

Overwork by Design: Undergraduate Edition

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Abstract: “Overwork by design” (OBD) is the term we coined to describe how the Department of Education’s minimum standards for instructional time exceed international norms and recommendations for academic workload. In a 2024 report to the Second Congressional Commission for Education (EDCOM2), we showed how merely by complying with mandated minimum contact hours, primary and secondary students in the Philippines already spend anywhere from one to ten hours more per week in the classroom compared to their ASEAN cohorts. Even if it is also true that schooldays are lost to disruptions, and classroom or staff shortfalls mean a good number of schools practice double-shifting, most in fact exceed DepEd minimum standards. These estimates of academic workload remain conservative because they do not include time spent on homework.

In this paper, I extend the argument to higher education. I show how, with few exceptions, CHED Policies, Standards and Guidelines (PSGs) require minimum units to a baccalaureate degree that are significantly higher than international norms. Again, this is a design issue since most higher education institutions (HEIs) strive to exceed CHED minimum requirements, further bloating already oversized curricula. I then simulate the impact of a decision to reduce academic workload by 25 percent and argue that it will result in better outcomes for all involved: students, parents, faculty, and institution as a whole.

Key Words: Academic Workload; Curriculum Design; Outcomes-Based Education

1. INTRODUCTION

In a report to the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM2), Dabbay and I (2024) compiled three decades worth of basic education curricula and showed that regardless of which version was in place, students in the Philippines spent more time in class per week compared to their ASEAN counterparts, as well as to international benchmarks for academic workload, such as those recommended by Testu (2008) and Benavot (2004). We termed the systematic implementation of excess academic workload as “overwork by design” (OBD) and argued it warrants significant attention in future waves of curriculum

reform. In principle, more workload may result in more learning, but it cannot be increased indefinitely without incurring the cost of impairment, whether in the form of disengagement, anxiety, sleep deficits, or burnout (Cattaneo, et al, 2017).

As it happens, overwork by design is not uniformly observed throughout K to 12 (see Fig. 1, where we compare PH instructional time to Vietnam’s). In the very earliest years, the excess is modest — about 20 minutes per week compared to international benchmarks or Testu’s recommendations. But it balloons in Grades 3, 7, 10 and Senior High School; in Grade 3, for example, the excess instructional time comes to 7.5 hours per week, compared to Vietnam’s. In all cases, our estimates are conservative because (a) they are based on the

DepEd’s prescribed minimum contact time, which many schools intentionally exceed, and (b) because this does not yet count time spent on homework, the other element of academic workload, for which no explicit limits are officially set, other than a DepEd Order (392 s. 2010) mandating no homework on weekends.

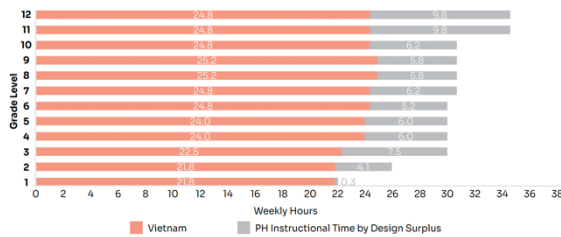


Fig. 1. Instructional times from K to 12, Philippines and Vietnam

Data from the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) allow us to estimate **actual** weekly instruction time for 15-year-old students (Grade 10/11), and the results are sobering: Philippine students average 36.5 hours per week in classrooms, confirming that they exceed the DepEd’s minimum standards of 31 hours, but also the actual instruction time spent by Indonesian students (by six hours), Thai students (four hours), Malaysian students (5.5 hours)...and Vietnamese students — whose PISA scores compare favourably even against OECD countries — by nearly 13 hours.

In this paper, we extend the argument to show that overwork by design is even more pronounced in higher education. We use as illustration current Policies, Standards, and Guidelines (PSGs) formulated by independent Technical Panels then adopted and issued by the country’s Commission on Higher Education (CHED). Our objective is to establish overwork by design as a series of stylised facts that can become the basis for curriculum reform and a more serious implementation of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE).

It is not within our scope to speculate on nor quantify the effects of overwork by design on student outcomes (this is a separate paper in progress). Neither do we address important questions such as

how curricular workloads in the Philippines remained heavy despite K to 12 reforms and the introduction of Senior High School. Instead, for now, we simulate the impact of a unilateral reduction of academic workload on faculty time and on an institution’s finances to assess the business case for credit-lightening programmes.

2. METHODS

We obtain and summarise publicly available PSGs indicating the minimum required units (academic plus non-academic) and prescribed periods of study for degrees that coincide with the undergraduate offerings of De La Salle University (DLSU). We anonymise the programmes themselves and the colleges that own them. For us, it is sufficient to establish the ubiquity and extent of overwork by design by creating a chart that establishes three facts: (i) that CHED PSGs differ significantly in their minimum credit requirements; (ii) that international norms for minimum credits to a degree are converging to around 120 Philippine “units”; and (iii) DLSU programmes, without exception, exceed these minimum requirements, mirroring a practice widespread among HEIs. When further analysed for their implications on total student workload using the well-known standard ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), the figures support our claim of curricular “overwork by design”.

We then sidestep for the moment the question of OBD’s impact on student outcomes. Instead, we carry out a thought experiment, to help imagine how the institution might transition to an alternative in which workloads more closely matched international norms: i.e., what would happen if a department of 20 full-time, 10 part-time faculty, and 800 majors, unilaterally reduced its programme’s workload from 174 units to, say, 130 units? With evidence that parents are more sensitive to total tuition (or “total cost to finish”) rather than per unit pricing (Hossler, et al, 1999; Belmonte, et al, 2022; St. John, 1990), we assume that total tuition per term remains more or less the same, then simulate the impact on faculty employment demand, full-timer workload, and the institution’s business model.

Suppose it is agreed that academic workloads have become too onerous and out of step with global benchmarks. What would the impact of a reduction on units be on demand for faculty, on the workloads of remaining faculty, and on an institution's business model? What follows is a simulation based on three key assumptions:

First, the programme in question is a single degree offering currently requiring 174 units over 12 trimesters, which the department wishes to reduce to 130 (say, 120 plus 10 units of institutional formation courses); the intake is 200 majors per year (five block sections), and 70 percent of courses are handled by the home department, the remainder by other departments;

Second, the department currently employs 20 full-time faculty and 10 part-timers, and wishes to preserve employment for as many as possible;

Finally, and most critically, the institution is still be able to charge more or less the same average tuition per term, as parents respond to the total cost of education (cost of completion) rather than the price per academic unit.

Under these conditions, student load will go from 14.5 units per trimester to 10.8, a 25 percent reduction in course enrollments per term.

The impact on faculty teaching load can be estimated by looking first at the demand side: total courses per trimester requiring instruction. At the current 800 students (four cohorts) \times 14.5 units (each course averaging three units), this comes to 2,880 "enrollments" per term. If only 70 percent of courses within the curriculum are to be handled by the home department, this reduces to 2,160 enrollments. If the average class size is set to 30, this comes to 67 course sections per trimester needing faculty assignments.

We can then set this figure against the supply side: available faculty complement. If the department wishes to retain all its 10 part-timers, even assign them three courses each, this supplies 30 sections. The 20 full-timers carrying a default load of 12 units per term (four courses) provide an additional 80 sections of potential instruction. In total, the department is able to handle 110 sections, a 40 percent surplus over the 67 required to service the slimmed-down curriculum.

Converting courses back to units to calculate faculty workload per term, we find 67 course sections multiplied by three units each equals 201 units. Part-

timers are able to service 90 units (30 sections), leaving 111 units to be distributed across 20 full-timers. This results in a full-timer teaching load of 5.55 units per trimester.

The figure is significant because it coincides with oft-cited international norms for teaching loads at research-intensive universities: two courses per semester. Based on these calculations, the notoriously "heavy" faculty teaching workloads at Philippine HEIs turns out to be chiefly the consequence of bloated curricula.

If 12 units remain the standard for full-timer workloads, what may be done with the remaining six units? There is no shortage of options, all of which have the potential to improve the institution's impact and financial health:

Research. Full-timers may now be required to meet publication, creative work, or grant funding KPIs, as research is treated as an explicit part of the 12-unit full-time workload, no longer as an add-on.

Industry or community placement. Consulting, extension programmes, development of short courses or micro-credential modules.

Academic advising and mentorship. Allowing lower advisee-to-adviser ratios, as well as programmes for senior faculty to provide career guidance or mentoring roles to juniors.

Strategic roles. Faculty expertise can be freed up for internal capability building (e.g., AI literacy, assessment reform, student success initiatives, recruitment and retention programmes).

Even in the worst-case scenario, with a 25 percent drop in revenue as students take fewer courses and per-trimester pricing is adjusted downward, the same adaptations listed above have long been used by institutions everywhere to diversify revenue streams and lessen dependence on undergraduate tuition. In a recent CHED-sponsored workshop, Gael McDonald of Arizona State University explained how ASU used, among other strategies, credit-lightening and curricular flexibility to go from 90 percent dependence on tuition and state funding, to 10 percent dependence in a span of 20 years. Indeed one can argue that drastic reductions in teaching load are the only way to free up faculty time for other impactful and mission-critical activities.

Despite the urgency, we are not recommending an instantaneous reduction in curriculum units, either at DLSU or similarly situated institutions. Whatever factors have driven poor student outcomes in basic and higher education, they have accumulated over decades and should not be addressed haphazardly. Deep questions about curriculum design remain up for discussion within departments and CHED Technical Panels:

What is the right mix of programme outcomes that balances industry training requirements with disciplinary standards (in other words, is an Economics degree meant to prepare most majors for advanced training, or to mostly produce graduates with general and transferable core skills honed through studying Economics?).

What is the rational distribution of general education courses between Senior High School and tertiary?

Should the development of new “twenty-first century competencies” (digital literacy, collaboration, project management, etc.) mean entire new courses added to the curriculum?

Can competencies, which are combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, be reliably developed by existing teaching and assessment methods — and if not, could it be time to more fully implement OBE practices such as authentic assessment, flipped classrooms, project-based learning, etc.?

Clearly curriculum reform to address overwork by design must be accompanied by corrective and supportive interventions. These might range from policy changes at the level of CHED Technical Panels and professional regulatory bodies, to amendments to faculty performance standards and contracts within institutions, to investment in modernising assessment and learning practices.

Our argument is simply that whatever reforms are deemed necessary, they ought to result in a roadmap meant to bring credit requirements and academic workloads closer to ASEAN and international norms, not farther away, as we continue to observe. If Filipino students are performing poorly in PISA and similar tests despite spending considerably more time in class than their counterparts abroad, it can hardly be argued that the solution is even more workload. By now, it's equally

likely that extra units are themselves preventing better outcomes. Behavioural economists might argue, for instance, that six to seven courses per term mean higher costs of so-called task and attention-switching for students.

Perhaps most importantly, without upper limits to required credits, there is much weaker accountability for faculty and programme owners: one need never be asked why 100 percent board passing rates cannot be guaranteed despite over 200 units of training — perversely in fact, poor performance may be used as a pretext for implementing even heavier curricular loads.

The issue at this point is direction of travel — e.g., will new programme offerings and the next version of CHED PSGs continue to encourage similarly-sized curricula? Or as DLSU's Vice President for Research and Innovation, Dr. Raymond Tan put it: “would it be wise for us, knowing what we know about these discrepancies, to not even express the ambition to match international workload standards, on the pretext that a long list of preconditions has not been met? To vacillate means our successors will be talking about the same problems ten years from now.”

4. CONCLUSION

We confirm that DLSU's undergraduate programmes all exceed the curriculum workload minimum standards set by the Philippine Commission on Higher Education, as well as emerging international norms. The surpluses are significant, placing DLSU and PH institutions at odds with global trends, and should prompt questions about how efficiently our curricula are able to deliver often the very same programme outcomes declared by institutions worldwide. We then show how a unilateral and significant reduction in academic workload need not threaten an institution's financial viability. With evidence that parents consider the total cost to graduate, rather than the per-unit pricing of coursework, revenues may be kept stable while freeing up faculty time and expertise to be redirected toward more impactful and strategic activities.

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