity, knowledge sharing and most of all student learning.

In fact, the shift to digital teaching and learning, particularly by non-online or open universities, is likely to have reduced learning capacity, considering that the majority of Philippine higher education institutions that were prepared to incorporate the appropriate teaching structures, lack the capacity to deliver quality higher education courses or programmes in a digital or hybrid learning environment.

Students – particularly disadvantaged students and those in non-urban areas – face significant challenges which are not just limited to financial problems, internet connectivity and literacy, and the time needed to adjust to a sudden change in the learning environment and approach to teaching.

It is clear that the non-inclusion of appropriate digital pedagogies in the design and delivery of courses and programmes reduces the quality of the teaching and learning process, particularly for disadvantaged students.

Lastly, although not immediately perceived, the shift to a digital or hybrid teaching and learning environment will have implications for higher education governance, particularly in terms of quality assurance, relevance and even tuition issues.

These implications will have to be renegotiated between CHED, being the regulatory body for Philippine higher education, professional regulatory bodies, higher education stakeholders including students, and higher education institutions, particularly from the private sector.

On a brighter note, creativity and innovation, including in the higher education sector, means having to face challenges, particularly if the sector is suddenly forced to shift its traditional models towards more innovative models.

However, capacity building, infrastructure development and embedding what has been absorbed as a result of a steep learning curve requires time, government support – particularly incentives for the private higher education sector – greater advocacy and redesigned quality assurance and recognition policies to ensure accessible, equitable, relevant quality learning in Philippine higher education.

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