

## Free College Education for Filipinos: A Play between Political Will and Economy

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### Abstract

In support of UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) frameworks, several countries around the world, including the Philippines, have made provisions for free college tuition. With Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte signing the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (UAQTEA), this paper illuminates on the arguments of those who are supporting the Act and those that are against it in the hope of identifying what motivated the Duterte administration to embark in a free college tuition project. Philippine education managers considered it instrumental in increasing the literacy rate of the Philippines and the ultimate answer to poverty. However, Orbeta and Paqueo (2017) posited that universal free tuition is anti-poor since the bigger chunk of the costs of higher education are those for living expenses and instructional materials, which are still inaccessible to the poor since they are not provided by the government. Moreover, critiques argued that the free college education undermines the already low quality of education in the country. While undoubtedly recognized as a leader with strong political will, given the centrality of free college tuition among Rodrigo Duterte's flagship projects promised during the past presidential election campaign, the President is left with no choice but to rely on a comprehensive taxation system (TRAIN Law) to finance his administration's lucrative projects as he struggles to maintain his popularity as a leader.

**Keywords :** Free College Education, Local Universities and Colleges, State Universities and Colleges, Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act

### Introduction

The turn of the century has seen the adoption of the *Education for All* (EFA) and *Millennium Development Goals* (MDG) in 2000. Not only are these the two most influential frameworks in the field of education, but also they are "ambitious roadmap for the global community to follow, offering a long-term vision of reduced poverty and hunger, better health and education, sustainable lifestyles, strong partnerships and shared commitments" (Fiske, 2012, p. 114). On the one hand, the EFA movement is a worldwide endeavor which views education as a basic human right and supports the provision of quality basic education for everyone including the children, youth and adults. On the other hand, the MDG is aimed to halve poverty by equipping people with appropriate theoretical knowledge and skills "to break the cycle of poverty and shape their future life chances" (Fiske, 2012, p. 114). However, the focus of these frameworks is the provision of free primary education. Tertiary education which provides foundation of knowledge and skills prior to landing in most jobs is quite undermined.

Despite nil support from international organizations such as the UNESCO, the provision of free college education has been lingering the globe. Several countries around the world, albeit mostly are from Europe (Goetz, 2019), have been providing free tertiary education not only for their constituents but also for the international community. These countries rely on their robust taxation system, and local and international donors to provide free tertiary education. For instance, Norway, Germany, and Slovenia offer free college education in public universities. Norway is in a unique position to provide free college

education to its constituents and to the international community due to high revenues it gets from its oil and gas reserves (Dehaas, 2011). Germany is another country that claims to provide free tuition for higher education students owing to its strong political will to help children from low-income families (Kaschel, 2017). Other notable countries in EU providing free higher education to its constituents include France, Sweden, Spain, Denmark, Finland, Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Greece and Italy (Gibbons, 2016).

Outside EU, another country that provides free college education, although limited, is Brazil. Free education is offered by the Ministry of Education in its federal universities by providing scholarships for undergraduate degrees, masters, doctoral and post-doctoral for Brazilians and immigrants who have Brazilian citizenship (Jackson, 2015).

While offering free education is seen by many as noble and supports UNESCO's EFA and MDG frameworks, these countries' free higher education projects did not escape criticisms. For instance, the Norwegian government has proposed in the national budget for 2015 a cut of 80.5 million Norwegian Kroner or approximately 9.5 million US dollars to higher education institutions. With its strong argument for a targeted internationalization, sending a message to the international community that students should choose Norway for quality of education and not because it is free, the Norwegian government believes that this budget cut would encourage public higher education institutions to introduce tuition fees for students coming from outside the EU/EEA and Switzerland (ESN, 2019). The Norwegian government's main goal in introducing tuition fees is to both advance these institutions' opportunities for education export and also expand their funding base (Smith, 2016). Earlier, Denmark introduced tuition fees in 2006, Sweden introduced them in 2011 for incoming international students and Finland began charging tuition fees from international students in August 2017 (Anderson, 2018). These experiences of EU countries on providing free college tuition is worth examining since they serve as role models for other countries to follow suit.

Recently in Asia, the Philippines has laid down an ambitious plan to provide free college education by virtue of Republic Act No. 10931, or the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (UAQTEA) signed by the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of the Philippines, Rodrigo Roa Duterte, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, 2017. This paper digs deep into the arguments of those who are in favor of the Act and those who are against it to shed some light on one of the most debated issues in the history of Philippine education.

### **Arguments for free college education**

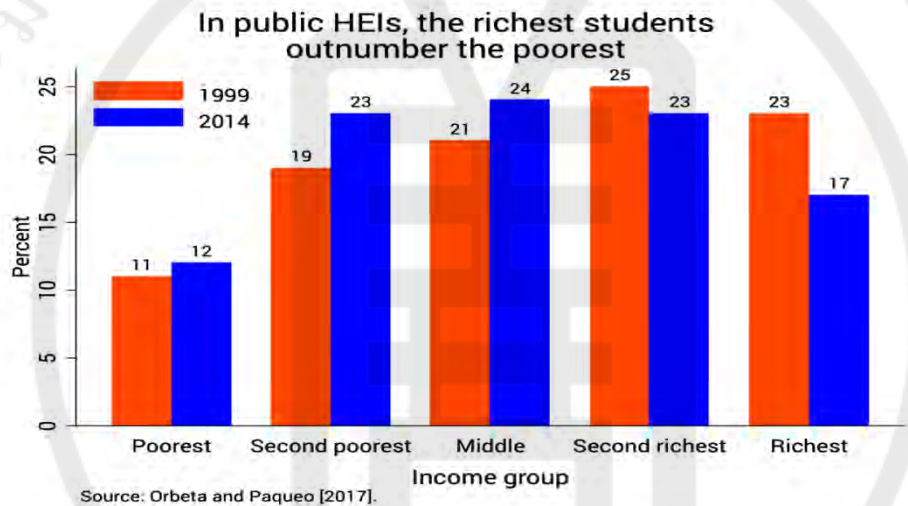
One of the highly debated topics among Philippine economists and education managers is "free college tuition". With a budget of PHP40 billion or approximately 770 million US dollars (USD), it embodies free college education in state universities and colleges (SUCs) and local universities and colleges (LUCs). The signing was followed by Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) release of the implementing rules and regulations (IRR) pertaining to the Act on March 26, 2018. Sicat (2018) reported that the free college tuition subsidy is for all Filipino students who enroll in undergraduate or bachelor degree programs of state universities and colleges (SUCs), local universities and colleges (LUCs), private higher educational institutions (HEIs), and other publicly run post-secondary technical vocational institutions (TVIs). Sicat (2018) reported further that the law covers not only tuition fees, but also other matriculation fees dealing with laboratories, libraries, computer use, athletics and other minor fees. While the coverage of UAQTEA includes most Filipinos, as part of its implementing rules and regulations, Cepeda (2018) reported that the law prohibits one from applying for free tuition in SUCs and LUCs if the applicant has (a) already taken a bachelor's degree or a comparable undergraduate degree from any public or private higher education institution (HEI), (b) failed to comply with the admission or retention policies of the SUC or LUC, leading to your disqualification to enroll, (c) failed to

complete a degree within a year after the period prescribed for the program applied for, and (d) voluntarily opted out of the free higher education provision.

Despite these prohibitions, the UAQTEA was warmly welcomed particularly by those from low-income families. It is a highly promising project, which is claimed by Philippine education managers as strongly supportive of UNESCO's EFA and MDG frameworks and therefore instrumental in increasing the literacy rate of the Philippines. Moreover, it was viewed by the education managers as the ultimate answer to poverty.

### Arguments against free college education

While this project is considered by many as appealing since it covers all Filipinos, the economists of the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) argued that fully financing the Unified Student Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education (UNFAST) law is a wiser approach. Their argument was based on the Annual Philippine Statistics Survey data in 2014 showing that only one in every 10 students enrolled in SUCs are from the bottom 20% of the income ladder (see Bersales, 2014). Figure 1 below illustrates the percentages of higher education students enrolled in HEI in different economic status.



**Figure 1** Higher education students from different economic status 1999 and 2014

Orbeta and Paqueo (2017) posited that universal free tuition is anti-poor since the bigger chunk of the costs of higher education are those for living expenses and instructional materials, which are still inaccessible to the poor since they are not provided by the government. Addressing this issue, in December 2018, the government released a budget of PHP16 billion (approximately USD310 million) for the Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES). According to Montemayor (2018), TES is given to poor but deserving students, who are enrolled in the 112 SUCs and 78 LUCs and whose names appear in the Listahanan 2.0 (List 2.0) or the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) (or the Filipino Family Poverty Alleviation Program) of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). TES beneficiaries in public universities get PHP40,000 (approximately USD770) a year, to be used for books, transportation, supplies, room and board fees, and other education-related expenses.

Moreover, critiques argued that the free college education undermines the already low quality of education in the country. In the past, the Philippines was struggling to improve education quality in its HEIs, which were lacking in advanced facilities, highly trained faculty members, research output and learning resource materials that are useful in this digital era (Sicat, 2018).

Dumlao-Abadilla (2017) reported that the advocacy group, Foundation for Economic Freedom (FEF) argued that providing 8.3 billion pesos to SUCs for free tuition is anti-poor because the funding considers only tuition in the cost of higher education, which covers only one-third of the cost of attending HEIs. Other expenses that are quite challenging for the poor to pay such as cost of living allowances and study materials, which make up the greater part of college expenses, are undermined. Put another way, students belonging to higher income families, and who have the capacity to pay for the cost of living expenses, may end up using the free tuition subsidy. Thus, the Foundation is supporting the implementation of an existing law that unifies and rationalizes all modalities for student financial assistance, including scholarships, grants-in-aid and student loans.

Departing from the vein of argument, Former Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Cielito Habito enumerated four reasons why free tuition is inimical to the country (Habito, 2017): (1) giving free tuition to all instead of picking only deserving students, would benefit both rich and poor students, (2) students who pay for their tuition have more motivation to finish their studies than “free riders” who could possibly have no interest in or were not suited for college education, (3) subsidies should be given not to schools but to students who could then choose which university or college to attend, and (4) tuition fee is just a fraction of the total cost involved in sending a student to college.

### Summary

The ultimate goal of this paper is to illuminate on the arguments of those who are supporting the UAQTEA and those that are against it in the hope of identifying what motivated the Duterte administration to embark in free college tuition project. In support of the UAQTEA, low-income families, to whom the majority of Filipinos belong, jubilated and celebrated their victory as the government finally addressed their pleadings for free education. On the part the education managers, the provision of free college tuition does not only strongly support UNESCO’s EFA and MDG frameworks but the Act is also instrumental in increasing the literacy rate in the Philippines. Invoking a similar vein of arguments, international students from non-EU countries enrolled in EU public universities to take advantage of the free college tuition offered to them. According to Finland’s Ministry of Education and Culture, 77% of the 19,880 foreign students in Finnish higher education in 2014 were from non-EU/EEA countries such as Myanmar, Nepal and the China (Smith, 2016).

Despite its noble goal of helping the poor and contributory to uplifting the country’s literacy rate, the UAQTEA was not exempted from criticisms. Unleashing a two-pronged argument, Aniceto C. Orbeta Jr. and Vicente B. Paqueo, two top economic managers of the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), posited that providing a non-selective free tuition college tuition to students underplays the value of education and can simply be taken for granted among the youth since it becomes very affordable, on the one hand. On the other hand, free college tuition is costly and it may easily derail the governments’ other projects of national significance using an overly stretched budget that relies mainly from taxation, particularly the recently enacted Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Act or officially known as Republic Act No. 10963. Similar arguments were cited by the governments of EU countries that shifted from providing free college tuition to international students to charging some fees claiming that “the goal of the proposal is to both advance these institutions’ opportunities for education export and also expand their funding base” (Smith, 2016 p. 2 of the running webpage). Given the centrality of free college tuition among Rodrigo Duterte’s flagship projects promised during the past presidential election campaign, the President is left with no choice but to rely on a comprehensive taxation system (TRAIN Law) to finance his administration’s lucrative projects as he struggles to maintain

his popularity and as a leader with strong political will. Future studies on the discourse of free college tuition in the Philippines may take a corpus-assisted investigation of online newspaper data to illuminate on the types of information on free college tuition that are presented by the media to the reading public. We hope that this brief paper inspires in-depth investigations of the discourse of free college tuition before other countries of similar economic status follow suit.

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