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THEMED INTERVENTION

Geography's trajectories in Philippine higher education

Kristian Karlo Saguin | **Yany Lopez** | **Jake Rom Cadag** | **Mylene De Guzman** | **Emmanuel Garcia**

Department of Geography, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines

Correspondence
Kristian Karlo Saguin, Department of Geography, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines.
Email: kcsaguin@up.edu.ph

Abstract

This piece situates the challenges and opportunities for geography as a discipline amid the setting of Philippine higher education. By charting the discipline's historical transformations and contemporary trajectories in the spheres of pedagogy, research, and service learning, it presents a particular picture of geography's place and possible futures within a global South context. Despite its disciplinal marginality rooted in institutional constraints in the country's higher education system, geography is at a crucial juncture in expanding its visibility and reach, and magnifying its relevance and transformative potentials in the Philippines.

KEYWORDS

community engagement, geography, global South, higher education, knowledge production, Philippines

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this piece, we situate the challenges and opportunities for geography as a discipline in higher education amid the historical and contemporary setting of the Philippines. Geography continues to occupy a marginal position in higher education in the country but it has also seen tremendous opportunities for growth in the spheres of pedagogy, research, and service learning. In what follows, we attempt to chart these trajectories and present a picture of geography's place and possible futures in a global South higher education context.

University-level geography was first taught in the country in the 1920s as a subject and a major offered by the College of Education at the University of the Philippines (UP), an institution founded in 1908 by the American colonial government. As a separate geography programme, a bachelor's degree was instituted in the 1930s and a master's degree in the 1950s under a combined geology and geography department (Juanico, 2012; Zoleta-Nantes, 2005). Geography would eventually have its own – and so far the country's only – department in 1983 but enrolment numbers in both undergraduate and graduate programmes would struggle for two more decades. This enrolment trend mirrored the relatively peripheral position of the discipline in higher education in the country, where offerings of geography as a discrete course in the curriculum or as a distinct programme or degree have been confined to a few universities. Reforms in both primary and secondary education since the 1940s have also relegated geography from a subject taught separately to one embedded within an umbrella social studies subject, further limiting student geographic competencies and exposure prior to entering the university (Juanico, 2012).

This marginality has historically been compounded by the limited state investment in teaching and research facilities and personnel. Until the 1980s, there were only four regular faculty members in UP's geography programme, only two of whom had PhDs – a figure that currently stands at 14 faculty members with eight PhDs. Geographic teaching and research had initially been supplemented by American visiting professors through the Fulbright-Hays Program in

the 1950s and 1960s, with the earliest geography texts about the Philippines written by these American geographers. Beginning in the 1950s, a number of scholars were similarly sent to the United States to pursue graduate degrees, returning to the country with specialisations in economic, agricultural, physical and regional geography (Juanico, 2012). Philippine geography's subsequent focus on area studies and applied fields such as resource management, spatial planning, and urban and regional development may also be situated within attempts to magnify its significance amid this marginality. Disciplinal directions aligned with the potential contribution of geographic knowledge to post-Second World War state-building, which was then dominated by Cold War technocratic policies influenced by modernisation theory (Tadem, 2020). Together, these movements and exchanges would shape the trajectory of both teaching and research in geography, which reflected a focus on particular mid-20th-century fields that remained in the curriculum and in geographic research until the turn of the 21st century.

2 | GEOGRAPHY, HIGHER EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Colonial traces in education and knowledge production persist in geography's development in the Philippines. The establishment of academic programmes such as geography in the early 20th century was patterned after American universities (Bautista, 2000), and thus theoretical orientations and research methodologies were rooted from Anglo-American traditions and practice. But unlike other social science disciplines with significant indigenisation movements such as psychology's *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (PePua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000), anthropology's *Pilipinolohiya* (Covar, 1998) and history's *Pantayong Pananaw* (Rodriguez-Tatel, 2015), Philippine geography has developed tangentially with these or other decolonising movements, limited by a historical lack of a critical mass and sparse engagement with indigenous or local knowledge systems. UP Geography would, however, develop stronger links with other social sciences following the creation of a separate department, particularly by contributing spatial, cartographic, and human–environment approaches to core questions in these disciplines. Cross-fertilisation and overlaps also continued with other allied fields such as education, urban planning, geology, environmental science and geomatics, driven by exchanges of faculty, students, and researchers undertaking work on broadly geographic concerns and enabled by relatively porous disciplinal boundaries.

Journal publications, textbooks, and other learning resources have been historically written almost exclusively in English and mostly by non-Filipinos. For example, the first college-level geography textbook written by a Filipino – Domingo Salita – was published only in the 1980s (Ulack, 1984). In the first 50 years of the country's only geography journal, the *Philippine Geographical Journal*, only a slight majority (60%) of the published authors were Filipinos, almost all of whom were men (Zoleta-Nantes, 2005), and between 1950 and 1982, Filipino and American geographers each accounted for a third of total publications (Ulack, 1984). Only a handful of personalities dominated local academic and non-academic publications during this period, often applying dominant contemporary geographic lenses drawn from regional geography, spatial analysis, resource management and urban/environmental planning, among others, to Philippine case studies.

In international geography flagship journals, articles about the Philippines were also overwhelmingly written by non-Filipinos – 12 out of 14 in the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* and six out of six in the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* at the time of writing. Filipino geographers based elsewhere and geographers in diaspora navigating a different set of transnational positionalities and relations with the Philippines complicate these simplified binaries, but these crude numbers show how publication patterns reflect the historically uneven geographies of geographic research and knowledge produced about the Philippines, reinforced by particular material conditions of academic work in Global South higher education institutions.

While more than a dozen other universities have offered geography subjects or majors, to this date only the University of the Philippines in Diliman has instituted geography degrees. These higher education institutions are primarily concentrated in and around Metro Manila, illustrating the limited geographic reach of the discipline in other parts of the country (Juanico, 2012). Geography is also often sidelined in higher education planning, especially in comparison to the other, more-established social sciences disciplines. This relative marginality in terms of limited programmes, courses and enrolment has undermined efforts to improve geographic literacy among students and amplify the discipline's place in the curriculum. Bringing geography back from the margins and strengthening its visibility in higher learning would enhance its potential to contribute to knowledge production and inform public policy and various local and national issues.

These patterns are also shaped by the continuing neoliberalisation of Philippine higher education, where an ongoing trend to enhance the curriculum of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to meet the industry demand for technical skill and know-how has led to social studies subjects, including geography, being pushed further back in the periphery of student and teacher education. Higher education in the Philippines has adopted strategies in line with global labour market demands of producing students with employable skills for working abroad, rooted in a broader state policy that has promoted and institutionalised labour export since the 1970s (Ortiga, 2017). STEM tends to be allocated more time for teaching in primary and secondary education, while the offering of general education subjects at the university level, where geography has recently achieved a greater degree of visibility and popularity, has similarly decreased to accommodate more specialised major subjects.

Persistent state underfunding of higher education has also configured trajectories of geographic knowledge production. Exemplified by our own experiences, the low pay and high teaching loads in state universities often force faculty members to prioritise earning additional income by undertaking activities beyond research, such as taking on more teaching responsibilities for extra honorarium or engaging in consultancy work. State universities continue to be teaching-oriented despite the recent push to be globally competitive in research. Practices such as contractualisation and hiring of instructors who take on the bulk of teaching duties continue, often at the expense of building a strong research culture. Furthermore, neoliberal pressures in higher education to internationalise research have also privileged particular forms of engagement with the global (i.e., largely Anglo-American) academic publishing community, which require a certain degree of familiarity and grasp of academic language and vocabulary that many scholars based in the country still find difficult to access.

Despite these deeply rooted challenges, geographic research continues to expand, both by those with formal training in geography and those who have adopted or been influenced by geographic approaches. In the absence of a PhD programme in the Philippines, geographers wishing to pursue higher degrees do so in other countries. Recent PhD graduates from various countries have returned to the Philippines and shaped the kinds of geographic research and pedagogy undertaken beyond the focus of 20th-century Philippine geography described previously. Diverse novel topics and approaches such as geohumanities, counter-cartographies, and strands of critical geographies have recently emerged as additions to longstanding research repertoires, and as attempts to re-evaluate the kinds of knowledge produced in and about geography in the Philippines. While still constrained by the structuring geographies of global academia and the neoliberal models of publishing, geographic knowledge about the Philippines is increasingly incorporating voices and viewpoints from Filipino scholars, who take on more active roles beyond the traditional mediators or contacts between foreign scholars and local case studies.

In teaching, the increasing resonance of geography with contemporary national concerns has also magnified the significance of geographic applications through geospatial technologies, disaster risk reduction, climate change and urban/environmental planning. Various learning opportunities such as hands-on activities in the geographic information systems (GIS) laboratory, as well as community and field immersions have provided a great impetus for the discipline's growing appeal to students. This is reflected, for example, in the five-fold increase in average undergraduate enrolment in UP Geography in the 2000s and the parallel growth of its graduate programme in the 2010s, with many geography graduates eventually finding a career in government and the private sector.

3 | GEOGRAPHY, PEDAGOGY, AND PUBLIC SERVICE

Geography in the Philippines has progressively become a locus where activism and community engagement coalesce around the politics of place. Extension and service-learning activities have been instituted in the UP Charter of 2008 as part of its mandate as a public service university, emphasising its distinctive role as the national university. Both activities enrich the teaching, learning, and research of those involved while seeking to benefit partner local people and organisations in communities and integrating academic learning with public service. Geography's broad topical scope has enabled higher education to directly engage with plural issues such as educational and health crises, disasters, poverty, and environmental degradation (Subingsubing & Ramos, 2019). Individual courses in UP have been redesigned to incorporate service learning in its delivery, such as cartography and GIS courses undertaking counter-mapping, open-source mapping and training programme activities with various local groups and organisations, and a disaster management course providing students with opportunities to practice disaster risk reduction and management through partnerships with national and local governments (Geography192, 2018; Jadloc, 2018; Martinez & Placino, 2015; Philippine Geographical Society, 2017).

The UP Geography Field School is one example of a longstanding and recognised programme in geography higher education that exemplifies service learning (UP Forum, 2017). It is an annual course-based extension programme that engages in collaborative research with various local government units, civil society organisations, academic institutions, and community members. Since the 1990s, more than 50 field classes have been conducted in more than 70 sites across the country, with outputs ranging from socio-economic and ecological plans, profiles, and assessments to participatory three-dimensional mapping. Reflections from these and other service learning activities illustrate the importance of a learning environment that fosters critical thinking and encourages active participation in the wider social sphere, contributing to calls for both reformist and radical changes in addressing social justice issues in marginalised communities.

Critical geographers have long recognised the potential of the classroom and other pedagogical spaces as vital sites of activist engagement (Hay, 2001; Heyman, 2000). Many geography faculty and students have been involved, for example, in a series of counter-mapping activities that have explicitly employed geographic techniques to engage in solidarity work with urban and rural communities experiencing forms of development-induced dispossession and marginalisation (Banta, 2017; Casabuena, 2019; Ortega et al., 2018). Employing mixed-methods techniques that combine GIS, participatory mapping, qualitative methods, and geonarratives, these activities have taken place through geography courses and through student organisation projects like Contour: Mapping for the People. These projects aim to contribute to the production of alternative spatial representations of sites contested by farmers, indigenous peoples, and urban poor communities. The counter-cartographic framing of such activities has elicited not only other visions of space rendered invisible or silent by dominant development paradigms but also created new spaces of engagement within the limiting structures of higher education.

These diverse encounters between academic and local communities have generated political implications and, in some instances, complications. Aligning with UP's long history and tradition of resistance against authoritarian and neoliberal state regimes, some of the extension and service-learning activities have actively promoted calls for social justice, often questioning and challenging existing power relations. The radical student activism that emerged in the campus as a prominent resistance to Ferdinand Marcos' martial law repression and injustice in the 1970s drew from solidarity work with surrounding urban poor communities (Pante, 2019) and would inspire subsequent movements in the university and elsewhere. The current socio-political climate, however, has reshaped the terms of these engagements, particularly in a time when activists, students, and even entire universities have been subject to the state's "red-tagging" of dissenters as communists or terrorists (ABS-CBN News, 2018). In a country where armed conflict continues to unfold and where anti-activist sentiments have been fostered by the state, these events undermine the integrity and sustainability of critical engagement with communities. A continuing tension also exists between the public service mandate of the university and its push for competitiveness in global university rankings, which has manifested in the disproportionate valuing of research productivity through a quantification of international journal article publications at the expense of other kinds of less quantifiable university work, including those engaging with the local politics of place.

We see the future of geography in the Philippines as promising, despite institutional constraints in the country's higher education system and the broader political environment. The increasing enrolment in geography programmes, the expansion of institutions offering geography courses, and the greater visibility and relevance of the discipline in answering questions pertaining to issues such as climate change, disasters, and social justice, among others, show a rising interest in geography and its transformative potential. We recognise that our position as early- and mid-career geographers based in a global South university experiencing various forms and degrees of precarity shapes and limits our field of vision and action, but we continue to be deeply invested in geography's fate in the country. We acknowledge too that any consideration of the discipline's future in higher education and beyond should necessarily rest on a commitment to a politics of care that extends across space and places.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were created for this paper.

ORCID


Kristian Karlo Saguin https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8389-4614

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