


## Bridging the Gap: Equity and Access in Postgraduate Opportunities

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### ABSTRACT

This research investigates the factors that influence equity and access in postgraduate education in the Philippines, with a focus on institutional, economic, geographical, and socio-cultural factors that impede underrepresented groups. A convergent mixed-methods approach was adopted. Quantitative survey research was conducted among 100 postgraduate students enrolled in selected Philippine HEIs, while qualitative semi-structured interviews were done with 20 academic administrators and faculty members in public and private universities. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used for quantitative analysis, and thematic analysis was done for qualitative data. Financial limitations (78%), geographical distribution of programs in urban areas (65%), strict admission requirements (54%), and lack of mentoring assistance (61%) were found to be the most important factors that impede students. Administrators also agreed that there are gaps between policies and practices, delayed stipends, and a lack of mechanisms to monitor institutional equity. Scholarships and flexible learning opportunities are available, but not equally accessible in HEIs. Results show that inequities in postgraduate education in the Philippines are influenced by structural funding constraints, geographical concentration of postgraduate programs in Metro Manila and other major cities, differences between public and private HEIs, and low application of equity-focused CHED policies. These trends echo international findings from the UK and Australia but also reflect unique characteristics associated with the Philippine higher education landscape and the recent free tuition policy changes. This study concludes that to enhance postgraduate equity in the Philippines, there is a need for collective efforts and collaboration among government agencies, HEIs, and the private sector, in addition to financial, academic, and psychosocial support. This study offers mixed-methods empirical insights to postgraduate equity discourse in the Global South by incorporating student and administrative voices and developing an institutional framework for equity strategy in the Philippine higher education context.

### RESUMO

A formação de pós-graduação é fundamental para o desenvolvimento de carreira, a inovação em pesquisa e o desenvolvimento nacional. No entanto, o acesso a essas oportunidades continua desigual, particularmente entre grupos sub-representados e marginalizados. Apesar das tentativas internacionais de promover a inclusão, as disparidades na equidade de acesso e conclusão de cursos de pós-graduação persistem. O presente estudo investiga os determinantes de acesso à educação de pós-graduação e oferece recomendações para melhorar a equidade, em consonância com o Objetivo de Desenvolvimento Sustentável 4 (Educação de Qualidade). Foi utilizada uma metodologia mista, combinando respostas a questionários de 100 estudantes de pós-graduação com entrevistas qualitativas de 20 administradores acadêmicos de instituições de ensino superior selecionadas intencionalmente nas Filipinas. Os resultados indicam que os requisitos financeiros, a localização geográfica, o desconhecimento das oportunidades e as barreiras institucionais limitam consideravelmente o acesso. Embora as universidades ofereçam bolsas de estudo e modalidades flexíveis de aprendizagem, estas são limitadas em escopo e disponibilizadas de forma desigual. Os administradores também mencionaram a dificuldade em equilibrar os recursos institucionais com as diversas necessidades dos estudantes, incluindo profissionais atuantes no mercado de trabalho e estudantes de áreas rurais. A pesquisa enfatiza a importância de políticas inclusivas, assistência financeira direcionada, infraestrutura para o ensino a distância e parcerias com organizações comunitárias para ampliar o acesso. Essa equidade só pode ser alcançada por meio de um esforço conjunto do governo, da academia e da indústria para promover uma aprendizagem sustentável e inclusiva ao longo da vida. Este estudo contribui para o debate sobre justiça educacional e apresenta recomendações práticas para ampliar a participação no ensino superior.

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## Introduction

Equity and access in postgraduate education are the foundation of social mobility, innovation, and inclusive development. World-wide expansion in higher education made access to undergraduate education universal, but postgraduate education continues to be severely tilted in favor of advantaged groups. The study purports to explore systemic inequities that cause access barriers to postgraduate opportunities and make evidence-informed recommendations on how they can be corrected.

Postgraduate study has emerged as a critical force in driving professional development, social mobility, and intellectual production. The holders of postgraduate degrees typically enjoy greater remuneration and higher social class, placing them in a position as leaders in both professional and intellectual fields (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013; Wakeling & Hancock, 2021). Despite the general consensus on the advantages, fair access to postgraduate opportunities continues to be a worldwide issue.

Students from low socio-economic status, minority, regional or isolated, or disability or care experienced backgrounds are vastly underrepresented in postgraduate entries and completions (Pitman et al., 2021; Macmillan et al., 2023). In Australia, equity groups are as little as four times less likely than their counterparts to achieve postgraduate study completion (ACSES, 2020). Correspondingly, in the United Kingdom, a study shows lower postgraduate taught programme progression for disadvantageous background graduates, evidencing the aggregated effect of structural disadvantage (Neill et al., 2024).

The postgraduate education sector in the Philippines is situated in a highly stratified higher education system, which is governed by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). Although the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (Republic Act 10931) has broadened the scope of free tuition in undergraduate studies in public higher education institutions, postgraduate studies are still tuition-driven. In addition, postgraduate programs are also spatially inequitable, as they are geographically concentrated in Metro Manila, CALABARZON, and other regional centers. Public universities offer lower tuition but limited slots, while private HEIs are more prominent in postgraduate education but with higher tuition.

Although there is a growing body of literature on equity in undergraduate education, there is still a lack of research on equity in postgraduate education in the Philippines. This study will fill this research gap.

Institutional stratification adds a further layer of inequity, as students from elite or research-intensive institutions have greater access to elite postgraduate programs, yet others are deterred by lack of funds, lack of mentorship, and discriminatory admissions patterns (Harrison & McCaig, 2023). Breaking down barriers necessitates financial support, but also

contextual admissions, bridge programs, and selective mentorship opportunities in support of inclusion. Through a focus on systemic barriers and reflective implementation, this paper aims to assist in creating a more inclusive model of postgraduate education—an education sector's greater responsibility that supports access, diversity, and opportunities for all.

Research Objectives: To determine the major issues in equity in postgraduate education. To examine how institutional, economic, and social issues affect postgraduate access. To analyze effective ways in promoting postgraduate admissions inclusion and student success.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### ***Concept of Equity in Higher Education***

Equity in education is described as equality of access, participation, and results irrespective of social and personal factors. According to Espinoza (2007), equity is differentiated from equality in that equity needs compensatory actions to overcome structural disadvantages. In the same way, Ainscow (2020) argues that a more inclusive education system is one that eliminates obstacles to the full participation of marginalized students. Moreover, Darling-Hammond (2010) highlights that equity in education is imperative for social order and economic growth in that inequitable access to learning opportunities leads to social stratification.

### ***Global Trends in Postgraduate Access***

International studies have repeatedly shown the existence of disparities in postgraduate education among various social strata. Wakeling and Hancock (2021) have revealed that there are systematic disparities in the patterns of postgraduate enrollment among various countries, with students from advantaged backgrounds being overrepresented. Pitman et al. (2021) have also found the same in Australia, indicating that equity students are significantly less likely to finish postgraduate courses. In the United Kingdom, Neill, Christie, and Burke (2024) have found that the progression rate of graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds is lower, thus confirming that structural disparities tend to accumulate along the educational trajectory.

Although similar patterns of stratification have been found in the UK and Australia (Wakeling & Hancock, 2021; Pitman et al., 2021), the Philippine scenario is unique in the sense that there is a regional concentration of programs, an uneven implementation of CHED policies, and the limited application of free tuition reforms to postgraduate levels.

### ***Institutional Barriers to Participation***

Institutional frameworks are critical in determining postgraduate study opportunities. Marginson (2016) states that elite higher education frameworks tend to perpetuate social stratification since elite institutions retain selective entry requirements. Harrison and McCaig

(2023) highlight that students from elite institutions have better opportunities to pursue postgraduate research studies based on institutional prestige, networking, and availability of resources. Bowl (2018) further contends that stratified frameworks tend to perpetuate inequality by favoring students with better academic capital. These arguments imply that entry policies that focus heavily on academic performance might inadvertently lock out deserving students from less advantaged backgrounds.

### ***Financial Constraints and Access***

Financial constraints are still the most widely reported hindrance to postgraduate education. Salmi (2019) found financial capability to be the most reliable predictor of engagement in higher education among fifty countries. OECD (2019) also found that lack of funding and delayed stipends are among the reasons for dropping out of postgraduate students. UNESCO (2021) added that tuition rates, research, and living expenses are major concerns for students from low-income families, making it difficult for them to pursue postgraduate education. In the Philippine setting, Manzano and Atilano (2020) found that despite the government's initiative for free college education, there are still hidden costs in pursuing postgraduate education.

### ***Academic Preparation and Mentoring Support***

Academic readiness and mentoring support are important factors in postgraduate success. Tinto (2017) emphasizes that the integration of students into academic communities is a critical factor for the persistence of students, especially those who are new to academic settings. Thomas (2012) also emphasizes that support systems can improve student engagement and success. Macmillan, Britton, and Vignoles (2023) have identified that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less prepared for research and lack professional networks, making them less competitive in postgraduate admissions.

### ***Cultural and Social Factors***

Social and cultural issues also influence postgraduate participation. Lee and Rice (2007) found that minority and international students are often victims of discrimination and cultural alienation in higher education institutions. Reay (2018) suggests that working-class students experience a sense of exclusion because of disparities in cultural capital and academic aspirations. Gender roles, language, and family commitments also influence participation, especially for women and first-generation students. Connell (2019) suggests that universities need to address these social issues to create an inclusive learning environment for students.

### ***Delimitations of the Study***

The study is limited to 6 HEIs in Luzon, of which 3 are public and 3 are private HEIs offering master's and doctoral degrees. The selection of HEIs was done from Metro Manila and from the semi-urban areas of the provinces. The study was conducted on programs offered in

Education, Business, Social Sciences, and some STEM fields. The study employed non-probability purposive sampling; hence, the results are not generalizable to all HEIs in the Philippines but offer analytical insights.

## **Methodology**

The research made use of a mixed-methods study design, quantitative and qualitative in combination, in order to obtain a holistic understanding of equity and access in postgraduate opportunities. National enrolment data provided by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), the Department of Education (DepEd), and the National Statistics Office (NSO) were used as quantitative data, and policy papers on postgraduate education were utilized as secondary data in the case of contextual analysis. 20 semi-structured interviews were undertaken as a supplement, with major stakeholders. The quantitative study included 100 postgraduate students (60 from public HEIs and 40 from private HEIs). Of these, 68 were from urban HEIs, and 32 were from regional/provincial HEIs. The criteria for participation were: (1) currently enrolled in a master's or doctoral program, (2) completed at least one semester, and (3) willing to participate.

The qualitative study included 20 administrators/faculty members (12 from public HEIs and 8 from private HEIs) who held positions in graduate studies offices, admissions, or academic leadership.

Participants were recruited through institutional email invitations and coordination with graduate school offices.

### ***Research Instruments***

The survey instrument for students was developed anew using frameworks from OECD (2019), UNESCO (2021), and Wakeling & Hancock (2021). The survey instrument consisted of Likert-type and multiple-choice questions. Example question:

“How far has financial cost influenced your choice to undertake or continue postgraduate study?” (1 = Not at all to 5 = Very significant)

The interview schedule was developed from postgraduate access studies in the UK and Australia and modified to suit Philippine HEIs. The survey instruments were pilot-tested with 10 postgraduate students for face and content validity. Only minor changes were introduced before full administration.

### ***Research Environment***

The study was undertaken in selected higher education institutions in the Philippines. These institutions were selected to represent different settings in terms of governance, resource availability, and admission processes. The selection of the actual setting of higher education institutions allowed the study to reflect realistic conditions within institutions that affect access to postgraduate education.

### ***Data Gathering Procedures***

Data gathering was done in two stages. The first stage involved the collection of data from national educational databases to establish trends of participation in postgraduate programs. The second stage entailed the use of semi-structured interviews to gather data from selected participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and validated to ensure the accuracy of the information gathered.

### ***Data Analysis***

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and inequalities in postgraduate participation. The qualitative data was analyzed using coding and thematic analysis with the aid of specialized software. The themes were identified based on recurring patterns in the responses of the participants, allowing for the interpretation of perceptions and experiences.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The ethical standards were adhered to in the study. The participants were required to give their consent before taking part in the study. They were also guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. The data was stored in a safe and only used for research purposes. The participants were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. This was to ensure that the ethical standards were followed in the study among human

### **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 points out that the most critical hindrance to equal access in postgraduate education is still financial, with students finding it hard to fund tuition, research, and living expenses, often resorting to disruptions in study—reflecting international evidence on how financial capacity is key to access and persistence in higher education. Geographic disparities exacerbate the problem, as rural students incur relocation costs and sparse local opportunities, and institutional and cultural barriers like inflexible admission standards, poor mentoring, low academic and psychosocial support, and underrepresentation of underclass groups further discourage access. In addition, information gaps and dependence on informal networks constrain postgraduate awareness, underlining the urgency for broad financial support, more robust institutional services, equitable policies, and proactive outreach to attain equity in postgraduate education.

**Table 1.***Major Barriers to Equity in Postgraduate Education – Student Responses (n=20)*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Theme</b>
S 1, 2, 3, 17	<p>“I cannot afford tuition and living expenses without scholarships.”</p> <p>“I had to stop because I could not pay for books and research materials.”</p> <p>“Even with part-time work, the tuition fees are too high.”</p> <p>“I had to pause my studies because the stipend came late.”</p>	Financial Constraints
S 4, 5	<p>“Opportunities are concentrated in urban universities; students from provinces are left behind.”</p> <p>“I need to relocate to study, but housing and transport costs are overwhelming.”</p>	Geographic and Regional Inequalities
S 6, 7,	<p>“Entrance exams favor students from elite schools.”</p> <p>“The GPA requirement makes it difficult for working students like me.”</p>	Admission Policies & Rigid Criteria
S 8, 9	<p>“First-generation students struggle because they have no guidance.”</p> <p>“I was not prepared for research writing since my undergrad didn’t emphasize it.”</p>	Lack of Mentoring and Academic Preparation
S 10, 11, 16, 18	<p>“Indigenous students feel isolated and their research interests are undervalued.”</p> <p>“As a woman with family responsibilities, I feel excluded from opportunities.”</p> <p>“The language of instruction makes it harder for students from non-English backgrounds.”</p> <p>“Faculty don’t understand the challenges of students from working-class families.”</p>	Cultural and Social Barriers
S 12, 13, 19	<p>“We don’t have a postgraduate office to guide students.”</p> <p>“There’s no mental health support for postgraduate students.”</p> <p>“We lack writing workshops that can help us cope with research demands.”</p>	Limited Institutional Support Services
S 14, 15, 20	<p>“I only learned about postgraduate opportunities by chance.”</p> <p>“In my province, there are no campaigns about scholarships or graduate programs.”</p>	Information and Awareness Gaps

Table 2 indicates that monetary and spatial impediments are still the overarching challenges to postgraduate equity because students from poor backgrounds and from rural locations tend to drop out because of high fees, relocation, and fieldwork expenses, validating global research that systemic inequities constrict access rather than capacity. Administrators further pinpointed institutional and policy problems like inflexible admission requirements, lack of bridging and mentoring schemes, inadequate support services, and scarcity of equity-oriented policies, which cumulatively disadvantage non-traditional and marginalized students. Such findings reinforce the long-standing "policy-practice gap" and signal the imperative for

universities to go beyond symbolic policy to concerted, inclusive interventions that focus on both structural and cultural obstacles to postgraduate entry and achievement.

**Table 2.**

*Major Barriers to Equity in Postgraduate Education – Administrator/Faculty Responses  
(n=20)*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Administrator 1, 2, 3	<p>“Many applicants from rural areas withdraw due to high costs.”</p> <p>“Students often fail to continue because they cannot afford fieldwork expenses.”</p> <p>“Even when admitted, students drop out due to lack of stipends.”</p>	Financial Constraints
Administrator 4, 5	<p>“Distance and relocation discourage rural candidates.”</p> <p>“Postgraduate programs are concentrated in major cities only.”</p>	Admission Policies & Rigid Criteria
Faculty 1, 2	<p>“Our reliance on GPA overlooks potential from non-traditional learners.”</p>	
Administrator 6 Faculty 3	<p>“The absence of bridge programs creates a gap in readiness.”</p> <p>“Students often lack research skills when they enter postgraduate programs.”</p>	Lack of Mentoring and Academic Preparation
Faculty Administrator 7	<p>“There is little sensitivity to cultural differences in supervision.”</p> <p>“Minority students feel their perspectives are marginalized in research topics.”</p>	Cultural and Social Barriers
Administrator 8, 9	<p>“Support for mental health and writing is very minimal.”</p> <p>“Our postgraduate office has no capacity to provide career counseling.”</p>	Limited Institutional Support Services
Administrator Faculty 5, 6, 8	<p>“There are no clear equity policies in postgraduate admissions.”</p> <p>“Monitoring systems don’t track which groups are left behind.”</p> <p>“Policies exist on paper but lack implementation.”</p> <p>“There is insufficient institutional training on handling equity challenges.”</p>	Policy and Accountability Gaps
Administrator Faculty 7	<p>“Awareness campaigns about postgraduate scholarships are weak.”</p> <p>“Many students are unaware of the requirements until the last minute.”</p>	Information and Awareness Gaps
Administrator 12	<p>“Our faculty lack training in mentoring diverse learners.”</p>	Lack of Mentoring and Academic Preparation

Table 3 demonstrates that postgraduate equity is most severely constrained by economic, institutional, and social barriers, with cost pressures—tuition fees, moving expenses, and research expenses—compelling numerous students to postpone or abandon studies, while postponed stipends and expensive fieldwork further disadvantage low-income

and rural learners. Institutional barriers, such as centralized urban-based programs, inflexible admissions requirements, poor support services, and poorly enforced equity policies, reinforce systemic inequities, with disproportionate impact on non-traditional and first-generation students. Social and cultural barriers like family responsibilities, language difficulties, and marginalization of minority voices reaffirm these disadvantages and restrict participation, especially among women and marginalized groups. Students and faculty alike highlighted the lack of good mentoring and psychosocial assistance, which otherwise would enhance retention and achievement. Generally, the research indicates economic adversity is still the most critical challenge, but institutional rigidity and cultural insensitivity exacerbate inequities, and efforts to both intervene financially and structurally in admissions, program provision, faculty development, and student support systems are necessary to attain true equity in postgraduate education.

**Table 3.**

*Institutional, Economic, and Social Factors Influencing Access to Postgraduate Education – Student Responses (n = 20)*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Student 1	“The tuition fees are too high; without a scholarship, I cannot continue.”	Economic – Financial Burden
Student 2	“Relocating to Manila is costly; I cannot afford housing and transportation.”	Economic & Geographic Inequalities
Student 3	“Postgraduate programs are concentrated in big cities, excluding students in rural provinces.”	Institutional – Centralized Access
Student 4	“Application requirements are complicated and favor those from elite universities.”	Institutional – Admission Policies
Student 5	“There is no postgraduate support office in our school to guide us.”	Institutional – Lack of Support Services
Student 6	“As a first-generation student, I don’t have anyone to guide me.”	Social – First-Generation Barriers
Student 7	“I had to stop my studies because I needed to work for my family.”	Economic – Work-Study Conflict
Student 8	“As a mother, the lack of flexible schedules makes it hard to continue.”	Social – Gender & Family Roles
Student 9	“Our indigenous perspectives are not respected in research.”	Social – Cultural Exclusion
Student 10	“Deadlines for scholarships are not well advertised in rural areas.”	Institutional – Information Gaps
Student 11	“Even with part-time jobs, the tuition and research costs are too high.”	Economic – Financial Strain

Participants	Responses	Theme
Student 12	“Students from public schools are disadvantaged in research preparation.”	Institutional – Academic Preparation Inequality
Student 13	“Scholarship stipends arrive late, which forces many to drop out.”	Economic – Financial System Issues
Student 14	“I feel discriminated against because I come from a small provincial school.”	Social – Regional Bias
Student 15	“The language of instruction makes it difficult for non-English speakers.”	Social – Language Barriers
Student 16	“We don’t have access to mental health services for stress management.”	Institutional – Support Service Deficit
Student 17	“Scholarship opportunities are focused on STEM; other fields are ignored.”	Institutional – Unequal Resource Distribution
Student 18	“There are no mentoring programs to help students succeed.”	Social – Lack of Mentorship
Student 19, 20	“Policies mention equity but are not felt in actual implementation.”	Institutional – Policy-Practice Gap

**Table 4.**

*Institutional, Economic, and Social Factors Influencing Access to Postgraduate Education – Administrator/Faculty Responses (n = 20)*

Participants	Responses	Theme
Administrator 1,2	“Many applicants from rural areas withdraw due to high costs.” “Even when admitted, students drop out because stipends are delayed.”	Economic – Financial Burden
Administrator 3	“Fieldwork expenses are too much for many students to bear.”	Economic – Research Cost Barriers
Faculty 1	“Strict GPA requirements exclude capable students from disadvantaged schools.”	Institutional – Admission Policies
Faculty 2	“Our admissions rely heavily on test scores, ignoring other competencies.”	Institutional – Rigid Selection Criteria
Administrator 4	“Programs are concentrated in major cities; rural students are excluded.”	Institutional – Centralized Access
Administrator 5	“There is no strong monitoring system to check equity in admissions.”	Institutional – Policy & Accountability Gaps
Faculty 3	“Students from private schools are more prepared in research than public school graduates.”	Institutional – Academic Preparation Inequality
Faculty 4	“Minority students feel isolated; their research interests are undervalued.”	Social – Cultural Exclusion
Faculty 5	“Women scholars face additional pressures balancing family and studies.”	Social – Gender & Family Roles
Administrator 6	“Our postgraduate office lacks capacity for counseling and guidance.”	Institutional – Lack of Support Services
Administrator 7	“Equity is mentioned in policies but not translated into practice.”	Institutional – Policy-Practice Gap

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Faculty 6	“Language barriers make postgraduate study difficult for some groups.”	Social – Language Barriers
Faculty 7	“There are no mentorship programs for first-generation learners.”	Social – Lack of Mentorship
Administrator 8	“Mental health support for postgraduate students is very minimal.”	Institutional – Support Service Deficit
Administrator 9	“Scholarship announcements are poorly disseminated, especially in provinces.”	Institutional – Awareness Gaps
Faculty 8	“Equity training for faculty is insufficient.”	Institutional – Staff Development Gap
Administrator 10	“Scholarship allocation is skewed toward STEM courses.”	Institutional – Unequal Resource Distribution
Faculty 9	“Students from rural areas face discrimination during selection.”	Social – Regional Bias
Administrator 11	“Equity is still treated as optional, not a central value in admissions.”	

Table 5 identifies seven major strategies for promoting inclusivity in graduate education: funding, integrative admissions, mentoring and academic support, culturally responsive supervising, graduate support offices, outreach and community engagement, and equity audits. Financial support, such as scholarships and grants, was highlighted as the most critical action to minimize dropouts and increase access for disadvantaged groups, while holistic admission taking into account professional experience and research potential enhance applicant diversity without compromising academic quality.

Mentorship programs, peer support, and bridge courses were seen as key to retention, in addition to culturally responsive supervision that affirms students' identities and research settings. Institutions with specialized postgraduate support offices that provide career counseling, writing centers, and mental health facilities indicated improved student outcomes, with outreach programs indicated as effective in sensitizing rural and marginalized communities when accompanied by ongoing support. Administrators also underscored the need for equity audits and monitoring systems to ensure inclusivity policies are indeed translated into relevant and accountable action.

Table 5 presents analysis of responses to the research question, to examine effective strategies that foster inclusivity in postgraduate admissions and student success in table 5 identified seven dominant themes: financial support, holistic admissions, mentoring and academic support, culturally responsive supervision, postgraduate support offices, outreach and community engagement, and equity audits and policy enforcement.

**Table 5.***Effective Strategies for Inclusivity in Postgraduate Admissions and Success*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Frequency of Mentions</b>
Holistic Approaches	“We now consider research potential and community engagement, not just exam scores.” (Administrator) “I was admitted because my work experience was valued as much as my grades.” (Student)	14
Scholarship and Financial Support	“Without the scholarship, I would not be able to pursue postgraduate studies.” (Student) “Tuition waivers and grants helped students from low-income families succeed.” (Administrator)	18
Mentoring and Academic Support Programs	“Peer mentoring made me feel I belonged and could handle the workload.” (Student) “Bridge courses helped students transition to research expectations.” (Faculty)	15
Culturally Responsive Supervision	“My supervisor respects my indigenous background and research focus.” (Student) “We encourage faculty to adapt supervision to students’ contexts.” (Administrator)	10
Dedicated Postgraduate Support Offices	“Our postgraduate office provides writing workshops and counseling services.” (Administrator) “I used the career counseling service to prepare for job opportunities.” (Student)	12
Outreach and Community Engagement	“We hold postgraduate awareness sessions in rural schools.” (Administrator) “I only learned about this program through community outreach.” (Student)	9
Equity Audits and Policy Enforcement	“The equity audits identified barriers we hadn’t seen before.” (Administrator) “Policies on diversity made us feel more welcome.” (Student)	7

Financial assistance was the most widely cited strategy. All respondents highlighted scholarships, waivers of tuition, and grants as vital in ensuring postgraduate studies are made available to economically disadvantaged and marginalized students. The evidence supports Salmi (2019) and UNESCO (2021), who contend that financial constraints are the most urgent and major determinant of higher education access across the world. Needs-based financial support has been proven to minimize dropouts and increase participation among underrepresented student groups (OECD, 2019).

Another continuing theme was the transition towards holistic admissions practices. Students and administrators alike reported that taking into account professional experience, research promise, and community participation—over GPA and test scores—permitted more varied applicants into postgraduate programs. This verifies Marginson's (2016) appeal for

admissions reform to identify a wider range of merit. Research further indicates that comprehensive evaluation not only promotes inclusiveness but also maintains academic standards by enrolling students with excellent potential for research and innovation (UNESCO, 2021).

Structured mentorship programs, peer support groups, and bridge courses were also commonly mentioned as useful strategies. Such mechanisms offer both psychosocial and academic support, allowing first-generation and underrepresented students to navigate the challenges of postgraduate studies. Tinto's (2017) student persistence model identifies integration into academic and social communities within institutions as essential to retention. Likewise, Thomas (2012) identifies that student support designed specifically for them is key to fostering equity in higher education outcomes.

Participants also identified the importance of culturally responsive supervision, through which faculty recognize and respect students' cultural identities, research areas, and languages. This practice promotes belonging and lessens feelings of marginalization, which have been extensively documented challenges for minority and international students (Lee & Rice, 2007). Including multiple cultural contexts in supervision, faculty are able to increase student engagement and research utility. Special postgraduate support offices were recognized as institutional instruments that bring together services like career guidance, writing centers, and mental health services. Higher retention rates were noted in institutions with such support structures, reported by administrators. This observation aligns with OECD (2019) suggestions that higher education institutions invest in equity-focused, centralized student services to realize policy promises into tangible results.

A few respondents emphasized the value of outreach programs for rural, indigenous, and marginalized communities. Outreach efforts create awareness of postgraduate possibilities and broaden the pipeline of potential applicants. Literature warns that outreach is not enough if it is not accompanied by long-term financial and academic investment (UNESCO, 2021). With scholarships and mentoring, outreach is a robust tool to meet the goal of inclusivity throughout the student journey.

Last but not least, although less commonly cited by students, administrators emphasized the significance of equity audits and institutional monitoring policies in promoting accountability. Routine audits enable detection of hidden barriers in admission, retention, and completion procedures. OECD (2019) emphasizes the significance of disaggregated data systems to monitor progress along gender, socio-economic status, and regional lines, such that equity policies are not symbolic but enacted effectively.

The results validate that financial limitations continue to be the most prominent obstacle to postgraduate education, in line with international studies that identify cost as the most important factor in postgraduate participation and retention. Nevertheless, the Philippine situation indicates unique structural features that exacerbate these financial

challenges. First, postgraduate courses are generally located in the Metro Manila area and a few major urban centers, generating geographical disparities that particularly target students from outside metropolitan areas who face relocation and living costs. Second, although the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act has extended free tuition to undergraduate students in public universities, this policy has very limited relevance to graduate education, making postgraduate courses largely tuition-driven. Third, substantial public-private disparities continue, with public universities charging lower tuition but limited enrollment and private universities dominating postgraduate education with higher tuition and inadequate student support services. Finally, equity monitoring in institutions is still very weak, with many universities failing to track marginalized groups in admission, retention, and completion. Unlike many Global North countries that have more centralized postgraduate funding and equity frameworks, equity in Philippine postgraduate education is still institution-dependent, leading to disparities in the implementation of equity initiatives.

This research work has several key contributions to the body of knowledge. Firstly, it combines both student and administrative perspectives in one institutional study, giving a more complete view of the issues. Secondly, it provides mixed-methods empirical research findings from a Global South setting, where postgraduate equity issues have been relatively uninvestigated compared to the debates on undergraduate equity. Thirdly, it develops an integrated institutional equity strategy framework that links financial support, holistic admissions reform, mentoring systems, culturally responsive supervision, and governance accountability mechanisms. All these areas of contribution can help to enhance the global discourse on postgraduate equity issues.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This research tackled its objectives by pointing out the important economic, institutional, and socio-cultural structural barriers that hinder postgraduate equity in selected Philippine HEIs. Financial limitations and geographical distribution were found to be the most prominent structural barriers, while inflexible admission procedures and lack of mentoring were factors in persistence.

The results clearly indicate that to attain postgraduate equity in the Philippines, a collective effort is needed among CHED, HEIs, and the private sector through the use of financial support, holistic admission reforms, mentoring programs, and institutional accountability.

Future research studies may include the longitudinal tracking of postgraduate cohorts, regional comparisons across Philippine islands, and in-depth research among particular marginalized groups such as indigenous students, working mothers, and first-generation students.

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