

Understanding the Implementation of Republic Act 10931: Implications to State Universities and Local Colleges

Marcel Marie T. Dagohey and Glenne B. Lagura, DPA

University of Mindanao, Professional Schools

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ABSTRACT

The Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, or R.A. 10931, is a law in the Philippines that aims to provide free tuition and other school fees for students in state universities and local colleges. However, the country's financial capacity to sustain education and school facilities must be improved to provide quality education. This issue has compelled the researcher to conduct a study that will better understand R.A. 10931 implementation. This paper is anchored on the Sustainable Development Goals number 4: Education. This factor ensures inclusivity and promotes equitable quality education that is open to all Filipino students. The proponent utilized a descriptive phenomenological qualitative study design. A total of eight (8) key informants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Thematic analysis was used as a data analysis tool. The findings of this study reveal the limited classrooms and other facilities, complicated process of fund requests and budget allocations, financial struggles, delays, and collection inefficiency, sticking to the plan and budget approved, increase in enrollment and graduates, school expansion and improvement, more job opportunities, more dreams to fulfill, and improved student support services. These changes have profound implications for the sustainability of free higher education and the effectiveness of state and local universities and colleges in fulfilling their mandate of providing quality education. In conclusion, this study reveals a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities of Republic Act 10931, highlighting its impact on the Philippines' free higher education landscape.

Keywords: public administration, republic act 10931, qualitative, education, Philippines Sustainable Development Goal 4: Education

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, or R.A. 10931 has been surrounded with various difficulties upon its implementation. Former President Rodrigo Duterte signed the law despite his economic team's concerns about the high costs of funding free higher education is the crucial reason for the uncertainty surrounding the long-term sustainability of the law. Given this issue, it remains one of the most challenging battles in the country, especially in the case of the LUCs since they remain dependent on the local government (Abanes, 2021). Apart from this, Alcantara (2022) states that the country's financial capacity to sustain education for the students is not enough to provide quality school facilities. In delivering quality education, there is a need to invest in laboratories, classrooms, and other school facilities (Abasola, 2023).

Many countries internationally have implemented similar laws that aim to provide free education for all their citizens. In Germany, the government implemented an educational package or "Bildungspaket" policy, whose goal is to provide free academic support and other services intended for low-income families (Germany Handbook, 2023). While it is promising to have free tuition, some public universities in Germany lack equipment and resources for students. The allocation of funds has been criticized over the years for being insufficient to meet the needs of eligible students (Rosa, 2019).

In the Philippines, the dream of every Filipino to enroll and finish college is the government's upfront priority. Since 2017, the country has provided free, accessible education as stipulated under Republic Act 10931. Despite having an accessible education for all, according to Anni (2022), there are still high dropout rates and poor performance in national and international achievement tests, which has been hunting the country's

education system. Other than this, the Department of Budget and Management (DMB) states that the government needs more funds to address the country's classroom shortage (Galvez, 2022).

The viewpoints among the key stakeholders of this law in different regions in the Philippines may differ due to various reasons, including economic, cultural, and social factors. Metro Manila has a diverse population with different socioeconomic backgrounds and educational experiences. The stakeholders in the area may have differing opinions on implementing R.A. 10931 compared to other people in the Visayas and Mindanao regions (Yang, 2022).

According to the country's economic managers, the free tuition policy in higher education needs fiscal prudence despite the presented merits of this law. More so, they emphasize the issue of the long-term economic sustainability of this law, which is indeed one of the issues faced by the government (Tomada & Galido, 2024). Given this, the government necessitates promoting quality and accessible education within the boundary of fiscal prudence. The use of appropriate tools and targeting mechanisms are also necessary to support free education since funding this implementation will be difficult to sustain (Hyoduk & Cruz, 2024).

Higher education has indeed a positive impact on the economic development of the country. Daway-Dunes, Pernia & Ramos (2022) states that there are some studies pointing out that it is not the higher education itself that makes the economy grow but rather the quality education that is provided by the institutions. Given this, the government ensures that the standard learning for the students is given and it is accessible to all Filipinos who want to finish their studies (Del Rosario, 2023). With these merits, the enrollment as of March 2024 has been increasing substantially in both SUCs and LUCs. More than 2 million beneficiaries have already seized the college education, which means a future shift in enrollment implications that favors more public institutions (Madrigal, 2023).

There are some studies that linked R.A. 10931 to a theoretical insight. The theory of human capital, commonly associated with Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, pointed out that an individual can increase their productive capacity through education and skills training. Education is one of the most important factors needed in the workforce; the more a person has a high educational background, the more competent he is (Ross, 2021). Given this, this theory is appropriate for this study considering that it highlights the value of improving quality education in the Philippines by providing enough resources and support for the students needed to produce skilled and competent graduates.

Numerous studies have been conducted that broaden our understanding of this law. However, some research studies mainly focus on free education as a whole and less often have researchers' studies on the implications of the law's implementation, including the sustainability of funds, especially as the Philippines is one of the countries that has the lowest budget grants to learning among all ASEAN countries (Alcantara, 2022). Hence, this compelled the researcher to conduct this scientific inquiry to fill in the gap in the literature that covers these factors.

This paper is anchored on the Sustainable Development Goals number 4: Education. This factor ensures inclusivity and promotes equitable quality education that is open to all Filipino students. According to this goal, the educational landscape in the Philippines ensure that all learners acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed for the promotion of sustainability development by 2030. Given this, the education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyle, human rights, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, and among others are must to establish.

The primary objective of this study is to describe the implementation of Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, or R.A. 10931, a law in the Philippines that aims to provide free tuition and other school fees for students in state universities and colleges, which refers to any public institutions of higher learning that were established by an act enacted by the Philippine Congress, and local universities and colleges, the institutions established by the local government units through an ordinance. It also analyzes its educational implications in SUCs and LUCs. Specifically, to explore the challenges in implementing the law; to describe the successes of SUCs and LUCs in implementing the law; and to identify the implications of these experience by the study participants, and to elicit suggestions on how to implement R.A. 10931 more effectively.

Three theories, with their relevant concepts, can provide valuable insights into comprehensively grasping the complexities of implementing R.A. 10931 and its implications for SUCs and LUCs. These theories are Policy Implementation, Resource Dependency, and Stakeholder theories.

This study is anchored in the theory of policy implementation. Corchon (2017) explains that policy implementation theory examines social objectives compatible with people. The process and factors of the policies could be successfully implemented if the agents followed what was necessary. This theory enables a closer assessment of the difficulties SUCs and LUCs face when executing the provisions of R.A. 10931, which directs free education in the Philippines. Hence, it can provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenging endeavors of the SUCs and LUCs in effectively executing the provisions of R.A. 10931, including the proper allocation of resources, stakeholders' perceptions, and coordination.

Meanwhile, another theory that will guide the study is the resource dependency theory proposed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) assesses how an organization depends on various external resources and relationships to function properly and effectively (Gordon, 2023). This framework can offer insights into the resource constraints and dependencies confronted by SUCs and LUCs as they navigate the provisions and implications of R.A. 10931, including its issues and concerns related to infrastructure, the ability to fund consistently, and other support systems.

Lastly, the stakeholder theory also supports the study. This theory explores the relationship and linkages between numerous stakeholders in an organization or policy context. In other words, this theory emphasizes that corporations and organizations will do their best for all these stakeholders, and through that, the organization will be able to achieve long-term and genuine success (McAbee, 2022). Further, this framework highlights the viewpoints, objectives, and power dynamics among those affected by the implementation of R.A. 10931, such as faculty, academic administrators, government organizations, students, and other pertinent groups.

It is indeed important to explore the implementation of Republic Act 10931 and its implications for state universities and local colleges in the Philippines. The educational system in the country needs more comprehensive impact assessments and sustainability analysis. Unique factors could arise from various research methods or a focus on unexplored areas, like quality education and sufficient faculty compensation. The urgency to conduct this study in the locale is evident considering its policy relevance, the dire need to assess the sustainability of financial support of the law, and the imperative to address issues of the educational aspects. This study played a significant role in evidence-based policymaking and the continuous improvement of the higher education system in the Philippines.

The purpose of this case study is to identify and describe the implications of implementing R.A. 10931 in State Universities and Local Colleges; this also examines the short-term and long-term consequences of implementing this law on various factors of the institutions, including finances, enrollment, student support services, infrastructure, and the overall academic endeavors. By thoroughly analyzing the impacts and hurdles at the institutional level, the study aims to contribute to a broader perspective of how the law influences the country's educational system. Lastly, it strives to deliver actionable insights that can recommend policy improvement, institutional strategies, and interventions for the enhancement of R.A. 10931 in State and Local Universities and colleges. In-depth interviews will be employed to gather relevant, unique, and precise information.

This study also aims to answer these qualitative questions: What are the challenges experienced by the SUCs and LUCs in implementing the Republic Act 10931? What are the successes experienced by the SUCs and LUCs in implementing Republic Act 10931? What are the enrollment implications of Republic Act 10931 on SUCs and LUCs? What are the suggestions of the university presidents and budget officers to enhance the implementation of R.A. 10931 in SUCs and LUCs?

Exploring the Republic Act 10931's implementation and its implications for SUCs and LUCs in the country carries global significance through contributing to the international literature on financial sustainability, providing quality education for the students, and educational policy. This study also offers valuable insights

for countries that are also grappling with similar issues in making higher education more accessible to all while ensuring the sustainability of funds. Through the Philippine experience, this research enriches the global toolkit for evidence-based policymaking. It enhances people's understanding of addressing the challenges faced by higher education amidst the rapidly changing educational landscape.

The study on the implementation of Republic Act 10931 and its impact on State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) holds various significance that could be valuable for the law's improvement and the country in general. First, it is anchored on the Sustainable Development Goals number 4: Education, which ensures inclusivity and promotes equitable quality education that is open to all Filipino students. This goal states that the educational landscape in the Philippines ensure that all learners acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed for the promotion of sustainability development by 2030.

Second, it contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the practical difficulties faced by educational institutions, particularly in following and executing the provisions of the law that mandates free tuition for students. With a thorough examination of the implications, this research study provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in policy implementation within the borders of the higher education sector.

Third, the study sheds light on the implications of R.A. 10931 for SUCs and LUCs. It also explores the broader challenges and impacts of the policy on these academic institutions, including organizational dynamics, stakeholder relationships, and changes in resource allocation. Having to understand these implications has a crucial impact on the policymakers, administrators, and stakeholders, specifically in making informed decisions and developing strategies to address adverse consequences and improve the positive outcomes of the law.

Lastly, this research study can guide future policy development and implementation in the field of higher education. It can inform the formulation of more effective and efficient policies to overcome various hurdles and enhance the execution of initiatives in the years ahead by identifying and analyzing the implications encountered.

METHOD

This section discusses the method used in this study. It includes the research participants, materials and instrument, and design and procedure.

Study Participants

There are 8 participants that were included in this study, to wit: 4 from the SUCs and four from the LUCs. The college President or Vice President for Academics and the Finance Director or Budget Officers shall be the study's stakeholders. These participants came from different State Universities and Colleges and Local Universities and Colleges within Davao Region, namely Davao del Norte State College, University of Southeastern Philippines, Santo Tomas College of Agriculture, Science and Technology, and Samal Island City College. According to Renwick (2019), qualitative data focuses more on smaller groups of participants. This claim has been supported by the authors Mira Crouch and Heather Mckenzie, who state that using fewer than 20 participants in a qualitative study is more likely to establish a better data result, considering that having a smaller group is easier for the researcher to develop a strong close relationship with the participants that later on leads to natural and comprehensive conversation.

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In the context of this study, which aims to explore the multifaceted implications of R.A. 10931 on State Universities and Local Colleges within Davao Region, a comprehensive level of understanding and context are necessary. Other qualitative studies, like research inquiries of Johnson (2018) and Garcia (2019) in the field of education, have demonstrated that, for exploratory research, a smaller, purposively selected sample of participants can provide comprehensive data. Further, this study

seeks to delve deeper into the perceptions of key stakeholders, such as the University President or Vice President for Academics and the Finance Director or Budget Officer. This is in line with the qualitative approach and the use of a limited number of research participants to achieve depth rather than breadth.

This study utilized a purposive sampling technique in data gathering. According to Nikolopoulou (2023), this indicates that the participants are purposely chosen, considering that they have the standards that are needed in the sample. Further, purposive sampling relies on the judgment capacity of the researcher to identify and select the individuals who can provide the best information to achieve the objective of the study. In the case of this research, the interview participants are purposely chosen and checked to ensure that they fit perfectly answer the problems stated in the study and come up with reliable results. To wit:

Individuals who are currently handling the position as the SUCs/LUCs President or Vice President for Academics with at least one (1) full term of experience in overseeing the implementation of R.A. 10931. The exclusion for this is the participants who have served in institutions that are not SUCs and LUCs, with minimal involvement and experience in the implementation of R.A. 10931, and those with a history of ethical and legal violations that could compromise the study's integrity.

Meanwhile, the Finance Director or Budget Officer should be a current finance or budget officer in State or Local Universities and Colleges, have deep knowledge of financial management, budgeting, and fund allocation within the institution for one (1) year, and have experience dealing with financial implications of Republic Act 10931. The exclusion for this category is officers who are not currently responsible for financial management from institutions that do not belong to State and Local Universities and Colleges and have no one (1) year of experience in the field, and a participant with a history of ethical and legal violations that could compromise the integrity of the study.

For withdrawal criteria, participants can withdraw from the study if they are no longer willing to do so if they immediately resign from their work, and if they cannot maintain contact with the participants, leading to an insufficient amount of essential data.

Materials and Instrument

This study used a researcher-made interview protocol for the conduct of in-depth interview. Before the researcher deployed the instrument, it went through a series of validations from internal and external validators to ensure its rigor validity, reliability, and ethical soundness. After being validated, the instrument was submitted to UMERG for ethics review. Once done, permission from the institution to conduct the study was secured. Afterward, the researcher started the interview.

The instrument being utilized has three parts: a Preliminary section that serves as informed consent, a Demographic Profile section that gathers important information regarding the research participants, and an open-ended Interview Guide Questionnaire that consists of probing questions. These questions aim to gather

the responses of the study participants, which was analyzed for data analysis purposes. The researcher's adviser reviewed and validated the instrument with the assistance of experts.

Design and Procedure

This research study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach. As a qualitative study, it explores the participants' experiences, behavior, and perspectives. It primarily answers hows and whys instead of how many. Further, qualitative research asks open-ended questions to the participants whose answers are not put into and expounded to numbers. One of the strengths of a qualitative approach is that it is able to explain various processes and patterns of human behavior that can be hard to quantify (Brannan & Brannan, 2022). According to Juma (2023), qualitative research has different factors, including phenomenology, action research, ethnography, case study, narrative model, grounded theory, focus groups, and history. These factors are used in a study depending on the researcher's subject focus, intended audience, and comfort level. A phenomenological approach is applied to this study.

According to Umanailo (2019), a phenomenological study is an approach that intends to understand people's perspectives and understanding towards a certain phenomenon. As stated by Creswell (1998) that the indicator to determine the use of phenomenology is when the study requires a comprehensive understanding of human experiences. This type of study is based in a paradigm of personal perspectives and subjectivity and highlights more to personal experiences and interpretation of a person.

More so, phenomenological research methodology is associated with various approaches that are suited to apply to single cases. Given this, it became easy to identify issues that present failures, discrepancies, and favorable inferences (Groenewald 2004, pg. 87; Greening 2019). Thus, the main reason the researcher used phenomenology as an approach in this study is because of the unique experiences of the president or vice presidents and finance or budget officers of the different institutions in the implementation of free higher education in the country.

The data collection process involves different steps, including the formulation, validation, and administration of a research questionnaire, which includes open-ended questions to elicit precise and comprehensive responses from the chosen participants of the study. These participants were approached with informed consent and had the freedom to decline participation if they felt uncomfortable. Establishing trust with them during the interview is of utmost importance, as it forms the basis of their accurate and unfiltered responses, aligning with the objectives of the study.

This study employed an in-depth interview (IDI) for the eight (8) stakeholders from different State Universities and Colleges and Local Universities and Colleges in Davao Region. Afterward, the researcher used the approved research instrument during the interview. To ensure the reliability and validity of the result, the researcher recorded the answers of the participants using the voice recording application. Aside from this, the researcher may take pictures as proof of the interview's conduct. Lastly, transcription, interpretation, and data analysis of the results were done afterward.

As a researcher, the task is to ensure that all the information provided in the study is conducted in a scholarly manner and unlock new enriching knowledge that will benefit the public. Aside from this, she is responsible for gathering information from different sources for the overall content of the paper. Proper authorship must be followed to define each author's role and contributions clearly. Also, the researcher should transcribe the responses of the participants after the interview session. After the data gathering, the results will be checked and analyzed with the help of her adviser and data analyst. The findings from these data shall be submitted to the panelists for comments and suggestions. All of these are to ensure the credibility and validity of the study.

The data of this paper will be analyzed using thematic analysis. Villegas (2023) states that thematic analysis is a technique in qualitative research used for investigating, which technically refers to a collection of texts, including interview transcripts. After the data gathering, the researcher needs to transcribe the participants' responses, and if there is a need to translate, she is compelled to change the language to English. Afterward, the data shall be submitted to the chosen data analyst to evaluate the data extensively and recognize common

themes, such as trends, patterns, and concepts. Then, both the Data analyst and the adviser will review the results for refinement purposes.

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the study is of utmost importance for establishing validity and reliability. According to DeVault (2019), there are four (4) components of data trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, reliability, and conformability. Credibility was maintained through informed consent, voluntary participation, and transparency by using interviews. Transferability was ensured by providing detailed contextual and thick descriptions of participants' experience, allowing others to assess the applicability of findings to different contexts. Reliability was achieved through consistent procedures, and employing multiple data sources, including interviews and observations to cross check and validate findings. Confirmability was ensured through reflexivity, in which the researcher's personal biases and reflection were examined to maintain objectivity throughout the study. Lastly, participant concerns were promptly addressed, and measures were taken immediately to ensure the paper's correctness and validity.

The researcher of this study adhered to accepted guidelines and methods while upholding the utmost ethical standards, including gaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and allowing participants to withdraw if uncomfortable, all while being transparent about the study's nature. Also, this study passed the ethical review as set by the institution with protocol no. UMER-2023-596. In case of any conflicts of interest, the researcher is expected to conduct a thorough self-assessment to identify potential conflicts. Detailed observation requires implementing strategies for participants to make informed decisions and ensuring transparency. The researcher must address participant concerns, particularly regarding the observational process, and follow strict confidentiality and anonymity policies to safeguard identities and maintain data integrity. Individual interviews should be conducted in private, interference-free settings, with precautions taken to avoid data fabrication and plagiarism, ensuring the study's validity and correctness. These ethical measures are meticulously observed to ensure the study's ethical validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the data collected and the results of the research question given in the first chapter of this paper. Its findings were based on the data gathered through the interviews of the participants. Those data were then analyzed, presented, discussed, and interpreted, and they emerged as the themes that serve as the answers to the statement of the problem.

The first table shows the challenges experienced by the SUCs and LUCs in implementing Republic Act 10931. The second table shows the successes experienced by the SUCs and LUCs in implementing RA 10931. The last one shows the enrollment implications of RA 10931 for SUCs and LUCs.

Challenges in implementing Republic Act 10931 by State Universities and Local Colleges

Table 1 shows the data on the challenges experienced by the SUCs and LUCs in implementing the Republic Act 10931. Three themes were derived from the interviews: limited classrooms and other facilities, complicated process of fund request and budget allocation, financial struggles, delays, and collection efficiency.

Table 1 Challenges in implementing Republic Act 10931 by State Universities and Local Colleges

Themes	Significant Statements
Limited classrooms and other facilities	The facilities of our classrooms must also be considered.
	What is really affected is our capital outlay projects. For example, our income at first could fund a building upon completion, but now, it cannot really be enough funding for

	the construction of a building.
	Limited classrooms due to influx of enrollees.
	Unavailability of comfort rooms
	Poor classroom ventilations
Complicated process for fund requests and budget allocation	Shift from CHED billing to GAA process.
	Sometimes, it takes a long time before we can bill this semester and pay it the following semester or almost two semesters later.
	The budget is missing something, but it's not the budget itself that is lacking, but the process of the paper.
	The budget has yet to be given much, so the LGU needs to support the college.
Financial struggles, delays, and collection inefficiency.	Our handling of money goes through a process. There's also a time when they have to scrutinize it. We are waiting for it to be the same, Ma'am, as we cannot just easily get a budget because there are processes to go through, and sometimes they also question it.
	The first challenge we have is the financial aspect of the institution.
	The only problem is that it takes a long time to receive the money because it has working days.
	The budget is not limited but insufficient because our deficit is about 22 million in the last two years.
	Collection efficiency is difficult.

Limited Classrooms and Other Facilities

During the Duterte administration, free higher education was enacted to help Filipino students finish their studies. Since its implementation, over two million students have benefited from this (Panti, 2022). However, no matter how promising this can be to the people, the government must consider and address the limitations of this program, including the limited facilities. Hence, most SUCs and LUCs must prioritize what's more needed in the institution. As participant 8 said,

“In terms of operations, we have to restrict yung mga programs namin, we have to prioritize ang mga needs ng university and wala kaming pang funding for additional buildings. Kasi since the government medyo hindi naman nag bibigay ng for buildings and infrastructure projects.” (P8, Q1.1.1.)

In terms of operations, we have to restrict our programs, prioritize the university's needs, and not have funding for additional buildings since the government only gives a little to buildings and infrastructure projects. (P8, Q1.1.1.).

More so, this issue of inadequate facilities and infrastructure are not just present in the Philippine settings but also to other country, like India. Despite being highly recognized educational institutes, most colleges and universities in the country lack in the basic and high-end research facilities. Also, they lack in proper infrastructure like sports facility, library, hostels, etc., which are one of the requirements to rank the quality institution (Sharma & Sharma, 2020). However, in the Philippines, despite the inadequacy in facilities, they are still able to cater to large numbers of students since the college is using blended learning or flexible learning. This method has been adopted in many academic institutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reshaped conventional learning paradigms in the country (Junsay & Lagura, 2024). As participant 1 stated,

“...the facilities, ang classrooms nato that must also be considered. Although, naa tay mga new classrooms karon unya na catered naman pud nato, considering that the college now is using the blended learning naman na. There are face-to-face classes, and then there will also be alternative mode or online classes.” (P1, Q1)

The facilities, our classrooms must also be considered. Although, we have new classrooms now that we catered too, considering that the college now is using blended learning. There are face-to-face classes, and then there will also be alternative mode or online classes (P1, Q1).

Senator Win Gatchalian proposed the inclusion of state universities and colleges (SUCs) in the government's "Build, Build, Build" program. If this proposal is approved, it ensures students will benefit from free higher education, including the usage of quality classrooms and other school facilities (Office of Senator Win Gatchalian, 2022). However, as much as the SUCs have given this opportunity, the same is true with the Local Universities and Colleges. If the budget they have requested from the LGU will be given to them directly, it will be easy for them to provide the necessities for the students. According to participant 4,

“Once ma provide naman gud to namo tanan gipang procure na mga facilities, murag mas mapadali ang services na maihatag namo. By the means of providing katong mga request nila nga mga needs, mga collections, mas mapadali ang proseso sa kung unsa man among mga kinahanglan.” (P4, Q3.2.2.)

Once we can provide all the procured facilities, it seems that the services we can provide will be easier. By the means of providing those requests of their needs, collections, the process of whatever our needs will be made easier (P4, Q3.2.2.).

Navarro (2022) states that all institutions, including the private sector, must improve the student's learning environment by providing better and adequate school facilities. These are good investments that would result in quality and better student learning outcomes and, eventually, productive workers in the future. All of these are integral to building endogenous economic growth in the country.

Complicated process for fund requests and budget allocation

According to Senator Win Gatchalian, the local universities and colleges (LUCs), run by the local government unit, will receive immediate reimbursements to support the government's free higher education program. The General Appropriations Act of 2023 upholds a special provision that seeks immediate reimbursement of the amount required to implement R.A. 10931 (Senate of the Philippines 19th Congress, 2022). However, despite having this special provision, there are still some LUCs that need to catch up on the process of reimbursement. As Participant 5 puts it,

“Unsayay naay kulang sa budget pero dili jud as in kulang sa budget kundi ang pag proseso gud sa papel, like for example naay lakaw, mahimo na syang reimbursement ang kwarta. Di sa nimo madawat man gud kay naa man guy proseso dapat diri sa amo sa finance office...” (P5, Q 1.1.)

Sometimes, there might be perceived budget shortages, but it's not actually a lack of budget but rather delays in paperwork processing. For example, when a trip occurs, the expenses may be reimbursed. However, the process must be followed here in our finance office (P5, Q1.1.).

She further added,

“Ang problema lang kay dugay ma receive ang money kay naa man jud syay working days na kuanon jud.” (P5, Q1.1.)

The only problem is that it takes a long time to receive the money because it needs to follow the working days (P5, Q1.1.).

Cervantes (2023) states that free higher education in the country must ensure equity-based access to all students; however, those who belong to the marginalized sector must be given priority. Given this, Senator Win Gatchalian has filed a bill that assures improving the quality of education for the local universities and colleges (Senate of the Philippines, 2023). The assurance given to the LUCs is no longer surprising, as some LUCs have not experienced any difficulties regarding the support given to them by the local government. As stated by Participant 4,

“For now, ambot lang ka ha sa future, but for now, wa gyud namo na experience ang kalisod. Every year, may budget ceiling man gud ang SICC as one of the departments of the local government.” (P4, Q1)

For now, I don’t know in the future, but for now, we have never experienced the hardships. Every year, our school has a budget ceiling as one of the departments of the local government (P4, Q1).

The sustainability of funds for free higher education remains one of the most challenging battles most public institutions have faced, especially for the LUCs that remain dependent on the local government. However, the implementation of R.A. 10931 is already a big help for the LUCs, considering that the national government is all out to support their needs, which they can be able to provide more access to quality education for Filipino students without the financial burden (Abanes, 2021).

Financial struggles, delays, and collection inefficiency

According to Jocson (2024), the government must find a way to expand the free higher education program in the country due to the limited fiscal space. Instead, it should prioritize supporting the needs of basic education. Economics professor Maria Ella Calaor-Oplas stated that universal access to quality tertiary education can only expand more due to many deficits. Thus, it is unsurprising that some institutions have been struggling to cope with this issue. As Participant 3 stated,

“Of course, ang first jud na challenge namo is on the financial aspect of the institution. Considering that when we were qualified for the free education, which all the students kay free na, there was a shift of population, increase of the enrollees.” (P3, Q1)

Of course, our first challenge is on the financial aspect of the institution. Considering that when we were qualified for the free education, which all the students are free, there was a shift of population, increase of the enrollees (P3, Q1).

Given the increase of student population, some SUCs cannot afford to accept more students given the insufficient budget of the government. As participant 8 added,

“...we cannot accept more students because hindi man nag babayad ang national government ng entire tuition fees and miscellaneous fees ng students.” (P8, Q1)

We cannot accept more students because the national government won’t even pay the entire tuition fees and miscellaneous fees of the students. (P8, Q1).

Despite this deficiency, some SUCs have gone to the fullest extent to balance their needs and what the government can offer financially. Hence, 1.6 Filipino students are no longer paying miscellaneous fees and tuition through the implementation of R.A. 10931 (Rocamora, 2021). As Participant 2 stated, they live within their means, so they don’t experience any problems.

“We live within our means; we live within our budget. So wala naman siguroy problema. We did not experience any delay. Yung mga COS natin and the job orders, did not experience any delay in the release of the payroll kasi nga we always make sure na ito yung budget pero na may naka reserve na tayo. Just in case na delay yung release of the money, we have the reserve budget for that.” (P2, Q1.1.1.)

We live within our means; we live within our budget. So, there must be no problem. We did not experience any delay. Our COS and the job orders did not experience any delay in the release of the payroll because we always make sure that this is the budget, but we already have a reserve. Just in case the release of the money is delayed, we have the reserve budget for that (P2, Q1.1.1.).

Imposing quality standards for free education in the Philippines is one of the government's core objectives. According to PIDS president Aniceto Orbeta Jr., senior research fellow Connie Bayudan-Dacuycuy, and supervising research specialist Kristina Ortiz, this factor addresses issues like financial schemes that allow this program to attain quality and access to higher education. This will surely help millions of students in the Philippines to have a brighter future.

Successes experienced by the State Universities and Local Colleges in implementing Republic Act 10931

Table 2 shows the data on the successes experienced by the SUCs and LUCs in implementing the Republic Act 10931. Three themes were derived from the interviews: sticking to the plan and budget approved, increase in enrollment and graduates, and school expansion and improvement.

Table 2 Successes experienced by the State Universities and Local Colleges in implementing Republic Act 10931.

Themes	Significant Statements
Sticking to the plan and budget approved	Our strategy is strictly implementing our plans.
	All expenses are controlled, and we prioritized only those important projects.
	Budget preparations a year before the incoming year. We have already arranged everything in our annual investment plan.
	The institution regularly conducts planning activities, including mid-year and annual planning sessions.
Increase in enrollment and graduates	The increase in enrollment also increases the number of graduates.
	We monitored that many are employed. For us, that was the biggest achievement we had.
	The number of students is increasing.
	Increase in enrollment and employability rate
School expansion and improvement	We bought capital outlay projects because of our income.
	The indicator is the development of the ongoing construction of the buildings.
	Due to the number of enrollees, new buildings are proposed.
	The offering of new courses is explored.

Sticking to the plan and budget approved

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) secured a budget of P105.6 billion for the SUCs under the proposed plan of the P5.768-trillion National Expenditure Program 2024. This budget is allocated to support free higher education in the country and address financial issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cordero, 2023). Given this, many institutions have created their own strategies to mitigate this implementation's problems. As Participant 7 stated,

“Amoang strategy is implementation of strictly implementing our plans.” (P7, Q1.2.2.)

Our strategy here is strictly adhering to out plans (P7, Q1.2.2.).

Further, problem-solving theory states that when an institution faces certain problems, they are organized with a given framework for solutions. This theory aims to find solutions amidst problems so an institution can work smoothly by effectively dealing with the sources of trouble (Smith, 2024). Hence, some institutions in the Philippines have used austerity measures as the best method to employ when it comes to financial issues. Participant 7 states that,

“Austerity measures lang gyud. All expenses are controlled by katong lang gyung priority projects ang amoa.” (P7, Q 1.2.)

It's just austerity measures. All expenses are controlled by our priority projects (P7, Q1.2.).

In addition, participant 4 also stipulated that

“Sa amoa, budget preparations a year before the incoming year. Gi plaster ug gi han'ay na jud namo daan during sa amoang annual investment plan.” (P4, Q1.2.)

In our case, budget preparations a year before the incoming year. We have already arranged it during our annual investment plan (P4, Q1.2.).

In improving college attainment, it is necessary to increase spending levels in public colleges and universities. The government must know that this program is not just a one-time spending. It requires more resources and careful government regulation of every institution that receives the funds (Deming, 2019). Knowing this, all SUCs and LUCs across the Philippines must employ various tactics to make this free higher education the best opportunity for all Filipino students.

Increase in enrollment and graduates

According to CHED Chairman De Vera, enrollment has substantially increased as of March 2024 in both SUCs and LUCs. Along with this, there are more than 2 million beneficiaries of free college education. This growing number of enrollees suggests a future shift in the enrollment implications that favors more public institutions (Madrigal, 2023). As stated by Participant 1

“Sa enrollment implications, of course, as I said, it implies the increasing number of enrollees. That means, there is a positive effect of the UNIFAST in relation to RA 10931.” (P3, Q3)

In enrollment implications, of course, as I said, it implies the increasing number of enrollees. That means there is a positive effect of the UNIFAST in relation to R.A. 10931 (P3, Q3).

Apart from increasing enrollment, there is also a substantial increase in the number of graduates that will eventually be part of the manpower contributing to the economy. As stated by participant 1,

“Ang increase of enrollment at the same time, increase also in the number of graduates, which will become part of the manpower or human resource sa atoang community and eventually, of course, it will boost and help the economy kay daghan nag trabahante, daghan nag mo earn, daghan na sag mo gasto.” (P1, Q2.1.)

The increase of enrollment at the same time, also in the number of graduates, will become part of the manpower or human resource in our community and eventually, of course, it will boost and help the economy because there are already a lot of workers that will earn a living (P1, Q2.1.).

Further, CHED Chairman De Vera said that access to education is no longer a problem. However, the government must ensure that quality education for all is provided (Del Rosario, 2023). Given this, many institutions in the country consider the growth of enrollment and employability rate as one of their biggest achievements. Participant 3 stated,

“We monitored na daghan jud ang na employed. For us, that was the biggest achievement we have.” (P3, Q2.1.)

We monitored that many people were employed. For us, that was the biggest achievement we have (P3, Q2.1.).

In South Africa, the implementation of free higher education can be viewed as a positive initiative, considering that it encourages millions of South Africans to finish their education regardless of their social status. However, the major concern faced by South Africa is despite having an increased number of graduates, the issue of unemployed graduates has plagued the country today (Mlambo, Hlongwa & Mubecua, 2020). Allowing students to enroll in college for free is indeed one of the best programs the government can offer, especially those in the marginalized sector. Panti (2023) states that Chairman De Vera said this is the “best anti-poverty strategy” offered to Filipinos. Through this initiative, the country will follow suit in producing highly skilled manpower.

School expansion and improvement

Free education for all is not just about giving the students tuition-free but also ensuring the quality of facilities on the campus. Hence, Senator Win Gatchalian is proposing an initiative to include the SUCs in the “Build, Build, Build” program of the government to build more infrastructure, including classrooms and other school facilities, to ensure that there are many students benefit from this program (Office of Senator Win Gatchalian, 2022).

“We’re able to provide not only in academics, kasi nag increase ang enrollment, we have bigger collection na din sa other miscellaneous fees, like sports, cultural. So we’re able to provide more opportunities to our students to be exposed ana nga area and then upgrade some of our laboratory facilities.” (P2, Q2.1.).

We’re able to provide not only in academics, because the enrollment has increased, we have bigger collection in other miscellaneous fees, like sports, cultural. So we’re able to provide more opportunities to our students to be exposed to that area and then upgrade some of our laboratory facilities (P2, Q2.1.).

However, participant 7 states they got funds to buy capital outlay projects through their income alone. With their hard-earned money to buy the necessities, this serves as a success for them.

“Nakapalit mig mga capital outlay nga projects tungod ana amoang income. So, i think, mao na ang mga success.” (P7, Q2)

We were able to buy capital outlay projects because of our income. So, I think, those are the successes (P7, Q2).

Gamboa (2023) states that many SUCs nowadays suffer from inflation rates. Hence, the odds of added costs for teaching personnel and improving school facilities and buildings are slim. The hand-to-mouth condition of the budget allocation for this program is what keeps these issues running in circles. Due to the limitation of fund allocations, Participant 8 stated that they had to restrict some programs and focus instead on those the university needed.

“In terms of operations, we have to restrict yung mga programs namin, we have to prioritize ang mga needs ng university and wala kaming pang funding for additional buildings. Kasi since the government medyo hindi naman nag bibigay ng for buildings and infrastructure projects.” (P8, Q2)

In terms of operations, we have to restrict our programs, we have to prioritize the needs of the university, and we do not have funding for additional buildings because the government doesn't give much for buildings and infrastructure projects (P8, Q2).

The continued support of state-supported higher education institutions in the country requires careful consideration. Improvements in colleges and universities can only happen if the government makes substantial cuts to other public expenditures. In today’s status quo, the government has supplied the needs of the SUCs and LUCs and made this program run smoothly.

Implications of Republic Act 10931 Implementation

Table 3 shows the data on the implications of R.A. 10931 to State Universities and Local Colleges. Three themes were derived from the interviews: more job opportunities, more dreams to fulfill, and improved student support services.

Table 3 Implications of Republic Act 10931 to State Universities and Local Colleges

Themes	Significant Statements
More job opportunities	This contributes to economic growth as more workers are employed and earn income.
	We monitored the number of employed workers, which was our biggest achievement.
	The increase in enrollment meant an increase in the need to hire more faculty members.
	More job openings due to the influx of students.
More dreams to fulfill	We can provide quality education to poor but deserving students.
	It implies the increasing number of enrollees.
	More students are given the chance to receive free education.
	It gave more chances to students from poor families.
Improved student support services	The services offered to the students are improved.
	It also allows us to open more courses, just like now.
	We invested so much in the quality of assurance on accreditation and everything.
	Proposed more funds for student activities outside.

More job opportunities

Alvarez (2023) states that the challenges of starting a career always start after they get a college degree. A person will be intellectually and socially prepared to face the hurdles in adulthood. Along with these challenges are the benefits of being exposed to new and exciting job opportunities, high-skilled careers, and better-paying careers. With this, most institutions do tracer studies to monitor their graduates. As Participant 1 said,

“Part of the physical target sa GAA is we do tracer study. Dili lang ta kutob sa pag pa graduate kundi i trace sad nato kung naka trabaho ba sila after 6 months from graduation or after 1 year. Basically, the common tool jud ana in measuring the quality of our graduates and kumusta na sila is by conducting tracer study.” (P1, Q3.2)

Part of the physical target of GAA is to do a tracer study. We don't only go as far as graduation, but we trace whether they got a job six months after graduation or after one year. The common tools for measuring the quality of our graduates and how they are doing is conducting a tracer study (P1, Q3.2).

Human capital theory highlights the importance of an employee's educational attainment, experience, knowledge, and skills. As economists Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz state, education and training are among the highest investments a person can make to increase his productivity (Ross, 2023). Hence, every institution greatly cares about what happens to its graduates, considering that their post-student life matters to them.

“At the present, we are still monitoring what happened to our graduate's kay we don't stop at producing but also monitor what happened to them after graduation kay ang gi look forward man gud sa institution kay naa man gu'y naka sumpay sa vision nga “Changing their lives.” (P3, Q2.1)

At present, we are still monitoring what happens to our graduates because we don't stop producing but also monitor what happens to them after graduation because the institution is looking forward because there is this one line that connects to our vision, which is “Changing their lives (P3, Q2.1).

Some studies have shown that it is not just about higher education that mostly highlights when it comes to economic growth but the quality of education that the students receive (Daway-Ducanes et al., 2022). Being admitted and graduating from college is indeed the best achievement that one has to have. Still, the government must also establish effective education in the country despite being free.

More dreams to fulfill

Going to college is one of the distant dreams for many low-income individuals. Due to high tuition costs, most cannot afford to sustain themselves to finish their education, which often results in missed opportunities. However, free higher education has enabled more people to enroll (Learn.org, 2024). This government program is specifically designed for marginalized sectors that cannot afford to pay for their education. Thus, every institution gives more chances to the poor but deserving students.

“Ang atoang tagaan man jud og option ana kay ang mga poor but deserving.” (P2, Q3.2)

We should give an option to the poor but deserving (P2, Q3.2).

In free higher education, opportunities for students are always available. These opportunities were not just built within the four corners of the classrooms but as well as outside campuses. The students can receive monetary perks as an award for their hard work. As Participant 5 stated,

“Daghan gyud mo apil og mga competition para naa sad silay money.” (P5, Q3.2.2.)

Many participants will join in various competitions to earn money (P5, Q3.2.2.).

Burke (2023) states that free college programs have no real financial benefits for marginalized students. Even so, this still positively impacts their credentials, specifically their educational background. After all, finishing college can be one of the most fulfilling events of their lives, and it can also be a way to fulfill their dreams.

Improved student support services

The student support services highlight the departments that provide services and support in higher education. It aims to ensure the development and growth of the student’s overall academic endeavors. According to Shaheen et al. (2020), free higher education allows students to meet the challenges in an ever-changing society. Given this, they are given enough support and provide their needs for their academic growth. Participant 4 also explained that

“Ang mga students dili sila deprive kung unsa jud ilahang makuha na quality kay gina provide jud pud sa mga bata ilahang mga needs sa academic aspect. Pero not only that, but we also have services na gina hatag sa guidance. So, gina cater pud sa student services, naa silay pa training including the clinic. So, kung unsa jud ang naka stipulate based sa city ordinance, i balik jud pud to sa mga bata.” (P4, Q3.2.2.)

The students are not deprived of what quality they can get because they are also provided with their needs in the academic aspect. But not only that, we also have services that provide guidance. So what is stipulated in the city ordinance, we will also return it to the students (P4, Q3.2.2.).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, consistent support for student support services should always be a top priority. However, during this trying time, student support services were at risk, especially in meeting the needs of the students (Kelly, 2021). However, after the pandemic, everything changed. Most institutions' budgets have improved, as have student support services.

“...because of the budget that we have now, we have improved the services for the students. It also encourages the stakeholders na makit’an nila na nag tubo among schools guided by mission and vision.” (P3, Q3.2.2.)

Because of the budget that we have now, we have improved the services for the students. It also encourages the stakeholders that they see that our school is improving guided by mission and vision (P3, Q3.2.2.)

One of the best outcomes of improved student support services is the academic success of the students. The assistance that will be provided for them, including study skills development, academic advising, and tutoring services, can surely help increase retention rates and graduation rates (Viswanath, 2023).

Suggestions to implement R.A. 10931 more effectively.

Table 4 shows the data on the suggestions to implement R.A. 10932 more effectively. Four themes were derived from the interviews: sufficient and timely funding, enhanced admission procedures with inclusivity measures, effective financial processes, and increased scholarship and shared responsibilities.

Table 4 Suggestions to implement R.A. 10931 more effectively

Themes	Significant Statements
Sufficient and timely funding	It's high time that sufficient funding is allocated from the Department of Budget and Management, specifically for implementing Republic Act 10931
	We partly understand why the payment is released that way, but perhaps they could release it earlier than what we observe now.
	There should be a measure of control

<p>Enhanced admission procedures with inclusivity measures</p>	<p>Even at the admission stage, we must already strengthen the admission process. However, we should also ensure that there are mitigation measures in place for certain groups.</p>
<p>Effective financial processes</p>	<p>The process could be expedited if possible. Instead of reimbursement, we could use cash advances so that the needs of the students can be addressed immediately.</p>
<p>Increased scholarship and shared responsibilities</p>	<p>The government should not shoulder everything; the students must have a share. Aside from free higher education, it shouldn't be just a few students who can avail of other scholarships. Since most of the students I mentioned are really poor, it would be better to increase the number of scholars under other scholarships.</p>

Sufficient and timely funding

Various loopholes have challenged the implementation of R.A. 10931 in the Philippines. These struggles are not just for the students alone but also for SUCs and LUCs. Given this, the study participants shared their suggestions to enhance free education in the country.

Participant 1 highlighted the possibility of returning to the old scheme, which CHED should handle the budget. He explained that

“Kung di man ma balik sa CHED, dili ma balik sa old scheme, it’s high time na naa juy ma allocate na enough funding from the Department of Budget and Management nga naa silay budget, specifically for the implementation of RA 10931 so that all the billings of the SUCs will be paid in full amount nga walay deficiency unta kay basically naa jud syay impact kay kung deficient ang SUCs, hampered ang operations.” (P1, Q4)

Suppose it can’t be returned to CHED, and it can’t revert to the old scheme. In that case, it's high time that sufficient funding is allocated from the Department of Budget and Management, specifically for implementing Republic Act 10931. This way, all the billings of the SUCs will be paid in full without any deficiencies. Basically, it has an impact—if the SUCs are deficient, their operations are hampered (P1, Q4).

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) allocated a budget of about PHP 3.84 billion to sustain the needs of free higher education. These funds were for the benefit of some 141,000 eligible tertiary education students. As additional funding for the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education - Tertiary Education Subsidy (UAQTE-TES) under the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), Amenah Pangandaman, the budget secretary, approved a Special Allotment Release Order (SARO) for the utilization of the 3.84 billion pesos funds for the program (Gita-Carlos, 2023).

Enhanced admission procedures with inclusivity measures

Despite having a huge budget, one of the participants suggested that there should be a measure of control, considering that when it comes to free higher education, some students thought it is open admission for all. As Participant 2 said,

“Dapat naa gyuy measure of control because naa man gud koy makit’an na uban na mga, not all, but naa koy mga makit’an nga it’s because naay mga misconceptions ba nga free higher ed, open admission.” (P2, Q4)

There should be a measure of control because I have seen some instances, not all, but there are some cases where there are misconceptions about free higher education and open admission (P2, Q4).

She further added,

“Sa admission palang, i strengthen na ang admission. Pero dapat matagaan unta natog ani sya ha nga naay mga mitigation na dapat buhaton, like mga IPs, rebellion returnees, mga anak og mga rebel returnees, kanang mga naa sa bukid kaayo. Mag lisod na sila og pasar sa entrance exam, so, dapat naa pud tay buhaton nga matabangan sila.” (P2, Q4)

Even at the admission stage, we must already strengthen the admission process. However, we should also ensure that there are mitigation measures in place for certain groups, like Indigenous Peoples (IPs), rebellion returnees, children of rebel returnees, and those who live in very remote areas. They might struggle to pass the entrance exam, so we should also do something to help them (P2, Q4).

In 2024, the proposed budget for the education sector is higher than the 2023 national budget. However, this fund is still insufficient to support various needs in the institution, including more classrooms, manpower, and higher teacher salaries. According to France Castro, Makabayan bloc member and ACT Teachers Representative, with a projected GDP of P25.40 trillion, the government should allocate at least P1.525 trillion for education if it were to adhere to United Nations (UN) criteria (Lalu, 2023).

Effective financial processes

Participant 3 suggested that, although the payments were later than usual, it would be helpful if there was a way to expedite the process. She explicitly stated that

“We partly understand nganog ing’ana ang releasing of the payment pero pwede siguro na they can release earlier than we can observe now, though di man jud kaayo as in late kay within the semester man sya mo sulod, pero it would be more helpful if it would be earliest mid in the semester or earlier sa semester para ang funds pud magamit namo within the semester.” (P3, Q4)

We partly understand why the payment is released that way, but perhaps they could release it earlier than what we observe now. Although it’s not extremely late since it comes within the semester, it would be more helpful if it could be released by mid-semester or earlier in the semester to use the funds within the semester (P3, Q4).

Most LUCs also have the same sentiments. The money allocated for them by the local government should, as much as possible, be in the form of cash advances instead of reimbursement. In this way, the money will be given directly to the students. As Participant 5 stated,

“Ang proseso na mapadali gani kung pwede buhaton, dili nalang gani reimbursement, Cash Advance nalang kay aron ang mga needs sa mga bata kay halimbawa manlakaw sila, ang mga needs sa mga bata kay ma hatag dayon nila.” (P5, Q4)

The process could be expedited if possible. Instead of reimbursement, we could use cash advances so that the needs of the students can be addressed immediately. For instance, if they need to travel, their needs can be met immediately (P5, Q4).

Increased scholarship and shared responsibilities

Bai (2023) states that poverty has been a long-standing issue in the Philippines, and education remains a distant dream for most people living below the poverty line. Hence, the government has launched various initiatives to address poverty and its educational impact. One of the programs is the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), which provides cash assistance to the marginalized sectors to help them meet their basic needs, including education. Given this, SUCs and LUCs expect that, at some point, students can have a share to fund their education. As Participant 8 puts it,

“Hindi i shoulder tanan ng government, the students must have a share.” (P8, Q4)

The government should not shoulder everything; the students must have a share (P8, Q4).

Since many students are from poor families, participant 6 suggested it would be more helpful if most of the population could get a scholarship to sustain their education. More scholarships should be available, and those who cannot afford to pay for themselves should be prioritized. Participant 6 clearly states that

“Siguro, aside from free higher education, dili lang kay pipila ka studyante ang naka avail sa other scholarship kay mostly sa gina ingon nako na mga pobre jud mga studyante diri, mas mag increases pa unta ang number sa mga scholars sa other, diba naa may mga other scholarship, mas mo pa increase pa ang number kay sa karon kay murag limited pa sya.” (P6, Q4)

Aside from free higher education, it shouldn't be just a few students who can avail of other scholarships. Since most of the students I mentioned are really poor, it would be better to increase the number of scholars under other scholarships. Aren't there other scholarships available? It would be better if the number of beneficiaries could be increased because, currently, it seems quite limited (P6, Q4).

Providing Filipino students access to quality higher education is not a privilege but a fundamental right. It is one of the basic rights among the people that is crucial in fostering social and economic development in the country. As Benjamin Franklin once said, no politician should take away the benefits of education to the people. Public education is a huge investment by the government, and it is both beneficial and cost-effective than dealing with the consequences of uneducated youth (Madrigal, 2023).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARK

Implication for practice

The Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, or R.A. 10931, is a law in the Philippines that aims to provide quality free higher education for all Filipino students in state and local universities (SUCs and LUCs). Given this, it is imperative for higher educational institutions to comprehensively and strategically navigate its implementation to maximize the law's benefits and immediately address the potential challenges. Hence, every SUC and LUC should conduct comprehensive financial planning. The institution must thoroughly assess its current economic status and foresee future expenses to ensure the sustainability of this program.

Moreover, SUCs and LUCs must strengthen their administrative capacity to efficiently manage the influx of students seeking free tuition. They must also highlight the importance of promoting equity and inclusivity in the academe. Regardless of the student's social, financial, and racial background, the institutions must address barriers to give access and create a conducive learning environment for all students.

While it is true that free tuition increases access to higher education, it is necessary to maintain academic quality standards and provide enough support services to ensure the success of every student. To foster educational excellence and an adequate support system for students, institutions should also invest in development programs for the faculty and staff, academic support initiatives, and the overall learning experience. The critical role of the Department of Budget and Management should be emphasized in allocating these funds for this implementation. Its duty should have coordination with the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to ensure effective implementation of R.A. 10931.

Lastly, this paper is also an aid for policy revision and policy evaluation. Hence, it is important for the government to examine the results of this study comprehensively to assess the impact of the R.A. 10931. By comprehensively analyzing the results, policymakers can be able to identify which areas of the law has successfully met its objectives and areas where it needs to improve. Effective policy revision and evaluation will have a big impact to the law's long-term success and support the ongoing development of higher education in the country.

SUCs and LUCs should regularly review and revise policies to ensure they align with the goals of R.A. 10931, including updating financial management policies, admission guidelines, and support services. Establishing a robust framework for monitoring and evaluating the law's implementation is crucial, with metrics to assess its impact on student access, academic performance, and financial sustainability. Higher educational institutions should collaborate with government bodies to provide feedback on the law's implementation, aiding in policy refinement and effective resource allocation. Additionally, SUCs and LUCs should engage in policy advocacy to address emerging challenges and ensure adequate support for the law's provisions.

By adopting these strategic practices, SUCs and LUCs can navigate the complexities of implementing this program efficiently and effectively, maximizing its beneficial impacts on access to free higher education. This is also a great opportunity for all Filipino students to finish their academic journey, which helps them have a brighter future.

Implication for future research

Exploring the implementation of R.A. 10931 in State and Local Universities and Colleges offers numerous opportunities for future research to unlock more knowledge and inform policy development. Qualitative research methodologies can provide further insights into the lived experiences of students and faculty affected by tuition-free initiatives, highlighting the pros and cons of this program. Future researchers can explore innovative funding mechanisms and alternative revenue streams that the SUCs and LUCs can utilize, including practical solutions to ensure the financial sustainability of free higher education.

Lastly, quantitative research may also be employed in this study to unveil the statistical results of the effectiveness of free higher education among Filipino students, faculty, and administrators. Future researchers can also have interdisciplinary research collaborators between economists, policymakers, and education scholars to foster holistic approaches to understanding the various implications of free higher education policies. By addressing these, scholars can make a big contribution to evidence-based policymaking and improve the success rate of the future of the Philippines' higher education reforms.

Concluding remark

Accessing free and quality education is one of the basic rights among Filipinos. It serves as a foundation for building themselves to suit the competitive world. As this paper is anchored on the Sustainable Development Goals number 4: Education, this ensures inclusivity and promotes equitable quality education that is open to all Filipino students. According to this goal, the educational landscape in the Philippines make sure that all learners acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed for the promotion of sustainability development by 2030. Hence, implementing Republic Act 10931 in the Philippines has brought multifaceted implications for State Universities and Local Colleges (SUCs and LUCs). Apart from financial considerations, the findings of this study highlight the transformative impact of the law on the free higher education landscape.

One of the most notable effects of this law is its recognition as a catalyst for broader societal change. Giving students enough opportunity to finish their education gives them more chances to secure their future. However, there are a lot of students who took advantage of this law, considering that they feel like they are entitled to do so. While it is true, however, there is always an exception to the rule.

Aside from the opportunities given to the students brought by this law, the enrollment patterns of both SUCs and LUCs have changed drastically. This factor means that the implementation of RA 10931 is effective, considering that the law is not just for the benefit of the institution alone but also a door for Filipinos to finish their studies, especially those who belong to the marginalized sector. However, people must be well aware that despite being free to all, many institutions, specifically the SUCs, have to strengthen the entrance examination to ensure that they just cater to students according to the availability and accessibility of their facilities. Of course, only those deserving passers deserve to enjoy the law's benefits. This is the challenge of the students to meet the requirements set by the institution before they can fully acquire a tuition-free education.

Since the implementation of this law, free higher education in the country has truly helped millions of students who have sought to seize this opportunity. However, the insufficiency of funds to support the SUCs and LUCs has hampered the sustainability of this program. Every institution limits the influx of students due to the limited number of facilities and classrooms. This issue remains until today, which calls for an immediate response from the government.

Given these challenges and successes of this law, the results of this paper have indeed made a huge contribution to policy revision and evaluation, providing valuable insights for further improvement of the free higher education in the Philippines. Additionally, this study offers students, parents, and the public a comprehensive understanding that while this law aims to enhance the educational landscape, it is not without its limitations. The results emphasize that the law is associated with various challenges that need to be addressed by the government. By acknowledging these areas, stakeholders of this law can work hand in hand to refine the policy even more, making it more effective to the needs of both the students and the institutions.

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