
The impact of COVID-19 on a Philippine university: Challenges and responses towards a new normal in education

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Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic which was initially reported to have occurred on December 2019 in Wuhan, China has affected many countries and disrupted how people function in their daily lives. Beyond its impact on health and business, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected educational systems across the globe. For instance, the World Bank reported on April 2020 that more than 160 countries have mandated temporary closures of schools affecting more than 1 billion learners (World Bank, 2020). A global survey research by the International Association of Universities (IAU, 2020) reported that almost all higher education institutions (HEIs) from the 109 countries which participated in the survey responded that their operations were affected by the pandemic, including teaching and learning. In the same report, results indicated that two-thirds of the participating HEIs reported that face-to-face classroom learning was replaced by distance learning. In a national survey conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) with college and university presidents in the United States, the following were considered as the most pressing issues: “enrollment numbers, future financial viability, sustaining an online learning environment, laying off of faculty and/or staff, and mental health of students” (ACE, 2020, p.1). In a special issue of *Higher Education in Southeast Asia and Beyond* (HESB), the impact of COVID-19 on HEIs in Asian countries like China, South Korea, India, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam were discussed. These include discussions on the impact of the pandemic on global student mobility, student assessment, and educational policies, among others (HESB, 2020).

In the Philippines, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the need to impose various levels of community quarantines across the country. With the enactment of RA 11469 (2020), otherwise known

as the *Bayanihan* to Heal as One Act, the Philippine Government, through its Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease (IATF) has set community quarantine guidelines to cushion the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the country (IATF, 2020). The quarantine includes strict implementation of safety and health protocols such as physical and social distancing, and closure of non-essential businesses/establishments and schools. The restrictions of the community quarantine and the continuing threat of the pandemic on Filipinos’ health and security resulted in the need to delay the opening of all public basic education schools for about four months, whereas some public and private HEIs delayed their opening of classes to various dates. For both basic education and higher education institutions, the shift to flexible learning delivery was mandated by the Philippine Department of Education and Commission on Higher Education (CHED) as face-to-face learning was prohibited by the Philippine government. The imperative to shift to a new learning delivery mode came from CHED which instructed Philippine HEIs to open their classes in August, but regular face-to-face instruction would not be allowed (Rocamora, 2020). Moreover, the agency pushed for a flexible learning arrangement that focuses on design and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions needed to address learners’ unique needs in terms of pace, place, process, and products of learning (Cervantes, 2020). These flexible learning arrangements needed new learning management systems, capacity-building or training of faculty members, and repositories for flexible learning resources. The shift to flexible learning delivery was needed in spite of issues with remote or online learning like differences in access to various remote modalities of learning due to differences in socioeconomic status among students (Simbulan, 2020).

The Impact of COVID-19 on Philippine Normal University (PNU)

Like most HEIs in Manila (Philippine Capital City), considered as the epicenter of COVID-19 in the Philippines, the pandemic has impacted PNU main campus since March 2020. The last term for the school year was suspended abruptly while summer term was cancelled altogether. Most University officials, faculty, and staff were required to work under the Work-From-Home (WFH) scheme as only the most essential offices and personnel related to management, finance, and selected academic services were required to operate, as community quarantine in Manila and other cities in the National Capital Region of the Philippines remained in quarantine since March. The Philippine national government also recalled unused funds from all public universities as part of its plan to re-allocate budget for programs to address the impacts of COVID-19 on various sectors and communities. The continuing threat of the pandemic and the need to shift to flexible learning also necessitated delaying the opening of the PNU's new school year (SY 2020-2021) for a month. Needless to say, COVID-19 is impacting the University in a manner that has never been experienced by Philippine universities. However, all universities must continue to function, and teaching and learning must continue in spite of the restrictions and threats imposed by the pandemic.

CHED has required Philippine universities to develop their university continuity plan on the implementation of a flexible learning program (CHED, 2020a). Educational planning during crises and pandemic requires creative problem solving. With these in mind, PNU developed its Continuity Plan which provided information about the University's Programs, Activities and Projects (PAPs) without compromising its major functions of instruction, research, extension, and governance (PNU, 2020a). At the center of PNU's continuity plan is curricular modification and implementation through its program on *flexible learning in the new normal*, translated as *Kaway-Aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan* in the Filipino language (PNU, 2020b; see Figure 1). The initiative for flexible delivery of learning started with a university survey on the readiness of faculty and students for online learning (PNU, 2020c). The results of the survey suggest that not all faculty and students have the required level of readiness in order to become active participants in online education. Hence, the university developed a framework for flexible learning that goes beyond online learning and consider offline remote learning. A flexible learning environment means that schools adapt the use of resources to best support personalization of learning (Wall, 2016).

The shift to flexible learning paved the way for PNU to refocus and recalibrate its current teacher

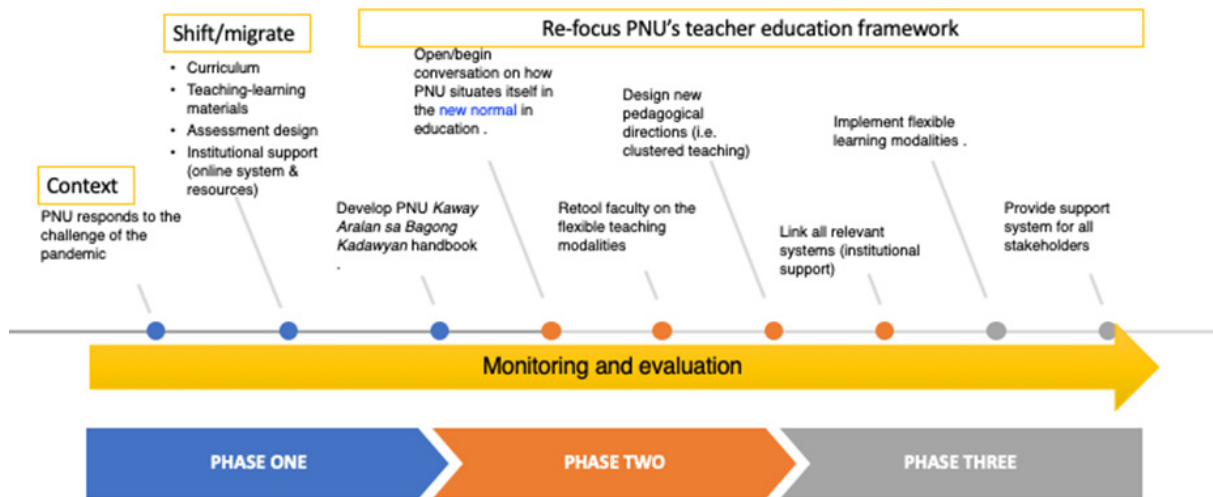


Figure 1. PNU's Timeline for the Shift to Flexible Learning (PNU, 2020a)

PNU's shift to flexible learning

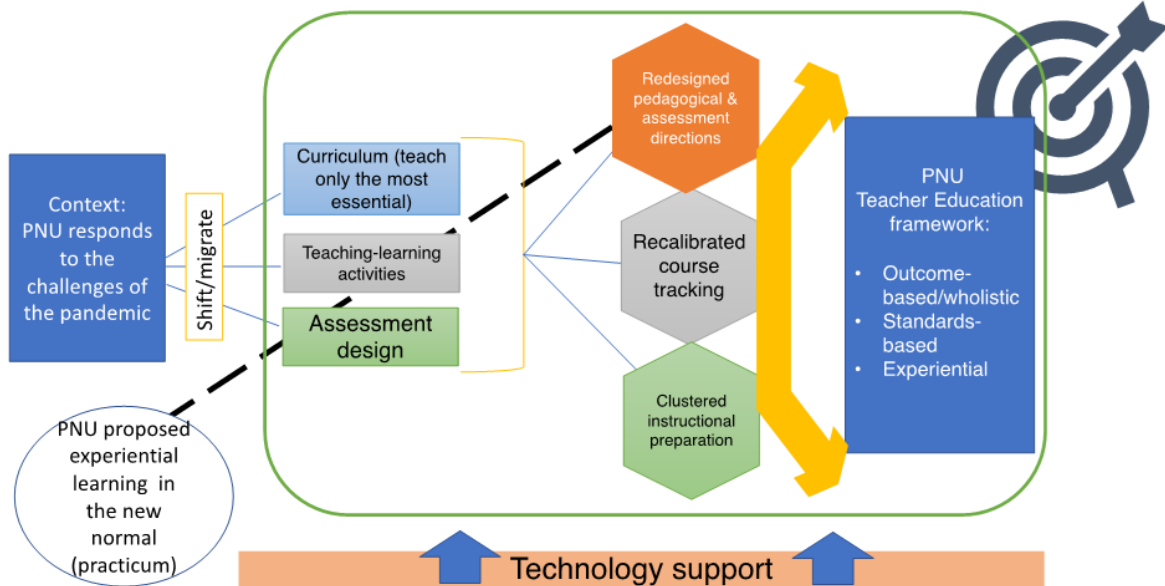


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of the Shift to Flexible Learning (PNU, 2020b)

education framework that is anchored on outcome-based learning. The PNU's *Kaway-aralan sa Bagong Kadawyan* introduced a framework for transitioning all academic programs of the university from face-to-face to Flexible Learning Delivery (FLD). FLD is anchored on the combined principles of online learning, distance education, and blended learning geared towards the creation of *communities of practice* where learning takes place with peers through guided study and facilitation. The following strategies were implemented: (1) systemic review and refinement of Course Intended Learning Outcomes which target learning of the most essential content and development of the most critical skills among students despite suboptimal learning conditions brought by the pandemic; (2) reduction of student workload through Clustered Course Tracking; (3) revision of course syllabi and migration from the regular mode of instruction to online, offline, and blended modes of teaching and learning; (4) development of instructional materials that are designed with utmost flexibility; (5) recalibration of the course offerings for the pilot term where priority was given to foundational, theoretical, and contextualized subjects; and (6) formulation of a guide for assessing student learning outcomes within the flexible learning environments. The framework for the shift to flexible learning (PNU 2020b, see Figure 2) was designed with the intent that it will

lead to the refinement of the current PNU Teacher Education Framework. As the National Center for Teacher Education (NCTE), it is expected that PNU will influence pre-service teacher education in the country by providing a national framework that is outcome-based and holistic, standards-based, and experiential, emanating from experiences during the pandemic.

From the survey on the readiness of faculty and students for online learning and from a series of consultations and meetings among various internal stakeholders of the University, the following challenges that could hinder faculty and students' experience with flexible learning were identified: (1) *limited access to a stable internet connection*; (2) *lack of suitable gadget or device*; (3) *inadequate learning management system or platform*; and (4) *absence of policies and guidelines for flexible learning, especially for the online modality*. For the University management, one major challenge identified is the implementation of programs and the assistance provided to financially-disadvantaged students within the limitations imposed by budgetary requirements and procurement procedures. As an ISO 9001:2015 certified institution, the university addressed these challenges through a PNU Risk Management Plan which designed and implemented strategic

interventions: (1) *investment in technological system and infrastructure*, which included upgrading of the learning management system (LMS) and purchase of online communication platforms and other ICT equipment; (2) *capacity building for faculty and students*, where faculty and students were trained on online teaching and learning through ePNU, the University's LMS; (3) *provision of technological support for faculty and students*, including fund-raising initiatives (e.g. Project *TANGLAW*) to provide assistance to financially-disadvantaged students through provision of gadgets or devices needed for online learning; (4) *counseling and socio-emotional learning programs for students*; (5) *preparation and dissemination of offline learning materials without cost to students*; (6) *upgrading of online and offline learning resources*, and (7) *continuing review of university policies and services* as basis for introducing refinement in existing policies or formulation of new policies and institutional guidelines that will support the implementation of FLD in the pilot term (Term 1, SY 2020-2021) and beyond.

Obviously, the challenge of continuing learning amidst the pandemic provides PNU the opportunity to redirect its resources to technology-oriented programs and services, and the digitization of learning. The pandemic also provides opportunity for PNU to rethink its curricular and pedagogical framework, not just as a response to the current pandemic but as a response to innovate for the future landscape of education which is expected to change drastically even after the pandemic. PNU realizes that its existing framework needs to be revisited to serve the current needs of stakeholders as they grapple with the implications of the pandemic. The talented and committed faculty members of the University continually work hard as PNU transitions towards a more flexible learning environment. The shift to flexible learning also provides opportunities for PNU faculty to learn innovative pedagogical strategies and technological skills in order to meet the demands of online and flexible teaching and learning. Moreover, the challenge of the pandemic provides an opportunity for PNU to further exercise its mandate as NCTE. The University collaborated and assisted educational agencies like CHED and DepEd in their initiatives to support the nation's academic community as they transition to a flexible learning environment. For instance, PNU, together with CHED and five other universities in the Philippines, offered

a free teacher training program on flexible learning under the commission's *HiEd Bayanihan project* (CHED, 2020b). Indeed, the pandemic provides an opportunity for Filipinos' "*bayanihan* spirit or collective community mobilization" to once again emerge (Simbulan, 2020, p. 18).

Moving Forward

The recent passage of RA 11494 (2020) otherwise known as the *Bayanihan* to Recover as One Act offers an opportunity to finance numerous government programs including flexible learning education. Added to this is the grant of assistance to state universities and colleges in combating COVID-19 (CHED, 2020c). These are critical initiatives of the national government to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic that can be maximized by PNU and other HEIs. While there are already answers to the question on how HEIs will operate within the "new normal" or within the conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains to be seen whether the initiatives and interventions planned and implemented by Philippine universities will attain its intended outcomes. Nothing could have really prepared anyone in facing the challenges created by the global pandemic as it did not only place us in very challenging situations but also pushed us to respond quickly and decisively to address the problems that it caused. As a university and as individuals, we are reminded of the value of life and health; the need to adapt to a global crisis, continue to live and work to the best extent possible; and the importance of mutual understanding and collaboration to facilitate adaptation to such a crisis. As a university, PNU is learning that responding to the challenges of the new normal is difficult and takes time, but we have also learned that continuing the University's commitment to the education of future and current teachers is of critical importance in the time of a pandemic.

While PNU has set into motions the programs and strategies to implement flexible learning delivery through its Continuity Plan, an allowance for refinement is needed. For this reason, regular and periodic monitoring, evaluation and research are required to improve the design and delivery of programs and services. It is likewise imperative that PNU continues to provide a more flexible learning program and alternative work arrangements which will ensure safety, health and economic welfare

of all its stakeholders. A continual engagement between the university management, faculty and students is critical in determining what works, what does not work, and what needs improvement in order to provide faculty and students the most optimal teaching and learning experiences in spite of the pandemic. Continual investments in educational resources, capacity building programs, and institutional support services for both faculty and students are essential to prepare them with the realities of a new normal in education.

The long-term impact of the pandemic on PNU and other Philippine universities remains to be seen and difficult to project at present. As NCTE, PNU has the responsibility to re-envision teacher education in the country in order to design teacher education programs that are not only innovative, but flexible to whatever “new normal” would mean in the future.

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