

AN EXPLORATION OF THE SUSTAINABILITY OF SELECTED PRIVATE SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of schools; however, some remained operational. The objective of this research was to determine how private HEIs were able to sustain their operation at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a Multiple Case Study design, 17 administrators, 8 faculty members, and 4 non-teaching personnel from three schools that remained operational during the pandemic were purposively selected based on their knowledge of the operation of their schools as well as their availability at the time of the study which was June to August of 2021. The key informants were interviewed, and their responses were organized using Microsoft Excel. Using thematic analysis, the study revealed the following strategies schools employed to sustain their operation: retained and provided support to their personnel; implemented cost containment measures; instituted flexible working arrangement; adapted the mode of instructions and delivery of services according to students' need; employed flexible learning strategies; implemented virtual classes; provided spiritual and psychological support; maintained physical and digital environments; called for administrators and personnel to be responsive to the COVID-19 situation and built stronger relationship amongst the different people of the schools. The study also pointed out that perceptive administrators, faculty, and staff who were ready to embrace change are critical elements to the survival of schools. The study concludes that to survive, schools should look beyond the attainment of excellence and exercise empathy and come up with innovative strategies to attract students.

Keywords: *Higher Education Institutions, private schools sustainability, COVID-19*



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INTRODUCTION

The spread of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) had severely threatened public health consequently, the Philippine government instituted containment and mitigation measures to curb the spread of the virus. One of the strategies undertaken was the imposition of varied types of community quarantines which led to the closures of schools, colleges, and universities. During the initial imposition of Community Quarantine, then President Rodrigo Duterte suspended physical classes at all levels in Metro Manila from March 10, 2020, onwards to prevent the possible massive transmission of the virus through the children (Lopez, 2020), who was tagged as super-spreaders of COVID-19 (Chalmers, 2020). The suspension of face-to-face classes which was initially intended for a few weeks continued up to SY 2021-2022. The physical closure of schools due to the pandemic was a global phenomenon, with over 1.2 billion children in 186 countries stopping attending classes (Li & Lalani, 2020).

The changes brought about by COVID-19 had "created the largest disruption to the education system in history" (United Nations, 2020, p. 2). The closures of schools also resulted in the stoppage of essential services such as feeding programs and outreach services which affected not only children but communities as well (UN, 2020). An Australian study on the impact of COVID-19 on tertiary education concludes that the pandemic could result in a decrease in the following: 1) revenue, 2) enrolment of international students and 3) the number of full-time employees (Thatcher, 2020), hence educational institutions must navigate through significant financial challenges as they provide educational services during COVID -19.

In the Philippines, 748 out of 14, 435 private schools suspended their operation for the school year 2020-2021 affecting 3,233 teachers and 40,345 learners (Mateo, 2020). This is due to low enrolment and the high cost of operation of using a blended learning strategy. The same situation is seen among tertiary schools (Jara, 2020). With the closure of schools, the retrenchment or layoff of private school teachers became inevitable (Fermin, 2020). Students at private schools either transferred to public schools or stopped schooling waiting for the end of the pandemic. Schools must consider the difficulties of students who opted to remain enrolled in their schools and provide measures to alleviate their difficulties, one of which is internet connectivity which is also a problem for school personnel (Asio et al., 2021).

Schools that continued operations must work around the crisis and adapt teaching strategies that do not require face-to-face interaction such as e-learning where teaching is done remotely and on digital platforms. In continuing their operations, schools must hurdle several considerations such as amelioration of risks, development of communication plans, adherence to health requirements for both

students and teachers, and cost considerations (Gross, 2020). Asio and Bayucca (2021, p. 24) enumerated the following problems schools must contend with in providing distance learning, namely, “inadequate learning materials, unavailability of online modality facilities, insufficient funds to support alternative delivery modes and low capacity to print and distribute learning materials.”

In terms of cost considerations, the questions to be addressed by schools were; Is the benefit of continuing schools' operation during the pandemic exceed the cost or vice versa? Can schools be sustainable during the COVID-19 pandemic? For answers, one may consider the closure of a 107-year-old school in the Philippines. In retrospect, if a 107-year-old school was forced to close, how about the other schools which were much younger?

Against this backdrop, this paper explored how three sectarian schools were able to sustain their operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Answers were sought for the following question: What are the different strategies employed by the schools to sustain their operations along the following areas: a) people, b) educational services, c) environment, and d) organizational culture? The knowledge generated from the study may assists not only schools but as well as key government agencies on how these institutions may be proactive in addressing challenges of the current and future pandemics.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The following documents became instrumental in the conceptualization of the guiding framework of the study, namely, the Whole School Sustainability Framework which was developed by the Center for Green Schools (Barr et al., 2014), which has three components, organizational culture, physical space, and educational program, the Sustainability Framework of Adidas (Apparel Resources News-Desk, 2014) which indicates that the sustainability of an organization is the function of the people, the product, the environment and the connectedness of the organization with the community. In the context of COVID-19, a checklist developed by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020) was used as a guide in the assessment of the sustainability of schools. Synthesis of these materials led to the formulation of Figure 1 below.

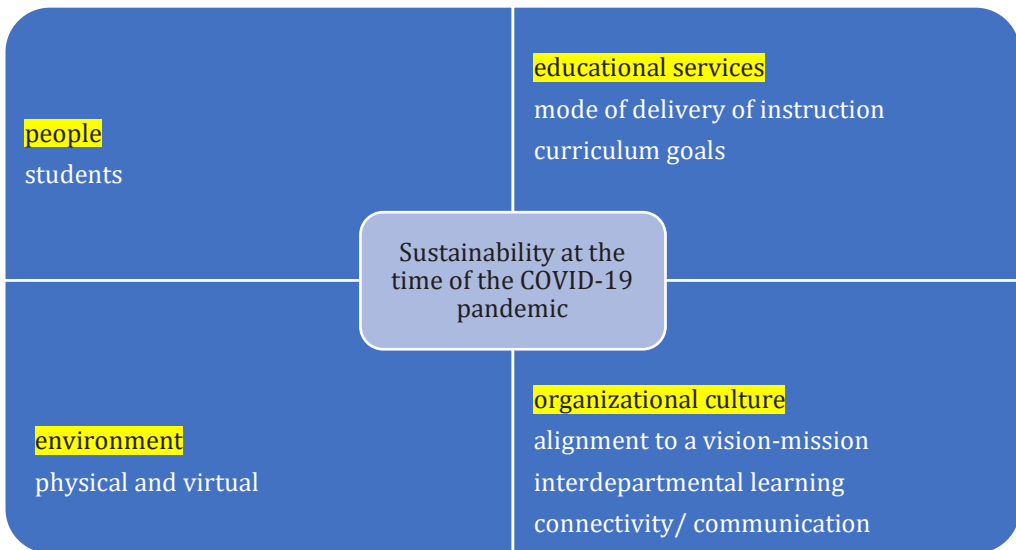
Figure 1*Sustainability in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Figure 1 showed that the sustainability of the school may be determined through the following parameters: a) people: enabling and maximizing (Gonzalez, 2019) the pool of talents of the University during the COVID-19 pandemic without excluding any sector of the institutions, this also includes assessing how teachers are supported during the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020); b) educational services: the school was able to continue the teaching and learning process given the limitation on face-to-face interaction (CMO No. 4, s 2020) by using a creative and innovative approach (Apparel Resources News-Desk, 2014). Aside from people and educational services, the sustainability of the environment is also considered which means that the physical and the virtual environments actively engage (Gonzalez, 2019) the students as well as other stakeholders to participate in the learning process. There exists an efficient system that enhances the participation of all the stakeholders without jeopardizing their health. The last dimension considered was the organizational culture which was based on the Whole School Sustainability Paradigm (Barr al., 2014) wherein the organizational culture includes the following: alignment of the school activities during the pandemic with the school's vision-mission; pandemic initiatives are implemented across disciplines and departments, and an enabling mechanism that sustains connectivity and communication among the different stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study utilized the Multiple Case Study design on three (3) private sectarian higher education institutions. A three-case study according to Brink (2018) is sufficient to note down similarities and differences of a phenomenon, hence may permit a holistic description of the event. The method allows the researcher to gain a rich and textured description of the event/phenomenon/case being studied. In using this method, the research did not intend to generalize the behavior of schools that continued with their operation during the pandemic but rather to understand how they managed to stay afloat during the pandemic. The experiences of the three schools became the lens that led to understanding the experiences of other similar schools that survive the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Participants

The inclusion criteria in the selection of the schools were as follows: 1) private school; 2) sectarian; 3) with Basic Education and undergraduate degree programs; and more importantly 4) continued with their operation for School Year 2019-2020 onwards. Two are in the National Capital Region while one is in the Cordillera Region. The three schools are Christian schools. Key informants from three sectarian private schools with at least Basic Education and undergraduate programs were enjoined to participate in the research. The key informants (KI) were the following: 1) top administrators such as the school president, vice presidents, finance officers, unit heads, and department heads; 2) faculty who have been with the school for the last three years; and 3) non-teaching personnel who have been employed for a minimum of three years. Table 1 shows the profile of the key informants.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants from Three Schools

Parameters	School X	School Y	School Z
Position			
Administrator	5	3	9
Faculty	5	1	2
Non-teaching Personnel	2	1	1
Sex			
Male	4	2	7
Female	7	3	5
Years of Working Experience in Current School			
3 to 7 years	4	3	5
8 to 12 years	2	1	1
13 to 17 years	1		2
18 to 22 years		1	3
23 to 27 years	3		
28 and more	1		1
no answer	1		
Total	12	5	12

For School X and Z, 12 personnel were interviewed per school, while only five (5) were interviewed in School Y which requested a face-to-face interview, thus only those who were reporting for work at the time of the study were interviewed. The limited number of participants is deemed sufficient when the issue does not require a certain degree of certainty (Yin, 2003) and is only intended to explore the phenomenon, which is the intention of this research.

Data Gathering Procedure

The case study entailed the collection of data from multiple sources. With the limitation of face-to-face interaction in schools, the researchers conducted a face-to-face interview with the participants of School X and a virtual interview for the participants of Schools Y and Z using Google Meet. Electronic mail, Messenger, and SMS were also used for preliminary and post-data gathering. The researchers were the primary data collectors who interviewed the participants using semi-structured open-ended questions. The prepared questions set the tone of the interview and were reinforced by follow-up questions as the interview progresses. For the face-to-face interview and the virtual interview, permission was sought to record the proceedings. Each interview took place for an average of one hour to one hour and fifteen minutes per participant. The research as stipulated in the grant had to take

place for three months as such data collection of the three schools was done during June, July until mid-August of 2021.

Data Analysis

All interviews of the participants were audio-taped and verbatimly transcribed. The interviews were processed using Microsoft Excel to code, categorize, and compare within and across data. Meyer and Avery (2009) posited that Microsoft Excel has features that allow the preparation, analysis, and presentation of data. The interviews were read and reread until a clear description of how the schools operated during COVID-19 became apparent. The researchers came up with a case description of each school which was forwarded to the gatekeeper who is the head of each institution. The school heads were requested to affirm the case description to ensure the truthfulness and faithfulness of the narratives. An expert in qualitative research from the home University of the researchers was enjoined to validate the findings of the research using the 15-point checklist criteria developed by Braun and Clarke (2013).

Ethical Consideration

The research was cleared by the TUA-IERC for ethics clearance. Following the ethical principle of research, the Informed Consent of the participants was verbally obtained. All the participants were anonymized, and the data gathered were kept confidential throughout the research process. The recordings and transcriptions were kept by the researchers for six months after their completion.

Limitations of the Study

The informants were limited to administrators, faculty, and staff who were accessible and available at the time of the interview. No students and parents were included in the study due to their unavailability. The participants were limited to those identified by the gatekeepers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three private schools which continued with their operation from March 2020 up to June 2021 were non-profit and non-stock institutions that were not paying the proprietary tax by Section 30 of the Tax Code of the Philippines. The non-payment of tax is a plus factor for the sustenance of the schools; however, it is not enough to assume that sectarian schools have no financial worries at the time of COVID-19. Personnel of the three schools shared that they were caught flat-footed by the closure of schools and were apprehensive about how they will be able to resume their work.

However, all three schools continued with their operation the best way they could during the initial months of COVID-19. Using the framework presented earlier, here are the ways and means which enabled the three schools to survive COVID-19.

Sustainability of Schools in terms of People

Sullivan (2013) highlighted the importance of human resources with the following statement, *“Employees are often the highest single expense item as well as the most powerful factors influencing a business’s success”*. With this, the three schools adapted strategies that worked two ways, one to sustain their people and two to ensure the viability of the school. An administrator of School Z pointed out that the bulk of the income of the school is used to cover the salaries and benefits of the personnel but since the management of the three schools was bent on keeping their workforce and at the same time keeping the business going, they must contend with the financial challenges of running their schools during the pandemic.

Retention of the Workforce

One of the critical resources in the continued operation of schools is their human capital consisting of the administrators, faculty, and non-teaching personnel. To ensure that the schools would have the services of skilled and loyal people, Schools X, Y, and Z retained all their employees amidst the threat of a decrease in revenues because of the decline in enrollment. The two schools X and Z reported decreased enrollment and with the decrease in enrollment, there was a decrease in revenue. The administrators of the three schools pointed out that they made it their priority not to lay off any of their personnel due to COVID-19. The initial agenda of the Technical Working Committee of School X was to plan and implement strategies geared towards retaining all its employees with no reduction in remuneration. The retention of its employees is critical to the smooth operation of an organization. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] in 2020 stated that holding on to the workers is done to ensure the continued operation of an enterprise without having to go through the process of hiring and training new employees. In retaining all their personnel whose talents and skills have already been honed, the schools were ensuring that their operation will proceed efficaciously during and even after COVID-19. With their posts secured, the workers were able to concentrate on addressing the challenges of the government-imposed restrictions on the operation of their schools. The schools retained their skilled employees knowing fully well that the COVID-19 scenario requires new skills which the workforce had to learn and relearn to enable them to deliver the quality of services they have been doing during the pre-pandemic times.

Support from the Management

Wei Tian, Codery, and Gamble (2016) cited in their study that based on the Social Exchange Theory of Max Weber, employees who feel the support and empathy of their supervisors, will in all probability reciprocate by doing good in their work, be willing to carry out task important to the sustenance of the organization and demonstrate commitment and loyalty to the institutions (Choi, 2019). The school personnel attested that their schools have provided support to their employees more specifically during the initial months of COVID-19. Some support given is as follows: School X employees received food packs and cellphone loads for communication allowance, while School Y and Z employees were given hazard pay and gadget support. All the employees of the three schools received their customary benefits such as 13th-month pay and Christmas bonus. School Z was able to give the quarterly rice allowance while School X gave “*Ayuda*” [assistance] of PhP 5,000.00 to employees who were asked to be on forced leave during the early months of COVID-19. School Y and Z employees who need to work on-site, thus, have a relatively high chance of contracting COVID-19 were provided with monetary assistance amounting to PhP 10,000.00 for testing and medicines. Since working on-site was required for some of the employees, the three schools provided lodging to those who opted to stay on-site and a mode of transportation to those who commute to and from the school. With the assurance that the school officials were “watching their back”, the employees willingly carried out the different tasks intended to ensure the operation of the academic institutions during the COVID 19-which entailed learning and relearning new skills and performing new work procedures as well as reporting on re-structured work schedules. Personnel capital development should be the leading priority of an organization.

Implemented Cost-containment Measures in terms of Personnel Services

To strike a balance between ensuring the employability of the employees and the financial stability of the institutions, cost-containment strategies were implemented by the two schools, X and Z. These were needed to cope with the unexpected expenses brought about by the observance of health protocols and application of new modes of teaching as well as to cope with the decrease in revenues. The foremost measure was the reduction of expenses, seen as the logical way to save money for the organization. Furthermore, nearly all private education institutions experienced a strong decline in the number of students compared to the enrollees before the pandemic where parents were forced to transfer their children to public schools due to financial shortcomings (Ancheta, 2020). Delmo and Morales (2022) stated that private schools came up with various strategies to support financial development and revenue. School X

withheld the positional pay of its administrative officers and required the staff to go on forced leave for two months which covered the short-term period or “summer classes” of SY 2019 to 2020. School Z restructured the work schedule to four (4) days in a week with one day off or forced leave of at least 20 days in two months by the non-teaching personnel. There were personnel such as the school nurses who reported only twice a week. These personnel were paid only on the days they reported for work. Another cost-saving measure was to reduce the benefits of the employees such as incentives and bonuses which were given during pre-pandemic. This measure was temporary until such time that the financial capability of the schools become stable. Miller (2020) reported on the Society for Human Resource Management website that to address the loss in revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic, employers reduced the salary of staff and hourly rates of faculty.

Taking in More Adjunct Faculty

Anthony et al. (2020) noted that with the economic crisis the number of full-time faculty members might decrease while the number of adjuncts might increase. The hiring of adjunct faculty may be seen as a cost-saving measure by some higher education institutions. This is likely to happen given that the adjunct faculty members have limited or no fringe benefits such as health care or retirement benefits and they are only assigned courses from semester to semester. Although there is a difference in remuneration the adjuncts are receiving compared with full-time faculty, they teach just like the full-time professors. Chen et al. (2021) put forward two issues with the hiring of adjunct faculty, 1) the insecurity of the job may motivate the faculty to excel in their job to be hired again, or 2) the instructors may lower the difficulty of the course content to earn high students’ evaluation, thereby increasing their chance of being re-hired after the term. However, Landrum (2009) learned that there is no significant difference in the performance of full-time and part-time faculty. This implies that part-time faculty may be as good as full-time faculty in teaching if not better. But one thing is sure, part-time faculty are paid less than full-time faculty.

The Head of School Y pointed out that having more adjunct faculty than full-time made the expenses for human resources lesser not only during the pandemic but even before the pandemic. School Y has 32 regular faculty in contrast to 260 part-timers, who were mostly part of the extension program, which at the time of the study is the most profitable program of School Y. To ensure that the adjunct faculty will deliver quality education, The President of School Y has instituted a screening process to select who will be renewed or retained. He explained that each adjunct faculty would have to submit his/her

grades, proofs of teaching, and completed integrated syllabi. Those who were unable to submit these requirements were not given teaching loads. With or without COVID-19, school heads when choosing between paying full salary plus benefit against paying per subject and with no benefits, the school heads will choose the latter, the adjuncts are likely to be disposed towards ensuring that the students learn from the course (Anthony et al., 2020).

Flexible Working Arrangement

The three schools enforced Flexible Work Arrangements for their employees compliant with the IATF-EID (Inter-agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease) and DOLE (Department of Labor and Employment) directives. The Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA) is seen as a better option than the retrenchment of employees or closure of the establishment (DOLE, 2020). Educational institutions implemented different work arrangements based on needs which vary depending on the circumstances (Mariano, 2022; UNICEF, 2020). School Z's decision for a flexible working arrangement (FWA) for its personnel depended on 1) the classification of community quarantine at a given time and b) the services needed to be accomplished by the University. In the Memorandum issued by the School Z President dated January 21, 2021, with NCR under General Community Quarantine (GCQ), administrators and non-teaching personnel were required to render two-day work on-site from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm while faculty members remained in a work-from-home setup. However, with the imposition of stricter lockdown afterward, the School Z President issued a Memorandum dated March 19, 2021, which suspended all work on-site arrangements. Later with the easing of restrictions, School Z resumed the on-site reporting of the personnel. Two components were required for a work-from-home (WFH) arrangement: 1) a freely accessible space and 2) available technology (Cornu, et al., 2021). Between the two, ICT availability was the main predictor of the WFH arrangement. School Z faculty worked from home since they have available and accessible digital resources in their homes while some faculty members of School Y reported on-site due to the lack of hardware and internet connectivity in their homes. Aside from that, another factor to consider is the nature of the work of the employee. One informant from School X commented that although they tried to carry out all school transactions online, still some activities cannot be done online such as the release of student records. She said, "*Parang nakakatakot kaming mag-send ng academic records sa internet.* (We are fearful of sending academic records on the internet.) Despite having the hardware, if the work requires face-to-face interaction or access to hard copies of records, then the personnel had to report on-site. For

on-site reporting, schools put in place measures to protect the personnel from COVID-19 infection. For work-on-site, Schools X and Z reduced the number of reporting days as well as the length of time spent in the workplace. Although the work arrangement is flexible, the arrangement is not supported by the common definition of flexible working arrangement which is allowing the workers to choose when and where they work as they make use of their ICT gadgets or tools (Cornu, 2021). For the three schools, the management decided the who, the when, and the where of Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA). In this context, the FWA arrangement during the pandemic was not able to give the employees control over their work, content, time, location, and mode of communication (Brummelhuis et al. in Cornu et al., 2021). The FWA of the schools was not intended to promote the autonomy of the personnel but to keep them safe from infection and at the same time ensured the continued operation of the schools. The personnel have no choice but to comply with the FWA instituted by the school. Hering (2020) reported that if leaders decide on the flexibility scheme, then it may be construed as favoritism or bias. Ideally, FWA applies to all regardless of needs. In an FWA, there is a need to investigate the well-being of the employee physically, emotionally, financially, and socially thus employers' support is critical to building and sustaining workforce resilience (Atiku et al., 2020). Support of administrators of Schools X, Y, and Z is deemed to motivate the faculty to work amidst the stress and challenges of COVID-19. When was the administrator asked until when will their schools provide COVID-19 related-support to their personnel working on-site and off-site? One administrator responded, *"Until there are students"*.

Sustainability of Students

Schools need students with or without the pandemic as such schools X, Y, and Z focused on retaining old and recruiting new enrollees and with COVID-19, the task was daunting as evidenced by the decrease in enrolment in private schools by 50% (Bueno & Pacis, 2020) for SY 2020-2021. Each school implemented measures that ensured that there would be students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ensured that the Mode of Instruction and Delivery of Services Catered to Students' Needs

Given that not all students had the gadgets or access to a strong internet connection, School X gave the students the option to choose the best mode of instruction either the use of physical modules or the use of e-modules or attending online classes. Class requirements were reduced; counseling services were accessible to the students; submission dates of student activities were extended and other activities that would make it easy for the students to

transact with the school were implemented. For School X, the students should feel the empathy of their teachers. Perrault and Levesque (2012) pointed out that empathy means putting oneself into the shoes of the students to better understand their needs. The premise is that if the students feel that the school cares for them, then most likely they will stay with the school. School X wants to make its students feel cared for, a sentiment that emerged from the discourses of its personnel. One of the Deans shared that School X is surrounded by bigger schools, despite this, students came to them not only because School X charged the lowest tuition fee in the area, or the school has a good track record in the nursing board exam but because the students see School X as "family". The school personnel were serious about maintaining this image for their students. Keown et al., (2020, p. 403) echo the need for schools to provide an empathetic environment to their students: "Each school should consider their unique culture and work collaboratively with students, teachers, staff, administrators, families, and the community to establish a positive, caring atmosphere where optimal learning can occur." School Y implemented an aggressive graduate program that aimed to bring in students from different parts of the country as well as outside the country. The EPTE [not its real title] which is a combination of an extension program and transnational education is School Y's answer to its historically decreasing enrolment. School Y offers programs that cater to local students who are already working or those aiming for higher degrees, as well as international students. Wilkin and Juusola (2018) cited that one of the benefits of transnational education is the expansion of the number of students increasing revenue. Tafford and Taylor (2016) describe transnational education as a plan of action for HEIs that intended to position themselves in the global market. It is intended to cover different activities that include the recruitment of students; mobility of the staff; development of an international curriculum. Simply put, the EPTE is intended to increase the enrolment of both local and international students. At the time of the interview, School Y is at a stage where there is a restructuring of its organizational set-up towards creating a management system solely for its digital programs. Stafford and Taylor (2016) advocate the development of strong institutional management propelled by the growing complexity of the environment which may support School Y's strategy. School Z, on the other hand, is focused on strengthening its remote learning mechanism and ensuring that the students can cope with the changes in the delivery of education. School Z promotes quality education combined with care for its students. Hopefully, these two would bring in students. One innovation to showcase School Z's drive for excellence is seen in its student recruitment strategy called the School Discuss program [not the real title of the program], a marketing strategy through social media. A Series of webinars on different topics were conducted and streamlined

in the different Facebook accounts of the University. Lansigan et al, (2016) found out that social media served as a popular and effective marketer, although, the medium has a minimal effect in persuading respondents to enroll. Schools, specifically private institutions, create their strategy to survive COVID-19 (Moraes et al., 2021). The planning and implementation of strategies are dependent on what schools perceived to be the best way to attract students. School Z aimed to attract students with its reputation of excellence, competence, and responsiveness to their needs as well as the community. To achieve this, administrators strive to improve the delivery of school services through constant monitoring of teachers' performance and listening to the voices of the students. These, plus the aggressive use of social media to bring School Z to the consciousness of the public became the school's main strategy to increase its enrolment. Usuh et al. (2019) pointed out that almost all schools are keen on presenting a positive image to the community and the use of electronic media may play a significant role in attracting students to enroll. The schools' recruitment strategies are anchored on how the schools' identity embodies the ideals and expectations of their current and prospective students. School X puts forward an image of empathy, School Y internationalization, and School Z competence. Another key in the sustainability of the student is communication, the teachers were tasked to build and maintain an open line of communication with the students by all possible means, be it physical such as the use of courier services or digital through the internet or mobile services. The importance of communication between the students and the school was highlighted by Myung et al., (2020) when they recommended that students should have ongoing and reliable contact with the school not only about their learnings but as well as their general well-being.

Sustainability of Educational Services

Modular approach in flexible learning

One way of facilitating the teaching-learning process is using modules which became a necessity with the onset of COVID-19. School X initially used physical modules which were either picked up or delivered to drop-off points in an area that was convenient for the student. However, one of the administrators of School X mentioned that due to the difficulty of picking up the printed copies, especially during the hard lockdown, the students requested to have them uploaded online for easier and faster access. For students who have a poor internet connection, physical copies were given. The unstable and inefficient internet connectivity paired with erratic power interruptions in various areas of the country often resulted in the inability of students to access online

learning materials (Camara et al., 2021). The use of both the e-module and physical module helped the school address the needs of its students. Dayagbil et al. (2021) observed that students were given options concerning the pace, location, and mode of learning that could apply to the learners. Unlike School X, Schools Y and Z maximized the use of e-modules in their e-learning systems. They embedded and uploaded course modules in the Learning Management System (LMS) used by the schools. Schools Y and Z have their respective e-learning portals such as Bluebook and TLC. E-learning is an effective learning avenue (Nugent et al., 2016) and enhances critical and problem-solving skills (Pastushkova et.al., 2019) and at the same time resolves the limitations brought about by the COVID-19 quarantine. Overall, both the printed and the e-module played a vital role in the delivery of lessons to students whose learning ability varies. Modules are the most flexible modality of learning for diverse learners (Hess, 2020).

Virtual Classes in Replacement of Traditional Face-to-Face

The establishment of various online platforms in schools and universities had been widely embraced to enhance access and promote flexibility for distance learning. This was also utilized by higher education institutions to promote independent learning among their students (Seeletso & Letseka, 2020). With the imposition of a strict community quarantine during the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, School X conducted classes using the available digital modes of communication such as Google Meet, Zoom, Messenger, or SMS (Short Messaging Service) to connect with students. The teachers created group chats with their students. Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) pointed out that distance learning is accomplished not only through cyberspace but also with the aid of radio, television, phone messaging, and email mode of communication. Different online platforms such as Zoom, Slack, Google Meet, EduPage were utilized by schools in other parts of the world. School Y made use of the NEO Learning Management System (LMS) where the students can access the educational resources and at the same time participates in asynchronous and synchronous activities. Bradley (2021) described the Learning Management System (LMS) as a tool that offers an online classroom to facilitate discussions, activities, and learning expectations and aid in problem-solving skills needed for decision-making. In School Y, Google Meet and e-course modules were used in the Senior High and undergraduate virtual classes while Zoom was employed for the graduate school. School Z had the In-House Teachers' Formation Training during the summer of 2020 and June 2021 where the faculty, department heads, and deans were trained on how to navigate the school's LMS. According to an administrator of School Z, "That's why we were able to survive

because people were able to adjust and accept the fact that this is the only way for us to handle classes.” Furthermore, another platform known as Light Weight Student Information System (LWSIS) was used for instruction, communication, enrolment, and accounting systems of the university. Another informant from School Z added that *“Ang kagandahan rin ng pandemic na 'to, may mga estudyante natin sa ibang bansa na abot natin”* (What’s good about the pandemic is that we can easily connect with our students even if they are abroad). Lin and Shek (2021) stated that despite the absence of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students, online platforms continue to allow the attainment of expected learning outcomes and to provide indirect school services. As presented in a study by Merrill (2020), the attainment of the expected learning outcomes requires an effective syllabus that should be engaging, efficient, and annotated to aid both the faculty and students. A unique strategy employed by School Y is the use of Integrated Clickable Syllabi, designed by the School Head himself in 2009. One of the best features is the easy accessibility of topics, activities, references, case studies, and other educational materials in just one click. This was highly utilized alongside online classes that made the student learning experience distinctive.

Spiritual and Psychological Support

In a study conducted by Marashi et al. (2021), increased mental stress accompanied by moderate anxiety and depression was reported from persons at least 18 years of age who lacked physical activity and had been greatly affected by the lockdown. Borges (2021) observed that various studies over the years had linked spirituality with the physical, psychological, and social well-being of individuals. An estimated 90% of the international population incorporates religious activities as an important component of healthcare. Likewise, spirituality had optimistically affected the health of adolescents in many countries where religious individuals experienced less medical concern (Zidkova et al., 2020). Schools X and Z continued to boost the mental health of their students, faculty members, and staff who were going through COVID-19-induced anxiety by conducting spiritual services with the use of social media platforms. This included biblio-theological reflections and Livestream masses. The Chaplain of School X recognized the need to engage in either individual or pastoral counseling with teachers. School Z’s Chaplain was continuously conducting Campus Ministry services such as Bible studies, weekly and monthly devotions, and sharing of spiritual reflections and prayers to its stakeholders. The links to the activities were disseminated through social media and email. The Guidance Office likewise provided an online counseling session by appointment. Furthermore, a Mental Health Hub was accessible

through the LMS on different topics of interest providing self-care strategies in the new normal where motivational quotations and messages were posted from time to time. These strategies allowed spiritual support to the students to overcome the anxiety brought about by the pandemic. The three schools had instituted measures that complimented their pedagogical services with programs that oversee the mental health of their constituents because the reality is that learners in the COVID-19 scenario experienced learning anxiety (Mohammed & Mudhsh, 2021). The challenge for the three schools is to make every participant in the teaching-learning process enthusiastic and relaxed about learning.

Sustainability of the Environment

Maintenance of the Physical Environment

Huang (2001) declared that even if the internet has changed the way people carry out their daily activities such as shopping, playing, and learning, still it did not render the physical world obsolete or even less important. With COVID-19, most human transactions were carried out through the internet, however, the physical world still plays a crucial role. One of the informants in School Y explained the critical role played by a physical environment in an organization. He said, "Not all work can be done at home. Not all the employees have the infrastructure nor the connection to work from home." As such schools need to sustain a healthy and safe physical environment. The workplace should be safe, healthy, and compliant with the minimum health protocols and standards. Since the pandemic started, learning institutions have been compelled to stop physical operations worldwide where environmental hygiene is the topmost priority to cease the transmission of the contagious virus (Toquero, 2020). According to the DOLE and DTI Interim Guidelines on Workplace Prevention and Control of COVID – 19, institutions should follow the minimum health protocols to reduce the transmission of COVID – 19. The employees should wear face masks and face shields, use alcohol/ sanitizers for hands, use the disinfectant foot bath, follow the one-way entrance and exit pathways or hallways, and observe social distancing. Schools X, Y, & Z complied. They also came up with an alternative work arrangement for teaching and non-teaching employees. Schools Y & Z's non-teaching employees work on-site while the faculty work from home. While School X, with its big and spacious area and few employees, made it possible for its people to work far apart from each other while on-site. Furthermore, companies are required to provide decent accommodation near the workplace to minimize travel and movement of employees to lessen the possible transmission of the COVID – 19. Schools X, Y, and Z provided safe and healthy spaces for their employees who are living in

far places. School Y converted computer laboratories into a “call center” set-up where the laboratories were divided into sections for teachers to carry out their online classes. Each workspace is equipped with computers and a headset. On the other hand, the classrooms were converted to dormitories for employees to stay on. School Y provided bedding and food for their employees while Z's non-teaching personnel were provided with bed spaces. School X required minimal fees from its employees who opted to stay on campus to cover the use of facilities. The three (3) schools sustained a physical environment compliant with the standards and protocols of the government which enabled them to provide on-site services to their clientele.

Maintenance of a Digital Environment

With COVID- 19, each school came up with a digital environment described as the space where teaching with the use of a computer takes place (Stikhina, 2021). Popov and Ustin (2021) explained that a digital environment is a spatial and temporal space where educational activities can take place resulting in productive interaction between the students and the teacher. It is more than a space where videoconferencing, classroom chat, and e-lectures take place, but is a space where the learners and the teacher can have positive connectivity. Stikhina (2021) pointed out that there are students that opt for a digital space where they can interact. The digital environment is more than using the computer, it is more than teaching but a combination of technology and teaching flavored by an atmosphere of face-to-face interaction. As stated by Mobo (2020), the necessary skills must be acquired to continue with blended learning through different educational tools and platforms. School X has no formal digital environment, but a semblance of digital space where it manages to interact with its students' using technology. The challenges that School X dealt with were echoed by the research of Vitales et al. (2021) which pointed out that the shift from traditional to online learning had resulted in difficulties both for the educators and students such as the need for resources, revisions of curriculum, and poor internet connectivity. Schools Y and Z have their own LMS uploaded with activities and lessons. Gonzalez (2020) cited that the learning management system is a must for schools to transition to virtual classrooms. Are these enough for the teachers? They do not have an option during the height of the pandemic to agree or disagree. Are they able to connect with their students? Yes. In the COVID- 19 scenario, any mode of connecting with the students is sufficient.

Organizational Culture

The sustainability of operations including the conduct of classes despite various uncertainties became the biggest challenge for universities amidst the onset of the pandemic. School leaders were called to be extra remarkable and outstanding amidst the worldwide changes (Pollock, 2020).

Responsive Leaders

The demand to effectively tackle the problems and difficulties brought about by the emergence of COVID-19 had placed leaders under immense pressure with constant planning for the impending uncertain changes in the workplace (Whiting, 2020). Leaders must revisit and adjust their leadership styles quickly to address the changing scenario resulting from COVID-19. Kwatubana and Molaodi (2021) explicated that leaders are looked upon by their people, expecting them to lessen the impact of COVID-19 and create an atmosphere of stability. With COVID-19, varied leadership styles emerged which were called for by the situation. School X Leader exercised proactive leadership as shared by the students, teachers, and staff of School X. School X leader personally distributed donations of the alumni to faculty, staff, and students affected by the lockdown despite the distance of the faculty members and students' residences. The head of School X reached out and extended a helping hand to employees who could not come to school. More than spearheading the donations, Leader X immediately called on School X constituents to plan and implement protocols to ensure the continuous operation of the school. Schools X, Y, and Z must deal with formulating online assessments, facilitating remote teaching, and shifting from face-to-face transactions to electronic modes which resulted in stressful experiences encountered by everyone who was unaccustomed to online concepts and teaching methods (Rahim, 2020). To address this challenge, School Y's leader fully extended administrative support to the faculty members who had difficulty with online teaching by allowing laboratories to be converted into computer rooms for those who did not have a stable internet connection at home. The immediate response of the School Z leader was to conduct a comprehensive course module training with corresponding incentives to the members of School Z. In addition, the use of online platforms such as Zoom for video conferencing and Microsoft Teams were put into use. Continuous support and training were found relevant by Moralista and Oducado (2020) for faculty members of Higher Education Institutions to fully acclimate to the new normal amidst the didactic difficulties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The informants from the three schools described their leaders to be "in control of the situation" the instant COVID-19 hit the country. People of School X described their leader as proactive, School Y's leader as

visionary, and School Z' as a situational leader. Whether, the leader is proactive, visionary, or situational, the informants valued leaders who supported the wellbeing of all members of the school. Leaders who were capable of outrightly leading during a crisis and were able to realistically assess the situation. Leaders who were able to influence their constituency to actively abide by the mitigating measures adopted by the organization. To reiterate what Kwatubana and Molaodi (2021, p. 111) said in their essay on leadership during the COVID-19 crisis, "it is necessary to tune into and understand teachers' emotional makeup and needs, as this is fundamental in supporting personal transitions through a well-functioning relationship."

Need for Responsive Members

The school personnel are teaching, or the non-teaching are considered valuable assets of the school. With COVID-19, school leaders need to understand their people to be able to plan measures that will meet the challenges brought about by the pandemic since the pandemic required all school personnel to transfer all its operations from face-to-face to online (Champagne & Granja, 2021) resulting to a paradigm shift. With the introduction of online learning, it became apparent that teachers had to acquire the skills needed to use the different technological tools. An administrator from School Z gave an example of how ignorant some of the faculty on the different technological tools: *"Because suddenly the teachers who were well-versed in their craft, suddenly had to deal with.... Some of them don't know how to click a mouse. I am not exaggerating."* Teachers had to learn how to use the different technological tools because they play a central role in online learning (Nissim & Simon, 2020) as such, training is imperative. An administrator from School Y said, *"they [teachers] try their best to learn because there's no way out."* Teachers and staff of the three schools underwent a series of training and seminars, especially during the summer months of S.Y. 2019-2020. Some of the training was on instructions such as module preparation, use of LMS for teachers of Z and Y, navigation on online learning, use of Google Meet and Zoom, and access and use of available e-resources. Teachers described the training as follows: *There are seminars and workshops. However, it's like a marathon, iyong woooshh.... and then tapos na [its woouooooooooosh... and then it's over already.]* A faculty from School Z described the seminars as *"..... hurriedly done."* Herlina (2021) discussed that the transition from face-to-face to online learning sometimes entails the coercion of teachers to learn and train new skills. An administrator of School Z observed, *they always learn new things, and I think that is what was happening right now. Natututo 'yong mga faculty na, "Ah! Ito pala dapat ang gawin ko."* [The faculty members get to learn, saying, "Ahh! This is how it is

done then.”] *So, they're improving, slowly. And, you know, time will tell if e-learning is effective or not. But I guess it's very difficult to judge right now...* Whether forced or not, the faculty and staff trained for the new skills. A faculty of School X stated that she was thankful as she was able to adopt the modular approach to teaching. She also added that “*...let us just explore and engage. We cannot go back to the normal way how we handle classes*”. According to one faculty of School Z, “*...we still have a lot to learn and we... siguro [most likely] we're learning slowly, and ... we're adjusting to it*”. It was also mentioned by a faculty of School Z that virtual or online learning had good points and bad points as well. “*Ganon din naman sa face to face. [It is the same with face-to-face.] So, we just must maximize the good points in virtual learning and then minimize the negative points,*” he added. On the other hand, it was not an unexpected change for a faculty member of School Y as he had been used to online teaching even before the pandemic. He also considered the new set-up of teaching as an avenue to learn new skills such as technical, communication, and collaborative skills which he felt were needed in the changing landscape of education. Aside from requiring the personnel to learn new skills, schools must implement measures intended to keep the schools financially viable. School X was forced to implement a no work, no pay policy or asked the employees to use their remaining leave of absence. One administrator said, “*Forced leave po sila. And yung parang kinonsume po lahat yung kanilang leave.*” [They were on forced leave. They consumed their remaining leave of absence.] Similarly, School Z had to explore alternatives to augment school income. One of which is to reduce the working days from five (5) to four (4) days. One employee said, “*...four times a week na lang... kaya ayun, medyo maliit ang kita.*” [... four times in a week only... that is why it is not much.] He added “*maswerte pa din, kahit limited yung ano natin, yung pasok natin, twice, thrice, at least may trabaho pa din.*” [... we're still lucky, even if we reported only twice or thrice, at least we still have work. Amidst these measures, personnel of Schools X, Y, and Z remained committed and passionate in fulfilling their responsibilities. They are extremely thankful to the school administrators for their efforts to keep the school afloat and retained their services. In return, the staff had been generous and willing to give their unconditional support to the school as it transitioned to a much more challenging and demanding modality of operation. The three schools were able to sustain their operation because of the synergy between responsive leaders and responsive workforce; both were willing to transition from physical to digital operations. As mentioned by Alonazi (2021), the creation of shared objective among staff and top leaders results in forming of a work culture that allows people to work collectively and produce quality outputs.

Stronger Relationship Bond Among Employees

In a study conducted by Lv et al. (2018), organizational effectiveness was found present in an organization with employees who are optimistic and impart a competitive advantage and success to the institutions. To be organizationally effective, the schools provided opportunities for their personnel to bond with each other. One positive outcome of the pandemic regarding relationships among employees of College X was the emergence of open personal communication about life, struggles, and challenges encountered during the lockdown. Every Wednesday most of the faculty got to see and talk with one another physically. People began looking forward to Wednesdays to share their experiences and have fun together. This practice was highly different before the pandemic when faculty worked individually without personal involvement with other colleagues. Another similar experience was also seen in School Z. Every last Friday of the month, the faculty, including the Dean, meet through Gmeet/Zoom to share random topics that interested them. The topics discussed were not related to academic work. As mentioned by Kumar and Kapoor (2019), enhanced engagement at work leads to more productivity and revenue for organizations. Therefore, an ecstatic employee tends to deliver excellent outputs. The three schools may have employed common strategies to survive the pandemic; however, each approached the pandemic with its brand. School X used the empathetic route, School Y went global while School Z walked the roads of excellence and competency.

Which prospered?

Two questions were asked of the school heads which could be the basis for determining which school prospered:

Table 3
Responses of Administrator

Schools	Did your school uses its saving to sustain its operation during the pandemic?	Would your school be able to survive the prolonged pandemic
X	No	The savings is not much so if the enrolment continues to decrease this year, School X can only sustain its operation for this year.
Y	No: Cash position improved with COVID 19	School Y was able to share its revenue with its affiliated churches of about XXX million.
Z	Yes	Yes

Of the responses obtained, School Y prospered.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has been a game-changer. It questioned each school on its belief on how to best sustain its services. The study showed that the three schools were able to sustain their operation during the pandemic with the following strategies a) in terms of people: retained and provided support to their personnel; implemented cost containment measures; instituted flexible working arrangements; ensured that mode of instructions and delivery of services catered to students’ need; b) in terms of educational services: used modular approach in flexible learning, virtual classes replaced face-to-face classes, provided spiritual and psychological support; c) in terms of the environment: maintained physical and digital environment; and d) in terms of organizational culture: called for responsive administrators and personnel, and strengthened the relationship amongst the constituent of the schools. The study also pointed out that administrators, faculty, and staff who were ready to embrace change and are flexible are critical elements in the survival of schools. The strategies instituted by the schools enabled them to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Critical to their survival are committed and adaptable people, availability of appropriate resources, workable physical and digital space, and responsive organizational culture. But primordial to all of these is establishing a flexible school system that is progressivist in outlook.

The three cases showed that the sustainability of schools heavily relies on the availability of resources, infrastructure, and human resources which can be achieved if the school has the means to attain and retain financial resources. Concretely translated, more students, more resources, more chances of sustainability. All three schools believed that they delivered quality education, cared for their students, and came up with strategies that would enjoin students to enroll; however, each school had its unique approach. One school focused more on being empathetic, another school concentrated on striving for excellence and competence while the other school diversified its clientele. Note that schools are competing for the same group of students, those who need to study, but schools might want to consider enticing students who do not need to study but wanted to study. Simply put, schools should recruit those which the other schools have not yet targeted. The excellence of instructions, the competence of teachers, and state-of-the-art facilities are leverage, but all schools strive to achieve them, there is a need to think of more innovative ways to attract students whether there is or no pandemic that will give schools the push to survive with COVID-19 or without COVID-19. With or without a pandemic, schools should look beyond excellence and empathy and think of innovative ways not just to attract students but to retain them as well.

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