

Transforming Families Through Free Tertiary Education Grants in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Education is a fundamental right, yet access to tertiary education remains a challenge for marginalized communities worldwide. To address this, the Philippine government launched the Expanded Students' Grant-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (ESGP-PA) in 2013, offering free college education to impoverished but academically inclined students. This qualitative case study explored the transformative effects of this program on selected graduate-grantees and their families. Findings reveal that economic hardship motivated participants to overcome challenges, supported by parents, friends, and strong faith. The program substantially improves their socio-economic conditions. It underscores how free tertiary education fosters social and economic empowerment for vulnerable populations.

Keywords: family transformation, free tertiary education grants, professional transformation, scholarship

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a pivotal role in transforming the lives of every person in a specific community and society (Rangaswamy, 2022; Sy et al., 2024). Most countries, including the Philippines, guarantee education as a constitutional right because of this. Academic inequality has become one of the pressing issues faced by many developing countries, including the Philippines. Even before, there was a large gap in higher education attainment based on socioeconomic status, as confirmed by the data from the World Bank and the Philippine Statistics Authority. According to the

2013 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) report, approximately 33.8% of Filipinos in the school-age population reached the college level, while the majority reached high school or elementary levels. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the recorded poverty incidence in the country decreased to 25.8% in 2014, 16.7% in 2018, and 18.1% in 2021. The term "poverty incidence" refers to the percentage of Filipinos in the total population whose incomes fall below the per capita poverty threshold (Symaco & Tee, 2019; Jocson, 2023).

To address this gap, the Philippine government has extended its human capital development strategy by implementing the Students' Grant-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (SGP-PA), which later became the Expanded SGP-PA in 2014. The program's goals are to (1) make sure that grantees enroll in state universities and colleges that are recognized by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and put them in CHED's priority programs; (2) give grantees financial support until they finish their studies and are qualified for high-value jobs; (3) help more poor families enroll in college in line with the national government's priority degree programs; and (4) help college graduates get jobs by helping them find them. The Philippine government implemented this program in response to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Target 4.4. This goal aims to significantly increase the global number of scholarships available to developing countries for higher education enrollment, while also measuring the "volume of official development assistance flows for scholarships" (Osei-Tutu, 2021; UN, 2019; in Novotny et al., 2019; Joint Memorandum Circular No. 6 s. 2017).

According to the 2013 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) in the Philippines, 1 out of 10 school-age students in the Western Visayas (region VI) reached or finished a college degree. In addition, Region VI, out of the 17 administrative regions in the country, ranked third in terms of the number of beneficiaries of the conditional cash transfer program, with 8.2 percent (Department of Social Welfare & Development Data, 2012). These data predisposed the government to commission a state university in the region to act as the pilot implementer of SGP-PA and ESGP-PA. This grant aimed to produce at least one (1) graduate in every poor household to break the intergenerational poverty cycle in the country (DSWD, 2012; Asian Development Bank Report, 2012).

However, Republic Act 10931's implementation of free tertiary education led to the end of this program in 2018. Nevertheless, few empirical studies have accounted for the impact of social programs in developing countries such as the Philippines. The majority of studies conducted in developed countries, focusing on the impact of financial scholarships on grantees, have demonstrated a noteworthy influence on the lives of beneficiaries (Mulyaningsih et al., 2021; Franken, et al. 2016; Laajaj et al., 2020; Cosentino et al., 2019). Thus, the preceding body of work

does not necessarily translate to the Philippine context and other developing countries. From 2016 to 2018, there were approximately 2,000 graduates from this program, some of whom graduated with Latin awards. Each student-grantee received a minimum grant of Php 60,000.00, or \$1,320, per academic year to cover the cost of tuition and other school fees, including allowances. Under this program, the student-grantees had to carry full loads per semester, or an average of 24 units and 24 hours per week as prescribed in the curriculum, and finish within the required period of the program; maintain satisfactory academic performance in accordance with the policies and standards of the State Universities and Colleges; render a return service of 2 years after graduation in the Philippines, except for highly critical courses determined by the local industry and government service; and adhere to terms and conditions as stipulated in the contract (CHED Memorandum Order No. 9 s. 2012).

Over five (5) years after its discontinuation, limited studies have been conducted to explore the transformational experiences of graduate-grantees as well as their families. Thus, this paper sought to determine the socioeconomic conditions of the grantees before and after the scholarship, including their personal and familial struggles and strategies in view of social transformation processes. The findings of this case study provide new insights into the growing literature on the transformative power of education in the lives of economically poor but intellectually inclined students through the lens of free tertiary education in the Philippines. However, these insights may only apply to specific groups exhibiting similar conditions.

Conceptual Framework

This study applied the theory of social transformation. People view education as a crucial tool for such transformation, a powerful agent that shapes individuals' perspectives, beliefs, and values, leading to changes in attitudes and behaviors in society. Education plays both a conservative and radical role in maintaining and changing different aspects of the social system and the individuality of a person. Education, considered the most important instrument for achieving social transformation, equips individuals with the necessary skills and occupations to become competent and functional members of society (Brisset, 2022; Marimuthu & Cheong, 2014; Dominic, 2011; Coates & McKay, 1995). The various types of changes in the patterns of social relationships and institutions, as well as in individuals and their families, trigger social transformation (Rangaswamy, 2022; Desjardins, 2015). As shown in Figure 1, socioeconomic conditions refer to income, food and water, clothing and other expenditures, health, housing and land use, and education (Basas, 2021). Societies view education as a potential social mobilizer. Considering that a white-collar job requires a tertiary education diploma, graduating from college under a scholarship is an excellent

opportunity for most people to obtain a decent job, which could transform their socioeconomic life and their family as well.

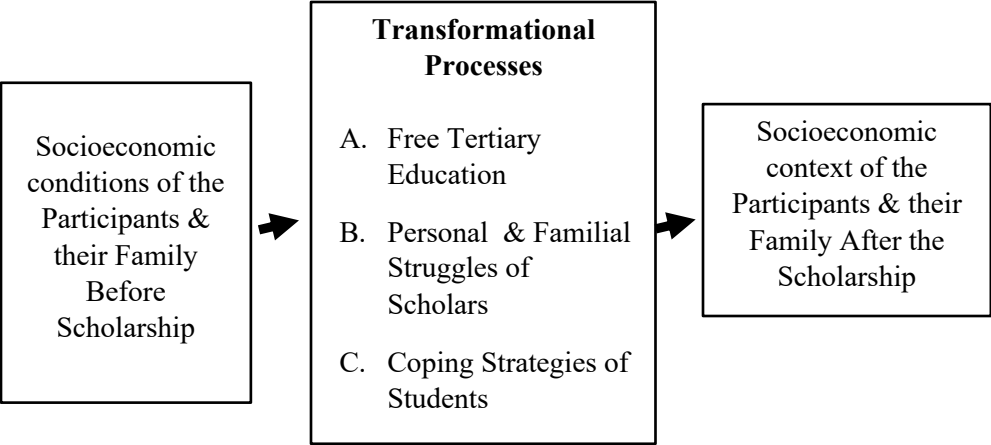


Figure 1: Transformational processes that lead to improved personal and socioeconomic conditions for learners.

This paper further explored the socioeconomic conditions of graduate-grantees before the implementation of free tertiary education, aptly known as the ESGP-PA. Along with this scholarship, the study explored the transformational processes that such privilege has brought to them in terms of personal and familial struggles and strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive case study design based on the ideas of Yin (2017; in Quintao et al., 2020). According to him, a descriptive approach is intended to understand the events with formal procedures structured and directed towards problem-solving or evaluation of alternatives. Specifically, this design was used to explore how participants and their families transform by revealing their socioeconomic conditions before and after they received the ESGP-PA grant.

This methodology was chosen on the following grounds: (a) the topic was relatively new and exploratory; (b) this research was suitable because the researcher wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and its meaning for those involved; and (c) this research sought to answer the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions through a case and bounded system.

Table 1. Profile of the Grantee-Participants

Name	Sex	Age	Place of Residence Before the Scholarship	Financial Background	Family Arrangement	College Degree Graduated	Current Employment
Allan	Male	25	Iloilo, Philippines	Parents: Farmers	4th among 6 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Information Technology	Call Center Agent
Peter	Male	27	Negros Occidental, Philippines	Informal workers	Eldest among 5 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Information Technology	Staff in a government office
John	Male	25	Iloilo, Philippines	Parents: Fishpond Caretakers	2nd among 5 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Information Technology	Call Center Agent
Aron	Male	25	Negros Occidental, Philippines	Parents: Farmers	4th among 8 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Information Technology	Employee in an enterprise
Mark	Male	25	Negros Occidental, Philippines	Parents: Farmers	5 th among 6 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Information Technology	Financial Advisor in a private insurance company
Fely	Female	26	Negros Occidental, Philippines	Parents: Farmers	Youngest among 8 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Agriculture	Employee in a government agency
Jane	Female	27	Antique, Philippines	Parents: Farmers	Eldest among 7 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Agriculture	Staff in a private company
Angelica	Female	27	Iloilo, Philippines	Supported by her mother (vegetable vendor)	Youngest among 6 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Forestry	Contractual in a government agency
Margarette	Female	32	Antique, Philippines	Parents: Farmers	2nd among 5 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Agriculture	Freelance Trainer
Luis	Male	29	Negros Occidental, Philippines	Supported by his father (sugar plantation worker)	3rd among 8 siblings	Bachelor of Science in Agriculture	Part-time Instructor in a state university

Participants

The researcher used purposive sampling to select 10 graduate-grantees who met the following inclusion criteria: they graduated as ESGP-PA scholars from a state university, were between the ages of 25 and 35, and were willing to participate in the study. Moreover, these grantee-participants were all members of the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program of the Philippine government. However, being a CCT beneficiary did not easily qualify them for this scholarship. Instead, they had to successfully navigate the National ESGP-PA Committee's and the host State University's selection process to secure their slot.

As shown in Table 1 (see appendix), six (6) of the participants were males, and four (4) were females. They all grew up in impoverished families in the Western Visayas, ranging in age from 25 to 32. They graduated from CHED's priority courses, such as Agriculture, Information Technology, and Forestry. Government and nongovernmental institutions currently employ these scholars.

Similarly, two (2) heads of the office of student affairs and five (5) parents of the grantees participated in the study. The parents of the grantees were selected on the basis of their availability and expressed willingness. The in-depth interview protocol used during the interviews was followed after a sufficient literature review. This instrument was then foreshadowed by nonparticipants who were in situations similar to those of real participants. Some of the questions asked were, "What were your experiences as an ESGPPA scholar? How did you overcome the challenges you faced as a scholar? How are you and your family doing now that you have graduated from college? What are your other insights with regard to ESGPPA? In-depth interviews were employed as the most feasible method for gathering data due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the flexibility of the available time of the participants. Nevertheless, this method was still useful for understanding the plights of the participants as recipients of free tertiary education grants.

Online interviews (phone calls and FB messenger) and document reviews were performed to gather data from the participants in the midst of the pandemic. Peer debriefing helped the researchers establish the validity of the data gathered. Thematic analysis commenced with the transcription of the interviews and then corroborated the findings of the document review. The conceptual analysis was performed using NVivo 12 Plus, while the analytic analysis was performed by the researchers through thematic analysis.

RESULTS

SOCIOECONOMIC CONDITIONS BEFORE SCHOLARSHIP

Before the scholarship, the grantee-participants' primary struggle was financial inadequacy. It also revealed that scholarships paved the way for human development as recipients overcame the opportunities and challenges inherent in college life with the support of their families and other social institutions.

In Region 6, most of the participants grew up in rural and remote areas. The majority of them were from poor families, and the scholars enabled them to proceed with schooling and earn college degrees. Before the scholarship, these participants claimed that their families' financial hardships made them unable to attend college.

A. Financial Inadequacy

The grantee-participants expressed their gratitude for the exceptional opportunity they received. A full scholarship and other perks helped them pursue their dreams and find decent jobs.

We are very poor. My parents are both farmers. We are far from civilization. I know my parents cannot send me to college because of our situation. However, thank God that this scholarship came. (Jane, 27, grantee)

I was very happy that my son was chosen as a scholar. I told my son to pursue his dream until he graduated. I am a vegetable vendor, and my proceeds could hardly finance the studies of my children, especially in college. (Jupiter, Parent)

The scholarship was a big help to our family since I and my husband had no fixed income. (Alicia, parent)

All participants are economically incapable of financing their education, and they are thankful that such opportunities have given them high hopes to pursue college degrees.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES

Struggles Faced by Grantees

Coupled with the experiences of ESGPPA grantees are the struggles and difficulties that each of them faced during their stint as a scholar. These struggles

of grantees were grouped into two groups: institutional and personal. The institutional struggles of grantees encompassed issues such as delayed stipend release, pregnancy among scholars, and inequalities in school resources. On the other hand, their personal struggles include proximity and detachment from their family and course-related difficulties.

A. Institutional Struggles

Institutional struggles refer to the problems and challenges that the participants encountered in a state university during the course of a scholarship.

A.1 Delayed Release of Stipend

Almost all of the grantee-participants were dismayed at the usual delay in the release of their monthly allowance. According to Peter,

One of my most challenging experiences was the delayed release of our monthly allowance. Sometimes, it took us several months before our stipend came; hence, we suffered in budgeting and the submission of our projects and other school-related activities. I meant that not all the time our family could give us enough allowances to sustain our daily living since we were far from them.

Henri & Jade agreed and stated:

The delay in our allowance brought me and my coscholars many problems, at times 3 months. Since it was delayed, it mainly went to the payment for our debts. Our parents could not immediately send us money, so we had to borrow some money from others.

All of the parent-participants shared common sentiments with the scholars. According to Palma,

My son always clamored about the delay of allowance, and during release, it would be insufficient to sustain his school requirements. Therefore, we are sometimes compelled to borrow some money and send it to him (my son).

This problem is not new to university officers. Ella (Student Affairs Officer) affirmed:

The number 1 problem of the grantees was financial. As head of student affairs, I extended my help to them. At times, I lent money to them, being guarantor of goods at the cooperative, and when they were hospitalized, I also helped with their hospital bills and expenses.

All participants admitted that they struggled economically due to the delayed release of their stipend, which made it difficult for them to meet both ends.

A.2 Pregnancy among the ESGP-PA Grantees

Teenage pregnancy is a common occurrence in any given society. Although it is inevitable, there are ways to mitigate it. This scenario is not new at the university. According to Luis,

My girlfriend got pregnant when we were still 3rd-year college students. In addition, it was hard for both of us how to balance our studies and our obligations to our child. It was also difficult for us to tell that event to our parents because we were both scholars.

Some university officials were amenable to this. Ella (OSA) expressed: *Some grantees became pregnant. Most of them finished their studies despite their conditions. However, some stopped schooling. Nevertheless, we instituted intervention programs, such as counseling, to mitigate the effects of such occurrences.*

Pregnancy ramps up during the participants' time at the university. However, the university implemented programs to reduce these occurrences.

A.3 Inequalities of School Stuff

Currently, technology has become an integral part of schooling, especially for those taking computer-related courses or subjects. According to Angelica,

I had to buy a laptop for my project presentation since the school computers were not always available for use. We had limited time to use them. In terms of the laboratory, we lacked tools to use, especially when we were in the field for practical applications.

Margaret added:

I had problems with our thesis; the experimental type of thesis is so expensive, especially in printing and editing. I was quite frustrated since we didn't have the chance to use the laptop or desktop computer in school for encoding.

Alicia (parent) said:

I still remember how difficult it was for my son when he enrolled in Bachelor of Science in Information Technology. He would always complain that he couldn't catch up with the demands of this course because he didn't have a computer to use. He had to go to an internet café to perform his assignments or exercises. He could not have been in such a situation if there were gadgets to be used like a computer.

Most of the participants experienced delays in the release of their stipends, which caused them to inefficiently manage their personal and school-related finances. Second, a small number of participants disclosed that some of their co-grantees became pregnant during their studies, putting these individuals at a significant economic and academic disadvantage. Finally, some participants expressed difficulty in meeting their school requirements due to a lack of computers for assignments and theses, as well as limited equipment for laboratory classes.

B. Personal Challenges

Personal struggles refer to the problems and challenges that the participants encountered personally during the course of the scholarship.

B.1 Struggles associated with the chosen course

Most scholars take their courses by chance. The establishment of priority courses prior to the scholarship led to this outcome. The majority of the participants used agriculture, while the rest used information technology (IT) and forestry. These courses were mainly not their dreams. The scholarship alone compelled some of them to enroll. Most did not anticipate that the courses would focus primarily on science, with some students having limited foundational knowledge. These struggles are not related to the negative perception that people have about agriculture courses. Jane said:

I realized that agriculture was not an easy course. It also made me realize that an agriculture course is not meant for one to become a farmer; rather, it is a way to learn about farming. It's not degrading to become an agriculture student, indeed. Agriculture as a course is a difficult course because it is a pure science. Thus, we need to study this topic further.

B.2 Proximity and Detachment from Their Family

Education is the most valued aspiration among humankind. For many, it is believed to be the definite way to achieve success in life. However, such a dream requires courage, dedication, and persistence in taking the risk of

fulfilling one's goal even at the expense of moving away from family. Most of the grantee participants, who were primarily natives of Region 6, experienced this exact scenario. According to Fely,

The struggle was real for me since I was away from my family. I am the youngest in our family. I struggled especially if I got sick since no one could take care of me.

Rey stated:

I faced several challenges as an ESGP-PA grantee since I was away from my family and sometimes it made me feel alone and longed for their presence.

These results support the claim of Former Social Welfare Secretary Dinky Soliman (2013; in Pazzibugan, 2013) that the first few months of the school year required major adjustments for scholars.

As most grantee-participants were from other provinces and islands, some experienced homesickness and loneliness, especially in the first weeks of class. Some experienced their first-ever separation from their families, a situation further exacerbated by their financial struggles. In addition, some participants admitted that they found their coursework challenging due to the multiple contents and requirements they had to fulfill as students.

COPING STRATEGIES

The participants overcame the aforementioned challenges with the support of significant others, other social institutions, and their strong faith.

Support from Significant Others

Like any other individuals, the grantee-participants were resilient in dealing with various predicaments in life. Most of them were able to overcome these trials with the support of their family, friends, and relatives. According to Rey,

I was a warrior. However, I handled those problems with the help of my family and friends. They never left me hanging, knowing that I didn't have anything for myself.

Henri added:

Sometimes, we opted to buy on credit food and groceries from the cooperative with the help of our professors. In terms of academics, I asked for help from my classmates, especially in completing my thesis.

The strong support of their family enabled the participants to overcome their academic and personal struggles.

Role of Faith

Prayers are the most powerful weapon in times of uncertainty. It serves as a medium for most people to connect or communicate with their supreme being. This also applies to this group of participants, as the majority relied on the Divine Being for support, wisdom, and enlightenment. According to Fe,

I always prayed to God for guidance. I was triggered by my drive to finish my studies. I knew that I should not disappoint my father who had a great expectation of me. I know God is always there if we just keep our faith strong.

Kristy (mother) affirmed:

We always prayed for my son's studies. I prayed that he would surpass all the challenges he was facing. I thanked God for hearing my prayers, and now I am blessed that my son graduated from the course

All participants recognized the greater power of prayers in helping them survive their academic journeys at the university.

Other Support Systems Instituted by Stakeholders

Despite their financial hardships, some participants managed their finances and other related matters efficiently. According to Luis,

Our life was not that easy. Considering that we already had a child, I and my fiancée agreed to combine the allowance we received from the scholarship so we could have some money to send to our parents who were taking care of our child. The remaining amount was spent on our school requirements.

On the part of the administration, Ella, an administration representative, shared:

We called up the pregnant scholars and their partners, and we provided counseling to them as part of our intervention. We talked to them since their parents were relatively far from them.

Institutional support and intervention were instrumental for the participants to manage their day-to-day living.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE GRANTEES AFTER SCHOLARSHIP

A. Improved Social and Financial Conditions

Most of the grantee-participants considered scholarships beneficial and life-changing opportunities. According to John,

Scholarship has changed our life forever from being poor. This provided us with the opportunity to raise the status of our family and to have a better life someday. I can already see how my fellow scholars transformed and changed their life from the day we first met as students up to now. Most of us can now help our families and have the chance to improve our living, which boosted our self-confidence.

Henri was quite emotional while expressing:

I can now help my father on the farm. I can provide for his needs and my family's needs. It seems that the graces are now coming/freely flowing. Previously, I could hardly borrow money from other people, but now I can do so, and many are approaching and asking me to do so. This is so because I have my income now which I can depend on.

These results resonate with the objectives of the program, which aims to support college graduates' entry into labor markets through placement assistance.

The scholars' parents are all appreciative of the exceptional opportunity they received. According to Jupiter,

Our life has improved since my son is now helping us. He has been augmenting our monthly allowance apart from this 4Ps. He is indeed a great help to us.

Furthermore, the university is grateful for being chosen as one of the program implementers that helped many poor but deserving students throughout Region 6. According to Ella,

To date, some of our graduates are working and have their own families. They also had good ratings in board examinations. Some graduated with honors. Some passed the board exam, but some did not. Based on my

assessment, some graduates have improved their social status. Most of them have stable jobs.

B. Stakeholders' Recommendations on the Continuance of the Program

The grant was tremendously beneficial to its grantees. According to Ella (OSA),

I am thankful to the implementing agencies for facilitating the conduct of this grant. Many graduated because of such scholarships. The program was indeed beneficial to those who graduated but not to those who did not finish their studies.

Nevertheless, the grantees themselves were hopeful that such scholarship would be revived. According to Angelica,

If the scholarship would be revived, I would like to suggest not limiting the scholarship to specific courses. This is to give scholars the chance to freely choose their course so that they will not lose interest in pursuing the course. I would also like to add the provision of a computer laptop, which is currently very relevant and useful to grantees, especially given school requirements.

Despite the preceding statements from scholars and parents, some university officials are cognizant of the existing free tertiary education and other scholarships from the CHED and relevant agencies/entities. This has led them to adopt stronger convictions. According to Alma:

For me, there is no need to revive the scholarship because of free tertiary education. Hereto, the tuition and miscellaneous fees are free. In addition, there are other scholarships available, such as the Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES).

These viewpoints from university officials conform to the qualifications set for the program. The provision indicates that students can only be eligible if they are not receiving any higher education scholarships/grants from public institutions, which, in today's case, is free tertiary education.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

All of the grantee-participants were households that received the Conditional Cash Transfer Program (CCTP), otherwise known as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). Most of them are from Negros Occidental, followed by Iloilo and Antique. Conventionally, Negros Occidental is known for its large disparity between the rich and the poor compared to the other provinces in Region 6 (Western Visayas). However, poverty did not stop them from dreaming, as they believe that education can emancipate them if they have personal drive and an appropriate support system to pursue their college dreams.

Struggles Faced by Grantees

The participants identified specific issues. Most of the problems encountered by the grantee-participants revolved mainly around the delayed release of their monthly allowance. The participants attributed their other challenges to their vulnerabilities as college students, which stemmed from their financial issues.

Coping Strategies

The scholarship revealed that these participants had survived their poor economic conditions. They must overcome the difficulties inherent in college life before they can pursue their dreams and earn college degrees. Empirically, scholars have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing social and gender disparities in Indonesia. It provides a solution to accelerate and thrive in the development of education and realization of increasing levels of the human development index (Aliyyah et al., 2019). Moreover, a study in China argued that financial aid in first-tier colleges can sufficiently help poor but achieving students. However, the additional financial aid could become counterproductive, as it negatively affects the financial autonomy of students and eventually translates to academic performance (Wang et al., 2013). This also holds true in Romania since social scholarships could lead to better academic performance and lower drop-out rates for students; thus, they could successfully finish their undergraduate academic studies on time (Cismaru et al., 2022; Facchini et al., 2019).

Improved Social and Financial Conditions

The study's findings reinforce Paulo Freire's (1970) ideas about human transformation in education, emphasizing that education has a transformative power that extends beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge, empowering individuals to challenge existing power structures and gain socioeconomic

advantage. The participants demonstrated this by joining the country's labor force, leveraging their college-level competence.

Nonetheless, education remains a crucial factor in equalizing the social stratum of society. This scholarship provides affordances not only for its grantees but also for the state universities that implemented such programs. This scenario indicates that the objectives of the ESGPPA are to increase the number of individuals enrolled in higher education in line with the national government's priority degree programs for poor households (Halili, 2014). The parameters of the EGPPA, which mandate eligible scholars to enroll in CHED-identified priority programs that include agricultural courses, align with these findings. Nevertheless, the results align with the findings of Silfverberg & Orbeta (2016), indicating the necessity to enhance the grantee selection process to better serve deserving and dedicated students.

The opportunities that they now enjoy after college graduation have propelled them to push for the revival of scholarship. Moreover, scholarships have enabled participants to transform their social and economic lives. Some of them improved their well-being and were able to secure a decent job, which also helped them liberate their family from poverty. Indeed, the findings adhere with the findings of Tolentino and Asiri (2024), that free higher education had brought emotional relief and contentment among beneficiaries and families, especially those who experienced financial limitations.

We strongly recommend that implementing agencies establish mechanisms to guarantee the timely release of monthly stipends. The grantees require financial support to meet their daily school and personal needs. In addition, some of the challenges faced by the participants included proximity and detachment from family, pregnancy among grantees, and a lack of personal and school electronic items, which are primarily related to personal and course requirements. A 2016 report from the Commission on Audit (COA) underscored that the lack of clear-cut guidelines for the ESGPPA program causes the delay of stipend payments to the grantees. Moreover, a study by Stollak, Vandenberg, Steiner, & Richards (2010) affirmed that college students significantly differ in their expenses based on several factors, such as age, personality traits, and knowledge. These students are believed to be in a unique situation since they have restricted incomes and high expenses; therefore, they obtain and manage money differently. Therefore, according to the same researchers, students who understand financial responsibility and status are less likely to be in debt.

Hence, the Philippine government has implemented strategic educational grants known as the SGPPA and Expanded SGPPA to allow poor yet academically inclined students to finish their college degrees for free. This is in response to the government's commitment to attaining Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.4. Furthermore, this scholarship grant supports the idea of a rights-based approach in education that allows everyone to pursue relevant quality education

notwithstanding one's current economic standing and to grab the chance to study if an opportunity comes (Novotny et al., 2019).

The data show that the ESGP-PA scholarship is effective, as all of the grantee-participants have completed their education and secured graduate jobs. They can now provide for the needs of their families, especially by supporting the schooling of their siblings. This shows that the program has been successfully targeting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their academic outcomes. Other countries, especially in Southeast Asia, may gain insights into the financial grant policies of the Philippines for poor but academically inclined students.

The challenges encountered by the participants require strong support from their families and significant others to overcome these significant episodes of their lives. The findings of Saa'da (2021) support this, stating that it is a reliable predictor of self-regulated learning and the success of learners across the educational ladder. However, the university requires an in-place intervention program to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy, not just among scholars but also among all students.

These grantee-participants have successfully hurdled their problems with the help of friends, family, and peers, having strong religious faith, good financial management, and doing part-time jobs. These support systems are vital for students to succeed in their endeavors. Moreover, personal strategies, such as perseverance, humility, and resiliency, helped the participants survive their college life. These factors have led to improved socioeconomic conditions through social mobility.

This research limits its findings to the specific university under study, but it is likely more generalizable to universities with similar contexts and characteristics. To establish the generalizability of this paper's results, researchers may conduct similar studies using other variables.

Finishing tertiary education provides Filipinos, especially economically challenged individuals, with an economic advantage that will improve their well-being. Thus, the Philippine government must continue the ESGP-PA scholarship despite the implementation of free tertiary education. If the ESGP-PA scholarship is revived, the concerned agency may establish additional parameters or clauses to ensure consistency with the current free tertiary education program, which may include the provision of electronic devices like laptops. Similarly, we encourage university administrations and government agencies to implement policies that enhance placement assistance for graduates, assisting them in securing suitable jobs. Further studies should be conducted on the impact of ESGP-PA grants on the labor market and may employ other methodologies, such as cost-benefit analysis (CBA).

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