Article

# Lives Behind the Numbers: Lived Struggles of 4Ps Beneficiaries in Accessing Higher Education

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study examines why many senior high school graduates from *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps) households do not access benefits under the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (UAQTEA), notably the Free Higher Education (FHE)[1] and the Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES).[2] Drawing on semi-structured interviews with four 4Ps senior high school graduates and their mothers in Barangay Payatas, Quezon City, complemented by key informant interviews and documentary review, the study identifies how household economic precarity, limited social and cultural capital, geographically concentrated and competitive higher education supply, and constrained

1 Free Higher Education in SUCs and LUCs: A program that exempts all eligible Filipino students enrolled in undergraduate programs at State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) from paying tuition and other school fees, contingent upon meeting admission and retention requirements (Republic Act No. 10931, 2017).

2 Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES) for Filipino Students: A program that provides financial support for undergraduate and post-secondary education in SUCs, LUCs, private HEIs, and TVIs, administered by the UniFAST Board, with funding included in the budgets of CHED and TESDA, and prioritization given to students from lower-income households (Republic Act No. 10931, 2017).

UAQTEA funding interact to limit higher education access. Findings suggest these factors jointly reduce the likelihood that 4Ps senior high school graduates will enter and complete higher education. The paper recommends targeted transition supports, enhanced information on tertiary pathways within Family Development Sessions (FDS), pilot quota measures for 4Ps graduates paired with bridging supports, and a multi-year plan to raise education spending toward the 4–6 percent of GDP benchmark.

*Keywords:* higher education access; Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps); Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (UAQTEA); education inequality; political economy of education.

## Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a pathway to upward social mobility and poverty reduction. The World Bank (2025) reports that each additional year of schooling is associated with a roughly 9 percent increase in hourly earnings, contributing to long-term economic growth and social cohesion. Over the last two decades, participation in tertiary education has expanded worldwide, with the gross enrollment ratio (GER) rising from 19 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2020. The East Asia and Pacific region recorded an even sharper increase, from 16 percent in 2000 to 51 percent in 2020, underscoring the region's momentum in higher education expansion (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2024). Reflecting these trends, Figure 1 shows that tertiary enrollment in the Philippines has generally increased since 1975, albeit with fluctuations (World Bank 2024). Yet access remains uneven across socioeconomic groups, indicating that wider availability has not translated into equitable participation.

To address persistent educational inequalities, governments have implemented policy reforms to expand access to education and reduce the cost burden on poor households. One such reform is the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program. Implemented in more than 60 countries, including the Philippines, CCTs provide financial support to poor households, tied to education and health-related conditions, to improve current welfare while building human capital for the future (Ferreira et al. 2009). In Latin America, for instance, Peru's *Juntos* program has increased enrollment in technical-vocational schools (Patel-Campillo and García 2022, 10). Meanwhile, Colombia's *Familias*

*en Acción* has improved educational aspirations among vulnerable households (Garcia and Cuartas 2019, 55).

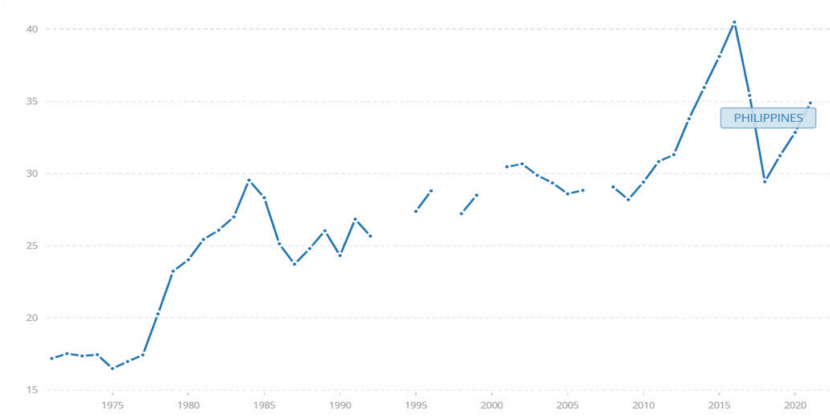


**Figure 1.** The Philippines' tertiary school enrollment rate, 1971–2024. Source: World Bank

In the Philippines, the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) has strengthened the motivation of children beneficiaries to succeed in school despite the challenges posed by poverty (Orbeta, Jr., Melad, and Araos 2023, 142-3). Institutionalized through Republic Act No. 11310 in 2019, the 4Ps serves as both the country's flagship poverty reduction strategy and as its core human capital investment program (DSWD 2021, 249). While its education grants cover children only up to senior high school, mechanisms such as the Kilos Unlad case management strategy and referrals to other government programs were designed to help sustain household resilience and encourage further education (DSWD 2021, 160). Complementing these efforts, the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (UAQTEA) provides pathways to tertiary education through programs such as Free Higher Education (FHE) and the Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES), thereby extending the continuum of support from basic to higher education for poor households, such as 4Ps beneficiaries.

Yet, despite the strategic alignment between the 4Ps and UAQTEA, evidence indicates that tertiary education access for 4Ps senior high school graduates remains limited. As Figure 2 shows, the cross-matched CHED–Unified Financial Assistance System for Tertiary Education (UniFAST) and 4Ps data presented to the House Committee on Higher and Technical Education indicate that between 2018 and 2022, only 146,511 (8.44 percent) of the

1,736,722 4Ps senior high school graduates accessed either FHE or TES. These figures underscore the persistent gaps in translating subsidies and cash transfers into actual increases in higher education access for the poorest cohorts.

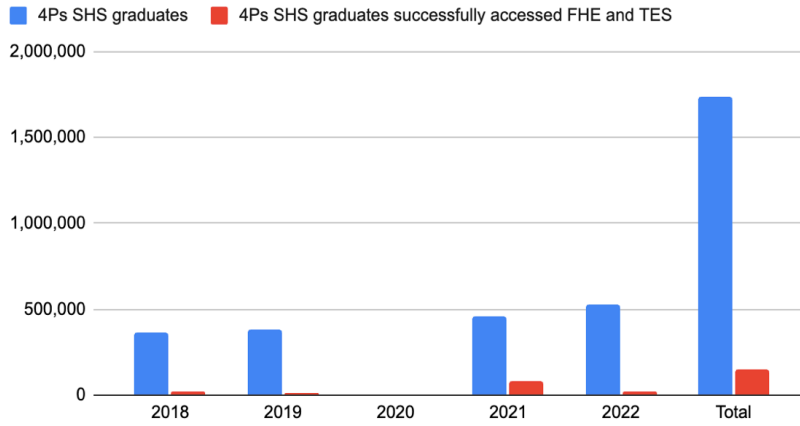


**Figure 2.** Trends in the participation of Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) beneficiaries in Free Higher Education (FHE) and Tertiary Education Subsidy (TES) under UAQTEA, 2018–2022 Source: 4Ps National Program Management Office

The persistence of such inequities indicates that the barriers confronting 4Ps beneficiaries may extend beyond household-level disadvantage or program design. These barriers can be understood in relation to broader systemic conditions that influence who is positioned to participate in higher education. As Marginson (2016, 413) notes, the expansion of tertiary education does not necessarily translate into more equitable access, particularly for disadvantaged groups, as structural and institutional mechanisms continue to shape the distribution of public subsidies.

In the Philippine context, chronic underinvestment in education has historically constrained the system's ability to expand equitable access. The pattern shown in Figure 3 reflects how the Philippine government's education spending has remained below four percent of the country's GDP since 1980 (TheGlobalEconomy.com 2023), trailing the international benchmark of 4-6 percent (UNESCO 2024, 1-2).

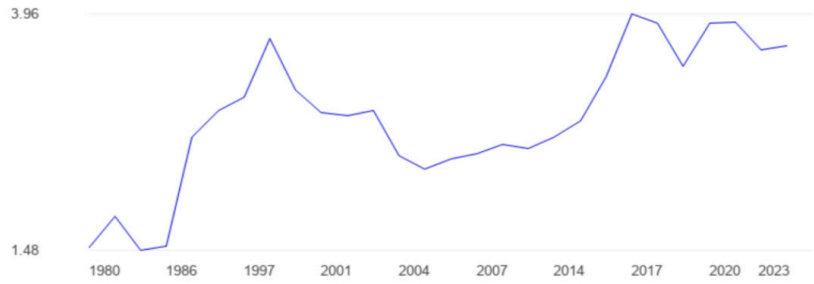


**Figure 3.** Philippine Education Spending as a Percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 1980-2023 Source: TheGlobalEconomy.com

Although underinvestment affects the entire education sector, its effects are felt most sharply by poor students, including those from 4Ps beneficiaries. With limited public resources, schools serving disadvantaged populations often suffer the most significant deficits in facilities, including classrooms, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), as well as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Navarro 2022, 40). This may have contributed to weak foundational learning, as reflected in the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), where Filipino learners ranked among the lowest in reading, mathematics, and science, with their performance lagging by five to six years behind that of peers in higher-scoring countries (Ombay 2023).

Underinvestment also appears to affect the supply of affordable public higher education. According to CHED, of 2,396 HEIs in AY 2019-2020, only 667 (27.84 percent) were public institutions funded by the government, generally offering free tuition or subsidized higher education costs, while the remaining 7 out of 10 were private institutions that rely primarily on student fees. This creates intense competition for limited public slots. Geographic disparities further shape this landscape: nearly 39 percent of HEIs are concentrated in Megapolis Manila (NCR, Central Luzon, and CALABARZON). For students from low-income households, these conditions may result in fewer nearby school options, higher transportation costs, and reduced chances of securing admission, indicating that education investment gaps continue to shape access to higher education.

Seen in this light, the low uptake of FHE and TES among 4Ps beneficiaries is not simply a question of individual or household-level capacity, choice, or awareness. Rather, it reflects the cumulative weight of systemic conditions, such as chronic underinvestment, uneven distribution of institutions,

and weak foundational learning, that disproportionately constrain poor students' pathways to higher education. Confronted with persistent resource limitations, some government officials are pushing for measures focused on efficiency and cost control. In 2023, for instance, the former Finance Secretary proposed a nationwide qualifying exam to 'rationalize' UAQTEA spending and reduce the number of beneficiaries. Critics, however, warned that such stricter screening could exclude the very students the program is meant to help (Jaymalin and Sarvallos 2023). This tension, between efficiency framings that prioritize fiscal discipline and selectivity, and equity framings that emphasize inclusiveness and poverty reduction, highlights how systemic constraints filter into policy discourse and institutional practice (Ball 1993, 14-15).

This study investigates why selected 4Ps senior high school graduates in Barangay Payatas, Quezon City, did not access UAQTEA benefits despite policy availability. Specifically, it examines how multi-level barriers (i.e., individual and household conditions, institutional arrangements, and systemic policy environments) intersect to shape their transition to higher education. This paper contributes to the growing literature on education access inequality in the Philippines.

## Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes barriers to tertiary education access among 4Ps beneficiaries across three interrelated levels: (1) individual and household capacity, (2) structural (i.e., institutional) barriers, and (3) systemic (i.e., policy and fiscal) constraints. At the individual and household level, this study draws on Bourdieu's (1986, 16) forms of capital, which are economic (e.g., household income, employment stability, ability to finance non tuition costs), social (e.g., parents' education, networks, mentoring), and cultural (e.g., academic preparedness, study practices, familiarity with university procedures). These represent observable deficits that limit students' competitiveness and capacity to navigate higher education pathways.

Structural barriers refer to institutional rules and everyday practices in HEIs and UAQTEA implementation. These include admissions criteria, student prioritization, scheduling, remedial support, and administrative procedures, among other institutional rules and practices, which shape how policies are implemented to ensure access.

Systemic barriers encompass macro-level factors, such as chronic underinvestment in education, the supply and geographic distribution of public HEIs, and broader political-economic arrangements that determine funding, capacity, and the design of policies and programs like UAQTEA. As illustrated in Figure 4, the conceptual framework offers a layered perspective on analyzing how systemic constraints, institutional actions, and individual and household experiences collectively contribute to the accumulation of disadvantages for 4Ps senior high school graduates.

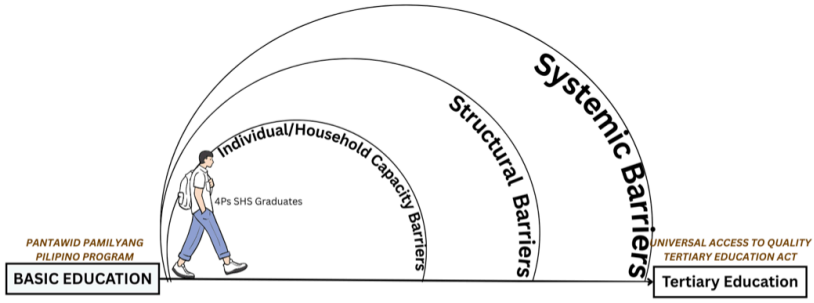


**Figure 4.** The Three-Level Barriers to Higher Education for 4Ps Beneficiaries

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design to capture in-depth, contextually grounded insights into the barriers that 4Ps households face in accessing higher education, illuminating experiences across individual, household, structural, and systemic dimensions. A case study approach was adopted to explore how and why these barriers influence 4Ps beneficiaries in pursuing higher education and accessing UAQTEA programs. Case studies are most suitable when the research centers on "how" and "why" questions and when the context is essential to understanding the phenomenon (Baxter and Jack 2008, 545). By examining a small and clearly defined group, this study prioritizes depth rather than breadth, aligning with the notion of a case as a phenomenon situated within a specific, bounded setting.

Barangay Payatas was selected as a critical site for examining the intersection of poverty, education, and social protection as it has the highest number of 4Ps beneficiaries in Quezon City (3,327 as of April 2024, according to a 4Ps City Link). Participants who were most directly affected by the research problem were purposively selected using the following criteria: (1) senior

high school graduates from 2018 to 2022 who belonged to 4Ps households, constituting the first cohort eligible for UAQTEA following its 2017 enactment; and, from this group, (2) those who did not access any UAQTEA programs were included in the study.

A 4Ps City Link assigned to Barangay Payatas, endorsed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)-Field Office National Capital Region (NCR), identified and endorsed four eligible participants based on the study's selection criteria. Although this study initially targeted only the graduates as primary respondents, the interviews were conducted in small household spaces where other family members, such as their mothers, fathers, siblings, and even neighbors, were also present. Among them, the mothers chose to participate voluntarily. Their participation provided valuable insights into household perspectives on the barriers these students face in accessing higher education.

Data collection combined in-depth semi-structured interviews with the four students and their mothers, each lasting between 45 minutes and two hours, with Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) involving representatives of the 4Ps National Program Management Office (NPMO), City Links assigned to Barangay Payatas, and a representative of Kabataan Partylist, a principal proponent of UAQTEA. Documentary sources were also examined, including official DSWD and CHED reports, written responses from CHED-UniFAST, and policy documents related to the implementation of 4Ps and UAQTEA. This triangulation of household narratives, institutional perspectives, and policy documents strengthened the analysis and enhanced the validity of the findings.

## Lives Behind the Numbers: Profiles of Participants

Barangay Payatas is among Quezon City's most densely populated barangays, ranking seventh nationwide in the Philippine Statistics Authority's (PSA) 2020 Census of Housing and Population. It is widely recognized as home to large urban poor communities, where government and non-government programs are concentrated—most notably, the 4Ps.

Among thousands of 4Ps households in Payatas are the families of Kit (age 21), Elen (age 21), Jeboy (age 20), and Jinky (age 20). As 4Ps households in Payatas, these families share several characteristics: They reside in modest homes built from either concrete or plywood, containing essential household furnishings. All four completed their secondary education in a nearby public

high school during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2021–2022). Kit, Elen, and Jeboy's families continue as 4Ps beneficiaries through younger siblings in elementary or secondary school, though they themselves no longer receive grants after completing high school. Meanwhile, Jinky's household exited the program in 2022 after reaching the maximum number of eligible children, with Jinky as the last monitored child to finish senior high school. The four participants were purposively selected; their experiences illustrate persistent multi-level barriers–individual/household, institutional, and systemic– that together constrain access to higher education.

## Individual and Household Capacity Barriers

### *Economic Capital: Financial Instability as a Key Barrier to Higher Education Access*

The parents of Kit, Elen, Jeboy, and Jinky are low-income earners. They are either employed in low-paying jobs or engaged in informal work. Elen and Jinky's parents hold similar jobs. Their mothers are informal workers taking *rakets*[3] from neighbors and clients, such as accepting laundry washing and house cleaning. Jinky's mother received a rice-selling livelihood grant from the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in December 2023. She mentioned that this grant was awarded after they graduated from the 4Ps, as DOLE does not allow active 4Ps beneficiaries to participate in their program. However, they were unable to sustain it due to the high level of competition in their neighborhood. Elen and Jinky's fathers are both construction workers.

Kit's mother sells *ukay-ukay* (second-hand clothes) in the nearby market, while his father works as a security guard in a distant city. Meanwhile, Jeboy's mother, a former call center agent, is now a housewife due to health issues, and his father, their family's breadwinner, works as a messenger.

These insecure economic circumstances directly shaped the educational trajectories of Kit, Elen, Jeboy, and Jinky. Their families' low and unstable incomes meant that even with 4Ps support, they constantly face trade-

3 Raket is a colloquial term used in the Philippines to refer to a side job or hustle. It often implies informal work.

offs between daily survival and school-related expenses. As Jinky's mother explained:

> *Malaking tulong din ang 4Ps para sa katulad naming mahirap kahit every two months lang siya. Kasi kung hindi ako nakasali sa 4Ps ay hindi ko alam kung makakatapos iyan sila, kasi iyong mga anak ko makapasok sila na busog ang tiyan. Kung walang 4Ps, wala kaming mapapala.*
>
> (The 4Ps is a big help for poor families like ours, even though the grants are only every two months. If we were not in 4Ps, I don't know if my children would finish school; at least they could attend classes with full stomachs. Without 4Ps, we would have nothing.)

This pattern echoes a wider concern raised by a Kabataan Partylist spokesperson, who observed that fewer than ten out of every 100 children who begin kindergarten make it to college, and even fewer graduate. The spokesperson cautioned that although UAQTEA reduces tuition burdens, the obstacles to continued education go far beyond fees. Families still face recurring costs (e.g., books, transportation, food, and secure housing, among others) that households like those of Kit, Elen, Jeboy, and Jinky can scarcely afford. This observation highlights the economic fragility at the individual and household levels among 4Ps families, a fundamental barrier that tuition subsidies alone cannot resolve and that constrains sustained access to higher education for marginalized youth.

Their economic struggles help explain why the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted informal livelihoods and added extra costs for distance learning, was particularly damaging for these students, who were in high school at the time. Prolonged lockdowns disproportionately affected low-income earners and informal workers, including their parents, as economic activity slowed and opportunities for supplemental income vanished. For example, Kit recalled that his mother lost her *ukay-ukay* livelihood because only essential goods were allowed to be sold. Meanwhile, his father faced difficulties commuting between home and work amidst mobility restrictions. These disruptions compounded existing financial vulnerabilities, highlighting how crises like the pandemic can directly limit educational access for students from marginalized households.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a particular challenge to these students. Their financial constraints made it difficult to adapt to online and modular

class setups. Lacking laptops, all four students relied on cellular phones for online classes. Jeboy even had to borrow his mother's phone because his own device was faulty. Their dependence on cellular data further hindered learning. As Jeboy described:

> *Noong online class, wala kaming knowledge na nakukuha, puro comply lang... maraming sabay-sabay na deadlines, tapos iyong gadget pa problema. Nanghihiram lang ako ng phone sa nanay ko... Iyong cellphone na gamit ko, sira iyong mic... Kaya madalas din ako napapagalitan noon e. Minsan akala nila nagsisinungaling ako na sira yung mic ko.*
>
> (During the online class, we weren't gaining any knowledge; it was just about complying... There were numerous deadlines all at once, and then the gadget was also a problem. I would just borrow my mother's phone... the phone I was using had a broken mic... that's why I often get scolded for it. Sometimes, they thought I was lying about the mic being broken.)

The modular setup seemed ineffective in maintaining these students' interest in staying in school. Jeboy noted that the distance learning approach required students to study new subjects independently, as teachers had limited opportunities to interact with them and explain the lessons. He shared that understanding the module contents is particularly difficult for new senior high school students, as they are faced with subjects that differ from those taught in junior high school. The challenges of distance learning during the pandemic prompted Jeboy to consider forgoing college. He said he would postpone his studies to work and support his family if the distance learning setup were to continue. In his words:

> *That time kasi, post pandemic, parang wala akong ganang mag-aral since nabuhay kami sa online. Madali akong maka-pick up, pero sa tingin ko magiging hadlang iyong online talaga. Kasi mas gusto ko iyong may nagsasalita sa harap ko. Marami rin po kasing factors sa online, kagaya na lang ng internet, kapag nawalan ng internet connection, tapos iyong bayad pa roon. Unlike kapag face-to-face, naroon iyong mga professor, nagsasalita sa harap mo.*
>
> (At that time, post-pandemic, it felt like I had no motivation to study since we lived through online classes. I can pick things up quickly, but online learning has become a hindrance. I prefer having someone

> speak in front of me. Factors such as unreliable or intermittent internet connections also affected online learning. Its cost also added to our financial burden. Unlike face-to-face classes, where the professors are there, speaking in front of you.)

The economic challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, forced Kit, Elen, Jeboy, and Jinky to make the difficult choice between continuing their education and entering the workforce to support their families. Jeboy, for instance, considered deferring college to work as a call center agent in a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company, a decision influenced both by his struggles with distance learning in high school and his mother's past employment experiences. His plan, however, was halted when his mother cautioned him against rushing into work, worried that earning a salary too soon might discourage him from returning to school. As he explained:

> *Binalak kong pumasok sa mga BPO companies. Pero kinausap ako ni mama na huwag kong madaliin iyong pagtatrabaho ko kasi kapag naka-graduate ako, may mas magandang trabaho pa akong makukuha.*
>
> (I planned to work at a BPO company. But my mother talked to me and told me not to rush into working because once I graduate from college, I can get a better job.)

Kit's mother also recalled Kit's discouragement in continuing his education after senior high school due to the shift to online learning. She said that Kit was initially content working at a canteen after graduation and had no plans to enroll in college. As she puts it:

> *Wala pa siyang balak mag-aral noon kasi nasisiyahan pa siyang magtrabaho noon sa canteen pagka-graduate niya. Noong tinanong ko siya kung mag-eenrol pa ba siya sa college, e online naman sabi niya, huwag na lang.*
>
> (He had no plans to study back then because he enjoyed working at the canteen after graduating high school. When I asked him if he was going to enroll in college, he said, It's online anyway, so I am skipping it.)

Even before graduating from senior high school, Jinky had decided not to pursue college because of her family's financial situation. She planned to look for a job to contribute to her family's daily expenses. However, despite their economic struggles, her mother strongly encouraged her to continue her studies. As Jinky describes it:

> *Naisip ko pong magtrabaho muna, pero ayaw naman po ni mama. Kesyo tapusin daw muna iyong college, para raw po mas maganda iyong trabaho.*
>
> (I thought about working first, but my mother did not want me to. She insisted that I should finish college first so that I could get a better job.)

Meanwhile, Elen worked after senior high school instead of going straight to college. She was employed as a housekeeper before pursuing higher education due to their financial struggles.

The economic situation of 4Ps families places them at a significant disadvantage, limiting their children's access to higher education, as their parents' salaries barely cover basic living expenses. A 2022 Commission on Audit (COA) report found that 90 percent of 4Ps beneficiaries remained below the poverty threshold, highlighting the persistent financial struggles of these families. Despite their precarious economic situation, the mothers of 4Ps students showed strong determination for their children to pursue and complete higher education, seeing it as a crucial opportunity to break the cycle of poverty. As Marginson (2016, 419) notes, higher education is often viewed as a pathway to upward mobility, a means to maintain social status, or protection against downward mobility. However, despite parental encouragement, economic pressures forced the students to balance work and studies, or pause their education to earn income. All four students intended or actually engaged in work at some point: Jeboy considered deferring college for work, Kit has become a full-time canteen staff, Jinky is now a working student, and Elen works full-time as a tutor.

The persistent unemployment or lack of decent-paying jobs among the parents of student respondents highlights the vulnerability of 4Ps beneficiaries to economic shocks such as COVID-19. It was evident during the pandemic's peak, as the students struggled to adapt to the new mode of conducting classes, primarily due to resource limitations. This suggests that any circumstance that would cause financial disruptions to 4Ps families further limits their ability to support their children's college aspirations.

### *Social Capital: Networks and Relationships as Gateways to Higher Education*

The narratives of Kit, Elen, Jeboy, and Jinky illustrate how deficits in social capital intersect with structural barriers, constraining their higher education opportunities. In Bourdieu's framework (1986, 21), social capital refers to the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, which can provide crucial support in navigating educational opportunities.

All four students' parents have access to 4Ps City Links, guiding them with information on transitioning to tertiary education, as Jinky's mother shared:

> *Bago kami grumaduate sa 4Ps, may binabanggit naman sa FDS pero ikaw na ang maglalakad. E kaso ikaw din ang maghahanap ng CHED accredited schools.*
>
> (Before we graduated from 4Ps, they did mention some things in the FDS, but you're the one who has to do all the legwork. And you're also the one who has to look for CHED-accredited schools.)

Because none of the parents completed college, they cannot supplement institutional guidance with firsthand knowledge or social networks that would ease their children's transition to tertiary education. Parents and students reported that Family Development Sessions (FDS) provide only basic information and do not equip them to navigate the more complicated realities of applying to state and local universities and colleges. Some college application requirements may include early application deadlines, limited slots, program-specific requirements, and admission testing procedures. Consequently, the lack of supportive networks leaves families to shoulder the legwork themselves, which contributes to the uncertainty and delays experienced by students such as Jinky and her peers.

The intense competition for limited public-university slots reflects not only systemic underinvestment but also the unequal advantage enjoyed by students who can draw on broader networks, such as parents who are college graduates, mentors, alumni, or peers familiar with university procedures. Without these connections, Kit, Elen, Jeboy, and Jinky face compounded challenges: their precarious economic situation and limited social capital restrict their opportunities, despite their aspirations and the modest support provided by 4Ps.

### *Cultural Capital: Embodied, Objectified, and Institutionalized Assets Shaping Access to Higher Education*

Cultural capital significantly shaped how Jinky, Kit, Elen, and Jeboy navigated the path to higher education, influencing both their preparedness and confidence in pursuing competitive opportunities. Embodied cultural capital shaped the experiences of 4Ps beneficiaries. This refers to students' long-standing attitudes, dispositions, and ways of thinking that influence how they perceive and pursue education. For Jinky, Kit, Elen, and Jeboy, this manifested as self-doubt, hesitation, and limited long-term academic planning. These dispositions are likely shaped by experiences within the education system, including its limitations, which may leave students unsure of their preparedness for higher learning. Jinky, for instance, admitted:

> *Sabi po nila, grades ang basehan sa pagpasa, pero hindi naman po ako confident na maabot ko iyong line of nine... Saka sabi po kasi nila kapag magka-college ka, dapat pinaplano mo na kung saan ka papasok, anong course ang kukunin mo. Sa akin po kasi hindi e; walang ganung nangyari.*
>
> (They said that grades are the basis for passing, but I'm not confident that I can reach the line of nine... And they also said that when you're going to college, you should already be planning where you'll enroll and what courses you'll take. But for me, that didn't happen; there was no such planning.)

Her mother echoed this anxiety. She pointed out that government support, one of their very few options to access affordable higher education, comes with strict grade requirements:

> *Ang ine-expect niya kasi kapag napasok ka ng iskolar, may maintaining grade. Iyon ang lagi niyang tinatatak sa utak niya. May maintaining grade, baka hindi niya kayanin.*
>
> (What she expected was that when you become a scholar, there's a minimum grade. That's what she always keeps in mind that there's a maintaining grade, and she might struggle to manage.)

Similarly, Kit doubted his ability to meet the academic standards of SUCs. At the same time, Jeboy described himself as "just an average student," recalling that he merely complied and went along with his peers in elementary and high school. These narratives illustrate how limited confidence and inadequate preparation constrain students' aspirations long before they apply to college.

In sum, the experiences of Jinky, Kit, Elen, and Jeboy demonstrated how individual and household-level capacities shape access to higher education. Economic constraints, reflected in low family income, precarious employment, and the financial impacts of crises such as COVID-19, directly limited their ability to pursue college. Social capital deficits, manifested in limited parental guidance and weak networks, further constrained their educational choices despite nominal support from 4Ps advisers. Meanwhile, disparities in cultural capital, including confidence, academic preparedness, and recognition through grades and scholarships, shaped both their aspirations and perceived eligibility for competitive institutions.

## Structural Barriers

### *Intense Competition for Slots, Stringent Admission Criteria, and Inaccessible HEI Facilities*

Higher education remains largely inaccessible due to structural constraints in accessing UAQTEA programs, including intense competition for slots, limited HEI facilities, and strict admission requirements. Entrance examinations and high general weighted averages in SUCs and LUCs pose significant obstacles, often forcing students and their families to turn to private HEIs despite the higher costs.

For instance, due to the various barriers they encountered in accessing SUCs and LUCs, Kit, Elen, and Jeboy eventually enrolled in Bestlink College of the Philippines, which they referred to as Bestlink. Its main campus in Novaliches, Quezon City, is approximately seven to eight kilometers from their homes, making it a geographically accessible option. Bestlink is perceived as more lenient than SUCs and LUCs because it does not impose stringent admission requirements, such as entrance examinations or high general weighted averages. It also has less competition for slots, further easing the enrollment process for students who struggle to secure admission in public HEIs. Although it is more expensive than tuition-free SUCs and LUCs, it remains a comparatively affordable option for poor students relative to many well-known private HEIs. As Kit's mother recalled:

> *Ang alam ko lang talaga, sa PUP sa Sta. Mesa, sa UP mag-eexam ka hindi ba... Hindi siya nakapag-exam doon, kahit sa QCPU hindi na abot kasi nag-exam doon October pa lang. Kasi noong time na iyon, one week na nag-start ang school year. Tinatanong ko pa siya kung gusto niyang mag-aral. Sasagutin na nga raw ng hipag ko para sa isang semestre. Doon pa lang siya nag-pursige. Ang naging sistema kami ang nagpa-enroll sa Bestlink, hindi namin siya kasama.*
>
> (In PUP and UP, you have to take an entrance exam. He could not take those exams. At QCPU, the tests were scheduled for October, and by then the school year had already begun. I was still asking him if he wanted to study. My sister-in-law even offered to pay the tuition for one semester. That is when he started to push himself. We were the ones who enrolled him in Bestlink. He was not with us.)

Jeboy attempted to apply to Eulogio Amang Rodriguez Institute of Science and Technology (EARIST), a relatively distant public HEI in Manila, to pursue a criminology program. However, its online admission slots filled quickly, leading him to suspect that his poor internet connection affected his application. He also applied to Quezon City University (QCU), but his preferred course was unavailable. Undeterred, he applied for Civil Engineering, intending to enter the Philippine National Police (PNP) through lateral entry; however, the available slots were filled up immediately. Although 4Ps guided other colleges that they could explore, his mother left the final decision to him, considering the distance to most state universities and the limited slots at nearby institutions. In the end, Jeboy, like Kit, enrolled at Bestlink. His mother shared:

> *Pinapa-attend kami ng mga seminar at orientation. Kaya lang ang sabi ko kasi, ang anak ko na lang ang mismong mag-decide kung saan niya mismong gustong pumasok. Kasi kung mga universities karamihan dito mga malalayo. Dito sa Quezon City iilan lang naman ang universities dito tapos wala nang slot. Sa Manila naman malayo naman, mahal sa pamasahe at yung pagod lang. Actually, ayoko talaga din siyang mag-aral sa EARIST kasi napakalayo. Sabi ko iyong oras ng pagpasok mo saka pag-uwi, pagod ka na. Pili ka na lang ng malapit na school dito. So doon na lang sya nag-enrol sa Bestlink.*
>
> (We attended seminars and orientations. However, I said my child should go where he wants to study. Most of the universities here are far from our house. In Quezon City, there are only a few universities, and they have no more slots. The ones in Manila are far, the

> transportation costs are high, and it is tiring. I did not want him to go to EARIST because it was very far. I told him that traveling back and forth from our house to the school would make him exhausted. I told him to choose a nearby school. So, he enrolled in Bestlink instead.)

Elen applied to the University of Rizal System (URS), a nearby state university in Rodriguez, Rizal, a first-class urban municipality adjacent to Barangay Payatas. However, the Tourism Management program she wanted was unavailable there. She decided to apply to Bestlink, which offers her desired course, even though it is both farther from her home and more expensive than URS.

Meanwhile, when Jinky's former school introduced PHINMA Saint Jude College Manila, she immediately seized the opportunity, despite initially being surprised by the PHP 15,000 program fee. She and her mother were relieved and appreciative upon learning that this amount was already discounted through the institution's scholarship program. As Jinky stated:

> *Sabi po kasi ng nanay ko, basta may pumasok lang na scholarship, kung ano na lang iyong school na papasukan. Kaya kung ano na lang po yung napuntahan kong school, dun na lang po ako nag-aral.*
>
> (My mother said that as long as there's a scholarship I can get, it doesn't matter which school I go to. So I just attended whichever school I ended up at.)

Meeting UAQTEA's admission and retention criteria already poses a barrier for low-income students who barely have economic, social, and cultural capital. The limited number of nearby HEIs compounds this challenge. In Barangay Payatas, only QCU, UP Diliman, and RSU are relatively accessible, which limits options and intensifies competition for available slots. These overlapping structural barriers place 4Ps students at a clear disadvantage. Marginson (2016, 413) similarly observes that expanding higher education does not eliminate unequal access to elite institutions, leaving disadvantaged groups, including 4Ps beneficiaries, at the margins.

## Systemic Barriers

### *Chronic Underinvestment in Education*

The CHED-UniFAST recognizes the decline in 4Ps beneficiaries across all UAQTEA programs, including FHE, TES, and Free Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET).[4] CHED-UniFAST attributes this decline to reduced government funding for the implementation of the UAQTEA, which has limited student coverage and intensified competition. Statements from 4Ps NPMO and City Links in Barangay Payatas support this claim. They noted that merging the Expanded Students' Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (ESGP-PA)[5] into TES reduced available slots for 4Ps senior high school graduates.

According to CHED-UniFAST, before the full implementation of UAQTEA in 2018, 4Ps beneficiaries were prioritized under the ESGPPA, aiming to reduce poverty by increasing the number of graduates from low-income households and promoting employment. With the rollout of UAQTEA, ESGPPA beneficiaries became eligible for TES. Initially, 4Ps beneficiaries were classified as "other poor," separate from *Listahanan* beneficiaries and students enrolled in private HEIs located in places (cities or municipalities) without State or Local Universities and Colleges (PNSL). However, due to budget constraints, TES coverage was limited to PNSL and Listahanan categories, with 4Ps beneficiaries previously placed under the "other poor" category subsumed within the Listahanan classification. This intensified competition among students from various categories for TES inclusion. CHED-UniFAST data highlights the reduction in budget allocation for the UAQTEA from PHP 39.98 billion in 2018 to PHP 25.47 billion in 2023.

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4 The Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) refers to the education process designed a post-secondary and lower tertiary levels, officially recognized as nondegree programs aimed at preparing technicians, paraprofessionals and other categories of middle-level workers by providing them with a board range of general education, theoretical, scientific and technological studies, and related job skills training;

5 The Expanded Students' Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (ESGP-PA) is a Philippine government initiative designed to provide financial assistance for higher education to students from low-income households, particularly those enrolled in the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). Implemented by the CHED in partnership with the DSWD, DOLE, DBM, and the PASUC, the program aims to increase the number of graduates in higher education among poor households and to help these graduates secure employment in high-value-added occupations, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation and national development (CHED, DBM, DSWD, DOLE 2014)

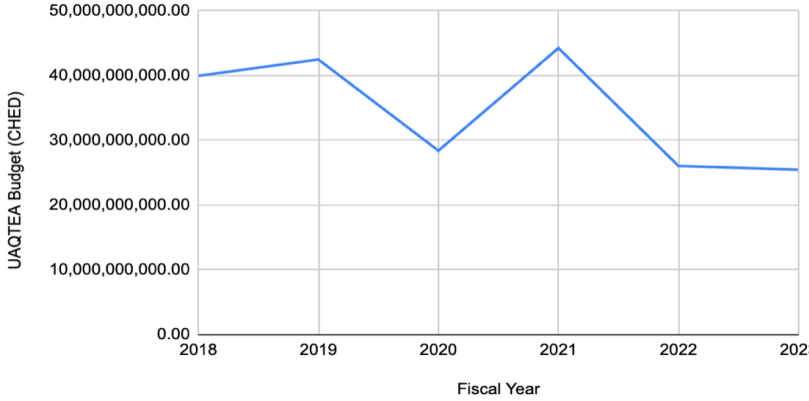


**Figure 5.** Allocated Budget for UAQTEA, 2018–2023 Source: CHED-UniFAST

The funding reduction has spurred advocacy efforts by youth organizations. A Kabataan Partylist member interviewed for this study highlighted that they closely monitor budget hearings and actively lobby against cuts to education funding. As the member explained:

> We monitor budget allocations to make sure cuts to SUCs and pre-higher education programs don't go through. We advocate for legislation that recognizes education costs beyond tuition, such as the Basic Student Services Bill, modeled after the University of the Philippines system, because many families are compelled to use their cash transfers on food and utilities rather than on schooling. Broader macroeconomic policies, compounded by the government's mismanagement of the pandemic, further worsened the situation for 4Ps households.

## Conclusion

### *Summary of Findings*

This study examined the barriers hindering 4Ps beneficiaries from pursuing higher education and availing UAQTEA programs. The experiences of Jinky, Kit, Elen, and Jeboy illustrate how individual, household, structural, and systemic obstacles intersect to restrict access to higher education. At the household level, economic precarity, low social capital, and limited cultural capital reduce students' readiness and motivation to pursue college.

Structurally, intense competition for scarce SUC/LUC slots, stringent admissions criteria, and geographically inaccessible institutions further constrain opportunities. Systemically, constrained UAQTEA funding intensifies competition and limits enrollment for the poorest students. Together, these barriers create compounded disadvantages that go beyond free or subsidized tuition.

## Policy Recommendations

1. Consider prioritizing 4Ps senior high school graduates as eligible cash-for-work grantees under DSWD's Tara, Basa! Tutoring Program. The program engages college students to teach struggling readers and non-readers, as well as to facilitate parenting sessions for their guardians. Involving 4Ps senior high school graduates as tutors would not only help address early grade learning gaps but also provide them with a modest yet meaningful income source. This could reduce their economic vulnerability while fostering a sense of contribution and supporting skill-building. To operationalize this, the DSWD could reallocate resources within the existing program or advocate for additional funding to include 4Ps senior high school graduates.

2. Strengthen information dissemination on the transition of 4Ps senior high school graduates to tertiary education by integrating this topic into FDS. Specific FDS modules may be designed to actively engage graduating 4Ps senior high school beneficiaries, together with their parents, in discussions on higher education pathways, including available programs, application procedures, scholarships, and support services. Since the FDS is already a core conditionality of the 4Ps, this intervention would not entail additional budgetary requirements, but rather a strategic enhancement of existing sessions. Beyond information sharing, the FDS platform could also serve as a space for youth organizing within the 4Ps, enabling graduates to broaden their access to information while advancing advocacies that promote their right to tertiary education. In this way, the FDS framework can raise awareness, strengthen social capital, and empower 4Ps graduates with the knowledge, networks, and collective agency necessary to navigate the transition to higher education successfully.

3. Targeted quota/affirmative action for 4Ps senior high school graduates in FHE and TES (pilot to scale). CHED-UniFAST may consider piloting a targeted quota or affirmative-action measure that reserves a modest

share (e.g., 10–15 percent) of FHE and TES slots in a certain number of SUCs/LUCs for recent 4Ps senior-high graduates. On top of the admission, the reserved slots would be more helpful to the 4Ps students if paired with short bridging courses or early semester tutoring, as well as basic support (e.g., device/data lending, mentor/admissions navigation, and modest transport or living stipends) to improve the likelihood of retention. To limit immediate fiscal pressure, the initiative could be implemented as a time-limited pilot (e.g., two to three years) funded from existing UAQTEA allocations with potential supplements from local government units (LGUs) or donors; if pilot evidence suggests improved retention and graduation, phased budget augmentation could be requested for scale-up. Selection and allocation should be transparent and verifiable (by verification against DSWD Pantawid registries and school records). Pilot sites should be chosen where capacity exists or where a small, planned slot expansion is feasible so as not to displace current applicants.

The pilot should be publicly reported and subject to an integrated monitoring and evaluation plan (a midline review at 12–18 months and a summative evaluation at three years). Suggested core indicators to inform the scale-or-sunset decision include the share of intake from 4Ps senior high school graduates, first-year retention, bridging test gains, graduation rates, and post-graduate employment; use those results to determine whether, how, and under what conditions the measure should be continued or adapted.

4. Adopt and sustain a 4–6 percent of the GDP education financing target. The national government should commit to allocating between 4-6 percent of the GDP to the education sector as a core pillar of a long-term strategy to remedy systemic weaknesses in both basic and higher education. Greater budgetary space would enable the expansion of UAQTEA (including FHE, TES, and related programs), thus raising the number of disadvantaged 4Ps graduates who can enter and thrive in higher education. The proposed FY2026 allocation of PHP 1.224 trillion—equivalent to 4 percent of GDP (DBM 2025)—is a historic and welcome first step, but it should be treated as a baseline rather than an endpoint. The government should adopt a multi-year financing plan that gradually increases the education share from the current 4.0% toward the 4–6% benchmark over succeeding fiscal years, with clear interim targets and accountability mechanisms.

   Gradual, sustained increases in public investment, paired with explicit spending priorities and governance reforms, would help address

multiple interlocking problems: under-resourced schools, teacher shortages and low pay, inadequate learning materials, and insufficient support for disadvantaged students to enter and remain in tertiary education. Strengthening foundational schooling and remediation would also create the conditions for improved internationally comparable learning outcomes (e.g., PISA reading, mathematics, and science indicators) and increase students' cultural capital and readiness to transition into higher education.

### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

This study focuses on a single community. Therefore, its findings may not be readily generalizable to other settings. Future research may replicate this inquiry across multiple communities, at regional and national levels, to determine which barriers are widespread and which are context-specific. In addition, the study relied on cross-matched data from 2018 to 2022. Participation rates of 4Ps beneficiaries in UAQTEA may have experienced either improvements or setbacks in the succeeding years. Thus, studies that utilize more recent data may offer clearer insights into whether the access of 4Ps beneficiaries to UAQTEA programs, and to higher education in general, has improved or further declined.

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