

Analysis of the Proposed Three-Year College Education Act

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Abstract. The recent proposal to shorten undergraduate degree programs in the Philippines to three years has raised concerns about academic quality, curricular coherence, and institutional readiness. This paper employs a qualitative policy-analysis approach, examining the proposed 3CE Act against Philippine higher education policies, selected ASEAN quality-assurance frameworks, and relevant literature on accelerated and three-year degree structures. It argues that the reform becomes viable only under participatory governance, locally grounded quality assurance, and demonstrably equivalent graduate competencies to the four-year program. The study finds that shortened degree programs may undermine academic quality and create systemic implementation gaps without adequate institutional support. In response, the paper proposes a policy roadmap led by higher education institutions and academics grounded in outcomes-based education, discipline-specific implementation, rigorous monitoring, and stakeholder participation. It concludes that higher education reform must balance efficiency and employability with academic integrity, equity, and education's broader civic and human development goals.

Keywords: Three-Year College Program, Philippine Higher Education, CHED Quality Assurance, K-12 Curriculum Reform, Educational Quality, AUN-QA Standards, Educational Efficiency and Access

Introduction

Recent legislative initiatives in the Philippines have proposed the structural compression of undergraduate degree programs into a three-year cycle. The Philippine higher education system has undergone major reforms, most notably through the K-12 program. This reform added two years to basic education with the intention of aligning the Philippine educational system with global standards. However, this extension has reopened debates regarding whether college education should likewise be restructured in duration and content. Senator Sherwin Gatchalian filed the Three-Year College Act as his priority measure in the 20th Congress. The proposal seeks to institutionalize a shortened undergraduate pathway on the premise that Senior High School already provides foundational disciplinary preparation.

The proposal argues that the additional two years in Senior High School sufficiently cover foundational subjects, allowing colleges to focus on specialization and professional training. As argued by Senator Gatchalian, the proposed legislation is twofold: to fulfill the promise made during the adoption of K-12 that college years would be reduced, and to ease the

financial burden on Filipino families (Gatchalian, 2025). The reform is framed not primarily as a cost-cutting measure but as a socio-economic intervention aimed at reducing household educational expenses. The proposal is informed by findings from the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II), which characterize Philippine higher education as disproportionately general education-heavy and underexposed to applied experiential learning. Under the current curriculum, students often retake subjects already covered in earlier years, such as Physical Education. To address perceived redundancy, the 3CE Act proposes the transfer of most General Education (GE) courses to the Senior High School curriculum. This shift would allow colleges to concentrate on specialization and professional training, giving students more time for internships and advanced coursework relevant to their chosen fields. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has expressed openness to the idea, highlighting the importance of competency-based curricula and robust quality assurance mechanisms to maintain educational standards (CHED, 2012). Although, the commission has not announced a blanket reduction of all college programs to three years, it supports initiatives that streamline courses without compromising quality. The CHED and Department of Education (DepEd) have moved for the transfer of several GE subjects to senior high school and the removal of supposedly redundant courses, a move that could shorten college by at least one semester. Comparative cases such as the United Kingdom and selected European systems under the Bologna Process illustrate that three-year degree structures are embedded within high-capacity educational ecologies characterized by mature secondary preparation, robust funding, and institutionalized quality assurance regimes. These systems operate on the assumption that students enter university with stronger disciplinary preparation and higher academic readiness than is typical in the Philippine context. In contrast, the Philippine context continues to grapple with uneven K-12 implementation, disparities in school resources, and significant socio-economic inequality. While elements of these international conditions are emerging locally, they are not yet uniformly present. This structural asymmetry suggests that policy transfer must be approached through adaptive translation rather than wholesale institutional transplantation.

CHED's Policy Reforms Toward Competency-Based and Quality-Assured Higher Education

This section maps CHED's evolving policy architecture, demonstrating a systemic shift toward outcomes-based governance and competency-driven quality assurance in Philippine higher education, reflecting a shift

toward outcome-based and competency-driven frameworks. CHED Memorandum Order No. 46 (s. 2012) establishes the foundational architecture of a typology-based, outcomes-oriented quality assurance system that reorients institutions toward measurable learning outcomes. The CHED Memorandum Order No. 10, Series of 2024, is built on this by focusing on teacher education institutions, mandating compliance with national standards and improving licensure exam performance through curriculum and faculty development (CHED, 2024). Further, the CHED Memorandum Orders No. 6 and No. 15, Series of 2023 and 2025, respectively, provided guidelines for granting autonomous and deregulated status to private HEIs, in recognizing institutional excellence and promoting innovation (CHED, 2023a; CHED, 2025a). To complement these, CMO No. 9, Series of 2023, it revised the issuance of Certificates of Program Compliance (COPC), to ensure academic programs meet CHED's minimum standards before being offered (CHED, 2023b), while CMO No. 19, Series of 2025, introduced updated faculty evaluation instruments to support teaching effectiveness and institutional accountability (CHED, 2025b).

Quality assurance should not be reduced to measurable competencies alone. Following Biesta (2009) and Freire (2017), higher education also has purposes related to democratic participation, critical judgment, and the formation of autonomous persons.

Moreover, the emphasis on quality assurance and institutional compliance may inadvertently prioritize bureaucratic efficiency over humanistic values. Freire's epistemology of education insists that pedagogical practice must be contextually grounded, dialogical, and oriented toward critical consciousness and social transformation. By focusing heavily on the international standards and institutional typologies, CHED's reforms may overlook the socio-cultural diversity of Philippine learners and communities. A truly liberating curriculum, in Freire's view, would center the voices of students and educators in shaping educational goals, rather than imposing a top-down metric of success.

Higher Education Programs in Southeast Asian Countries

The ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) program promotes student exchange among ASEAN member countries to foster regional identity, cultural understanding, and academic collaboration (SEAMEO RIHED, 2025). Similarly, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) aims to enhance quality assurance, credit transfer systems, and collaborative research among universities in the region to improve academic standards and support internationalization (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). In

terms of workforce development, the Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) Acceleration Pathways initiative strengthens workforce readiness and skills development by improving the quality and accessibility of TVET in Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and the Philippines, in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Choi & Gunawan, 2021). Greening Education for Sustainable Development integrates sustainability principles into higher education curricula to promote environmental responsibility and sustainable practices (Said, Bakray, & Harun, 2023). The STEM Education Landscape Program supports regional collaboration and capacity building for educators to strengthen Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics education (SEAMEO STEM-ED, 2024). In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) launched the ACHIEVE Agenda to align higher education programs with industry needs, foster innovation, and ensure equitable access to future-ready education (Untalan, 2025). Lastly, the EU-SHARE Program contributes to the harmonization of higher education systems in ASEAN through initiatives in credit transfer, quality assurance, and student mobility (Lim, Anabo, Phan, Elepano, & Kuntamarat, 2023).

The ASEAN higher education initiatives collectively foreground four converging agendas: internationalization, quality assurance, sustainability, and skills readiness, yet remain analytically underexamined in terms of implementation constraints, distributive equity, and policy coherence (Miña, 2023). However, the existing literature remains largely descriptive, offering limited evaluative interrogation of effectiveness, scalability, and structural constraints. It also fails to compare programs, contextualize their relevance to the Philippines, or address the implementation barriers such as funding and policy alignment (Lefievre, 2022; Carvajal et al, 2024; UNESCO & ASEAN, 2024). Furthermore, the initiatives' ambitions through mobility, harmonization, quality, sustainability, and workforce readiness can serve indigenous Philippine learners only if they center self-determination, FPIC, language justice, and IKSP (Banes, 2021; Colicol, 2024; Hassan et al, 2025). Without these safeguards, internationalization risks becoming a subtle mechanism of epistemic and cultural dispossession. With them, Asean integration could become a platform for plural, place-based excellence that uplifts indigenous communities and enriches the region's higher education ecosystem.

Regionalization and internationalization in higher education are conceptually interdependent yet analytically distinct, particularly within ASEAN's evolving policy landscape. Driven by ASEAN integration, regionalisation initiatives among HEIs emphasize region-first orientations

through academic collaborations, accreditation, and institutional reforms, while also highlighting the need for stronger policies, awareness campaigns, and stakeholder engagement to support these efforts.

The relationship among regionalization, internationalization, and quality assurance can be analytically decomposed into four interlocking governance dimensions. First, accreditation and standards alignment play a central role. Regionalisation encourages institutions to adhere to regional frameworks such as the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA, 2020), which ensures that academic programs meet shared quality benchmarks. This alignment not only strengthens QA processes but also promotes comparability and mutual recognition of degrees across the region (ASEAN University Network, 2020). Second, the emphasis on curriculum development and outcome-based education (OBE) is a fundamental QA mechanism. By designing programs around measurable learning outcomes, institutions can ensure that their academic offerings meet both regional and international standards, which is essential for accreditation and continuous improvement (Rao, 2020; Tam, 2014). Third, institutional policies and enabling environments are critical for sustaining QA. Policy reforms that incentivize faculty development, research, and partnerships foster a culture of quality and accountability. These policies provide the structural support needed for effective regionalization and internationalization initiatives (Hou et al., 2024). Finally, continuous improvement through collaboration is a hallmark of QA in the context of regionalisation. Collaborative networks, benchmarking, and peer reviews among higher education institutions (HEIs) enhance institutional quality beyond national standards. Sharing best practices and engaging in joint initiatives create opportunities for innovation and sustained excellence (Knight, 2013; ASEAN Quality Assurance, 2020). Regionalization functions as a structural driver of quality assurance through accreditation harmonization and institutional benchmarking.

However, as Jane Knight (2012) argues, internationalization must be understood as a capacity-building process grounded in mutual benefit rather than market-driven competition. Marginson (2018) further emphasizes that mobility must serve as a global public good, ensuring equitable access and avoiding stratification. From a normative philosophical perspective, mobility should be evaluated not merely as participation but as capability expansion and human flourishing, as articulated by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), and to promote subjectification as the formation of autonomous, responsible individuals, to add with Biesta's (2009) triadic framework of qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Parallel to mobility efforts, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) has advanced quality assurance through the AUN-

QA frameworks and the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), which aim to harmonize academic standards and facilitate credit transfer across diverse national systems (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). While these mechanisms enhance portability and trust, Barnett (2014) warns against reducing higher education to performative metrics, arguing that universities must cultivate critical judgment and resilience in an age of supercomplexity. Harmonization, therefore, should respect contextual diversity and orient toward common goods rather than homogenization or audit culture dominance (Marginson, 2018). The pragmatist educational perspectives value adaptability and alignment with societal needs, while humanistic traditions emphasize holistic development, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement as both echoed in CHED's OBE language on graduate attributes and nation building (CHED, 2012). Philippine policy notes diagnose a learning crisis and call for competency-based, learner-focused transformation suggesting that programs reforms should enhance critical thinking, communication, and collaboration rather than merely shorten seat time (Bautista & Aranas, 2023).

Philippines Higher Education Shortening Programs

Gatchalian's proposed Three-Year College Education Act 3CE reflects a strategic alignment with CHED's policy reforms that emphasize competency-based and quality-assured education, aiming to streamline higher education programs, costs, and enhance employability (Gatchalian, 2025). These reforms resonate with broader trends in Southeast Asia, where countries are adopting flexible, outcomes-based models to improve academic efficiency and regional compatibility (Lim et al., 2023; Largoza & Fernandez, 2025). Three-year bachelor's programs are most visible in Malaysia, particularly in private universities and transnational education (TNC) partnerships following UK models in Business, IT, and social sciences (British Council, 2019). Singapore and Brunei host selected three-year pathways, especially in TNE or non-professional fields, while professional and engineering programs commonly extend to four years (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022). By contrast, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar predominantly operate four-year structures for bachelor's degrees, with professional fields often larger (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022). Recently, Timor-Leste was admitted as ASEAN's 11th member (ASEAN, 2025). Most of their universities and higher institutions of the country offer 4-year undergraduate degree programs.

Although a three-year degree structure may appear economically efficient, it raises fundamental concerns regarding epistemic depth,

curricular integrity, and professional readiness. The proposal reflects an anti-intellectual stance that devalues the time needed for holistic development and meaningful academic engagement (Dizon, 2025). It also raises concerns about labor implications for faculty and the potential for producing graduates who are less competitive globally. In countries like China, India, and Mexico, four-year degrees remain the standard, and deviating from the norm could harm the international credibility of Filipino graduates. Moreover, the students' time-use and academic outcomes are deeply influenced by structured college experiences (Park and Swanson, 2021). Empirical literature indicates that students frequently struggle with time management and academic adjustment during the transition to tertiary education. Compressing college into three years may exacerbate these challenges, leaving students with less time to adapt, explore, and engage meaningfully with their disciplines. The findings suggest that interventions to improve academic success are most effective when they target students before college, not by reducing college duration. Also, the shortened college may lead to academic burnout and reduce engagement, particularly in high-intensity programs. It found that time management and self-control are critical predictors of academic success, and that mobile phone dependence can negatively impact study engagement (Fu et al, 2025). A compressed degree structure may inadvertently intensify cognitive load, thereby increasing academic stress and diminishing learning retention. This could result in lower retention, weaker learning outcomes, and diminished readiness for graduate studies or professional work.

Proposed Educational Policy: Academe-Led Three-Year

A core principle of this framework is outcome equivalence, requiring three-year programs to demonstrate parity with or superiority over four-year degree outcomes (CHED, 2012). At the same time, these programs aim to improve efficiency and access by reducing the time cost required to complete a degree, without compromising academic standards or increasing student attrition, particularly among disadvantaged populations (Bautista & Aranas, 2023).

This paper advances a six-component policy framework for the calibrated implementation of three-year degree programs in the Philippine context. First, eligibility should be limited to disciplines where international models support shorter cycles and where Philippine licensure or program standards do not require longer durations (European Commission, n.d.). Second, curriculum redesign must align program outcomes with K-12 exit competencies and adopt a workload equivalent to 180 ECTS credits,

ensuring rigorous assessment standards (European Commission, n.d.). Third, quality assurance protocols should include pre-pilot external reviews using AUN-QA criteria and CHED’s Institutional Sustainability Assessment (ISA), along with mandatory annual outcomes reporting (ASEAN University Network, 2020; CHED, 2014). Fourth, student support systems must provide intensive academic advising, learning assistance, and experiential learning; opportunities such as internships, research, or community engagement, to maintain outcomes within compressed timelines (Dinarte-Diaz et al., 2023). Fifth, governance should involve an academe-led steering committee composed of HEIs, discipline-based associations, and accrediting bodies to propose pilot programs, define metrics, and publish evaluations, with CHED overseeing authorization and monitoring (CHED, 2012; Largoza & Fernandez, 2025). Lastly, recognition and mobility should be pursued through regional quality assurance alignment with AUN-QA and international credential frameworks to ensure comparability (ASEAN University Network, 2020; Saidi-Kuehnert, 2017).

Monitoring and Evaluation Metrics

Scaling of three-year degree programs should proceed only when there is clear evidence that student outcomes are equivalent to or superior compared to traditional four-year models. In cases where outcome gaps persist, discipline should revert to the standard four-year format or adopt a hybrid “3+1” honors structure to maintain academic integrity and global comparability (European Commission, n.d.).

The feasibility of a three-year degree structure is contingent not on temporal compression but on curricular coherence, epistemic rigor, and institutional quality assurance capacity. International models such as the Bologna Process and regional frameworks like AUN-QA demonstrate that program duration is only one of many design variables; educational quality is

Table 1. Proposed monitoring and evaluation metrics based on CHED ISA and AUN-QA best practices (ASEAN University Network, 2020; CHED 2014).

Metric	Operational Definition	Primary Data Source	Frequency	Target/Benchmark
Learning outcomes attainment	Direct assessment of program outcomes via capstone / standardized tasks with external moderation	Program Assessment Report; AUN-QA/ISA documentation	Annual	Parity or >95% of four-year comparator mean

Progression and completion	Year-to-year retention and on-time graduation rate	Registrar data; LMS analytics	Semester/Annual	Retention $\geq 90\%$; on time completion $\geq 80\%$
Graduate employability	Employment within 6 months, quality of placement, median starting salary	Graduate tracer studies; employer surveys	Annual	Employment $\geq 85\%$ within 6 months
Recognition & mobility	Acceptance in graduate programs /employers internationally	Admission/ placement records	Annual	No statistically significant shortfall vs. four-year unit
Equity & support efficacy	Outcomes for disadvantaged students; utilization of supports	Financial aid records; advising logs	Semester/Annual	Gap vs. overall cohort ≤ 5 percentage points

determined more by curriculum coherence, credible assessment practices, and robust learner support systems than by the number of years alone. To ensure integrity and effectiveness, the future reforms in the Philippine education must be led by the academe, developed through inclusive consultation, and implemented through carefully monitored pilot programs with transparent evaluation prior to any scale-up (European Commission, n.d.; ASEAN University Network, 2020; CHED, 2012). The Commission on Higher Education should ensure epistemically plural representation across disciplines to avoid policy reductionism and epistemic marginalization. Though shortening degree programs assures efficiency, reduced costs, and greater employability, such structural reforms must be accompanied by rigorous academic standards, transparent evaluation processes, and continuous curriculum review aligned with CHED's existing quality assurance frameworks. The success of a three-year model depends not on speed alone but on ensuring that learning outcomes, program competencies, and instructional methods meet national and international benchmarks. This imperative mirrors broader shifts across Southeast Asia, where flexible and outcomes-based is paired with strengthened quality

assurance systems to support harmonization and regional compatibility (Lim et al., 2023). As Largoza and Fernandez (2025) emphasize, Philippine higher education still faces uneven implementation of assessment practices and workload designs, underscoring the need for systemic capacity building as the country moves toward more streamlined degree pathways. Ultimately, the 3CE Act can contribute to a more agile and globally competitive higher education system, but only if quality assurance remains at the center of preserving academic integrity, safeguarding student learning, and ensuring that accelerated programs continue to produce graduates with the competencies, values, and capabilities necessary for meaningful participation in a rapidly evolving regional and global landscape.

Given the proposed reforms under the 3CE, this paper recommends the policy roadmap anchored in participatory governance, with academic communities of faculty, researchers, administrators, and students taking the lead in decision-making processes. Such a governance model ensures that reform directions are informed primarily by scholarly expertise, pedagogical evidence, and disciplinary standards rather than shifting political agendas. Such an inclusive governance structure ensures that curricular revisions, learning outcomes, and assessment practices reflect the collective expertise and lived realities of those who deliver and experience higher education on the ground. Research on higher education policymaking in Southeast Asia shows that systems that empower academic institutions through consultative bodies, faculty senates, and independent quality assurance agencies are better able to maintain academic integrity while implementing structural reforms (Lim et al., 2023; Largoza & Fernandez, 2025). Embedding the participatory mechanisms like the curriculum councils, national discipline-based associations, and strengthened internal quality assurance units, helps safeguard against the politicization of higher education, a risk that escalates when policy shifts occur without broad academic engagement. By grounding reform decisions in transparent community-driven deliberation, the roadmap enhances legitimacy, promotes shared ownership, and ensures that accelerated programs under the 3CE Act remain aligned with CHED's quality standards and ASEAN outcomes-based frameworks. Ultimately, participatory governance not only improves policy coherence but also reinforces public trust by ensuring that higher education reforms serve long-term academic and societal goals rather than short-term political interests.

A reform strategy grounded in both democratic participation and rigorous quality assurance strengthens public trust, preserves academic integrity, and ensures that higher education remains a public good that is

responsive to societal needs yet anchored in the autonomy and expertise of the academic community.

This paper foregrounds philosophy of education as a constitutive analytical lens in higher education reform, shaping both its normative direction and epistemological coherence. At its core, philosophy of education provides the conceptual foundations that clarify the purpose of education, whether oriented toward human flourishing, democratic citizenship, economic productivity, or the holistic development of learners. Educational reform must be dialogical and emancipatory rather than merely technocratic. Freire's critique of banking model underscores the risk that accelerated degree structures may prioritize efficiency over conscientization. Similarly, Biesta's (2009) argues that the triad of framework of qualification, socialization, and subjectification, cautioning against reforms that privilege only technical skills at the expense of ethical and civic formation. This philosophical lens is essential for curriculum development, ensuring that compressed or streamlined programs under the 3CE model continue to foster not just employability, but also reflective thinking, democracy agency, and personal autonomy. Without philosophical grounding, curriculum revisions risk becoming reactive, fragmented, or narrowly instrumental, guided more by market pressures than by a coherent vision of the educated person. Participatory governance, therefore, becomes both a philosophical commitment and a practical mechanism to safeguard academic autonomy.

Integrating philosophy into curriculum governance establishes a coherent epistemic framework that aligns pedagogical design, institutional decision-making, and quality assurance mechanisms. Philosophy provides the “north star” that aligns these processes, ensuring consistency between what institutions teach, how decisions are made, and how quality is evaluated. Such integration enhances the capacity of higher education systems to mediate competing demands of economic utility, political governance, and cultural formation while preserving their public mission. In this way, it will be a practical guide for designing, implementing, and evaluating reforms that aspire to be both effective and ethically grounded.

Although the government is still in the process of a consultative inquiry. The stakeholders should not rush their findings that initially target curriculum reforms to shorten college programs. They should look into the matrix of success of the curriculum that proves the Philippine Department of Education's K-12 program and CHED reforms have been effective after modernizing basic education, improving quality, and equity in higher education.

In the Philippine context today, the recent international report of PISA that ranked our country at the bottom, as it reveals performance levels of poor critical thinking, problem-solving, and application to the real-world. And, triggered by the politician's pronouncement during their election promises thus recommend overhauling our educational system. If we aligned with international standards and political interests, then we truly need educational reform. On the other hand, internationalization, such as global rankings of universities, has superseded the matrix of international assessment. Our universities are not far from producing Filipino professionals in diverse fields and consistently recognized in the global age. The existing curricula need revision if the needs of the country, economy, and learners signal a crisis. Right now, the PISA cannot truly define the crisis of learners among participating countries, and the government should not be fixated on score improvement. Experts acknowledge the decade-old learning problems, such as a lack of facilities, poor learning quality, weak teacher training, and overcrowded classrooms.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that a three-year college education program in the Philippines is viable only under clearly defined conditions: robust outcome-based curricula, strengthened senior secondary preparation, discipline-specific applicability, and credible quality assurance mechanisms. The findings reveal that program duration alone does not determine educational quality; rather, coherence, assessment integrity, and learner support are decisive. Consequently, reforms should proceed through carefully monitored pilots led by the academe, ensuring that efficiency gains do not come at the expense of equity, intellectual depth, and the broader social purpose of higher education.

Ethics Statement

This paper is a philosophical and conceptual inquiry grounded in critical reasoning, theoretical analysis, and interpretative argumentation.

It is non-empirical in nature and does not involve human participants, animals, personal data, surveys, interviews, experiments, or observations. As such, ethical clearance and informed consent were not required.

Nonetheless, the research adheres to established principles of responsible scholarship, including intellectual honesty, accurate citation of sources, respect for authorship, and faithful representation of philosophical texts, discussions from the Philippine government's higher education documents and policies, as well as internationally relevant documents

pertaining about education. The author assumes full responsibility for the interpretations and positions advanced in this paper.

Conflict of Interest (COI) Declaration

The author declares no conflict of interest. There are no financial, institutional, professional, or personal relationships that could be perceived to have influenced the conceptual development, philosophical arguments, or conclusions presented in this paper.

AI-Assisted Writing Declaration

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely for linguistic support (Grammarly), including grammar checking and academic clarity. No AI tool was used to formulate philosophical arguments, construct theoretical positions, interpret philosophical works, or determine the conclusions of the study. Full intellectual responsibility for the content of this paper rests with the author.

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