Academic Calendar and Philippine Higher Education

The matter of changing the academic calendar is an important issue for the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). The current discussions in Higher Education Institution (HEI) campuses on this issue provides CHED a chance to have a fresh articulation of its stand on the academic calendar.

CHED’s position is rather straightforward. The move by some HEIs to change the academic calendar year from June to August is consistent with Republic Act 7797, Section 3 which states that the school year shall start on the first Monday of June but not later than the last day of August. It is also in consonance with Republic Act 7722 which provides some leeway for HEIs to establish their own academic calendars and set their opening days in order to encourage innovation and the exercise of academic freedom among institutions of higher learning.

For autonomous HEIs, shifting to an August start is really their prerogative. For other HEIs, CHED generally prescribes a June start but they can adopt a different start for as long as they inform CHED in writing not later than 15 days before the prescribed June start and get the Commission’s approval. CHED Memorandum Order No. 1, Series of 2011 specifies the guidelines and the process is quite simple.

What CHED is most concerned about is for HEIs to meet the requisite academic hours within an academic calendar year. CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 1, Series of 2011 underscores the imperative for HEIs to meet the requisite number of hours per unit for all courses prescribed in the relevant Policies, Standards, and Guidelines (PSGs). A total of not less than seventeen (17) lecture or recitation hours in a term shall be equivalent to one unit of college credit. Two or three hours of laboratory work, drafting, shop or field work shall be equivalent to one hour of classroom lecture or recitation work.

In the discourse about the academic calendar, other issues have been raised such as: a) internationalization, b) ASEAN integration, c) climatic factors, d) socio-economic and cultural considerations, and e) synchronization with DepEd’s calendar. CHED has carefully studied these considerations and states its position as follows:

On internationalization, CHED stands firm in its belief that the best way to internationalize or engage with the global academic community is for HEIs to intensify their quality assurance, capacity-building, and institutional development programs. In pursuit of quality assurance in higher educational institutions, CHED has emphasized learning competency-based standards along with the quality of instruction, research and extension programs.
Research, in particular, is the currency of the global academic community. There is no question that Philippine HEIs can be a magnet for international faculty and researchers as well as varying types of collaborative endeavours if they have the faculty and students with the skills, competencies, dedication and mind set to pursue and engage in quality research as well as teaching. HEIs have to put a premium on knowledge generation and production as the initial step to internationalization. The real challenge then is to ensure that our HEIs can produce graduates who are capable of critical, analytical, original and independent thinking that can result in the creation of new knowledge or practice.

Evidently, there are Philippine HEIs that are prepared to engage with the international academic community, and synchronizing their academic calendars with their international university partners may provide the right signal for collaboration. However, there are also other current gaps that need to be addressed if HEIs are to fully engage the international academic community such as requirements for work permits, tax regulations, and for public HEIs, the issue of tenure for non-Filipino academics.

On ASEAN integration. CHED believes that it is important to think about how Philippine higher education can best respond to ASEAN Integration in 2015. There are two basic concerns for HEIs. First is the issue of quality of our college or university students. Are our college students ready to engage with students from other ASEAN member states? Are our college graduates up to par with their ASEAN counterparts? Do our HEIs produce college graduates with the technical skills and competencies as well as the ability to communicate, innovate and collaborate, think critically, find and solve problems, and possess the commitment to lifelong learning? This is the essence and challenge of ASEAN Integration, and the academic calendar is not a major issue. There is no provision in ASEAN Integration about synchronizing academic calendars of HEIs in the region.

Second is the issue of how well we have prepared our college or university graduates for the world of work. Our HEIs need to guarantee that our curricula, instructional modalities and standards, assurance of learning and assessments of learning outcomes of students in the different degree programs produce the level of professional skills and competencies vis-à-vis the emerging ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework to ensure the mobility of our graduates within the region under the Mutual Recognition Agreements or MRAs.

These concerns, which we all need to work on together as a nation, are much more fundamental than the issue of academic calendars.

On climatic factors. A CHED-Technical Working Group that looked into adapting higher education learning systems to mitigate the impact of climate change has noted that tropical cyclones, in the last ten years, tend to hit between July and September. Indeed, class suspensions due to heavy rains and typhoons tend to spike as well from July through October. Thus, shifting the start of the academic calendar from June to August would not make much of a difference.
On socio-economic and cultural considerations. The issue of the academic calendar has socio-cultural implications. There is concern for families, particularly those from farming and fishing communities who would have difficulty with an August school opening because agricultural cycles cause them to run out of financial resources in August, hence a June start is most feasible.

On synchronizing with DepEd’s calendar. The June start of most HEI academic calendars is better harmonized with the schedule of classes of basic education. The Department of Education has done an extensive study on this matter and has advised against an August start and an end in the late summer months. The DepEd study noted that summer months in recent years have had temperatures up to 40 degrees Centigrade making learning most difficult. In addition there are several long holidays, including Holy Week and fiestas, during the summer months. A DepEd commissioned survey also showed a 95% support for a June to March calendar year.

In conclusion, the Commission on Higher Education does not advise a change in the academic calendar. CHED believes that variation among HEIs in the start of the academic calendar, within the boundaries specified by law, is acceptable and as a matter of fact actually already exists. HEIs can start their academic years at different times. What ought to be a common concern for all Philippine HEIs is providing the requisite academic hours within an academic calendar year, setting sights on establishing and sustaining the quality of academic programs, and producing Filipino graduates who possess the knowledge, competencies and values necessary to meet the needs of the country and the challenges of the 21st century.

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