

## Policy Brief

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# Higher education and leadership for development in the Philippines

### Key messages

- Higher education policy and practice should look beyond a focus on technical skills and knowledge to consider the important capacities that extra-curricular activities provide, including leadership skills.
- The networks students form during higher education, including with people from diverse backgrounds outside their usual circles of acquaintance, can be important in later efforts to bring about social change. They have enabled individuals to draw on connections across many sectors to gain broad support for complex reforms.
- To make access to higher education in the Philippines more equitable, initiatives are needed to widen the participation of disadvantaged students in the most prestigious universities, and to ensure quality across the system beyond 'elite' institutions.

This brief is based on research in the Philippines that explored the role of higher education in the emergence of leaders who promote development.

The study focused on leaders of three reforms or movements: the Public Sector Procurement Reform Act of 2003, which aimed to eradicate opportunities for corruption and avoid the waste of public resources; the Mindanao Electoral Reform (2012-present) and the related Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (2014-2016); and the Gawad Kalinga social movement promoting poverty reduction, Filipino identity and participatory democracy (1995-present). It is part of a series of country case studies on reform leadership and higher education being carried out through the Developmental Leadership Program.



The Philippines study involved an historical-political analysis and 53 interviews with key actors in the reforms/movements. The interviews focused on these leaders' involvement in the movements, their educational experiences (especially of higher education), and how these were related.

### Findings

Higher education supported interviewees' involvement in leading reform in three main areas:

- providing technical knowledge and skills;
- developing attitudes and values that promote public service; and
- providing opportunities to develop networks and exercise leadership.

Their tertiary qualifications gave them expertise and status. Yet their desire to use this knowledge *for reform* often arose from their experience of social problems before, during or after higher education. To tackle such problems, interviewees drew on their experience of student activism and their knowledge of how to use networks.

All the interviewees saw their education as having significantly helped them to become a leader. But they believed **extra-curricular activities** played a much larger role in that than the formal curriculum and teaching. The extra-curricular activities included leading student councils, running student newspapers, and getting involved in



political movements and in work with disadvantaged or workers' groups. These provided valuable political leadership skills, raised interviewees' awareness of social and political issues, and enabled them to discuss varied ideas about development and reform.

A further finding was that educational experiences are important but not sufficient for attaining leadership roles, especially given the close links in the Philippines between family, wealth, and membership of political elites. Navigating the system requires talent, determination and opportunity.

For many interviewees, higher education was their first opportunity to mix with varied people, including fellow students of the opposite sex and from diverse religious and socio-economic backgrounds from different parts of the Philippines. This helped them to create new kinds of **networks** ('bridging capital').

The networks formed during higher education proved important in interviewees' later reform efforts – in gaining allies, working with a wide range of individuals and groups across sectors in complex reforms, and dealing with potential adversaries.

When asked for their recommendations, the interviewees advised that higher education that supports the Philippines' development as a peaceful, unified and prosperous nation will need to provide:

- equal opportunities, regardless of class, gender, ethnicity or religion;
- access to a mix of people and ideas; and
- a broad curriculum.

## Policy and practice implications

Findings highlight that the value of higher education goes beyond its formal teaching and learning functions. Higher education also gives students opportunities to:

- gain skills and insights through extra-curricular activities;
- develop networks with a wide range of people outside their usual circles of acquaintance;
- engage in advocacy on social issues.

In addition, it creates a base for research that informs government policy. All of these functions need to be promoted.

To develop the diversity of their student bodies, higher education institutions need **equitable admissions and tuition fee policies**. It is important to provide more opportunities in the Philippines' elite educational institutions to those who cannot afford tuition fees, in both higher education and its earlier feeder stages. This could involve scholarships, which would mean considering how to award these based on merit, and at what stage of education. Educational disadvantage begins early in life and needs to be disrupted early.

**Quality throughout the higher education system** is important. This helps ensure that it is not just graduates of elite institutions who go on to hold positions of power. Quality higher education helps support democracy through a well-educated population ready to participate in civic life and hold officials to account. Broadening access to higher education by making more places available at the bottom of the educational hierarchy will not be sufficient.

**Independent, creative and critical thinking** are at the heart of development. Yet interviewees noted the emphasis on rote learning and the avoidance of critical thinking in all stages of their education, which they found unhelpful. A starting point for transforming teaching so that it encourages more critical and creative thinking is to provide higher education teachers and leaders themselves with more experience of this kind of teaching, as well as with training in how to implement it.

Higher education institutions in the Philippines have played important roles in supporting democracy. They could **increase their contributions to society** by:

- prioritising poverty reduction and other development issues in research and teaching; and
- collaborating more with government, civil society and the private sector in outreach activities.

As an example of collaboration with government, a tenure system that supports shifts between university and government roles has already contributed to the quality of the government workforce, and has enabled scholars to incorporate experience in government into their research and teaching once they return to university.

This brief is based on the DLP research paper *Developmental Leadership in the Philippines: Educational Experiences, Institutions and Networks* by Michele Schweisfurth, Lynn Davies, Lorraine Pe Symaco and Oscar Valiente with Chelsea Robles. See [dlprog.org/publications.php](http://dlprog.org/publications.php)

Lead author **Michele Schweisfurth** is Professor of Comparative and International Education and Co-Director of the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change at the University of Glasgow, UK.

Images: University students (Janine/Flickr); a student activist (Victor Villanueva/Flickr).

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The Developmental Leadership Program  
International Development Department  
School of Government and Society  
College of Social Sciences  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham B15 2TT, UK  
[info@dlprog.org](mailto:info@dlprog.org)

[www.dlprog.org](http://www.dlprog.org)