

Voices and narratives of the FHE grantees as input to DNSC GAD policies and programs

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ABSTRACT

The study describes the grantees' experiences under the Free Higher Education (FHE) in Davao del Norte State College (DNSC). The study applied a descriptive qualitative research design, and utilizes an in-depth interview to gather the narratives of the grantees. There were ten (10) participants in this study who represented the intersectionality of genders such as married woman, single mother, a person with a disability (PWD), pregnant grantee, and a child of an OFW. The FHE grantees came from low-income families, and these motivate them to finish a college education. They see education as an opportunity to uplift their lives from poverty. The study used the Simple Thematic Analysis to examine the data. Notable themes emerged in describing the experiences of the FHE grantees, such as academic hurdles and successes. Moreover, the grantees perceived the program as a great help and an opportunity given to them. Time management and physical discomforts, especially for the PWD, emerged from the student grantees' challenges. The study discussed the findings concerning the program's improvement based on the themes that emerged from the grantees' narratives.

Keywords: *Free Higher Education, experiences, intersectionality, Gender and Development*

INTRODUCTION

The RA 10931 or Free Higher Education Act or Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education is a law signed by President Rodrigo R. Duterte last August 3, 2017, as part of the administration's commitment to provide quality and affordable education for all. The law was fully implemented in the school year 2018-2019 in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs), and Technical-Vocational Institutions (TVIs) across the country.

With this law, there was an increase in the number of students in the above mentioned schools, including the Davao del Norte State College (DNSC). In the school year 2018-2019, the total number of enrollees in DNSC was 2,739 (DNSC Registrar, 2018). There was an increase of 1,215 students compared to the previous school year. Even before the implementation of the FHE, there were already many scholarships offered by the college, which lead to the growth in the student population. This significant increase also applies to the number of female students. There was a roughly 85% increase from school year 2017-2018 and another 15% in 2019-2020 (DNSC Registrar, 2019). Vulnerable groups like pregnant women, persons with additional needs and single mother/single fathers also showed an increase in number.

Many of the previous studies culled out from scholarships/grants are focused on the impact of the program on education. Filmer and Schady's (2008)

survey entitled, "Getting Girls into School: Evidence from a Scholarship Program in Cambodia," found out that scholarship recipients' enrollment and attendance rates were approximately 30 percentage points higher than they would have been with the absence of the program. The program's impact on enrollment and attendance is most prominent for the most disadvantaged girls - girls of lower socioeconomic status, girls with lower parental education levels, and girls living further away from school.

Dong and Chapman (2008) stated in their study entitled, "The Chinese Government Scholarship Program: An Effective Form of foreign Assistance?," that there is a high level of satisfaction towards the beneficiaries' experience in China as international students. Further, Commeret (1992), in her study on the Worcester Art Museum's Scholarship Program, reiterated the positive impact of the scholarship on many students and emphasized that the experience enhances the quality of the lives of students by opening their minds to new ideas and stimulating their imagination.

Numerous studies explored the effect of merit and college access on students underrepresented in higher education. New Mexico Lottery Success Scholarship Program, Binder and Ganderton (2002, 2004) found that these scholarships award a disproportionately lower percentage to racial/ethnic minorities. While Heller and Rasmussen (2002) see similar results for the merit aid programs in Florida and Michigan. In that, the high schools with

the highest college participation rates also have the highest scholarship rates.

In the "Philippines, a study entitled "How should income-based grantees in tertiary education be chosen?" by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) is a preliminary review of the Students Grant-In-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (SGP-PA) of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). As a form of affirmative action, SGP-PA provides financially constrained but deserving students the opportunity to obtain college degrees and break the cycle of poverty. A related PIDS study published in 2013 found that the better a person's educational attainment, the better his chances are to get employed and earn higher wages. The study looks into the selection process of the grantees. The study found out that it was upon the discretion of the SUCs to accommodate the program that contributed to the variations in the SGPPA success rate.

Another study conducted by the De La Salle University on Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) mothers and the impact to the education of their children states that children of migrant mothers tend to score lower and have poorer performance. The absence of mothers is consistently identified as having a more pervasive influence on the lives of their children. Mothers can miss out on entire childhood years. Sometimes, relationship with their children becomes damaged and distant, even after they return. Other times, their children's lives can veer off course. These

reasons make children of OFW as one of the vulnerable groups.

With the possibility of continuously increasing in the student population due to the FHE program of the government, it is high time to determine the grantees' perceptions, challenges, and triumphs, especially for the vulnerable group like those mentioned earlier. This study will serve as baseline data in crafting programs and policies of Gender and Development (GAD), which is the primary purpose of this initiative. Using the lens of intersectionality can help the college unpack how students' intersecting identities contribute to increased risk for discrimination and oppression that marginalizes educational experiences.

Intersectionality asks academicians and social development practitioners to use multiple lenses and identities to better understand different issues and concerns in higher education. As such, is recognized as a medium through which an individual can overcome various social barriers and inequalities through which it becomes an institution with intersecting objectives and mandates. This intersectionality makes access to higher education a highly contested arena. DNSC as a higher institution is starting to put the GAD policies and program in place, leading to the development of this GAD research paper.

The study aims to describe the experiences of the FHE grantees in Davao del Norte State College (DNSC), considering the intersectionality of gender. Specifically, this study aims to answer the

following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of FHE grantees?
2. What are the perceptions of the FHE grantees of the FHE program?
3. What are the challenges met by the FHE grantees considering the intersectionality of gender?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study aimed to describe the experiences of the FHE grantees in DNSC; thus, the overarching paradigm in the research is qualitative. It only describes the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of grantees considering their intersectionalities : being married, single mother or single father, child of an OFW, pregnant woman at the time of the grant, and PWD. Ten FHE grantees participated in the study. Most of the participants are between 20-28 years old. The oldest grantee is 28 years old. The sex of the participants comprised of eight (8) females and two (2) males. The gender intersectionalities are as follows: three (3) were single mothers, one (1) was married, two (2) were children of an OFW, two (2) were PWD, and one (1) was pregnant during the grant.

A focus group discussion (FGD) is one of the methods utilized to gather the FHE grantees' narratives. In-depth interview (IDI) provides profound descriptions of their unique experiences. This study

used simple thematic analysis. It entails qualitative coding data into clusters of similar entities or conceptual categories and identifies consistent patterns and relationships between themes to develop a theoretical explanation of the phenomenon under investigation (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The study is focused only on the experiences of the student grantees, the DNSC as the state college implementer, where experiences of other student grantees in other SUCs may not be similar. Also, this study cannot explain related Scholarship programs offered by other agencies. The findings of the research are only valid to the 10 participants of the study. Hence, the study cannot generalize the grantees' experiences under the Free Higher Education, implemented by the government all over the Philippines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of FHE Grantees

This theme covered the narratives of the grantees during the program implementations, their academic and non-academic experiences. It also describes the positive and negative experiences and full involvement of the FHE grantees.

Theme 1: Academic Hurdles

Theme 1 refers to the grantees' experiences as students in DNSC. A married grantee with three kids narrates her experience when she first entered the school as a college student. She said

that she had difficulty concentrating on her studies since it has been a long time she's not in school. She has difficulty understanding her lessons. Also, she is thinking of her children back home. She shared that it was okay for her as a solo parent to get a 75% grade in her subjects. She felt pressured between her studies and work. Though she wanted to focus on her studies, she needed to work to augment the financial needs of her children.

Students face several academic challenges in college, including finding time – management, understanding course content, and maintaining a high degree of motivation. Students often struggle to balance academic demands with work, personal responsibilities, and social experiences, along with meeting these challenges. The causes of student stress are numerous and varied. Academic stress can be interpreted as an emotional or mental state that the participants of this study commonly feel. It is in line with Carveth's (1996) study, which defines academic stress as stress experienced by students in their learning. Academic stress usually arises due to students' perceptions of the amount of knowledge that must be mastered in a certain period, also related to their learning activities. Tension on the student can affect physical, emotional, and behavioral. Academic stress can also be caused by academic stressors in the teaching and learning process or matters related to learning activities, such as the pressure to move up to class, length of study, anxiety in facing exams, and the number of tasks to be submitted.

Theme 2: Successes

The grantees have experienced academic successes. With the FHE program, grantees are motivated to do well in school. The theme appears in the following statements:

Dean's listernako, dapat maningkamot kay wala na koy gibayran. (I am already a Dean's Lister, so I will do well since I do not have anything to pay in school) R7COFW.

Nagexcel ko sa field of arts, naga participate pud ko sa mga events. Dili nako low-key og na elect na pud ko og officer sa among Institute. (I excelled in arts, participated in students' events, and am not a "low-key" student, even I was elected as an officer in my institute) R5PWD.

These imply that students react to college in a variety of ways. For some, the school offered no boundaries and performance of supreme social confidence.

Perception of grantees to FHE program

The theme contained insights of the FHE grantees towards the program, their perceived accessibility, adequacy of the program, and the views and opinions of the grantees. There were two (2) themes that emerged from the narratives shared by the grantees.

Theme 1: A Great Help

The grantees perceived the FHE program as a great help. It is a notable theme when asked about their perception of the program. The FHE provides an opportunity to get a college education,

increasing the chances of getting better employment in the future. The theme was illustrated in the following statements:

..since grade 11, maglisod ko og sustain sa akong mga needs, kay seven (7) mi kabook nga mag igsoon, naglisod si mama ogpaskwela sa amoa. Di jud ma suportahan akong kinahanglan atong grade 11 og 12 pa ko. (I have difficulty maintaining my needs since grade 11, we are seven siblings, so my mother has a problem sending us to school and cannot support my requirements during grade 11 and 12) RIPWD.

Makamotivate kay wala koy gibayaran tapos dili kaayo stress asa ko mangita og pampbayad kay naa pud akoang tulo ka anak nag skwela pud so naa pud koy bayranan sa ilahang skul, sa among balay kay bills sa kuryente og pagkaon. (I am motivated to go to school since I do not pay anything and I am not so stressed to look for finances because I also have three children who go to school. I also pay for their education. In the house, I am also paying the bills like electricity and food) R3M.

Dako jud sya nga tabang para sa akoa kay akong pamilya dili makapa skwela sa akoa. (It is a great help for me because my family cannot support me in my education) R4PWD.

Dakong tabang sya sa akoa og sa akong pamilya kay nag iskwela ko nga libre ra nga dili sila mag problema sa bayronon sa iskwelahan. (It is a great help to me and my family because I am studying for free and they will not think any more of payment for the school) R7COFW.

The implementation of the Free Higher Education Law is a significant step towards improving the lives of underprivileged and marginalized Filipinos. The FHE grantees see this as a great help in attaining their dreams of having education. The importance of education is undeniable for every single person. Education has a positive effect on human life. The grantees agreed that life is difficult, especially in the financial aspect, but education is evident. Some claimed that they were employed formally or informally to save for their college education.

Education has always been important to Filipinos. Filipino has a strong belief that every child should be educated. The importance of education at a family level is a main social mobility. It is an advantage for young Filipinos to finish their education to get a better job and a better future. There is an ardent desire for education because they see it as a solution to poverty. Education can give people knowledge, skills, confidence, competency, structure and can improve one's mind to become sharp. A good education for their children gives great fulfillment to Filipino parents, knowing that they can give the best for their children. The FHE grantees have a strong positive outlook towards education.

In the Philippines, education is one of the priorities of every Filipino. Education in the Philippines has been improved, and Filipinos may have a high quality of learning skills. The Philippine government has focused on giving a higher quality

of education around the country; thus, the Free Higher Education Law was implemented.

Theme 2: Opportunity

The grantees considered the FHE program an opportunity. Having free education, there is no reason not to go to school. An OFW child said that the FHE helped them a lot in terms of personal savings. They were able to provide for their needs and devices for academic purposes. Moreover, she said that it is a great offer, especially to students, families with unstable financial status and working students. Thus, this program makes a difference in their lives.

The program hopes to empower deserving members of poor households by providing them the opportunity to be employed in higher value-added occupations, to help alleviate their family from poverty, and at the same time enable them to contribute to national development (Department of Social Welfare and Development, 2012). Education is fundamental to development and growth. It is one of the most vital instruments to reduce poverty and improve health, gender- equality, peace, and stability.

Education is still the ultimate need of the grantees, and the Free Higher Education program met that.

Tabang gyud sya sa mga kabantan-unan nga wala naka skwela...ang tao na walang wala pero gusto gyud mo skwela, maynalang mahayahay ang kinabuhì og maynalang makatabang sa pamilya.

(It is a great help to the youth who have no opportunity for education. There are people who have nothing but want to go to school, a chance to make their lives better, and an opportunity to help their families) R8M.

The Challenges of the FHE Grantees

The theme includes the grantees' needs that were not met under the program, the challenges the grantees encountered, and how they cope with them. It also describes the support systems of the grantees that help them surpass those challenges. In discussing the grantees' challenges, two (2) themes emerged: time management and discomfort.

Theme 1: Time Management

The grantee voiced out that one of their challenges is to manage their time. A married grantee shares that she has a problem working out her time since she has children to teach in addition to her own modules and requirements in class. Married grantees faced too many challenges in managing their time. They have multiple and even conflicting roles, the academic achievement of their family life may be at risk.

Time management plays a vital role in improving student's academic performance and achievements. Every student should have developed the ability to manage their time, including setting goals and priorities, and organizing time. Here, time management is only possible through self-motivation: performance, ability, and motivation (Brigitte et al., 2005).

Theme 2: Physical Discomforts for PWD grantees

Persons with disabilities (PWD) grantees shared that they felt physical discomfort in schools, such as sitting in class for an extended period, long walking distances, limited access to learning materials, and climbing building stairs. The following statements illustrate their experience:

Kanang dugay dugay ko magtindog, mga one hour or two hours, kung makalingkod nako, maglisod nako og tindog kay sakit na. Matibo man gud ang sakit. (Whenever I am standing for one hour to two hours and when I sit, I have difficulty standing up again because it is painful. The pain has accumulated) R4PWD.

Usahay kay hindrance sya kay magsakit man gud sya, akong likod. Tas usahay murag dili ko kabangon. (Sometimes, my disability is a hindrance since it is painful, my back. Moreover, sometimes I have difficulty getting up) R5PWD.

Mcleod (2014) points out that students with physical disabilities experience personal limitations in school environments that affect their social, psychological, and academic spheres which in turn may also affect their academic performances. Despite their physical condition, physically disabled students are supposed to be treated like other human beings because they feel, think, and behave like ordinary people. In line with that, Morley (2010) argued that,

without interaction and participation, physically disabled students would feel inferior, and their life will be miserable. Students at higher learning institutions need to interact and cooperate regardless of one's physical condition because academically and socially, one has to depend on others to be successful. For example, group discussion and assignments, make students familiar with each other and improve social abilities among them.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study gives an in-depth perspective on the experiences of the FHE grantees in Davao del Norte State College. The results reveal that the students came from low-income families, and it is evident that they desire to have education amidst difficulties in life. Notable themes emerged about the experiences of the grantees during the program.

Students have experienced academic hurdles and successes, and these did not hinder their participation in social activities. Thus, they better understand how ability, motivation, study time, and work patterns influence academic performance. They value the FHE program of the government as an opportunity to change their lives. With this, the Davao del Norte State College has an essential role in addressing the challenges met by the student grantees. The institution should design activities that will strengthen the services they give to students. Thus, provide programs to facilitate adjustment

to college life, enhance value formation, and create a career guidance program. The student affairs office should create a program that will help the students develop self-concept and self-esteem.

Moreover, higher learning institutions like DNSC should have special offices and desks to deal with students with physical disabilities. Infrastructures such as classrooms, dormitories, dining halls, washrooms, and playgrounds should consider people with disabilities by building ramps and elevators in multiple level buildings to access different services in different locations. Lastly, the Gender and Development (GAD) Center of the college should have programs that will address the intersectionality of gender.

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