

Plans as Faculty Regent

(Ricardo P. Babaran)

The University of the Philippines selects a Faculty Regent (FR) every two years. This is an important process because the FR, as the representative of the faculty, plays a crucial role in the university's governance.

The following proposed activities for the next FR is anchored on the mandate given to UP as the national university, the Philippine government's commitment to respond to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are now increasingly used to measure individual and institutional performance, and UP's Strategic Plan 2023-2029, entitled "Transformative University in the Service of the Nation", which includes 10 Flagship Programs that seek "to leverage UP's expertise and resources to maximally impact national progress". All these can be used to harmonize advocacy work for the faculty's interests and attainment of UP's institutional mandate as the national university.

The challenge for the next FR is to explore how the faculty can be mobilized to support this strategic plan, which touches on almost all aspects of the faculty's responsibilities related to teaching, research and creative work, and public service, and ensure that they are aligned with the UP Charter. It is important to note that many of these proposed activities are not necessarily new but are also not yet fully integrated in the university's operations.

So, for the next two years, the following activities are proposed.

1. Faculty needs assessment

The total number regular faculty and research faculty members of UP is 4,629, comprised of Professors/Research Professors (633, 14.8%), Associate Professors/Research Associate Professors (834, 19.5%), Assistant Professor/Research Assistant Professors (2041, 47.8%), and Instructors (760, 17.8%). This profile suggests that there is still a lot of room for professional growth among the faculty. It would be informative to know the typical nature of the activities of faculty members by rank so that all issues affecting faculty welfare can always be addressed and balanced with the productivity that the university would like to achieve. Thus, an internal study across all CUs of UP shall be conducted to understand the motivation of faculty members to stay with the university. Such a study may provide insights on how to promote professional development among the faculty and strengthen faculty retention. The goal is to explore every opportunity available to maximize the potential of faculty members during their stay with the university.

2. Assessment of issues affecting faculty welfare

Every faculty member has the potential to reach the highest positions within the university under the right conditions. Sadly, some faculty members retire without reaching the highest possible position of Professor. This is a serious opportunity loss for faculty because rank is directly related to one's level of compensation, which is a major factor related to faculty welfare. This must be addressed, if the university wants to leverage faculty expertise for national progress, because the capacities of experienced faculty members are so much richer when they rise through the ranks.

For the faculty to support the range of activities expected of the national university, it is important to determine the factors that would enable faculty members, irrespective of rank, to deliver their services happily while staying with the university. First, compensation and retirement

plans are essentially settled through SSL and GSIS, respectively; but there is probably some room for additional performance-based incentives. For example, an incentive, similar to the International Publication Award, may be introduced to motivate faculty members who can help commercialize research outputs or can support community partners establish or sustain a profitable business enterprise. Second, given the intentions that every administration is planning for the entire country, the university should consider introducing strategies to address the professional development of the faculty, such as research support, teaching development programs, support for attendance in conferences and workshops, or any capability-building programs that offer clearer career pathways. Third, many options were introduced after the COVID-19 pandemic for flexible work arrangements, but the university should continue exploring ways of improving work-life balance, especially on matters related to mental health. Fourth, a lot can still be done to improve working conditions, especially on the allocation of teaching and administrative load, both of which can take time from research or creative work and even personal life. Fifth, there is also room for improvements in terms of recognition and career satisfaction, and these can probably be addressed through additional award systems, more participatory governance, and support for community and collegiality. Sixth, for a university with 8 CUs spread over 20 campuses, the university needs to constantly review issues to job security and fair contracts, ensuring that possible isolated miscues, such as arbitrary dismissals at the CU or department level somewhere, are addressed promptly and will not taint the image of UP, being the national university. Seventh, since the university seems more open to partnerships, perhaps the best arrangements for contracting part-time, contractual, or adjunct faculty with respective to compensation, workload, and career development opportunities should be used as a template for all other academic units to follow; the best possible package should be considered for highly qualified partners from other institutions. Eighth, the university's interests can always be served well when candid negotiations and open channels of communication are maintained on matters related to faculty rights or conditions affecting the faculty.

3. Study the effectiveness of the faculty promotion instrument

The professional growth of the faculty members, if they retire as full professors, should follow a growth curve, which peaks asymptotically as the retirement of age of 65 is reached. For many, this level is reached, if not always exceeded, because of productivity through scholarly outputs, which are expected of all professors. One challenge is how to continue motivating this group of professors. For example, introducing an incentive for a Distinguished Professor Award or a Distinguished Mentor Award may be appropriate for this purpose.

Although many will reach the professor level by the time they retire, the pace at which this is reached varies, depending on the levels of engagement of faculty members. Initiatives of the university administration to speed up the promotion of faculty members to the highest possible faculty positions shall be encouraged since this would mean better (and accruing) compensation from the start of any promotion until retirement age. The expanded capacities of professors who get promoted much earlier in their careers will enable them to engage more of their academic peers outside UP. Thus, the thrust of the current administration to encourage the formation of research groups is commendable and should be supported because this will allow more faculty members to deepen their level of knowledge within their respective academic disciplines. Enabling policies to make this happen shall be supported to sustain the operations of organized research groups (see possible topics below).

Despite the existing policies that will ramp up the production of scholarly outputs, it is probably necessary to review the promotion instrument, to assess if it is still effective in capturing the range of anticipated activities of the faculty of a national university. It is worth asking whether

the assignment of points for promotion is still commensurate to the nature and amount of work dedicated to completing assigned tasks. Inputs from item 1 above (on Faculty Needs Assessment) and the following point on diversification of the faculty activities will shed more light on possible policy interventions on this matter.

4. Diversification of the activities of the faculty

Almost all outputs of organized research groups are possibly jointly authored by its members. The strengths of collaborations will surely ramp up the production of scholarly outputs; however, it is worth asking if the activities of the faculty can still be diversified, especially by rank, so that these activities can be more effectively captured in allocating promotion points, which are currently more tilted towards publications and citations.

A review of the engagements of the faculty would reveal the need to prioritize their activities, possibly guided by faculty rank and even age. The adjustments are necessary to support the thrusts of the current UP administration to be a “Transformative University in the Service of the Nation”. For example, considering that the funds from private donors are similarly available for non-government organizations and universities, more senior members of research groups should probably be harnessed to demonstrate their leadership by helping in seeking grants that will benefit all members of their group; they can also be relied upon in forging connections with other researchers within and outside UP to extend the reach of the group and its members. Senior faculty members seem more fit to render services like these while the more junior members of research groups probably can do more physically taxing tasks, especially travelling to far-flung areas given the archipelagic setting of the country. Strategies like these need to be introduced to regularly motivate faculty of any rank to render their services that support the interests of the university.

5. Pursuit of tangible outcomes for greater societal impact through inter-research group collaborations

Some legislators and managers of government funds are hedging in allocating research grants or in continuing established research platforms because of perceptions that the benefits of research to the public are not readily evident. From this feedback, publications, and citations alone apparently do not adequately guarantee the government’s sustained support for research activities, and appropriate interventions should be introduced to convince them that such funds are necessary for national progress. The university therefore needs to consider strategies to respond to these clamors by ensuring more translation of research results, such as transformation of scientific outputs to useful technology, or creation of commercial products or services from research findings, in addition to using outputs of research to support the formulation of policies. Attempts to promote research collaboration should not just be limited to the usual research groups in the natural sciences, engineering, and other academic fields that are traditionally strong in generating new knowledge. It is probably necessary also to promote inter-research group collaborations that cut across disciplines within a CU, especially between the natural sciences and business or social sciences faculties, so that the feasibility of drawing benefits from any research activity to support the generation of jobs can immediately be assessed. Moreover, it is possible to draw lessons from expanded group collaborations, and these can be documented to contribute new knowledge about processes that work and should be sustained and about processes that do not work and should be discontinued.

Perhaps, a strategy to leverage the university’s support for disciplines that are less catered to by most government grants, for example, business-related disciplines or the social sciences, should be developed to gain access to bigger research funds that typically go to the disciplines in the natural

sciences and engineering, such as those from DOST, CHED, or other government grant-giving agencies. It should be possible for the university to allocate funds representing up to 20% for every working research group. However, this allocation should be prioritized to those in the business disciplines, as this would demonstrate the university's seriousness in commercializing research outputs, which is essential for job creation and local area development. Similar allocations for social science disciplines should be considered because this would allow the university to systematically assess the impacts of research activities and may be used to guide future programs. These initiatives will project a broader and more acceptable image of a responsive university to all its stakeholders.

6. Promotion of integrative programs as a strategy for inter-university partnerships

A lot is expected of UP being the national university. One way of doing this is to find common ground with our national partners towards implementing interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary programs focusing on matters of national concern. The opening up of a SUC/LUC Liason office will help in this regard. This means that the formation of research groups should be expanded to include experts across CUs and between UP and SUCs/LUCs. Perhaps, not known to many, this is important because the simple act of opening channels of collaboration with these partners will unleash counterpart funds that are just waiting for the right proposals to promote local area development. All these partnerships should be encouraged, provided such engagements would mutually benefit all parties involved.

The feasibility of using established academic partnerships (represented by UP and its partners) to engage industry and other partners may also be explored because these collaborations will likely foster faster translation of research outputs to realize better outcomes and broader societal impacts. National partnerships would ensure a more equitable development of different regions throughout the country, promote the implementation of standardized or mixed approaches, and ensure the effective distribution of scarce resources.

7. Exploration of possible two-way collaborations between UP and its national partners

The delivery of services to support our partners would likely put so much strain on the capacity of UP to attend to its regular stakeholders. Thus, to ensure that 'serving the nation' is a happy endeavor and not a source of mental stress for the faculty, it is suggested that any new arrangement should promote a better work-life balance for all participating faculty members. The university might want to explore possible mechanisms for qualified faculty of partner SUCs to share their expertise with UP so that the university would not be solely burdened by the collaborations. For example, qualified faculty of SUCs may be tapped to be members of thesis/dissertation committees of UP students as a way of reducing workload. Faculty with advanced training abroad should be allowed to co-implement capability-building programs using UP's facilities. A workshop shall be proposed to discuss the types of activities where our national partners may participate in.

8. Support national partnerships through UP's international linkages

Recently, the BOR approved a policy to engage international partners. This is a good development, and all organized research groups should take advantage of this initiative to forge partnerships with their foreign counterparts. Organized national partnerships (item 7 above) can be leveraged to engage international foreign partners. To help realize national progress, expanded research groups need to capitalize on the strengths of the Philippines by developing programs on certain thematic areas of national and global concern, such as biodiversity conservation; Philippine culture and the arts; natural products and drug discovery; health and nutrition; innovative food systems; environmental management; climate change adaptation and mitigation; disaster risk,

response, and management; and, ocean energy systems, among others. These broad topics can allow several research groups to collaborate; providing seed funds to mobilize the expanded groups would offer cascading benefits for UP for years to come.

In forging international partnerships, the university must be conscious also of the interests of potential partners and their representatives, and be ready to consider them, provided the collaborations mutually and fairly benefit all partners. For example, professors in North America and Europe usually have a free 2-month period that they can shop around for engaging interested partners. If the university wants to engage these professors, especially those with expertise that is not readily available in the country, the university needs to source counterpart funds to cover their compensation for this period. This will require innovative strategies for fund generation.

About half of our faculty are Assistant Professors and about 20% more are still instructors. The university will be served much better opportunities open for them to earn their doctorate degrees much faster. Therefore, the research groups should be encouraged to open channels of partnering with their peers in top universities abroad and to consider offering programs by research. However, the arrangements must have the flexibility for UP to own the program. Attaining doctorate degrees by research is very appropriate for the Philippines because it is probably the fastest way to address information gaps that directly relate to the country. The university can even realize its thrusts for national progress faster if engaged faculty members from UP's SUC and LUC collaborators can be harnessed to be supported as part of the collaborations.

Summary

The faculty provides the image of the university to all its stakeholders. It is therefore important that the concerns of this sector are properly addressed so that it can effectively serve the interests of UP. At the Board of Regents (BOR), the FR shall strive to advocate for the interests and concerns of this key sectoral group. The interest of the university can best be served if the faculty work harmoniously with the UP administration; thus, to realize this condition, the FR shall always make sure that the channels of communication between the sector and the administration are open and that feedback from the faculty are always considered in governance processes, especially on matters related to academic freedom. Regular consultations with all faculty members across CUs of UP shall be conducted to ensure that inputs to these processes, especially on issues concerning the university's academic environment and faculty welfare, are inclusive. And, whenever necessary, collaborations with other regents and university stakeholders shall be considered to ensure that UP really lives up to its role as the national university of the Philippines.