

Higher Education and Equity in Malaysia

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Abstract

This article looks at higher education in Malaysia. Issues relating to this sector, including, among others, expansion of access to higher education to certain ethnic classes, equity issues among groups and classes, the New Economic Policy (NEP) and its role in restructuring Malaysia's higher education sector, are discussed. This article also focuses on the socio-political implications of the NEP as relevant to the public higher education sector, where the differential patterns in higher education access as reflected by the NEP among the three main ethnic groups-- the local Malays (also known as Bumiputras), the Chinese and the Indians-- is manifest.

The Equity Issue in Higher Education

Stratification in higher education through sorting with the use of demographic norms (e.g., gender, ethnicity and race) apparently comes parallel with the move to increase access to tertiary education. The increasing call for quality and efficiency is now exemplified by the move towards the 'new managerialism' perspective. The underlying principle of 'new managerialism', which promotes 'corporate' objectives, procedure and performance assessments (Morley, 1997), has led today to the increasing practice of measuring educational quality and efficiency by competitive league tables and benchmarking. Notwithstanding the contribution this has brought to enhancing an awareness of the improvement in the overall features of the higher education sector, the notion of the prejudiced acceptance only of students that are deemed to meet increased expectations of 'quality' is apparent. The presence of quasi-markets increases the tendency to "cream-skimming" (Apple, 2006) or the predisposition to admit to the academe students who are deemed more likely to improve an institution's market value, i.e., students that are 'typed' to do well or more than well in institutional assessment tests, among other things. Giving impetus to this trend is the traditional elitist nature of universities, and the limited access this has caused through its provision for only elite members of the society brings up the question of the diversity issue. The select members of society, among whom financial provision for higher education is rightly presumed, are said to carry a 'privileged' potential to the universities. The emphasis on quality and the other assessments of the 'new managerialism' are directed to a consumer empowerment devoid of social diversity recognition (Morley, 1995; Ball, 1994).

Bourdieu's analysis of the 'habitus' or 'cultural capital' also suggests how students from lower class levels are disadvantaged in gaining entry into higher education institutions because of the inherent lack of familiarity in their backgrounds with the curriculum content of institutions that are viewed, as far as access is concerned, as favouring the middle class in their admission criteria and tests (Robbins, 1993). Additionally, the cultural bias mentioned above is found in

evaluations of the increasing market differentiation related to higher education. Inherent in this is the problem of inequity brought about by language policy in higher education. This is a major cause of a further divide among ethnic groups, where the language of the dominant group (often the former colonial power) is preferred in modern business and technology. This problem is further aggravated by globalisation, which favours a worldwide uniformity of curricula and qualifications, and the adaptation of a universal rather than a multilingual medium of instruction (Watson, 2007). Reiterating this is the attitude on inequality posited by Functionalist theorists, where education broadly, and higher education, in particular, is seen as part of a “meritocratic sorting process, determining the best people for particular jobs and roles in society” (Archer, 2003: 8). Functionalism is heavily criticised for its ‘natural-selection’ process and for too suddenly destabilising the structural formations of society. The ability to possess ‘characteristics’ that are said to be natural to one’s social background translates to the explanation of the inequalities in higher education for which society, at large, is not prepared, and causes anxiety and a sense of confused helplessness and incoherent fatalism in the older generation. For instance, the low performance or participation rates of people from socio-economic lower class levels show the supposed “irrelevant” abilities in such people’s social class background. The tendency to look at social groups rather than individual differences is the foundation used by functionalists to explain differential patterns in higher education (Archer, 2003). Robbins (1993: 161) further suggests that “ (...) the growing trend towards self-assessment or to forms of peer assessment encourages a process of cultural self-endorsement since the members of socially homogeneous groups have no extraneous criteria by which to judge each other’s performance”.

This dichotomisation imposed on universities is challenged by the move towards mass higher education, which has led to the rise in access to higher education. This runs counter to the ‘new managerialism’ perspective, which lays emphasis on inadequate diversity, but, in fact, conversely assures the influence of a competitive market that lays claim to a broadening consumer base (Morley, 1997) wherein “expansion is represented as beneficial to members of the subordinate groups by enabling them access to cultural capital in the form of academic and professional training.” (ibid., 1997: 236)

Despite the formal adherence to equity that educational expansion presents, the argument is adduced that changes in stratification often is merely mechanical and does not correspond to qualitative changes (Evans, 1995). The negative equity associated with the expansion of higher education also contradicts among many people of traditional and conservative persuasion the very notion of equity as understood by them, for to them widening access is “perceived as dilution, pollution and inflation of certification” (Morley, 1997: 239) rather than overall enhancing quality and efficiency which to them are essential, indispensable, non-negotiable ground values and aims of human society and of education.

Redistribution in Malaysia: the NEP and Higher Education Opportunities

Ethnic conflict is classified by Horowitz (1985) as ranging from relatively peaceful economic and political struggles between or among groups, to separatist

and sporadic violent conflicts, to civil wars. Malaysia's current ethnic divide belongs more to the non-violent categories in that tally. However, the racial riots that occurred in 1969 caused the government to produce the New Economic Policy (NEP) in order to: (a) reduce and eliminate poverty, irrespective of race; and (b) restructure Malaysian society so as to correct the economic imbalance and eliminate the identification of race with economic function (Hart, 1994: 48-49). Official data over the course of the NEP on poverty, ownership and income redistribution have, however, been a matter of debate (Hart, 1994).

Hirschman (1993) has suggested that a crisis should be imminent for political policies to emerge. Policy initiatives are seen to emerge from a political condition that requires it, such as Malaysia's 1969 racial riots, which served as the impetus for the development of the NEP. The policy is said to have made considerable shifts in the structure of the Malaysian economy. Unemployment rates were significantly less among the three groups of Bumiputras, Chinese and Indians, with a drastic change in unemployment from 8 per cent to 3.1 per cent being recorded from 1970 to 2000. The creation of a more diverse Malaysian economy also emerged, manifested by shifts to occupations requiring higher levels of educational attainment, reflecting the improved access to education (Hashim, 2003). Snodgrass (1995) also noted positive outcomes through the implementation of the NEP (1970-1990) among which were: (a) growth in real Gross National Product (GNP), which averaged 6.7 per cent per year from 1970 to 1990, (b) significant poverty eradication, manifested by the change in poverty levels from nearly half (49.3 per cent) of all households in Peninsular Malaysia in 1970 to 15 per cent in 1990, and 17.1 per cent for the whole country; (c) employment restructuring of the Bumiputras through considerable access to the industry sector (173,000 in 1970 to 918,000 in 1990), and an economic restructuring which led to a shift from Agricultural (from 31 per cent of Gross Domestic Product -GDP in 1970 to 19 per cent in 1990) to Industrial (from 25 per cent to 42 per cent over the same time); and (d) increase in corporate ownership and wealth of Bumiputras from a mere 2.4 per cent in 1970 to 20.3 per cent in 1990. A decrease in foreign shares was also recorded, from 63.3 per cent to 25.1 per cent during the same period.

Higher Education and the NEP. The national unbalanced allocation of income, which was associated with the disparity in educational opportunities, became a leading political issue among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia (Selvaratnam, 1988). The government granted educational opportunities to the Bumiputras to reconstruct Malaysian society, with the hope of creating a Bumiputra middle class in terms of income, occupation, status and wealth. The New Economic Policy implemented in 1970 was meant to reallocate the country's assets among the ethnic groups by increasing the Bumiputras' share of corporate equity (Malaysia, 1971). The period of the New Economic Policy was also marked by an increase in access to higher education as a means of restructuring Malaysian society and eliminating the connection in access to higher education and the race and ethnicity of the three ethnic groups. The Plan acknowledged the task of higher education as an instrument in producing national unity and providing the requisite manpower for a modern, progressive economy. Making tertiary education more

accessible to the economically disadvantaged and those living in the rural areas was also stated as a policy in the Plan (Ministry of Education, 2001).

To facilitate dynamically the Bumiputra demand for access to higher education, the Malaysian government implemented the ethnic quota system where admission to public universities was based on the ratio of 55:45 for Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra students respectively (Lee, 2004). The government's rationalisation for this was "to widen access to university education congruent with the needs, aspirations, and expectations of the people, and more importantly, to the Bumiputra community on whose support the ruling regime relies heavily" (Lee, 2004: 78). With the implementation of the Plan since 1970, the proportion of students enrolled in degree programmes in 1985 in relation to ethnic groups was Bumiputra (63 percent), Chinese (29.7 percent), and Indian (6.5 percent), compared to the corresponding proportions in 1969, which were 35.6 percent, 52.9 percent, and 11.5 percent, respectively (Lee, 2004). This evidently illustrates how university education became more accessible to Bumiputras and how the norms in the new Policy influenced the ethnic mix of students in public higher education institutions (HEI). Clearly, the government's intervention increased the involvement of the Bumiputra community in tertiary education, and thereby in higher-level human resource in the economy.

However, countervailing results arose over time from the modifications. A growing unrest and dissatisfaction with the quota system from the non-Bumiputra groups became manifest. Issues regarding access to education within the Bumiputra population itself arose; this evinced the increasing intra-Malay inequity, which favoured the relatively rich in the Bumiputra class. In the 1980s, it was shown that scholarships and bursaries were awarded to 23 per cent of the upper strata of the Bumiputras, which only constituted 5 per cent of that sector's population. Poorer Bumiputras were recorded as constituting 63 per cent of the whole sector (Selvaratnam, 1988). The quota system is said to have "exacerbated ethnic and cultural polarisation" more (Selvaratnam, 1988: 196). Despite the figures that point to the continuing need for improvement in equity among the Bumiputras, the unsought result of the NEP has been the creation of a Bumiputra 'business class' distinct from the poorer Bumiputras, despite measures to fight poverty. This has brought with it "the dangers of increased, and evident, inequality of incomes." (Milne, 1986: 1372). Another concern that arose was that, because of the admission of a greater proportion of Malays, a substantially low academic achievement record of the Malays resulted, manifested by the continuing implementation of the quota (or merit) system in higher education, the figures related to a system which had existed for almost three decades. Quota systems also imply equality as 'inclusion' without regard to skills among groups (Stelle, 2000). The heavy reliance of the Bumiputras on this system to gain entry to public HEIs reflects the lower entry standards applied to the Bumiputras, resulting in a higher proportion of admitted Bumiputras that, in the first place, because of their original and increased proportion as a sector of the national population, numerically dominated the other ethnic groups and consequently had an edge over them in a quota system based on quantity- with merit disregarded or given little weight. The lowering of standards in the public higher education system in general resulted (Nagaraj and Lee, 2003).

So I have to be frank about it. The quota system that we have it may encourage course in terms of lowering standards [in higher education] and therefore erode the comparative capability of the nation and slow down the growth in technological capability.

Government official

The ethnic quota system may have neutralised discrimination, favouritism, or other inequity in enrolments, but it also has resulted in an excess of enrolment of students in the humanities and the arts. Bumiputra students have become prevalent in humanities and social science courses. The ratio of student enrolment for first-degree courses in the arts compared to the sciences was about 60:40 in 1995 (Malaysia, 2001). The government, however, has taken steps to increase enrolment in the sciences and technology, obviously perceiving their evidently increasing value in these times. (EPU, 2006).

Language Policy and the NEP. The formulation of the NEP also provided a definition of nationalism in terms of language hegemony through Bahasa Melayu. The failure to fully execute the National Language Act of 1967 gave an opening to the NEP to realise this objective. In keeping with the New Economic Policy, observance of the language policy after the racial riots in 1969 was strictly enforced, which meant that English ceased to be the main medium of instruction in the national education system. This has caused a substantial social cost as the language policy, which asserts the use of Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction in the national education system, reinforced not only the nationalism and unity which the state pronounced but also the greater advantages of the Bumiputra community (Mohamad, 2005). Watson (1999) highlights the tendency of governments to promote a national language with the objective of achieving greater national unity, or maintaining a formidable political power base, as both evident in Malaysia. A negative consequence to this however, was an escalated adherence by Chinese, Indians and other groups to their mother tongue languages. Further, by the 2000s, a decrease in enrolment rates in national institutes among the Chinese and Indians were observed. (Mohamad, 2005).

Gill (2005) further recognises the link between the medium of instruction in schools and existing economic and social opportunities. The declaration of Bahasa Melayu as the national language would provide the ethnic Malays with “The educational and administrative capital which would lead to its development as a language of higher status and provide the linguistic capital and economic opportunity which would lead to social and professional mobility” (Gill, 2005: 246).

This language policy however became an obstacle for Malaysia in keeping up with the times. The low English proficiency level of local graduates has been a major point of concern especially with regard to the country’s move towards the knowledge-based economy. Additional to the negative effects of the language policy in the NEP is the increase in partiality to employment opportunities. And the quality of education in the nation is said to have been diminished due to the predisposition of universities to select their teaching staff and other employees on the basis of ethnicity.

When you don't employ staff on an open basis then clearly, you are not employing the best. And when you are not employing the best, then you are not employing the best to teach, and when you are not employing the best to teach, then I think the standards will fall (Government Official).

The impact of Malaysia's language policy on its higher education sector is significant due to its influence on education access among its ethnic groups. The 'mainstreaming' of Bahasa Melayu as the method of instruction as prescribed by the NEP further reinforced the greater advantage of the Bumiputras in the educational sector. A changeover in the past years to English as the form of instruction has been favoured because of the urgent demands of globalisation and the knowledge economy. Harnessing the "English advantage" was considered important for increasing the competitiveness of the country's human resource in a globalised economy. However, recent moves of the government in favouring the disadvantaged rural students has called for policy reorientation and the switch back to Bahasa Melayu as medium of instruction by year 2012 for maths and sciences

Closing Remarks

To date, the government of Malaysia is still continuing to push the expansion of the Bumiputra middle class, and increasing the group's wealth and capabilities through human capital development. This is envisioned through employment restructuring programmes, with the aim of promoting Bumiputra entrepreneurs, increasing asset ownership among the Bumiputras, and improving educational opportunities—particularly higher education—in order to provide the group with the prospect of competitively gaining employment in higher -paid jobs (EPU, 2006). It should be noted that, despite the implementation of both the NEP and its corrective, the NDP (New Development Policy), in 2004 the Bumiputras still constituted 76 per cent of the bottom 40 per cent of households. Increased equity ownership (to 30 per cent) of the Bumiputras, which the NEP imagined it had achieved in 1990, had failed. Accordingly, the government announced the need for a longer time frame (to 2020) in order to realise this aim. Income parity is also envisioned by the government through narrowing the income gap between the Bumiputra and Chinese from 1:1.64 in 2004 to 1:1.50 in 2010. Similarly, between the Malays and Indians, a reduction in the income gap from 1:1.27 for 2004 to 1:1.15 for 2010 is envisaged (EPU, 2006).

Despite some unforeseen negative consequences and the partiality embodied in the NEP, without doubt the economy of Malaysia advanced during the implementation of the Policy. Adherents of the Policy maintain that the Indian community is given more opportunity to access public higher education institutions, access which they and others will find difficult to attain without the 'quota/merit' system installed by the Policy. Malaysia has also been considered successful in quelling violence and promoting inter-ethnic stability. The achievement of such stability is attributed to the state-centric adoption of and impetus given to the NEP and the NDP. The emphasis of the NDP focuses on the continuation of the rapid economic advancement that the country experienced during the last two decades

(1970–1990) under the NEP (Mohamad, 2005). However, current concerns about inequity as a result of the programme’s implementation, although the programme could lead to further advancement of the country, cannot be ignored; there is for instance the issue of the declining HEI quality. Moreover, the lack of access to better-qualified applicants who can more effectively maximise the returns—both public and private—of higher education, has hindered quicker progress in programme implementation. If higher education is considered the catalyst for development, as recognised by the government through its skills-training and manpower production policies and projects, then every effort to improve, sustain and optimise the benefits of the system should be made.

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