# Higher Education Beyond the Traditional: Experiences of a Local University Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

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*Abstract—* Paradigm shift from traditional to online form of learning is necessary to continue the delivery of quality education to the students. The experiences of a local university in the National Capital Region- a locale which is one of the hardest-hit areas of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines, reveals how online learning is regarded by teachers in general, as a great difficulty in carrying out responsibilities on issues such as logistical limits imposed on by restricted resources, a larger workload, and anxiety over the quality of online education.

*Keywords—* covid-19, local university, higher education, traditional, national capital region.

## INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus has forced higher education to move to online teaching and learning – at least temporarily. In so doing, it has sent college administrations, faculty and students scrambling for ways to adapt traditional face-to-face teaching to an online format. Fortunately, video-conferencing technologies have recently evolved to levels that can support the production of group meetings with large numbers of participants. While it is likely that most colleges will meet the most basic criterion of completing instruction in some form until the end of the academic year, a series of questions remain open. In the context of the transition, to what extent are students engaged in meaningful learning. How well does online learning serve the social needs of students?

More important questions loom on the not-so-distant horizon. What will be the next disaster bring? It is possible the world will bring the coronavirus under control: the infection curves will flatten and extinguish so that college life will return to normal. But what about the other calamities that may affect the traditional classroom setting. If this is so, then all colleges will need to do is to put sufficient plans into place to weather the storm. It is also possible, however, that the crisis will last longer, that the coronavirus will prove to be seasonal, or that more viruses will arise on the horizon. Under such circumstances, there may be a need to prepare for a new normal wherein the classroom will be done online.

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, college teachers have experimented with a variety of pedagogical models to support student learning, including active learning (Lee & Jabot, 2011)[1], flipped classrooms, problem-based learning (Savery, 2006)[2], various forms of collaborative learning, experiential learning, and the use of various technologies. Despite these experiments, the quality of student learning continues to be in question (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Arum, Roksa & Cho, 2011)[3][4].

If there is a new normal – and it is as yet unclear whether there is – how will colleges respond? If there is a need to move the brick-and-mortar residence to increasingly online formats, how will the student develop the human relations necessary to existence? As more families are losing their livelihoods, how will students afford the high price of higher education? If students do physically attend colleges, how will colleges raise enough money to compete with already established online institutions? How will brick-and-mortar institutions survive in a post-COVID world? Should they survive?

Local Colleges and Universities, there exists no excuse to adapt and adopt hitherto experimental practices in the present and future educational environment, where technology and a paradigm shift from traditional to online form of learning are necessary to continue the delivery of quality education to students.

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study focused on the experiences during the traditional learning discontinuity-as seen through the experiences of a local university. To develop new system that will enable them to consider offering fully online classes and adopt the new educational environment.

## METHOD

### Respondents

This research study was conducted in a local university in the National Capital Region. This research locale is one of the hardest-hit areas of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines. The selected local university is

currently facing the so-called "New Normal" and is in the process of implementing various modalities in delivering quality education to their constituents. It made use of a selective sampling method, and includes responses from the College Deans of the local university who has an administrative and teaching function during the Academic Years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. For the study, a total of three (3) College Deans and four (4) Program Heads from the academic departments willingly participated in the survey.

### Instrumentation

The study use of a focus group survey to draw insights on the individual perspectives from qualified respondents regarding the topic being investigated. It is a derivative of the well-established Focus Group Discussion as defined by various literature (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Hayward, Simpson, & Wood, 2004; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996), and for the purpose of ensuring the safety of the researchers and the respondents, modified in such a way as to comply with local and national health protocols enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study employed a Survey Questionnaire that sought the answer to questions regarding the following topics: a) Institution's response to COVID-19; b) The extent of support extended to the school/college's students and faculty; and c) Areas of improvement under an assumed "New Normal". It also requested each respondent's insight on whether or not a shift to a fully digital paradigm of teaching would be advisable for the selected local university.

### Scope and limitations

This research focuses on the finding the practical responses of an education institution operating at the tertiary level, through the perspectives of college deans who serve as an intermediary between the bureaucracy of the Commission on Higher Education and the program chairs on the field who implement the prescriptions of the said body. All the respondents have an existing teaching loads as part of the requirement for the regular faculty member. The research data offers a unique indication of the extent the selected university has acclimated to COVID-19.

This research does not delve into inferential statistical treatment as data from the methodology used in this study would yield data values unsuited to be subjected to quantitative modes of treatment. However, a combination of descriptive statistics is still used as bases for feedback analysis as it those represent the concrete actions taken by the respondents in the course of their

capacity as education administrators for the selected local university.

### Research Locale

This study will be conducted in a local university in the National Capital Region. This research locale is one of the hard hit area of COVID19 Pandemic in the Philippines.

Schools are now facing the so-called "New Normal" and will implement various modalities in delivering quality education to their constituents.

### Time Schedule

This study was conducted during the First Semester of the Academic Year 20212022.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### School operation during the pandemic

To the survey question "Has your school/college ever had to halt operations/employ a skeletal workforce due to a local outbreak of COVID-19 in this semester? And if so, for how long?" The result of this study revealed that majority of the respondents answered "Yes" and the agreed that the University employed a skeletal work force during the local outbreak of the Covid19 virus, and it lasted for more than three weeks.

It is undeniable that the Covid-19 pandemic has altered our daily life. World leaders have opted to enforce various sorts of lockdowns as countries implemented precautionary steps to curb the spread of the covid-19 virus. Its residents are encouraged to stay at home and maintain a physical distance from one another. This had a significant impact on various aspects of society. This has a significant impact on schools. Because schools were closed during the community quarantine, pupils had no choice but to stay at home and were exposed to a variety of flexible learning modes.

The Philippine government initiated the Enhance Community Quarantine (ECQ) a few months after the Covid-19 outbreak began and a week after the World Health Organization proclaimed Covid-19 a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Community Quarantine is a word used in the Philippines that is equivalent with lockdown, because the government chose the latter over the former, which can generate fear among citizens. Instead of a statewide lockdown, the Philippine authorities used the term "Community Quarantine" to avoid causing panic among the population. Community quarantine is divided into four categories: Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ),

Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ), General Community Quarantine (GCQ), and Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ). The differences between these categories are based on the restrictions placed on people's movement, as well as economic and business transactions and operations, ranging from strict ECQ to less strict MGCQ. ECQ, MECQ, and GCQ are three of the four categories in which people's movement is severely restricted, particularly for individuals under the age of 20 and older persons. Students from college to primary school have been subjected to this; they are not permitted to leave the house unless they have a very urgent or essential task to complete.

The President's Office first ordered that all government offices, local government units (LGUs), and state universities and colleges put Luzon under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). From March 17, 2020 to April 13, 2020, a rigorous home quarantine will be enforced, movement will be restricted, work from home arrangements will be implemented, and classes and school activities at all levels will be suspended. In Luzon, the ECQ classification was prolonged until May 15, 2020, after which it was converted to MECQ and GCQ (www.officialgazette.gov.ph). Quezon City is one of Metro Manila's hardest-hit districts because to the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Chavez (2020), as the number of covid-19 cases in Quezon City rises, the city has become one of Metro Manila's hardest-hit localities. Quezon City University and its students are not immune to the pandemic's effects, and because to a lack of resources to care for covid19 patients, the university has been converted into a quarantine facility, making face-to-face classes more difficult and impossible. Quezon City University promptly encouraged its Faculty to postpone face-to-face classes and make work arrangements in response to the President's decree.

The above results support the response made by the respondents towards the sudden change in the mode of operation of the university during the height of the pandemic. And it was also true due to the fact that the President of the Philippines is firm to his decision of "no vaccine, no face-to-face classes" during the said period.

### Learning modalities used in the university during the pandemic

To stop the spread of the coronavirus, most countries throughout the world decided to close schools partially or completely in early 2020. This resulted in an unprecedented number of kids being unable to attend school in person - approximately 1.6 billion students were affected worldwide at the peak of school closures in late March 2020. More than half a year later, in mid-November 2020, as Covid19 instances continue to climb in many parts of the world, over 670 million children live in nations that have fully closed schools, and over 150 million students live in countries that have partially closed schools. Students' learning chances, as well as their socioemotional and cognitive development, have been severely harmed by school closures. Estimates of learning losses linked with school closures show that affected pupils could lose roughly $10 trillion in lifetime earnings, putting pressure on countries to restore schools.

One critical concern as governments consider when and how to reopen schools securely is how schools will assist learning and learning recovery. Some students continued to learn through other distant modalities, such as online learning platforms, television and radio, and paper packets, while others ceased learning entirely.

The majority of the respondents said they held classes in an online learning environment via Google Classroom and supplemented it with prepared printed and online modules, as well as pre-recorded video lectures, in response to the survey question "What modalities has your school/college employed as a response to the difficulties imposed by COVID-19?" (Table 1).

*Table 1: Modality used during the pandemic*

| Modality | Frequency (f) | Percentage (%)* |
|---|---|---|
| **Prepared Printed Modules** | 1 | 25.0 |
| **Live online classes via Google Classroom** | 4 | 100.0 |
| **Pre-recorded video lectures/classes** | 3 | 75.0% |

*N=4

Distance education, often known as online learning, is a sort of technology-based education that allows students to attend classes from afar (Sandars et al., 2020). It's also a sort of education that brings together academics and students from all around the world. They give students several distance-based degrees and master's programs yet maintaining their basic face-to-face format. On the one hand, some authors have noted that online teaching can be synchronous when students and teachers both log in at the same time and communicate in real time. Asynchronous teaching, on the other hand, does not require the teacher and pupils to be in the same room at the same time. The class is usually recorded, and students can watch it at any time (Bao, 2020).

The pandemic had no effect on this form of instruction, which was already in place prior to the outbreak (Daniel, 2020). Distance education is distinguished by the presence of an existing organizational infrastructure that enables the development of educational objectives for online learning (Singh & Hardaker, 2014).

### *Response and support of the university to online class*

The Quezon City local government has purchased 8,000 high-quality laptops for its Quezon City University (QCU) students, after the distribution of Samsung tablets to public high school students in the city. Dell Philippines secured the contract for 8,000 laptops for college students, which will be utilized for their online learning system, through its local contractor Unison Computer System (quezoncity.gov.ph).

The QC Local Government and QCU, according to the city mayor, want the whole education system, from elementary to college, to be ready as they move to new learning modalities. The laptops will assist QCU students in attending their online classes from the comfort of their own homes (quezoncity.gov.ph).

To the survey question "Does your school/college's response include providing temporary laptops or other similar digital devices for students and instructors in need? Cite the reasons for doing/not doing so." Majority of the respondents agreed and say "Yes". Below is the highlight their response to the reason/s why the university should respond immediately to the needs of the online distant learning.

- R1: Yes; The Quezon City Government says that they will lend laptops to students and provide free Wi-Fi connections to QCU students for them to study continuously.
- R2: Yes; for virtual classroom.
- R3: Yes; For students to have kept up with the online classes.

More than Php 168 million has been set aside by the University for the purchase of these laptops. Apart from the laptops, QCU will provide all of its students with a monthly internet allowance and pocket Wi-Fi. The city mayor also expressed her gratitude to Dell Philippines for providing a discount on laptop prices to help the city's student project. Additionally, 250 laptops were acquired to support the university's faculty personnel.

### *Educational management during the pandemic*

The continuing coronavirus pandemic has triggered an unprecedented worldwide disaster. Personnel in educational organizations, including primary school systems and higher education institutions, abandoned face-to-face instruction and transitioned fast to online learning in second semester of 2020, with no warning. Educators were faced with maintaining relationships and guaranteeing quality while balancing student needs with their own personal safety, caring for family members, and monitoring their own children's online educational progress. The transition to digital learning is just one example of the pandemic's substantial ambiguity and immediate crises, which have impacted educational institutions, students, programs, teachers, and staff, as well as individuals in positions of leadership.

"In your capacity as Dean/Program Chair, what parts of your institution's reaction to COVID-19 do you have direct authority over?" asked the survey. One of the responders stated that he did class scheduling, prepared professor schedules, and supervised and implemented criteria set by the university to ensure seamless operation and delivery of quality education despite the pandemic. Other possible responses are:

- R1: Following the institution's flexible learning plan.
- R2: With the help of social media, FB Messenger, viber for the dissemination of instructions/information.
- R3: The online classes. The Google Classrooms being created for students have just been attended to by me and my co-teacher, the OIC-Dean of the college.

Deans and department heads must lead their groups through times of upheaval and disaster as administrators. They may not be directly involved in the assessment and reform of university policies and procedures that have occurred because they are midlevel administrators. Yet, as they lead fair implementation of changed policies, examine their implications on faculty, staff, and students, and decide means of communication with relevant stakeholders, heads frequently engage in sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). The department head's responsibilities include acting as an agent of the institution as well as acting as an actor (Berdrow, 2010). The director "brings his or her own knowledge, abilities, viewpoints, experiences, expectations, and objectives to the job" as an actor (Berdrow 2010, p. 500). As a result, the unit's leader collaborates with individuals within and outside the business to establish relationships, manage human and social capital, resolve issues, and ensure equitable resource allocation. The head, as an agent, "acts within the context of the institution" (Berdrow, 2010, p. 501), working inside the system to address academic roles, administrative obligations, and external

interactions. The complex demands of a crisis are layered upon the fundamental scholarship about leadership, which reports the effectiveness of leadership as a collective incorporating the shared and diverse talents of faculty, students, and program stakeholders. For heads of units with leadership preparation programs, the complex demands of a crisis are layered upon the fundamental scholarship about leadership, which reports the effectiveness of leadership as a collective incorporating the shared and diverse talents of faculty, students, and program stakeholders (LeFevre & Robinson, 2015). More profoundly, educational leadership is based on a public and democratic ethic that promotes social justice and equity as practices and outcomes in all levels of education.

### *Areas of improvement to ensure quality education during the pandemic*

To the survey question "What are areas of improvements that remain in the response to COVID-19 as far as your school/college is concerned?" it can be seen on the response made by the respondents that educational leaders should have adequate skills and knowledge on how to deal with crisis like the Covid19 pandemic to ensure quality education. The responses made are the following:

- R1: Room facilities and Medical facilities.
- R2: Complete data for students with vaccine/booster.
- R3: Library services (Online).
- R4: As yet the university still takes advantage the Google

Classroom as LMS. However, there should have acquisition of more apt and helpful LMS like the Microsoft for more explorations of modalities in teaching remotely.

During a crisis, school leaders, like those in other institutions, must communicate effectively, assist sense making in unclear situations, be flexible and adaptable, and pay attention to employees' emotional well-being and health. Boin et al. (2013) identify executive duties that are applicable to school organizations and their leaders, just as they are in other socioeconomic sectors. Some crisis leadership study has been undertaken on school settings particularly, in addition to the more generalized research foundation.

Smith and Riley (2012), for example, noted that school administrators' crisis leadership differs significantly from that required to succeed in a more "regular" school setting.

### *School adjustment to the pandemic*

Even in the best of conditions, transitioning from classroom teaching to online training is difficult, let alone in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic. It will take time for education, as well as the rest of the world, to acclimate to the "new normal."

To the survey question "Would you say that your school/college/institution has acclimated to the rigors of the COVID-19 pandemic? Cite your insights on your statement." Majority of the respondents agreed that the university has already adjusted to the "new normal". Most of them said that due to proper preparation and following protocols, the adjustment was not that hard. Below is the highlight of their insights towards the survey question:

- R1: Yes; We are able to continue our classes regularly and learning process is quite satisfactory.
- R2: Yes; Since preparation to the new normal mode is already being stablished.
- R3: Yes; It still has adopted the protocols to avoid the

possible wide spreader event such as F2F classes. Albeit, the CHEd has already allowed the limited F2F classroom set-up, but not actually imposed to all, the university merely offers the residential teaching and learning for programs with laboratory. It still observes the flexible learning modality as yet.

Because the pandemic is unprecedented moment in public education, adjusting to the "new normal" will take time and effort. Educators, on the other hand, can lead the way by preserving personal connections, establishing new routines, redesigning timetables, and offering additional help to vulnerable pupils. They may not be able to reproduce classroom instruction in the event of a pandemic, but they can surely use flexibility and tenacity to keep pupils learning in the days ahead.

### *Full transition to online classroom*

Prior to the pandemic, remote learning was not a widely used way of teaching and learning in the Philippines. However, the COVID-19 health crisis made this a common practice. This study looked at the experiences of Filipino teachers who were transitioning from traditional face-to-face interactions to virtual or remote learning in this environment.

To the survey question "Would it be advisable for your school/college/university to transition to a fully digital classroom, doing away with the traditional model of

face-to-face classes?" majority of the respondents or ninetyfive percent said "No", primarily because they still opted to choose the regular face-toface classes especially for those courses with board examinations. Respondents' response includes the following:

- R1: No; Face to face classes is still better especially for programs that have board examinations. Students need also social interaction and social development.
- R2: Yes; Resources such as laboratories and manpower utilization are already retrofitted in preparation for the limited face to face.
- R3: No; Not all the skill can learn in the digital classroom and the laboratory class should have face to face most specially to the engineering in order to catch up the lesson and to produce output.
- R4: No; I personally, as an educator, want to have gotten back to residential teaching and learning to assure the completeness of learning possibly trickled to students. Although remote learning may be applicable amidst the pandemic, the hours spent for online class do not suffice the need of students to acquire learning due to connectivity constraint.

The findings show that the transition is viewed as both an opportunity for professional progress and a period of great difficulty in carrying out teacher responsibilities. The latter, on the other hand, dominates the tales. Some of the issues that occurred were logistical limits imposed on by restricted resources, a larger workload, and anxiety over the quality of online education. The perceived suddenness of such a need for change, as shown in the narratives, is thought to reveal how online learning is regarded by teachers in general. The obstacles in this transformation, it is further suggested, are inherent in decades of underinvestment in distance learning, as indicated by the country's poor information and communication infrastructures. This lack of investment in digital modality could indicate a lack of understanding of the ability of technology in expediting educational procedures and increasing outcomes in a variety of contexts and scenarios.

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