A Scoping Review of Mental Health Programs in Philippine Higher Educational Institutions under a Pandemic

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Much of the pandemic context literature on the mental health situation of learners in higher education revealed the common stress factors of students in a remote learning environment, such as packed schedules, difficult lessons, internet connectivity issues, and the lack of private spaces to learn or the housing situation, among others. All these factors were found to be related with learning outcomes. Salutogenic perspectives revealed personal resilience as an important variable in sustaining the mental health stability of university students. This policy brief focuses on filling up the current research gaps in mental health literature as well as addressing the need for facilitating the sustainability of the mental health and well-being of learners in a tertiary education context during a pandemic. In particular, it addresses the need to maintain the health stability of higher education students which in turn catalyzes learning or increases educational outcomes at the tertiary level.

Recommended Citation:

The current efforts of the government are focused on understanding the epidemiology, clinical symptoms, patterns of transmission, and control of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as social distancing, remote learning, and non-traditional work arrangements are being imposed, issues on mental health are also on the rise. Research shows that the behavior of people may affect the transmission and severity of the pandemic (Javed *et al*, 2020). Hence, strengthening mental health programs that are pandemic-responsive has an indirect long-term effect on helping mitigate the transmission and severity of the health crisis.

Mental health is an important aspect of overall well-being, and it is essential for students in higher education institutions (HEIs) to have access to appropriate resources and support. In the Philippines, mental health programs in HEIs are still developing and improving, with many universities and colleges only recently recognizing the need to focus on and enrich such programs (Toquero, 2020).

The Philippines is guided by the Republic Act (RA) 11036 or the Mental Health Act, a law establishing a national mental health policy to ensure the enhancement of the delivery of integrated mental health services, promote and protect the rights of individuals who are availing of psychiatric, neurologic and psychosocial health services, and provide funds for these services. Its underlying principles are rooted from a rights-based paradigm that commits to the provision of optimal mental healthcare in the country. Hence, it serves as an overarching frame for all mental health programs, projects and interventions that will be implemented in various institutions, including HEIs.

Mental health issues among students are often associated with academic and social pressures, financial difficulties, and family problems (Alejandria *et al*., 2022). In particular, much of the pandemic context literature on the mental health situation of learners in higher education revealed the common stress factors of students in a remote learning environment, such as packed schedules, difficult lessons, internet connectivity issues (Son *et al*., 2020; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020), and the lack of private spaces to learn or the housing situation, among others (EDUCAUSE, 2021). Learners with disabilities have a different set of hindrances that add to their stress (EDUCAUSE, 2021). All these factors were found to be related with learning outcomes. Salutogenic perspectives revealed personal resilience as an important variable in sustaining the mental health stability of university students (Oducado *et al*., 2020; Labrague & Ballad, 2021; Valladolid 2021).

A similar pre-pandemic needs for a whole-system approach or framework to addressing the mental health problems of students in higher education has been emphasized (Nurunnabi *et al*., 2020, Chessman *et al*., 2020), with the additional need for regular and compassionate communication from the university (ACE, 2020) as well as prompt and effective mental health assistance (Ballester, 2021) which can be facilitated through online platforms (Toquero, 2020).

On the other hand, the impact of mental health programs on Filipino college students has significantly improved students' mental health outcomes (Malolos *et al.*, 2021). Toquero (2020) also noted that mental health stigma is a significant barrier to seeking help, and that culturally tailored programs can help to address this issue. Overall, the literature suggests that mental health programs are crucial for supporting the mental health needs of college students in the Philippines.

One of the main challenges in implementing effective mental health programs in HEIs in the Philippines is the lack of trained mental health professionals (Yuduang *et al.*, 2022) that limits the scope and quality of university mental health services (Cervantes *et al*., 2019). Another issue is the stigma associated with mental health in the Philippines, which may prevent students from seeking help when they need it (Pinggolio & Mateo, 2018). To address these challenges, Arrieta & Valeria, (2021) note that some universities in the Philippines have started to implement mental health awareness programs that aim to promote mental health education and reduce the stigma associated with seeking help. Another approach is the integration of mental health services into existing university health programs. This approach can help increase the availability of mental health services and ensure that students have access to appropriate support (Liu *et al.*, 2022).

This scoping study provides specific pieces of information on the current programs being implemented by HEIs in the Philippines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic who have opened their programs to the public. A scoping study for Phase 1 of a bigger project was conducted to explore the alignment of the current policies on mental health programs in HEIs with the country's mental health law (RA 11036). It involves reviewing the existing literature, gathering data, and identifying gaps in knowledge, to determine whether further research is warranted (Pollock *et al*., 2021).

Mental Health Programs in HEIs

After reviewing local documents on mental health policies and programs that are available in the public domain, the following are the common actions observed that are undertaken by HEIs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Raise Awareness on Mental Health Issues

To raise awareness on mental health issues, HEIs have used social media to disseminate information regarding programs, services, and psychoeducation through publication materials; developed student wellness program initiatives; and held webinars that opened opportunities for students to engage in discussions on various topics.

Identify and Provide Support and Services for Individuals at Risk

HEIs identify and provide support and services to individuals at risk during the pandemic through the use of psychological screening, testing, assessment, and evaluation in gathering empirical data on students' needs and well-being; shifting counseling services to an online modality to address the varying concerns of students; utilizing a system of peer facilitation wherein students are trained to provide basic psychosocial support to their fellow students to create a culture of support within the institutions; providing specific student services in addressing the needs of special populations to promote inclusivity, and undertaking research and evaluation to improve the services provided to students.

Facilitate Access to Treatment and Psychosocial Support

As part of their mental health programs, guidance offices in HEIs address referrals from faculty, administrators, discipline offices, and other concerned individuals during the pandemic. HEIs facilitate access to external referral mechanisms to assist in connecting students to professional services. Aside from external referral mechanisms for psychological services, HEIs utilize active networks and linkages with various external institutions for professional development.

Mental health programs in the workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed HEIs, affecting not only the students but also the faculty, employees, and school staff. HEIs took steps to implement dynamic program initiatives through mental health awareness activities.

Wellness programs were launched in efforts to enhance the overall well-being of employees and staff members. Additionally, training programs were implemented to equip employees with relevant knowledge. To address the stigma and discrimination associated with mental conditions, HEIs put emphasis on creating a supportive and inclusive environment. Lastly, HEIs provided access to valuable mental health resources for stakeholders such as counseling services and psychological evaluation. Due to the pandemic, HEIs have made their services accessible online.

Best Practices of HEIS

To strengthen its mental health support system for students, a university mobilized a four-component program consisting of a directory of mental health service providers; training on mental health promotion for college mental focal persons; a training program for peer facilitation; and a student mental health advocacy program.

Another ideal approach to addressing the mental health concerns of the university's constituents is from a school unit, which monitored the situation and the person at risk and takes seriously any declarations of self-harm and suicide.

To address the needs and wellness of the students, a university developed a program that aims to aid students in achieving their academic aspirations and lead fulfilling lives. Through this, students are given opportunities to receive a range of services and assistance. Also, this program serves as a platform for fostering a culture of giving.

One college launched a holistic wellness center for the school staff, students, and the public that provides access to the gym; opportunities to join group fitness activities; counseling and psychological assessment services, and; therapeutic massages.

A university addresses the international need for community-based mental health training that can be adapted to reflect the social, cultural, economic, and political climate of any nation or region through a mental health facilitation training program. It aims to increase awareness and engagement toward reducing mental health stigma and promote help-seeking in rural communities.

To integrate and advocate mental health initiatives in all human resource and organizational development policies and programs, a university launched a program that provides workshops and training programs, health insurance,

honoring of personal needs and commitments, recognition, and reward for distinguished employees, information services, employee-social support system, secure partnership, and institutional networks, and the assessment of workplace and workplace sociometry

Key Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Below are Key Recommendations derived from the Scoping Review:

- Expand and strengthen the social media or online and mobile communication component of mental health programs to communicate with students, faculty, staff and other possible clients from HEIs better. The pandemic paved the way towards the utilization of the internet and mobile communications to facilitate engagement between mental health program staff and would-be clients. Such facilitation in communication should continue even if the pandemic is coming to a close to ensure continuous implementation of programs and provide a more responsive support staff.
- Expanding and strengthening the social media or online and mobile communication engagement of mental health programs requires a lot of first responders. And since there is a lack of mental health professionals in tertiary institutions, tapping volunteers, peer groups, and project-based staff, or creating new plantilla items (e.g., Guidance Assistant, Counseling Assistant) are imperative in HEIs. Other options for possible sources of first responders can be On-the-Job-Training (OJT) junior college interns (apprenticeship).
- HEIs can also collaborate or team up with civil society organizations (e.g., Non-Governmental Organizations) and the private sector to spruce up mental health and wellness programs. HEIs can seek the assistance of corporations with corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs on mental health and well-being (e.g., free use of gym equipment in a fitness center).
- Also, college/university entrance exams and/or admission procedures may require survey instruments to establish the profile of first year college students with a history of mental health illness or are highly at risk based on their basic education history. In this way, college instructors can practice differentiated instruction to address learner diversity (e.g., do not implement graded recitation if the block section has a student with anxiety disorder) among other pedagogical practices and considerations.

- Mental health literacy programs for students and their family (parents/guardians and siblings) or their community can also be provided by HEIs. Seminars/webinars should focus on demystifying or debunking commonly perceived "normative" behavior in Filipino culture (e.g., being a heavy drinker is typical of the Filipino male - may be a sign of substance abuse due to depression). A team of multidisciplinary resource speakers can be invited for these seminars/webinars (medical anthropologist, *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* practitioner, lecturer on sociology of the family, women's and gender studies advocate).
- The creation of a college/university wellness center and/or redesigning the schools' spaces by utilizing a salutogenic perspective in interior design or architecture can also aid in providing a healthy spatial environment for students, faculty, staff and other HEI stakeholders. The HEI's wellness center and/or spaces can serve as a breathing space for those who have home spaces that are not conducive to good mental health and/or are psychologically pathological in nature.

Conclusions

In conclusion, mental health programs in higher education institutions in the Philippines are still in their early stages, with many universities facing a shortage of trained professionals and limited resources. However, the increasing awareness of mental health issues and the efforts of some universities to promote mental health education and support services are encouraging signs. Particularly, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, HEIs are utilizing social media to disseminate information, developing student wellness programs, holding virtual events, and offering psychological support through screening, online counseling services, and referral systems. Further, HEIs integrates and advocates mental health of their employees and staff members through wellness initiatives in human resources and organizational development policies and programs. To ensure that their stakeholders have the support they need to thrive, it is essential for universities in the Philippines to continue to invest in mental health programs.

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1. Establish and maintain a web-based university research portal that facilitates automated research management system and which also serves as the database of teacher education policies and teacher education research in country and Southeast Asia.
2. Share research expertise and competence in teacher education research with other TEIs throughout the country;
3. Develop and disseminate the University research agenda
4. Design and implement the research capability program for faculty and staff;
5. Manage University's research production particularly the conduct of educational policy studies in education and teacher education; and
6. Serve as the implementing arm for research incentives and research ethics review.

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