

Enhancing the Academic Experiences of Internationally Mobile Students: The Philippine Experience

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Abstract

With the increasing trend in international student mobility at the dawn of the ASEAN Integration 2015, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines started preparing and enacting new policies and structural reforms. Integrated into the process of establishing a university's framework for internationalization, benchmarking had emerged as one of the measures for institutions to learn from each other. These perspectives provided the impetus for this research. This qualitative and exploratory study described the implementation of the academic support services made available to internationally mobile students in private and public HEIs in the Philippines. Best practices and different challenges encountered were also noted during the benchmarking. Purposive in its sampling approach, with a preference for expert informants, the researchers visited schools and interviewed administrators, registrars, guidance counselors, faculty members, and internationally mobile students. Findings showed that HEIs in the Philippines, be it private non-sectarian, private sectarian, or universities, have institutional and policy-based academic support services for internationally mobile students and counseling, tutorial, research consultations, student group projects, and community engagement. The universities had their share of best practices and challenges and the curriculum, administration, and socio-cultural aspects in offering these services. The insights drawn from interviews, documents, observations, and focus group discussions provided the empirical bases to the suggested action options to build efficiency in school administration and enhance the academic learning experiences of the students.

Keywords: *Higher Education, Internationalization, Student Mobility, Student Services*

Introduction

From a global perspective, with the demand for a knowledge-based economy and highly skilled human resources, the number of international students increases with over 5.3 million international students (UNESCO, 2015). Such growth demonstrates a new generation of young mobile people eager to study in other countries or go to places to expand their horizons (Amendola & Restaino, 2017; Beine *et al.*, 2014; Dyer & Peters, 2004). It has also been noted that there has been a shift from the traditional flow of international students to western English-speaking countries towards new emerging universities in the Asia-Pacific region (Beine *et al.*, 2014; UNESCO, 2013). Some countries within the region, like Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore—have been investing heavily in improving the capacity and quality of their Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to become

regional education hubs (International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF Monitor, 2014).

With the increasing trend in international student mobility within the Asian region with the dawn of the ASEAN Integration of 2015, there is the challenge for HEIs, regardless of membership to the network, to operate within its new framework coming up with programs and policies to address the emerging issues and identify opportunities for internationalization. The Bicol University in Legazpi City, Philippines, needs to prepare for the eventual full integration. The challenge is to develop a research-based framework, programs, and policies on internationalization to address the emerging issues and identify development opportunities.

With this expected cross-border mobility of students, working as an individual institution may not be an effective way of addressing the emerging issues,

concerns, and development opportunities. The new paradigm calls for inter-higher education institution collaboration and establishing linkages (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017). Institutions need to work together to a great extent to help develop global and intercultural competencies (American Council on Education, 2016). Within this light, benchmarking will emerge as one of the tools integrated into establishing a framework for internationalization and formulating new policies or structural reforms. This is a positive process, providing objective measurements for baselining (setting the initial values), goal-setting, and improvement tracking, leading to dramatic innovations (Shafer & Coate 1992).

These perspectives provided the impetus for this qualitative research that commenced with visits to notable universities in the Philippines with internationally mobile students to benchmark on the implementation of their institutionalized academic services. From the experiences shared by the key informants, some lessons learned with action options were presented to provide research-based inputs to the crafting of the university's framework for internationalization and to enhance the delivery of academic support services, addressing international student mobility through inter-higher education institution collaboration.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative research is essentially descriptive, inductive, and context-based in analysis. The data were collected through informal conversations, semi-structured interviews with prepared interview protocol, focused group discussions, and documentary analysis.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted in 9 HEIs: three (3) private sectarian, three (3) private non-sectarian, and three (3) state universities in the Philippines. These universities from Luzon and Visayas agreed to be part of the study. They were purposively selected because they have a good number of internationally mobile students enrolled in First Semester SY 2017-2018 based on the official records of the Bureau of Immigration and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

Respondents of the study were the Administrators as represented by the Directors of the International Affairs and Student Services and Admission, Registrars, Guidance Counselors, Faculty, and internationally mobile students. Each university had 15 to 20 key informants, eight to ten

of whom were international students themselves.

The internationally mobile students being referred to in this study are the individuals who have to physically cross an international border within two countries to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin (UNESCO, 2015).

Data Gathering Procedures

Benchmarking was identified as a relevant tool to gather the data. Protocols were observed. Permission was sought through phone calls, and formal communication along with the interview protocol, was sent through email. During the benchmarking, the researchers facilitated the one-hour group sessions with 8-10 and 5-8 administrators. The dialogues were recorded with consent from respondents. These audio recordings were transcribed into written texts for analysis. From the transcriptions, keywords and phrases were highlighted and analyzed based on recurring themes.

As per agreement and as part of the ethical issues for the research, information shared was treated as group data, and the personal profile of the respondents and the names of the universities had to be kept confidential. Figures 1 and 2 show the map of Luzon and Visayas, where these universities are located.

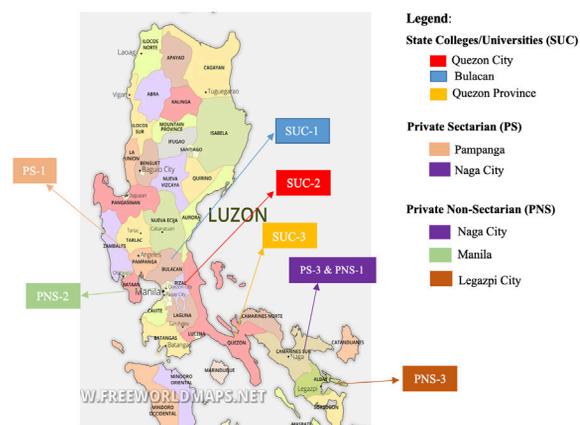


Figure 1. Map of Luzon Island, Philippines where the Universities are located.

Results and Discussion

Most universities with large numbers of internationally mobile students have developed



Figure 2. Map of the Visayas Group of Islands Philippines where one private sectarian university was located.

educational support systems like counseling, tutorial, research, student group projects, and community engagement. These academic support services are designed to address diversity and access in higher education for all students regardless of age, gender, race, or socioeconomic background (Butcher & Macgrath, 2004). Such services provide students with support like tutoring and counseling. Table 1 shows the recurring

themes and institutionalized academic support services in HEIs in the Philippines.

Institutionalized Academic Support Services along with Counseling for Internationally Mobile Students in the Philippines

Internationally mobile students face many challenges (Khoo et al. 2002). Various researches pointed out some of the common problems like adjustment to a new environment, academic difficulties, language problems, financial challenges, culture shock, misunderstandings, loneliness, confusion, and depression (Crano & Crano, 1993; Khoo et al., 2002; Leong & Chou, 1996; Lin & Yin, 1997; Parr et al., 1992). As they adjust to a new environment, students also experience psychological distress, as documented in various literature and studies (Wang et al., 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Counseling plays a significant role in establishing a supportive campus environment for internationally

Table 1. Institutionalized Academic Support Services for Internationally Mobile Students in HEIs in the Philippines.

Classification of Schools	Counseling	Tutorial	Research	Student Group Projects	Community Engagement
Private Sectarian Schools (PS)	Counseling and Orientation Programs Retreats and recollection Interfaith Dynamics	Special referrals An offering of Special Language Classes or Filipino and English Language Proficiency classes	Referrals Designation of research Advisers Research Consultations Research Coaching	Learning Buddies Referrals	Outreach activities Community Immersion
Private Non- Sectarian School (PNS)	Counseling and Testing Psychological Testing Peer Counseling/ Peer Pairing Information Services	Special referrals Offering of Special Language Classes or Filipino and English Language Proficiency classes	Referrals Designation of research Advisers Research Coaching Research Consultations	Learning buddies	Outreach activities
State Colleges and Universities (SUC)	Counseling Guidance Services Culturally based school-based organizations	Special referrals Offering of Special Language Classes or Filipino and English Language Proficiency classes	Referrals Designation of Research Advisers Research Coaching Research Consultations	Learning Buddies or Student Tutors	Extension Activities

mobile students within these contexts. Counseling students is necessary to assist in achieving academic and personal goals (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996; Hayes & Lyn, 1994). It can optimize learning opportunities together with academic advising, orientation, and career preparation. As articulated by the Advice Centre Policy and Procedure of the Imperial College London (2019), the need for counseling that is "free, confidential, impartial, independent and non-judgemental" cannot be overemphasized, especially for universities and colleges which accept students from other countries who are bound to have more or different concerns and issues compared to regular students.

As shown in Table 1, the different schools have established guidance programs and services for regular and internationally mobile students. These guidance services include counseling, testing, and information services. Referrals were done for those students with counseling needs. Students are also called in for counseling, but they are free to visit the Guidance Center if they need help and support. Registered and licensed guidance counselors are designated to attend to the socio-emotional concerns of the students. There are also trained peer counselors in some other schools.

Psychological tests are administered upon admission to check on the adaptability and attitude of the students. Information services include occasional activities for the student's personal growth, which are also participated in by Filipino students. The sectarian universities offered recollections and retreats focusing on the religious formation and the inclusive "interfaith" dynamics for Catholic and non-Catholic students.

The involvement of student/peer counselors and an international student organization together with culturally-oriented Filipino clubs can be seen as helpful components in implementing a responsive counseling program in the different schools visited. Even among the top international schools, student counterparts of professional counselors are particularly helpful in promoting socioemotional adjustment. This finding is supported by Quintrell and Westwood (1994) on the influence of peer pairing programs on international students. The study found that structured contact between host and international students can have beneficial effects on international students' experience.

Institutionalized Academic Support Services along Tutorial and its Implementation

Regardless of the level of academic preparedness, internationally mobile students entering a culturally

different learning environment inevitably will experience major adjustments. Yi and colleagues (2003) identified five areas in which international students are likely to experience adjustment issues. These areas included academic, physical health, financial, vocational, and personal/social. Gebhard (2012) also studied international students' adjustment problems and behaviors, and he found out that students encountered problems in adjustment in academic, social interaction, and emotional reaction to their new environment. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with available resources, access to those resources, and lack of an established social support system and social network were also identified as challenges (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Schools catering to international students assist in tutorials or academic coaching under their academic support program to address possible problems because of academic maladjustment. Along with tutorials, all the schools visited offered interventions depending on the need or requests of the students. The internationally mobile students are referred to teachers who have expertise in the courses where they need assistance. Some schools have designated a senior mentor or a senior foreign student mentor specifically assigned to look after the welfare of the students.

One of the factors that had contributed to the academic difficulties of international students is the language difference. Aside from Filipino and English, which are the national and secondary languages of the Philippines, respectively, each region in the country also uses a language unique to its people. This adds to the challenge of interacting with fellow students and professors and understanding lessons taught in the classroom. Addressing this concern, most of the participating schools noted that they have tutorials or special English or Filipino classes offered to foreign students. Free tutorials are offered by academically inclined Filipino students in the form of peer mentoring. The academic support services are decentralized. Each college offers the said services, which makes access easier for their clients. Also, all of the participating schools identified Filipino students to serve as buddies or student tutors.

Institutionalized Academic Support Services Along Research Consultations and its Implementation

Research is a crucial part of many, if not all, of the coursework done in college, not only in the Philippines but globally. It is an indispensable and sustaining component of academic life. Universities pride themselves on the

extensive research created and published by faculty members and expect their students to imbibe the same.

International students are not exempted from this expectation, at least in the courses for which research is a part of the curriculum. For degree courses, institutions usually require a research paper or a thesis to be submitted individually or in a group. This is one of their difficulties.

The study found that when the internationally mobile students experience difficulties along with their research requirements in their respective institutions, referrals to faculty members with the needed expertise are done similar to when they need assistance in their different subjects. Research advisers are likewise designated for consultation. It is also advantageous for the students if these research activities are done in groups because their peers or groupmates can assist them. As part of their student support services, research coaching will go to a more long-term kind of assistance known as mentoring. In either case, an expert faculty is identified to provide the needed guidance to the students.

Institutionalized Academic Support Services Along Student Group Projects and its Implementation

Similar to research, student group projects may be part of the coursework of the degree program students are pursuing. With collaboration as part of the four C's of 21st century education, internationally mobile students may benefit greatly from group requirements, especially if their groupmates are sensitive to their needs. These are also good opportunities for them to develop and enhance their communication and interaction skills.

For student group projects in sectarian schools, the students were allowed to use the electronic resource center, group discussion room, multimedia collection, and library. Likewise, referrals to administrators or faculty members who have expertise on difficult topics are made. The rest of the schools rely on their peers or classmates' significant roles, particularly the group members. With most of the schools reporting that they allow learning "buddies" or peer tutors for foreign students, there has not been any complaint on this particular arrangement, so this strategy is deemed effective.

Institutionalized Academic Support Services Along Community Engagement and its Implementation

Community engagement, service learning, or extension, as it is often termed in HEIs, especially in the Philippines, is part of universities' three-pronged mission, including instruction and research. This is also

undoubtedly part of CHED's mandate for HEIs, first through the implementation of Republic Act 9163 or the "National Service Training Program (NSTP) Act of 2001 and then through CHED Memorandum Order 52, series of 2016 which underscores more research-based partnerships and collaborations with communities (Llenares & Deocar, 2018).

Given this context, extension activities become part of the course requirements. Regardless of the setup and as long as safety protocols are followed, which are true even for Filipino students, international students are also expected to engage in community outreach programs. All the schools cited that they have outreach activities where foreign students participate, and these are lodged either with student organizations or an office handling community extension programs. The nature, design, and target beneficiaries of a particular extension project are dependent on the specialization of the students in a particular degree program or on the advocacy of the organizing club. Though there were some differences in the implementation of extension activities, it can be noted that policies govern participation in extension activities.

Best Practices of HEIs in Implementing various Academic Support Services

The research found out that some of the best practices of HEIs in the delivery and implementation of the different academic support services include the establishment of a unit or center in charge of the affairs and concerns of foreign students, creation or presence of international students' organizations or internationally-oriented Filipino clubs, awareness campaigns or orientation programs, scholarships for exchange programs, contextualization in Filipino culture-oriented classes like Philippine History, offering of English and Filipino proficiency courses, teachers' positive attitude towards foreign students which include treating them as if they are a family, and the peer mentoring program and buddy system.

Shown in Figure 3 are the best practices of the HEIs in the delivery and implementation of the different academic support services. All had established centers or offices like the Office of International Affairs, or International Student Center, or the Office of International Linkages to address international students' different academic and socio-emotional needs. These offices have definite support systems headed by a Director, and they have set their international admission policies.

Memoranda of Agreement relative to student-

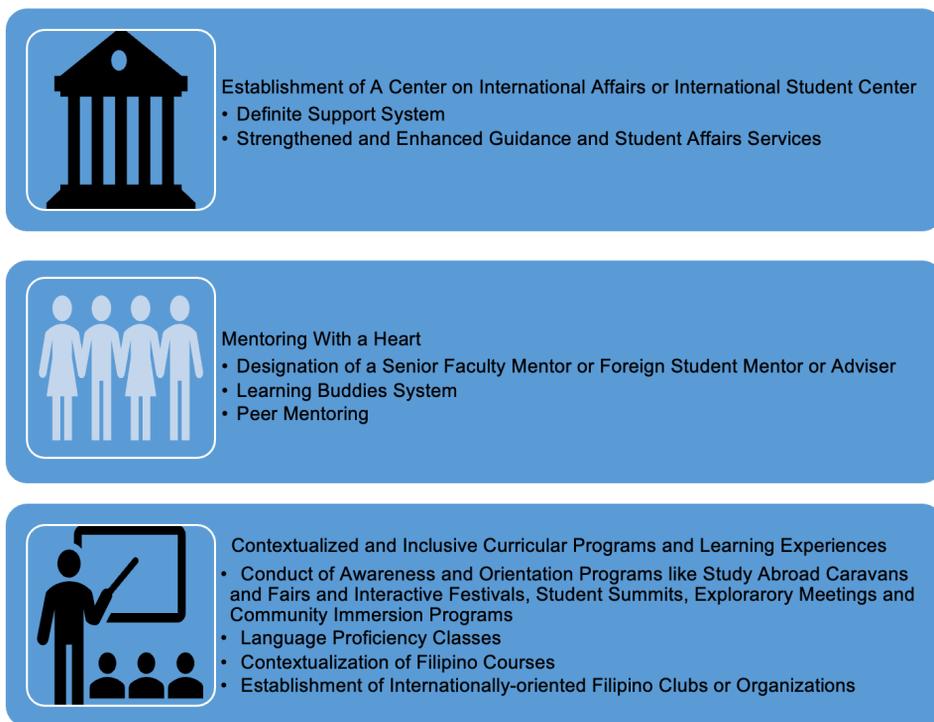


Figure 3. Best Practices of HEIs in the Philippines in the delivery and implementation of the different academic support services for internationally mobile students.

faculty mobility were drafted and signed to formalize these linkages. The student affairs and the guidance offices have a significant role in taking care of these students, while the other units such as the registrar's office, the library, and even the instructors also constitute the definite support system. It was also evident that they regularly monitor their foreign students and show concern for them through their monthly meetings and informal conversations.

A proof of the institution's commitment to the welfare of these students is mentoring with a heart, as evidenced by the peer mentoring and learning buddy system in place. A senior faculty mentor or foreign student mentor is designated to assist the students.

The universities provided contextualized and inclusive learning experiences to the students through the conduct of awareness and orientation programs like caravans and fairs, interactive festivals, and community immersion activities, language proficiency classes, contextualized lessons especially in Philippine History and the establishment of an international student association.

Contextualization has also been reported as a consequential yet notable practice where the teachers acknowledge and accommodate the cultural difference of the foreign students who are usually mainstreamed in classes. For example, though the course may be Philippine History, teachers allow the foreign students to share their country and history so that the course may become relevant to the mainstreamed student and his/her classmate will also get to understand his/her country and culture better. Intervention programs are likewise taken seriously with referrals arranged, again, as the need arises, while recollections offered are also very inclusive since they take an open-minded view on religion.

Challenges encountered by Different HEIs in Implementing Various Academic Support Services

The challenges encountered by the schools along the areas of Curriculum, Administration, and Socio-Cultural aspects are presented in Figure 4. The commonly cited concerns are the difficulty of the foreign students learning the Filipino language, some attitude problems, and cultural differences, which may lead to misunderstandings. It has been noted that aside from the expected problems in being adept at the national

language, some international students demonstrate certain undesirable behaviors, especially when dealing with school transactions. Personnel from the schools visited observed that some students tend to be impatient and display their irritation deliberately when asked to line up for specific school processes.

What needs to be addressed is the concern regarding language proficiency and curricular accommodation. Programs that can provide more efficient assistance for foreign students to adapt better to the communication requirements in the country must be designed. Likewise, the principle of inclusion must be seriously considered and embedded in the course design, particularly in subjects that may be culturally delimiting. Nevertheless, they should be made relevant to all kinds of students, again adhering to the principle of more inclusive pedagogy.

In state universities and colleges, the major challenges encountered were lack of funding and additional support systems for international students' mobility programs. Only one or two personnel would handle the various concerns of in-bound and out-bound students. There is an expressed need to hire permanent staff members with permanent items to handle international students' mobility programs. Modernizing facilities like the comfort rooms and dormitories were also expressed as some of the issues raised, especially by homestay foreign students. They also need to intensify scholarship and student loan programs and services to address the financial difficulties of international students.

Suggested Action Options and Services to Enhance the Academic Support Services

The program for communicative competence offering language proficiency courses is suggested to have a more functional approach to language learning where the target language/s will be required. Peer tutorials, buddy systems, or identified conversation groups may supplement the special classes. A regular 3Cs (Communication, Counseling, and Conversation) with their class advisers or department heads and the Director for International Linkages may be part of the suggested activities.

Counseling should be made available to students to optimize learning opportunities. Even among the top universities identified by Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings as the most international universities of 2018, counseling is a top service. In the University of Hongkong (2019), the Counseling and Person Enrichment (CoPE) is a program under their Centre of Development and Resources for Students (CEDARS). In CoPE, professional counseling is only one of the five services they offer to "develop social capability and emotional resilience" among their students.

A "Learning Together" Program to institutionalize Peer Tutoring and Peer Mentoring Program is also suggested. This will involve student academic achievers taking on an instructional role with foreign students who need academic support. This peer-mediated intervention

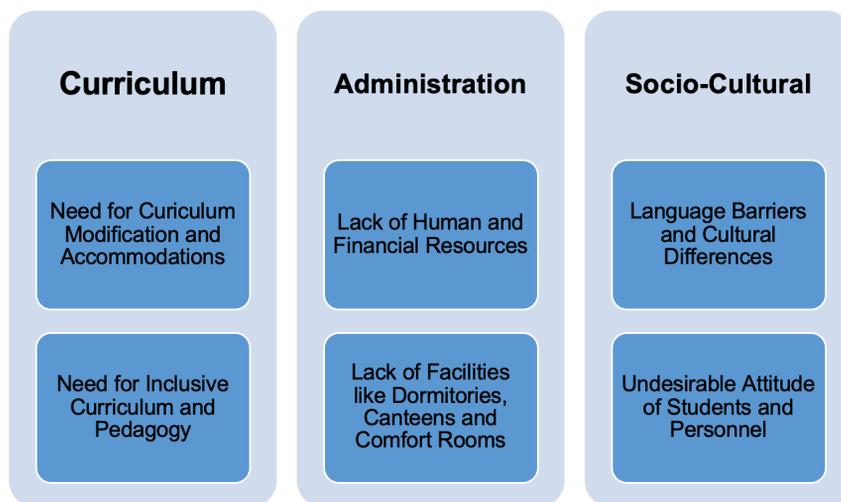


Figure 4. Challenges encountered by the different HEIs in the delivery and implementation of the different academic support services.

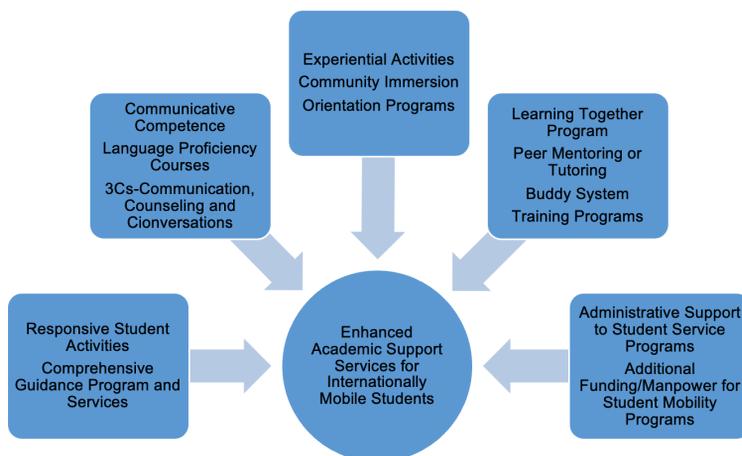


Figure 5. Suggested action options and services to enhance academic support services

along major subjects, research or language courses hopes to provide positive academic outcomes as affirmed by various literature on the positive impact of peer learning (Dawson *et al.*, 2014; Emmelinea *et al.*, 2016; Ford *et al.*, 2015). Institutionalizing peer-assisted learning will lessen marginalization due to academic deficiencies, and it supports the thrust of promoting student welfare (Bercasio & Cabrillas, 2017).

Likewise, an empowering program for teachers, class advisers, club moderators, or department heads may be part of the in-service training for the faculty. Seminar workshops focusing on basic counseling and facilitation, art of campus advising, enhancing student academic support services, celebrating differences in the classroom, and heartfelt teaching and learning may be considered.

Along experiential activities, the conduct of orientation programs is important as it provides enough information on the school culture. This is done to level off expectations. The schools must likewise investigate how the courses or the curriculum itself can be more open to students of diverse backgrounds so that even those subjects with a strong Filipino context, grounding may still be made relevant and exciting to students from other nationalities or contexts. Orientation programs can facilitate and promote more inclusive, diverse environments. (Boening & Miller, 2005).

Community immersion activities for foreign students may be considered for implementation. These experiential learning activities will help raise awareness and consciousness and get to know the local culture of their immediate communities that will help them grow

as professionals. This may include structured trips or thoughtfully organized research-based experiences that meet local and actual community needs to the local community.

Designating full-time Guidance Counselors in universities is important. The crafting and implementation of responsive Guidance Programs based on needs assessment, student inventory information, psychological testing, counseling, research appraisal, and personnel development should also be considered. With the limited number of counselors, an empowering program for peer counselors or student buddies may also be established. Training for peer counselors may focus on self-awareness, peer coaching and counseling, value clarification, enhancing communication skills, and feed backing.

Internationally mobile students may be assigned to academic advisers who shall provide assistance and support to course planning, clarification of career or academic concerns, and interpretation of academic policies. They will be available for consultations during the designated office hours.

All these programs and services will be possible with full support from the school administration, especially financial and human resources. Budgetary allocation for internationalization and student mobility must be in place. In establishing a center that will cater to the needs of internationally mobile students, personnel requirements must be considered. Accountability and quality services are important.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The HEIs in the Philippines with foreign students enrolled, be it private non-sectarian, private sectarian, or state universities have institutionalized academic support services for foreign students along counseling, tutorial, research consultation, student group projects, and community engagement, and these are being implemented within the school system guided by policies and guidelines. In implementing these programs and services, these schools have their share of best practices and challenges. The research-based actions options suggested are responsive to the various challenges identified by the administrators, faculty, and international students. Two important lessons can be learned from this study. First, enhancing the academic support services for internationally mobile students is essential for holistic development. Second, doing so requires collaborative efforts among various stakeholders. The action options recommended may be considered part of the benchmark standards in crafting the university's framework, policies, and programs on internationalization. Phenomenological research on internationally mobile students' academic experiences in the Philippines might also be undertaken to search for meanings and insights on cross-border student mobility.

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