



Quality Assurance in Distance Education achieved in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT :

This paper analyzes and synthesizes the developments and challenges of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) which offers the Distance Education (DE) Program since 1995. Focusing on the core components of (1) quality of distance education, (2) administrative service, (3) faculty development, and (4) student feedback, this paper reviews and evaluates how the UPOU performs quality assurance and provides an effective mediated learning experience in the tertiary and graduate levels serving its local and overseas Filipino students in 33 different countries. The UPOU reports improvement and faces challenges on: (1) government, private sector, non-governmental organization, and academe support for policy and budget for technology and multimedia upgrade, (2) organizing and training DE scholars, specialists, personnel and practitioners, (3) relevance and competitiveness of programs and curriculum, (4) establishment of more digital learning centers and learning object repositories, (5) strengthening collaboration with other universities, including the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) and in the Southeast Asian Region, (6) student retention and technological support, (8) assessment methods, (9) research agenda, and (10) bridging the 'pedagogical gap of acceptance'. The UPOU is determined to address these educational realities to prove that DE is beyond an alternative to conventional university, and is a viable academic institution based on a learner-centered paradigm for more Filipino students.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Distance Education (DE) is a learning experience generally characterized by independent self study with a time period to finish. Classes are online with specially designed materials using electronic communication. There are also learning centers for occasional class interaction and examinations.

Distance Education in the Philippines is in its primary stage relative to its Asian neighbors namely India, Pakistan, and Thailand which started in the 1970s and 1980s (Moore, 2005). The University of the Philippines (UPOU) in particular was established in 1995 as a constituent university of the University of the Philippines (UP) System. Its primary goal

is to provide access to the highest standards and quality of academic excellence and educational opportunities for higher education for Filipinos via distance education. UPOU offers degree programs in the Undergraduate level, Post-baccalaureate Diploma, Master's, Doctoral and Nonformal courses and Certificate programs which are responsive to the needs of the learners and the society they are part of (UPOU website). It was declared by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) as the National Center of Excellence in Open Learning and Distance Education. The Commission of Information and Communication Technology (CICT) and the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) have also acknowledged UPOU for its quality education.

2. METHODS :

2.1 Research Objectives

According to Brinkerhoff (1983), a program evaluation is a “systematic evaluation of the various aspects of program development and training progress to assess their merit.” This paper aims to chronicle and to evaluate UPOU’s delivery of the program and quality of course materials for 15 years. Although evaluation of distance education is challenging among developing countries (Quimbo, 2002), it is important for the improvement of its performance and sustainability as an academic institution. A number of studies and articles are combined to present this comprehensive report.

2.2 Background

UPOU was a product of the introduction of rural radio and a radio format of school in the air (SOA) in UP Los Banos. It was in 1959 when broadcast services started for lessons and language drills in English were first aired as supplementary materials to classroom. Later, rural educational broadcasting at the UP College of Agriculture in Los Banos through Radyo DZLB developed and the “schools on the air” became regular programmes providing non-formal education for farmers in the country. It had radio lectures, discussions and interviews. It reached its popularity in the 1970s (Librero, n.d.).

Forward to 1991 when the former UP President Jose Abueva created a Distance Education Program Committee, which recommended to set up a Distance Education Planning and Implementation Unit (DEPIU) “to provide information on the potential demand and support for distance education in UP.” Inevitably, this was criticized compared to the conventional classroom. But, the DEPIU became the UP Distance Education Program as approved during the 1053rd Board of Trustees meeting on 27 August 1992. In spite of this initiative, it was not clear whether the UP Distance Education Program would be pursued as a separate entity parallel to the conventional UP campuses. The former Executive Director Dr. Francisco Nemenzo

defended the value of distance education in an essay which served as the philosophical and policy framework for the Program. He presented the significance and beneficiaries of the Program as an academic support unit. The program had priority initiatives to grant degrees and diploma courses, to create instructional materials, and to provide non-formal programs (Librero, n.d.).

UPOU is considered as a second generation DE with provision for student support by way of tutorials or sessions in Learning Centers (LCs) located in cities and provinces in the Philippines. It was carried out through printed self-study modules developed by course teams. LCs needed telephone, telegraph and courier services for the classes and office functions; long distance telephone being the most useful tool (Annual Report 1997).

UPOU also established linkages with Simon Fraser University - Canada, Open University - UK, University of Victoria, Open University of Israel, University of South Africa during its establishment and growth in 1996. (Annual Report 1996).

2.3 Framework

The Context - Input - Process - Product (CIPP) Model of Daniel Stufflebeam is the framework of this exploratory evaluation. The CIPP model aims to improve the leadership and staff of an institution based on available resources and from feedback of its stakeholders. The criteria in determining the success or failure of a program are Effort, Performance, Adequacy, Efficiency, and Process (Madaus et al., 1986). Specifically, this paper adapts the Context, Input, and Process variables of the CIPP Model in assessing the (1) quality of distance education, (2) administrative service, (3) faculty development, and (4) student feedback.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION :

3.1 Quality of Distance Education

The UPOU has accomplished remarkable feats for its academic programs which started with three programs in 1995. Three

new non-formal courses were approved by the UPOU Executive Committee bringing the total programs to 33 and eleven (11) Certificate, Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral programs are being developed (Annual Report 2009).

According to Chancellor Alfonso (2009), Quality Assurance methods are employed by the Faculty of Education, Information and Communication Studies, and Management and Development Studies for their Program Review. The goal is to assess the Relevance, Effectiveness, Quality, and Sustainability of the Program Offerings.

Quimbo's (2002) study yielded positive results on the perception PhD in Education students about the relevance of program goals and objectives to their needs. The results show adequate contribution to the PhD students' perception on the effectiveness of the program to their Personal Growth, Cognitive Development and Professional Advancement. The respondents also perceive the quality and timeliness of feedback of their course performance to be moderately efficient.

In 2009, the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) collaborated with five international open universities in the region to develop and offer a graduate degree program on ASEAN Studies. These open universities are the Hanoi Open University, Vietnam; Open University of Malaysia; Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand; Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia; and Wawasan Open University in Malaysia. The ASEAN Studies program aims "to promote regional and global understanding about ASEAN Countries from the perspective of ASEAN; increase the ASEAN community's consciousness of its common historical, cultural, and regional identity; and obtain a balanced perspective in ASEAN studies" (UPOU website). This is a significant development for UPOU and Southeast Asian countries in making promoting DE in the region.

In offering Distance Education, UPOU heavily relies on technology. It began using TV, radio, internet, teleconferencing, teletutorials and other technologies in 1997 but the method was asynchronous. The educators and students faced challenges in

real-time instruction because of problems in stable internet access since technology was expensive and there was a general concern for the readiness of users.

In terms of software support, Dr. Felix Librero (2005), former UPOU Chancellor, said that UPOU lacks IT experts and needs a "reliable and sustainable infrastructure support system." He acknowledged the following challenges of DE in UPOU: (1) difficulty of hiring experts in hardware, software, and processes, (2) funding for top-of-the-line hardware and software, (3) systems and policies that allow Asian OU universities to share ideas and experience. UPOU began using the Audio-Video for Teaching and Learning Laboratory (AVTELL) and Online Teaching and Learning Laboratory (ONTELL) in 1997. It was only in 2001 when all courses were practically delivered online. And as of 2008, 100% of the courses were delivered online but only 80 of the 200 courses modules are downloadable (Annual Report 2008). These, however, need to be continually updated to suit the diverse student needs and available electronic learning tools where some students and teachers resort to using commercial internet programs such as Yahoo messenger, Skype and similar services.

To address this, UPOU aims to develop a resource-based course package (RBCP) which is a collection of study guides and learning resources in various digital formats (such as text, audio, video) most of which can be downloaded from the Web (Annual Report 2009).

While these technological developments are essential, it is equally important for UPOU to establish digital learning centers and learning object repositories. The Learning Centers and Testing Centers of UPOU are located in UP campuses, local government units and private and public colleges and universities.

Study sessions in the LCs are conducted with a tutor. Students take part in these to enhance self-learning, register, avail counseling, receive learning packages, submit requirements, and take exams. The study session is also an opportunity for DE students to meet their classmates and to

inquire about the modules and lessons. The frequency and length of study sessions depend on the course requirements as agreed by the students and teachers. On the other hand, there are also online study sessions where students and tutors communicate asynchronously where “a tutor or student leaves messages on a discussion board and the rest of the class interacts by replying to these messages.” In addition, around 300 students every semester take proctored examinations in Philippine embassies and reputable universities and colleges (UPOU website).

The “DE and the Disciplines” colloquium series held in 2009 was a milestone in assessing the status of DE. The goals were “to foster critical reflection and dialogue on pedagogical and curricular innovations, research themes and approaches, disciplinary tensions and debates, and evolving perspectives on distance education.” The event paved way in creating a concrete steps for a better state of DE in UPOU and the Philippines.

3.2 Administration Services

The UPOU officials are the Chancellor, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Vice Chancellor for and Finance and Administration. The University Registrar and the Directors of the Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services, Multimedia Center and Program Development Associates function primarily for student services. The Faculty of Education, Faculty of Information and Communication Studies, and Faculty of Management and Development Studies were established in 2003 and are headed by deans. These were formerly referred to as Schools for Distance Education. Of the total 259 UPOU personnel, there are four (4) officials on temporary seconded appointment, 21 full-time faculty, 130 affiliate faculty, 28 lecturers, 15 REPS, and 61 administrative staff.

A study by Quimbo (2002) revealed that there is low satisfaction in Support Services offered by the administration. In particular, the respondents expressed concern about some enrollment problems. They suggested

to better promote UPOU programs, to send advance notification of accepted students, to provide enough time for registration and financial assistance. These reflect the challenges in the number of staff members and faculty to provide service to the growing student population of UPOU in the Philippines and abroad.

One factor which affect the quality of distance education is the budget allocation. The budget of UPOU was PhP93.9 million in 1997; PhP42 million was allotted for capital outlay and PhP18 million for course and staff development. The Congress and Department of Science and Technology (DOST) added PhP7.6 million to the 1997 budget as support for its technological needs and scholars (Annual Report 1997). However, the budget continued to decrease annually and the budget for 2009 was PhP50.8 million which was allocated into PhP40 million for personnel services and PhP10.8 million for maintenance and other operating expenses. PhP3.3 million was allotted as supplement for capital outlay for purchasing of ICT equipment and multimedia production equipment (Annual Report 2009). These figures reflect the decline in financial support for UPOU which affect the services and technological support of UPOU.

In 2005, House Bills 2276 and 3784 were submitted to Congress to institutionalize distance education and open learning through legislation. Both bills promote the creation of a national open university and regulate colleges and universities which offer distance education. Dr. Libro explained that there is no need to formalize through legislation and instead change the mindset of the public for acceptance of open learning as a learner-centered learning environment. He added that the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), as a regulating body, is already mandated to evaluate academic institutions which offer distance education programs. However, there was a proposal to designate UPOU as the national open university thereby proposed to be allocated PhP25 million. There was another proposal to enact a law institutionalizing an open learning system to gain access to funding and to other support

mechanisms from the government. As of today, these remain to be realized. UPOU needs to continue to be proactive in outreach and institutional linkages with government offices, the private sector and non-government organizations locally and internationally.

Lastly, although a “virtual learning environment,” UPOU created a UPOU Physical Development Master Plan in 2006. Based on that plan, UPOU to date has built the Administration building and Oblation Hall in 2000 and the UPOU Centennial Plaza, Centennial Center for Digital Learning Building and UPOU Executive Guest House in 2009.

3.3 Faculty Development

UPOU started with affiliate faculty who were “borrowed” teachers from the UP system. It had no full time faculty when it started its operations in 1995. At present, there are 179 full time and affiliate faculty members and lecturers. Students expect them to be “innovative subject domain experts, effective education instructional designers, inspiring course facilitators”. The faculty members are active in research and attending local and international conferences for professional growth.

The faculty members use a Course Guide in teaching which is equivalent to a syllabus explaining the overview of the course during the first meeting of a traditional face-to-face class. According to Prof. Jayson Petras (2010), who handles *Komunikasyon 1 (Kasanayan sa Komunikasyon 1)* and *Komunikasyon 2 (Kasanayan sa Komunikasyon 2)* which are Basic College English and Writing courses, less than half of the class are active and thereby comply with the requirements. He is concerned with the non-compliance of deadlines of the academic calendar which affect grade submission. Some students face difficulty in following instructions. He is concerned with how to really gauge students with the course requirements which are paper writing and a final examination. He is likewise concerned with logistics. He believes that additional training must be given for Moodle users, to

improve coordination with classes in the constituent campuses of UP. On the other hand, he also observed that students become close in the duration of the course and enjoys the face-to-face interaction. Dr. Alfonso reiterated the need “to organize scholars who are distance education practitioners who are in multimedia, new media and digital imaging into professional associations for instructional design, media specialists, and learning object creators; to create an association of e-librarians, e-curators, and scholars helping develop academic standards of e-materials for efficiency in exchange of resources in this area.”

3.4 Student Feedback

The UPOU student enrollment in school year 1996-1997 was 1,397. This increased to 1,663 in 2004-2005. For school year 2009-2010, 2,503 students were enrolled in the first semester and 2,315 for the second semester. There are also UPOU students based abroad in 33 countries including Thailand, Qatar, London, Canada, China, Japan, and USA.

The Diploma in Science Teaching and Diplomat in Mathematics Teaching for teacher education are the main thrusts and strategies that attracted UPOU students who were mostly high school teachers in 1995. The Department of Education was concerned with the decline of the performance of Filipino students in rural areas where the quality of secondary education needs to be improved primarily through the academic development of the teachers. This is where UPOU contributed to teacher development.

The majority of UPOU students are employed, mostly in their 30s and 40s, heads of family, Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), teachers, rural medical practitioners, rural agriculturists, physically challenged and government personnel. They enroll primarily for employment advancement. There are also 23 scholarship grants.

The student profile has changed from mostly scholars of congressmen and senators and of the Department of Education

and Department of Science and Technology during the first five years compared to around 80% regular “paying” students at present. This indicates a change of positive perception from the public to enroll in DE (Lontoc, 2010). The total alumni for the period 1995-2006 are 2,419.

The UPOU online Student Support Services are registration, payment, tutorials, testing sites, exams, bookstore, library (Annual Report 2007). Quimbo (2002) studied the perception PhD in Education students about the instructional materials and the student support system. Results indicated that the respondents perceived the learning materials to be moderately adequate, suitable to the requirements, convenient to handle, moderately efficient in delivery. On the other hand, the respondents perceive the support services to be adequate, low satisfaction on tutors. Overall though, respondents had a better satisfaction with the support services than the quality of course materials.

Alip et al. (2004) also studied the students’ perceptions on Student Support Services. Results showed that the perceived importance of most of the services did not match their accessibility as rated by both the face-to-face and online respondents. There was no difference in the needs of the face-to-face and online respondents in the “pre-enrollment stage” and the “starting out a course/program stage.” They indicated the need for “information on registration procedures” and support services for “course orientation”, “orientation to media/course delivery”, “delivery of course materials”, “provision of library/learning resources.” There was a statistical significant gap between the importance and accessibility of the student support services rated by face-to-face and online respondents during the “moving through the course/program stage.” “Feedback on examinations” was the primary support need for the respondents.

Alviar-Escobin (2004) discovered the insights of the UPOU students and tutors on the effectiveness of its virtual learning system. Results showed that time, learning attitudes, and knowledge of technology affected the application of the technology in

distance learning. Respondents indicated flexible time management as most important in the application of Internet technology in DE. Respondents considered self-discipline as the most important factor when thinking about the application of Information technology in DE. The lack of knowledge and training about the new technology and technological problems of IVLE affected the attitude and use of IVLE. The following are recommended :

- to provide ample support from initial hands-on training on the use of the technology to online aids and facilities to eliminate technological hurdles. (student training should accompany the introduction of a new technology, the computer, Internet, and Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) ;
- to provide a web-mail server for the UPOU faculty, staff, students, and tutors to increase real-time interaction ;
- to integrate internet sources by providing tasks which allow the students legitimate reasons to use the available technology ; and
- to evaluate the virtual learning system to identify specific problems in design and function (students got frustrated from invalid passwords and inability to open the university website or IVLE due to the Internet Service Provider and software.

4. CONCLUSION :

UPOU celebrated its 15th anniversary with the goal of expanding access and improving the quality of its programs. An exhibit, launching of the UPOU Networks, and an international forum were held. According to UPOU Chancellor Dr. Grace Alfonso, UPOU is evolving in its philosophy of open learning (UPOU website).

While Librero (2007) observes that DE in the Philippines is an “anomaly” whereas it is a norm worldwide, a knowledge society in the Philippines must be operated under a comprehensive policy which must “ensure changes and equity to access of education”.

Thus, in bridging the “pedagogical gap of acceptance to the learner-centered paradigm in the mindset of non-believers of educators and policy makers, DE proponents need to be more innovative in methods and techniques, address the costliness of technology, and vigorously campaign to adapt and accept the value of the virtual classroom.”

Alfonso maintains a positive outlook for UPOU to be a “A Philippine Cyber University” at the forefront of knowledge society. She considers UPOU as a “Learner-Centered” University where active learners form a community using hypermultimedia. Among the goals is to create a Roadmap of UPOU in the Digital Age where UPOU will improve and be recognized as a Research University, Graduate University emphasizing on Teacher Education and will create UPOU Networks, an online network producing, programming and delivering scholarly productions through the Web using a content management system. These will be accomplished in particular by strengthening ties with the Asian Association of Open Universities and continuing partnership with 36 national institutions and 19 international agencies and with Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia for the ASEAN studies program.

To situate UPOU in the Philippine macrocosm, Trinidad (2004) recommends a holistic observation and solution on e-learning in the Philippines where there is a great digital divide among Filipino Internet users who use it mainly for communication than education. He recommends the following to be established : (1) Networked Learning (integration of ICT in the educational system to improve learning and availability of technical training programs in the community that can train and prepare an ICT workforce ; (2) Networked Society (referring to individuals using ICTs at work and in their personal lives) ; (3) Networked Economy (on how business and governments using ICTs interact with the public and each other) ; and (4) Networked Policy (on the policy to promote or hinder the growth of ICT adoption and use). More importantly, there is the need for additional

collaboration among the government, non-governmental organizations and the private sector in increase the budget and policy support. Trinidad (2004) states that government should encourage more private agencies and individuals by offering tax cuts for donors and creating a master plan for ICT use and policies for ICT infrastructure and curriculum. Consequently, UPOU will benefit in its goals for curriculum development, faculty support, technology upgrade, review of academic policies, student needs assessment particularly the overseas Filipino workforce in building learning communities thereby uplifting the quality of tertiary education in the Philippines. The UPOU and Distance Education are in the stage of development to become a viable academic institution based on a learner-centered paradigm for more Filipino students.

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