Celebrating 25 years of the UST Audiology Program: a landmark audiology school in the Philippines

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From pioneering roots to global recognition, UST's Audiology Program has shaped hearing healthcare in the Philippines for 25 years – and is still evolving.

A quarter century of excellence in audiology education

Marking its silver anniversary in 2024, the University of Santo Tomas (UST) Master in Clinical Audiology Program stands as a testament to the evolution and progress of audiology education in the Philippines. From its inception in 1999, what began as a pioneering initiative has become a driving force for professional standards and innovation in hearing healthcare throughout Southeast Asia and beyond.

The beginning

The late 1990s represented a turning point for audiology in the country. Previously, the field was largely shaped by ENT specialists who acquired their expertise abroad [1]. Yet, the introduction of advanced technologies, such as cochlear implants, underscored the need for specialised, locally trained audiology professionals. Recognising this gap, Norberto Martinez, in collaboration with Professor Philip Newall of Macquarie University, spearheaded the establishment of the nation's first professional Master's Degree in Clinical Audiology. This partnership was not merely academic but signified a broader commitment to giving the best care for individuals with hearing and balance disorders across the Philippines.

The pioneering years

The programme's beginnings were modest but ambitious. In 1999, a cohort of 12 pioneering students enrolled in a curriculum benchmarked against Macquarie University's standards. The creation of the Center for Audiological Sciences (CAS) was made possible by the UST Medicine Alumni Association of America Foundation, UST Medicine Class of 1982 and other partners. It provided essential infrastructure for both education and research.

Uniquely positioned outside the traditional graduate school structure, the programme was able to experiment with innovative teaching models, such as modular instruction and the integration of visiting international faculty, including Prof Philip Newall from Australia, Dennis Au from Hong Kong, and Canadian Audiologist Douglas Clutton, who collaborated with local faculty, Norberto Martinez and Ma Cristina Lopez.

(L-R): Norberto Martinez, Prof Philip Newall, Cristy Newall and Ma Cristina Lopez during a meeting in the founding years of the Master in Clinical Audiology Degree Program in the Philippines.

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International recognition and collaboration

International collaboration quickly became a hallmark of the UST programme. The Center for Audiological Sciences (CAS), as the country's first dedicated audiology research laboratory, established the Philippines as an active participant in global audiological research. Through a systematic approach that encompassed both pocket research and extensive prevalence studies, the programme has effectively established its credibility. The university has collaborated with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) since 2015 on the Annual Public

Health Planning for Hearing Impairment (PHPHI) led by Prof Andrew Smith. This enhanced reputation has led to faculty members being invited to serve as technical advisers and subject matter experts for international organisations, including Christian Blind Mission (CBM) International and the World Health Organization's Prevention of Deafness Program. The hosting of the 4th Asia-Pacific Congress on Deafness in 1994 further cemented the Philippines' emerging leadership in the regional audiology community.

Learnings and evolution of excellence

Over the past 25 years, the programme has garnered significant insights. The integration of global best practices with local healthcare realities has demonstrated that excellence in audiology education requires both an international perspective and cultural sensitivity. The degree programme has consistently produced competent professionals who serve a wide variety of contexts, from urban hospitals and private clinics to resource-limited rural settings. Sustained collaboration with international partners has proved essential, with ongoing exchanges enriching the curriculum and student experience [2].

Additionally, the establishment of the Hearing Science Laboratory (HSL), the recently opened Otorhinolaryngology Center at the UST Hospital (accredited by various international organisations), and the recently launched William F Austin Center for Ear and Hearing Healthcare at the Henry Sy Sr. Building, the university's medical and research simulation center, have all played a crucial role in advancing hearing health.

Current challenges

Nevertheless, the programme continues to face substantial challenges. The demand for audiology services continues to grow, highlighting logistical and resource disparities across the Philippines' 7641 islands [3]. Urban-rural gaps in healthcare access persist, requiring graduates to be adaptable and innovative in diverse environments.

Keeping up with technological advancements is no small feat for any academic programme, especially in audiology. The rapid evolution of hearing aids, cochlear implants and diagnostic equipment demands ongoing updates to curricula and consistent professional development for faculty. Financial investment in both modern equipment and specialised training is essential. On top of that, there is a constant need to navigate the balance between international standards and local regulations, especially the complexities of healthcare funding.

Looking forward to the next quarter century

As UST's Audiology Program enters its second quarter-century, several key areas will define its future directions. Integration of artificial intelligence, machine learning and advanced diagnostic methods will further transform audiological practice. Preparing graduates for these advances, while upholding a strong patient-centered ethos, remains central to the programme's mission.

Expanding access to audiology services across the Philippines continues to be a critical objective. This involves not only training additional audiologists but also developing sustainable models to deliver care to underserved communities. Collaborations – whether with governmental agencies, NGOs, alumni or international partners – will be vital in the pursuit of more accessible ear and hearing healthcare.

Likewise, research represents a significant avenue for growth. While the Center for Audiological Sciences has laid a solid foundation, further expansion of research capacity will require ongoing investment in faculty, facilities and global partnerships. There are promising opportunities in areas such as auditory processing disorders, tinnitus management and public health approaches to hearing and ear care.

A legacy of excellence

The 25th anniversary of the UST Master in Clinical Audiology Program is more than a milestone; it is a testament to the programme's transformative impact on hearing healthcare in the Philippines and beyond. From its first cohort of 12 students to a network of alumni serving communities across the country and internationally, the programme's influence extends far beyond the university.

As the programme looks to the future, it remains guided by the founding vision of Dr Martinez and Prof Newall: "Quality hearing healthcare should be accessible to all, achieved through excellence in education, research and service." The next 25 years promise continued innovation, broader reach and a steadfast commitment to enhancing the quality of life for those with hearing impairment throughout the Philippines, the wider Asia-Pacific region and across the globe.

The journey continues, propelled by expertise, compassion and a commitment to the possibilities ahead.

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Declaration of competing interests:
None declared.