INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic will have lasting global impacts, but it presents greater obstacles for low- and middle-income countries. Higher education institutions in the Philippines were some of the earliest affected by COVID-19. They had to make drastic adjustments to their infrastructure and means of communication in order to continue providing a quality education and learning environment for more than 3.5 million students.¹

There are more than 2,300 higher education institutions in the Philippines, of which approximately 1,700 are private.² USAID has supported the Philippines’ goals of sustained growth of the higher education system by helping these institutions align their research and academics with the demands of industry and improving the country’s science, technology, and innovation.³ COVID-19 tested the ability of the University of the Philippines (UP) to adapt in a crisis through efforts directed at continuity of learning, research and innovation, community engagement, and communications.

This case study looks at the UP system holistically across multiple campuses and explores the conditions that led to a strong crisis-response to ensure learning continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. The UP, being both a public university system and the national university of the Philippines, prides itself on the diversity of its curricula options as “a graduate university, a research university, a public service university, and a regional and global university.”⁴ UP is a large system of eight universities (Diliman, Los Baños, Manila,
Visayas, Open University, Mindanao, Baguio, and Cebu) across 17 campuses, offering more than 250 undergraduate programs.\(^5\)

**APPROACH**

COVID-19 affected all parts of the UP system—from students, faculty, and staff to local communities. Each campus follows overarching guidelines and regulations from the UP system-level such as the structure and platforms for online learning. All campuses work together to engender a higher education system that fosters learning in a sustainable way under the new conditions caused by COVID-19.

**CONTINUITY OF LEARNING\(^6\)**

Although the UP system closed all campuses in March 2020, it was able to develop a system-wide, comprehensive means of connecting and engaging students via a distance learning online platform. UP announced they have no intention to return to in-person classes until a vaccine is available, so distance learning will continue indefinitely.\(^7\) The development of this infrastructure across the UP system included emphasizing old tools (such as the Learning Management System, Canvas, and Google Classroom, etc.) and introducing new tools for students (e.g. Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp, Zoom, etc.).\(^8\) UP also put in place a system-wide campaign asking for donations to help students who need access to laptops and the Internet.\(^9\)

Faculty and staff are also learning to navigate the upheaval. Both the general websites of the UP and the individual campuses set up a website complete with tutorials, resources, free online courses, and helpful links to make the transition to online learning as painless as possible.\(^10\) Called UP Open, this platform has been integral to the online learning transition. It includes a webpage with materials about teaching, learning, and working remotely in addition to a microsite for faculty and professors in the UP system.\(^11\)

With the aid of UP Open, the entire UP system has developed e-learning beyond a single year. It has dedicated resources to improve technological infrastructure to enable long-term distance learning.\(^12\)

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\(^6\) Guidelines, policies, plans, or actions intended to facilitate the shift to distance learning and prepare for reopenings of higher education institutions (HEIs). These include the expansion of access to the Internet and digital devices and other actions that promote equity and inclusion; holistic support of educators and learners (e.g. academic, psychosocial, and financial support); and the creation of phased reopening plans aligned with public health guidance. The research team sought to identify existing infrastructure/capacity (e.g. an existing contingency plan for distance learning) to understand the extent to which these investments promote resilience in higher education.


RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

COVID-19 has been the impetus for the UP system to speed up and shift processes to incorporate more low-cost solutions using local resources. Recent successes in research and innovation created cost-effective methods to produce personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical technology from local resources.

As the location of the medical school and the Philippine General Hospital, UP Manila took on a leadership role in rapid innovation of medical technology. UP Manila created a detection kit for COVID-19 that is one-sixth the cost of kits imported from other countries. This kit increased both cost efficiency and availability to the public. UP Visayas produced PPE, with students creating face shields for local hospitals made from “velcro straps, acetate sheets, craft foam, and PVC covers.” UP Cebu rapidly manufactured face shields by using the fabrication laboratories of its Product Design Program.

The University of the Philippines innovation went beyond the mass production of PPE and medical technology. USAID’s Science, Technology, Research, and Innovation for Development (STRIDE) program has helped Philippine higher education institutions improve the process of procuring scientific supplies and equipment through a better understanding of the use of emergency procurement policy, primarily with UP Diliman.

There has also been increased demand to find solutions for those who require in-home care, who are some of the most vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19. Faculty from UP Diliman, Manila, and Cebu have developed a prototype that uses virtual reality in-home therapy behavioral care. This increases the overall quality of life for patients with neurological conditions like dementia and cerebral palsy. Additionally, the UP system has issued many policy papers analyzing the effectiveness of quarantine and the potential impact of COVID-19 on a post-pandemic world.

13 Technological advancement and innovation in testing (test kits, distribution channels, processing, etc.), equipment (ventilators, isolation facilities, etc.), protective supplies (PPE such as masks, gowns, face shields, etc. to protect healthcare workers), and protocols. COVID-19-related social science research contextualizing the social and economic impact of the pandemic on both an in-pandemic and post-pandemic world and the resulting engagement from HEIs, governments, and the public. Funding sources ranging from government, to private sector firms, to HEI administration, and to the local community, as well as partnership and collaboration efforts attempting to advance the capacity of the HEI and its learners.


16 Ibid.


COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Manila campus houses medical facilities, which have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis. They have supported treating COVID-19 patients and working with six other medical schools and hospitals to create online measures to ensure educating medical students is a priority. The UP Mindanao campus satellite facility of the Philippine Genome Center has helped fund two testing centers (for both COVID-19 and other infectious diseases) while providing financial compensation for those training to work there. Community partnerships have also stretched beyond the medical and technical fields. The UP Badminton Association in Diliman launched a program working with a local fashion brand to raise funds for indigenous communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic, such as the Itneg tribe. This program created a more sustainable means to increase funds by selling face masks created by the Itneg community via social media. Additionally, UP Baguio opened a distanced arts and crafts fair to aid arts occupations during a difficult time due to decreases in tourism.

The UP Diliman College of Law launched an online portal to help “handle requests for legal assistance, legal advice and education, and if necessary, legal representation for issues arising from the implementation of the Enhanced Community Quarantine.” The portal connects expertise across the community in order to better deal with inevitable and difficult interruptions caused by COVID-19 and quarantining.

COMMUNICATIONS

Given the importance of communication, the UP system’s social media sites are updated consistently. Important posts are pinned in order to make them easily accessible, university newsletters have become popular, and multilingual chat centers were developed to assist students learning from home.

Preparing and educating the public has been extremely important. Students from UP Diliman College of Mass Communication Journalism Department are helping to combat the “infodemic” resulting from the surplus of (mis)information about COVID-19. The Diliman campus houses the Resilience Institute, which has created a COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team that releases news reports, forecasts, policy recommendations, and other resources on the Philippine’s governmental COVID-19 response. The

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20 Public health-related support (e.g. local COVID-19 testing, donations of PPE and sanitation products) and non-public health-related support (e.g. donations of nutritional kits, support to the entire education system) provided by HEIs to local communities.
26 Both the mechanism through which and frequency with which important public health, academic, and logistical information reaches key stakeholders during crises. In a crosscutting way, consistent and accurate communication strategy ensures that HEIs and governments are able to provide an inclusive response to the crisis and promote transparency. The research team also sought to understand the levels of engagement among key stakeholders as a result of effective and clear communication strategies.
School of Journalism has created FactRakers, a fact-checking initiative that can be found on Facebook, Twitter, and Google’s Fact Check Explorer.28

The UP communicated early and often to inform the public and students. The UP Pandemic Response Team is made up of more than “200 professors, researchers, alumni, and students from across the entire UP System, from Baguio to Mindanao” who come from a variety of backgrounds, from social work to public health to statistics.29 All eight universities have been included in the UP System’s COVID-19-related publications. For example, UP Los Baños has a link to all their publications on preparing for post-quarantine, COVID-19 forecasts, etc.30 The Cebu and Visayas campuses have published analysis and recommendations for their own campus in addition to the system publications via the pandemic response team.31 32 The UP Pandemic Response Team has developed a country-wide reputation with mentions on the Philippine’s Department of Health Website to CNN Philippines and World News.

LESSONS LEARNED

The University of the Philippines has successfully implemented an infrastructure for continuity of learning and community engagement that incorporates a model that could prove sustainable. At the time of the development of this case study, the UP system planned to continue distance learning until a vaccine becomes available. It has also created resources such as multilingual chat options, research opportunities, a news system, etc. that provide a basis for an accessible, virtual learning environment.

According to the four key objectives questions in the Higher Education Response to COVID-19: A Landscape Map of USAID Partner Countries, the University of the Philippines system has placed continuity of learning, research and innovation, community engagement, and communication at the forefront of their actions. The structure of this higher education system continues to develop and provides a foundation for responding to any future crisis that could have a similar impact to that of COVID-19. Lessons from this case study include:

- Integrating alternative learning methods into instructional design creates opportunities for learners in crisis-free learning environments and enhances the ability to adapt to unforeseen shocks. Before the pandemic, the University of the Philippines used Internet-based platforms to supplement traditional in-class instruction. This created a situation where, when students were sent home, the UP system faced a much less severe adjustment.

Even with this experience, the UP system saw limitations in its existing academic infrastructure. Rural students faced difficulties with connectivity, and many students struggled financially to access the necessary technology. UP is taking these lessons and exploring the use of TV and radio as an

alternative means of instruction, but it will need to keep adapting in the face of continuously changing circumstances.

- **Higher education institutions are well-placed actors in facing challenges that arise in the local context.** Drawing from local expertise and established resource networks, they can be efficient and effective partners in crisis response efforts. COVID-19 has been the impetus for the University of the Philippines system to speed up and shift processes to incorporate more low cost solutions using local resources.

Utilizing local supply chains and expertise from the university, UP Manila successfully created a locally made COVID-19 test kit. These test kits eliminated the need for the Philippines to depend on foreign-sourced test kits, which at that time, were experiencing a global shortage.

- **A resilient education system is able to effectively coordinate between different actors to maintain equitable and quality education services.** The education system includes many different actors such as governments, private and public education institutions, students, faculty, staff, research institutions, and community organizations. Crises not only make it more difficult for these actors to continue with their individual functions, but coordination and complementarity of efforts between actors in the system also becomes more challenging.

This case study specifically cited a need for consistent messaging within the UP system as well as with their students, faculty, and staff. Wider system coordination is also imperative during a crisis such as COVID-19. Resources can become stretched, and actors must work together to support the physical safety and social emotional well-being of students, faculty, and staff.

This case study was developed by Ally Stavros (University of Michigan), an undergraduate student participating in the 2019-2020 academic year Virtual Student Federal Service internship program. Recommended citation:


USAID is actively assisting countries that are affected by or at risk of the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19. USAID is working directly with host country governments and through organizations responding on the ground to contain and combat the outbreak. For additional resources, please visit [https://www.edu-links.org/COVID-19](https://www.edu-links.org/COVID-19).