Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures

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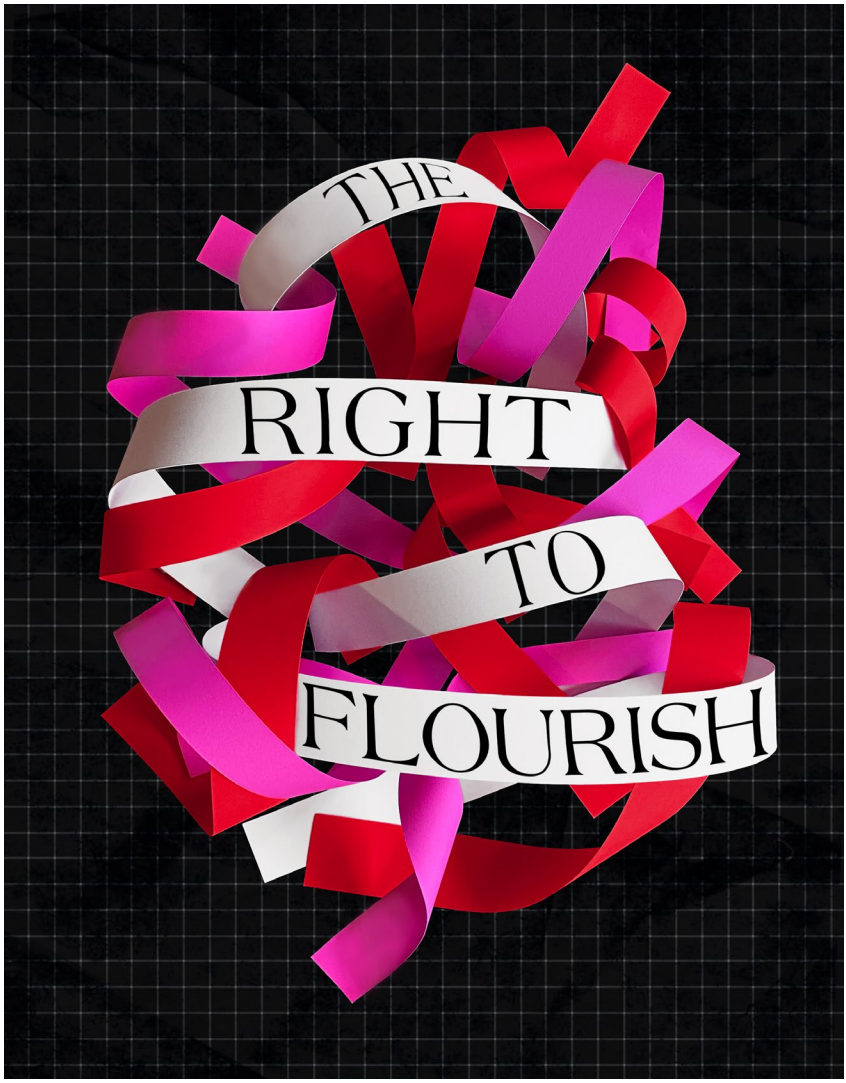
Section V
(Re)making HE Systems and Structures



'The Right to Flourish' by Niamh McArdle. All rights reserved: used with artist's permission.

Note from the artist

The word flourish has two meanings. The verb, to flourish means "to grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly congenial environment". I felt this encapsulated an ideal future for third-level education; the implementation of systems that create an environment to support, encourage and foster growth, learning and personal development regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion and so on. An environment where minority groups do not have to work twice as hard to get half as far because the system itself is built on fairness, and equal opportunity, and prioritises the enjoyment of learning and creative thinking.

But secondly, flourish as a noun is "a bold or extravagant gesture or action, made especially to attract attention". For some reason however, I have a learnt definition of my own that some may see a flourish as a frivolous, feminine embellishment, as something unnecessarily over-the-top and vapid, something stupid and meaningless, without function, something vain that women would engage in: something unproductive. Using this word in this piece, I attempted to reclaim some of the feminine connotations of the word, embracing the power of the flourish through feminine colours, forms and typography. We all deserve the right to flourish in education and do so with our own individual flourishes, whatever they may be.

My name is Niamh McArdle and I am a graphic designer and occasional artist based in Dublin, Ireland. Originally from a very small village in Galway, I'm interested in emotive storytelling through the use of typography, language and image-making. I like to create work that will prompt an emotion from whoever happens to see it — whether it's amusement, sorrow or something else entirely depends on the viewer!

24. Cultivating sustainable blended and open learning ecosystems

Patricia Arinto, Primo Garcia, and Ana Katrina Marcial

Introduction

In recent years, blended, online, and open learning (BOL) have been heralded as the future of higher education. Face-to-face (f2f) instruction has limited reach and is often not accessible to those who are poor, geographically isolated, and/or differently abled. It is also characterised by uneven quality, with its dependence on the capability of individual teachers and their willingness to update their knowledge and skills (Lalima & Dangwal, 2017). In contrast, BOL can, in principle, cater to many and more diverse learners, increase student engagement using a range of digital tools and resources, and develop digital literacies and independent learning skills, which are essential to lifelong learning.

In the Philippines, Republic Act (RA) 10650 or the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Act of 2014 and the Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning issued by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in 2020 encourage higher education institutions (HEIs) to implement BOL. The ODL Act (2014) declares:

> It is hereby declared the policy of the State to expand and further democratize access to quality tertiary education through the promotion of open learning as a philosophy of access to educational services, and the use of distance education as an appropriate, efficient and effective system of delivering quality higher and technical educational services in the country. (section 2)

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, the relevance of distance education was further underscored as Philippine HEIs sought to maintain learning continuity amidst lockdowns and community quarantines. The CHED *Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning* (2020) issued at the height of the pandemic refer to "the urgent need to explore other innovative learning modalities that will.... allow customisation of delivery modes responsive to (sic) students' need for access to quality education" (p. 1). The CHED Guidelines (2020) define flexible learning as a pedagogical approach that addresses differences in learner needs and contexts through "the use of digital and non-digital technology and face-to-face or in-person learning, out-of-classroom learning... or a combination of modes of delivery" (p. 2).

Both the ODL Act and the Guidelines on Flexible Learning refer to the imperative to broaden access to quality higher education, consistent with the state's commitment to the protection and promotion of "the right of all citizens to affordable quality education at all levels" (Higher Education Act of 1994, section 2). Higher education is an important driver of economic and social development through poverty reduction and promotion of democratic values. It "leads to better jobs, stimulates economic growth, reduces vulnerability among the marginalised, and breaks patterns of poverty" (Pajayon-Berse, 2019). It can also help promote social cohesion through the development of "scientific" ways of thinking or "the capacity to analyse and understand complex socio-economic and political problems" (Leftwich, 2009, p. 23, quoted in Schweisfurth et al., 2017, p. 2), and social values such as tolerance, fairness, meritocracy, social responsibility, respect for the rule of law, and good governance (Schweisfurth et al., 2017). Higher education has an important role in achieving sustainable development goals, through the development of a "sustainability mindset" which includes "management ethics, entrepreneurship, environmental studies, systems thinking and self-awareness" (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021).

BOL can help improve access to higher education by providing learners flexibility regarding when and where to learn, and by facilitating access to more tools and resources for learning. It can also "optimiz[e] use of limited resources [such as classrooms], making these available to more individuals through proper... management" (Pajayon-Berse, 2019). Furthermore, BOL can stimulate new

pedagogies that can transform learning. However, achieving quality higher education for all with the help of BOL requires a systems approach to building capacity in BOL among Philippine HEIs, as in HE sectors elsewhere. In this chapter, we explore the notion of a BOL *ecosystem*, composed of institutions interacting at different levels as a community of BOL providers in an environment with the resources and support mechanisms necessary for growth.

From ODL to BOL

BOL practice in the Philippines can be traced back to the adoption of open and distance learning (ODL) by several institutions in the 1990s. The Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) claims to have pioneered the open university concept in the country with the establishment of its Open University called Pamantasang Bayan in the 1970s, and its revival in 1990. The University of the Philippines (UP) Los Baños implemented a project called Upgrading Science Teaching Using Distance Instruction (STUDI) in the mid-80s. In 1995, the UP Open University (UPOU) was established as a constituent university of the UP System, with the mandate to offer degree programs through distance education "to democratize access to quality higher education". Some of the other state universities (e.g. Benguet State University, Bicol University, and Central Luzon State University) followed suit and established their own DE units, adopting the nomenclature "open university"; although unlike UPOU they are not full-fledged universities operating autonomously. There are also private ODL institutions such as the Southeast Asia Interdisciplinary Development Institute (SAIDI) Graduate School of Organization Development and the Asian Institute for Distance Education (AIDE).

Until the end of the 1990s, distance education in the Philippines was print-based with occasional tutorial or study sessions held in learning centres. In 2001, UPOU adopted web-based or online distance education as a mode of delivery for some of its courses. Other universities were also taking an interest in e-learning and a national conference on e-learning was held in 2002. The Philippine eLearning Society was established in 2003 with the aim of "promoting substantive content, appropriate

pedagogy, and appropriate use of technology for eLearning, guided by ongoing research activities."

By 2007, UPOU had shifted completely to online DE mode, and within five years (i.e. by 2012) began experimenting with offering its own massive open online courses (MOOCs) in partnership with organisations wanting to expand the reach of their continuing education programs. UPOU adopted the term MODeL, for "massive open distance e-learning" for its MOOC platform (Bandalaria, 2014). The term "open and distance e-learning" (ODeL) was coined by UPOU's administrators at the time to refer to "forms of education provision that use contemporary technologies to enable varied combinations of synchronous and asynchronous communication among learners and educators who are physically separated from one another for part or all of the educational experience" (Alfonso, 2012, n.d.). ODeL is an expansion of the term "open and distance learning" or ODL to include e-learning or online learning methodologies. Its coinage was consistent with the fact that only 17 Philippine higher education institutions were offering DE programs and many other academic institutions were expressing interest in offering courses in online or blended mode (Alfonso, 2014) as evidenced by the number of attendees in the conferences on ODeL that UPOU ran annually.

Still, it was not until the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that Philippine universities really took DE and online learning seriously. Indeed, colleges and universities had no choice but to shift to DE or remote learning. The conventional HEIs pursued a type of remote learning characterised by a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online learning. This is a variant of blended learning (Cleveland-Innes & Wilton, 2018) called blended online learning (Power, 2008). The other two variants of blended learning are the blended block model, which combines blocks of independent online study and intensive f2f sessions, and the classical blended model, which alternates or rotates f2f sessions and asynchronous online learning (Cleveland-Innes & Wilton, 2018). When CHED allowed limited f2f sessions in programs in the medical and allied fields, the health sciences units in UP and other universities in Metro Manila adopted the blended block and classic blended models.

In the transition to a post-pandemic world, blended learning is seen as the better alternative to conventional classroom-based instruction and

distance education. The draft guide to learning delivery modes in UP for academic year 2022–2023 notes that well designed blended learning can improve learning outcomes and provide flexibility for teachers and learners. Specifically, the guide refers to the potential of blended learning to foster learner engagement and active learning, expand opportunities for collaborative learning, enable learning anytime and anywhere, develop independent learning skills, and develop digital skills. The guide also notes that blended learning gives academic institutions greater flexibility in the scheduling of f2f sessions in different courses to avoid crowding on campus, and allows for learning continuity in case of changes in public health alert levels and other disruptions, through a rapid shift to fully remote or online learning. It can also allow academic institutions to plan for more optimal use of campus facilities and more strategic technology infrastructure development and support to ensure access for all learners, especially those with limited means.

The concern for ensuring access to learning for a diverse population of learners, the majority of whom come from low-income families and reside in areas with poor internet connectivity, underpins CHED's choice of the term "flexible learning" as the approach to higher education during and beyond the pandemic. The CHED Guidelines (2020) differentiate levels of technology use in teaching and learning and present three learning modalities for HEIs to consider: "off-line", blended, and "on-line". The Guidelines also suggest that flexible teaching and learning is not a temporary arrangement but a "paradigm shift" underpinned by the need to be "responsive to learners' needs for access to quality education".

A BOL ecosystem

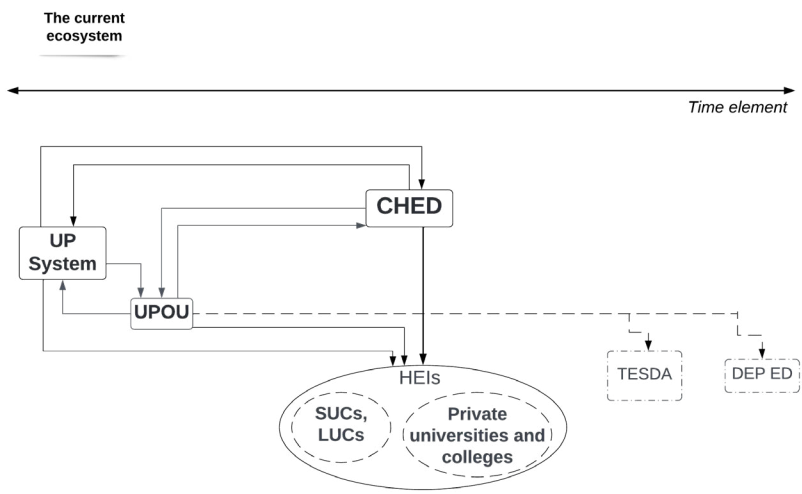
For the realisation of the envisioned paradigm shift (to flexible higher education), it is important to consider the diversity of higher education provision in the Philippines, an archipelago of more than 7,000 islands and 182 ethnolinguistic groups living in a few crowded cities and regional centres, and many geographically isolated rural towns. There are at present close to 2,000 HEIs, including 112 public or state universities and colleges (SUCs) with 421 satellite campuses among them, 121 local universities and colleges, 13 "Other Government

Schools", and 1,729 private colleges and universities. Despite this relatively large number of tertiary education providers, the percentage of college students is small, given the low completion rate in basic and secondary education (only 55% of those who enrolled in Grade 1 finish high school). The Philippine education sector is confronted with the challenge of relevance and sustainability given the high levels of income inequality and poverty among the population, high dropout rates and poor academic achievement, and lack of funding for education, among others. How can BOL help address these systemic problems and how do "differently situated" HEIs come together to "converge and harmonize efforts" as the CHED Guidelines (2020) invite, to make quality higher education accessible to all learners through BOL?

To help address these questions, we use the metaphor of a BOL ecosystem composed of different types of institutions interacting as a community of BOL providers. Like a biological ecosystem, a BOL ecosystem has biotic (teachers, learners, institutions) and abiotic (educational technology, infrastructure) components and nodes interacting in a network of institutions (i.e. public and private colleges and universities and regulatory agencies). Figure 24.1 is a depiction of the current BOL ecosystem in the Philippines.

Figure 24.1

The current ecosystem, CC BY-NC



The key institutions in the current BOL ecosystem are the following:

- The Commission on Higher Education (CHED), which sets minimum standards for programs and institutions of higher learning as provided for in Republic Act No. 7722.
- The University of the Philippines (UP) System, composed of eight constituent universities including UPOU. As the national university, it is mandated to lead in higher education and development by setting academic standards and initiating innovations in teaching, research, and faculty development in various disciplines and professions, and by providing advanced studies to scholars and professionals, especially those who serve on the faculty of state and private colleges and universities (RA 9500).
- The UP Open University (UPOU), which is recognised as the leading provider of DE in the country and mandated by the ODL Act (RA 10650) to contribute to upgrading the quality of the Philippine education system by developing innovative instructional strategies and technologies, and sharing these with other colleges and universities through cooperative programs.
- State universities and colleges (SUCs), which are institutions of higher learning established by the Philippine congress, and are fully subsidised by the national government. At present there are 112 SUCs in the country.
- Private universities and colleges, which are incorporated as non-stock or stock educational corporations (BP Blg 232 as amended by RA 7798). There are currently more than 1,700.
- The Technical Skills Development Authority (TESDA), which aims to provide relevant, efficient, accessible, and high-quality technical education and skills development in support of the development of a globally competitive Filipino middle-level workforce (RA 7796).
- The Department of Education (DepEd) which is charged with "the establishment and maintenance of a complete, adequate, and integrated system of basic education relevant to the

> goals of national development" through policy formulation, implementation, and coordination of basic education programs and projects and supervision of all elementary and secondary education institutions, including alternative learning systems, both public and private (DepEd, p)

There are various relationships or interactions between and among these primary actors in the ecosystem. CHED has a regulatory function over Philippine HEIs, which are classified by source of funding (i.e. as public or private) and by level of regulation (i.e. autonomous HEIs, deregulated HEIs, and regulated HEIs).[1] CHED sets higher education policies, standards and guidelines and ensures compliance through a system of accreditation of educational institutions and their academic offerings. CHED also facilitates access to higher education through scholarship programs and the promotion of flexible learning, and it provides competitive financial grants to these institutions to support teaching and research initiatives. CHED commissioners head the governing boards of all SUCs. In addition, senior academics from different universities who are recognised as leaders in their respective disciplines sit on CHED's technical panels.

UP as the national university occupies a unique position in the HE system. It is considered autonomous from CHED, although the CHED chairperson sits as the chairperson of the UP Board of Regents, and CHED disburses the tertiary education subsidy for UP students. UP provides technical expertise in higher education matters. It also applies for and receives financial grants from CHED for some of its educational and research initiatives. With regard to its interactions with other HEIs, UP has educated many of the country's leaders both in government and

1 Based on CHED's QA-based vertical typology, autonomous HEIs are those that exhibit exceptional institutional quality in terms of accreditation, recognition, certification, and remarkable graduate and research outcome; deregulated HEIs are those that demonstrate good quality through effective internal QA systems and good program outcomes; and regulated HEIs are those that still need to demonstrate good institutional quality and program outcomes. CHED's QA-based horizontal typology classified HEIs into professional institutions (which offer academic programs at the undergraduate and graduate level leading to professional practice), colleges (which develop adults with the skills needed for employment and other related roles); and universities (which provide specialised training in technical and disciplinary areas, with an emphasis on new knowledge generation).

industry, and many administrators and professors in other universities, particularly SUCs, receive their graduate training at UP. Its academic programs are considered the model for those of other institutions. Regarding BOL, given UP's status as well as the relative unfamiliarity of BOL to most educational institutions in the country, it is possible that the latter will find it safer to adopt or mimic (Cardona et al., 2020) the modes of teaching and learning in the national university.

UPOU is a primary node in the BOL ecosystem by virtue of its status as the leading institution in DE and online learning, its role as defined in the ODL Act, and its status as a constituent unit of the national university. The ODL Act stipulates that UPOU should provide technical advice to CHED in its regulatory functions related to distance and transnational education and in capacity building in open and distance learning. It also stipulates that CHED should provide funding to UPOU to support its capacity building programs for HEIs. The ODL Act also states that UPOU should provide technical assistance to TESDA in the delivery of their technical vocational courses via ODL. To fulfil this institutional mandate, UPOU has implemented a wide range of capacity building initiatives, including online and in-person seminars, MOOCs, workshops customised for specific organisations and groups, national and international conferences, and graduate certificate and Master's programs. Some of these initiatives are formal collaborations with CHED for large scale training, while others involve partnerships with specific institutions.

Public and private higher education institutions offer a range of curricular programs in different modes in keeping with their respective institutional mandates. In the post-pandemic context, many conventional institutions may be more likely to implement blended learning with a f2f learning component, while institutions catering to geographically dispersed learners would offer fully online programs with varying proportions of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Some of the more established universities may venture into offering MOOCs to the public, while others will limit their online offerings to students already enrolled in their regular programs or those whom they wish to attract into their programs.

Ecosystem resilience

Mars and Bronstein (2018) argue that in a biological ecosystem:

> not every node is linked to every other node; links may vary in strength and can impart positive, neutral, or negative effects… and… nodes grow and shrink over time; they can be lost, without the ecosystem as a whole necessarily failing. (p. 384)

Similarly, the BOL ecosystem can be seen as evolving with varying levels of interactions and types of collaboration among the different institutions comprising the network. At present, aside from participating in the training programs run by UPOU, SUCs and private HEIs connect with UPOU for benchmarking and research activities. But while these interactions are productive, there is an urgent need to make the BOL ecosystem more robust and resilient.

A robust and resilient ecosystem is better able to adapt to and recover from environmental change; it can withstand or respond to threats while maintaining diversity and important connections or links between members (Holling, 1973; Latham et al., 2021). Applied to the BOL ecosystem, developing resilience means cultivating diversity, vigour and adaptability, and stronger linkages among institutions. It is necessary to have different types of educational institutions (SUCs and private HEIs, conventional universities and distance education universities) offering a range of programs in different modes to diverse learners. And just as an ecosystem's resilience depends on links between and within habitats, partnerships and collaboration between BOL institutions will facilitate exchanges of ideas, practices, and economic and social capital that will strengthen each institution and the entire network.

Under the ODL Act, UPOU can help establish a robust and resilient BOL ecosystem by facilitating the development of zonal centres and nurturing a strong network of BOL leaders and practitioners. Section 13 of the ODL Act (2014) refers to "centers… one each in Metro Manila, Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, and eventually one in each region[2]… that shall take charge of the training of teachers for ODL programs." In the post-pandemic context, these zonal centres would support not only ODL programs but the whole range of BOL. This is the long-term aim

2 The Philippines has 17 regions.

of UPOU's Sustainable Institution Building for Open Learning (SIBOL) initiative, a pilot project under the "Advancing Equity and Access to Higher Education through Open and Distance Learning" project co-funded by the EU ERASMUS+ programme.

The acronym SIBOL is also a Filipino word that means "to sprout" or "to grow". Accordingly, the SIBOL program seeks to cultivate the capacity of academic institutions to plan, manage, and support effective BOL programs, and grow a network of BOL leaders and practitioners. The program has three phases. Phase 1 is a 14-week online training program composed of seven modules on systems for blended, online, and open learning; it combines independent and collaborative learning and features asynchronous and synchronous activities. Phase 2 is a mentoring and network-building program that aims to foster institutional collaboration in the implementation of different BOL initiatives. Active and meaningful participation in these two phases is expected to lead to Phase 3 where zonal centres will emerge to act as nodes of effective BOL practice in their respective regions.

SIBOL differs from UPOU's other capacity building initiatives in its application of a systems approach to fostering effective BOL practice within institutions and across the BOL ecosystem. For one, SIBOL participants are not individual practitioners, but teams of academic administrators tasked with overseeing BOL planning, program implementation, and monitoring and evaluation in their respective institutions (e.g. directors or coordinators of teaching and learning, DE or e-learning centres; coordinators for instructional materials development; systems administrators; students services coordinators; and QA officers). And instead of classroom or course level practice of BOL, the training curriculum focuses on the program and institution level components of BOL implementation: strategic planning, materials development, technology management, faculty development, learner support, and quality assurance.

At the time of writing this chapter, SIBOL was in its early phase. Nevertheless, some insights into cultivating a BOL ecosystem both within institutions and across the higher education sector can be gleaned from this initial stage of the program.

Within academic institutions, an ecosystem approach to BOL necessitates developing skills and capabilities in the following ways:

- Analysing the institutional context — i.e. the institution's mission and the communities it serves as well as national legislation, policies, and guidelines and global developments (e.g. the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals) that provide the climate and weather conditions for BOL, and the available resources for BOL.
- Fostering and strengthening coordination among units in charge of different BOL subsystems.
- Calibrating the resources and effort needed for each BOL subsystem to develop, and the strategy for managing change within the institution.
- Anticipating the internal and external factors that may weaken the institution's BOL system and setting up healthy BOL subsystems that can keep the entire system from withering.

The issues and concerns articulated by the participants in SIBOL phase 1 show that planning for BOL is a highly complex process even where institutions have some experience of implementing BOL and willingness to institutionalise BOL. Aside from clear policies and adequate systems, BOL requires a collective rethinking of institutional thrusts and critical reflection on institutional culture and values and how these can inform as well as undermine the BOL strategy. Adopting a new instructional model is fraught with "daunting difficulties like change management" (as one participant put it), which require systems thinking and a long-term commitment to building trust among members of the institution before transformational outcomes (Lammert et al., 2018) can be achieved.

Across the higher education sector, an ecosystem approach to BOL calls for the following:

- Careful analysis of institutional backgrounds and capacities (i.e. organisational setup, human and technical resources, existing partnerships, and capacity building initiatives implemented) and levels of engagement in BOL based on institutional setups.
- Recognising the diversity of institutions and positioning each in a spectrum in terms of the assistance they need in

contextualising BOL frameworks and approaches and in stimulating interactions between institutions.

- Intentional design to deepen engagement, encourage interaction between institutions, and provide feedback; and
- Addressing environmental factors that impede growth, including a weak information technology (IT) infrastructure, policy gaps and tensions, lack of funding, and low levels of digital literacy, among others.

Infrastructure, including power supply, hardware (devices) and software, and connectivity, is a critical component of the environment for BOL in the Philippines. As the country's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, affordable as well as "reliable internet connectivity remains a challenge in many cities and municipalities across the country" (U.S. Embassy Manila, 2022, n.p.). In the Digital Quality of Life Index 2022, the Philippines ranked 98th out of 117 countries in internet affordability, 45th in internet quality[3] and 61st in mobile internet speed (Tan, 2022). These infrastructural challenges are beyond the control of the higher education sector and CHED (2020) has instead articulated a framework for flexible learning that includes a range of delivery modes, "depending on the levels of technology, availability of devices, internet connectivity, level of digital literacy, and approaches" to address "learners' unique needs". However, while the framework espouses a learner-centred perspective, the ability of HEIs to implement different learning delivery modes is circumscribed not only by infrastructural issues but also pressure from politicians, who approve the budget for higher education, to return to "100%" face-to-face classes (Fernandez, 2022).

3 Internet affordability is measured in terms of how much a 1 gigabyte (GB) mobile internet package costs in terms of amount of work measured in minutes. In the Philippines, a 1 GB package, which is roughly how much data is needed for a one-hour synchronous meeting or class session over Zoom, costs "4 minutes and 51 seconds of work per month in the Philippines, 59 times more than the 5 seconds of work needed to buy a 1 GB package in Israel, which has the most affordable mobile Internet in the world, based on the index" (Tan, 2022).

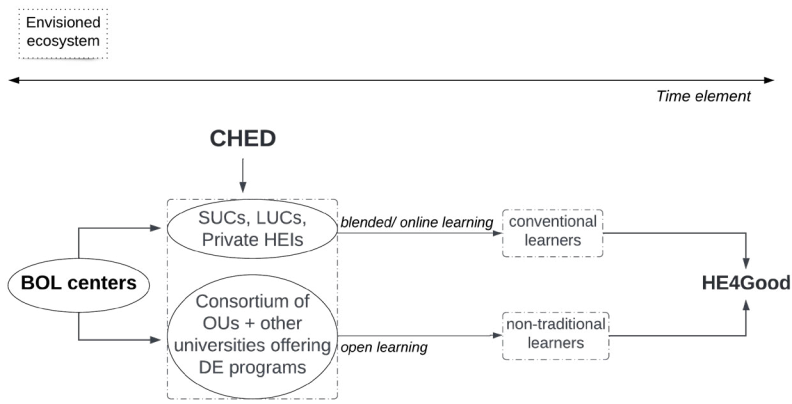
Concluding note

There is a long way to go in building a robust BOL ecosystem in Philippine higher education. And SIBOL is only one program among a host of interventions that are needed for establishing this ecosystem. What may be noted at this point is the value of an ecosystem perspective in adopting blended, online, and open learning as a strategy for providing quality higher education for all in the Philippines.

In the envisioned BOL ecosystem that SIBOL hopes to help cultivate (see Figure 24.2), the BOL centres mentor and support different types of academic institutions and associations or consortia of HEIs who are catering to different types of learners, including non-traditional learners and marginalised learners with little to no access to a post-secondary education, using various learning modalities. The diversity of institutions and the relationships among them (including collaborations and exchanges as well as healthy competition) would make individual members and the BOL ecosystem more responsive, adaptable, and productive (Hammer et al., 2018). In this robust and resilient ecosystem, quality higher education for all is possible.

Figure 24.2

The BOL ecosystem, CC BY-NC.



While this chapter focuses on the Philippines, we have aimed to illustrate how adopting an ecosystems perspective prompts us to think

about how a healthy BOL ecosystem might be fostered. While natural ecosystems develop organically, building an education ecosystem is more intentional, involving a process of design (of capacity building programs, for example). Having an ecosystems perspective, however, means "analyzing how an educational ecology is functioning: how it is achieving what it achieves; how its internal processes generate its outcomes" (Ellis & Goodyear, 2019, p. 218), and adapting the approach through to development. The approach to be taken needs not only to be sensitive to internal dynamics and environmental factors promoting as well as limiting growth, but also developmental, collaborative, restorative, and reflexive, allowing individual members and the entire ecosystem to flourish.

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