

## Equity & Access to Higher Education in Aceh

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**In the future, Aceh may follow Australia as well as other countries, which have already decided equity and access as their key policy goal to higher education.**

### Abstract

*Higher education is a successful key for everyone in the current world. It is believed that there are still many people in Aceh who do not have proper access and equality to higher education level. The paper analyzes the equity and access to higher education in Aceh from gender, income, region and socio cultural perspectives. The analysis is aimed at supporting the educational policy to support the population of Aceh who do not have proper access to higher education. The results of this analysis indicate that the number of women enrolled in higher education is more than the number of men although the women proportion is very low when compared to the total university-age group. Other results also indicate that the lack of income, the uneven spread of universities and colleges throughout the region and the socio cultural beliefs have contributed to the lack of access and inequity to higher education in Aceh. The paper suggests that educators should advise policy makers in Aceh to make equity and access to higher education as a key policy goal with the important target groups are women, the poor and those living in remote areas.*

**Keywords:** *equity, access, higher education, gender, income-related, region-related, socio-cultural*

### INTRODUCTION

Aceh, also known as Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD), is a special territory located on the northern tip of Sumatra Island, Indonesia. It is a diverse region consisting 21 districts and city areas inhabited by approximately 4,031,589 people (BPS, 2005) from several ethnic groups and language backgrounds. In recent years, there has been an increase of people attending higher education in Aceh (Serambi Indonesia, 2007, April 25). However, World Bank (2007, p.6) reported that the distribution of students across the higher level of education in entire Indonesia, thus in this case including Aceh, was only six percent during the 2004-2005 academic year.

Therefore, I assume that there are still significant numbers of Aceh population underrepresented in higher education institutions. It is imperative that less privileged social classes and various ethnic groups living in the region, especially the minorities, have access to higher education. Through this paper, I want to analyze to what extent the participation in higher education in Aceh has reached all social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. I hope this analysis to be useful in the sense of deciding the educational policy to help those students who have no access to higher education in Aceh.

## **EQUITY, ACCESS, AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN ACEH**

Equity and access has become a very strong concept in the field of multicultural education. Arnez (1993) defined equity as fairness and justice, and access as freedom to make use of the contract process of public schools. This concept is often relative to group or ethnic minorities in a country in terms of their achievement.

Lee (1998) described minorities as variously defined in terms of their economic circumstances, political or religious beliefs, ethnic or linguistic background, and gender. It is difficult to collect data on minorities, since few governments that report data based on minority group membership especially in relation to educational access and equity.

The population of Aceh is mainly divided by ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. The majority of population is Acehnese (50%) spreading across Aceh. The minorities consist of Javanese (16%), Gayo Lut (6%), Gayo Luwes (5%), Alas (4%), Singkil (3%), and Simeulue (2%). There are other minority ethnic groups known as Tamiang, and Aneuk Jamee, and Chinese. The main religion is Islam (97.6%), followed by Christianity (1.7%), Hindu (0.08%), Buddhism (0.55%) ("Aceh," 2007).

According to BPS (2005) census, the current population in Aceh consists of 2,005,763 males and 2,025,826 females. The higher education age group (19-24 years old) indicates 188,989 males and 203,331 females. From this age group, there are only 17.53% of male and 19.08% of female attending higher education institutions. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) of Republic of Indonesia's (n.d.) statistic data shows that there are 48 higher education institutions available in Aceh, with 90,685 students enrolled during the 2003-2004 academic year. The numbers of lecturers were only 3,319 persons. BPS (2005) also concluded that the level of participating students in higher education was only 18.33%.

Obviously, the Chinese minority in Aceh is quite successful in terms of their economic and education. Meanwhile, the other minorities, in most cases, are disadvantaged in terms of welfare. Most ethnic minorities are also living in poverty across rural, remote and sparsely populated areas of the region where economic development is still growing slowly.

As the matter of fact, people from urban areas, rich households, and dominant ethnic and racial groups are overrepresented in higher education in Aceh, while people from rural areas, poor households, women and minority ethnic background groups are under-represented. Muhaimin (as cited by Sadiman, 2004) stated that generally educational disparities in Indonesia can be seen across geographical areas, urban and rural, between western and eastern part and among groups of people with varying income and gender.

## **ANALYZING THE EQUITY AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN ACEH**

In analyzing the equity and access to higher education in Aceh, I follow the theory described by Lee (1998) that the analysis of equity in Asia needs to consider four

factors: gender-related, income-related, region-related, and socio-cultural. Since Aceh and its people are part of Asia, these factors are likely to contribute in understanding the concept in the Aceh's context.

First, we have to see the number of females who have access to various types of higher education institutions, their achievement and success in education, and their opportunities to benefit from education to enhance their life quality. The data from BPS (2005) shows that number of males attending higher education institutions is less than females. This fact indicates that women in Aceh already have a significant access to higher education. However, it is not clear whether this fact represents women living in both rural and urban areas or over-represents women living in urban area. Surprisingly, the previous data reveals the fact that only 19.08 % of women in Aceh who have access to higher education. Thus, it seems that other 80.92 % of women do not enjoy this benefit. I assume that some factors such as financial support, community beliefs, local tradition and values contribute significantly in limiting women's access to higher education. In this matter, sometimes women also could be seen as minorities in certain respects, and their educational opportunities are very much limited by socio-cultural perceptions on women that are unfavorable for them to continue and receive higher education.

Second, we need to take into account income-related equity that refers to the access of financially disadvantaged minority groups to various levels of higher education and their opportunities to succeed in higher education. Sadiman (2004) explained how many lower-income people do not see the benefit of sending their children to school after seeing the fact that many school or even university graduates cannot find any job and remain unemployed. The unemployment rate in Aceh is very high. The poverty rate is 49.7 % if the standard of earning is US\$1 per day (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), 2007). Since the higher education expenses are usually expensive, only people with good income may have the opportunity to go to higher education. This situation reveals the fact that access to higher education in Aceh is still difficult due to income-related problem.

Third, we have to consider region-related equity that refers to the educational opportunities of the people living in disadvantaged areas throughout Aceh. The minorities in Aceh, except the Chinese, generally live in areas where economic development is growing slowly. Hence, equity and access to higher education is still limited since most higher education institutions are mainly located in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh, and several other district seats (i.e. city of Sigli, Lhokseumawe, Langsa, Meulaboh) where the Acehnese, the majority ethnic group, dominate the population. Acehnese in these cities enjoy better access to higher education.

Fourth, we have to be aware of socio-cultural equity that refers to the educational opportunities of socio-culturally disadvantaged groups. Frederick and Worden (1993) explained that the concept of ethnic minorities in Indonesia is often discussed not in numerical but in religious terms. In Aceh, basically, people are divided by being Muslim or non-Muslim and it is indicated on the identification card. Being a non-Muslim in Aceh could be considered as a disadvantage since almost all higher education institutions in Aceh are dominated by Muslim.

To this end, there is no such official data indicated the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions in Aceh based on their ethnic backgrounds. Collecting such data will probably break out the harmony that people from different ethnic groups currently enjoy. Lee (1998) supported this view that some countries adopt official policies to promote unity and discourage collection of data by minority status.

What are the best things to do by educators and educational policy makers to overcome the problem? The development and implementation of open education and learning system is likely to improve the equity and access to higher education in Aceh. According to Sadiman (2004), this strategy has been conducted in Indonesia, which is called Open Learning University or Universitas Terbuka. Open learning using radio and television becomes a good solution since the prevalent problems such as disadvantaged regions, limited time, lack of income and insufficient learning facilities might be solved.

Another way to improve equity and access to higher education in Aceh as suggested by Sadiman (2004) is by providing free education from primary school to university level. Consequently, the government of Aceh must provide extra funding to support the teaching expenses. During my five-year study at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, I saw that the education under the umbrella of Al-Azhar was free of charge from the primary level to the university level (even the doctorate program was free!). This fact has made Al-Azhar University accessible by everyone in Egypt and the world, regardless their gender status, male and female.

## **A REFLECTION TO “CURRENT” ACEH SITUATION**

I realize that observing the higher education situation in Aceh through the concept of equity and access makes more difference than looking it from the general perspective. It is clear for us who get the advantage to learn in higher education institutions and who do not. It is very important for the government of Aceh and its legislative council as well as the educational policy makers to assure that everyone has access and equity towards higher education.

It is essential for educators to be able to examine facts related to equity and access carefully and work to address inequities in any community throughout Aceh region. There are indeed minority groups in Aceh who are missing the opportunities to higher education. In addition, media and the community should be reminded to investigate carefully the entire academic system in Aceh in order to eliminate the fact that the poor continue to be left behind the rich.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although Hollenshead & Miller (2000) stated that the higher one looks in higher education the fewer women one sees, it is obvious that in Aceh the number of women enrolled in higher education is more than the number of men. However, the women proportion in higher education is very low when compared to the total university-age group.

Based on the previous data, I conclude that minorities in Aceh still do not have proper access to higher education. Issues of gender-related, income-related, region and socio-

cultural equities and uneven access to higher education should be regarded seriously. The equity and access to higher education could be achieved through a more equitable education system in Aceh such as establishing open learning university and providing free education to the university level.

As suggested by World Bank (2007), the government should allocate educational funds to provide the slow growing regions sufficient resources so that they can perform better in educational achievement. Educators should advise the policy makers in Aceh to make equity and access to higher education a key policy goal with the important target group those people living in disadvantaged regions, the poor, and women.

In the future, Aceh may follow Australia as well as other countries, which have already decided equity and access as their key policy goal to higher education. The participation in higher education by the Australian aboriginal minority group has increased significantly from less than 1,500 students to more than 4,000 after the policy implemented in 1988 (Higher Education Authority, 2004).

(Mth - [www.acehinstitute.org](http://www.acehinstitute.org))

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