

# INITIATIVES OF A STATE UNIVERSITY IN SUSTAINING PUBLIC SERVICES IN THE NEW NORMAL

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## ABSTRACT

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented changes to everyone around the world. It affected all sectors of society, including higher education institutions in the Philippines such as Sorsogon State University. This study employed qualitative research methods through document analysis and interviews in order to identify the initiatives of the university in sustaining the delivery of public services, particularly in administration, instruction, research, and extension during the time of the pandemic. Electronic copies of documents, reports, memoranda, and other information posted on the official website of the university and on the official Facebook page of the Office of Research, Development and Extension Services were reviewed and analyzed by the researchers. The Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Director for Research, Development, and Extension Services, and the Head of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Office were involved as key informants in the study. The findings revealed that the university embarked on significant initiatives involving administration, instruction, research, and extension through the collaborative efforts of the officials, faculty members, non-teaching staff, students, and various stakeholders from the Commission on Higher Education, local government units in the Province of Sorsogon, and other partners in the community. Policies and guidelines on preventive measures for COVID-19 and on alternative work arrangements were formulated and implemented. Further, faculty capacity building for online learning was conducted. Policies on online procedures in the submission, evaluation, implementation, and dissemination of research projects and capacity building for faculty researchers were also implemented. Community outreach activities in response to the pandemic were also conducted. The threats and challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic continue to affect everyone in the community. Hence, Sorsogon State University must continue to employ more innovative actions in order to further improve the delivery of public services in the new normal.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 initiatives; new normal; public services; Sorsogon State University; Philippines

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The world today has been greatly affected by the pandemic which was caused by Coronavirus Disease 2019, commonly known as COVID-19. It began on December 31, 2019, when a clustering of pneumonia cases of unknown etiology was reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province in China (Department of Health, Republic of Philippines, 2020) and subsequently spread worldwide. The first COVID-19 case in the Philippines was confirmed on January 30, 2020 in a 38-year-old woman who arrived from Wuhan (Duddu, 2020). Then, due to the increase in confirmed cases and reported local transmission, the Philippine government declared a state of public health emergency throughout the country under Proclamation No. 922 by President Rodrigo Duterte on March 8, 2020, for all government agencies to act immediately and to prevent further loss of life (Office of the President, Republic of the Philippines, 2020).

Section 15, Article II of the Philippine Constitution (Philippine Government, 1987) states the following: “The State shall protect and promote the right to health of the people and instill health consciousness among them.” Proclamation No. 922 directed all government agencies and local government units in the Philippines to extend full assistance and cooperation and to mobilize necessary resources to undertake critical, urgent, and appropriate responses and measures promptly to curtail and eliminate the COVID-19 threats (Office of the President, Republic of the Philippines, 2020). With this, all agencies including state universities and colleges (SUCs) have taken actions to combat the various threats of COVID-19 for the safety and health of the people in their respective communities.

As the lead agency involved in the formulation and implementation of policies on higher education in the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) released several advisories for the prevention, control, and mitigation of the spread of the deadly virus in higher education institutions (HEIs) to promote the welfare of all students, faculty, staff, and administrators. On March 11, 2020, the CHED encouraged all HEIs to establish protocols based on World Health Organization guidelines on screening and response and ordered the suspension of classes at all levels in Metro Manila (CHED, 2020a). The commission also provided guidelines for HEI operations and work arrangements and the deployment of available flexible learning and other alternative modes of learning instead of on-campus learning (CHED, 2020b). The CHED eventually ordered the suspension of classes at all levels and school activities including on-the-job training and internships for the entire Luzon region on March 17, 2020 (CHED, 2020c) because of the rapid surge of COVID-19 cases in different parts of the region.

Sorsogon State University (SorSU), former Sorsogon State College (SSC), which was founded in 1907 as a trade school, was converted into a state university under Republic Act No. 11088. It has four campuses in Sorsogon City, Castilla, Bulan, and Magallanes in the Province of Sorsogon. The CHED officially declared the institution’s university hood last May 8, 2021, through a ceremony at the Audio-Visual Hall headed by CHED officials. Anchored in Republic Act No. 11088, the primary mandate of SorSU is to provide advanced and higher professional, technical, and special instructions in all its academic programs and to conduct research, extension, and income-generating projects for the sustainable development of the Province of Sorsogon and the Bicol region (Congress of the Philippines, Republic of the Philippines, 2018a).

Sorsogon State University is one of the 117 SUCs in the Philippines that was heavily affected by the pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions, lockdowns, and social distancing measures caused disruptions in the day-to-day operations of the entire university, especially in terms of instruction. On March 13, 2020, the university president issued Office Memorandum No. 20, series of 2020 as part of the administration’s immediate action to address the needs and safety of the university community and all its stakeholders. The memo ordered the suspension of classes on all levels beginning on March 16, 2020 and directed the faculty members to assign an alternative mode of home-based learning or distance learning (Office of the President, Sorsogon State College, 2020). The adoption of a four-day work week for personnel on an accrued leave basis and campus entry protocols was also implemented.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted services and tested the continuity, responsiveness, and agility of the public sector (Asian Productivity Organization, 2021). According to Saiz and de la Varga, as cited by Rossetti and da Cruz (2022), despite the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, local and regional governments all around the world have led innovations to ensure the safe continuation of local public service provision. Similarly, the implementation of research and extension mandates of Sorsogon State University was also affected, but this did not stop the public servants of the university from ensuring that the services offered by all its offices would be sustained during the pandemic. The sudden shift to online learning, virtual meetings and conferences, online paper presentations, online submission of requirements, and virtual consultation of students to the Guidance and Counselling office and other offices to name a few, became the “new normal” in order to sustain teaching and learning while ensuring the safety and health of everyone in the community.

The impacts of COVID-19 on workers and workplaces across the globe have been dramatic (Kniffin et al., 2021). The pandemic changed how and where organizations and their employees work. According to Schuster et al. (2020), many public sector workers now telework because of social distancing during the pandemic. The teaching and non-teaching personnel of Sorsogon State University have also responded to the call of the time and adopted flexible working arrangements, lectures and teaching assessments through virtual platforms. According to del Arco et al. (2021), the solution adopted in the area of higher education was the suspension of in-person teaching and the establishment of a virtual format in order to ensure continuity of the academic year. Similarly, the university embraced information and communication technologies (ICT) and implemented digital measures in order to ensure the continuity of academic and administrative services.

By threatening the disruption of public service delivery, the COVID-19 pandemic touched on a cardinal principle of public service, that of continuity (Kauzya and Niland, 2020). Being quick to adapt and re-adjust how services are delivered are vital for sustaining public services during the pandemic. Today more than ever, organizations, particularly government institutions, are playing a critical role in ensuring the continuity of basic services. However, Raghavan et al. (2021) stated that the continuity of services during the COVID-19 pandemic became challenging across the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Further, Ansell et al. (2021) stated that the COVID-19 crisis has made clear that turbulent problems such as COVID-19 persistently disrupted society and challenged the public sector. The authors also affirmed that public leaders must also reinvent themselves on several dimensions in order to enhance the capacity for designing robust solutions to turbulent problems. In addition, Olowo-Okere (2020) emphasized that governments must lead responses to the COVID-19 pandemic through policy, coordination, funding, and fast, agile implementation. Hence, the leaders and workforce of organizations need to be innovative, robust, and resilient to cope with the workplace challenges during the pandemic and in the new normal.

Raghavan et al. (2021) introduced a framework called emergency-learning-institutionalization-new normal or ELIN to explain the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery. The authors explained that organizations and employees have evolved in their responses to the crisis throughout the life cycle of the pandemic. According to them, the emergency phase represents the reactions of organizations to the pandemic and lockdowns imposed by the government. The learning phase represents the organizations that began adopting technology-based solutions and promoted responsible behavior with physical distancing and improved sanitation. In the institutionalization phase, organizations have now adopted new policies and models to become more resilient in terms of future crises. The new normal, according to Raghavan et al. (2021), can be defined as a situation where the nature or behavior of organizations or employees has changed in response to the new realities in a post-COVID-19 world.

Just like any organization, Sorsogon State University has evolved in its response to the pandemic in order to ensure the sustainability of its services without disregarding the employee's safety and health. Policies on telework or work-from-home arrangements were crafted and implemented, and online platforms and digital technologies were utilized to continue employees' performance of the mandates on instruction, research, and extension. Guided by its vision, mission, and core values, the faculty members, non-teaching staff, students, and officials joined hands to sustain the services even in these trying times of the pandemic. Hence, this study aims to determine the initiatives of the university in sustaining public services, specifically with reference to administration, instruction, research, and extension from the onset of the pandemic in March, 2020 to the first and second semesters of academic year 2020–2021. It also aims to provide policy recommendations on how to improve public service delivery and to ensure the welfare of the faculty, non-teaching staff, officials, students, and other stakeholders of HEIs, particularly in the public sector during a pandemic.

The findings of the study will demonstrate how HEIs can adjust to potential disruptions in their operations. Further, this study also provides evidence on how ICT can be utilized by HEIs in the conduct of instruction, research, extension, and administrative-related activities to continue delivering vital services during COVID-19 lockdowns. The study also provides significant insights into the importance of awareness, flexibility, and collaboration among university officials, faculty, and students of HEIs as they respond to emerging crises. Furthermore, the study provides evidence on the importance and role of alternative work arrangements in the public sector in order to sustain services during pandemics.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative study utilized documentary analysis and interviews to gather the data needed for the study. Documentary analysis was conducted in order to identify the initiatives of the institution in terms of administration, instruction, research, and extension. The primary sources of data were the requested documents from the university, which included accomplishment reports, memoranda, policies and guidelines, the President's Update from the first to the fourth quarter of 2020, and the Sorsogon State College Annual Report of 2020. In

order to gather additional information, particularly on the purposes and challenges met in the implementation of these initiatives during the pandemic, the researchers conducted interviews with three key informants (KIs) through phone calls and Facebook (FB) messenger. The KIs were composed of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Director for Research, Development, and Extension Services, and the Head of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Office, who is also the Unit Head of the Office of Security and Safety. Based on their terms of reference and functions, they were the key officials of the university that could provide significant input for the study. The interview with one KI, along with instructions, were conducted via FB messenger September 30, 2021. Phone call interviews with two KIs on administration, research, and extension were carried out on October 1, 2021.

The gathered data are summarized, analyzed, and presented in the tables. In order to validate these data, the researchers coordinated with the Director of the Public Information Office through FB messenger and with the Quality Assurance Coordinator of the Sorsogon City Campus. The researchers also utilized the Internet for validation purposes by looking into the posted information on the official website and FB page of the university, and on the official FB page of the Office of Research, Development and Extension Services.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The initiatives of Sorsogon State University in sustaining public services in the new normal are grouped into four categories namely administration, instruction, research, and extension.

#### 3.1 Initiatives of the administration

The initiatives of the administration refer to the policies and activities that aim to sustain the day-to-day operations of different offices of the university during the pandemic. The initiatives include policy formulation on COVID-19 preventive measures, policy formulation on alternative work arrangements, and the provision of services via online platforms. Table 1 shows the policies formulated to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the university.

It can be noted that as early as February 7, 2020, the Office of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Office issued an Advisory on 2019 nCov. It laid out guidelines for the protection, preparedness, and response to the possible threats of the novel coronavirus. SSC Preventive Measures and a National Service Training Program (NSTP) memo on COVID-19 were also employed with the school community on March 12, 2020. Additionally, several policies were issued later in order to further prevent the spread of the virus in the school premises and to ensure everyone's health and safety. One of which was Office Memorandum No. 20 series of 2020 which ordered the suspension of classes at all levels from March 16, 2020, and established social distancing measures to be strictly implemented in the institution. Other policies included SSC COVID-19 General Community Quarantine Guidelines, the SSC Safety Protocol Against COVID-19, the SSC Disaster Risk Reduction & Climate Change (DRR & CC) "To-Do List for Incoming A.Y. 2020–2021," and SSC Safety and Security Policy No. 1, Series of 2020. These were initiated by the Office of the President, the Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Office, and the Office of Security and Safety, respectively.

**Table 1:** Policy Formulation on COVID-19 Preventive Measures

Title	Office (s) Involved	Date
SSC DRR & CC Advisory on 2019 nCov	Disaster Risk Reduction and the Climate Change Office	February 7, 2020
Office Memorandum No. 19, series of 2020 (SSC Preventive Measures on COVID-19)	Office of the President	March 12, 2020
NSTP Memo on COVID Measures	NSTP Office	March 12, 2020
Office Memorandum No. 20, series of 2020 (Suspension of Classes and Social Distancing Measures)	Office of the President	March 13, 2020
SSC COVID-19 General Community Quarantine Guidelines	Office of the President	April 29, 2020
SSC Safety Protocol Against COVID-19	Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Office	May 18, 2020
SSC-DRR & CC "To Do List for Incoming Academic Year 2020-2021"	Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Office	July 7, 2020
SSC Safety and Security Policy No. 1, Series of 2020	Office of Security and Safety	October 16, 2020

Based on the results of the study, it can be implied that in order to sustain the public services of a university, policies that address the demands of the time must be in place. The immediate response of the university officials to the life-threatening situations brought by the pandemic through policy formulation and issuance played an important role in safeguarding the health and safety of the students, employees, and the entire SorSU community. One informant explained the following: "The awareness of the university officials to the existing COVID-19 dangers and constant coordination with other government agencies contributed much

to coming up with these policies.” According to Chatterjee et al. (2020), risk awareness is the best way to prevent and slow-down the transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic. This result implies that the officials of HEIs have a critical role to play in crisis management. Awareness and understanding of the emerging situation through access to important and critical data from the national government and other international and local organizations would help the officials of educational institutions to come up with appropriate policies and timely and relevant courses of action to address the crisis situation.

**Table 2:** Policy Formulation on Alternative Work Arrangements

Title	Office (s) Involved	Date
Office Memorandum No. 21, series of 2020 (Guidelines on work Schedule Under the “New Normal”	Office of the President	May 14, 2020
Office Memorandum No. 30, Series of 2020 (Guidelines on Work Schedule Under the “New Normal”)	Office of the President	July 30, 2020
Office Memorandum No. 12, Series of 2021 (Guidelines on Alternative Work Arrangements)	Office of the President	March 5, 2021

Aside from COVID-19 preventive measures, the school president issued guidelines on alternative work arrangements, as presented in Table 2. These are consistent with Memorandum Circular No. 10, series of 2020 of the Civil Service Commission, Republic of the Philippines (2020) for alternative work arrangements and support mechanisms for workers in the government during the period of state national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These include Office Memorandum No. 21, series of 2020, Office Memorandum No. 30, Series of 2020, and Office Memorandum No. 12, Series of 2021 from the Office of the President. The teaching personnel of the university were on work-from-home arrangements while the non-teaching personnel were allowed a four-day work per week with alternate schedules in order to maintain distancing measures and to ensure the safety of everyone.

The results imply that in order to sustain the delivery of public services in HEIs, flexibility in work schedules through alternative working arrangements could be imposed in times of disruptions. Telecommuting may be sustained as the public transitions to the new normal. In the Philippines, telecommuting, as defined under Republic Act No. 11165 or An Act Institutionalizing Telecommuting as An Alternative Work Arrangement for Employees in the Private Sector (Congress of the Philippines, Republic of the Philippines, 2018b), refers to “a work from an alternative workplace with the use of telecommunications and/or computer technologies.” But with the onset of the pandemic, telecommuting became one of the solutions to sustain the delivery of services not only by the private sector but most especially in the government, particularly in educational institutions.

Table 3 shows the activities and services conducted by the different offices of the university through the use of online technologies from May 2020 to February 2021. The Admission Services Office, the Registrar’s Office, and the Library Services Office continued to provide relevant information and announcements for their clientele via the online platform on May 16, 2020. The Health Services Unit of the university established its Facebook page on July 14, 2020. They began medical and dental consultation services for students and employees through an online platform. This initiative aimed to deliver and promote optimal health care services and assistance among its clients amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Public Information Office, Sorsogon State College, 2020). The Office of Students Affairs and Services conducted a Virtual Students’ Orientation on September 25, 2020. It aimed to inform and introduce the services of the university relating to students’ welfare. Meanwhile, the National Service Training Program (NSTP) Office also held a Virtual Orientation for NSTP students on the same day. The Placement Services conducted an online activity entitled “Marketing Me Live at SSC” on October 7, 2020, and December 16–17, 2020. This activity aimed to help graduates and graduating students seeking employment. The same activity was conducted on February 26, 2021 in order to allow those that were not able to attend the previous activities. All of these were made possible through the use of online technologies.

**Table 3:** Provision of Services via Online Platforms

Title	Office (s) Involved	Date
SSC Announcements: Admission Services, Enrolment Services, E-Library Service	Admission Services Office, Registrar’s Office, and Library Services Office	May 16, 2020
Medical and Dental Consultation in the New Normal	SSC-Health Services Unit	July 14, 2020
SSC Students Virtual Orientation 2020	Office of Student Services	September 25, 2020
NSTP Virtual Orientation	NSTP Office	September 25, 2020
Marketing Me Live at SSC	Placement Services Office	October 7, 2020
Marketing Me Live at SSC (A Replay)	Placement Services Office	December 16–17, 2020
Guidance and Counseling Services Facebook Page and Tele-Counseling Initiative	Guidance and Counseling Services Office	October 17, 2020
Marketing Me Live at SSC 2	Placement Services Office	February 26, 2021

As the coronavirus pandemic rapidly swept across the world, it caused a considerable degree of fear, worry, and concern in the population at large (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2020). With this, the Guidance and Counselling Services Office established its FB page on October 17, 2020, and initiated “tele-counseling” to help the students experiencing anxiety, stress, depression, and other negative feelings during the pandemic and to safeguard mental health. The result implies that ICT played an important role in continuing delivery of student services in the university. The study has proven that the Internet and other information technologies can be of great help in sustaining various activities of the student services in higher learning institutions during crisis situations, such as a pandemic in which social distancing, lockdowns, and other restrictions are enforced. According to Bajpai et al. (2020), ICT has shown itself to be essential both in bolstering long-term resiliency against future pandemics and in resolving the secondary challenges that emerge within a socially distanced environment. Hence, HEIs may look into those services that can be delivered online and develop policies that would implement ICT-enabled systems to sustain services even during trying times such as a pandemic.

### 3.2 Initiatives regarding instruction

One of the most affected sectors in the time of the pandemic is the education sector. It has caused unprecedented changes that have required immediate and innovative actions in order to sustain teaching and learning activities. Schools have been forced to close and face-to-face instruction has been prohibited to prevent further spread of the virus. Hence, the shift to online learning became necessary. Amidst this crisis, there was no alternative left other than adapting to the dynamic situation and accepting the change (Dhawan, 2020). Tables 4, 5, and 6 present the initiatives of Sorsogon State University regarding instruction. These initiatives included the following: provision of online services and resources, faculty participation in webinars and online training, and policy formulation in terms of flexible learning.

**Table 4:** Provision of Online Services and Resources

Title	Office (s) Involved	Date
Digital Presentation of the SSC-Laboratory High School Achievers, Completers and Graduates for School Year 2019-2020.	Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Public Information Office, ICT Dept. of SSU-Bulan Campus	August 5, 2020
Digital Presentation of the SSC Batch 2020 Graduates	Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Public Information Office, ICT Dept. of SSU-Bulan Campus	August 7, 2020
Learning Management System (LMS) Tutorial Video and Quick Start Guide for Students	SSC-Bulan Campus	August 28, 2020
Online Accreditation of Academic Programs	Office of the Quality Assurance	December 7–11, 2020
LAPTOP Project (Learning Assistance Project to Support Online Instruction in the time of the Pandemic)	Office of the President, Office of the Campus Administrators, Faculty Organizations, Faculty Association	June 28, 2021

Mass gatherings are prohibited these days. According to the World Health Organization (2020), an event counts as a “mass gathering” if the number of people it brings together is so large that it has the potential to strain the planning and response resources of the health system in the community where it takes place. Hence, graduation ceremonies, student orientation activities, job fairs, and other activities that will be attended by the large crowd were prohibited. In response to this, the Vice President for Academic Affairs Office (VPAA), the Public Information Office, and the ICT Department of Bulan Campus spearheaded the Digital Presentation of SSC-Laboratory High School Achievers, Completers and Graduates for School Year 2019–2020 and Digital Presentation of the SSC Batch 2020 Graduates on August 5 and August 7, 2020, respectively, via the official YouTube page of the university. This initiative aimed to celebrate the accomplishments and to recognize the achievements of the students and graduates via an online platform. Meanwhile, the ICT Department of Bulan Campus developed an LMS Tutorial Video and Quick Start Guide for students which were uploaded via the YouTube channel of the university and on the official Facebook page of the university on August 28, 2020.

Program accreditation has also been affected by the pandemic. The Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines or AACCUP adapted online platforms to continue its evaluation and assessment functions (Bukidnon State University, 2020). The university, through the Office of Quality Assurance with the active participation of faculty, employees, and officials, subjected the Master of Arts in Management, Master of Education, and the Civil, Electrical, and Mechanical Engineering, and Agricultural Technology programs to online accreditation on December 7 to 11, 2020 in order to sustain quality assurance activities. One of the most notable initiatives of the university was the acquisition and distribution of laptops to its faculty members on June 28, 2021. Initially, the proposal came from the Faculty Organization (FO) of the Sorsogon City Campus. The Project LAPTOP or “Learning Assistance Project to Support Online Instruction in this Time of Pandemic” was very significant as it is one way of assisting the faculty members as they shifted

from traditional teaching to online distance education. It was adopted university-wide through the collaborative efforts of different offices, namely, the Office of the President, the Office of the Campus Administrators, faculty organizations of the four campuses, and the Faculty Association. The aim was to assist the faculty members in conducting online instruction by providing first the resources they need, such as a laptop.

As shown in Table 5, the SSC LMS Training and Workshop was conducted via Zoom on June 18, 2020. The faculty members of the four campuses attended the webinar in order to gain knowledge on the features of the LMS and how to use them. The LMS was the main platform of the university in delivering flexible learning among its 10,384 students. The second batch of faculty members participated in the training on July 8, 2020. This was initiated by the Office of the VPAA, the ICT Office, and the ICT Department of Bulan campus. The use of a LMS in education is a smart choice for educational institutions in today's world (Obana, 2021). Through a LMS, teachers are able to deliver customized learning content and students can learn anytime and anywhere. The school LMS is supported by the learning platform MOODLE or the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment.

It can also be noted that the institution through the Office of the VPAA sent some faculty participants to webinars sponsored by other institutions. These include the following: Fast Tracking the Retooling of HEIs on Flexible Learning in Region V for Education 4.0; Professional Training for Teacher 4.0: Online Learning Module Writing; Trainer's Training on Module Development for Engineering, Architecture, Technology, and Computer-Related Programs or EATC; NSTP Module Development; Understanding Teacher Education Noticing Behavior during COVID 19 Pandemic: Mindfulness, Decision-Making and Adaptation; Training of Teacher-Trainers on Flexible Teaching and Learning in the New Normal; and Online Training Course to Enhance Licensure Examination for Agriculturist (LEA) Review Practice among SUCs Faculty Experts. On August 21, 2020, the VPAA Office conducted a Virtual General Education Curriculum (GEC) Training for Faculty Members. This was participated in by faculty members that handled GEC subjects during the academic year.

**Table 5:** Faculty Participation in Webinars and Online Trainings

Title	Office (s) Involved	Date
SSC Learning Management System Trainings and Workshop	Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, ICT Office, SSC-Bulan Campus	June 18, 2020 and July 8, 2020
Sending of faculty participants to various webinars and online trainings organized by other institutions:	Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs	June–October, 2020
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fast Tracking the Retooling of HEIs on Flexible Learning in Region V for Education 4.0</li> <li>• Professional Training for Teacher 4.0: Online Learning Module Writing</li> <li>• Trainer's Training on Module Development for EATC Related Programs</li> <li>• NSTP Module Development</li> <li>• Understanding Teacher Education Noticing Behavior during COVID 19 Pandemic: Mindfulness, Decision-Making and Adaptation</li> <li>• Training of Teacher-Trainers on Flexible Teaching and Learning in the New Normal</li> <li>• Online Training Course to Enhance LEA Review Practice among SUCs Faculty Experts</li> </ul>		
Virtual GEC Training for Faculty Members	Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs	August 21, 2020

The results imply that even in the times of a pandemic, the faculty members of higher learning institutions value their professional growth, as an informant stated: "There are faculty members who in their own initiative attended trainings to show their commitment to the university and as manifestation of their dedication to their teaching profession." Ramos-Pla et al. (2021) affirmed that universities were able to focus training and react to the training needs arising from the health emergency situation. As facilitators and translators of knowledge, faculty members need to be updated with the different online learning strategies and tools, especially on the digitization of teaching materials as demanded by the current situation. Regarding

COVID-19, Ramos-Pla et al. (2021) mentioned that there is a need for continuous training for university teachers related to virtual teaching.

**Table 6:** Policy Formulation on Flexible Learning

Title	Office (s) Involved	Date
Office Memorandum No. 042, s. 2020 (Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning for SY 2020–2021)	Office of the President	October 9, 2020

It can be gleaned from Table 6 that the Office of the President issued Office Memorandum No. 042, series of 2020, which pertained to the guidelines in the implementation of flexible learning for SY 2020–2021. This memorandum was in conformance with CHED Memorandum Order No. 4, series of 2020. Flexible learning is a learner-centered approach that is deeply rooted in the needs of the students (Commission on Higher Education, 2020d). With this pandemic, the SorSU faculty members were advised to provide the students with the most flexibility regarding the learning content, schedules, access, and in terms of their use of digital and non-digital tools since not all students have access to good Internet connectivity and not all students can buy laptops and other ICT resources. The study showed that the teaching and learning process in HEIs could still be conducted and implemented through the use of ICT. Learning management systems and online or flexible learning served as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face classes in most HEIs during the pandemic. However, an informant explained the following: “During that time when online learning management system is being introduced to the teachers, there are many of those who do not know how to use it, and even the so-called experts need to study how to navigate and implement the system. So, the challenges experienced by many faculty members are but considered natural during that time.” But as Rangel-Pérez et al. (2021) stated, there is a need to continue to improve the digital competencies of faculty professors to favor access to ICTs by university students to promote quality education worldwide. Thus, HEIs need to look into the ICT competencies of their faculty members in conducting flexible learning classes especially during the pandemic.

In addition, the most crucial concerns in flexible learning also include comprehension of learning content, student engagement, and internet connectivity (Tarrayo et al., 2021). With this, it is also important for the faculty and officials of HEIs to evaluate the effectiveness of the flexible learning modalities and mechanisms being implemented by their universities during the pandemic in order to ensure that the quality of instruction is not sacrificed while maintaining the safety of the community.

### 3.3 Initiatives regarding research

Research is one of the core mandates of higher learning institutions. Researchers and educators at universities, colleges, and primary and secondary schools face specific and ongoing challenges related to the pandemic (Superfine, 2020). But through the continued support of the Office of Research, Development, and Extension Services (ORDES), research services were still delivered to attain the goals of the university. In order to ensure the sustainability of research services during the pandemic, ORDES issued several guidelines to address the needs and demands of the situation. Tables 7 and 8 show the initiatives of Sorsogon State University regarding research.

**Table 7:** Research Policy Formulation

Title	Office (s) Involved	Date
Office Memorandum No. 23, s. 2020 (Guidelines and Procedures in the Evaluation of Research/Extension project proposals under the “New Normal”)	Office of the President	June 4, 2020
SSC Memorandum No. 43, s. 2020 (Revised Review Mechanics on Sorsogon Research, Development, and Extension Conference or SorDECon Evaluation)	Office of the President	October 9, 2020
SSC Memo No. 60, s. 2020 (Special Call for Proposals for Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Funding)	Office of the President	November 23, 2020
Interim Guidelines for SSC Research Development and Extension or RDE Projects in the New Normal (Board of Trustees or BOT Resolution No. 10, series of 2021)	Office of Research, Development and Extension Services	March 19, 2021

On June 4, 2020, the Office of the President issued Memorandum No. 23, series of 2020. The said memo provided guidelines and procedures in the evaluation of research/extension project proposals that are adaptive to the alternative mode of work arrangement under the “new normal.” In this memo, an official email

address with the designated administrator was created for this purpose and the evaluation of proposals was conducted through online conferencing or individual reviews of members in which comments and suggestions were to be gathered within 10 working days. The results will be forwarded to the corresponding proponents via email or other online platforms. Other guidelines were issued by the Office of the President. These include SSC Memorandum No. 43, s. 2020 or the Revised Review Mechanics on SorDECon Evaluation and SSC Memo No. 60, s. 2020 or Special Call for Proposals for FY 2021 Funding on November 23, 2020. In the guidelines, paper presentation during SorDECon was done via an online platform with a set time frame and evaluation of papers was conducted through blind review using the revised evaluation form. Meanwhile, the special call for proposals aimed to provide the faculty members and researchers of the university an opportunity to conduct short-term research projects with fixed funding of 80,000 pesos with a focus on provincial commodity priority areas. Another important policy crafted was the Interim Guidelines for SSC RDE Projects in the New Normal, which was approved through BOT Resolution No. 10, series of 2021 on March 19, 2021. It laid out the protocols and procedures regarding the submission, evaluation, implementation, and presentation of RDE projects, and the channeling of communications for RDE project implementation with strict adherence to the health and safety protocols issued by the government.

Conducting research during the pandemic or during a period of disruption seemed challenging, especially in terms of data gathering because of several restrictions imposed by the government. However, there are alternatives to the traditional methods of data collection that could be implemented by HEIs. Torrentira (2020) stated that data collection for quantitative and qualitative research may be conducted by using online development tools, the telephone, mobile phones, and video-conferencing applications. These alternatives were taken into consideration by the university, as evidenced by the approved policies and guidelines on the online submission, evaluation, implementation, and dissemination of the research projects. This result implies that the research activities of HEIs can be sustained using alternative strategies, particularly through the use of ICT during periods of disruptions.

**Table 8:** Online Research Activities

<b>Title</b>	<b>Office (s) Involved</b>	<b>Date</b>
Intellectual Property or IP Master Class	Office of Research, Development and Extension Services	July to October 2020
Webinar on Innovation, IP and Technology Commercialization: Creating Spin-offs (via Zoom)	Office of Research, Development and Extension Services	July 28–29, 2020
IP Policy Workshop	Office of Research, Development and Extension Services	September 10, 2020
Webinar on Innovation, IP and Technology Commercialization: Introduction to IP Valuation	Office of Research, Development and Extension Services	October 20, 2020
Virtual SorDECon 2020, Theme: “Redefining RDE Landscape in the New Normal”	Office of Research, Development and Extension Services	October 29, 2020
Orientation on IP application	Office of Research, Development and Extension Services	November 25, 2020
IP-Technology Business Management or TBM/IP Masterclass Re-echo Training (via Zoom)	Office of Research, Development and Extension Services	December 16–17, 2020

Table 8 shows the online activities initiated by ORDES, one of which was the SorDECon. It is an annual activity of ORDES that aims to disseminate completed research and extension of the institution. Because of the pandemic, the 2020 SorDECon was conducted virtually using the Zoom application on October 29, 2020. It was also streamed live on social media through its official Facebook page. The conference highlighted 43 competing research projects in the four categories, namely Education, Language, and Literature; Higher Education and Institutional Development; Technology, Environment, and Natural Resources; and Social Issues and Community Development. Retired professors of SorSU and experts and professionals from CHED Regional Office V and other institutions such as Central Bicol State University of Agriculture, Bicol University, Camarines Sur Polytechnic College, Partido State University, Northwest Samar State University, Divine Word College of Legazpi, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources–Sorsogon Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Office, and the Bicol Consortium for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development, served as evaluators. The top three papers with at least an 85% rating per category were declared as winners.

Other initiatives along research included various online training and webinars spearheaded by ORDES. These were conducted from July to December 2020. These included an IP Master Class, a Webinar on

Innovation, IP and Technology Commercialization: Creating Spin-offs (via Zoom), an IP Policy Workshop, a Webinar on Innovation, IP and Technology Commercialization: Introduction to IP Valuation, Orientation on IP application, and IP-TBM/IP Masterclass Re-echo Training (via Zoom). ORDES values the professional growth of faculty, especially in terms of the research: hence, the office allowed them to participate in these webinars. The result of this study implies that the capacity building activities of faculty researchers in the HEIs can be sustained even during a pandemic or crisis situations through the use of ICT tools.

### 3.4 Initiatives regarding extension

CHED (2008) has defined extension as the act of communicating, persuading, and helping specific sectors and target clientele to enable them to effectively improve production, the community and/or institutions, and quality of life. Despite the numerous challenges, extension projects must still address the community's needs and extension project implementers must ensure that activities and community linkages are not hampered by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pizaña et al., 2021). Similarly, SorSU, through ORDES, was able to sustain its extension services despite the pandemic through the collaborative efforts of officials, employees, students, CHED, local government partners, and other stakeholders. Table 9 shows the initiatives of SorSU regarding extension, which refers to the community outreach activities during the pandemic.

**Table 9:** Community Outreach Activities

Title	Office/Campus Involved	Community Served
SSC as first Quarantine Facility	Office of the President, SSC-Sorsogon City Campus, SSC-Bulan Campus, in collaboration with CHED and the Provincial Government of Sorsogon	Province of Sorsogon, Patients Identified as Persons Under Investigations and Persons Under monitoring
School of Graduate Studies (SGS) Donation Drive	School of Graduate Studies	Home for the Aged of Sorsogon and Person Deprived of Liberty at Provincial Jail.
Tindog Sorsogon, Daranon SSCians	SSC-Sorsogon City Campus	Selected beneficiaries in Sorsogon City
SSC Cares	SSC-Sorsogon City Campus	Fellow Bicolanas who were Victims of Typhoon Rolly at Guinobatan and Malinao, Albay
Immuno-booster Drink	SSC-Sorsogon City Campus	Frontliners of Sorsogon City
Veggie Cookies	SSC-Sorsogon City Campus	Frontlines of Sorsogon City
One SSC One	SSC-Bulan Campus	Farmers, Fisherfolks, and children in selected barangays of the Municipality of Bulan
Heart for Community Donation Drive		Participants from St. Louise de Marillac School of Bulan, Inc., A.G. Villaroya Technological Foundation Institute, and Sorsogon College of Criminology
Mask Production	SSC-Magallanes Campus	Magallanes Community
Community Kitchen	SSC-Magallanes Campus	Magallanes Community
Demo Farm Harvest	SSC-Magallanes Campus	Magallanes Community
Tilapia Tocino Production	SSC-Magallanes Campus	Magallanes Community
BIGANI (Biga Innovative Group for Advancement and Inclusiveness) sardines processing	SSC-Magallanes Campus	Magallanes Community
Smoked Fish Production (Tinapa)	SSC-Magallanes Campus	Magallanes Community
"Color MyECQ World"	SSC-Magallanes Campus	Selected senior citizens in Magallanes
Tabang Agrikulturista	SSC-Castilla Campus	Farmer beneficiaries in Castilla
Vermicast Distribution		
Disinfectant Formulation	SSC-Castilla Campus	Selected barangays in Castilla
Tabang Kapwa: SSC-Castilla Relief Operations	SSC-Castilla Campus	Castilla Community
Project aRTA: Reaching Through Arts	SSC-Castilla Campus	Selected beneficiaries in Castilla

In response to the increasing number of persons under monitoring (PUMs) and persons under investigation (PUIs) due to COVID-19, Sorsogon established its first provincial quarantine center at Sorsogon State University (CHED, 2020e). This was made possible in collaboration with the administration, the officials of CHED, and the Provincial Government of Sorsogon. The university shared its facilities with 4,448 patients. Sorsogon City and the Bulan Campuses started their operation on March 22 and March 30, 2020, respectively.

Also, the School of Graduate Studies conducted an outreach activity through a donation of goods for the immediate needs of the elderly of the Sorsogon Home for the Aged on September 28, 2020. An outreach activity was also initiated through the SGS Extension Services on January 21, 2021, in which 350 persons deprived of liberty at the Sorsogon City District Jail served as the beneficiaries.

The extensionists of the Sorsogon city campus also actively engaged in several activities. They were able to serve 23,680 beneficiaries through its “Tindog Sorsogon, Daranon SSCians” initiative. They also shared their research-based outputs, namely “Mah-gic,” an immune-booster drink, and veggie cookies, with several frontliners in Sorsogon City. On November 6, 2020, the Sorsogon City campus extended its service to fellow Bicolanos in the Municipalities of Guinobatan and Malinao, Albay who were victims of Typhoon Rolly. Similarly, the extensionists of Bulan Campus served 1,055 farmers, fisherfolks, and children in selected barangays in the Municipality of Bulan through its “One SSC, One Heart for Community Donation Drive.” The ICT Department of the Bulan campus extended technical assistance to three schools, namely the Saint Louise de Marillac School of Bulan, Inc., the A.G. Villaroya Technological Foundation Institute and Sorsogon College of Criminology, Inc. The primary aim of this project was to educate the faculty members and staff of the schools on the utilization of Moodle as their official online learning management system during the pandemic.

The Magallanes campus had various initiatives regarding extension to be of service to the Magallanes community. They produced more than 200 masks, 120 of which were distributed in the municipality of Magallanes. Through the community kitchen initiative, more than 50 packs of sardines were also distributed. Fresh fish through a demo farm project was also given to selected COVID-19 frontliners. The campus sustained its tilapia tocino production. They were able to distribute 200 packs of tilapia tocino in Magallanes. Also, through the BIGANI sardine production of the campus in coordination with LGU-Magallanes, 900 bottles of sardines were produced. Six hundred and seventy-four bottles were bought by the Local Government Unit to be given to their barangays and 60 bottles were given to the recipients in the coastal barangay of Biga in Magallanes. Further, 250 packs of smoked fish were distributed through the campus’ smoked fish production. Lastly, a fun COVID-19 measure for the elderly in Magallanes was initiated through the activity entitled “Color MyECQ World.” They distributed coloring materials to ease the boredom and anxiety of senior citizens.

The extensionists from the Castilla campus also embarked on outreach activities as part of SorSU’s response to the challenges of the time. The campus distributed five sacks of vermicast to farmer-beneficiaries in Castilla through its “Tabang Agrikulturista” initiative. They also formulated disinfectants and distributed these to selected barangays. The Tabang Kapwa Relief Operations served 200 beneficiaries from barangays Mayon and Tomalaytay in Castilla, Sorsogon. Lastly, an online exhibit for a cause entitled “Project aRTa: Reaching Through Arts” was also conducted in coordination with other local artists to support the Castilla campus’ relief operations.

An informant stated the following: “Faculty extensionists were able to conduct community extension activities because of their commitment and support to the thrusts of the university.” The result of the study implies that the extension services of HEIs can be sustained even during periods of disruptions or during a pandemic. The commitment of faculty members and officials, and strong collaboration among HEIs, local governments, and other stakeholders, are vital for sustaining the community extension services, for performing their social responsibility, and for continuing to uplift the lives of the community in which they serve.

### 3.5 Policy recommendations

The initiatives of Sorsogon State University in sustaining public services in the new normal are noteworthy. However, the threats and challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic continue to affect everyone in the community. Hence, in order to improve further the delivery of public services in the “new normal”, the following policy recommendations may be considered: (1) SorSU, through the Office of the Student Affairs Services, may establish an institutional mechanism to support and extend assistance to students that have tested positive for COVID-19 in collaboration with the Health Services Unit of the university and other organizations; (2) the faculty and students’ readiness for online learning may be looked into in order to have a clear view of what appropriate intervention may be conducted; (3) more in-house capacity trainings for all faculty members on different flexible learning modalities and trainings on how to develop pre-recorded video lessons and other digital instructional materials may be conducted; (4) monitoring and evaluation may be conducted on the effectiveness of the flexible learning modalities and mechanisms being implemented in order to ensure that the quality of instruction is not sacrificed while maintaining the safety of the SorSU community; (5) ORDES may initiate data-driven research on the vaccination status of all employees and students of the university and on other areas related to the pandemic that could be of use in the policy formulation and decision-making of administrators; (6) through the ICT Office and the ICT Department of Bulan Campus, SorSU may consider developing IT solutions/web-based systems that could be utilized by the university; (7) the ICT office may also extend technical assistance to students having difficulty in installing programs needed for their

online classes; and (8) SorSU may strengthen its linkages and consortia with other higher educational institutions and other agencies to further improve its services in the new normal.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Sorsogon State University embarked on significant initiatives to sustain the delivery of public services even during the pandemic through the collaborative efforts of the officials, faculty members, non-teaching staff, students, and various stakeholders from the Commission in Higher Education (CHED), local government units in Sorsogon, and other partners in the community. The administration formulated policies and guidelines on COVID-19 preventive measures and on alternative work arrangements that were anchored on the protocols issued by the Inter-Agency Task Force Against COVID-19, the Department of Health, the Commission on Higher Education, and the Provincial Government Unit of Sorsogon. The different offices of the university conducted virtual activities and online services through their official Facebook pages and other online platforms such as Zoom and Facebook Live streaming features for virtual activities with large audiences.

The initiatives regarding instruction centered on capacity building for the faculty members to adapt to the current demand for online or distance learning. These initiatives included online training and webinars on the utilization of learning management systems and the implementation of flexible teaching and learning in the new normal. The university strictly adhered to the policies of CHED on flexible learning modality in order to continue delivering services on education while ensuring the safety and health of everyone in the community. The initiatives along research were also focused on policy formulation and capacity building for faculty researchers. The shift to online procedures in the submission, evaluation, implementation, and dissemination of research projects was noteworthy in SorSU through the Board of Trustees' approved policies and guidelines. Professional growth was also considered by ORDES when they conducted online training for the faculty members of the university despite the pandemic. The initiatives of SorSU along extension were mostly community outreach activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Various activities were implemented by the extensionists of each of the campuses of the university as a manifestation of SorSU's commitment to be always of service to fellow Sorsoguenos and the community. SorSU was also the first SUC to open its doors to the public, as it shared its facilities with the PUIs and PUMs of Sorsogon province. All of these initiatives were made possible through the collective and collaborative efforts of the officials, employees, students, and other stakeholders from CHED, LGUs, and other agencies.

The threats and challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have caused disruptions to people's normal way of doing things. As public servants, the officials and employees of the university must continue to uphold their mandate to deliver advanced and professional instruction in all of its programs and to conduct research and extension activities. The university may endeavor to conduct more innovative actions to further improve public services in the new normal. Since the study was limited only to identifying the initiatives undertaken by the university in the areas of administration, instruction, research, and extension, there is a need to conduct future studies to investigate how these initiatives have created an impact on the lives of the faculty, students, and other university stakeholders during the pandemic. The effectiveness of the flexible learning modalities implemented by the university and the challenges experienced by the faculty members and students during online teaching may also be looked into in order to ensure the quality of teaching and learning even during the pandemic. The efficiency and productivity of the university employees during their work-from-home arrangements could also be studied. These are some of the future research directions of the present study.

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