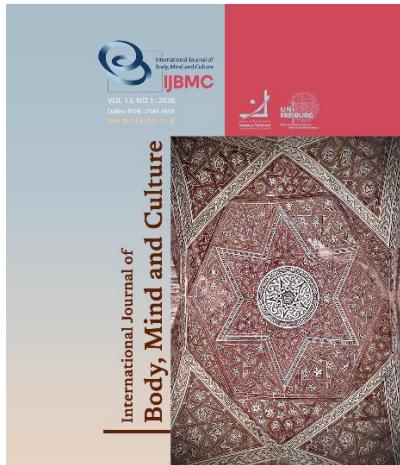


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Exploring the Lived Experiences of ESGP-PA Grantees in the Philippines: A Multi-Case Study

Noreen P. Echague

ABSTRACT

Objective: The Expanded Students' Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (ESGP-PA) seeks to expand tertiary access for low-income youth, yet graduates' lived experiences remain underexplored. This study examined how ESGP-PA shaped scholars' educational trajectories, obligations, and post-graduation needs.

Methods and Materials: An embedded multiple-case qualitative design was conducted among ten purposively selected ESGP-PA graduates (AY 2014–2018) from five state universities in the CALABARZON region, Philippines. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via hybrid modes, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis with cross-case comparison; credibility was supported through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing.

Findings: Five interconnected themes emerged: (1) Material Support provided a tuition "floor" but auxiliary subsidies were inconsistently delivered; (2) Strategic Resource Allocation showed stipends' fungibility as households balanced schooling and survival costs; (3) Navigating Conditionalities reflected amplified self-imposed academic pressure and a "give-back" ethic; (4) Emergent Capacities included gains in confidence, leadership, resilience, and social capital that outlasted financial aid; and (5) Implementation Gaps & Remedies highlighted chronic disbursement delays and weak job-linkage, prompting calls for fixed payout schedules and institutionalized employment pathways.

Conclusion: ESGP-PA can translate financial access into durable capability and human-capital gains when cash flows are predictable, auxiliary supports are standardized, and graduate employment pathways are institutionalized.

Keywords: ESGP-PA, conditional cash transfer, thematic analysis, higher education, poverty alleviation.

Introduction

Poverty remains a persistent barrier to educational attainment in the Philippines, disproportionately affecting students from low-income families. Although various government initiatives, such as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), have aimed to reduce inequality, access to higher education remains uneven. Recognizing this, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) launched the Expanded Students' Grants-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (ESGP-PA) to support students from poor households in completing tertiary education. While the program has helped thousands of students, its implementation across state universities has varied, and limited research has examined the lived experiences of its recipients beyond academic metrics.

Prior studies have focused primarily on academic outcomes, resilience, and institutional support mechanisms for ESGP-PA recipients (De Asis et al., 2020). However, these investigations often treat beneficiaries as passive recipients, overlooking the complexity of their personal, familial, and institutional interactions. Pineda & Fabella, (2019) examined former 4Ps beneficiaries and found that economic and psychological struggles persist post-graduation. These findings point to the need for a more holistic understanding of scholars' experiences throughout and beyond their participation in ESGP-PA.

This study draws from three interrelated theoretical frameworks. Human Capital Theory (Becker & Schultz, 1974) posits that investments in education yield long-term benefits for individuals and society, aligning with the program's intent to develop a more skilled workforce. Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory (Omlas & Obnamia, 2024) helps explain scholars' perseverance despite socioeconomic obstacles, highlighting the role of internal motivation and program-provided supports. Affirmative Action Theory (Fryer Jr et al., 2008) frames ESGP-PA as a compensatory measure for addressing systemic inequities in educational access, aligning with its targeted support for marginalized populations.

By examining the lived experiences of ESGP-PA graduates across multiple universities, this study aims to fill the existing gap in the literature on the nuanced effects of conditional grants-in-aid. The research

specifically explores how scholars navigated their responsibilities, utilized benefits, and perceived the program's implementation, with the goal of informing more equitable and effective scholarship policies.

The study is guided by the following research questions: What benefits and privileges did participants receive, and how were these utilized? How did participants perceive and fulfill their responsibilities as ESGP-PA grantees? What challenges and motivations characterized their academic journey? What improvements do participants suggest for future implementation of ESGP-PA?

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative Embedded Multiple Case Study design to explore the lived experiences of ESGP-PA beneficiaries across multiple state universities. This approach was selected for its ability to generate in-depth, contextually grounded insights from multiple bounded systems: individual scholars nested within institutional contexts (Stake, 2013). The design was particularly appropriate given the research aim of examining how individual experiences intersect with program implementation at different universities.

Each participant constituted a single case, and these cases were embedded within five state universities across the CALABARZON region. This structure enabled both within-case and cross-case analysis, allowing the study to capture common themes as well as institutional variations in the administration of ESGP-PA.

The design aligned theoretically with Affirmative Action Theory and Human Capital Theory, both of which highlight how individual outcomes are shaped by institutional structures and policy interventions. By treating each participant as a unit of analysis within a broader organizational and policy context, the study was able to explore how structural conditions such as inconsistent benefit delivery or varying support systems that influenced scholars' trajectories and outcomes.

The design was operationalized through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten ESGP-PA graduates. Data collection and analysis prioritized thematic convergence and divergence across the embedded cases, enabling a comprehensive understanding of both

individual narratives and broader programmatic implications.

The study was conducted in Region IV-A CALABARZON, which comprises the provinces of Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon. According to (Vera-Cossio et al., 2023), this region had a poverty incidence rate of 12.1% among families and 16.1% among the population at the national level, with lower rates of 5% among families and 7.1% among the population as indicated by the Philippine Information Agency (Mojares, 2013). The poverty line for a family of five in CALABARZON was estimated at Php 11,604 per month in 2018, higher than the national average of Php 10,727.

Participants

The study involved ten purposively selected participants, all graduates of the ESGP-PA program from the academic year 2014–2018, representing five state universities in the CALABARZON region: Cavite State University, Laguna State Polytechnic University, Batangas State University, University of Rizal System, and Southern Luzon State University. Two participants were drawn from each university to ensure institutional representation and allow for cross-case analysis.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences as ESGP-PA scholars. Eligibility criteria included: (1) completion of the program in 2018, (2) willingness to participate in an in-depth interview, and (3) accessibility for hybrid-mode data collection. Potential participants were identified through university scholarship offices, which provided referrals based on these criteria. Participants were then contacted via email or messaging platforms and invited to join the study after giving informed consent.

While the sample size is relatively small, it is appropriate for an Embedded Multiple Case Study, which prioritizes depth over breadth. Saturation was achieved when recurring themes and patterns began to appear across cases, with no new insights emerging from the final interviews. This suggests that the sample size was adequate for the study's exploratory and interpretive goals.

The approach allowed for both individual and comparative insights into how scholars experienced and navigated the ESGP-PA program within different institutional contexts.

Instrument

The researcher designed a semi-structured interview guide questionnaire through analysis of readings and prior studies as well as relevant literature and published and unpublished theses. The research instrument incorporated questions to answer the study's main questions and evaluated participant understanding of the subject matter. The instrument received validation after receiving evaluation from thesis experts who have specialized knowledge in the field to verify content and item reliability. Two ESGP-PA 2018 graduates served as test subjects in the pilot study even though they did not take part in the final research due to their matching criteria.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a validated interview schedule. The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and aligned directly with the study's research questions. It covered areas such as receipt and use of benefits, program responsibilities, challenges encountered, and suggestions for improvement. The guide underwent expert review for content validity and was pilot-tested with two ESGP-PA graduates who were not included in the final sample.

Interviews were conducted using a hybrid modality (in-person, phone, or video call), depending on participant availability and public health considerations. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, data collection incorporated triangulation through supplementary interviews with select family members, scholarship personnel, and peers. This helped validate the consistency of participants' narratives and provided contextual depth.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Emotional risks were mitigated through post-interview debriefings, and participants were offered support resources if needed. Member checking was conducted by returning transcripts and thematic summaries to participants for verification, enhancing interpretive accuracy and transparency.

The research study followed ethical principles according to [Speziale et al. \(2011\)](#). The research followed basic ethical guidelines by upholding individual dignity, securing participant consent, protecting privacy and anonymity, preventing harm to participants and allowing them to leave the study without penalty and by eliminating biased study elements. Obtaining letters from University scholarship heads became a necessary step before starting the research work.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (TA) following [\(Braun & Clarke, 2006\)](#) six-phase process. The analysis was conducted manually, without the use of software, to allow closer immersion with the narratives. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The process unfolded as follows:

1. *Familiarization*: Transcripts were read multiple times to identify initial patterns and meanings. Notes were taken on recurring ideas and emotional tones.

2. *Initial Coding*: Descriptive and interpretive codes were manually generated using a line-by-line approach.

3. *Theme Generation*: Codes were grouped into broader categories.

4. *Reviewing Themes*: Themes were reviewed for coherence and distinctiveness. They were compared across participants to ensure that they reflected both individual and shared experiences.

5. *Defining and Naming Themes*: Final themes were refined to capture the essence of each pattern. Definitions and scope were written to guide interpretation.

6. *Writing Up*: Themes were supported with verbatim quotes to maintain authenticity and contextual grounding.

To ensure validity and trustworthiness, multiple strategies were employed: Triangulation of data sources (e.g., scholarship officers, family members) to corroborate participant accounts; Member checking through participant feedback on thematic summaries; Peer debriefing with a research auditor to challenge interpretations and enhance reflexivity; Audit trail documentation of coding decisions, theme revisions, and analytic memos.

These steps contributed to a rigorous and transparent qualitative analysis that preserved the integrity of participants' voices while producing analytically meaningful insights.

Findings and Results

Data were drawn from ten ESGP-PA graduates (N = 10) across five state universities; coding followed [Braun & Clarke \(2006\)](#) six-step thematic analysis. Frequencies are reported using qualitative labels ([Hill et al., 1997](#)): general (9-10 cases), typical (5-8), variant (2-4), rare (1).

Table 1

Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Identified through Thematic Analysis of ESGP-PA Graduate Interviews

Themes	Sub-themes	Concise analytic insight	Illustrative quotation
1. Material Support	a. Core academic subsidies (tuition, miscellaneous, books, stipend) b. Auxiliary allowances (transport, food, uniform)	Mandated benefits reached every scholar, but auxiliary items were patchy, signalling implementation drift across SUCs.	<i>"The ₦10 000 went straight to the school, but the transport money never came" – Joy</i>
2. Strategic Resource Allocation	a. Academic spending b. Household re-allocation c. Survival trade-offs (board, food, gadgets)	Grants were fungible: after paying fees, most scholars diverted residual funds to family bills, stretching both scholarship intent and household budgets.	<i>"If the electric bill was due, I'd lend my allowance and catch up on projects later" – Lizette</i>
3. Navigating Conditionalities	a. Maintaining grades b. Seminar attendance c. Moral reciprocity ("give-back" ethic)	While grade cut-offs were vague, scholars internalized a duty to "pass everything" and to repay social debt through future public service.	<i>"Graduating on time is my main responsibility; that's how I prove the programme works" – Brett</i>
4. Emergent Capacities	a. Personal growth (confidence, resilience) b. Social capital (peer network, leadership)	Training, fora and peer groups acted as low-cost capability boosters that out-lived monetary aid.	<i>"ESGP-PA turned a shy farm-boy into the campus speaker they now invite" – Cardo</i>
5. Implementation Gaps & Remedies	a. Delayed disbursement b. Communication lapses c. Post-graduation support needs	Chronic release lags triggered borrowing and stress; scholars asked for fixed payout calendars and DOLE-led job linkage after graduation.	<i>"Three months of delay meant three months of debt" – Reynard</i>

Material Support

All ten participants confirmed that core academic costs such as tuition, miscellaneous fees and mandated books were covered without exception, establishing the scholarship as an indispensable entry ticket to tertiary education. Yet the program's promise of auxiliary help proved uneven: only a variant subset (3 of 10) regularly received the transport and food allowances mentioned in implementing guidelines. This inconsistency left many scholars to "back-fill" expenses from their own pockets, a gap that foreshadowed later budgeting stress. The data therefore position material support as a "floor but not a cushion," sufficient for enrolment but fragile in sustaining day-to-day attendance.

Strategic Resource Allocation

After obligatory fees were settled, stipends became fungible household capital. A typical pattern saw scholars re-allocate residual cash to electricity, siblings' school needs, or rice purchases which decisions they framed not as misuse but as rational poverty management. While such re-allocation occasionally delayed purchase of laboratory materials (variant survival trade-off), no participant reported outright academic derailment, suggesting that the scholarship's design like lump-sum was relatively flexible and allowed beneficiaries to juggle competing family and academic imperatives without abandoning either.

Navigating Conditionalities

Although formal guidelines specified only a passing general weighted average, recipients narrated a self-imposed standard closer to dean's-list territory. Nine of ten described an internalized rule to pass every subject "with margin," illustrating how external conditionalities can be amplified by scholars' own moral economies. Attendance at ESGP-PA seminars was likewise treated as obligatory socialization rather than optional compliance. Most tellingly, a "give-back" ethic emerged: scholars framed diligence as a debt-repayment to taxpayers, not merely a bureaucratic requirement, indicating that conditional cash transfers can engender prosocial obligations beyond the letter of the policy.

Emergent Capacities

Beyond financial security, participants credited the program with capability gains: self-confidence, public-

speaking ease, and a durable peer network. These soft skills that cultivated in low-cost fora and leadership camps were cited as lasting "beyond graduation," implying that psychosocial scaffolds can be high-leverage complements to cash. Importantly, such capacities surfaced as typical but not universal; two participants felt the activities were "token." Thus, while material aid enabled access, it was the layered social experiences that converted access into personal agency for the majority.

Implementation Gaps & Remedies

Every scholar recounted at least one delayed disbursement, some stretching a full semester, compelling emergency loans that undercut the very poverty-alleviation goal. Communication lapses like unclear payout dates, shifting document requirements exacerbated anxiety and fed rumors of program collapse. Participants proposed concrete fixes: digital payout calendars, SMS alerts, and an integrated job-matching system upon graduation. These grassroots prescriptions underscore that administrative reliability is as critical as benefit size in safeguarding program credibility.

The five interconnected themes trace a pathway from access (Material Support) through adaptive household budgeting (Strategic Allocation) and self-regulation (Conditionalities) to capability building (Emergent Capacities), all modulated by governance quality (Implementation Gaps). When funds flow predictably, scholars leverage both cash and psychosocial assets; when they stall, intrinsic motivation and peer networks become the decisive buffers.

Case Profiles

Lizette – *"The Family Paragon"*: A Social Work graduate who channeled unspent stipend to siblings' school fees. Her trajectory illustrates Theme 2b's household re-allocation and Theme 4a's personal growth: "I used to snap like a tiger; now I handle clients calmly."

Brett – *"The Student-Leader"*: Four-year ESGP-PA organization president. His experience embodies Theme 3c's moral reciprocity, leveraging leadership seminars (Theme 4b) to mentor newer grantees and lobby SUC officials for on-time releases.

Joy – *"The Techie Breadwinner"*: An IT graduate who immediately entered project-based software work. Her story foregrounds Theme 1b (missing transport

allowance) and Theme 5a (disbursement delay) but also shows long-term empowerment: she now funds two younger siblings' tuition.

Discussion and Conclusion

Aligning with global CCT scholarship

The universal receipt of core subsidies mirrors evidence from Mexico's *Prospera* (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009) that tuition-type transfers reliably reach beneficiaries. However, ESGP-PA's ad-hoc auxiliary benefits resemble the report of (Baum et al., 2023), highlighting a common challenge: non-tuition costs are harder to standardize than fees.

Motivation-Hygiene lens

Stipends functioned as hygiene factors by removing financial stress while internal drivers (familial uplift, leadership identity) acted as motivators. Scholars who re-allocated funds to family still persisted academically, echoing (Baird et al., 2019) Malawi findings that intrinsic aspirations, not cash size, best predict completion.

Affirmative Action perspective

ESGP-PA resembles quota-free affirmative action: it subsidizes entry but does not reserve slots. This "soft" model boosted representation (Theme 4) yet left scholars vulnerable to irregular payments (Theme 5), supporting (Fryer Jr et al., 2008) claim that compensatory transfers must be institutionally disciplined to sustain equity.

Resource fungibility and household welfare

Scholars' diversion of stipends to electricity bills parallels a pattern where cash transfers finance non-educational needs (Galario et al., 2025). Such fungibility is rational poverty management, not misuse, suggesting policy should anticipate partial household capture rather than frame it as leakage.

Program stewardship and graduate outcomes

Post-graduation job brokerage was weak, diverging from Chile's *Gratuidad* model that couples fee waivers with internship pipelines (González, 2020). Without labor-market integration, human-capital gains risk underutilization, tempering the optimistic human-capital thesis.

ESGP-PA affirms that financial aid plus psychosocial scaffolding fosters persistence, but only a governance triad: predictable cash flow, clear conditionalities, and

labor-market bridges that converts persistence into poverty exit.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study captured only graduates from five CALABARZON SUCs, excluding non-completers and other regions; findings therefore reflect successful trajectories and may over-estimate program efficacy. Data relied on retrospective self-reports, susceptible to recall bias, and the first author's prior work with scholarship offices may shape interpretation (researcher positionality). Qualitative transferability is inherently bounded; future mixed-method, longitudinal designs should track both completers and drop-outs across regions, integrate administrative payout data, and model labor-market outcomes over five-plus years to test whether ESGP-PA's promise of poverty alleviation endures beyond graduation.

This study shows that while the ESGP-PA program has provided essential financial support to help students from low-income households complete higher education, its full impact is constrained by inconsistent implementation, blurred spending boundaries, and limited post-graduation support. To address these gaps, national policymakers should strengthen disbursement guidelines, standardize accountability mechanisms, and establish reliable employment linkages for graduates. Institutions must clearly communicate scholar responsibilities, offer targeted support services such as academic bridging and financial literacy training, and engage families to protect educational funds from misuse. At the individual level, scholars should be encouraged to build peer support networks and advocate for improvements through student organizations. If these measures are implemented effectively, the ESGP-PA can better fulfill its goal of promoting equitable access to higher education, ultimately strengthening human capital and contributing to poverty reduction at a national scale.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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