



INDIGENOUS NAVIGATOR

Data by and for Indigenous Peoples



Policy Brief **3**

Institutionalizing Indigenous Studies/Education in Philippine Higher Education

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Introduction

The educational system that was introduced by the Spanish and American colonial regimes, and was essentially maintained by post-colonial regimes under Filipino elite rule has been instrumental in the “othering” or marginalization of Indigenous Peoples (Veneracion 1990; Rodil 1994; Constantino 1975).



As a cultural apparatus of the State, the educational system, which includes its structure, processes and, most significantly, its content, served to consolidate the colonial and post-colonial State. In the process, it created and reinforced ethnic differentiation. It privileged the ethnic groups that lived—forcibly or otherwise, while it simultaneously “othered” (demonized) or marginalized those ethnic groups that resisted colonial assimilation (Rodil 1994; Salazar 1997; Veneracion 1990; Rovillos 2009). Spanish colonial education dismissed indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing as “vain genealogies” (Salazar 1997) or sheer superstitious, pagan beliefs that had to be forgotten and rejected.

Today, Indigenous Peoples continue to be misrepresented in State-approved textbooks and curriculum as backward, uncivilized and other derogatory and discriminatory labels (De Los Reyes, 2016). Even well-meaning initiatives like the IP Education (IPEd) by the Department of Education (DepEd) have been found wanting, since “its design is not founded on indigenous learning systems or structure...” (Abayao 2011, 217).

The Philippine State guaranteed to address this historical injustice on Indigenous Peoples through the 1987 Constitution and the 1997 Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA). Section 10, Article II of the 1987 Philippine Constitution provides that the State shall promote social justice in all phases of national development. Section 17, Article XIV of the 1987 Philippine Constitution also provides that the State shall recognize, respect, and protect the rights of indigenous cultural communities to preserve and develop their cultures, traditions, and institutions. “It shall consider these rights in the formulation of national plans and policies.” (NCIP AO 3, s. 2018).

To fulfill the above-mentioned constitutional provision, the Philippine State, through its House of Representatives and the Senate, legislated the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 or the Republic Act No. 8371: “An Act to Recognize, Protect and Promote the Rights of Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples, Creating a National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, Establishing Implementing Mechanisms, Appropriating Funds Therefor, and for Other Purposes.” This landmark legislation recognizes, protects and promotes the four (4) bundle of rights of Indigenous Peoples, which includes the following: 1) right to ancestral land/domain and natural resources therein; 2) right to self-governance and empowerment; 3) right to social justice; and 4) right to cultural integrity.

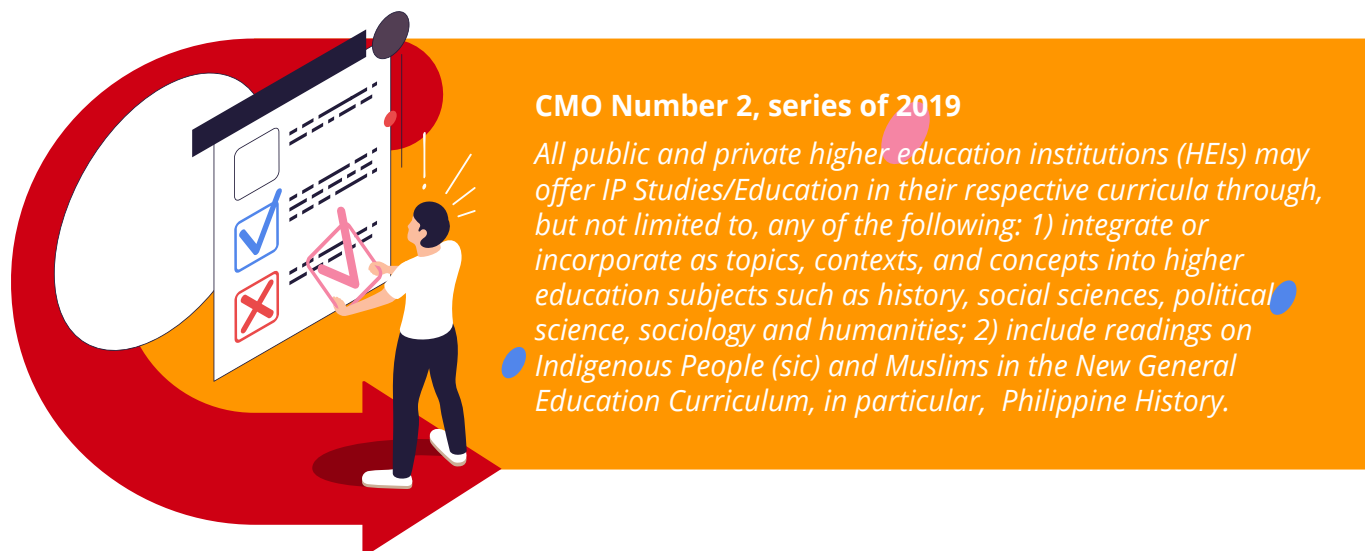
Moreover, Section 30 (educational systems), Chapter VI (right to cultural integrity) of IPRA stipulates that:

Section 30 (educational systems), Chapter VI (right to cultural integrity) of IPRA

The State shall provide equal access to various cultural opportunities to the ICCs/IPs through the educational system, public or private cultural entities, scholarships, grants and other incentives without prejudice to their right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions by providing education in their own language, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children/youth shall have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State.



In furtherance of the above-mentioned State policy on Indigenous Education, being an expression of their right to cultural integrity, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) came up with CMO Number 2, series of 2019, with subject: “Integration of Indigenous Peoples Studies/Education into the Relevant Higher Education Curricula.” Section 1 of the CMO suggests “Schemes on How to Offer Indigenous Peoples’ (IP) Studies/Education.” It states that:



CMO Number 2, series of 2019

All public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) may offer IP Studies/Education in their respective curricula through, but not limited to, any of the following: 1) integrate or incorporate as topics, contexts, and concepts into higher education subjects such as history, social sciences, political science, sociology and humanities; 2) include readings on Indigenous People (sic) and Muslims in the New General Education Curriculum, in particular, Philippine History.

More than a hundred of Philippine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) promptly responded to the CMO No. 2, Series of 2019, despite the absence of a more detailed implementing rules and a handbook/manual on Indigenous Peoples’ Education/Studies. The HEIs were provided leeway to conceptualize and implement the “mainstreaming of Indigenous Peoples’ Studies/Education into the curriculum.” There is a need to study the effects or even impacts/outcomes of the CMO, as this was not covered by the Indigenous Navigator national survey (Tebtebba, 2023).

Recently (in December 2024), the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), in an en banc resolution, created a Technical Panel on Indigenous Peoples Studies/Education. This is an unprecedented move. The Technical Panel (TP) is tasked, among others, to come up with the 5-year development plan on IP Studies for higher education institutions in the Philippines and to recommend policies, standards and guidelines towards Indigenous Studies/Education for higher education.

This policy brief aims to contribute (at least initially) to this policy development/s, particularly on the subject matter of: 1) increasing IP Student’s access to higher education and 2) advancing indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing in higher education.

Methodology

This policy brief is based on the Indigenous Navigator (IN)-Philippines study as of 2022-present. The IN conducted a national and community survey in order to assess the state of implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The IN data is supplemented and corroborated by a review of related literature.

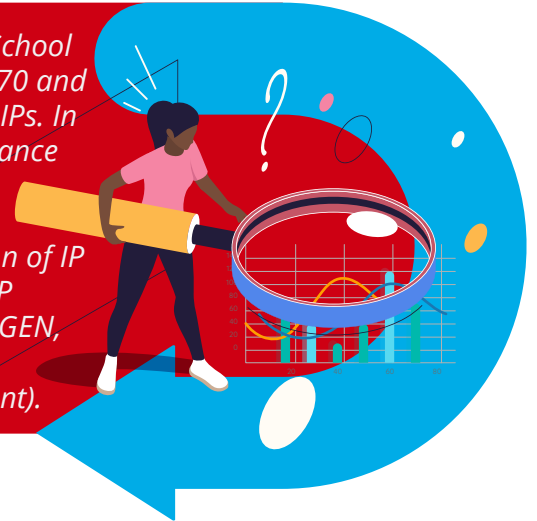
Data/Findings

ON IP ACCESS TO EDUCATION (ESP TERTIARY LEVEL)

The IN-Philippines Report (2023) revealed that IPs continue to have difficulties accessing basic social services like education from the State. The study reveals only 30% of IPs are able to reach tertiary level education of which 8% are able to graduate from college.

A recent World Bank report (2024) confirmed that:

School attendance rates for IP children vary across regions. School attendance rates for IP children aged 5 to 24 range between 70 and 78 percent nationally, compared to 75 to 79 percent for non-IPs. In most regions (except CAR and Cagayan Valley), school attendance rates are lower among IP children. The gap in school attendance between IP and non-IP children is particularly large in MIMAROPA and SOCCSKARGEN, where the proportion of IP children attending school is about 7 points lower than non-IP children. The disparity is particularly alarming in SOCCSKARGEN, with the country's highest level of non-IP school attendance (79 percent) but also the lowest level for IP children (70 percent).



The report also explained that “work and the lack of financial resources are the most common reasons for not attending school.” (WB 2024, 52). Indigenous Peoples’ poverty is indeed the major reason for non-attendance to school. There are, however, other reasons, as cited by the IP participants in the IN community survey. These are: feeling of detachment/isolation/exclusion from the college/university community, bullying and discrimination from other non-IP students within the college/university and lack of psycho-social support from the college/support from the college/university.

ON THE CONTENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In April 2022, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) farmed-out a survey on the compliance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with CMO No. 2, series of 2019 that we mentioned above. Some 139 HEIs participated as respondents in the survey. A study (Rovillos and Bautista, 2025) of the data from the survey shows that: twenty (20 or 14.38%) HEIs reported that they have established their IP Studies/Education Center or Hub in their respective regions; forty seven (47 or 33.81%) reported that IP Studies/Education is being offered as an elective subject; and ninety two (92 or 66.19%) reported that they have integrated IP Studies/Education as a topic in existing subjects and programs. Moreover, there was no HEI (zero) who reported that they have an existing academic degree program on Indigenous Studies/Education (Rovillos and Bautista, 2025). It must be noted, however, that the University of the Philippines Baguio, which started offering a doctorate on Indigenous Studies in August 2021, did not participate in the CHED survey.

On a more substantive (content) aspect, the CHED survey shows that the dominant or most preferred scheme of “mainstreaming” efforts is by adding IP studies topics to the existing subject/course of the academic program. According to the literature on Indige-

nous Studies, “mainstreaming” is synonymous to “integration.” Many IP scholars, advocates and activists are wary of “mainstreaming” because “it has underlying assumptions on the “status” of indigenous knowledge (IK) and science as knowledge.” (Rovillos and Bautista, 2025). In co-management of natural resources, for example, IK is treated only as a ‘supplement’ to science; useful parts of IK are “mined” and praised when they are aligned with scientific knowledge (Mazzocchi 2018, 329). In programs like this, IK is only given token recognition through an “add-indigenous-and-stir” approach. This disembodied knowledge as pieces of IK are “re-contextualized within a different knowledge system” leading to processes of atomization, fragmentation, alteration (or scientification) and dispossession of IK (Mazzocchi 2018, 329).

Critiques of mainstreaming/integration model propose either an indigenist (i.e., IK as a distinct educational system in itself) or a pluralist epistemology (i.e., IK co-exists with other knowledge systems, e.g. the western scientific knowledge system).

Conclusion

The Philippine educational system has failed the Indigenous Peoples in the country in two ways. One is its inaccessibility to the majority of the 9.8 million (PSA, 2020) IP population of the Philippines due to IPs’ poverty (no funds and needed at work in the community); lack/absence of economic and psycho-social support to IPs, who continue to feel alienated from the HEI and discriminated by non-IP students and their teachers.

Another failure is that the content of HEI curriculum, which is (still) dominantly western-influenced, is “integrationist” of IPs and IK into mainstream culture and education. Here, IK becomes fragmented and disembodied, and not recognized as a holistic, community-based and culturally contextualized knowledge system.

Recommendations

Based on the preceding presentation of data, findings and analysis, we propose the following:

1. Increase IP students’ access to higher education by:
 - a. allotting more slots for IP students in HEI admissions policy;
 - b. providing more scholarships and other financial assistance to IP students;
 - c. providing housing for IP students;
 - d. providing psycho-social support to IP students;
 - e. educating non-IP students on IP culture, history and rights to make them more sensitive to and respectful of their IP classmates, and vice-versa.
2. Revise/improve the HEI curriculum, by:
 - a. offering Indigenous Peoples’ Studies/Education as a distinct academic program;
 - b. centering Indigenous Knowledge System/s and IP rights (UNDRIP and IPRA) in the content of HEI curriculum;

- c. involving the IP communities, directly or through their leaders and/or elders, in the design and development of the curriculum and
- d. inviting IPs/culture bearers as resource persons, if not as faculty of the course or program, with appropriate incentives.

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**Funded by
the European Union**

Disclaimer: This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Tebtebba and its author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.