

*Strategies of Selected HEIs in Addressing Challenges and Issues Inherent to Student Mobility*

Renelee M. Subsuban, University of Mindanao, Philippines

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**Abstract**

Internationalization initiatives in student mobility of selected higher education institutions (HEIs) in Davao region, Philippines certainly set the ground for an internationalization effort to cope with the challenges of globalization. However, HEIs being an open system is not immune to challenges and issues which might put the internationalization efforts of HEIs in student mobility at risk and in the end might result in limited planning and long term policies on regional internationalization process. As per experiences of the respondents in this study, the concrete actions for change in order to manage the challenges and issues inherent to student mobility includes non-academic endeavor: providing support in terms of budget and infrastructure development and academic endeavors : aligning the curriculum to meet international standards, strengthening the curriculum to meet international standards, establishing linkages and collaborations with foreign HEIs, aligning school calendar between two HEIs, teamwork, and sharing of responsibility. Implications of these experiences to theory, policy, and present practices of Philippine HEIs are also discussed.

Keywords: HEIs, Strategies, Student Mobility

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## **Introduction**

The Philippines, just like the rest of the countries in the world is beset by increasingly uncertain changes brought about by globalization (Abas and Imam, 2016). It is an irreversible reality of human life and its impact has seeped into the educational sector and has challenged traditional institutions (Tullao,2003). Ota (2018) and Rose and McKinley (2017) both cited globalization which transfers people, goods and services, money, information, and ideas rapidly across national borders, posit that globalization is having a major impact in the field of higher educational institutions (HEIs). Due to globalization, many countries ensure that higher education is able to provide both professional knowledge/skills and all-around attributes to the graduates so as to enable them to face the diversified yet global demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century society (De Guzman, et al.,2017). As expected, the demands of globalization have added more challenges to higher education as universities are being asked to help meet major international challenges, to educate students in their disciplines with a sense of global competence and engagement, and to contribute to local and national economic perspectives (Morris, 2009). In the Philippines, the country contends not only with local quality assurance measures but with regional and international benchmarks. Moreover, world and Asia university rankings, international accreditation and quality assessment, faculty and student exchange, research publication and citation, and international networking and linkages have become essential considerations that are inevitably transforming the academic landscape (Carrillo, 2017). In recent years, many countries have undertaken reform programmes in addressing these challenges. One way to address this globalization trend is to internationalize the higher education institutions (HEIs). Thus, internationalization has become a key strategy for all tertiary education systems in the world, and the Philippines is no exception (Gacel-Avila, Bustos-Aguirre, Freire Jr, 2017). In the Philippine context, the internationalization initiatives of HEIs can be attributed to the country's integration into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community. When the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was formally established in 2015, ASEAN countries became more open to each other in terms of products and services mobility (Madula,2018). According to Cinches, et al., (2017), an in-depth understanding of internationalization initiatives is essential for school management to sustain internationalization effort.

Presently, student mobility is a leading cross-border internationalization activity both inbound and outbound mobility. It is expected to increase since ASEAN countries have adopted various strategies and policies to stimulate student mobility so it is prudent to understand these diverse activities since it has been observed that while student mobility may help Southeast Asia improve its higher education, it can also cause conflicts and challenges such as brain drain and foreign dependency (Do and Pham,2014). In the Philippines, the country's Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has issued several Memorandum Order (CMOs) in order to guide HEIs in their internationalization efforts especially when it comes to student mobility, but it has not been without its share of challenges. To the researcher's knowledge, selected HEIs in the Davao region lacks baseline data on this matter especially as to how the HEIs management addresses the challenges and issues inherent to student mobility. Thus, this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on three theoretical underpinnings namely; Open-System theory, Contingency theory, and Bureaucratic theory. The enumerated theories have certain common aspects, it all stresses the need of an organization to change, to be flexible, and adapt amidst changing circumstances. Also, the three theories complement each other by stating that the

adaptability of the organization to changing circumstances is essential for a successful management system. Applying these principles imply that System theory sees HEIs being part of a system as an adaptive system since it interacts between the external environment and the system's subparts and the subparts themselves. This is supported by the loose coupling perspective of the Bureaucratic theory which articulates that leaders of an organization must be flexible and adapt to the present needs of society which in this study is the internationalization as mandated by CHED. Internationalization of HEIs requires an integration of an international, intercultural dimension into the teaching (learning), research and service functions of an institution. Change needs to occur at these levels for it to be effective. Contingency theory stresses that HEIs leaders must be flexible and that a leader's style must match with the present situation and adapt to the changing circumstances. This calls for a new leadership in order to triumph these challenges most especially that today's higher education is surrounded by uncertainty and challenges brought about by globalization. The institution and its people need to change and transform to the changing scenario.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach using phenomenological research since the study required a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon which is the cross-border internationalization initiatives particularly student mobility among the five (5) selected HEIs in Davao region. Data collection in this study involved key respondent's interview as source of primary data and document review as secondary data in order to extract information and data relating to the selected HEIs student mobility activities. In the key respondent's interview, a researcher made semi-structured interview guide was used. The responses of the 26 key respondents during the actual interview provided mainly the qualitative information. The respondents were the following: Vice President for Academic Affairs, Head of International Office, Dean of the different colleges, and one accompanying Faculty per college. Purposive sampling was used in choosing the identified key respondents.

In analyzing and interpreting the data gathered in this study, thematic analysis was done on information gathered from interviews of the various key respondents. The responses verbalized by the key respondents were transcribed into word documents. The process allowed for patterns/themes to be identified and for comparison to be established with what the key respondents said and how the concepts was understood.

At the onset of conducting this study, ethical issues were considered immediately by seeking approval of the researcher's adviser, Graduate School Research Coordinator, and the Dean of the Graduate School to allow the researcher to gather data. Once approved, letters of approval to conduct data gathering were secured from the President of the selected HEIs in Davao region. Lastly, a letter of consent was secured from the identified HEIs key respondents before the actual interview and a certificate of appearance was also secured after the interview. Codes were used to protect the identity of the selected HEIs and the various key respondents.

## **Summary of Findings**

The findings of the study revealed that student mobility is not a new phenomenon anymore to the selected HEIs respondents in Davao region. However, certain challenges and issues are affecting the operation of student mobility in the region. As per experiences, the selected HEIs have concrete actions for change in order to address the challenges and issues inherent to student mobility. These strategies include non-academic endeavor such as providing support

to student mobility initiatives in terms of financial (example: allotting budget for paper presentation and travel funds), and infrastructure development (example: construction of dormitory for international students). Meanwhile, the academic endeavors include the following: a.) aligning the curriculum to meet international standards by adding foreign language in the curriculum, b.) strengthening the curriculum to meet international standards by incorporating international practices into the curriculum such as the following: changing the grading system from numerical to letter grade, international benchmarking, adapting the credit transfer scheme, incorporating transcultural inputs in the courses, offering of new courses and conduct of on the job training (OJT) abroad, applying for international certifications, and focusing on institutional programs considered as Center of Development (COD) and Center of Excellence (COE), c.) establishing linkages and collaborations with foreign HEIs by attending international activities, maintaining membership in international organization, and memorandum of agreement (MOA) signing with partner HEIs abroad, d.) aligning school calendar between two HEIs by changing school calendar from June to August to match with foreign HEIs, e.) teamwork between HEIs management and stakeholders by establishing good relationship and full support between HEIs management and its stakeholders, and lastly, f.) internationalization is a shared responsibility as shown in the concerted efforts of all sectors in the university and the collaboration and cooperation of the HEIs.

## **Conclusion**

In this time of globalization and ASEAN integration the selected HEIs in Davao region, Philippines has been engaging in cross-border internationalization initiatives particularly student mobility. The academic and non-academic endeavors of the HEIs are concrete actions for change in order to address the challenges and issues inherent to student mobility. The implications of the experiences of the key respondents in this particular study to the theory, policy, and present practices of Philippine HEIs are discussed below:

## **Theory**

The results of this study as to the lived experiences of the key respondents affirm the open-system characteristics of an organization such as HEIs that it cannot seal itself off from both the internal and external forces that affect the whole system. Due to globalization HEIs must adapt to international standards by changing certain practices in our education system that may not be appropriate anymore with the present need of the society. Likewise, the study affirms Contingency theory that sees HEIs as organizations that adapt to developing sound strategic plans that will fit the current circumstance and do away with some “traditions” that are no longer applicable in a globalized world. However, this study does not conform with the idea of the usual top to bottom management approach of the Bureaucratic theory. Instead, strategic planning and decision making on the internationalization agenda of the institution must involve teamwork and sharing of responsibility between the internal and external clientele of the institutions. In this study, a “decentralized” form of organization that is flexible and open to “top-down bottom up” approach seems to be the most ideal practice when it comes to internationalization of higher education.

There had been numerous studies and literature conducted about cross-border internationalization initiatives among universities abroad but minimal when it comes to HEIs in the Philippines and most especially in Davao region, Mindanao. The researcher finds no studies yet on the lived experiences of the school administrators and accompanying faculty who are involved in the internationalization initiatives of some selected HEIs in Davao region.

Thus, this baseline study presents a different and additional knowledge to the existing body of knowledge on cross-border internationalization of higher education specifically student mobility.

### **CHED Policy**

The CHED policy on internationalization of Philippine higher education gives a clear direction for the HEIs efforts to internationalize but it should not end there especially that based on the experiences of some key respondent's certain aspects of the CHED policy is "not encouraging" and not "internationalization-friendly." There is a need to revisit/review the policy on internationalization which will consider HEIs strengths and weaknesses, and with a support mechanism to encourage HEIs to pursue internationalization initiatives such as student mobility. The prospects of improving certain "imperfections" in the current CHED policies on internationalization is viable as long as CHED has a deep understanding of the current strengths and weaknesses of HEIs in the region in pursuit of student mobility.

### **HEIs Practice**

This particular research is a baseline study that focuses on the strategies of selected HEIs in Davao region in addressing the challenges and issues inherent to student mobility. This study contributes to the existing knowledge about cross-border internationalization specifically student mobility. Following the narratives of the key respondents, internationalization is essential in order to cope with the challenges of globalization. The diversity of inbound and outbound student exchange activities in the region certainly set the ground for an internationalization effort. The present practices of the HEIs in strengthening the curriculum to meet international standards, establishing linkages and collaborations with foreign HEIs, adapting to certain international practices, providing support in terms of budget and infrastructure development, as well as promoting collaboration, sharing, and teamwork within the institutions and its stakeholders are all good practices that must be continued and strengthened. The university governance has given way to participatory management leading to strategies for more cooperation and collaboration. These experiences are a reflection of how "resilient" and "flexible" the educators in Davao region that despite the challenges and issues along the road of cross-border internationalization initiatives specifically student mobility, they still adapt and change. The prospect of more student mobility collaborations and engagements in the future between Philippine HEIs particularly in the Davao region and universities abroad is very encouraging.

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**Contact email:** [bingmsd@gmail.com](mailto:bingmsd@gmail.com)  
[zereleen\\_226@yahoo.com](mailto:zereleen_226@yahoo.com)