

Graduate Students' Perceived Contribution of Scholarship Grants to Academic Success

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ABSTRACT

To improve the production of high-level human resources that can spearhead efforts to attain national development, many countries, including the Philippines, have provided scholarship grants to interested professionals for them to pursue advanced degrees. This study aimed to find out graduate students' perceived contribution of scholarship grants to their academic success. We gathered data through a survey of 46 scholars who pursued graduate studies at the Visayas State University. To supplement the survey data, we conducted a focus group discussion with seven scholars who were not among the survey respondents. Results showed that participants considered their scholarship grants as contributors to their academic success. These grants motivated them to perform well academically and finish their respective degrees within the time allotted for their study. The scholarship grants provided funds for their school and living expenses, thus encouraging them to complete their degrees on time. Since their scholarships facilitated their completion of graduate degrees, they said it also contributed to their career development. Their scholarship also enabled them to improve their knowledge and skills, opened better career opportunities, and boost their self-confidence to apply for jobs with higher compensation. They also considered their scholarship as a plus factor in their job applications.

Keywords: academic persistence, academic success, financial support, graduate studies, scholarship programs

INTRODUCTION

Graduate education is essential in nation-building. According to the Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service [CGSETS] (2010), graduate education produces critical thinkers and innovators that are needed to facilitate national development. The Council of Graduate Schools [CGS] (2008) also acknowledged that graduate education is strongly associated, not only with knowledge production, but also with economic and social improvement. In the Philippines, graduate education plays an important role in producing industry

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leaders and improving the professional capacity of university faculty to address the problem of insufficient number of faculty members with a high level of expertise (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] & Nomura Research Institute [NR1] 2015).

Despite the demand for human resources with postgraduate education, only a few graduates of bachelor's degrees proceed to graduate school, and many graduate students, particularly those pursuing the doctor of philosophy degrees, fail to complete their degrees due to financial difficulties (CGSETS 2010). To satisfy the demand for human resources with advanced education, many countries in Southeast Asia have invested much to "expand their provision for graduate education" (Chapman & Chien 2015).

In the Philippines, government agencies and institutions have provided scholarships for graduate students to hasten the production of high-level human resources to contribute to the country's global competitiveness and economic development. The Commission on Higher Education-Faculty Development Program (CHED-FDP), for instance, was implemented to "upgrade qualifications of higher education faculty to masters and doctorate degree levels and to enhance faculty performance," which could eventually contribute to better student learning. The Department of Science and Technology (DOST) Science and Technology Institute (SEI), on the other hand, offers several programs for undergraduate and graduate students to boost science and technology human resource development in the country. Privileges for scholars include tuition and other school fees, monthly stipend, and thesis support (Halili 2014).

While these scholarship programs for postgraduate education have been implemented for several years already, their contribution to the grantees' academic success remains unclear.

The academic success of students is commonly measured by the student's persistence (i.e., continued enrollment in the institution), progression (i.e., successful accrual of credit hours), and timely graduation (Ganem & Manasse, 2011). Many studies show that the availability of financial aid and scholarship grants to college students facilitate student success (Cabrera, Nora & Castañeda, 1992). These consist of both need-based and merit-based assistance that may come in the form of grants, loans, free tuition, thesis grants, and scholarships. According to Robins et al (2004), financial aid and scholarships could directly affect students' academic motivation. The student could be directly motivated to persist and perform well, knowing that good academic performance is required to maintain his/her scholarship.

Although several studies have suggested that financial aid positively contribute to persistence, other studies have shown either no effect (Braunstein, McGrath & Pescatrice 2001) or negative effects (St. John & Starkey 1995). Alon (2007; 2005) found that low-income family status is negatively related to persistence and graduation, while the amount of financial aid is positively related to persistence and graduation. Grants and scholarships had more pronounced effects on persistence and graduation compared to loans.

As in other universities, graduate and undergraduate students at the Visayas State University (VSU) enjoy various financial assistance and scholarships. For graduate students, those enrolled in agriculture, forestry, food science, and other allied fields have full scholarships and thesis grants from various agencies.

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At this time, we lack understanding of the graduate students' perceived contributions of financial assistance and scholarship to their academic success. Most published studies have focused on college students only. Thus, this study aimed to describe the graduate students' perceived contributions of scholarship to their academic success.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sampling Procedure

A survey and focus group discussion were conducted to gather the data. We identified the survey respondents by getting a list of graduate students from the Office of the Dean of Graduate School (ODGS). These students pursued graduate degree programs in VSU through a scholarship grant or financial aid. Fifty scholars were randomly chosen to become respondents. This sample size is already reasonable since the purpose of this study was to explore the scholars' perceptions about the contribution of scholarship to their academic success. According to Johanson and Brooks (2010), a sample size of "30 representative participants from the population of interest" is a reasonable minimum recommendation if the research is a pilot study or a preliminary survey.

Of the 50 selected respondents, only 46 returned the questionnaire. Thus, this paper presents information gathered from 46 respondents. A focus group discussion was also conducted at the VSU campus in Baybay City, Leyte to supplement the survey data. The participants included seven scholars who were not part of the survey.

Data Collection

For the survey, we prepared a self-administered questionnaire to facilitate data gathering. It was designed to elicit data on the respondents' socio-demographic and employment profiles, degree program pursued, scholarship/financial aid enjoyed, reasons for pursuing graduate education, and perceived contributions of scholarship to academic success.

Before the actual survey, we pretested the questionnaire on five graduate students having similar characteristics with the target respondents. We used the pretest results to improve the questionnaire. To facilitate sending of the questionnaire to graduates who had active email addresses or were active in social media sites, we converted the questionnaire into a Google form and sent it to the selected respondents. Printed copies were also administered personally by the research assistant to respondents living near the university.

For the FGD, we prepared a discussion guide to facilitate data collection. It contained open-ended questions on the participants' reasons for pursuing graduate education, the perceived contribution of their scholarships to their academic performance, degree completion, and career development. To capture the important points discussed during the FGD, the researchers recorded the discussion using a digital recorder, with the FGD participants' consent.

Data Analysis

Data gathered from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, totals, and percentages. On the other hand, the qualitative data gathered through the open-ended questions in the survey questionnaire and the FGD were analyzed through thematic analysis and presented using narrative descriptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Description of the Survey Respondents

Based on the age categorization of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA n.d.), more than half of the survey respondents (52.2%) were at their prime working age (25 to 54 years old), while the remaining 47.8% were at their early working age (15 to 24 years old). Nearly three-fourths (73.9%) were female, and more than three-fourths (78.3%) were single. There were ten respondents (21.7%) who were married (Table 1).

A little more than three-fifths (60.9%) of the respondents were employed (Table 1) who went on study leave to pursue graduate education. The remaining two-fifths (39.1%) were still unemployed because they were able to get scholarships after finishing their bachelor's degree, so they decided to proceed to graduate studies as full-time students. Of those who were employed, majority (82.1%) held academic positions. More than half of them (57.1%) had permanent positions and they decided to pursue graduate education for promotion purposes.

A great majority of the respondents (93.5%) were taking up Master of Science degrees. Only three (6.5%) were taking up doctoral degrees (Table 1). Most of the Master of Science respondents specialized in Food Science and Technology (26.1%), Animal Science (21.7%), Soil Science (17.4%), and Agronomy (10.9%). These fields of specialization were among those covered by the scholarships provided by the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

Nearly three-fourths of the respondents (74%) were recipients of the scholarship grant under the DOST's Accelerated Science and Technology Human Resource Development Program (ASTHRDP) (Table 2). The others were recipients of the CHED K to 12 scholarship program (20%), VSU Graduate Teaching Assistantship (4%), and VSU Fellowship (2%). Majority (85%) enjoyed full scholarship benefits, including free tuition and other school fees, living allowance/stipend, book allowance, and thesis support. The DOST scholars added that they also had other privileges such as financial support for their attendance to DOST conventions, research paper presentations, travel allowance, and career incentive program.

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Table 1. Profile of the survey respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percent
<i>A. Socio-demographic characteristics</i>		
Age		
Early working age (15 – 24 years old)	22	47.8
Prime working age (25 to 54 years old)	24	52.2
TOTAL	46	100.0
Sex		
Female	34	73.9
Male	12	26.1
TOTAL	46	100.0
Civil status		
Single	36	78.3
Married	10	21.7
TOTAL	46	100.0
<i>B. Employment profile</i>		
Employment status (n = 46)		
Employed	28	60.9
Not employed	18	39.1
TOTAL	46	100.0
Job classification (n = 28)		
Academic position	23	82.1
Research/extension	4	14.3
Administrative position	1	3.6
TOTAL	28	100.0
Status of appointment (n = 28)		
Permanent	16	57.1
Contractual	8	28.6
Regular temporary	4	14.3
TOTAL	28	100.0
<i>C. Degree program pursued</i>		
Degree pursued in VSU		
Master of Science	43	93.5
Doctor of Philosophy	3	6.5
TOTAL	46	100.0
Major field of specialization		
Food Science and Technology	12	26.1
Animal Science	10	21.7
Soil Science	8	17.4
Agronomy	5	10.9
Development Communication	3	6.5
Horticulture	2	4.3
Others (Agricultural Extension, English, Language Teaching, Entomology, Plant Protection, Tropical Ecology)	6	13.2
TOTAL	46	100.0

Table 2. Scholarships enjoyed by the scholar-respondents

Variables	Frequency (n = 46)	Percent
Type of Scholarship		
ASTHRDP-DOST	34	74
CHED K to12	9	20
VSU Graduate Teaching Assistantship	2	4
VSU Fellowship	1	2
TOTAL	46	100
Scholarship benefits		
Full benefits (free tuition and other school fees, book allowance, stipend and thesis support)	41	85
Stipend only	2	4
Free tuition only	2	4
Thesis Grant	1	2
TOTAL	46	100

The FGD participants

Seven scholars, who were not among the survey respondents, participated in the FGD held at the university's main campus. All of them were middle-aged (between 22 to 45 years old). Four were males and three were females. Three of them were married and the remaining four were single. All of them were full-time students. One took up PhD in Animal Science and six were pursuing master's degrees – two majored in Language Teaching, and one majored in Animal Science, Plant Protection, Food Science and Technology, and Soil Science each. Three were recipients of the CHED K + 12 scholarship, and the other four were scholars of DOST-ASTHRDP. All of them enjoyed full scholarship benefits.

Reasons for pursuing graduate education

The survey respondents had several reasons for pursuing graduate education. These reasons fell under three categories. The most common reason was their desire for professional development. These included the need to further hone their knowledge and skills in their chosen field of specialization (72%), to get job promotion (28%), to satisfy professional goals (26%), to get a good job and be financially successful (11%), and to pursue a career that they love (11%) (Table 3). These results imply that most of the respondents in this study pursued graduate studies to attain professional growth.

The results of the FGD supported this survey finding. According to the FGD participants, they decided to pursue graduate education because they wanted to grow professionally. A male FGD participant who pursued a PhD degree explained, "I am a college teacher, so I want to further hone my skills, especially in doing research, so that I will be able to better guide my students." A female participant pointed out her desire to get a regular item after pursuing graduate studies. She said, "I want to get a regular item in our university, so I decided to pursue my masters here in VSU. In our school, we cannot get a regular item if we don't have an MS [degree]."

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These results are similar to the findings of some researchers showing that academic improvement and professional development or career advancement are among the graduate students' prevailing reasons for pursuing graduate education (Incikabi, Pektas, Ozgelen & Kurnaz 2013; Almeda 2014; London et al 2014).

Table 3. Respondents' reasons for pursuing graduate education

Category	Answers*	Frequency (n=46)	Percent
Professional development	To further hone my knowledge and skills in my chosen field of specialization	33	72
	To get a job promotion	13	28
	To satisfy professional goal	12	26
	To get a good job and be financially successful	5	11
	To pursue a career that I love	5	11
Availability of scholarships	There is an available scholarship to support graduate studies	30	65
Parental advice	I just followed the advice of my parents	4	9

*multiple responses

Another reason for pursuing graduate education cited by nearly two-thirds (65%) of the survey respondents (Table 3) and mentioned by the FGD participants was the availability of scholarship grants. An FGD participant explained that he finally decided to pursue a master's degree when he obtained a scholarship grant that could support his graduate education. He said, "*Kun wala pa ang scholarship, dili unta ko maka MS kay wala ma'y mogasto sa akong pag-eskuwela*" (Had it not been for the scholarship grant, I would not have been able to pursue master's studies because nobody would support my graduate education.) This result suggests that the availability of a scholarship grant could motivate students and increase their access to graduate education. This result is similar to the findings of Cosentino, Fortson, Liuzzi, Harris, and Blair (2019), which showed that offering scholarships is an effective way to improve access to university studies, especially among vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underserved youth.

There were also four survey respondents (9%) who said they pursued graduate education because they followed their parents' advice. This suggests that the respondents' significant others also influence their decision to pursue graduate education. This result conforms to the findings of Incikabi, Pektas, Ozgelen, and Kurnaz (2013) that some external factors, including encouragement of their college teachers, family members, and peers, also motivate students to pursue graduate education.

Perceived contribution of scholarship to academic success

In this study, academic success is described in terms of academic performance, degree completion, and career development. The data were collected from survey questionnaire and focus group discussion.

Contribution to good academic performance. All of the scholar-respondents said that their scholarships have helped them attain good academic performance (Table 4). All of them reasoned that their scholarship encouraged

them to study well in order to attain the scholarship's grade requirement. This survey's finding was confirmed by the FGD participants who said that their scholarship motivated or pressured them to study well to maintain their scholarship's grade requirement. As explained by one FGD participant,

“Naniguro mi kay na-pressure man mi pag-maintain gyud sa amo grado. Mauwaw sad mi ma'am uy nga dili maka-maintain sa grado unya dili na ma-scholar.” (We tried hard because we felt pressured to maintain a [good] grade. It's embarrassing if we could not maintain our grade and then we would lose our scholarship.)

Table 4. Respondents' reasons for considering scholarship as contributory to good academic performance

Reasons	Frequency (N = 46)*	Percent
It encourages scholars to study well to maintain the grade requirement	46	100
It provides financial support for educational expenses	40	87
Scholars do not need to engage in paid work to earn money for school fees, so they can focus on their studies	27	59

*multiple responses

Another reason given by a great majority (87%) of the survey respondents for considering scholarship as contributory to good academic performance is that their scholarship provided them with financial support, which enabled them to focus on their studies. One respondent explained that since they have funding for their education, they could easily accomplish many of their requirements, so they were able to get good grades. The FGD results also confirmed this finding. During the FGD, the participants pointed out that the scholarship's financial support enabled them to focus on their studies and served as their motivation to get good grades. According to one FGD participant,

“Tungod sa financial assistance sa scholarship, na motivate mi. Ang amo lang is not to be lazy kay kami pa ang naka-gain og knowledge, gi-hatagan pa gyud mi sa tanan suporta. So, mura'g part na sa among responsibility as a scholar to study seriously and get good grades.” (We were motivated by the financial assistance provided by the scholarship grant. We should not be lazy because we have been given a chance to gain knowledge and we are provided with all the support. So, it is part of our responsibility as scholars to study seriously and get good grades.)

The majority of the survey respondents (59%) also reasoned that their scholarship helped them get good grades because they do not need to engage in paid work to earn money for their school fees; hence, they could focus on their studies. The FGD participants confirmed this. A female participant explained,

“Maka-focus man mi sa amo academic work kay full-time student man mi. Dili parehas sa uban namong classmates nga nag work while studying. Dili gyud sila makahatag og 100% attention sa ilang studies kay kasagaran

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busy man sila sa ila trabaho." (We can focus on our academic work because we are full-time students, unlike some of our classmates who are working while studying. They could not give 100% of their attention to their studies because most of the time, they are busy with their jobs.)

These results suggest that aside from motivating students to get good grades, the scholarship was seen by the graduate students as a factor that enabled them to perform well academically. It provided them with financial resources, which allowed them to focus on their studies and accomplish their requirements on time. These results conform to the findings of Mapuranga, Musingafi, and Zebron (2015) that student motivation and funding are among the important determinants of students' academic performance.

Contribution to persistence and degree completion. We also asked the respondents if they believed that scholarship contributes to persistence and degree completion. In the academic context, persistence is described as continued enrollment or progression until degree completion at any higher education institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2015) despite opposition, importunity, or challenges (Kennel & Ward-Smith 2017; Tinto 2017).

Survey results revealed that a great majority of the respondents (89%) were able to finish their studies within the prescribed period of two years for master's degrees and three years for PhD (Table 5). Almost all of the respondents (97.8%) believed that scholarships contribute to graduate students' persistence and timely degree completion. When asked why, all of those who gave an affirmative answer (100%) said that scholars were obliged to stay in the university and finish their degree within the prescribed period to avoid being penalized if they could not finish their studies. A great majority of them (93.3%) also said they have the needed financial support from their scholarship, so there was no reason for them not to stay in the university to finish their studies. Some scholar-respondents specified that the financial assistance from their scholarship helped them with their living expenses (60%). It reduced their stress on where to get support for their stay in the university (48.9%); hence they stayed in the university and finished their degree.

Table 5. Respondents' period of degree completion and perceived contribution of scholarship to academic persistence

Variables	Frequency (n = 46)	Percent
Period of degree completion		
Within the prescribed period (2 years for MS, 3 years for PhD)	41	89
Beyond the prescribed period	5	11
TOTAL	46	100
Does scholarship contribute to academic persistence and timely degree completion?		
Yes	45	97.8
No	1	2.2
TOTAL	46	100
Reasons for saying that scholarship contributes to academic persistence (n = 45)*		
We scholars are obliged to stay in the university and finish our studies within the prescribed period so that we would not be penalized	45	100.0
We have financial support for our studies	42	93.3
The scholarship helped us with our living expenses	27	60.0
The scholarship reduced our stress and worry	22	48.9
Reason for saying the scholarship does not contribute to academic persistence (n = 1)		
Stipend is very much delayed, so I was discouraged to continue pursuing my degree	1	100

*multiple responses

The results of the FGD supported the survey findings. During the discussion, the participants shared that their scholarship contributed to their persistence and degree completion. It compelled them to finish on time in compliance with the contract they signed. They added that their scholarship provided them with financial assistance, which enabled them to meet their educational and living expenses and encouraged them to stay in the university and finish their degree. As explained by one of the FGD participants,

“Nakatabang ang scholarship sa completion sa among degree kay in the first place, naa mi kontrata nga gipirmahan, we are bound by the contract. Unya, naa pud mi allowance nga maka support sa among pag-eskuwela ug pagpuyo dinhi. Unsa pa man among pangitaon? Makahuman jud mi kun mag serious sa among studies.” (Our scholarship helped us complete our degree because, in the first place, we have signed a contract, we are bound by the contract. We also have an allowance that can support our studies and our stay here. What more can we ask for? We really can finish if we are serious in our studies.)

These results conform to the finding of Mapuranga, Musingafi, and Zebron (2015) that the availability of financial support is an important determinant of students' academic performance and completion of degree programs.

While most of the respondents believed that scholarship contributes to

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academic persistence, one survey respondent did not. She said that the stipend from her scholarship was very delayed, so she was discouraged to continue pursuing her degree because she found it difficult to look for financial support while waiting for her stipend's delayed release. This result indicates that the delayed release of scholars' financial support can have a negative effect on students' persistence and degree completion.

Contributions to career development. We also asked the respondents about their perceptions of the scholarship grants' contribution to the development of their careers. The question was open-ended, hence the respondents gave different responses that were subjected to thematic analysis. Results showed five themes that represent the respondents' perceived contribution of scholarship to the development of their careers. These include (1) completion of a graduate degree, (2) better job opportunities, (3) plus factor in job applications, (4) improvement in knowledge and skills, and (5) boost in self-confidence. The first three themes also emerged from the responses of the FGD participants.

Completion of a graduate degree. Many respondents expressed that they were able to complete a graduate degree because of their scholarship, which qualified them for a promotion. One respondent wrote, "Without the scholarship, it would have been a challenge for me to pursue a doctorate degree. I might have deferred my graduate studies because of financial constraints. But because of the scholarship, I was able to finish my PhD, which became my ticket for promotion."

This same theme also emerged from the responses of the FGD participants. According to a male participant,

"Nakatabang ang scholarship nga makahuman ko og graduate degree. Kun wala pa ko'y scholarship, basin dili pud ko maka MS kay wa ma'y support. Dili unta pud ko ka apply og mas maayo nga work." (The scholarship helped me finish a graduate degree. If I was not able to get a scholarship, I might not have finished an MS [degree] due to lack of support. I also would not have been able to apply for a better job.)

Better job opportunities. This theme is strongly related to the first theme of finishing a degree because of the scholarship. A number of the respondents revealed that since they were able to finish a graduate degree through their scholarships, they were also able to apply for better or higher-paying jobs. This theme also emerged from the FGD participant's responses. According to an FGD participant,

"Pagkahuman nako og MS, naka-apply ko as instructor kay naa na man ko'y MS. Mao man requirement kun mo-apply as a college instructor, naa'y MS. Kun wala pa ko kakuha og scholarship, dili siguro ko kahuman og MS, so basin RA lang gihapon ko hangtud karon." (After finishing my MS, I was able to apply as an instructor because I already had an MS degree. Having a master's degree is a requirement when you apply as a college instructor. If I was not able to get a scholarship, I would not have been able to finish an MS, so I could have remained as an RA [research assistant] until now.)

Plus factor in job application. Some survey respondents believed that having a scholarship serves as an added qualification when one applies for a job. One respondent wrote, "Being a scholar has a great impact to help sell yourself to any government/private company/companies." This theme also emerged from the responses of the FGD participants. According to one FGD participant,

"Ang naa'y scholarship, naa baya na'y edge over sa kadtong mga wala ka-avail. Murag plus points na siya kun mag-apply og trabaho." (Those with scholarships have the edge over those who do not [have a scholarship]. It's like additional points when one applies for a job.)

Improvement in knowledge and skills. This theme emerged only from the responses of the survey respondents. A number of them expressed that since they were able to pursue graduate education through their scholarships, their knowledge and skills in their respective fields of specialization were enhanced. Some of the respondents also mentioned that since their scholarships provided support for their attendance to conferences, they became exposed to more information that was useful in their work. One of the respondents wrote,

"My schooling at the university and my participation in conferences developed some of my skills. These gave me additional knowledge, which is advantageous on my part since I was able to use it when I went back to work."

Boost in self-confidence. This theme emerged only from the responses of the survey respondents. Some respondents revealed that their being able to get a scholarship boosted their confidence to seek better jobs. According to one of the respondents, "My being a scholar gave me the confidence to apply for a teaching job, since I believe that passing the screening of DOST means that I am capable and that I deserve the chance to get a good job."

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to find out graduate students' perceived contribution of scholarships to academic success. Consistent with the findings of several researchers (Robins et al., 2004; Alon, 2007; Omeje and Abugu, 2015; Mapuranga, Musingafi, and Zebron, 2015; Zacharias et al., 2016; Cagasan et al., 2017), the experiences shared by the scholar-respondents and those who participated in the FGD indicate that availment of scholarships/financial grants facilitated the overall academic success of students because it gave them constant motivation to persist and perform well academically resulting to the timely completion of their graduate degrees. Aside from that, it also allowed them to improve their competencies in their fields of specialization, boosted their self-confidence, and opened better opportunities for career establishment and/or development. These suggest that investments in scholarship programs by the government and other institutions is a worthy undertaking as it can help satisfy the demand for highly skilled human resources with advanced education (Chapman & Chien, 2015) who can spearhead efforts towards national development.

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To help interested professionals succeed in obtaining graduate education, universities are thus encouraged to enhance students' access to graduate education. This may be done by offering more scholarship grants, research and teaching assistantships, and other financial grants to graduate students. To augment internal funding support, universities may vigorously expand linkages with agencies offering graduate scholarships.

More studies are needed to improve our understanding on how scholarship programs and financial aid contribute to the academic success of graduate students. One study is an expansion of the present study. It is suggested that the expanded study cover a bigger number of respondents and more universities. Comparing the experiences of graduate students who availed of scholarship grants and those who did not is also a potential research problem. Investigating the contributions of scholarship grants availed by students who studied abroad is also worth pursuing.

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