

Academic Silver Linings in a Philippine State University Amid the Early Stages of Pandemic Cases

Cathy Mae D. Toquero

College of Education, Mindanao State University-General Santos City

Abstract: The primary role of the academe is knowledge building, however, due to the prevailing digital divide, some institutions of higher learning were not able to offer even Emergency Online Teaching (EOT) for continuous formal education during the early stages of the pandemic. This article highlights diversified ways that a state university from a developing country (Philippines) responded to the crisis to offer assistance towards the social development of the stakeholders amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

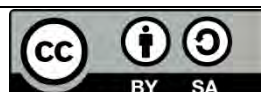
Keywords: COVID-19, higher education, crisis response strategy, emergency response, Philippines.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken the world off guard and continues to hit people in numerous nations. Based on the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Dashboard of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021a), there are 101,561,219 confirmed cases of coronavirus with 2,196,944 deaths as of January 30, 2021. Scientists, researchers, and medical experts from leading pharmaceutical industries, renowned laboratories, and top academies are racing to find a cure to prevent the spread of the deadly virus. Despite global efforts, the number of cases is still on the rise around the world (Hare et al, 2020) which causes extensive health concerns among the public (Ather, Patel, Ruparel, Diogenes, & Hargreaves, 2020).

In the Philippines, there are 525,618 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 10,749 deaths as of January 31, 2021 (covid19tracker.ph.com). Because of this, community quarantine, lockdown, social distancing, and school closures are still compulsorily implemented nationwide as preventive measures to control the spread of the virus. During the early stages of the pandemic, academicians and students went to alternative online delivery as mitigating measures to continue learning through virtual spaces. The country, however, was, and is not, prepared for online learning due to dominant issues such as Internet connectivity, closure of Internet shops, the remote location of many students, and many other social, curricular, and economic factors. Despite these predicaments, some universities have found ways to extend the help to the community even beyond the classroom.

The roles that the university portray are central to community development and is reflected in how it could identify, prioritise, and engage with its stakeholders (Jongbloed, Endres, & Salerno, 2008). The help that the university can extend to its constituents could create a good and lasting impression to the stakeholders, especially in the time of crisis.



Hence, this article reports on innovative strategies made possible through online communication applied by one of the few universities to provide practical assistance to some communities in the Philippines during the early stages of the virus outbreak.

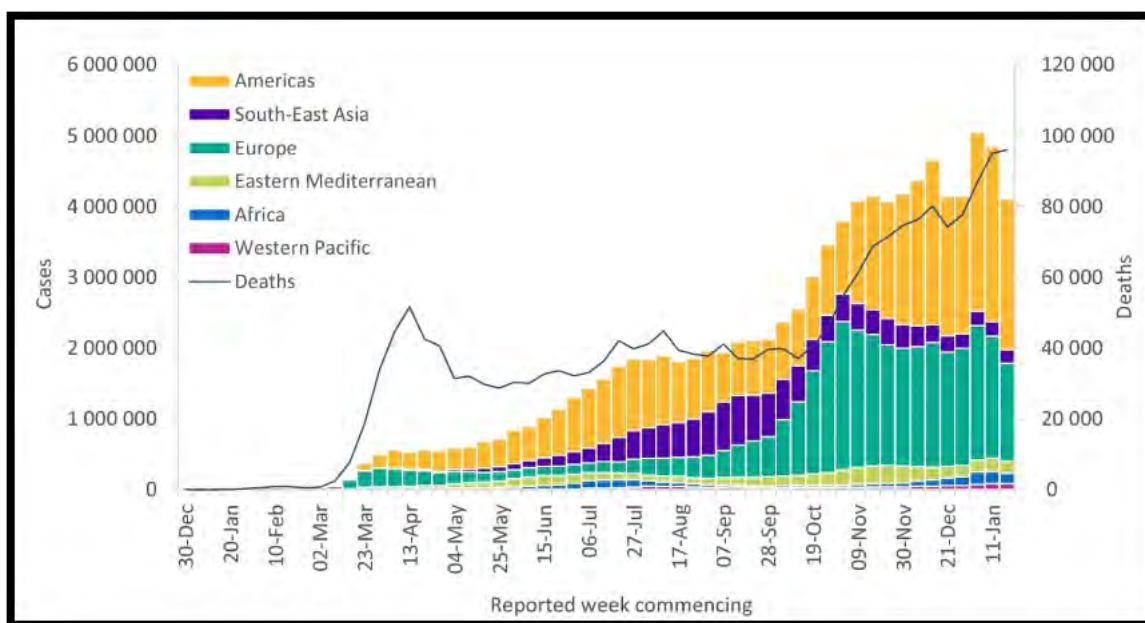


Figure 1: COVID-19 cases reported weekly by WHO (2021b) Regional and global deaths, as of January 24, 2021.

Aim of the Programme Initiative

This article presents an analysis of the programme initiative of a state university in Mindanao, Philippines during the early phase of the pandemic. The anti-COVID-19 programme of Mindanao State University-General Santos City (MSU-GSC) aimed to create strategies that could cater to the university and the community stakeholders. The framework of MSU-GSC also aimed to build activities with the goal to prevent the transmission of the 2019 novel coronavirus disease and help the local community. As a state university from a developing country with insufficient resources, it diverted to extend community support to stranded students, medical front-liners, and the rest of the stakeholders in the community. Moreover, the functions of higher learning nowadays are not just the transmission of knowledge, and research, and training. The social responsibilities of the academe, especially amid the pandemic, include promoting awareness about COVID-19 through online platforms and helping the community in any way it can to extend its efforts and resources. Academicians play a crucial role in the social development of the stakeholders. Due to a rapidly evolving situation, incorporating changeable statistics from the university is not viable at the moment. During this pandemic, there is a need to articulate the practises of the university on how it responds to the emerging real-life challenges due to an unprecedented emergency, hence, the researcher utilised memoranda from the institution, as well as Facebook posts, Facebook pages, chat messages, advisories, and online pictures to achieve this. The researcher reviewed the materials and studied the flow of communication among the students and the faculty. Participant observation through the

online group chats and narrative experience of the researcher as one of the faculty members served as a way to create this report. Likewise, data were observed through a public page of a state university in the Philippines. The university dedicated this Facebook page to serve as an information dissemination system for the online community to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The article used the model of Creswell (2013) to formulate data out of the relevant public documents.

Case Context

Mindanao State University-General Santos City is one of the three premier state universities in the Soccsksargen area and the only state university located in General Santos City, Mindanao, Philippines. It envisions becoming a National Peace University in the country, considering its numerous peace efforts and the similar peace programmes it renders to the community. The university caters to multicultural groups of students from different areas in Mindanao and has a special mandate from the Philippine government to offer quality instruction to the tri-partite groups of Muslims, Christians, and Indigenous People. At the advent of COVID-19, the university was adversely affected as it did not have a distance learning environment. COVID-19 has caused digital divides in some societies in developing countries such as the Philippines due to the inaccessibility of distance education. Consequently, the university ensured efforts to assist its local community, especially the students whose schooling was earlier terminated during the semester when the pandemic cases worsened in the country. Because of the community quarantine and ongoing lockdown, the university could only cater to constituents within the General Santos vicinity. Due to the suspension of online delivery in the entire country after three days of the community quarantine, faculty members were not able to conduct online classes for the students during the early phases of the pandemic. To mitigate the dilemma, the state university shifted its efforts to help the stakeholders through looking for alternative ways other than online teaching but made full utilisation of an online platform such as Facebook as the primary tool, and Messenger for free online communication amid the pandemic. Since the COVID-19 Testing Medical Centre in General Santos City had limited supplies of PPE, the university made use of donations to create face masks, face shields, laboratory gowns and coats to freely give as assistance, and to supplement the equipment needs of medical professionals as well as catering to the fundamental preventive needs of its students and faculty. The local government had already proposed to include the state university as another testing centre in the city, and, at the time of writing, is undergoing the process for further context analysis for medical purposes. Nevertheless, the efforts of the university just prove that “next to the area of training and research, higher education interacts with areas like health, industry, culture, territorial development, and the labour market” (Jongbloed, Endres, & Salerno, 2008, p. 305).

The University’s Practical Innovations during the Early Stages of the Health Emergency

Volunteerism efforts from faculty members and staff of MSU-GSC have been the key to extend help to its stakeholders. The academe needs to form good relationships with the stakeholders since this is essential during the time of crisis (Hocke-Mirzashvili, Kelly, & MacDonald, 2005). The university’s partnerships have vital implications for the working arrangement of its governance and accountability to the community (Jongbloed, Endres, & Salerno, 2008).

Moreover, because of the call for online drive donations, the university has amassed sufficient donations of money, materials, and relief goods to give to the community. The crisis response efforts of the university have been made possible through the use of technology. The online platform, particularly Facebook, has been very useful for reaching out to those students and individuals who need supplies.

Call for Online Donation Drives

There were students who had been stranded in the dormitories and boarding houses near the vicinity of the university. These students were from far provinces and they did not have sufficient transportation allowance to proceed to their residential areas. They decided to stay in the university and the boarding houses during the earliest implementation of the community quarantine, since they did not expect a rigid, enhanced community quarantine in General Santos and the rest of the provinces. However, the university opted for online donation drives, which equipped the university with enough financial support from the community itself to give to the students and the medical frontliners. A report in one study stated that the stakeholders themselves wanted to receive news and updates from the social networks (Hocke-Mirzashvili, Kelly, & MacDonald, 2005). Facebook has been useful for the academic community, since it is free and accessible online except for those who are in remote areas and do not have Internet connectivity. The online call for donation drives is also effective as there are still more offerings of financial assistance at the time of writing. Aside from this, numerous students from the said state university are also proactively engaged in many Facebook groups that the university's clubs and organisations have created so that they can share their learning and university-related experiences.

Support to Stranded Students

Though the university did not monitor earlier that there are students who stayed behind in the institution, even when there was an earlier memorandum of the cancellation of classes, the university looked for ways to supply the stranded students with food and allowances during the rest of the community quarantine. Student Affairs services organised the distribution of the relief goods to the stranded students. Likewise, an alumni organisation of the university, especially of the elementary education department, also assisted the stranded students through financial assistance, relief goods, and online support. The students were thankful for the financial assistance, relief goods, and emotional support given to them, since they were far from their families and nobody could provide for their needs due to the lockdown. This highlights the responsibility of the academe to fulfil the needs of the students, since "universities have to understand the role of their stakeholders, identify their primary stakeholders and apply corresponding strategies to deal with them" (Tetřevová, & Sabolová, 2010, p. 231).

Counseling through Online Care Centers

Social media plays a crucial role nowadays for faster dissemination of relevant and critical information. It can increase the voices of the people who can participate during the crisis (Hocke-Mirzashvili, Kelly, & MacDonald, 2005). Consequently, online platforms, such as Facebook and Messenger, have been vital for the university to offer accessible services to the stakeholders for engagement even amid the pandemic. Thus, for the community to also access emotional and mental health support, volunteer experts of MSU-GSC with masters' and doctors' degrees related to

psychology, created Facebook pages to give free consultation, health education, mental health tips, COVID-19 related information, and biosafety protocols through an online mental health counselling page for the students and constituents to access anytime. Students have chatted through online private messages to the experts, following the protocol for assurance on confidentiality.

Generation of Knowledge through Technology

A significant social responsibility of universities is to represent the “centres of intelligence, knowledge and creative activity and plays [sic] the key role in the scientific, cultural, social and economic development of the society” (Tetřevová, & Sabolová, 2010, p. 229). Being at the forefront of the generation of knowledge, MSU-GSC contributes to knowledge production that gives limited supplies to the students through the formulation of products for sanitising. It is widespread in social media news that at the early peak of COVID-19, people rushed to obtain supplies of hygiene materials. On a local level, there was no more supply of cleaning alcohol in the malls and stores because of the panic buying that happened when the community quarantine was announced nationwide. Likewise, there was a control on the market regarding the distribution of these essential materials. For other people in the community to at least have a decent bottle supply, one of the departments of the university aligned with the natural sciences formulated hand sanitisers and alcohol cleaners to give to students, medical professionals and police officers. Thus, the COVID-19 situation allowed the academe to meet the needs of its stakeholders, especially concerning products that require scientific knowledge. Technology has been instrumental for fast dissemination of information at a time when it is urgently needed to produce knowledge that can help save lives.

Informal Social Media Education

The educational system in the Philippines is the same as that of the country of Georgia, where there is a traditional setting that requires students to attend their classes through face-to-face education (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020) and the teachers lack training in online teaching (Toquero, 2020). The researcher, who is a faculty member of the said university, initiated an alternative way to reach the students and help them learn through online platforms those lessons which were real-life events instead of the curriculum standards, since this was not possible due to the suspension. Thus, a Facebook Messenger group was created as an informal online learning group chat made up of faculty members and students. Through Messenger, students have been extended relevant information about COVID-19 and learnt topics related to the real-life contexts that emerged in the social media such as legalities, health and environmental issues. The researcher included this since it is administered to keep students updated and free from the problems of fake news. Students shared and engaged themselves in conversation with the faculty members. This was also a way for faculty members to extend their expertise, despite the suspension of the online learning during the early rise of COVID-19 cases. Due to a lack of Internet connectivity, financial constraints, and being in remote areas, some students were not able to access this unofficial social media education.

Impact on Development and Evidence

Though the transfer and advancement of knowledge to the younger generation is the primary responsibility of a university, higher education today has born with public policy domains (Jongbloed, Endres, & Salerno, 2008) and outreach to the community. The pandemic has driven the university to create innovative responses and services to mitigate the effect of the crisis and to address and alleviate the concerns of the public due to the spread of the virus. During this public health emergency, volunteers coming from the university have taken advantage of their expertise to actively participate and assist in the survival of the community in the fight against COVID-19. At the time of writing, social media and online platforms have been highly significant for communication so that the academe can easily dispense relevant information about COVID-19, ideate on crisis response strategies, and provide updates on relief efforts and donation drives for the benefit of the stakeholders. This emergency education also entails making use of available and accessible social networks as supplementary platforms to emergency learning during this educational crisis. The existing scenario proves that the role of the academe does not end in the classroom but goes even beyond the academe to foster social development and help people in the community amid the pandemic. However, the COVID-19 global crisis is still ongoing so there is not enough data to validate and make reflective or evaluative notes on the effectiveness of using social media as a crisis response strategy. Despite this reality, the use of Facebook has been very helpful to implement the efforts of the university in the local community at the time of writing. Consequently, a good reputation can affect the stakeholders and can influence student recruitment, research funding, financial donations and public support (Kelley, 2014). Having a good reputation is also an indicator that the university has made an impact on changing the life of the community for the better. By doing so, a university can be functional in its mission for social accountability, even in these times of distress.

Considerations for Future Works

The article presents some of the efforts and roles that the academe has pursued during the pandemic. Likewise, this paper comments on academic, policy, and social implications. Part of the academic implications is to formulate a Crisis Preparedness Plan (Kelley, 2014) so that the academe has a forecast and can respond immediately to a possible virus outbreak in the future. This also includes conducting a needs assessment survey in the community. The university also needs to secure its readiness to implement the curriculum through emergency remote teaching (ERT) so that the students can continue their opportunity to access education even during a crisis. Policies related to online counselling should also be formulated to extend mental health services to the stakeholders even after the pandemic. Socially, the academe can conduct surveys on the stakeholders for an ongoing dialogue and feedback during a crisis to evaluate the academe's crisis response strategy (Kelley, 2014). There remains a gap in the body of literature dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the institutions of higher learning. For instance, the limitations of this article include having no validation on the stranded students and no faculty members who volunteered for the programme initiative of the state university were interviewed nor taken as participants, since the article relied only on natural observation, field notes and archival data. Thus, future research should include having faculty members and students as participants of the study, and research can be done on the use of social media and online platforms to evaluate their effectiveness for crisis communications after the pandemic. Research should also be conducted on the impact of the response strategies of the

university to provide for the needs of the stakeholders. In truth, COVID-19 opened the gateways for the global health and educational crisis, and to which universities need to spearhead the global arena in the pursuit of evidence-based medical and educational revolutions amidst this post-truth period in human history.

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Author:

Cathy Mae D. Toquero is an Assistant Professor IV of the College of Education, Mindanao State University, General Santos City, Philippines. She has performed work-related functions such as programme organiser, training coordinator, project leader, among others in extension and research areas relative to Peace Education, Impact Evaluation, and other Teacher Training Programmes. She is Director for Publications and Peer Review of the Philippine Association for Researchers, Education, and Statistical Software Users (PARESSU), Inc., and is currently the Editor-in-Chief of the *Asean Journal of Basic and Higher Education*. Email: cathymaetoquero@gmail.com

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