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Are the Mental Health Programs of Philippine Higher Education Institutions Prepared for Disruptions like the Pandemic?

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<https://www.cal-hosa.org/mental-health-resources-parents-2/>

This policy brief explores the mental health programs in Philippine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) amidst the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from a scoping study and key informant interviews, it investigates the alignment of these programs with the Mental Health Act and their responsiveness to pandemic-related needs. Findings reveal a focus on awareness-raising, support services, and access facilitation for at-risk individuals. While HEIs also offer mental health support for employees, challenges in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are identified. The pandemic has prompted flexible program delivery, including online counseling services and wellness breaks. Recommendations include revisiting social contexts, enhancing awareness, hiring trained professionals, and improving monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Despite challenges, investing in mental health programs remains crucial for the well-being of HEI stakeholders.

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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 research sought to provide information on the priorities and implementation processes of mental health programs in Philippine HEIs and in what ways have these programs been responsive to the current pandemic. Specifically, the study focused on programs implemented by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and specific HEIs, who have opened their programs to the public.

The study utilized a descriptive research design divided into two phases. In Phase 1, local documents relevant to the project were reviewed. In Phase 2, key informant interviews (KII) were conducted. The analysis focused on the alignment of the programs with the Republic Act (RA) 11036 or the Philippines' Mental Health Act; and the adjustments introduced by the HEIs to address the pandemic-related needs and problems of the academic community. Data collected was analyzed through content and thematic analysis to identify the themes underpinning the responsiveness of mental health programs in Philippine HEIs to global emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Findings

1. The scoping study showed that the mental health programs of sampled HEIs in the Philippines focused on the following: (1) raising awareness on mental health issues; (2) identifying and providing support and services for individuals (students) at risk; and facilitating access, including referral mechanisms, of individual with mental health conditions and psychosocial support.
2. The analysis of the documents provided by HEIs showed that as a workplace, they also provide mental health support for its employees. Officials, non-teaching personnel (NTP), and faculty members receive the following: (1) webinars and training on mental health awareness; (2) wellness programs; and (3) mental health resources such as counseling and psychological testing, assessment, and evaluation.
3. HEIs' mental health programs and its equivalent framework underwent processes such as stakeholders'

forum, benchmarks from different institutions, needs analysis of target recipients, and revisiting mental health laws and relevant legislations.

4. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of HEIs mental health programs must be revisited as challenges on the frequency of monitoring activities and dissemination of reports and impact study were observed.
5. The Covid-19 pandemic has urged the HEIs to tailor their mental health programs in a flexible delivery. Counseling services, wellness checks, and other recreational activities were converted into online sessions. Implementation of wellness breaks were found to be an innovation during the pandemic that promoted essential breathing space for both students and employees.

Key Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings from both Phase 1 and Phase 2, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. There is a need for HEIs to revisit the intersectional social contexts of its students, officials, and employees as mental health stressors are mostly rooted from role strain. In relation to this, establishment of a database or profile of the mental health status of students, faculty, and NTP will help in providing the needed intersectional contexts.
2. HEIs should continue to boost school community awareness of the mental health services to enhance visibility and accessibility throughout the institution. The study already revealed that HEIs have a plethora of mental health services, but awareness of the availability and accessibility to its stakeholders are areas to improve on. Moreover, administrative support and action needs to be reinforced so that institutional commitment to the improvement of existing mental health programs (e.g., improvement of employee policies, provision of necessary facilities/infrastructures, enforcement of wellness breaks) and implementation of new programs can be provided.
3. There is a need to hire trained professionals to provide mental health services and capacitate the existing officials, faculty, and NTP on promoting well-being, and identifying students, staff, or subordinates who are in need of psychological and emotional support.
4. HEIs should revisit their existing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of mental health programs. Enhancement and re-calibration of M&E mechanisms are



needed to keep the effectiveness and efficiency of mental health programs on track.

Conclusions

The mental health programs in Philippine higher education institutions are still in their early stages, facing challenges such as a shortage of trained professionals and limited resources. Despite this, there is increasing awareness of mental health issues, with some universities making efforts to promote mental health education and support services. However, social stigma remains a barrier, highlighting the need for a comprehensive database of mental health statuses among students, faculty, and staff. It is crucial for universities to continue investing in mental health programs to support the well-being of their stakeholders.

Regarding participants' responses, there is varying knowledge of mental health programs, with some understanding the program's purpose and framework more comprehensively. Practices such as collecting feedback, aligning with relevant legislation, and benchmarking ideas from other institutions are noted. However, there are challenges in monitoring and evaluating program effectiveness, with participants suggesting a need for more comprehensive assessment approaches. During the pandemic, universities have tailored wellness programs but need to improve visibility and accessibility, capacity building for staff, facility improvement, workload management, and program implementation. Enhancing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is also crucial for maintaining program effectiveness and efficiency.

Reference

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The EPRDO is a specialized research center in the University focused on policy research and studies on teacher education. It is established to provide research-based policy recommendation to policy makers. It also serves as the clearing house for all data relevant to teacher education in the Philippines and beyond.

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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
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SYNERGY (Working collaboratively as a team)

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