

INDIGENOUS STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE OF RAUB PAHANG.

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Abstract: *This study aims to analyse the challenges that indigenous students face in pursuing higher education. Indigenous students are a group of people who often face difficulties and obstacles in accessing higher education. Despite having a strong desire to pursue education at a higher level, indigenous students often encounter various challenges. Using a qualitative method, data was collected through interviews with four counsellors in selected high schools at Raub. Based on the findings, there are four factors identified that lead to challenges among indigenous students from the teacher's perspective. The factors are mentality, low self-confidence, improper financial planning, and language barrier have become significant reasons to discourage indigenous students from pursuing higher education. For mentality factor leave the family and students feel comfortable with current lifestyle. Students also have difficulties dealing with self-confidence levels to take part in the learning process. We also found that most indigenous students are not facing a lack of financial support but rather having improper financial management. School funds have been used for other purposes rather than spending on education expenditure. Many indigenous students have low mastery skills in Bahasa Melayu thus limiting their ability to gain knowledge in school. All these factors are contributing to challenges faced by indigenous students to further study in the future. In the future, the study will proceed to investigate the challenges of pursuing higher education from indigenous students' perspective.*

Keywords: *Challenges, Higher Education, Indigenous People, Raub*

Introduction

The Twelfth Malaysia Plan, scheduled for the period of 2021-2025, aims to tackle existing challenges while revitalizing Malaysia's socio-economic development for long-term sustainability and prosperity. This comprehensive plan, with the goal of 'A Prosperous, Inclusive, Sustainable Malaysia,' seeks to empower Malaysians by progressing through the restructuring of the economy as a fundamental step towards enhancing the well-being of the people (PMO, 2021). The successful implementation and achievement of the objectives and goals outlined in the Twelfth Plan heavily rely on the commitment of Malaysians to foster economic growth and advance socioeconomics. To boost economic growth and advance socioeconomics, the Malaysian government needs to prioritize the acceleration of human capital development through the provision of high-quality higher education.

Providing higher education to the future talent not only facilitates economic growth and socio-economic development of a nation, but also contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development, n.d.). This goal emphasizes the importance of quality education, promoting inclusive and equitable access to education, and fostering lifelong learning opportunities for all individuals. Attaining SDG 4 is important for a country because it empowers people, lowers poverty and inequality, supports economic growth, advances gender equality, promotes an inclusive and peaceful society, and assures sustainable development (Education for Sustainable Development 2023). Education is a fundamental right and a major factor in the advancement of human development in all areas.

In Malaysia, education has always been highly valued by the government. Despite considerable investments and focus on the education sector by the Malaysian government, the development, and achievements of the Indigenous people of Malaysia, have significantly lagged behind other ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, and Indians. For indigenous students, the journey to higher education is often fraught with difficulties and obstacles that limit their access to academic opportunities (Battiste, 2013; Fredericks, 2019). Despite the acknowledged importance of higher education in fostering personal growth, expanding career opportunities, and promoting socio-economic development, indigenous students face significant challenges that hinder their access to academic opportunities. These obstacles impede their readiness and participation in higher education, thus limiting their ability to pursue higher educational aspirations.

Past studies have highlighted several barriers faced by indigenous students in accessing higher education. The barriers include socio-economic factors (Singhal, 2019; Baker, 2019; Ghani et al., 2020), socio-cultural factors (Wahab et al., 2013; Hasssan and Ramli, 2020; Rosnon and Talib, 2019), geographical factors (Sawalludin et al., 2020; Isa et al., 2016; Marzuki et al., 2014; Nor et al., 2011) and limited awareness about the benefits of higher education (Isa et al., 2016; Jamiran & Seow, 2013; Abdullah et al., 2023). Building upon these past studies, our research attempts to identify and comprehend the challenges encountered by indigenous students in their pursuit of higher education focusing on the town of Raub, Pahang. By interviewing the experiences of high school counsellors, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on indigenous students' access to higher education by investigating the barriers that hinder them to pursue higher education.

Literature Review

Generally, the Orang Asli in Malaysia continues to attain relatively low levels of overall educational achievement, and the number of Orang Asli children and teenagers leaving primary and secondary schools is still continuing.

However, over the past few decades, the socioeconomic status of indigenous people has changed, and their economy is now more developed than it was in the past. Although there have been advancements, they have occurred slowly (Jamiran & Seow, 2013). Poverty and a poor quality of life continue to be problems among indigenous peoples. Education is the way to achieve the objective of eliminating poverty among them and enhancing their standard of living. Although efforts have been made to help the indigenous community, the various challenges faced are delaying the process. Based on previous literature, some of the challenges faced by indigenous communities in education are related to economics, socio-cultural factors, awareness, and geographical location (e.g. Abdullah et al., 2023; Sawalludin et al., 2020).

Economic

Past studies have identified economic factors play a significant role as barriers to students pursuing higher education (e.g. Singhal 2019; Baker 2019). Some parents are not aware that school fees are voluntary and are instead described as mandatory. Other than fees, the school also requires many expenses including food, accommodation, traveling, and many more. Thus, a family who is not ready to provide adequate financial support for higher education may lead to financial strain for the students. This phenomenon is more obvious for a student who comes from a low-income family as their priority is to provide food for day-to-day survival. Hence, education is less likely perceived as important to children. In addition, a study among the indigenous community found that most Orang Asli have only completed primary school (Ghani et al., 2020). Based on the low level of education qualification, most of them are unable to obtain a fixed salary making them unable to increase their family economy status. As a result, the family would not prioritize education and discourage the children from going to school.

Socio-Cultural

The parental influence is one of the variables that contributes to Orang Asli's poorer performance in the educational system. The majority of Orang Asli people, particularly the parents, are unaware of the value of education in enhancing their own and their children's lives. This is due to the fact that the majority of them have never obtained any kind of official education, and only a small number of people continue their education above the first grade before dropping out. Many of them leave school sooner, get married to the love of their life, and start working for their family at a very young age. Given the circumstances that have arisen, these parents are seen as uneducated individuals who are unable to set a positive example for their children regarding the value of education in general (Deli and Yasin, 2016).

Low self-esteem and aversion to social engagement among Orang Asli students have been linked to poor academic performance (Wahab et al. 2013; Hasssan and Ramli, 2020). As indicated by the rising number of Orang Asli school dropouts in Perak, Malaysia, which is 40.01 percent (2015), 42.43 percent (2016), 42.90 percent (2017), and 51.06 percent (2018) (Suara Perak, 2019), relatively stated that indigenous parents in rural areas ignore their children's education, leading to high school dropout rates (Wahab et al. 2013; Hasssan and Ramli, 2020). The Orang Asli rejected the mainstream education system because it assimilates them with mainstream society, despite the government introducing parental engagement in school to close the education gap among Orang Asli. The Orang Asli community needs an education system

that is focused on their group since they are fiercely loyal to their culture, customs, and protocol. The inspiring ideas of the Orang Asli community should be integrated into the national education system through full participation, as the current strategy for closing the achievement gap is exclusive and disregards cultural differences, which puts pressure on, discriminates against, and isolates Orang Asli students in mainstream education (Rosnon and Talib, 2019).

Awareness

The indigenous community's awareness of the importance of education is still low, which has turned into a barrier for them to pursue studies at a higher level (Isa et al., 2016; Jamiran & Seow, 2013; Abdullah et al., 2023). Most indigenous people, especially parents, are unaware of the importance of education in enhancing both their own and their children's lives (Abdullah et al., 2023). They have a view that education is not at all necessary because they have historically lived in secluded and underdeveloped settlements that are located in remote areas. Although various methods and policies have been implemented, the perception that education is not important is difficult to change (Isa et al., 2016). The indigenous community's mindset has an impact on indigenous students' academic success as well. They believe that life can still go on even without a high education (Isa et al., 2016). The world is becoming more globalised, but their way of thinking has not kept up. In this age of globalisation, education is a crucial tool for development. The mindset of the indigenous people, who merely accept whatever is available without making an effort to better themselves or their living standards, also affects the mentality of their children, who continue to live in substandard conditions (Isa et al., 2016). There are undoubtedly indigenous children who succeed in continuing their education at a higher level, though. However, they are unable to influence or change the mindset of the rest of their community, which downplays the value of education (Isa et al., 2016). A study conducted by Singh and Reyhner (2013) shows that awareness of the importance of education among the children of the indigenous people has existed for a long time, but the influence of culture has narrowed their mentality to change their lifestyle and standard of living. Even their parents are aware of the importance of education. The academic success of indigenous children is also impacted by the poor educational levels of their parents. This is a result of their inability to support their kids' academic endeavors.

Geographical

Indigenous people also face considerable obstacles to acquiring a formal education due to their geographical location (Sawalludin et al., 2020; Isa et al., 2016; Marzuki et al., 2014; Nor et al., 2011). In general, it is known that the majority of indigenous community settlements are typically situated in rural locations, far from towns and cities that have developed with good infrastructure and amenities. The nearest school is quite a distance from the homes; even their connectivity, such as paved roads and bridges, is not well developed. As a result, public transport like buses cannot be offered due to their poor connectivity. The transportation modes to schools are poor and frequently unsafe and risky (Sawalludin et al., 2020; Nor et al., 2011). Due to this circumstance, the children now find the trip to school from home to be highly time-consuming, which discourages them from continuing their studies (Sawalludin et al., 2020). Some indigenous students attend well-endowed schools with good physical facilities that are situated in less remote areas, but their attendance is not satisfactory (Nor et al., 2011). The indigenous community settlements struggle with a lack of infrastructure, which prevents them from improving their level of education. The lack of water and electricity infrastructure makes it difficult for schools to operate effectively. Due to the few accessible roads, it is difficult for educational resources, such as textbooks, teaching aids, and learning materials, to arrive on time, which will cause the teaching and learning process to be delayed (Sawalludin et

al., 2020). There is a gap in the provision of facilities and the placement of teachers as a result of its geographic location in rural and remote areas. The majority of Orang Asli schools in rural areas also exhibit a very significant digital divide (Isa et al., 2016). The digital divide is a discrepancy in the accessibility of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities, which are typically present in rural areas. The knowledge and skills of using and integrating ICT in education are very important in shaping and upgrading the educational progress of indigenous students so that they do not lag behind others in this country (Isa et al., 2016).

Methodology

This study had been conducted in three secondary schools around Raub Pahang namely SMK Tengku Kudin, SMK (P) Methodist, and SMK Mahmud. These three schools are foster schools for the Faculty of Business Management at UiTM Raub Campus. Moreover, this school is a settlement of indigenous students who come from various districts. Four school representatives from these three schools were interviewed to obtain information for this empirical study (please refer to Table 1). This study used a qualitative research approach to allow the researcher to explore deeper into the area of challenges faced by indigenous students in pursuing higher education. All questions were open-ended and formulated concerning the broad purpose of the study and the existing literature. The interview questions focused on the participants' general background such as a number of indigenous students and teaching experience in that school. In relation to the study objective, respondents were also asked about indigenous students' motivation and challenges for pursuing higher education. Respondents are free to express their opinion and as the interview progressed, probing questions were also added when necessary. By conducting interviews with the respondents, we managed to obtain first-hand and up-to-date insights by storing their experiences and knowledge on challenges faced by indigenous students.

Table 1: The counseling teacher demographics

Counsellor	Gender	Age	Counseling experience	School
C1	F	41	16 years	SMK Tengku Kudin
C2	F	40	15 years	SMK Tengku Kudin
C3	F	45	22 years	SMK Mahmud
C4	F	34	4 months (replacement)	SMK (P) Methodist

We interviewed two counseling teachers at SMK Tengku Kudin and one counselor at SMK Mahmud as well as at SMK (P) Methodist. These teachers were all female and they were highly experienced and competent in managing assessments to determine Orang Asli students' strengths, weaknesses, interests, and aptitudes. They also work closely with those students to develop and improve their skill sets. Before conducting research, a semi-structured interview was developed based on the research objectives. The interviews were carried out in June 2023 at the counseling teacher's office in their free time during the school day. The data obtained from the respondents were transcribed and analyzed manually.

Findings and Discussion

All the respondents reported their experiences dealing with indigenous students in their school. When asked about the challenges of indigenous students in pursuing higher education, respondents elaborated on several factors that mirrored the findings of the literature review. Surprisingly, they also discussed further aspect of these findings and raised interesting points.

Mentality

Our findings showed that indigenous students are having a similar set of mentality for staying comfortable. This mentality was formed early in the family, which is difficult to change. And it is passed from generation to generation. This mentality may come in many ways including perception towards school, financial management, and life. Firstly, most indigenous parents understand that education is important but finishing high school is good enough for them. We can observe that some of Orang Asli's parents do give support to send their children to school at least to complete Form 5. Their mindset is just to make sure their children get basic knowledge on education and hope they help the family financially after finishing school. This is something that is expected from their parents thus making the students form a set of thinking that they just want to complete high school. Most parents do not set aspirations for them to pursue higher education.

"The parent wants their children to go to school and finish up until Form 5 only. To them, that is good enough for their children. They still do not understand the importance of continuing or furthering study in higher institutions." (C1, C2)

Secondly, another set of mentality is to get married earlier especially among indigenous girls. For indigenous families, there is a belief that girls who marry at 20 are considered late in marriage. Also, it is normal for indigenous students to get married during school years, especially during school breaks. Among indigenous communities getting married early is considered a blessing and therefore, there is a high possibility for them to leave school and focus the married life.

"Majority of the Orang Asli parents do force their children to get married at an earlier age at 15 years old. Sometimes female students are willing to settle down and get married during the school holiday breaks. I was shocked when one of the students came and told me that she had got married and wanted to leave the school immediately. It was my first experience since I'm a replacement counselor." (C4)

Thirdly, the indigenous family also has a comfortable mentality regarding financial aid provided by the government. Currently, Jabatan Orang Asli is responsible for taking care of the welfare of Orang Asli such as by providing financial support. It is known that Indigenous communities have received a lot of financial aid which led them to feel comfortable when it comes to education funding. This set of mentality causes the parents to be less responsible as they believe that the government will not neglect the indigenous community.

"Parents do not worry about their children's daily expenses and their cost of living at school as they are fully supported financially by the government besides other NGOs." (C2)

"There were no school fee charges, and students were fully given a free hostel to stay in together with three meals daily. They were also provided with school uniforms, daily needs at the hostel such as detergent for washing clothes, and other basic needs. The students are also given daily pocket money during school days." (C1 & C2)

"Some of the students did mention to their counselor that they feel better about being at school because they are fully covered and sponsored with food, money,

and everything. To them studying well is not their main passion as long as they feel safe and survive at school,” (C3)

In addition, the comfortable mentality also leads the parents to believe that school should provide support even after they finish high school. Even though the parents permit their children to study further, they are expecting the school and teacher to handle their children including the registration and travel. The family believes that they can pass over the responsibility to teachers as they believe it is their advantage to be indigenous people. It shows that the orang Asli is unable to be independent which leads to the lower self-development. This finding supports the findings stated that indigenous parents are still having low awareness of higher education for their children (Isa et al., 2016; Abdullah et al., 2023). A comfortable mentality imposes challenges among students in pursuing studies as their parents are not aware of the benefit of better education qualifications.

“There was a case when one of my Orang Asli students got an offer to continue study at one of the higher institutions. The parents were doing nothing about it and handed over the responsibility to me to manage and help with their children’s registration fully. I’m willing to help fill up the forms but not to the extent of sending the students to the university on the registration date. To me, this is too much.” (C1)

“Indigenous students always feel satisfied with what they have achieved. Most of them feel happy when they have completed their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination even though they got bad results”. (C3)

“I had bumped into a few of my ex-students who have finished their studies in school. They expressed their happy feeling about earning a minimum salary of RM1000 from their employer. They feel glad and great to be employed working at the supermarket and convenience stores in town. To them that is their highest achievement in their life.” (C1, C2 & C3)

” Frankly, some of the students are coming to school or staying in the hostel just to ensure they continually receive financial aid. Thus, it is common for indigenous parents to send their kids out to school to secure financial support not to have better education access,” (C3)

The comfortable mentality led them to take education as easy and unnecessary since with Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia they manage to earn a minimum salary. The respondent also claimed that the indigenous community's mentality regarding education heavily relies on high school and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. Government support, especially in terms of financial aid forms a set of mentality of comfort. Thus, this will make them to be less responsible and unable to see the importance of having a higher level of education. They believe this is a comfortable life they can live, so why should they struggle to do unfamiliar matters such as pursuing higher-level education?

Low self-confidence

Based on the interview, we also found that some indigenous students have low levels of self-confidence. Their level of self-confidence is affected by many factors such as the language barrier. In school, the Malay language is widely used as a medium of instruction and teaching. For native Malay language speakers, this is not an issue, but indigenous students may find the

Malay language is difficult to comprehend. Most of them use their native language such as Semai thus, making students be less confident to communicate and interact with teachers and friends.

"I usually mix up the students in class regardless of their religion and race. The indigenous students seem to feel low self-confidence especially when they are surrounded by other majority races when it comes to group activities. They seem to be a bit quiet in the group especially when it deals with role-play activities." (C4)

"From my observation, they feel more comfortable with their community, especially during recess or break time. If they are asked by the teachers to mix with Malays or other races, they say that they don't stand out and turn up less talking to each other". (C1, C2, C3 & C4)

Most of the respondents agreed that language limitations make indigenous students more comfortable interacting with their community which causes them to not actively participate in class and school activities. To be successful in the teaching and learning process, it must involve effective communication between teachers and students. Language barriers can have a significant impact on one's self-esteem. Communication is a crucial component of human contact, and failing to communicate effectively in a language that is not your native tongue can result in feelings of frustration, loneliness, low self-esteem, and low self-confidence. Their attributes of low self-esteem and shyness have limited their opportunity to compete with other majority races and been left further behind in the progression.

Language Barrier

Indigenous communities populated in Raub widely speak the Semai Language. During primary education, the indigenous students as a school in their village and commonly interact with their people using Semai. Meanwhile, when they enter secondary school, some of the indigenous students have difficulties participating in academic activities because Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan uses Bahasa Melayu. This allowed their interaction with other races to be limited and to understand Bahasa Melayu. For example, in class, while teachers are explaining something the indigenous students feel bored as they do not understand the language. And some may just fall asleep showing less interest in the subject. Teachers also have difficulty encouraging the indigenous students actively involved in class activities as they are not able to communicate well. Some students refuse to respond to teachers' questions even though they have tried to persuade them to try even if their answer is wrong. The teacher also allows the students to speak in their language to make them feel more comfortable.

"During teaching and learning sessions conducted, I do encourage the students to speak or talk in Semai language, as long as they want to participate in class if they don't understand or are unable to reply using Bahasa Melayu. But most of them refuse to do so. It might be because they feel ashamed to expose the language to me or feel shy to speak in the Semai language among other friends". (C1)

"I think I can learn the Semai language, it may not take so long time to learn it but, the students themselves refuse to use Semai language even having a small group discussion with the teachers. They would rather use their language among their community", (C1)

The inability of indigenous students to master the Bahasa Melayu may lead to low motivation of study. As they perceive secondary education is difficult thus leads to low interest in pursuing higher-level education.

Improper financial management

From the interview, we discover that indigenous students do not have less financial support but somehow, they are not able to manage money wisely for education (Singhal 2019; Baker 2019). These students are provided with many financial supports such as daily pocket money by Jabatan Kebajikan Orang Asli. But most of the money was spent for outside food and internet. It shows that the students are fully supported with financial, but their priorities are not meant for education. The students are not fully aware of the importance of education which requires a lot of expenses (i.e. school activities fees).

"I quite often saw the students buying outside foods after school time. They usually went to the nearby Petronas Station located next to their hostel. Some of them purchased junk food and also top-up their handphone credit, they usually used their daily pocket money provided by the school. Some of them tend to finish up the total cash that they had in their pocket". (C1)"

Based on the interview, it is found that the students have experienced easy money as they received money support such as food, accommodation, and pocket money. However, it seems that the financial aid has led them in a comfortable zone which not helping them to excel in education or school. The students are comfortable and gain a lot of support thus making them refuse to work hard to succeed. They feel that, if this is what they could receive (e.g., pocket money, food) so why do they need to struggle adventure new things such as study?

"Sometimes the schoolteachers and counsellor do have a social activity in Orang Asli village with their community. We always observed that they are eagerly waiting for us to come and expect us to bring along food or any groceries to them." (C3)

This situation shows that the indigenous community is comfortable with aid and support from other parties until it becomes a pleasant condition for them. Consequently, indigenous children also adopt the same pattern of perception and complacent mindset that, government agencies or other parties are supposed to provide them with all the aid, not them should hard work.

Conclusion

The findings from this study lead us to believe that indigenous students face four major challenges, including mentality, language barriers, low self-confidence, and poor financial management, which contribute to their lack of interest in pursuing higher education. This is not surprising because indigenous students have persistently poor self-esteem, regardless of gender, level of study, year of study, or whether they are first-generation or not. This is impacted by their socioeconomic origins and is compounded by their poorer academic achievement and disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances in comparison to non-indigenous classmates. It happened because of a lack of institutional support for indigenous students, yet Malaysian public universities can offer academic and counselling support to assist them in adapting academically and socially (Primus et al., 2017). To ensure the objective is achieved, it requires a multifaceted approach to address these challenges. It is envisaged that the authority would be able to increase Orang Asli's academic attainment in the future through more effective planning and better execution of education programs.

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