

Access to Tertiary Education

Republic Act (RA) 10931, otherwise known as the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, was approved by Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte on 3 August 2017. It mandates the State to provide, through adequate funding and support, all Filipinos with equal opportunity to quality tertiary education in both the private and public educational institutions (HEIs) and to increase the participation rate among all socio-economic classes in tertiary education. Sensibly, access is prioritized for academically able students who come from poor families.

RA 10931 is a strategic legislative move that will energize the Philippine scientific enterprise system. Its successful implementation will increase the number of BS graduates and consequently, expand and deepen the pool of potential PhD students in all areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The relatively strong growth of the Philippine economy in recent fiscal years would enable the government to raise the revenues needed to administer the various programs mentioned in the said law.

Between 2002 and 2016, the nominal GDP (in Philippine pesos) of the country grew at an average rate of 16.72% per annum. The approved national budgets for 2016 and 2017 were equivalent to 22.6% (PhP 3.002T) and 22.8% (PhP 3.35T) of the 2015 and 2016 GDP figures, respectively. In 2017, the respective allocations for the Department of Science and Technology and the state universities and colleges (SUCs) are 6.46 and 2.15 times bigger than those given to them in 2006. The University of the Philippines System Budget grew 1.52 times in the said span of time. On average, UP receives 27% of the annual budget that is allocated to operate and maintain the one hundred and twelve SUCs that comprise 5.8% of the total number of HEIs in the country. During AY 2016-2017, 45.33% of all undergraduate (3.5895M) and 50.42% of graduate (0.6815M) students were enrolled in public HEIs according to the Commission on Higher Education.

Among the SUCs, UP has the second largest undergraduate population at 71,507 after that of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (79,372) in AY 2016-2017. The national university of the country immediately implemented the provisions of RA 10931 by stopping the collection of tuition and other school fees from qualified undergraduate students in the first semester of AY 2017-2018 that started in the first week of August.

The number of examinees that took the UP College Admission Test (UPCAT) has increased at an average annual rate of 3.19% from 2003 (64,041) to 2015 (88,525) while the number of available slots for first year students remained essentially the same at $12,600 \pm 610$ per year. The steady increase in the number of UPCAT applicants is not surprising given the perceived worth of a UP education and a national population that grew at an annual rate of 1.90% from 2000 to 2010, and 1.72% from 2010 to 2015 according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. The population was 103.32M in 2016 and forecasted to reach 109.703M in 2020 by the United Nations.

Yearly, sixty-five percent (65.1%) of UPCAT examinees applied for admission into UP Diliman from 2009 to 2015. They competed for a number of slots that remained essentially steady at 3890 ± 102 per year between 2003 and 2014. In 2015, the number of slots was increased by 43.68% to 5,589. In 2016, the number of UPCAT applicants plummeted down to 5,045 with 90% applying into UP Diliman, as a result of the K-12 shift in the high school curriculum.

Admission into UP Diliman is getting increasingly difficult. In 2013, a total of 50,587 competed for 3,876 available slots implying that only one applicant qualified for admission out of every thirteen. In the following year, a larger number of 56,847 vied for 3,913 slots representing a more lopsided applicant-to-slot ratio of 14.53:1. Fifty seven percent (57.4%) of UP Diliman qualifiers in 2013 came from private high schools, while 30.1% were products of highly selective public science high schools. Only 8.9% were educated in general public high schools.

More than fifty-eight percent (58.4%) of the 2013 UP Diliman qualifiers resided in the National Capital Region where almost thirteen percent (12.84%) of Filipinos lived in 2010. The NCR also contributed 37% of the entire GDP in the said year. Overall for the 12,732 UPCAT qualifiers in 2013, 48.8% and 19.9% came from private schools and public science high schools, respectively. Those who graduated from general public high schools accounted for 24.6%.

Improving one's chance of admission into UP Diliman involves many years of meticulous supervision, systematic technical training, and exceptional academic performance starting with enrollment in an embracive kindergarten

school that would pave the way for subsequent entry into an elite elementary and high school program. Excellence in basic education requires the services of well-trained and dedicated teachers, as well as hands-on access to proper laboratory facilities and resources. Receiving it is costly particularly to parents and guardians of children studying in private schools.

The aforementioned case of UP and UP Diliman points to the necessity of refining current admission policies in order to improve access to UP education especially for students from economically challenged families. Aside from UP Diliman, UP has seven other constituent units that have to improve and become equally attractive to more UPCAT applicants. UP also needs to increase judiciously its undergraduate enrollment capacity in line with the increasing number of UPCAT examinees. The number of UPCAT qualifiers in 2015 was only 31.69% higher than that (11,381) in 2003 even though the number of applicants increased by 38.23% during the said period. Having a severe applicant-to-slot ratio like the 14:1 of UP Diliman is counterproductive to the task of nation building. More likely its cumulative effect over time is to worsen the degree of income inequality in Philippine society.

State investments in education and health care are a socially benign and politically acceptable way of redistributing total national income by the government for the purpose of mitigating the serious harm being done by rising income inequality which is an inescapable byproduct of a free market economy. The purpose of RA 10931 is noble and its successful implementation is crucial in achieving a just, prosperous, and inclusive society. Its implementing rules and regulations must be well crafted and derived from scientific evidence if RA 10931 is to succeed in removing the concrete ceiling that separates the haves from the have-nots in Philippine society instead of merely replacing it with transparent glass.

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