



Democratizing Higher Education in the Philippines: A Learner-Centered Policy Analysis of Open and Distance e-Learning

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Abstract—Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) has emerged as a key strategy for democratizing higher education in the Philippines by expanding access to quality learning for geographically isolated, working, and other non-traditional learners. This study examines how learner-centered learning (LCL) is embedded within the Philippine ODEL policy framework through a qualitative normative policy analysis of Republic Act No. 10650 (Open Distance Learning Act) and Commission on Higher Education Memorandum Order No. 12, s. 2025. Guided by Weimer’s learner-centered learning framework, the study analyzes policy provisions alongside the institutional practices of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) to determine the coherence between policy intent and implementation. Findings reveal that both policies strongly support learner-centered principles through flexible learning pathways, self-directed learning, faculty facilitation, authentic assessment, and the use of open educational resources, micro-credentials, and massive open online courses (MOOCs). UPOU operationalizes these principles through capacity-building initiatives, open educational programs, and technology-enabled learning environments. However, challenges related to digital infrastructure, institutional readiness, faculty capacity, and quality assurance continue to hinder effective implementation across higher education institutions. The study concludes that a learner-centered policy framework provides a strong foundation for equitable and inclusive higher education, but its success ultimately depends on sustained institutional capacity, digital transformation, and effective policy implementation.

Keywords—Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL), University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Learner-Centered Learning (LCL)

I. INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is leveraging Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) to democratize access to quality tertiary education, overcoming barriers of geography, time, and personal circumstances. ODEL represents the convergence of an open learning philosophy, distance education pedagogies,

and e-learning technologies, transforming the delivery of higher education in the digital age.

Philippine higher education policy has institutionalized ODEL through a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework anchored by the *Open Distance Learning Act* (RA 10650) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issuances, establishing quality standards, defining institutional roles, particularly for the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), and addressing the evolving needs of diverse learners, though implementation challenges persist [1].

On December 9, 2014, RA 10650 was signed into law [1]. It systematizes Open Distance Learning in Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs) by offering degree and non-degree programs, maximizing the use of technology in pedagogy, and supporting flexible and remote learning environments [1]. The law advocates empowering students through a learner-centered approach that emphasizes self-paced, accessible, and flexible learning modes, especially for working professionals, stay-at-home partners, people with disabilities, persons deprived of liberty, and geographically isolated students. CHED is tasked with ensuring that HEIs offering open distance learning uphold academic integrity and standards.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical period in the implementation of RA 10650, as HEIs were compelled to transition rapidly to remote and online modes of instruction. The law became particularly significant amid the administrative and institutional complexities that could have further constrained the rapid adoption of alternative learning modalities during the pandemic.

Beyond addressing educational disruptions, RA 10650 provides HEIs with a foundation for expanding flexible and technology-mediated learning opportunities, including programs that support upskilling, reskilling, and the

continuing development of competencies relevant to learners' evolving professional and career needs.

The University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), as a pioneering institution in ODeL, operationalizes the principles of open learning by providing greater flexibility in access, delivery, affordability, and educational pathways. This openness is reflected in admission processes that allow prospective learners to apply remotely; flexible delivery modes that enable learners to access course materials and complete learning activities within prescribed yet adaptable schedules; and relatively accessible educational opportunities, including free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). UPOU also accommodates diverse learner needs through multiple educational pathways, allowing students to pursue degree, diploma, certificate, and other continuing education programs under varying study loads [2]. These approaches reflect the broader principles of open education demonstrated by established open universities internationally, including the British Open University, the University of South Africa, and Indira Gandhi National Open University [2]. Collectively, these practices illustrate how openness can reduce temporal, geographic, financial, and institutional barriers to higher education while providing learners with greater flexibility in determining how, when, and where learning takes place.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper aims to lay down the foundation of learner-centered learning (LCL) in the context of open and distance e-learning. Specifically, it aims to answer the questions: a) what are the various policies in the Philippines that are relevant in online education? b) what are the specific provisions that highlight LCL; c) what is the role of the UPOU in ODeL, and d) provide examples of learning designs related to LCL.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study centers on a comprehensive review and analysis of policy-driven materials related to online education and learner-centered learning. It focuses on two policies, namely: a) Republic Act 10650 known as Open Distance Learning Act; and b) CMO No. 12, s. 2025 or Policies and Guidelines on Open Distance and e-Learning (ODeL).

This is a normative policy study because it focuses on what institutions "ought to do." The researchers are analysts and critics who assess practices anchored in normative principles. The research is structured as a qualitative policy analysis involving primary data consisting of policy documents from the Congress of the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and other academic papers related to open and distance learning.

Qualitative coding was done to identify key themes, including definitions of terms and other topics related to learner-centered learning. Findings are evaluated against the pre-established normative criteria to determine policy gaps.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

LCL is defined as an educational orientation that prioritizes the learning process and students' active

engagement in constructing knowledge, emphasizing what learners do, how they learn, how they apply and retain knowledge, and how learning prepares them for future learning, rather than focusing primarily on what teachers teach [3].

In this regard, five principles comprise LCL. First is the balance of power. It advocates challenging students to break norms, especially in social, political, and gender equality, which is also visible in the classroom. Distributing the capacity to learn among students, not just with the teacher, exhibits empowerment and opportunity for cooperation and student motivation [3]. Second is learning content and resources. Through LCL, students learn to construct their own meanings and knowledge from the texts given to them. Their co-learners serve as their community, and they collectively create solutions to certain problems given by the teacher [3]. Third is the role of the teacher. Using the constructivism approach, teachers encourage students to explore the content rather than being the exclusive producer of knowledge. Teachers work by moving around the classroom to facilitate learning [3]. Fourth is the responsibility for learning. It should be noted that HEI students are aware of informal learning that they achieved through their hobbies and experiences. As such, self-paced and self-monitored learning is also attainable in formal education [3]. Lastly, the evaluation purpose and process of learning. Self-assessment happens when students are aware of their own learning. Though evaluation is the highest form of assessment, a teacher's feedback and peer contribution in evaluation are huge drivers of effective assessment [3]. These five principles define the relationship between the teachers and the students and how learning is designed.

Alongside, the study's framework parallels on UNESCO's Six Pillars for the Digital Transformation of Education as complementary dimensions for examining the institutional conditions necessary to support learner-centered ODeL in the Philippine context [4]. The Coordination and Leadership pillar relates to the formulation and implementation of public policies and institutional mechanisms that enable and regulate ODeL. Capacity and Culture encompasses the competencies, practices, and institutional conditions necessary to facilitate a more balanced distribution of roles and responsibilities among institutions, educators, and learners. Cost and Sustainability addresses the capacity of institutions to provide accessible, affordable, and sustainable ODeL opportunities for Filipino learners, while Content and Solutions concerns the development, accessibility, relevance, and quality of learning content, digital resources, and educational technologies that support learner-centered learning. Data and Evidence further provides a basis for monitoring learner participation, evaluating educational outcomes, and informing institutional and policy decisions [4].

Among these dimensions, Connectivity and Infrastructure remains particularly critical in the Philippine context. Effective learner-centered ODeL depends not only on pedagogical flexibility and institutional readiness but also on learners' equitable access to reliable internet connectivity, appropriate digital devices, and supporting technological

infrastructure. Consequently, limitations in connectivity and infrastructure may constrain the realization of learner-centered principles by affecting learners' access, participation, interaction, and continuity in digitally mediated education.

In the local context of LCL in the Philippines, CHED, in collaboration with the World Bank, surveyed 112 state university colleges (SUCs) regarding digital readiness and digital maturity to commence distance e-learning [5]. As a result, the majority of the SUCs are prepared to conduct distance e-learning but have yet to establish an institutional culture, train personnel, and equip themselves to facilitate the transition [5]. It is also important to note that no private HEIs were represented in the study [5].

The Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023–2028 positions HEIs as key drivers of human capital development and innovation, emphasizing inclusive growth and globally competitive skills [6]. It promotes microcredentials through ODL to expand access for non-traditional learners and improve skills-occupation alignment beyond conventional degree pathways [7]. However, the PDP provides limited guidance on how HEIs, particularly SUCs, can achieve digital transformation. Although the UPOU supports ODL capacity-building, many HEIs remain underserved due to budget limitations and UPOU's limited pool of qualified trainers [8].

Research on digitalization in Philippine education has found that limited internet access and infrastructure services, socio-economic gaps, and finite resources for educators' and students' training hinder the country's ability to implement effective digitalization [9]. For example, in one local community college, educators found it difficult to assess student competencies due to challenges in online classroom management, student engagement, and instructional delivery, citing limited internet access for educators and students as preventing them from completing their tasks [10].

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *The Open Distance Learning Act (Republic Act No. 10650)*

The RA 10650 was enacted in 2014, institutionalizing open distance learning in tertiary education [1]. It aims to expand and democratize access to quality tertiary education, in line with CMO No. 35 of 2000, through open learning as a philosophy of access and distance education as a delivery system [1].

ODL is a “merger of three concepts, that of open learning, distance education, and e-learning,” combining methodology, open learning concepts, and flexible learning [1]. Under this law, the core principles highlight learner-centeredness, which “shall focus on the needs of the learner and the goal of facilitating independent learning [1].” It is important to emphasize that RA 10650 promotes flexible learning delivery through textbooks, audiovisual materials (film, radio, and television), electronic materials via the internet, such as e-mail, podcasts, vlogs, e-learning management systems, and video conferencing, including

face-to-face sessions, which are conducted in schools or learning centers [1].

Though considered independent and flexible learning, it still does not negate the importance of a quality education, as the courses should offer relevant and important discussions, transparency in information, curricula, and student support, quality outcomes through effective and measurable student assessments, and timely improvements in course delivery.

In relation to RA 10650, the CHED Memorandum Order No. 12, s. 2025, or the *Policies and Guidelines on Open Distance and e-Learning (ODEL)*, was released to further the law and to affirm that ODeL is no longer considered a temporary learning arrangement but rather a permanent program to promote universal access to higher education [11].

B. *CMO No. 12 of 2025 or the Policies and Guidelines on Open Distance and e-Learning (ODEL)*

The CMO No. 12 of 2025 supports the provision of short-term courses, or “microcredentials,” by HEIs to equip learners to upskill their knowledge and competencies [11]. It also promotes MOOCs, or massive open online courses, which offer affordable, flexible short-term courses that learners can take anytime, anywhere [11].

Although apprenticeships and internships should be conducted in accordance with the HEIs' program guidelines, the recommended assessments for ODeL should follow CMO No. 46 of 2012 or an outcomes-based approach in developing course objectives, learning packets, and teaching techniques [12].

Most importantly, the law also ensures that students in ODL programs have equal access to “all privileges, opportunities and entitlements” available to conventional students, including scholarships, grants-in-aid, and government-administered loans [11].

C. *The Role of UPOU in ODeL*

Since its establishment in 1995, the UPOU has always pioneered the distance education model [13]. It promotes asynchronous learning while still guiding independent study through specially designed learning packages [13]. It utilizes virtual classrooms through a Learning Management System (LMS) called MyPortal as the primary learning environment and database [14]. It still supervises examinations, which can be conducted face-to-face at designated testing centers or online [14].

In line with RA 10650, the UPOU is tasked to develop and share innovative instructional strategies and technologies with other colleges and universities through cooperative programs [1]. Under the mandate, UPOU is tasked with assisting relevant national agencies, HEIs, and technical and vocational institutions in developing and improving their distance education programs through educator and administrative training, technical assistance for appropriate and quality ODeL, designing model curricular programs as prototypes for ODeL, digital transformation research, providing technical assistance in institutional policy formulation, promoting public-private linkages, and other scholarly efforts [1].

UPOU emphasizes that the institution is prepared to become a transformative, future-ready university [15]. Its thrust includes sustainability and resiliency, being an intrapreneurial university that demonstrates pursuing knowledge-based solutions through collaborations and co-creation teach-ready future-forward developments. It is also a learning university, since UPOU is the leader in ODeL and remains sharp, inventive, and responsive to the needs of students, community, and technology. Lastly, it is also keen in promoting the well-being of its community to ensure the physical, social, and mental wellness of its students, staff, and faculty; enabling everyone to achieve their full potential [14].

The following are the programs initiated by UPOU in accordance with RA 10650.

- 1) Benchmarking activities: UPOU hosts several institutions interested in doing benchmarking activities. It enables them to learn about online education as well as quality assurance in the ODeL context.
- 2) Capacity Development for ODeL: The UPOU offers its services by providing training programs to various HEIs such as the Technological University of the Philippines (TUP) and the Manuel V. Galleo Foundation Colleges [16]. It also caters to National Government agencies such as the Philippine Statistics Authority and Maritime Industry Authority. The training program aims to equip the institutions with the relevant knowledge and skills on ODeL.
- 3) Micro-credential development and implementation: UPOU also advances the introduction of multiple pathways to upskill or reskill someone's craft. By offering micro-credential certificates, learners can earn a "stackable" accumulation of certificates to build more advanced credentials [17]. For 2026, examples of these short-course offerings include Introduction to Semiconductor Manufacturing, AI and Smart Manufacturing, Global Career, Entrepreneurship and Cross-Cultural Communication, Foundations of Semiconductor Materials Physics, and Foundations of Industrial Electronics [18].
- 4) Continuing Education Programs (CEPs): UPOU also offers CEPs such as Caring for the Child with Special Needs, Personal Entrepreneurial Development, Digital Marketing for Entrepreneurs, Organic Agriculture, Permaculture Systems Design Thinking, and more [18].
- 5) Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): These courses are publicly available in compliance with RA 10650 [17]. These online courses are free, self-paced, and can uplift one's lifelong learning skills without sacrificing quality education [17]. Examples of these courses are Technology for Teaching and Learning, Child Rights Protection and Promotion, Fundamentals of Marketing, Social Entrepreneurship, and more [17].
- 6) Open Educational Resources (OERs): UPOU also shares a repository of various open educational resources that are accessible to everyone [20].

RA 10650 and CMO No. 12, s. 2025 are normative policy documents because they prescribe what HEIs should do. On the other hand, UPOU provides institutional evidence of implementation through its programs and practices. Using the principles of a learner-centered approach, Table 1

presents the coherence among the policies with the programs, activities, and practices of UPOU.

- 1) Balance of Power - Sections of the two policies emphasize shared responsibility, as shown by UPOU's practices in providing flexible admission and pacing.
- 2) Learning Content - Both guidelines include transparency and use of open education resources, and UPOU not only produces OERS but also offers MOOCs.
- 3) Role of the Teacher - The policies have specific provisions for the faculty as facilitators of learning, ensuring teacher competency. This is also evident at UPOU with their tiered Program that prepares the faculty to deliver courses in the ODeL environment.
- 4) Learner Responsibility and Self-Directed Learning - The policies provide guidelines that affirm learners to be self-directed. The UPOU recognizes this, and designs courses meant to be self-directed.
- 5) Evaluation Purpose and Process - The policies ensure accountability and appropriateness of assessment methods. For UPOU, authentic assessments are designed and implemented to ensure that learning outcomes are achieved.

TABLE 1. COHERENCE OF THE POLICIES WITH UPOU PRACTICES

RA 10650	CMO No. 12, s. 2025	UPOU
Principle 1. Shared Responsibility and Student Partnership (Balance of Power)		
*Section 3(a) defines distance education as "student-centered, guided independent study."	*Article II, Section 9.1 states that ODeL programs shall focus on the needs of the learner and facilitate independent learning.	*Flexible admissions pathways, asynchronous learning, learner choice in pacing, online consultations
*Section 8(a) provides that "the place, pace, and mode of study shall be at the option and convenience of the student" within institutional timeframes.	*Emphasizes flexibility and learner choice in the design and delivery of ODeL.	
Principle 2. Learning Design and Educational Resources (Learning Content)		
*Section 6(b) requires ODL programs to be equivalent in quality and rigor to conventional programs.	*Section 5 encourages the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs).	*Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Open Educational Resources (OERs), online library services, multimedia learning materials
*Section 6(c) requires institutions to provide transparent information on curricula, instructional materials, delivery systems, and student support.	*Section 9.2 (Quality and Relevant Programs) requires learning materials to be accessible, current, relevant, practical, and responsive to learner and industry needs.	
*Section 9 identifies multiple delivery media (print, audiovisual, online technologies, etc.)		
Principle 3. Faculty as Facilitators of Learning (Role of the Teacher)		
*Section 3(a) characterizes distance education as guided independent study, implying that instructors	*The CMO requires HEIs to ensure that faculty possess competencies for ODeL course	*Faculties-in-charge act as learning facilitators through online discussions,

facilitate rather than simply transmit knowledge. *Section 6(d) institutionalizes peer review of ODL courses, reinforcing the faculty's responsibility to design high-quality learning experiences.	design, facilitation, learner engagement, and online assessment as part of institutional quality assurance.	tutorial support, etc. *Continuous capacity development for Faculty and staff
Principle 4. Learner Responsibility and Self-Directed Learning		
*Section 6(a) states that ODL shall "focus on the needs of the learner and the goal of facilitating independent learning." *Section 8(b) requires HEIs to monitor students' academic progress.	*Section 9.1 (Learner Centeredness) emphasizes independent learning. *Learner support systems that enable students to manage their learning successfully in an ODeL environment.	*Self-paced learning activities, reflective assignments, graduate research, academic advising, student orientation, learner support services
Principle 5: Assessment for, as, and of Learning (Evaluation Purpose and Process)		
*Section 8(a) provides that although students may choose the place, pace, and mode of learning, the content, context, and conduct of examinations remain the responsibility of the HEI. *Section 6(e) requires public responsibility and accountability, and Section 6(f) requires quality and continuous improvement.	*The CMO includes provisions requiring valid, reliable, secure, and appropriate assessment methods in ODeL, aligned with learning outcomes and supported by institutional quality assurance mechanisms.	*Authentic assessments, project-based learning, electronic portfolios, research outputs, discussion participation, continuous assessment, online examinations, rubrics, feedback mechanisms.

VI. CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

A. Challenges

Infrastructure and Connectivity: One of the main reasons ODeL remains a work in progress in the Philippines is the country's internet infrastructure and accessibility [5]. Given the country's geographical setup, it is difficult to provide sustainable nationwide internet connectivity [5]. Regarding funding, although the education sector received a whopping 15.9 million dollars for 2025 [21], internet infrastructure remains a low priority, as the goal is to allocate the budget to building schools and supplying school supplies in low-income areas of the country [21].

Institutional Readiness: Many HEIs still need training, especially at the administrative level and among their educators.

Regarding public policy regulation: HEIs that offer ODeL are still finding their way to maintain academic excellence comparable to that of traditional on-campus programs. One of its main concerns is how to make the application both accessible and rigorous while maintaining the authenticity of the documents and assessments, especially for undergraduate learners.

B. Implications

This learner-centered policy analysis of Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) demonstrates that public policy can play a critical role in democratizing higher education by establishing normative expectations for teaching, learning, and assessment that prioritize learner needs while maintaining academic quality. The analysis of Republic Act No. 10650, CHED Memorandum Order No. 12, s. 2025, and the institutional practices of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) illustrate how legislative, regulatory, and institutional policies collectively promote learner autonomy, flexible learning pathways, quality learning resources, learner support, and authentic assessment. These elements are consistent with the principles of learner-centered learning and provide a policy foundation for expanding equitable access to higher education.

The findings are relevant in the Philippine context as a developing country characterized by geographic dispersion, socioeconomic disparities, uneven digital infrastructure, and diverse learner populations. By emphasizing flexibility, independent learning, and comprehensive learner support, learner-centered ODeL policies offer a practical strategy for widening participation while maintaining academic standards.

The study also contributes to policy development by demonstrating how an established educational theory, such as Weimer's learner-centered learning framework, can be used as an analytical lens for evaluating higher education policies. Rather than assessing policies solely for regulatory compliance, this approach enables policymakers and higher education institutions to examine whether policy provisions genuinely promote learner engagement, autonomy, inclusivity, and successful learning.

Finally, the analytical approach adopted in this study has broader applicability beyond the Philippines. Researchers and policymakers in other countries may use the same learner-centered framework to examine how their national legislation, regulatory policies, and institutional practices support learner-centered education within their own higher education systems.

The success of ODeL in the Philippines depends on translating policy into effective execution and meaningful learning experiences that serve individual development, national competitiveness, and the common good.

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