

SENSE OF EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL EQUALITY AMONG UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

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Abstract. The issue of patriotism, nationalism, racism, and sensitivity between races is increasing. Many of it has caused debate in society. It encompasses all aspects of society from students, civil servants, professionals, and politicians. The case is frequently linked to claims of equality between two groups of different interests. The education system that is expected to play a role in shaping the community's thinking and behaviour is also disputed by some groups. The aim of the study is to investigate the perception of equality among graduates from the two dimensions of educational equality and social equality, so as to discover existing problems and propose effective countermeasures. The data is collected through a questionnaire adapted from Wang et al. (2020) and distributed to graduates at an established state private university. A total of 982 individuals participated in the study. Most of them are at diploma (49.7%) and degree (31.5%) program. The findings show that there is a low correlation between student acceptance on the education system and all components of education equality and social procedure equality, and a very low correlation to social opportunity equality and social outcome equality. This will open up a wide space for debate on the effectiveness of the education system in shaping people's thoughts and behaviours. Educational institutions have to ensure their programs are capable of enhancing students' understanding and awareness of equality issues in society. As for educators, they must realize that they are the most influential factor to contribute to shaping the thinking and behaviour of students for the society.

Keywords: *educational equality, social equality, quality of education, national interest, teacher's role*

Introduction

There are basically two types of equality (Fourie, 2012). Distributive equality requires certain social goods to be distributed equally as a requirement of justice. Another aspect is social equality, which identifies a social ideal that is not marked by status divisions such that one can place different individuals in hierarchically ranked categories. A status hierarchy occurs when a behaviour, social practice, or policy expresses a distinct relationship between a person or group of people, and others. Specifically, it is a relationship between inferiors and superiors. In this relationship, one person is deemed to be an inferior in relation to another person, who is either directly deemed to be a superior or who, by virtue of their relationship to an inferior person, automatically becomes the superior. When one person is treated as a superior and another as an inferior this does not necessarily imply that the superior person is treated very well or that the inferior person is necessarily severely disadvantaged or devalued. The point, when we refer to hierarchies of social status, is the nature of the relationship between social positions, not the absolute level of treatment.

Indirect social inequalities demonstrate a significant link between social inequality and other forms of inequalities, such as wealth and power. Other inequalities can create or reinforce social disparities. Thus, a notion of social equality could provide a basis for evaluating other inequalities. For example, for evaluating the principles of the

distribution of social goods. Uncertain distributions of certain social goods could create hierarchies of social status. In order to achieve a society of equals, goods would need to be distributed in ways that did not either create or reinforce unjust social status. Large income gaps may also provide an example of a distributive inequality, which causes social inequality. Other examples could be policies that discriminate or exclude certain groups by denying them social goods such as healthcare. A theory of social equality could, therefore, be useful for evaluating the principles of distributive justice, although it will seldom be ambiguous which distribution social equality requires. There are two primary claims that could be made about the value of social equality. We could assert that it has intrinsic value or that it is constitutive of something that is intrinsically valuable, or it has instrumental value, or we could refer to its negative effects. The harmful effects that result from inequality can be classified as individual or social. Individuals can be affected by being treated as inferior. Someone who is treated as inferior could have a negative impact on her self-respect, or her ability to form her conception of the good could be compromised. Social inequality can also cause harms to society; for instance, more unequal societies seem to be unhealthier.

Over the last few decades, discussions about public education have been focused on the three distinct functions, the identity-related function; the knowledge-related function, and the status-related function (Sardoc, 2016). The dominant aspect of the first function is largely socio-integrative, as it links public education to the establishment of the “national” character of a population. The second basic function carried out by public education is centered on its role as an "ideological state apparatus". The third function of public education focuses on the provision of equal opportunities in the process of competition for advantaged social positions to all individuals irrespective of their social or cultural background, gender, race, creed, national origin, physical and mental constitution, etc. Sardoč further expressed that the basic premise of any conception of equal opportunities is that individuals' opportunities in the process of competing for advantaged social positions should be equal. Any conception of equal opportunities consists of four basic elements: (i) agent or agents of equal opportunities, (ii) objective or objectives to which equal opportunities are directed, (iii) the relationship between the agent and the objective of equal opportunities, and (iv) obstacles to the realisation of equal opportunities. The concept of opportunity may therefore be defined in two different ways. The first is the absence of obstacles to the attainment of a particular objective and considered to be negative justification. The other one is the ability of an individual to achieve a particular goal using his or her efforts and considered as positive justification. The idea of equality of opportunity is based on two separate and allegedly incompatible principles, which is the principle of non-discrimination, and the principle of levelling the playing field.

Education is the fundamental of a country and it is one of the important support factors of a nation's growth (Lin, 2018). Equality in educational opportunity is a slogan coming to describe equal opportunity for individuals to succeed according to ability and thus implied fairness in the provision of educational opportunity for every child of school going age. However, there are numerous aspects of equality of educational opportunity. The most argumentative issue is the outcome of education. The authority may be able to control the equality of the input and process of education. But it still cannot guarantee the output of education. In general, the output of education indicated that the achievement is the same; however, the achievement cannot be a representation of learners' learning performance, results, or potential. College students' sense of

equality is mainly manifested in two dimensions: educational equality and social equality (Wang et al., 2020). Educational equality refers to the fairness and protection of citizens' basic rights in education, that is, to ensure that personal and social factors won't hinder one reaching the education level as long as one's ability permits, and that all social members could receive the fundamental level or minimum standard level education. The sense of educational equality is a citizen's evaluation and attitude of the educational opportunities, resources, and fairness he/she has received and perceived. Social equality is conditional; it focuses on the fairness of citizens in basic rights. The sense of social equality is a citizen's evaluation and attitude of the current situation of social justice, it's determined by two aspects: the objective social structure and the subjective psychological experience. The aim of the study is to investigate the sense of equality among graduates from the two dimensions of educational equality and social equality, so as to find out existing problems and propose effective countermeasures.

Materials and Methods

The design of this study is a quantitative research design. The main objective is to investigate the sense of equality among graduates from two dimensions, which are educational equality and social equality. The specific objectives is to determine the relationship between student acceptance on education system as an independent variable and their perception towards education equality and social equality as the dependent variables. The term correlation is used in the context of a linear relationship between two continuous variables and expressed as Pearson product-moment correlation (Schober et al., 2018). Correlation is a measure of a monotonic association between two variables. A monotonic relationship between two variables is a one in which either as the value of one variable increases, so does the value of the other variable: or as the value of one variable increases, the other variable value decreases. The data is collected through a questionnaire adapted from Wang et al. (2020). The questionnaire compose of three sections. The first section provides students background information which is their gender, faculty (field of study), level of study, year of study and their academic grade (CGPA). The second section is to measure students acceptance about national education system through ten statements of 7-point Likert scale score. The third section is to measure the students sense of educational and social equality. Both type of equality is divided into three dimensions, namely the opportunity, procedure and outcome. This section consist of 25 statements of 7-point Likert scale score. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient (α) is used to determine the validity of this questionnaire as it is said to be suitable for social sciences experiment (Taber, 2018). Analysis to obtain the coefficient value is carried out separately for each dimension to increase the accuracy compared to the overall findings. The interpretation of the Cronbach Alpha value is based on Kotian et al. (2022) as shown in *Table 1* below, whereas *Table 2* for 7-point Likert scale score.

Table 1. Cronbach Alpha value of reliability and acceptability (Kotian et al., 2022).

Range of Cronbach Alpha value	Instrument reliability
<0.50	Inconsistent/weak
0.65 to 0.69	Marginal consistent/fair
0.70 to 0.79	Acceptable consistency/satisfactory
0.80 to <0.89	Good consistency/good
>0.90	High consistency/excellent

Table 2. Interpretation of score for students' feedback (7-point likert's scale).

Range of score	Level of acceptance
1.00-1.85	Very low
1.86-2.72	Low
2.73-3.56	Moderate low
3.57-4.41	Moderate
4.42-5.27	Moderate high
5.28-6.11	High
6.12-7.00	Very high

The study is carried out at an established private state university in Malaysia. The institution has a student body of nearly 8,000, including about 1,000 postgraduates and 500 international students. The determination of the sample size is based on the table proposed by Taherdoost (2017) as shown in *Table 3* below. The sampling technique used is stratified random sampling. Based on this technique, the heterogeneous population of students is divided into homogeneous groups according to their school and level of program (studies). The questionnaire is distributed to the students within two weeks at the start of semester April 2023. The researcher applied the stratified random sampling technique to ensure that respondents can fairly represent certain characteristics (sub-groups) that are considered important in the population as well as enable the results of the analysis to be more accurate. However the researcher realized that this technique is quite difficult to implement and expressed its influence as suggested by Taherdoost (2017). This technique is also said to comply with three principles of sampling which are the principle of sample compatibility, the principle of sample adequacy and the principle of sample confidence (Ahrens and Zascerska, 2015). The researcher realized, determining an appropriate sample size is vital in drawing realistic conclusions (Memon et al., 2020). Sample size can be defined as the subset of a population required to ensure that there is a sufficient amount of information to draw conclusions. There are several factors to be considered when estimating an appropriate sample size. These factors include the research approach, analytical method, number of variables, and the most important time factor and resources. Due to that the samples targeted for this study are about 357 to 964 students from all faculties within the main campus of the university.

Table 3. Sample size based on desired accuracy with confidence level of 95%.

Size of population	Variance of the population p=50%; Confident level=95% margin of error		
	5	3	1
1000	278	516	906
1500	306	624	1297
2000	322	696	1655
3000	341	787	2286
5000	357	879	3288
10000	370	964	4899
25000	378	1023	6939
50000	381	1045	8057

Source: Taherdoost (2017)

Results and Discussion

The reliability of the instrument

Table 4 below shows the Cronbach Alpha value (α , or coefficient alpha) for the seven dimension of study which is between 0.447 (weak) to 0.866 (excellent). The overall α value is .949 is considered high consistency and excellent. Score of 0.7 is normally accepted (Barbera et al., 2020). However, according to Ursachi et al. (2015), the accepted value actually depends on the requirement of the research and the justification given. Therefore, the low score recorded in this study is not an issue because the researcher used an adapted questionnaire which is probably influenced by various local factors due to the background of the students and the academic and social environment within the institution.

Table 4. *The cronbach alpha value (α , or coefficient alpha) for each of research dimension.*

No	Research dimension	No of items	α value	Reliability level
1	Acceptance on national education system	10		
2	Educational opportunity equality	4		
3	Educational procedure equality	4		
4	Educational outcomes equality	4		
5	Social opportunity equality	5		
6	Social procedure equality	4		
7	Social outcome equality	4		
8	Overall	25	.949	High consistency

Background of the respondents

A total of 982 students from four faculties participated in the study as shown in Table 5. As expected, there are more female (540, 55%) than male (442, 45%). Most of them are diploma students (49.7%). Others are at degree (31.5%) and pre-university program (17.3%). There is a special program at the university namely Smart Tahfiz for students from religious school to take Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia (SPM). None of postgraduate's students involve on this study because their classes is conducted during the weekend in another campus.

Table 5. *Respondents' information.*

Category	Frequency (N=982)	Percentage (%)
Faculty		
Education and Social Sciences	317	32.3
Communication, Visual Art and Computing	263	26.8
Engineering and Life Sciences	206	21.0
Foundation and General Studies	196	20.0
Level of education		
SPM (Tahfiz)	15	1.5
Foundation	170	17.3
Diploma	488	49.7
Bachelor	309	31.5

Student acceptance to education system

Table 6 shows the mean score of student's acceptance on education system. The overall mean score is 6.07 which is considered to be high acceptance. Five items recorded very high score. It can be concluded that respondents have a strong belief in

the importance of school and education, and the role of parents for their children's education. They determined that school is a good place for education and will provide a better future for children. However, they also realized that the government should provide more funding to enhance the education and schooling services.

Table 6. Mean score of student's acceptance on education system.

Statements	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Variance
Education and the school is important.	6.19	1.082	1.170
Education providing benefits to the community.	6.10	1.038	1.077
Schools is a good place for education development.	6.12	1.001	1.002
Schooling provide better future for children's.	6.13	0.990	0.979
The government has provided basic needed facility.	5.70	1.203	1.447
Development of education infrastructures is needed.	6.05	1.009	1.019
With good education, the community will be better.	6.10	1.014	1.027
Parents have important role for children's education.	6.20	0.989	0.977
Employers need to be involved in education development.	5.97	1.010	1.020
National education budget needs to be improved.	6.16	1.062	1.129
Overall	6.0724	0.75761	0.574

Education opportunity equality

Table 7 shows the mean score of student's acceptance towards education opportunity equality. The average mean score is 5.43 which is considered as high acceptance. Respondents have high confidence that the community from all backgrounds have equal access to school and there is a fair competition environment at schools.

Table 7. Mean score of student's acceptance towards education opportunity equality.

Statements	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Variance
Citizens have equal access to schools.	5.54	1.340	1.796
Fair competition environment at schools.	5.57	1.229	1.510
Reasonable and effective financial aid system.	5.25	1.310	1.717
Fair enrolment for impoverished family.	5.37	1.224	1.498
Overall	5.4308	1.02916	1.059

Education procedure equality

Table 8 shows the mean score of student's acceptance towards education procedures equality. The average mean score is about 5.42 which is considered as high acceptance. Respondents has strong belief that school evaluation indicators can reflect the students' comprehensive ability and this may be related to teachers who provide attention to students according to their abilities.

Table 8. Mean score of student's acceptance towards education procedure equality.

Statements	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Variance
Teachers' attention to students according to their attitude.	5.42	1.186	1.407
Evaluation reflect the students' comprehensive ability.	5.48	1.136	1.289
Reward mechanism are sound and complete.	5.40	1.177	1.385
Reward evaluation procedure are transparent.	5.38	1.168	1.365
Overall	5.4188	0.96918	0.939

Education outcome equality

Table 9 shows the mean score of student's acceptance towards education outcome equality. The average mean score is about 5.57 which is considered as high acceptance. It can be concluded that respondents have a strong belief that students' performance and

development are linked to their efforts. Furthermore, their potential for employment is linked to their educational level.

Table 9. Mean score of student's acceptance towards education outcome equality.

Statements	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Variance
Students' academic performance and development status are linked to their personal abilities.	5.57	1.200	1.440
The National Education Philosophy, Education Acts 1996 etc. are equitable.	5.40	1.165	1.358
Students' performance and development status are linked to their efforts.	5.69	1.143	1.307
Students' (graduate) employment status is linked to their educational level.	5.63	1.165	1.358
Overall	5.5738	0.92522	0.856

Social opportunity equality

Table 10 shows the mean score of student's acceptance towards social opportunity equality. The average mean score is about 5.39 which is considered as high acceptance. According to it, respondents have high confidence that the nation provides education for all equally and equal rights in employment opportunities.

Table 10. Mean score of student's acceptance towards social opportunity equality.

Statements	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Variance
Citizens have equal rights in receiving education.	5.63	1.288	1.658
Citizens have equal rights in employment opportunities.	5.53	1.322	1.748
There is no difference in status between men and women.	5.35	1.535	2.357
National policies concerning benefit distribution are fair and reasonable.	5.22	1.431	2.049
All social classes have equal status.	5.24	1.359	1.846
Overall	5.3943	1.09670	1.203

Social procedure equality

Table 11 shows the mean score of student's acceptance towards social procedure equality. The average mean score is about 5.43 which is considered as high acceptance. According to it, respondents have a strong belief that the government valued citizen demand and government officials are honest and upright.

Table 11. Mean score of student's acceptance towards social procedure equality.

Statements	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Variance
The laws can protect citizens' legal rights.	5.08	1.474	2.173
Government officials are honest and upright.	5.18	1.363	1.857
The society takes more care of vulnerable groups.	5.16	1.366	1.865
Citizens' reasonable demands are valued by government.	5.32	1.376	1.892
Overall	5.4389	1.11012	1.232

Social outcome equality

Table 12 shows the mean score of student's perception towards social outcome equality. The average mean score is about 4.99 which is considered as moderate high. The highest score is on the belief that community social status is related to their personal income, although they agree that in the country there is equal pay for equal work.

Table 12. Mean score of student's acceptance towards social outcome equality.

Statements	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Variance
The gap between rich and poor is small.	4.70	1.785	3,185
The development gap between different regions is small.	4.89	1.633	2.665
Throughout the country there is equal pay for equal work.	5.02	1.641	2.694
The personal income can reflect one's social value.	5.37	1.546	2.390
Overall	4.9950	1.41302	1.997

Correlation between students' acceptance on education system and education equality

The overall mean score for all domains of study is shown in *Table 13*. *Table 14a* shows the correlation value between students' acceptance on education system and education equality, whereas *Table 14b* provide the interpretation of the score. The correlation value is between 0.382 to 0.430 and this result indicates that there is a low correlation between student acceptance on education system and all three components of education equality

Table 13. Overall mean score for each domain of study (variables).

Variables	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Variance
Students' acceptance on education system.	6.0724	.75761	.574
Student's acceptance towards education opportunity equality.	5.4308	1.02916	1.059
Student's acceptance towards education procedure equality.	5.4188	.96918	.939
Student's acceptance towards education outcome equality.	5.5738	.92522	.856
Student's acceptance towards social opportunity equality.	5.3943	1.09670	1.203
Student's acceptance towards social procedure equality.	5.4389	1.11012	1.232
Student's acceptance towards social outcome equality.	4.9950	1.41302	1.997

Table 14a. The Pearson's correlation value between the variables.

Variable	Education system	Education procedure equality	Education opportunity equality	Education outcome equality
Education system	1	.382**	.378**	.430**
Education procedure equality		1	.739**	.660**
Education opportunity equality			1	.533**
Education outcome equality				1

*Note: ** correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*

Table 14b. The interpretation of correlation scores between the variables.

Correlation value	Interpretation
1	Perfect Correlation (Positive/ Negative)
±0.90 to ±0.99	Very High Correlation (Positive/ Negative)
±0.70 to ±0.89	High Correlation (Positive/ Negative)
±0.50 to ±0.69	Moderate Correlation (Positive/ Negative)
±0.30 to ±0.49	Low Correlation (Positive/ Negative)
±0.10 to ±0.29	Very Low Correlation (Positive/ Negative)
±0.0 to ±0.09	No Correlation / Negligible

Correlation between students' acceptance on education system and social equality

Table 15 shows the correlation value between students' acceptance on education system and social equality. The correlation value is between 0.121 to 0.310 and this result indicates that there is a low correlation between student acceptance on education system and social procedure equality but very low correlation toward social opportunity equality and social outcome equality.

Table 15. *The Pearson's correlation value between the variables.*

Variable	Education system	Social procedure equality	Social opportunity equality	Social outcome equality
Education system	1	.310**	.298**	.121**
Social procedure equality		1	.980**	.555**
Social opportunity equality			1	.602**
Social outcome equality				1

*Note: ** correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*

The overall analysis of the study data showed that the university students' acceptance of education system is high. They highly regarded the existence of educational and social equality in the country. It encompassed the equalization of opportunities, procedures, and outcomes. However, the analysis also indicates that there is a low correlation between students' acceptance of the education system towards their belief in educational and social equality. The findings of this study open up a wide space for debate on the effectiveness of the education system in shaping people's thoughts and behaviours. As for local context, this finding may be contradicted to claim by Idris et al. (2012) that education contributes to the formation of national identity. In their study, Idris et al. did mention that the level of identity of graduates from a vernacular school's is lower than students with a background of religious schools and national schools. From the ministry perspective, it is clearly stated that the government is committed to providing equal access to quality education of an international standard for all Malaysian (KPM, 2013). The Ministry strives to ensure universal access and full enrolment of all children from preschool through to upper secondary school. Every Malaysian child deserves equal access to an education that will enable him or her to achieve his or her potential. However, it has long been known that Malaysian education policy has been influenced by many factors (Jamil, 2010). The plural nature of its society, the struggle for preserving ethnic and culture identities, and independent efforts of some ethnic communities to make provision for their mother tongue and the desire to maintain dominant ethnic group status and hegemony are amongst the challenges. These have also been complicated by the global demands and influences on the national educational system in this developing country. It is evident that there are multiple forces executing policy in different ways.

The highest score in the study is on student belief about the importance of schooling and the role of parents in education. The lowest score is their confidence in the equality in social outcomes regarding the disparity between rich and poor and the development of different regions. This finding is expected and reflects the awareness of the students about common social issues in society. Despite the policy drawn up and implemented and various inputs provided, it is believed that teachers possess the power to some forms of equity. In daily interactions with the students, the teachers are able to understand their needs, their cultures, and their ideas. The teachers must provide an atmosphere in which students can explore their own cultural understanding of the subjects learned and discover other perspectives on those same subjects. Having said that, the challenges to equity are still dominated by at least three factors. The first one is even by subjecting all children to the same curriculum, although it is still impossible to achieve the desired equality. The inborn differences among individuals are too fundamental to be obliterated. Compulsory schooling fails to achieve its egalitarian objective, but the consequences will be detrimental to any real opportunity. The second

one is the existence of a powerful force in society which will always strive to maintain its dominance. One way to ensure this dominance is by sending children to selected schools and in the case of Malaysia being participated by the Government itself. The third one is the confusion in the planning and implementation of the equity policy, and at time compounded with the .advocacy of meritocracy which always gains the upper hand in the policy formulation and implementation especially in the face of the need to meet the global challenges. It has been demonstrated that Malaysian education policy development has played a significant role in reinforcing the national agenda of developing the nation. These policies have been successful in reducing ethnic disparities, but on the other hand, they have also contributed to the creation of ethnic disparities. The issue of equality and equity of education and society will remain an essential issue for the government.

Conclusion

The awareness of university students on issues related to equality in education and social in society is important. They will eventually return to society and are required to develop and ensure the harmony and cohesiveness of society. All educational institutions must act to ensure the curriculum and activities are capable of enhancing students' understanding and awareness of equality issues in society. As for educators, they must realize that they are the most important and most influential factor in the education system to contribute to shaping the thinking and behaviour of students for the society.

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Conflict of interest

This study has given due consideration to the issue of conflicts of interest between the parties involved. The research group did not receive any remuneration or was in a position deemed to have an interest in the results of the study. The actual objective of this study is to provide exposure about educational sociology to a group of students. The involvement of students is supervised by lecturers (researchers) and given marks based on the scoring structure set by the academic committee at the institution. The findings of the study have been discussed with students for the purpose of achieving learning outcomes. The involvement of the respondents is voluntary. None of the parties involved in this study received financial or similar benefits that were not declared at any time before, during and after this study was conducted. The findings of the study were reauthored by the researcher to be published for academic purpose (for future learning) and are not used by any department in the research institution for promotional purposes etc.

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