

Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City, Metro Manila

TWENTIETH CONGRESS
First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL NO. 3469



Introduced by Representative Jan Rurik D. Padiernos, GP (Galing sa Puso) Party-List

EXPLANATORY NOTE

Agriculture and fisheries continue to be essential to the food security and rural livelihoods of our country. However, poverty rates among farmers and fishermen remain disproportionately high. According to Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the poverty rate among farmers and fishermen in 2023 was 27.0% and 27.4%, respectively. This is significantly higher than the national average of 15.5%. This highlights the pressing need for targeted interventions.¹

Providing access to quality tertiary education is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty. Education equips farmers and fisherfolk, as well as their dependents, with the knowledge and tools to improve production, adopt modern practices, and participate in agribusiness opportunities. This not only improves their livelihoods but also strengthens rural economies and supports national food security.

This bill seeks to provide qualified farmers, fisherfolk, and their dependents with access to tertiary education in agriculture, fisheries, and related fields. Investing in their education is essential to cultivating the next generation of innovators who can strengthen our agrarian and aquatic sectors.

In view of the foregoing, the immediate passage of this bill is earnestly sought.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Padiernos".

ATTY. JAN RURIK D. PADIERNOS
GP (Galing sa Puso) Party-List

¹ Philippine Statistics Authority. (2024, March). Poverty Incidence among Farmers and Fisherfolk. Retrieved from <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/poverty>

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**AN ACT PROVIDING FREE TERTIARY EDUCATION IN AGRICULTURE,
FISHERIES, AND RELATED FIELDS FOR QUALIFIED INDIGENT FARMERS,
FISHERFOLK, AND THEIR DEPENDENTS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES**

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

SECTION 1. *Short Title.* - This Act shall be known as the “**Free Tertiary Agricultural and Fisheries Education Act**”.

SEC. 2. *Declaration of Policy.* – It is the policy of the State to promote access to quality and inclusive tertiary education for registered indigent farmers and fisherfolk, as well as their dependent children. Recognizing their vital role in ensuring food security, environmental stewardship, and national development, the State shall support their empowerment through education in agriculture, fisheries, and related fields.

SEC.3. *Definition of Terms.* - For purposes of this Act, the following terms shall be defined as follows:

- (a) **Qualified Farmer or Fisherfolk** refers to any Filipino citizen who is:
- i. primarily engaged in farming, fishing, or aquaculture as a main source of livelihood;
 - ii. duly registered with the Department of Agriculture (DA), the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA), or other government-recognized registries; and
 - iii. unable to pursue or afford tertiary education without financial assistance, as determined through guidelines and documentation set by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), in coordination with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), and local government units (LGUs).

(b) **Qualified Dependent** refers to the child of a qualified farmer or fisherfolk who:

- i. is not more than twenty-five (25) years old;
- ii. is unmarried and not gainfully employed; and
- iii. is certified as a dependent by the DSWD, LGU, or any other authorized agency.

(c) *Tertiary Agricultural and Fisheries Education* refers to formal post-secondary education leading to a degree, diploma, or certificate in fields related to agriculture, fisheries, or rural development, including but not limited to agronomy, aquaculture, horticulture, animal science, crop science, soil science, agribusiness, agricultural engineering, forestry, sustainable agriculture, agricultural economics, and agricultural technology.

(d) *Accredited Educational Institution* refers to a higher education institution recognized by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), or other relevant government accrediting agencies as qualified to offer agricultural, fisheries, or related programs.

(e) *Education-Related Support* refers to financial or logistical assistance provided to beneficiaries, including but not limited to tuition coverage, stipends, book and material allowances, transportation subsidies, and internship or practicum support.

SEC. 4. Coverage. - The benefits of this Act shall be granted to:

(a) Qualified farmers and fisherfolk who wish to pursue tertiary education in agriculture, fisheries, or related disciplines; and

(b) One qualified dependent per registered household of a farmer or fisherfolk, in cases where the farmer or fisherfolk opts not to avail of the benefits directly.

No household shall receive more than one scholarship grant at a time under this Act. Beneficiaries may be enrolled in state universities and colleges (SUCs), local universities and colleges (LUCs), or private higher education institutions offering CHED-accredited programs in agriculture, fisheries, or allied fields.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED), in coordination with the Department of Agriculture (DA), the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), the DSWD, PSA, and other concerned agencies, shall issue the necessary implementing guidelines on validation, documentation, and eligibility screening within ninety (90) days from the effectivity of this Act.

SEC. 5. Education Subsidy and Support Services - Qualified beneficiaries under this Act shall be entitled to:

(a) **Tuition and Miscellaneous Fees Subsidy** – Full coverage of tuition and other required school fees, including but not limited to registration, library, laboratory, internship, and graduation fees, as charged by the accredited institution.

(b) **Monthly Living Allowance** – A regular monthly stipend to assist with basic living expenses such as food, accommodation, and personal needs, subject to regional cost-of-living adjustments and availability of funds.

(c) **Educational Materials Allowance** – An annual allowance for the purchase of books, learning materials, uniforms, and digital tools necessary for academic performance.

(d) **Transportation Allowance** – A travel subsidy or support for board and lodging may be provided to beneficiaries studying in locations far from their residence, as determined by CHED guidelines.

(e) **Internship and Practicum Support** – Financial and logistical assistance shall be granted for required fieldwork, on-the-job training, or practicum activities related to agriculture, fisheries, or rural development.

(f) **Counseling and Career Services** – Participating institutions shall provide career guidance, mental health support, and job placement assistance to help beneficiaries succeed during and after their academic journey.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) shall determine the standard amounts and conditions for each form of support, subject to periodic review and budget availability. Prioritization shall be given to the most economically disadvantaged among qualified applicants in case of limited funding.

SEC. 6. Implementing Agencies. - The Department of Agriculture (DA), including the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), shall serve as the sectoral lead agency in the implementation of this Act. It shall provide policy direction, ensure alignment with national agricultural and fisheries development strategies, identify workforce priorities in the agri-fisheries sector, and assist in the identification and validation of qualified farmer and fisherfolk beneficiaries.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) shall serve as the education lead agency, responsible for coordinating with higher education institutions, administering scholarship benefits and educational support, setting academic compliance standards, and issuing the implementing rules and regulations of this Act.

The DA and CHED shall jointly convene a Program Coordinating Committee, with the participation of the following agencies:

- i. **Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)** – to support socioeconomic eligibility validation and certification of qualified dependents;
- ii. **Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA)** – to provide updated poverty thresholds and related socioeconomic data;
- iii. **Local Government Units (LGUs)** – to assist in barangay-level validation, local outreach, and program coordination;
- iv. **Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA)** – to provide support for non-degree and diploma-level programs related to agriculture and fisheries.

The Program Coordinating Committee shall be responsible for:

- i. Developing and maintaining a unified National Registry of Qualified Beneficiaries;
- ii. Establishing clear and transparent guidelines for application, screening, disqualification, and retention of scholars;
- iii. Ensuring efficient implementation, monitoring, and fund utilization
- iv. Submitting an annual report to Congress on the status of program implementation, including beneficiary data, fund use, and policy recommendations.

SEC. 7. *Partnership with Institutions.* - To ensure effective delivery and long-term sustainability of the program, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), in coordination with the Department of Agriculture (DA), shall establish and maintain partnerships with eligible higher education institutions and relevant institutions, as follows:

- (a) CHED shall prioritize collaboration with State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs) offering programs in agriculture, fisheries, or related disciplines, to ensure cost-effective and accessible education for qualified beneficiaries.
- (b) CHED may also accredit and enter into agreements with private higher education institutions (HEIs) that offer CHED-recognized degree or diploma programs in agriculture, fisheries, agribusiness, agricultural engineering, aquaculture, or other allied fields, subject to availability of funds and compliance with program standards.
- (c) CHED, DA, and BFAR may enter into Memoranda of Agreement (MOAs) with recognized agricultural and fisheries research institutions, including but not limited to the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice), the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC), and other relevant institutions, to facilitate practicum placements, internships, industry exposure, and employment linkage for beneficiaries.
- (d) Partner institutions shall adhere to the minimum quality standards set by CHED and relevant government agencies. They shall submit reports on beneficiary performance, retention, and graduation rates, and shall coordinate with CHED, DA, and BFAR for academic and field-based support services.
- (e) CHED shall ensure that partner institutions uphold policies promoting student welfare, academic freedom, inclusion, and transparency in the implementation of this Act.

SEC. 8. *Funding.* - The amount necessary to implement the provisions of this Act shall be included in the annual General Appropriations Act (GAA) under the budgets of the Department of Agriculture (DA), including the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

In addition to the regular appropriations, the program may be funded through the following sources:

- (a) The Agricultural Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (ACEF) under Republic Act No. 8178, for scholarships in agriculture and fisheries-related fields;
- (b) Other special funds administered by the DA and BFAR that support training, education, or workforce development in the agriculture and fisheries sectors;
- (c) Grants, donations, and endowments from domestic and international sources, subject to government accounting and auditing rules;
- (d) Financial support from Local Government Units (LGUs) through their Special Education Fund (SEF) or other authorized sources.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED), in consultation with the Department of Agriculture (DA), shall determine the allocation and utilization of funds, including the release of mobilization funds to accredited institutions at the start of each academic year and subsequent reimbursement based on actual enrollment and billing.

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) shall ensure the timely release of funds upon submission of the validated list of beneficiaries and requirements by CHED and DA.

SEC. 9. Penalties. - To ensure the integrity of the program and protect public funds, the following acts are prohibited:

- (a) Any person who knowingly submits false information, falsified documents, or makes any misrepresentation to qualify for, maintain, or benefit from the program under this Act shall be disqualified from the scholarship, required to return any funds received, and shall be subject to criminal prosecution under applicable laws, including Article 172 of the Revised Penal Code.
- (b)) Any public official or employee who, without lawful cause, delays, obstructs, or unjustly denies the processing or release of benefits to qualified beneficiaries shall be subject to administrative sanctions under Republic Act No. 6713, otherwise known as the "Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees," and other relevant laws, rules, or regulations.
- (c) Any official, agent, or representative of an educational institution who knowingly participates in or facilitates any fraudulent transaction or misrepresentation in connection with the implementation of this Act shall be liable for appropriate administrative, civil, or criminal penalties under existing laws.

The imposition of these penalties shall be without prejudice to the filing of any appropriate civil, criminal, or administrative action under other applicable laws.

SEC. 10. Implementing Rules and Regulations. - Within ninety (90) days from the effectivity of this Act, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), in coordination with the Department of Agriculture (DA) shall promulgate the necessary rules and regulations for the effective implementation of this Act.

The IRR shall include, but not be limited to, detailed guidelines on beneficiary selection, institutional partnerships, fund disbursement, academic support services, monitoring and evaluation, and coordination mechanisms among implementing agencies.

SEC. 11. Separability Clause. - If any provision of this Act is declared unconstitutional or invalid, the remainder of the Act or any provision not affected thereby shall remain in full force and effect.

SEC. 12. Repealing Clause. - All laws, decrees, executive orders, rules, and regulations or parts thereof inconsistent with the provisions of this Act are hereby repealed or modified accordingly.

SEC. 13. Effectivity. - This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its publication in the Official Gazette or in a newspaper of general circulation.

Approved,