

Challenges Brought by COVID-19 Pandemic: Implication on the Existing Policies and Practices on Educational Governance

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ABSTRACT Notwithstanding the difficulties caused by COVID-19 pandemic, the study analysed the effects of current policies and practices on educational governance at state universities and colleges (SUCs) in Camarines Sur. Through a qualitative research method adopted, the study revealed that SUCs in Camarines Sur claimed that managing employees during the pandemic is a strategic initiative in continuing education despite the pandemic. It also revealed that SUCs in Camarines Sur used distance learning modalities to provide students learning. It confirmed that SUCs' common learning platform used during the pandemic is Google Classroom. The pandemic also changed the way research and extension activities are conducted. They were conducted through video conferences and remote communication platforms to follow the social distancing protocol. Various challenges for the teachers and students brought by the pandemic were discussed and their implications on the existing frameworks and practices in educational governance were explored.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges to different sectors of society. There have been serious economic repercussions all around the world, and it does not appear that any nation will be spared. In addition to having an impact on the economy, this also has a negative impact on society as a whole, which has drastically altered how businesses act and customers behave (Donthu and Gustafsson 2020).

In educational institutions, the closure of schools and implementing various policies to stop the spread of coronavirus has impeded the delivery of education to the student. Numerous educational systems moved swiftly and on an unprecedented scale online as a result of the long-term harmful effects that school closures would have on the development of skills. It is crucial for governments to consider the main challenges that students, parents, teachers and school principals have faced in adapting to this phase of massive online learning and to take action to better harness the

potential of online learning because lockdowns may be implemented again in the future until effective vaccines or therapeutics become available (OECD 2020). Thus, new policies and practices were implemented following the new normal to deliver quality education to students. SUCs in Camarines Sur implemented different approaches to continue education amidst the pandemic. SUC implemented flexible working setups, including the work-from-home structure and skeletal reporting in which primary office staff are required to work on-site. In student learning management, SUC adapted distance learning education, flexible learning education, and a modular approach. In addition, learning management systems like Google Suite Applications and Moodle were utilised.

Meanwhile, emails and social media applications were used for the primary communication between the teachers and students (Jaudinez 2019). For the conduct of research, data gathering methods shifted to rapid qualitative research approaches, phone call and video conferencing, and surveys through Google Forms. Lastly, extension activities were planned and conducted through remote learning opportunities. Facebook Live, Zoom and Google Meet video conferencing were adapted to deliver seminars and capability enhancement projects and programs.

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The COVID-19 outbreak has caused significant disruptions in schools. A robust response from school administrators is urgently required to lessen the disturbance caused by kids who could miss school in the near future as the COVID-19 problem worsens and spreads (United Nations 2020). In this unprecedented, rapidly evolving problem, school leaders are in a unique position to advise families on how to help their children at home. They also have the respect and interpersonal connections to do so.

Education governance refers to both the process of reforming who and how conducts educational activities as well as the ensuing arrangements in which non-state actors and other levels of government have a larger involvement in providing educational services (Jongbloed et al. 2018: 441). Decentralisation, administration at the school level, better parental choice, and privatisation of education are some recent improvements to educational governance. Adopting such governance structures often entails the government encouraging a larger role for non-governmental players in the field of education (Wilkins and Olmedo 2018). This might make it difficult for educational leaders to drive change and inspire others to uphold the mandate of higher education institutions for teaching, research and extension (Chavez and Rubi 2021).

Educational systems worldwide have undergone significant transformations since the advent of the pandemic (Nousheen and Kalsoom 2022). Schools are restructuring their policies and frameworks in response to the new normal's demand. More and more education is provided online and in a modular approach. At Bicol University, a policy like no face-to-face education is implemented. Various memorandums were also circulated, and almost all educational processes like enrollment, requesting necessary academic documents, and payment of tuition fees are made online. Like in Bicol State College of Applied Sciences and Technology (BISCAST), Gnosis is a web-based school registration and account management system locally available to the institution being utilised to cater the needs of its stakeholders, such as the students, faculty and the administration.. Meanwhile, in basic education and senior high, students are in a flexible blended learning modality as implemented by the Department of Education (DepEd) (Abel Jr 2020).

The study focuses on determining the implications of the current issues in the COVID-19 pandemic in the existing policy and practices on education governance of SUCs in Camarines Sur. The study's findings may contribute to society's benefit since novel research on COVID-19 opportunities and resources for mitigating its impact on education is in demand. Moreover, it may be a basis for crafting government policies for a resilient society amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to examine the implications of the existing frameworks and practices on education governance of SUCs in Camarines Sur despite the challenges brought by COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study described these existing frameworks and practices along staff management, student learning, research and extension. The study also identified the challenges encountered, and determined the implications of these issues faced by the SUCs in the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to framework and practices on education governance in Camarines Sur.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This adopted the descriptive-analytic approach to collect qualitative data. determine the implications of the current challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in the existing policies and practices of the education governance of SUCs in Camarines Sur. This method was used to confirm, validate, or corroborate findings. A proportional random sampling established the 305 respondents composed of middle managers (40), and teaching (200) and non-teaching personnel (65) of selected Higher Educational Institutions in Camarines Sur.

The data were gathered through key informant interviews, FGDs and a questionnaire-checklist. A review of the documents like memorandums, official college/university announcements, and other documents available on the college/university official websites was also conducted.

Distribution of the questionnaire checklist and conduct of interviews and FGD with the respondents were set and administered to all upon approval of the concerned persons. The questionnaire checklist also contains a cover letter stating the purpose of the study. In addition, respondents

of the study were informed that all their personal data would be used only for the research and be kept confidential. The data analysis was started as soon as the questionnaire checklists were retrieved and the interview and FGD were completed. Thematic analysis was used in analysing the data gathered from the interviews and FGD. Meanwhile, frequency count was used for the data collected from the questionnaire checklist.

RESULTS

Existing Policy and Practices on the Education Governance of SUCs in Camarines Sur During The COVID-19 Pandemic

Presented in Table 1 are the SUCs’ existing frameworks and practices on educational governance during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The Table presented four educational governance parameters, namely, staff management, student learning, research, and extension.

Staff Management

State Universities and Colleges in Camarines Sur had claimed that managing employees during the pandemic is a strategic initiative in continuing education despite the ongoing pandemic. The Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases is a task force organised by the executive of the government of the Philippines to respond to affairs concerning emerging infectious diseases in the country (Executive

Order No. 168 2014), in which SUCs based their staff management during the pandemic.

In the first months of the pandemic, SUCs narrated that they were preparing to implement different strategic initiatives to mitigate the spread of the infection. SUCs implemented different working strategies, such as (a) skeletal staff working on-site, (b) work from home setups, and (c) scheduled reporting on sites.

Skeletal staff working on-site means that important offices that require the staff to work on sites shall report daily to the college or university.

Work From Home (WFH) setups are implemented primarily for faculty members since distance learning is implemented during the pandemic.

Scheduled reporting on sites refers to the working condition in which the staff of the institutions are required to at least report on-site or in the school based on the scheduled day of reporting.

Faculty members in SUC A were provided with laptops to aid their online teaching. Meanwhile, SUC B and C faculty members were provided an internet allowance of 300 Pesos monthly. Meanwhile, SUC D were provided with printing materials as they implemented a combination of Online Distance Learning and Modular Learning Approach (printed modules).

Student Learning Management

In the teaching-learning process, learning resources aids teachers and students in constructing more than superficial knowledge that builds in-depth knowledge on a particular subject and develops the student’s learning strategies, values,

Table 1: SUCs policies and practices after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

Parameters	SUC			
	A	B	C	D
Staff Management	WFH Set-up	Admin staff working on site; Faculty members on scheduled reporting	Admin staff working on site; Faculty in WFH setup	Skeletal staff working on-site; Faculty in WFH setup
Student Learning	Online learning using LMS (Google Classroom)	Flexible learning (Moodle and Google Classroom)	Distance learning (Google Classroom)	Distance learning (Google Classroom and Modular Learning Approach)
Research	Encourage the researches on the COVID-19 pandemic; Data gathering procedures were advised to follow the IATF Policy			
Extension	Seminars were delivered online using different platforms; Communications are done through social media platforms like Facebook, Messenger, and through email			

attitudes, and generic skills. Presented in Table 2 are the SUC teachers' teaching resources. It can be seen that SUCs in Camarines Sur have varied learning resources. Besides, teachers have a scanner and pen tablet. Meanwhile, smartphones seem to be the most common learning resource in Camarines Sur. Furthermore, smartphones, books, and printers were identified as their primary learning resource.

Table 2: Teaching resources

<i>Resources</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Books	47	4.00
Blackboard and Chalk	100	8.52
Smartphone	23	1.96
Tablet	148	12.61
e-Readers	201	17.12
Television	100	8.52
Scanner	165	14.05
Printer	52	4.43
Light and accessories for online class	192	16.35
Headset	146	12.44
Total	1,174	

Number of respondents using the teaching resources

This result may have been attributed to the features of each learning resource. For instance, smartphones are versatile in terms of learning. It can be used for communication, reading, sending/receiving files, taking videos, etc. A printer is also necessary for all SUCs since a flexible learning system requires a modular learning approach, and some are required to print multiple copies of the Self-Learning Module for students. Meanwhile, having a pen tablet and scanner seems to be the last priority of the teacher's learning resources because of its limited features.

Faculty members of SUC A also revealed that USB/OTG devices were provided to students where modules and activities were saved. Meanwhile, SUC C and D provided printed modules to selected students who could not afford digital devices for online learning.

Learning Platforms

Different learning platforms emerged at the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in which face-to-face education was not permitted. Learning platforms are interactive online services that provide teachers, learners, parents, and others involved in education with information, tools, and resources

to support and enhance educational delivery. In the current study, learning platforms used in Camarines Sur are identified. Presented in Table 3 are the learning platforms used in teaching amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3: Learning platforms used in SUCs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

<i>Learning platforms</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Google Classroom	57	28.50
Edmodo	13	6.50
Blackboard Learning	12	6.00
Moodle	7	3.50
Canvas	4	2.00
TalentLMS	0	0.00
Showbie	0	0.00
Brightspace	0	0.00
Facebook	12	6.00
Messenger	19	9.50
No response	76	38.00
Total	200	100.00

Shown in Table 3, 38 percent of the teaching respondents did not answer the question for which platform they are using. However, among those who responded, the most commonly used learning platform in SUCs with 28.50 percent of teachers, is Google Classroom. It can also be noted that no teachers in SUCs are using Showbie, TalentLMS, and Brightspace.

In the Philippines, the most common learning platform is the GSuite, or commonly a Google application that various schools in the country are using because of its varied and easy-to-use features.

Learning platforms are essential in adopting flexible learning options since the different learning modalities can be adopted depending on the COVID-19 restrictions and the particular context of the learners in the school or locality. The learning platform will allow the teachers to enhance their knowledge of the subjects they are handling. Besides, learning platforms now have varied features that may be essential in specific learning delivery modalities. For example, Google Classroom is commonly used in schools adopting distance learning and blended learning. Some public secondary schools use Google Classroom as a learning management system where they can upload modules and assessments of students. In Google Classroom, teachers can also have an engagement where students can leave a message for their teachers regarding the material uploaded in the classroom.

Meanwhile, Messenger and other social media sites with their wide accessibility feature, teachers are using them as a way to communicate with their students.

Research

Conducting research has long been a function of higher education institutions alongside instruction. Amidst the pandemic, to continue conducting research, data gathering has posed as a challenge for the researchers. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, research is observed to be undertaken through rapid qualitative research initiatives, using online surveys and conducting key informant interviews through phone and video teleconference.

Extension

Extension activities refer to the SUC-sponsored program in which the human and material resources of the college or university and its linkages are extended to the client communities through planned, coordinated group activities maintained over time and aimed at producing specific types of services. However, during the pandemic's advent, SUCs delivered community extension programs through remote learning opportunities, and delivery of other services was impeded.

Challenges Encountered by the SUCs During COVID-19 Pandemic in Relation to Policy and Practices

When schools in the Philippines were required to remain closed, most educational establishments, including state universities and colleges, have turned to online education. However, due to this abrupt shift, challenges have arisen, particularly for students who do not have access to technological resources. The digital divide widens when an online learning modality is employed as a response to the epidemic. This makes it more difficult for people who do not have access to the internet to keep up. Access and internet connectivity have been two factors that have made it difficult for both instructors and students to maintain their academic commitment.

DISCUSSION

The initiatives of the SUC's in terms of staffing, precautionary measures, and shift in the deliv-

ery of learning modalities are the SUC's response to disasters, which also reflects their level of preparedness for untoward situations (Renschler et al. 2016). This is also reflective of worldwide organizational scenario since organizations all around the world were forced to implement a partial or full virtual team structure as a result of the intense lockdown. Work arrangements known as "virtual work" include separating personnel in a variety of ways, such as geography, and having them communicate with one another via technology (AlMazrouei 2023).

In the student learning management, the result is supported by the study which emphasises that the availability of learning resources affects the success of an educational system. Similarly, in the study, learning resources are believed to be very important in adopting flexible learning systems (Okongo et al. 2015). While in terms of the learning platforms, the results align well with the study of Gunawan and his group where variations of learning platforms for prospective teachers were investigated during the pandemic period (Gunawan et al. 2020). The same study reveals that Google Classroom is a good learning management platform with various features, and it facilitates instruction and learning despite the pandemic. Similarly, the current study demonstrates that Google Classroom is the commonly used learning platform in Camarines Sur.

In terms of research and extension, and due to time restrictions, rapid qualitative research projects have recently grown in favour, delivering high-quality data that can guide decision-making (Johnson and Vindrola-Padros 2017). Rapid qualitative research, which can take anywhere from 4-5 days to 6 weeks to complete, is a technique for shedding light on a topic by quickly collecting and evaluating data (Beebe 2014). A more thorough data analysis is made possible by such a method, which reduces the amount of time and resources needed (Watkins 2017). In order to do this, methodologies like "mirror studies", which duplicate and apply the approach in the study of sub-cases, can aid in improving and facilitating epidemic-related reactions and experiences. Researchers are seeking for new and creative approaches to data collection that make use of technology to provide simultaneous or asynchronous virtual interactions and field access.

In situations where physical proximity is limited, online focus groups (via chat or video) and interviews, for example, can be considered (Hess et al. 2021). Other methods for collecting qualitative data that do not require interaction include digital text communications, written or video diaries, and photo-voice (Lupton 2020).

In terms of the challenges during the pandemic, and due to connectivity limitations, the concept of flexible learning has emerged as a workable substitute for online education, especially at higher education institutions in the Philippines. Giving students a choice in the speed, setting and format of their education is a key component of flexible learning, which may be supported by employing successful pedagogical practices (Gordon 2014). The learners have a choice in how they will proceed with their studies, where they will do so, when they may do so, how they will meet the criteria, and how they will demonstrate their learning results. This option is provided to the learners to make an informed decision about how they will continue their education. Flexible learning and teaching encompass a wide variety of ways that can be tailored to the specific requirements of a wide range of students. These include “independence in terms of time and location of learning, and the availability of some degree of choice in the curriculum”, as well as “the use of contemporary information and communication technologies to support a range of learning strategies” (Alexander 2010).

Most of the students who responded to the survey stated that their instructors had modified the course outcomes and syllabi in response to their feedback. On the other hand, most of them asserted that the educational pursuits could not be completed offline or online since they lacked the adaptability necessary to fulfil the obligations within the specified time frame. In addition, students have reported that most of them could not complete the tasks assigned to them by their teachers because they could not access the internet or use appropriate gadgets to complete the tasks. This was due to the students’ inability to use suitable devices to complete the tasks. On the other hand, some instructors offered students the opportunity to complete alternative assignments online through electronic mail and a website portal. Students could verify that some of their required online classes and supplemental coursework were still being made available to them by the faculty

(Why E-Learning: Insights into Online Learning and Development for 2023 n.d.).

Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges to different sectors of society. In educational institutions, the closure of schools and implementing various policies to stop the spread of coronavirus has impeded the delivery of education to the student. Thus, new policies and practices were implemented following the new normal to deliver quality education to students. SUCs in Camarines Sur implemented different approaches to continue education amidst the pandemic. SUCs implemented flexible working setups, including the work-from-home structure and skeletal reporting in which primary office staff are required to work on-site. In student learning management, SUC adapted distance learning education, flexible learning education, and a modular approach. In addition, learning management systems like GSuite Applications and Moodle were utilised.

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CONCLUSION

The nation was severely affected by COVID-19, which confronted higher education institutions with an unprecedented crisis and significant challenges. Despite these challenges, SUCs in Camarines Sur have implemented various measures to continue delivering quality education to their main stakeholders, the students. These measures include flexible working arrangements, distance learning, flexible learning, modular approaches, and the use of learning management systems and communication tools such as GSuite Applications, Moodle, emails, and social media. The conduct of research has also shifted to rapid qualitative approaches,

phone calls, video conferencing, and online surveys. Lastly, extension activities have been conducted remotely using tools such as Facebook Live, Zoom and Google Meet video conferencing. These initiatives demonstrate the resilience of SUCs in Camarines Sur and their commitment to providing quality education and support to their students amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of continued COVID-19 related concerns, it is advised that institutional policies and practices need to be further explored and scrutinised. Higher education institutions must consider the long-term effects of disruption and the unequal distribution of that disruption on budgeting procedures, research productivity and foci, faculty evaluation, student learning experiences, and college/university partnerships in addition to the virus's immediate effects. This may pose a challenge to educational leaders to be the catalyst on change processes, and be motivators to still put forward the higher learning institution's mandate to instruction, research and extension.

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