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# INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES OF ACCESS: RETHINKING UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS AND EQUITY IN PHILIPPINE HIGHER EDUCATION

Sherrie Ann Cananua-Labid<sup>1\*</sup>, Marilyn D. Cardoso<sup>2</sup>, Redentor S. Palencia<sup>1</sup>, Rodrigo Estrada<sup>1</sup>, Analyn C. España<sup>3</sup>, Gina U. España<sup>1</sup>, Ma. Andrea C. Del Rosario<sup>1</sup>, Abegail G. Bordios<sup>1</sup>, Virginia S. Ariza<sup>3</sup>, Mae V. Cañal<sup>1</sup>, Junelle R. Guerra<sup>1</sup>, Ariel B. Mabansag<sup>1</sup>  
Lovely Rose A. Bolante<sup>1</sup> and Michael Hendrix T. Casama<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Samar State University, Catbalogan City, Samar, Philippines, Email: sherrieann.labid@ssu.edu.ph

<sup>1</sup>Samar State University, Catbalogan City, Samar, Philippines,

<sup>2</sup>Samar College Inc., Catbalogan City, Samar, Philippines,

<sup>3</sup>Eastern Visayas State University, Tacloban City, Leyte, Philippines

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Corresponding Author: Sherrie Ann Cananua-Labid

(sherrieann.labid@ssu.edu.ph)

## ABSTRACT

*Tuition-free higher education policies in the Philippines have expanded participation in State Universities and Colleges, yet equity target students (ETS) continue to experience barriers during the admission process. This study examines how admission systems shape equitable access by conceptualizing admissions as institutional capability filters rather than neutral administrative processes. Guided by the Capabilities Approach, the study employed a qualitative participatory policy research design involving 60 purposively selected stakeholders, including students, alumni, parents, scholarship sponsors, and university administrators across State Universities and Colleges in Eastern Visayas, Philippines. Data were generated through focus group discussions and document review of institutional admission policies and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal four interrelated domains through which admissions constrain or enable access: (1) admission-stage financial and procedural burdens, (2) process complexity and institutional inconsistency, (3) exclusionary effects of uniform admission criteria, and (4) governance gaps characterized by bias, limited transparency, and information asymmetries. The results demonstrate that affordability reforms alone are insufficient when institutional processes limit students' real freedom to apply, qualify, and enroll. By applying a capabilities lens to admissions, the study advances higher education equity scholarship and highlights admissions as a critical site of institutional responsibility. The findings offer transferable insights for systems seeking to move beyond enrollment expansion toward inclusive and substantively equitable access.*

**KEYWORDS:** Admission Barriers, Capabilities Approach, Educational Inequality, Equity Target Students, Governance in Higher Education, Higher Education Access, Participatory Policy Research.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Equitable access to higher education remains a persistent global challenge despite sustained policy efforts to widen participation (Salmi & D'Addio, 2020; Wanti *et al.*, 2022). Over the past five decades, tertiary enrollment has expanded significantly worldwide; however, this growth has been uneven and has often reproduced, rather than reduced, existing social inequalities. Students from low-income households, marginalized ethnic groups, rural and geographically isolated communities, and those with disabilities continue to be systematically underrepresented in higher education systems across both high- and low-income contexts (UNESCO, 2020; Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025). These patterns suggest that access to higher education cannot be understood solely as a function of enrollment expansion or affordability, but must also be examined as a socially and institutionally mediated process shaped by cultural norms, power relations, and organizational practices.

A growing body of international literature demonstrates that financial barriers are only one dimension of exclusion. Even in contexts where tuition fees are fully or partially subsidized, inequities persist through indirect costs, rigid admission criteria, standardized testing regimes, and procedurally complex application systems (Herbaut & Geven, 2019; Salmi, 2020). Such mechanisms are not merely technical requirements but reflect institutional cultures that privilege particular forms of knowledge, preparation, and social capital. Admission processes that prioritize narrow academic metrics often disadvantage students who have attended under-resourced schools or who lack access to preparatory networks and informational resources (Batson, 2023). Empirical evidence from diverse contexts indicates that these ostensibly meritocratic systems can function as cultural gatekeeping mechanisms, reproducing patterns of advantage for socioeconomically privileged groups while marginalizing those whose educational trajectories have been shaped by structural disadvantage (Agumba, 2025).

In Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines, these global dynamics are clearly evident. The enactment of the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (Republic Act No. 10931) marked a significant policy shift by eliminating tuition and other mandatory fees in public higher education institutions. While this reform substantially reduced direct financial barriers, emerging evidence suggests that it has not fully addressed deeper inequalities embedded in admission systems and institutional

practices (Trinidad & Leviste, 2020; Orbeta & Paqueo, 2022). Equity Target Students (ETS), including first-generation college students, children of farmers and fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, and those from geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, continue to encounter multiple constraints at the point of entry. These include application fees, medical and documentary requirements, centralized testing, and limited access to reliable information, all of which reflect broader institutional arrangements that shape differential access to higher education (Wanti *et al.*, 2022; Olapane *et al.*, 2025).

Existing research on higher education access in the Philippines has largely focused on enrollment trends, financing mechanisms, and student persistence under tuition-free policies. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how admission criteria, procedural design, and institutional decision-making processes shape inequitable access for ETS. In particular, there remains a paucity of empirical studies that foreground the lived experiences of multiple stakeholders, including students, families, administrators, and scholarship sponsors, in understanding how admissions function as both gateways and gatekeeping mechanisms. This gap is significant, as admission systems are often the first institutional interface where inequality is reproduced or contested.

To address this gap, the present study adopts the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1995; Walker, 2005) as its guiding theoretical framework. The Capabilities Approach shifts the focus from formal access and resource provision to individuals' real freedoms and opportunities to pursue valued educational outcomes. Applied to higher education admissions, this perspective emphasizes whether institutional arrangements enable or constrain students' ability to meaningfully access university education, given their social, economic, and spatial contexts. This framework is particularly useful in examining how institutional cultures shape individuals' real freedoms, highlighting how formal access may coexist with structural constraints embedded in social and institutional practices.

Anchored in Region VIII (Eastern Visayas), one of the country's poorest regions, with a substantial proportion of families living below the poverty threshold (Meniano, 2024), this study examines how admission policies and practices in State Universities and Colleges shape access for equity target students. Employing a qualitative participatory policy research design that engages diverse stakeholder

groups, the study conceptualizes admissions not simply as technical selection mechanisms but as culturally situated institutional practices through which equity, power, and inclusion are negotiated. While grounded in a specific regional context, the study generates policy-relevant insights with broader applicability to higher education systems in the Global South and other contexts grappling with the limitations of tuition-free reforms.

By reframing admissions as a critical site of institutional culture and social stratification, this study contributes to international scholarship on inclusive higher education and advances ongoing efforts toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4.3, which calls for equitable access to quality tertiary education. Beyond its national context, the study offers transferable insights for higher education systems globally, particularly in the Global South, where expanding access must be accompanied by deeper transformations in institutional cultures and practices to achieve substantive equity.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Guided by the Capabilities Approach and aligned with international debates on equity in higher education, this study aims to critically examine how admission policies and practices in Philippine State Universities and Colleges function as mechanisms that either enable or constrain equitable access for ETS.

**Specifically, the study seeks to:**

1. Explore the structural, financial, and procedural barriers encountered by ETS during the higher education admission process.
2. Examine how institutional practices influence unequal access across stakeholder groups
3. Analyze admissions processes as institutional capability filters affecting students' real opportunities to apply, qualify, and enroll.
4. Develop equity-sensitive policy implications and institutional reform directions grounded in stakeholder experiences.

By pursuing these objectives, the study aims to contribute empirically and conceptually to global discussions on inclusive admissions, offering contextually grounded yet internationally relevant insights for advancing equitable access to higher education in systems operating under tuition-free or subsidized regimes.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative participatory policy research design grounded in the Capabilities Approach to address three core analytical aims. This design was selected to generate context-sensitive, policy-relevant evidence by centering on the perspectives of those most affected by admissions systems and treating admissions as institutional mechanisms rather than neutral administrative processes.

### 3.2. Participants And Sampling

A total of 60 participants were purposively selected to represent key stakeholder groups involved in or affected by admission processes: students ( $n = 12$ ), alumni ( $n = 12$ ), parents ( $n = 12$ ), scholarship sponsors ( $n = 12$ ), and SUC administrators and admission personnel ( $n = 12$ ). Sampling prioritized individuals from equity target students, including students from geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, Indigenous communities, low-income households, and recipients of public scholarships. This multi-stakeholder approach enabled triangulation of perspectives across applicant, family, institutional, and policy levels.

### 3.3. Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Data were generated through two complementary sources. First, a systematic desktop review examined institutional admission policies, Citizens' Charters, and relevant national laws (e.g., RA 10931; RA 11032) to identify formal policy commitments and procedural requirements. Second, five focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, one per stakeholder group, using semi-structured guides aligned with the study objectives. FGDs were conducted in English or local languages (Waray or Cebuano), audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Coding was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from stakeholder narratives, but interpretation was guided by the Capabilities Approach, complemented by insights from cultural capital and social justice literature. Coding and theme development were conducted iteratively by the research team, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. ATLAS.ti software supported data organization and retrieval.

### 3.4. Trustworthiness And Reflexivity Statement

Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and stakeholder groups, prolonged engagement during FGDs, and member checking of

preliminary interpretations. Reflexivity was maintained through analytic memos and team discussions acknowledging the researchers' positionality within higher education. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional research ethics board, and informed consent, confidentiality, and secure data storage protocols were strictly observed.

## 4. RESULTS

Analysis yielded four interrelated themes, shown in Table 1, illustrating how admission systems shape equitable access for ETS in SUCs. While presented separately, these themes reflect overlapping institutional and socio-cultural mechanisms that influence access at the point of entry. Selected quotations are included to illustrate key patterns.

**Table 1: Summary of Themes and Subthemes.**

Themes	Subthemes
<i>Theme 1: Financial and Procedural Barriers at the Point of Entry</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Admission-stage indirect costs (transportation, documentation, medical requirements)</li> <li>● Absence of early financial assurance and restrictive scholarship eligibility</li> </ul>
<i>Theme 2. Complexity and inconsistency of admission processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Burden of paper-based and multi-step application procedures</li> <li>● Lack of standardized admission requirements across institutions</li> </ul>
<i>Theme 3. Exclusionary effects of uniform admission criteria</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Limitations of standardized examinations and rigid academic thresholds</li> <li>● Need for equity-sensitive mechanisms, including quota-based prioritization and disability accommodations</li> </ul>
<i>Theme 4. Governance, bias, and information asymmetries</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Limited transparency, feedback, and access to admission information</li> <li>● Experiences of discouragement and perceived institutional bias</li> </ul>

### 4.1. Theme 1: Financial And Procedural Barriers at the Point of Entry

Participants consistently emphasized that tuition-free policies do not eliminate exclusion when indirect and upfront costs remain embedded in admission processes. Students and parents identified expenses related to documentation, medical requirements, transportation, and daily subsistence as significant barriers. These costs often discourage applications or delay enrollment.

Several participants highlighted that uncertainty at the application stage—before admission is secured—already shapes family decisions about pursuing higher education. For low-income households, the absence of early financial assurance creates hesitation and risk.

#### A parent explained:

*“Kumbaga ha akon, kun may igharatag man nga bulig karuyag ko unta itot bulig pagtikang pala han pag paenroll sigurado na kami na an mga sugad han amon mga anak, mayda na scholar para makagcollege gud an amon mga anak kay pobre gudla.” (“For me, if there’s any assistance to be given, I hope it would be provided right at the start of enrollment, so that children like ours are assured of a scholarship and can truly go to college, because we are very poor.”) – (H\_Pr\_10)*

### Students similarly described how financial strain persists despite free tuition, especially when access to additional support remains limited:

*“Ako tikang po ako ha solo-parent household... my biggest struggle was really an adlaw-adlaw na pamasaha, and aside from free tuition fee waray na po ako iba na scholarship kay makuri kasi an criteria.” (“I come from a solo-parent household... my biggest struggle was really the daily transportation fare, and aside from free tuition, I didn’t receive any other scholarship because the criteria were difficult.”) – (M\_AI\_1)*

Admission-related medical and documentation costs were also identified as early points of exclusion. These requirements demand financial readiness even before students are officially admitted:

*“Additional nga pinansyal ba kay makuri man ito nga pagpila nga masiring halimbawa kun an imo anak gin-aaruan hin medical... kinahanglan may andam na pinansyal.” (“Additional financial support is needed because going through the process is difficult – especially when your child is required to undergo a medical exam... we need to be financially prepared.”) – (J\_Pr\_7)*

### Students suggested that reducing or waiving these costs could ease access:

*“...maupay kunta kun magin libre nala bisan la an mga pag papa-xerox han mga documents na kaylangan isubmit, or a pagpamedical since mayda*

man po clinic a university para diri na magin sugad kabug-at a baraydan." (*"It would be better if photocopying required documents or medical examinations were free, especially since the university has a clinic, so the expenses would not be so heavy."*) – (K\_St\_2)

Taken together, these accounts indicate that financial barriers operate most powerfully at the admission stage, shaping access even before students formally enter the higher education system.

#### **4.2. Theme 2: Complexity And Inconsistency of Admission Processes**

Stakeholders highlighted the burden created by multi-step, paper-based, and non-standardized admission processes. Students from rural and island communities described repeated travel, long waiting times, and logistical challenges in submitting requirements.

##### **One student emphasized the potential benefits of online applications:**

"Kanang pwedi gad siguro na mag allow nalang sila na online ang application... para dili gyud need ug physical mag gastos para pamasaha ngan pankaoon." (*"Maybe they could just allow online applications... so there's no need to physically spend on transportation and food."*) – (F\_St\_7)

Participants also noted that differences in admission requirements across institutions create confusion, especially for those applying to multiple universities. Adjusting to varying procedures requires additional time, effort, and resources:

"Medyo nakurian po ako pag-adjust kay iba liwat po an ira process tas documents na inaaro... maupay nala po kay naihabol ko an mga kulang ko na documents ngan nakapasar ghap ako." (*"I found it difficult to adjust because their processes and required documents were different... fortunately, I was able to submit the missing documents and was accepted."*) – (M\_St\_2)

These findings show that navigating admissions requires more than eligibility. It also demands familiarity with institutional systems and access to reliable information, resources that are unevenly distributed. For ETS, procedural complexity becomes a significant barrier.

#### **4.3. Theme 3: Exclusionary Effects of Uniform Admission Criteria**

Participants questioned the reliance on standardized examinations and rigid academic thresholds. Many noted that such criteria do not account for differences in schooling conditions, access to resources, and socio-economic background.

Students described being excluded despite strong motivation and potential, while administrators acknowledged tensions between merit-based selection and inclusion goals.

##### **Some participants emphasized the need for prioritization mechanisms for ETS:**

"Kanang mapriority ba unta ang sugad sa amon ma'am na nabelong ha equity target students pag-abot sa mga quota sa enrollment kay may instances na diri na po nakaka-enroll kay quota na." (*"Hopefully, students like us who belong to equity target students would be prioritized, because there are times when we cannot enroll since the quota is already full."*) – (J\_St\_4)

##### **Students with disabilities also highlighted the lack of accommodations in standardized testing:**

"Tagan hira dako nga oras pag-take exam... parehas ha akon nga dire hiya nakakkuan han iya mata." (*"Give them more time to take the exam, especially those who are visually impaired."*) – (H\_St\_4)

These accounts suggest that uniform criteria, when applied without flexibility, can reinforce inequality. Participants pointed to the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive admission practices.

#### **4.4. Theme 4: Governance, Bias, And Information Asymmetries**

Participants emphasized the importance of access to clear, timely, and accurate information throughout the admission process. Limited transparency and inconsistent communication were seen as barriers that affect both decision-making and confidence.

##### **Some students shared experiences of discouragement from authority figures:**

"Mayda kami teacher nga nagdi-discourage... gusto ko ig-cut iton na discouragement." (*"We had a teacher who discouraged us... I want that discouragement to stop."*) – (H\_St\_1)

##### **Others stressed the need for transparency in admission decisions, particularly beyond academic grades:**

"Ha admission, dapat transparency iton nag-coconduct han admission. Dire la babasehan han grade han students." (*"There should be transparency in the admission process. Decisions should not be based only on grades."*) – (H\_St\_2)

##### **From an institutional perspective, administrators also acknowledged the importance of feedback mechanisms for unsuccessful applicants:**

"There must be feedback for those who have not qualified." – (M\_Mn\_3)

These findings show that access to information is unevenly distributed. Applicants with stronger support systems are better able to navigate requirements, while others face uncertainty and

limited guidance.

Across all themes, the findings demonstrate that admissions function as a critical institutional interface where access is shaped through everyday practices. Financial constraints, procedural complexity, standardized criteria, and governance gaps are interconnected rather than isolated barriers.

Together, these findings indicate that access is shaped by interacting institutional and social factors.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on equitable access in higher education by showing that admissions operate as an access-shaping mechanism, whether ETS can realistically pursue higher education even within tuition-free policy environments. Empirically, the analysis identifies four interrelated domains through which admissions constrain access: (1) financial and procedural burdens at the point of entry, (2) process complexity and institutional inconsistency, (3) exclusionary effects of uniform admission criteria, and (4) governance gaps characterized by bias and information asymmetries. Rather than reiterating individual findings, these domains collectively illustrate that access is not solely determined by policy provision but by how institutional arrangements enable or restrict students' real freedoms.

### 5.1. Admissions-Stage Costs as Capability Constraints Under Tuition-Free Regimes

Admission-stage financial requirements remain a critical barrier despite tuition-free reforms. Consistent with prior studies (Herbaut & Geven, 2019; Salmi, 2020), the findings show that indirect and upfront costs—such as transportation, documentation, and medical requirements—continue to deter participation, particularly among low-income households. Within the Capabilities Approach, these costs function as conversion constraints that limit individuals' ability to transform formal entitlements into real opportunities (Hannon, 2023; Harrison, 2023). This reinforces the argument that affordability must be understood beyond tuition coverage, extending to the full range of financial conditions shaping access at the point of entry.

### 5.2. Process Complexity, Standardization, And the Equity Value of Streamlining

The findings show that process complexity and institutional inconsistency emerge as significant structural barriers embedded in procedural design. Fragmented, multi-step, and paper-based systems

require applicants to possess not only financial resources but also institutional familiarity and access to information. These findings align with broader evidence that administrative complexity can reproduce inequality by privileging those with greater social and informational capital (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). In this context, streamlining admission processes—through standardized requirements, reduced documentation, and digital platforms—constitutes an equity-enhancing intervention that expands applicants' capabilities. This is further supported by emerging system-level initiatives such as the Unified College Admission System (Bordios *et al.*, 2026), which demonstrate the potential of coordinated and data-driven approaches to reduce procedural fragmentation.

### 5.3. Uniform Criteria, Equity-Sensitive Design, And Disability Inclusion

The study highlights the exclusionary effects of uniform admission criteria, particularly standardized examinations and rigid academic thresholds. While these mechanisms are often justified as merit-based, the findings show that they may reproduce inequality when applied across applicants with unequal educational backgrounds. This observation is consistent with critiques of meritocratic systems that overlook structural disparities in preparation and opportunity (Batson, 2023; Agumba, 2025). From a capability's perspective, fairness requires attention to individuals' real opportunities to demonstrate their abilities, rather than reliance on formally equal rules alone (Sen, 1995; Walker, 2005). The need for equity-sensitive mechanisms—including quota-based prioritization and disability accommodations—emerges as a critical dimension of inclusive admissions design.

### 5.4. Governance, Bias, And Information Asymmetries as Institutional Barriers

Governance practices, including transparency, feedback, and access to information, play a central role in shaping access. The findings show that information asymmetries and limited institutional communication constrain both applicants' decision-making and their confidence in pursuing higher education. Applicants with stronger social networks or institutional exposure are better positioned to navigate admission systems, reinforcing patterns of advantage. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the role of informational access and institutional trust in shaping educational participation (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Within the

Capabilities Approach, access to information constitutes a key resource that enables agency; its absence therefore represents a substantive constraint on opportunity.

### 5.5. Analytical Contribution and Policy Implications

These findings reposition admissions as a critical site of institutional practice where equity is actively constructed. By integrating multiple stakeholder perspectives, the study highlights how misalignments between policy intent, institutional processes, and lived experiences shape access outcomes. The analysis extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that inequities persist not only through resource limitations but also through the design and implementation of institutional systems.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for integrated admissions reform. Rather than addressing barriers in isolation, equity-oriented strategies should align financial support, procedural design, selection criteria, and governance mechanisms. Key interventions include early-stage financial assurance, streamlined and standardized application systems, equity-sensitive admission criteria, and transparent, feedback-oriented governance practices. These elements should be understood as mutually reinforcing components of an inclusive admissions framework.

### 5.6. Limitations And Future Research

As a qualitative, regionally grounded study, the findings are not statistically generalizable; however, they provide transferable analytical insights into how institutional practices shape access in contexts where

tuition-free policies coexist with persistent inequalities. Future research could test specific admission interventions (e.g., fee waivers, standardization, digital platforms, quota/priority mechanisms) using comparative and longitudinal designs to assess effects on application rates, admission outcomes, and subsequent retention and completion.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that university admissions are not neutral administrative procedures but institutional practices that actively shape equitable access. While tuition-free policies expand formal opportunities, they do not fully address the structural and procedural barriers that constrain students' entry into higher education.

The findings show that financial burdens at the point of entry, fragmented and complex processes, uniform admission criteria, and governance gaps limit students' real freedoms to apply, qualify, and enroll. Importantly, these barriers operate before formal entry, underscoring the limits of affordability-focused reforms alone.

By reframing admissions as a critical site of institutional responsibility, this study contributes to global scholarship on higher education equity. It highlights the need for integrated, equity-oriented admission systems that align financial support, procedural design, selection criteria, and governance practices. Such an approach shifts the focus from expanding access in formal terms to ensuring meaningful and substantively equitable educational opportunity.

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