

The University of the Philippines and Economic Inequality in PH

Disruptive technologies that enhance the quality of life of many in unprecedented ways—from wireless broadband digital networks to large-scale waste management systems—are successful applications of new scientific knowledge gained through painstaking research and development. They beget a superior user experience that is rendered possible by the seamless integration of advanced hardware and software components within an insight-driven design framework. Meaningful access to the said technologies, however, will require ample purchasing power on the part of the potential beneficiaries which is a challenge because not everyone has that good fortune.

As a matter of policy, governments aim to provide the environment that enables their stakeholders to partake fairly and equitably the fruits of increasing national prosperity that, in a globally connected knowledge-based economy, is largely technology-driven. While living below one's means is an appealing road to take for attaining material contentment in life, to those who are bereft of such an option it is but a gauzy spiritual nostrum.

Economic inequality may be examined by looking at the distributions of wealth and income of members in a population. The former pertains to the distribution of ownership of assets while the latter considers the current individual income. The two distributions are not the same in information content, but they are inevitably related if analyzed over sufficiently long sampling periods. Their values are tracked and compared regularly for different countries by organizations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank (WB).

In terms of the ratio of the average income of the richest 10% of the population to the poorest 10%, the Philippines [PH; May 2020 population (PSA 2021): 109.035 M] yielded a score of 15.5, which implies that those who belong in the upper 10% of PH society are earning about 15 times more on average than the lower 10% (UNDP 2021). The following are the corresponding scores of other selected countries: Haiti (54.4), South Africa (33.1), China (21.6), the United States (US, 18.5), Vietnam (6.9), Finland (5.6), and Japan (4.5). A symmetric income distribution yields a ratio that is near to unity (1.0). In terms of their Gini index scores we have (WB 2021): South Africa (63.0 in 2014), PH (42.3 in 2018), Haiti (41.1 in 2012), US (41.4 in 2018), China (38.5 in 2016), Vietnam (35.7 in 2018), Japan (32.9 in 2013), and Finland (27.3 in 2018). A Gini index of zero and 100 implies perfect equality and maximal inequality of wealth or income, respectively. The value is also zero when all are equally poor.

The following are the percentages of the population living on less than USD 3.20 a day (in 2011 purchasing power parity) in the said countries: Haiti (50.8 in 2021), South Africa (37.6 in 2014), PH (17 in 2018), Vietnam (7.0 in 2021), China (5.4 in 2016), US (1.0 in 2016), Japan (0.5 in 2021), and Finland (0.1 in 2017). More than a fifth (24%) of the world's population survived on less than USD 3.20 a day in 2017. The WB also reported that 9.3% of the world's population in 2017 and 2.7% of the PH population in 2018 subsisted below the international poverty line of USD 1.90 per day.

While no single driver of income inequality can be pinpointed, it is generally accepted that improved access to high-quality education at the individual level is critical in slowing down its worsening over time. For young Filipinos, getting a baccalaureate degree from a higher education institution (HEI) is a key element for upward socioeconomic mobility in a knowledge-based economy.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED, ched.gov.ph) accredited a total of 1,975 HEIs (87.5% private) in AY 2019–2020, including 112 nationally funded state universities and colleges (SUCs) and 131 other institutions (LUCs) that are financed by local government units. In AY 2018–2019, 362 HEIs (19% of the total; +9% year-to-year increase) were categorized as Level IV institutions in terms of the relative quality of the faculty, services, and facilities.

A number of organizations are engaged in the business of comparing the different HEIs around the world. The Times Higher Education [THE, timeshighereducation.com] measures the performance of more than 1,500 universities across 93 countries using 13 performance indicators under the following categories: Teaching (30% of total score), Research (30%), Citations (30%), International Outlook (7.5%), and Industry Income (2.5%). In the 2021 THE rankings, only the University of the Philippines (UP; rank: 401–500) and De La Salle University (DLSU, at 1001+) are included in the overall list of 1,397 entries. UP (801+) first appeared on the list in 2017, then DLSU (801–1000) in 2019.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS, topuniversities.com), on the other hand, included the following HEIs in its top 1000 World University Rankings for 2021: UP (396th), Ateneo de Manila (ADMU, 601–650), and DLSU (801–1000). There were four in the previous 2020 QS rankings: UP (356), ADMU (601–650), DLSU (801–1000), and the University of Santo Tomas (801–1000). The following set of evaluation criteria is utilized by QS: Academic Peer Review (40%), Faculty/Student Ratio (20%), Citations per Faculty (20%), Employer Reputation (10%), International Student Ratio (5%), and International Staff Ratio (5%). In the last 10 years, the rank of UP fluctuated from a high of 348th in 2012 to a low of 401st–410th in 2016.

Of the three or four HEIs that made their way into the QS or THE rankings, only UP is publicly funded where undergraduate students fully enjoy the provisions of Republic Act (RA) 10931, also known as the “Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act,” that institutionalizes free tuition and exemption from other fees in SUCs and LUCs. Private HEIs, as well as post-baccalaureate education, are not covered by the provisions of RA 10931, although some level of subsidy may be extended by CHED to qualified undergraduate students.

UP (up.edu.ph) became the national university on 29 April 2008 by virtue of RA 9500—also known as the “The UP Charter of 2008.” As the national university, it is expected to lead in setting academic standards and initiating innovations in teaching, research, and faculty development. It must also serve as a graduate, research, and public service university while beaconing as a veritable reference standard of academic governance. UP is currently composed of eight constituent universities (CUs) in 15 different campus locations in the archipelago. Its highest policymaking body is the UP Board of Regents.

The preeminent role of UP in the continued development of the PH higher education system is aptly recognized by a relatively large budget allocation from the national government. The UP budget accounted for 27.4% ± 1.32% of the yearly SUC budget from 2006–2016. It amounted to 25.4% of the total budget in 2020. The SUC budget allocation increased from PHP 23.81 B in 2012 to PHP 73.72 B in 2020.

The number of high school students applying for admission to UP is increasing yearly, which is unsurprising given the steady growth of the PH population. A total of 64,041 applied in 2003, which rose to 90,426 and 92,567 in 2019 and 2020, respectively. The increasing trend was disrupted only in 2016 (5,045) and 2017 (5,488) as a result of the transition in the basic education curriculum from K-10 to K-12. Admission to UP is based on academic merit and student performance in high school.

Between May 2010 (92.338 M) and May 2020 (109.035 M), the PH population grew by 18.1% while the number of qualified UP applicants increased by 42%. The increase in applications was not matched by a proportional increase in the number of admissions allowed. UP qualified a total of 11,381 (17.77% of total) and 12,794 (13.82%) applicants for admission in 2003 and 2020, respectively. The figures indicate that getting a UP education has become increasingly difficult with the succeeding generations. In 2003, only one applicant was qualified for every 5.62, which tightened further to one per 7.24 in 2020. Of those who were admitted in 2012, 2014, and 2015, about 30% (29.1 ± 1.85%) studied high school in the National Capital Region (NCR). The rest of Luzon accounted for 38.73 ± 1.80% of the successful applicants, while those from the Visayas and Mindanao accounted for 19.1 ± 0.87% and 12.23 ± 0.40%, respectively.

Admission to UP Diliman is even more competitive. Each year (2003–2020), an average of 62.86 ± 4.61% of all UP applicants wanted to study in the said campus except during the transition years of 2016 (90%) and 2017 (88%). But the growing interest is not met by stronger absorption, which has remained basically unchanged at 3,891.375 ± 162.594 qualifiers per year. Hence, the likelihood of succeeding is getting lower with time from one per 9.42 applicants in 2003 to one per 15.21 in 2020. The following is the provenance of UP Diliman qualifiers in 2012, 2014, and 2015: NCR (56.9 ± 2.18%), rest of Luzon (30.67 ± 2.52%), Visayas (5.83 ± 0.51%), and Mindanao (5.87 ± 0.40%).

The NCR, where 12.4% of the PH population lived in 2020, contributed an average of $31.93 \pm 0.16\%$ to the annual PH gross domestic product (GDP) from 2018–2020. The rest of Luzon (with 44.6% of the population), the Visayas (18.9%), and Mindanao (24.1%) accounted for $37.84 \pm 0.14\%$, 13.6%, and $16.73 \pm 0.14\%$ of the GDP, respectively. Hence, those living in the NCR have the highest GDP *per capita* among the four major regions in the country.

Being in UP Diliman allows students to train under the supervision and tutelage of faculty members in national institutes and other centers of excellence in the arts, sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics. They will learn from among the most creative and productive artists, scientists, and researchers in the country and be in a better position to advance the state of their fields when they graduate. Time on the campus is also a great opportunity for undergraduates to forge new personal ties through memberships in *bona fide* organizations—forming lasting social networks that will serve them well in their future professional careers and personal endeavors.

Those in the rest of the country, especially in the Visayas and Mindanao, are inadequately represented in the undergraduate population of UP and that of UP Diliman in particular, which admits the largest number of new students among the different CUs. Because residents in these regions are economically less prosperous than their counterparts in the NCR the prevailing admission process is not helping to solve the economic inequality in PH society and could even be argued to contribute towards its worsening.

The social harm done on society by economic inequality is well-argued in general. But the admission glass ceiling in the national university is preventing PH from increasing its population density of scientists and researchers in established and emerging areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. More of them are needed per million of population in order to strengthen the fragile trust that many Filipinos still have on the scientific method and evidence-based decision-making as the best approach at finding sensible solutions to the tremendous challenges facing our country today. Their invaluable contributions will avert a collective loss of faith in science from ever reaching a disastrous tipping point in Philippine society.

CAESAR SALOMA
Editor-in-Chief

REFERENCES AND NOTES

[UNDP] United Nations Development Program. n/d. Human Development Reports, UNDP (hdr.undp.org). Data retrieved on 13 July 2021 *via* en.wikipedia.org

[PSA] Philippine Statistics Authority. 2021. Data retrieved on 14 July 2021 from psa.gov.ph

[WB] The World Bank. 2021. Data retrieved on 13 July 2021 from data.worldbank.org

UP admission data were sourced from the Office of Admissions, UP Office of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs through the assistance of Assistant Vice-President Amor.