Positional Fitness

Usually within months following the assumption of office of a newly elected President of the Republic of the Philippines, state universities and colleges (SUCs)—including the University of the Philippines (UP)—will initiate separate search processes to find their next chief executive officers. The selection of a new president of an SUC does not directly involve the Philippine President. All SUC presidents are given a term of four years with the exception of the UP president, who is given six. Because SUCs are publicly funded, it is but natural for their stakeholders—particularly the toiling Filipino taxpayers—to wish that the most qualified nominee ends up being appointed to lead an academic institution of higher learning.

Republic Act (RA) 8292—also known as the “Higher Education Modernization Act of 1997”—was signed into law by then Philippine President Fidel Ramos on 06 June 1997. RA 8292 prescribes that the governance of an SUC is vested on its highest policy-making body, the Board of Regents (BOR), which is composed of eleven members with specific individual qualifications. The BOR is empowered to appoint the next SUC president upon the recommendation of a duly constituted search committee. Of note is Section 13, which qualifies that the provisions of RA 8292 do not affect the charters of UP and the Mindanao State University except for the chairmanship of their respective BORs.

The guidelines needed to achieve a stable implementation of RA 8292 are contained in Memorandum Order No. 16 series of 2009 (CMO 2009-16) that was issued by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) on 27 May 2009. They supplement an earlier set of implementing rules and regulations that was released via CHED Memorandum Number 03 series of 2001. Section 5.1 of CMO 2009-16 lists six minimum qualifications that an SUC presidential nominee must possess, which include being a holder of a doctorate degree from a reputable higher education institution (HEI), as well as a proven track record as an administrator preferably in the academe for at least five years. He or she must also be a natural-born Filipino citizen who is not less than 35 years and not more than 61 years of age at the time of application.

CMO 2009-16 strives to accomplish an objective assessment by explicitly stating in Section 7 the set of criteria that would be used to evaluate the qualified nominees, namely: professional competence (35%), academic background (25%), public forum/presentation (25%), and panel interview (15%). The scoring system for each criterion is detailed in the Profile Appraisal Form that is attached as Annex A of CMO 2009-16.

RA 9500—also known as the “The UP Charter of 2008” —was approved by then Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on 29 April 2008. UP was established by the American colonial government on 18 June 1908 with the passing of Act No. 1870 by the First Philippine Legislature. UP became the national university of the country by virtue of RA 9500. Its purpose as the national university is to lead in setting academic standards and initiating innovations in teaching, research, and faculty development in philosophy, the arts and humanities, the social sciences, the professions and engineering, natural sciences, mathematics, and technology. UP must also serve as a graduate, research, and public service university while functioning as a veritable reference standard of academic governance for HEIs in the country.

The mandated leadership role of UP in the development of the Philippine higher education system is duly recognized by its relatively large budget allocation from the national government. The UP budget accounted for 27.4% ± 1.32% of the yearly SUC budget from FY 2006 to 2016. In AY 2016–2017, there were 112 SUCs operating in the country—a number that has remained fairly stable over the years. According to CHED, the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (58,167) and UP (57,139) had comparable enrollment during AY 2018–2019, with the former (16,099) producing 67% more graduates than the latter.
On 16 August 2016, the UP BOR approved the following minimum qualification requirements of a nominee to the position of UP President—a holder of a Master’s degree, substantial academic experience at the tertiary level, ability to serve the full term of six years before reaching the age of 70, and no conviction for administrative and criminal cases. In connection with the 2016 Search for the Next UP President, the Office of the Secretary of the University issued Memorandum Number LADLL-16-16 in September 2016 to inform the public about the decision of the UP BOR to constitute itself as the Search Committee. It also announced the aforementioned minimum qualification requirements but without an accompanying evaluation instrument that similar to the one included in CMO 2009-16.

A cursory comparison between the two sets of minimum requirements reveals that a nominee who is disqualified from becoming an SUC president under RA 8292, because either he or she is not a doctoral degree holder or is more than 61 years of age, can still qualify to become a UP president. It can, therefore, be argued that the selection process of an SUC president is more discerning since it allows a fewer number of qualified aspirants. To borrow from an argument of KR Popper about scientific theories, the more specific a search process is, the more precise and accurate it becomes with respect to its objective. An ill-defined search is highly susceptible to intense politicking and tenebrous backroom maneuverings as well as subtle rent seeking, with the adverse effect of sliding the process into an outright race at securing the proverbial six votes.

Entering into the second decade of the 21st century, the task of achieving the stated purpose of UP as the national university is not getting any less daunting. UP is not among the top 1000 research universities according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities 2019 (www.shanghairanking.com), which utilizes the following evaluation criteria: quality of education (10%), quality of faculty (40%), research output (40%) and per capita academic performance of institution (10%). Four other ASEAN economies have contributed the following number of HEIs in the Top 1000: Malaysia (five), Thailand (four), Singapore (three), and Vietnam (one).

As a graduate university, UP continues to underperform in the production of Ph.D. graduates. It awarded fewer than 150 doctoral degrees a year on average (UP Diliman: 68.47 ± 10.51; UP Los Baños: 53.80 ± 9.32; UP Manila: 1.73 ± 1.62) from 1999 to 2014. The latest productivity figures for UP Diliman are not getting any better, as the campus yielded only 67.5 ± 11 Ph.D. graduates yearly from June 2016 to June 2019. UP Diliman offered 49 doctorate degree programs as of June 2019 and employs 607 Ph.D. faculty members, representing 47% of its total regular faculty members (245 professors, 277 associate professors, and 760 assistant professors) as of February 2020. In comparison, there were 498 Ph.D. faculty members in December 2015—30.9% of them affiliated with the College of Science. Only Ph.D. faculty members are qualified to supervise the dissertation research of Ph.D. students.

Excluded in the counting are graduates of doctoral degree programs that do not require the submission and approval of a doctoral dissertation such as medicine, veterinary medicine, and law. The higher education system direly needs the services of more Ph.D. graduates. Only about ten (10) of the 1,963 HEIs operating in AY 2018–2019 were capable of offering STEM Ph.D. degree programs mainly due to the lack of qualified and willing dissertation research supervisors. In AY 2017–2018, less than 15% of all HEI faculty members were doctoral degree holders.

As a public service university, UP needs to increase its undergraduate enrollment capacity in response to the growing number of applicants taking the annual UP College Admission Test (UPCAT). The number of UPCAT applicants from 2003 to 2019 increased at an average rate of 2.58% per annum. In 2003, a total of 64,041 applicants took the UPCAT with UP admitting 11,381 (17.8%) of them. Moreover, 56.2% (35,991) of the said applicants wanted to study in UP Diliman but only 3,820 were admitted. Sixteen years later in 2019, 65.6% of all UPCAT applicants (90,426) wrote UP Diliman as their first option but only 3,905 of them were taken in.

The UPCAT figures point to an admission-to-applicant ratio for UP Diliman that is getting increasingly untenable from 1:9.42 in 2003 to 1:15.19 in 2019. The UPCAT is becoming increasingly discriminatory against the year of the high school graduating class and thousands of talented Filipino youth are denied yearly of the precious opportunity to learn from among the most creative and prolific faculty members and staff in the country. The admission trend reveals that UP as a public service university is not doing enough to slow down, if not reverse, the worsening income
inequality and socio-political inequity in Philippine society. The hemorrhaging of young talent does not make sense particularly to the small domestic science community. It is preventing the meaningful expansion of the said community by depriving it of the vital contributions of many more future Filipino scientists and researchers.

The UP BOR is empowered by RA 9500 to enable UP to attain its existential purpose as the national university. The crucial first step is for it to craft an evidence-based data-driven selection process that is designed to actively find and duly appoint future university executives who are most fit for the administrative positions at hand. These executives include not only the next UP president and chancellors of the different constituent units but also the future college deans, institute directors, and department chairpersons. Such an accurate and precise selection process must be codified for posterity in a duly approved revised set of implementing rules and regulations of RA 9500.

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