



PHILIPPINE NORMAL UNIVERSITY
The National Center for Teacher Education

POLICY BRIEF SERIES

VOLUME 9 | ISSUE 10 | 2025

PRINT ISSN: 2984-9063

ONLINE ISSN: 2984-9071

Strengthening Philippine Higher Education Through Centers Of Excellence: Policy Insights From CHED Memorandum Order No. 10, S. 2025

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(Source. Photo taken by Prof. Arlyne Marasigan)

Based on CHED Memorandum Order No. 10, s. 2025, this policy brief examines the role of Centers of Excellence (COEs) in strengthening Philippine higher education. While the COE framework aims to elevate academic quality, research, and international competitiveness, its potential is hindered by significant systemic challenges. Key arguments highlight the stark regional disparities in COE distribution, with Luzon, particularly the National Capital Region, hosting a concentration of centers compared to Visayas and Mindanao. Furthermore, disciplinary imbalances persist, with Education and Engineering dominating, while fields like Health Sciences and Humanities receive less recognition. The brief identifies critical weaknesses, including a compliance-oriented culture that prioritizes standards over substantive outcomes, and faculty promotion systems that do not adequately reward research excellence. To address these issues, the recommendations advocate for deeper structural reforms. These include equitable resource allocation, genuine faculty development, enhanced research capacity with database access, and robust accountability mechanisms with frequent evaluations. The central argument is that without a shift from symbolic adherence to transformative action, the COE designation risks perpetuating existing inequities rather than fostering inclusive, world-class scholarship essential for national development.

Keywords: CHED Memorandum Order No. 10; Centers of Excellence; Philippine Higher Education; Academic Quality; Research Capacity; Internationalization; Higher Education Policy.

Recommended Citation:

Aminulla, J.T., et.,al, Strengthening Philippine Higher Education Through Centers Of Excellence: Policy Insights from CHED Memorandum Order No. 10, S. 2025. *Policy Brief Series* 9 (10), pp. 1-7. Philippine Normal University Educational Policy Research and Development Office.



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Introduction

Higher education is a central driver of human capital formation, research productivity, and socio-economic progress. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), as mandated by Republic Act 7722, also known as the Higher Education Act of 1994, is tasked with promoting excellence and equity across higher education institutions (HEIs) (Higher Education Act 7722, 1994). One of its flagship mechanisms for achieving this is the recognition of Centers of Excellence (COEs), which serve as benchmarks for quality instruction, research, and innovation. To institutionalize this framework, CHED issued Memorandum Order No. 10, series of 2025, which outlines the policies, standards, and processes for the recognition, support, and monitoring of COEs.

The EDCOM II report, carried out by the Second Congressional Commission on Education, revealed serious problems affecting Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs) (Second Congressional Commission on Education, 2024). It emphasized that the country's education system is struggling, particularly in the areas of graduate education, research, and innovation, which have been identified as key priority concerns. Among the specific challenges raised is the limited capacity of universities to produce high-quality research.

The COE designation is both a recognition and a responsibility. Institutions awarded this status are expected to sustain high academic quality, contribute to knowledge production, and support other HEIs through mentoring, networking, and collaboration. Although Centers of Development (CODs) are not explicitly covered under CMO 10, they continue to play an important role in CHED's quality assurance ecosystem by identifying promising programs that may eventually transition into COEs (Commission on Higher Education No 10, 2025). Furthermore, the globalization of higher education has significantly impacted Philippine universities, prompting them to engage in global competition and ranking based on performance and competitiveness. However, some institutions resist this direction, citing issues related to equitable access to government assistance and the consistency of internationalization efforts with their institutional missions. Data on the distribution of HEIs and the spread of COE and COD designations reveal disparities across regions and disciplines, underscoring the need for policies that promote balanced access to excellence nationwide.

Key Issues

Among the 2,334 higher education institutions, private HEIs lead with 1,619, followed by 152 Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) and 113 State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) (Commission on Higher Education, 2025). Table 1 illustrates the regional distribution of centers of excellence and

development universities, totaling 135 institutions nationwide. Luzon Island has the highest number of universities recorded (Commission on Higher Education, 2022). Moreover, the uneven geographical distribution of these centers is linked to stringent compliance standards (Sinsay-Villanueva et al., 2025). These patterns serve as a critical reference for assessing regional equity in educational provision and directly inform the designation of Centers of Excellence (COEs) and Centers of Development (CODs), which function as instruments for advancing institutional performance and capacity-building.

Table 1. Distribution of COE/COD Higher Education Institutions by Region

Island Group	Region	Official Name	Number of Institutions
Luzon	Region I	Ilocos Region	11
	Region II	Cagayan Valley	8
	Region III	Central Luzon	9
	Region IV-A	Calabarzon	12
	Region V	Bicol Region	7
	Region XIII	National Capital Region (NCR)	26
	Region XIV	Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR)	5
	Region XVII	MIMAROPA	2
		Sub-total	80
Visayas	Region VI	Western Visayas	7
	Region VII	Central Visayas	9
	Region VIII	Eastern Visayas	5
	Region XVIII	Negros Island Region	4
		Sub-total	25
Mindanao	Region IX	Zamboanga Peninsula	6
	Region X	Northern Mindanao	11
	Region XI	Davao Region	8
	Region XII	Soccsksargen	2

Region	Caraga	3
XVI		
	Sub-total	30
Total		135

Note. The authors created this table based on the available data from Commission on Higher Education (2022)

Table 2 indicates that although private schools are more numerous than public ones, both types of institutions are well-represented in terms of COD and COE designations. This implies that recognition is not limited to one type of school but is spread throughout the higher education landscape, highlighting a collective dedication to academic excellence and institutional growth. The significant presence of CODs and COEs in both public and private schools highlights their equal contribution to the nation's educational progress and their role in promoting excellence across various academic fields.

Table 2. The distribution of Public and Private Institutions Recognized as CODs and COEs

Institutional Classification	Number of Recognized Institutions	Centers of Development (COD)	Center of Excellence (COE)
SUC	53	46	28
Main/Satellite			
Private HEIs	71	139	116
Total	124	185	144

Note. The authors created this table based on the available data from Commission on Higher Education (2022)

Table 3 illustrates that among the 257 centers of excellence and development, the field of education and teacher training had the most centers, totaling 74, followed closely by engineering and technology, with 67 centers. Agriculture and fisheries had an equal distribution of COEs and CODs, whereas health sciences had fewer universities designated as COEs and CODs. In the study that Castulo et al., (2025) analyzed the data from 21 COEs between 2014 and 2023, the study reveals that the Philippines ranks sixth in international educational research collaboration among Southeast Asian nations, trailing Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand. Additionally, the results indicated that Europe ranks highest in terms of the number of collaborative partners, whereas the Asia Pacific region excels in the number of co-authored papers. Within the country, collaborations that involve only academic institutions are most common, with De La Salle University having the most robust national networks and the University of the Philippines excelling in international collaborations.

Table 3. Allocation of COE and COD across Academic Disciplines

Discipline Cluster	Centers of Development (COD)	Centers of Excellence (COE)	Aggregate
Agriculture & Fisheries	18	18	36
Engineering & Technology	40	27	67
Health Sciences	10	9	19
Education & Teacher Training	38	36	74
Business & Management	16	10	26
Humanities & Social Sciences	20	15	35
Total	142	115	257

Note. The authors created this table based on the available data from Commission on Higher Education (2022)

Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

Building on the provisions of CMO 10, s. in 2025, this study offers policy recommendations designed to strengthen COEs as drivers of world-class scholarships and national development. These include program alignment with global standards, faculty development, digital infrastructure, research capacity-building, and strengthened monitoring mechanisms. By addressing both institutional capacity and regional disparities, these recommendations seek to enhance the contribution of COEs to national development and global competitiveness.

1. A Shade of Meritocracy in the pre-selection Criteria

The compliance issue from the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) outlines the initial criteria that a HEI must meet to be eligible for the COE evaluation (Commission on Higher Education No 10, 2025). Furthermore, the standards for the required level of quality assurance have raised questions about the definition of what constitutes world-class scholarship. Therefore, this highlights the meritocratic nature of the system, positioning Philippine HEIs as entities that adhere to compliance-based standards, yet perform poorly in international rankings. Marasigan et al., (2025) contends that while Philippine HEIs follow the standards set by the global north, they still fall short in demonstrating the practical application necessary to meet high-level quality assurance and compliance.

2. Recruit and retain highly qualified, research-engaged faculty

One of the criteria for selecting the COE is the tradition of staff development. However, a political dilemma in promotions has led to undeserving faculty members being appointed to professor positions. A major issue is the presence of Full Professors, especially those who hold VI-level positions with limited research output. The center of excellence (COE) project is an inherent mandate of the Commission on Higher Education, as outlined in Republic Act 7722 (CHED). However, we must provide excellent human resources and facilities to attain its academic object (Fusco et al., 2023). Hired faculty with advanced degrees, strong research backgrounds, and industry experience

Provide support for continuous professional development through training and conferences. Produce high-impact research publications and projects. (Harvey et al., 2024). Moreover, establish partnerships with the government, the community, the industry, and international institutions and organizations. Create a culture of innovation and knowledge generation. Invest in digital libraries, modern laboratories, and learning spaces. Ensure strong internet connectivity for easy access to digital tools, databases, and equipment relevant to the field of study (Ocloo et al., 2025). Set compulsory review in each department to maintain high passing rates in licensure exams. Offer scholarships, mentoring, and career services. Encourage students to participate in competitions, research, and community engagement (Shamzzuzoha et al., 2022).

3. Establishing Research Centers with Database Access to Enhance Disciplinary Strengths

Numerous universities face challenges in accessing top-tier journals listed in Scopus and Web of Science (Castulo, 2024), which restricts their ability to publish internationally and gain scholarly recognition. Concurrently, there is a disconnect between the skills of graduates and the demands of the job market (Macatangay, 2023). This issue is linked to the uneven recognition across disciplines, with research-heavy areas like IT, Engineering, and Teacher Education predominantly receiving COE/COD status (Table 3). Therefore, providing equal access to databases such as Scopus across all fields is crucial for enhancing publication rates and international competitiveness. As noted by (Tynan & Garbett, 2007), access to resources leads to superior research quality, while (Ulla & Tarrayo, 2021) point out that the scarcity of journals remains a significant obstacle in the Philippines. Creating specialized research centers can address these issues, enabling both established and developing fields to maintain high standards and align with CMO 10's emphasis on boosting research productivity.

4. Each COE designation must have a Sponsorship and Employment Incentive for its students.

In line with CMO No. 10 series of 2025, under the CHED COE Framework: Learner and Graduate Quality, this proposed policy seeks to leverage the Center of Excellence (COE) designation to enhance students' development and employability (Evaluation and Criteria Indicators, Criterion: Learners and Graduate Quality – indicator no. 1). To elevate the quality of education and bolster the global competitiveness of Philippine higher education, this strategy aims to promote outstanding academic performance, creativity, and industry relevance within COE designations by providing scholarships and job incentives (Hellström, 2018). For instance, CHED may offer sponsorships in addition to free tertiary education support to students with exceptional performance, particularly those from Indigenous Peoples or marginalized groups (i.e., students from geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, GIDA). One year of sponsorship corresponds to one year of service. This initiative is supplementary to the recruitment efforts of DOST-SEI, meaning it must span across disciplines and not be confined to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). As indicated in Table 3, there were equal numbers of COEs and CODs in agriculture and fisheries, but fewer universities in health sciences were designated as COEs and CODs. Furthermore, the humanities and arts have been undervalued, despite research indicating they enhance students' creativity and innovation. This policy aims to reward academic excellence, support student development, and improve employability outcomes for graduates of COE-designated institutions (Shamzzuzoha et al., 2022).

5. Strengthening Selection, Evaluation, and Accountability Mechanisms for Centers of Excellence

It is recommended that the selection, evaluation, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms for Centers of Excellence (COEs) be strengthened through the development of transparent rubrics with clear indicators encompassing instruction, research, extension, and linkages. These rubrics should be anchored on evidence-based outcomes such as graduate employability rates, licensure examination performance, industry certifications, and international recognition. To ensure impartiality and global alignment, periodic external peer reviews involving both local and international experts should be institutionalized. Furthermore, monitoring and accountability mechanisms must be reinforced by setting a fixed validity period of three to five years for COE designation, complemented by mid-term and end-term evaluations. Annual performance reports should be required to capture key achievements, challenges, and the impact on stakeholders (Hellström, 2018). To safeguard quality, consequences such as probationary status or revocation of designation should be imposed on underperforming COEs. By institutionalizing

annual evaluations, CHED can ensure that schools do not simply prepare for performance reviews at long intervals but are continuously engaged in quality assurance and innovation. This proactive monitoring mechanism aligns with the global standards of excellence emphasized in CMO 10, s. 2025, ensuring that Philippine HEIs are not only compliant with national benchmarks but are also responsive to the rapidly evolving demands of international education, research productivity, and industry linkages while responding to local needs. Ultimately, more frequent evaluations would enhance accountability, sustain momentum for improvement, and solidify the role of COEs as engines of academic leadership and national development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the COE framework under CHED Memorandum Order No. 10, s. 2025 represents a significant step toward elevating Philippine higher education; its potential is critically undermined by systemic inequities and a compliance-oriented culture that prioritizes ceremonial adherence over transformative impact. The persistent regional and disciplinary disparities in COE distribution, coupled with faculty promotion systems that reward tenure over research excellence, reveal a system struggling to reconcile meritocratic ideals with on-the-ground realities. Without deeper structural reforms, such as equitable resource allocation, genuine faculty development, and accountability mechanisms that prioritize outcomes over optics, the COE designation risks becoming another symbolic marker that perpetuates existing hierarchies rather than fostering inclusive, world-class scholarship. For the COE initiative to truly drive national development, it must transition from a badge of honor to a catalyst for substantive, equitable, and sustainable academic transformation.

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Term 1, SY 2025-2026

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