Philippine Institute for Development Studies
Surian sa mga Pag-aaral Pangkaunlaran ng Pilipinas
EDCOM2

POLICY NOTES

ISSN 2508-0865 (electronic)

No. 2023-12 (May 2023)

The quest for quality and equity in the Philippine higher education: Where to from here?

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The ongoing learning crisis underscores decisive actions for education reforms. Crucial to reforms is a keen understanding of the current conditions and an even sharper cognizance of the reasons leading to these situations. This *Policy Note*, which is based on existing research, provides a broad assessment of the performance of the higher education sector in the country.

It finds that while there have been successes in the sector, critical issues remain. These include low and uneven quality, underdeveloped research and innovation systems, de facto gaps that affect equity in access, weak financial sustainability, and poor labor outcomes. This note provides recommendations that can potentially address these issues moving forward.

Where are we now?

High tertiary education attendance, given the country's income level, but sluggish relative to neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

There have been improvements in the country's tertiary enrollment rates. The World Bank's World Development Indicators show this to be around 20 percent in the early 1970s and about 35 percent in 2021. Currently, the country's tertiary attendance rate is on par with Viet Nam and the average of middle-income countries.

Salient Points:

- Attendance rates in Philippines higher education institutions (HEIs) are high, given the country's income level, but behind other Association of Southeast Asian Nations member-states.
- Tertiary education providers in the country are largely private. However, they have substantially lower enrollment rates than public HEIs.
- The Philippine higher education currently faces challenges with quality and equity in access. Outcomes and input indicators reveal low and uneven quality. Moreover, equity issues in access remain despite financing reforms.
- Some system-level policies undermine the complementarity of public and private HEIs, while some institution-level policies adversely affect human resources.
- There is a need to promote the complementarity between public and private HEIs, address uneven and low quality, address equity in access with better student financing scheme, improve the financial sustainability of HEIs, develop the research and development culture in Philippine HEIs, address the underdeveloped innovation ecosystem, and promote overall employability of graduates.

However, a closer look shows that although ASEAN neighbors had substantially lower enrollment rates in the 1970s, these countries had overtaken the Philippines at some point. For example, South Korea, which had less than 5 percent college enrollment rate in the 1970s, surpassed the Philippines by the mid-1980s. The country's enrollment rate is currently close to 100 percent enrollment rate. Meanwhile, Thailand surpassed the Philippine enrollment rate by the late 1990s and Malaysia by 2003. Thailand's and Malaysia's enrollment rates are currently 44 percent (2020) and 43 percent (2021), respectively.

Largely private higher education institutions (HEIs) with substantially lower enrollment rates

The 30-year period starting Academic Year (AY) 1990–1991 had witnessed the growth of higher education providers, which tripled since AY 2019–2020. Private HEIs account for a large portion of providers in the country, accounting for 88 percent since AY 2009–2010. The number of public and private HEIs grew at similar rates (30-year compound annual growth rate [CAGR] of 3.6% for public HEIs and 3.4% for private HEIs). Public HEIs grew due to the increase in the satellite campuses of state universities and colleges (SUCs) (30-year CAGR of 6.9%) and local universities and colleges (LUCs) (30-year CAGR of 4.3%). Private HEIs grew due to the increase in nonsectarian HEIs (30-year CAGR of 3.8% versus 1.3% in the sectarian sector).

While enrollment rates had been increasing from AY 2009–2010 to AY 2019–2020, the enrollment growth rate in public HEIs was faster (10-year CAGR of 3.77% versus 0.84% in private HEIs). This can be attributed to a host of factors, including policies that favor public HEIs. Prior to the K to 12 Basic Education Program implementation, private HEIs' enrollment was 80 percent of the enrollment in public HEIs. Enrollments declined during the initial phase of K to 12 implementation. However, recovery from K to 12 was faster for public HEIs. In 2019, public HEIs surpassed pre-K to12 enrollments and registered a slight gain, even during the pandemic. Meanwhile, enrollments in private HEIs have yet to reach their pre-K to 12 levels.

Uneven and low quality

Outcomes and inputs indicators are revealing, with only a few universities rated in the top 100 universities in the world. Based on the 2009–2018 Commission on Higher Education (CHED) data, the average passing percentage in pre-board examinations was less than 40 percent. Regarding faculty qualifications, barely half of the faculty members have graduate degrees, and less than 20 percent have a doctorate (PhD). In addition, less than 30 percent of HEIs have accredited programs.

Poor commitment to excellence

Commitment to excellence is demonstrated by the (1) presence of Centers of Excellence (COEs) and Centers of Development (CODs) and (2) institutional and program accreditations. A COE is a "department in an HEI that continuously demonstrates excellent performance in instruction, research and publication, extension and linkages, and institutional qualifications".[1] A COD is an HEI department with the potential to become a COE. Meanwhile, accreditation is a process that examines the institutions/programs through self and peer evaluation.[2] Level IV is the highest level of accreditation awarded to institutions/programs that meet the standards[3] in quality, operations, and services.

There are very few HEIs with COEs/CODs. CHED data show only 182 have COEs and CODs (7.61% of the total HEIs in AY 2018–2019).

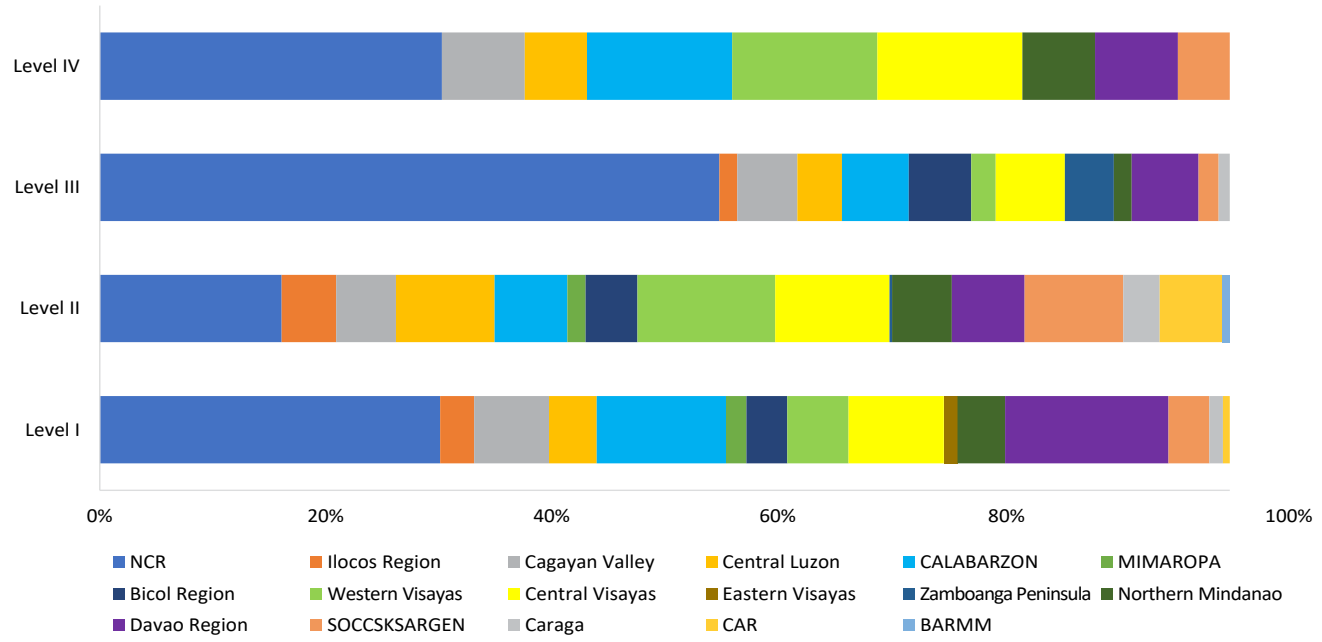
[1] https://ched.gov.ph/centers-excellence-centers-developmentcoescods (accessed on November 7, 2022).
[2] https://paascu.org.ph/index.php/accreditation (accessed on November 7, 2022).
[3] Standards are prescribed by accrediting bodies.

Regional disparities are observed, with the National Capital Region (NCR) and CALABARZON [Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon] garnering a double-digit share of the total COEs and CODs in the same academic calendar. In addition, HEIs in NCR and CALABARZON account for 20 percent and 10 percent of the total COEs and CODs, respectively. On the other hand, Bicol Region, Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), Zamboanga Peninsula, Eastern Visayas, SOCCKSARGEN [South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani, and General Santos], Caraga, and MIMAROPA [Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, and Palawan] account for less than 5 percent, while the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has none.

Moreover, there are very few HEIs with institutional accreditation. Based on the September 2022 data from the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU), only 12 HEIs have institutional accreditation, 5 of which are in NCR.

At the program level, PAASCU accreditation is concentrated at levels II and III. Together, these account for 77 percent of the total accredited programs. Regional disparities are also observed (Figure 1), with programs in NCR accounting for the largest share of the total accredited programs at each level (30%, 16%, 55%, and 30% at levels I, II, III, and IV, respectively). Focusing on the highest level of accreditation, programs in CALABARZON, Western Visayas, and Central Visayas account for 13 percent each of level IV accredited programs. MIMAROPA, Bicol Region, Eastern Visayas, Zamboanga Peninsula, Caraga, CAR, and BARMM have none.

Figure 1. Accredited programs by levels and regions



NCR = National Capital Region; CAR = Cordillera Administrative Region; CALABARZON = Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon; MIMAROPA = Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, and Palawan; SOCCSKSARGEN = South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani, and General Santos; BARMM = Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
Source of basic data: PAASCU data as of September 2022, obtained via personal communication with the authors on November 22, 2022

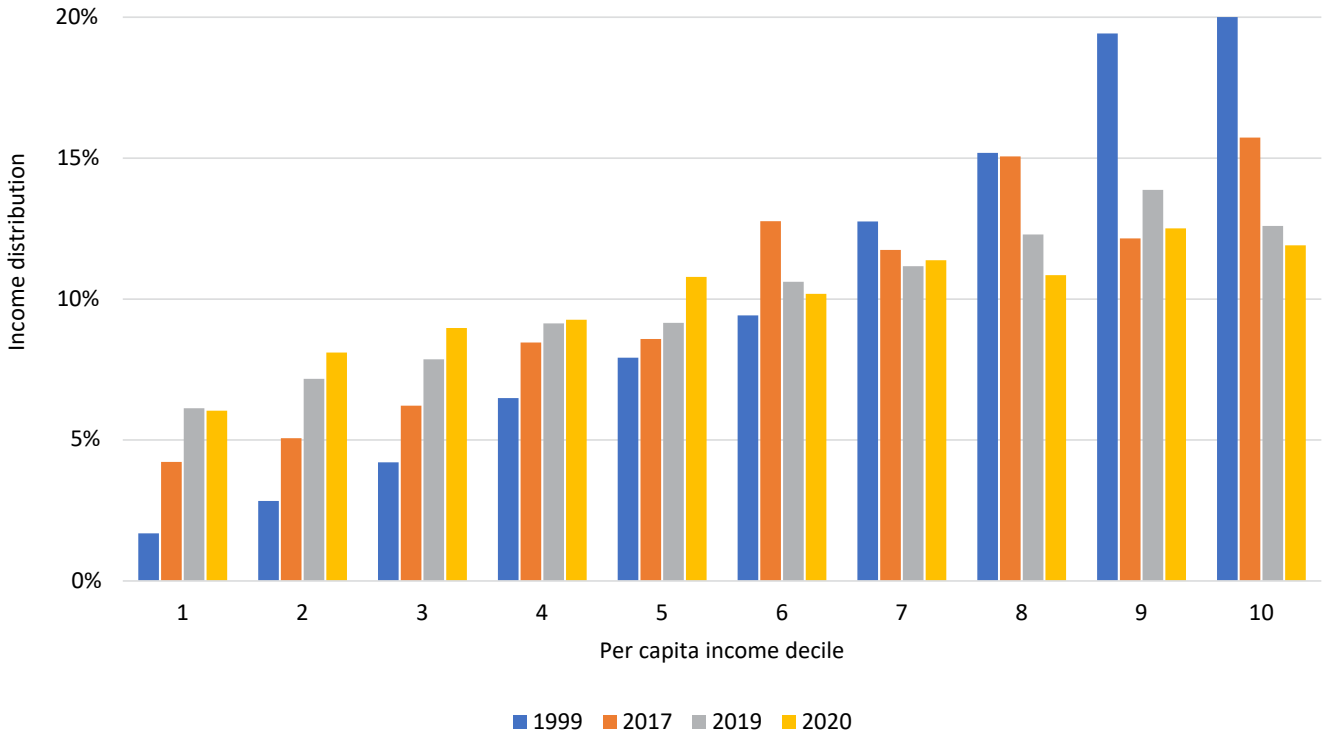
De facto gaps that affect equity in access

Substantial gains have been achieved in encouraging college enrollment among the poorest, although its share remains lower than that of the higher-income deciles. Data show that the segment of students coming from the poorest households increased from 1.7 percent in 1999 to 4.2 percent in 2017 and 6.1 percent in 2019, but the share of the richest remains twice as much (Figure 2).

Nonetheless, the improvement in the enrollment from poor households in public HEIs is more pronounced, as the combined share of the bottom three deciles becomes slightly larger than that of the top three deciles at (28.9% versus 26.5% in 2020; Figure 3). In private HEIs, the distribution continues to be highly skewed in favor of the richer students.

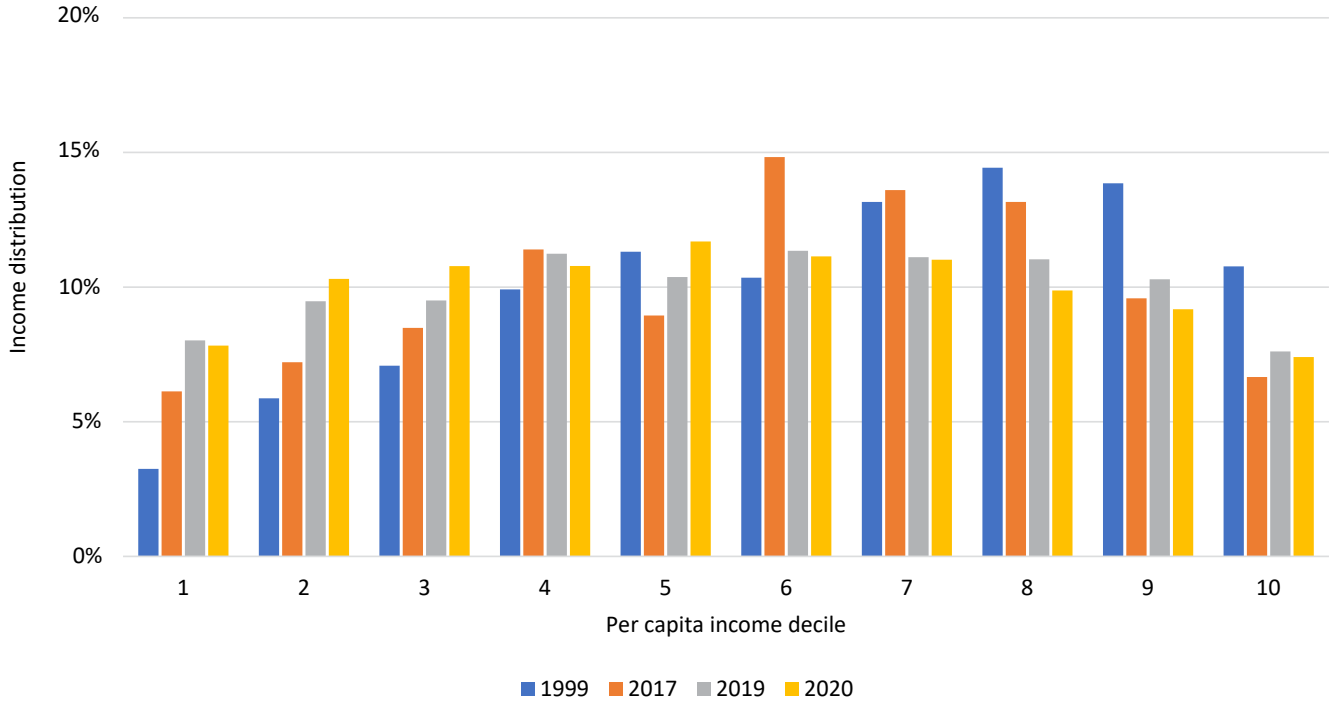
Since the First Congressional Commission on Education, the national government has been committed to ensuring that education remains accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic status. Several programs (e.g., CHED's grants-in-aid program, scholarship, and student loans) have been implemented to achieve this goal. The recent initiative is the passage of the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (UAQTEA or Republic Act [RA] 10931), which has four components, namely: (1) free higher education (FE); (2) tertiary education subsidy (TES); (3) student loans; and (4) free technical and vocational education and training. In AY 2021–2022, recipients of FE reached 2 million students (UniFAST 2023a), while the TES reached about 364,000 students (UniFAST 2023b).

Figure 2. Income distribution of college students by income decile



Note: "1" refers to the poorest income group, and "10" refers to the richest income group
Source of basic data: Processed from the 1999, 2017, 2019, and 2020 Annual Poverty Indicator Surveys of the PSA (2000, 2018, 2020, 2021)

Figure 3. Income distribution of college students in public HEIs by income decile



HEI = higher education institutions
Note: "1" refers to the poorest income group, and "10" refers to the richest income group
Source of basic data: Processed from the 1999, 2017, 2019, and 2020 Annual Poverty Indicator Surveys of the PSA (2000, 2018, 2020, 2021)

Notwithstanding increased accessibility by poor households to higher education in recent years, freeing higher education services does not ensure equitable outcomes. The enrollment at the University of the Philippines (UP) System is a case in point. From AY 2015–2016 to AY 2022–2023, there is less than one percentage-point (pp) improvement in the admission of students from the poorest group, while there is a 9 pp increase in the richest group (Table 1, columns 2–3). Moreover, as a percentage of total examinees in each income group, the passing rate decreased by 3.6 pp for the poorest and increased by 7.4 pp for the richest (Table 1, columns 4–5).

The growth of qualifiers and applicants (Table 1, columns 6–7) also indicates a bleak narrative. Notwithstanding the 52.8-percent expansion in the number of applicants from the poorest households from AY 2015–2016 to AY 2022–2023, the qualifiers from the income group grew only by 2.3 percent. Meanwhile, the richest group recorded a 41.5-percent increase in qualifiers. Indeed, recent empirical evidence showed that income advantage is a factor in entering the UP System, with those in richer households having a higher probability of being qualified (Daway-Ducanes et al. 2022).

The case of UP, which is an example of a quality SUC with a highly selective admissions policy, illustrates how a free higher education policy may promote access but not necessarily equity. A poor student may want to enter a high-performing public HEI, but its richer peers are more equipped to do so. Thus, an important question calls for further investigation: Where did the recent increase in the share of the poorest deciles in public HEIs come from?

Table 1. Distribution of UP admission qualifiers and applicants by income group, AY 2015–2016 and AY 2022–2023

Income Group	Distribution of Qualifiers		Passing Rate		Qualifiers Growth Rate	Applicants Growth Rate
	2015–2016	2022–2023	2015–2016	2022–2023		
Below 101,000	9.3	9.9	10.9	7.3	2.3	52.8
101,000–200,000	13.6	12.6	15.1	13.2	(10.4)	2.9
200,001–300,000	12.4	10.3	17.4	14.2	(20.0)	(1.9)
300,001–400,000	8.8	8.1	18.9	14.8	(11.5)	12.6
400,001–500,000	8.0	6.7	18.9	16.3	(19.2)	(6.0)
500,001–1,000,000	22.2	21.3	20.7	21.2	(7.2)	(9.3)
1,000,001 and above	19.4	28.4	25.1	32.5	41.5	9.2
No data	6.2	2.7	11.0	6.8	(57.7)	(30.9)
Monitored	100.0	100.0	17.3	15.9	17.7	5.1

Notes: AY 2014–2015 was selected as starting point to show the trend before K-12 and the Free Tuition policy; income groups refer to households' annual income.
Source of basic data: UP System Budget Office (2015, 2022)

At this juncture, the UAQTEA, with its four components, seems to pose both opportunities and threats to the issue of equity. Sound improvements, both in the design and implementation, are crucial to ensure that its objectives are met and that the government's limited resources are well spent.

Weak financial sustainability

Financial sustainability is the ability to achieve desired outcomes over time (USAID 2021). It is a means to attain quality education, which comes at a cost, given the challenges and opportunities presented by innovations and shocks occurring at the local and global stages. Financial sustainability enables HEIs to invest in infrastructures and learning systems, improve human resources, and adhere to national and international standards. These investments help HEIs achieve the accreditation levels necessary to demonstrate commitment to excellence.

In turn, quality is an avenue for HEIs to attain financial sustainability. Quality attracts clients and private funding. More importantly, commitment to excellence is one of the criteria for obtaining an autonomous status, which grants HEIs benefits and privileges that contribute to their revenue streams. These include priority access to CHED subsidies/incentives and privileges in offering new programs/courses and establishing satellite campuses. Autonomous/deregulated HEIs do not need CHED permission to increase tuition and other fees.

At present, there are only a few autonomous and deregulated HEIs in the country. Of the 1,729 private HEIs in AY 2019–2020, only 68 are autonomous, and 16 are deregulated.

The Higher Education Development Fund (HEDF), established in 1994 under CHED, aims to address the challenges in the HEI ecosystem through programs[4] that both public and private HEIs can avail. However, some issues were identified.

[4] Programs funded by the HEDF include the Student Financial Assistance Program, faculty scholarship, HEI development initiatives, development of COEs/CODs, accreditation, research and development, faculty development program, and corporatization.

The HEDF seed capital has been unused since Calendar Year 2005, and the Commission on Audit found no financial plans for utilizing these funds (CPBRD 2021). Meanwhile, the funding for developing COEs/COD has declined (Manasan 2012) and currently accounts for 2 percent of the total Higher Education Development Program. Not only do COEs and CODs serve as models of excellence, but their presence is also one of the criteria for obtaining an autonomous or deregulated status.

Moreover, SUCs have yet to tap high-value, revenue-generating sources. Few SUCs have entered into collaborative ventures with business and industry (Manasan and Revilla 2015). Moreover, SUCs have yet to transform their research outputs into intellectual properties.

Underdeveloped research and innovation system

Several observations contribute to the underdevelopment of the country's innovation system. These include the underexposure of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) graduates to research culture, and their training is focused on passing licensure exams (Klich and Dix 2020; Orbeta and Paqueo 2022); still emergent academe-industry collaboration (Vea 2014); and job mismatch of science and technology (S&T) graduates (Albert et al. 2020).

Poor labor market outcomes

Most hard-to-fill jobs require analytical skills (Bayudan-Dacuycuy and Dacuycuy 2021). These are typically found in growing sectors such as information technology and business process management, health and wellness, agribusiness, mining, and power and utilities. Moreover, around 20 percent of workers with tertiary education are employed in jobs with low specificity levels (i.e., using basic skills only).

Training and skills development obtained from the higher education sector is inadequate, which students themselves recognize. Graduates report their lack of communication and problem-solving skills, competence, and trainability (Tutor et al. 2021). The mismatch is also pervasive, with 65 percent of graduates not employable in the sector of their choice due to the lack of skills to secure their desired position or career (Aspiring Minds 2017).

Why are we here?

System-level policies that undermine the complementarity of public and private HEIs

In the past two decades, there has been intensified access to basic and secondary education, which led to an increase in the establishment of SUCs and LUCs. As the number of SUCs and LUCs grew, government funding became an issue. Later, public HEIs were mandated to generate their revenue. This resulted in competition between public and private HEIs, with SUCs and LUCs offering private HEIs programs in the same catchment area.

The implementation of the UAQTEA rekindled the issue of competition between private and public HEIs. Clients of private HEIs mostly come from well-off households. However, the free tuition in public HEIs and the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in financial challenges for many Filipino households, leading to the exodus of many to public HEIs.

Institution-level policies that adversely affect human resources

There is a faculty hiring bias toward academic qualifications. While it satisfies one of the performance indicators, it unintentionally undermines the potential of industry practitioners to contribute substantially to the diffusion of knowledge and expertise necessary in preparing the next set of professionals.

Moreover, politicized leadership can set aside succession plans in public HEIs. Leadership in LUCs, for example, depends on the three-year election cycle, which can contribute to weak leadership, resulting in the discontinuity of policies, poor management of resources, and weak investment strategies.

Absent or ineffective reforms related to financing, research, and innovation

Financing instruments to fund research, infrastructures, and innovations are markedly absent. Moreover, recent reforms in public financing have yet to address the issue of equity in access. Finally, the lack of national programs to institutionalize academe-industry linkages, cultivate innovation, and improve research culture contributes to job-skill mismatch.

What must we do to move forward?

Promote the constitutionally mandated complementarity between public and private HEIs by harnessing the strengths of the private education sector

There is a need to (a) harness the strengths of private HEIs, including their agility to respond to market demand and offer courses of comparable quality; (b) make tertiary education financing follow the student; and (c) implement well the TES to help poor students enrolled in private HEIs.

Address uneven and low quality (on average) of education

There is a need to (a) enforce the rule of closing programs that successively do not produce passers in professional board exams, (b) issue permits to offer programs conditional on satisfying quality standards and with the provision of automatic closure if not compliant, (c) encourage more HEIs to become COEs and CODs by increasing support for COE/COD development, and (d) investigate how to improve the number of accredited HEIs at the institution and Level IV program level accreditation.

Address inequitable access with better student financing schemes

Stakeholders need to recognize that granting universal access to public higher education will not completely address equity issues due to lingering concerns in competition for limited slots, which can be fiercer in high-quality SUCs. As such, there is a need to ensure that the prioritization in granting TES is observed and review how the UniFAST law proposal of using grants-in-aid to fund the education of children of poor households would make the intervention more targeted and sustainable.

Improve the financial sustainability of HEIs

This can be done by developing financing instruments to fund HEIs' long-term debts, innovations, research, and infrastructures.

Amalgamation initiatives such as regional university systems can also be explored. These initiatives can improve resource utilization, management practices, and the quality of services. The University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines is an amalgamation of Mindanao University of Science and Technology and Misamis Oriental State College of Agriculture and Technology through RA 10919. Assessing how this initiative is faring can shed light on best practices and its replicability in other regions.

Develop the research and development culture in Philippine HEIs and address the underdeveloped innovation ecosystem

Since a fully functioning innovation ecosystem is critical for encouraging research in universities, establishing innovation hubs and coworking spaces in strategic locations can be useful. These spaces facilitate the pilot testing of new technologies and innovations. These also provide avenues for enhancing collaboration and exchanging ideas. Equally valuable are internship opportunities for STEM students in S&T firms.

Promote employability

There is a need to (a) implement bridging programs and work-to-school transition initiatives for students, with careful attention to the issues of the underprivileged; (b) incentivize faculty members' collaboration with industries; (c) allocate sabbatical leaves for immersions to gain experience in the actual practice of faculty members' fields of expertise; (d) harness the knowledge and expertise of industry

practitioners by removing the faculty hiring bias toward academic qualifications; (e) increase accountability to clients through monitoring outcomes other than passing rates on board examinations (i.e., employability of graduates); and (f) improve the information dissemination of outcomes/indicators through a publicly available information system.

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Based on existing research, this *Policy Note* was written for the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II), a national commission tasked to undertake a comprehensive national assessment and evaluation of the performance of the Philippine education sector. It is published under the PIDS Policy Notes Series in view of the valuable perspectives it provides on the policy and institutional responses to the challenges faced by the sector.

PIDS Policy Notes are analyses written by PIDS researchers on certain policy issues. The treatise is holistic in approach and aims to provide useful inputs for decisionmaking.

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