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Higher Education and Social Mobility: The Role of the University of Malaya

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Social Imbalances in Malaysia

During the last decade, Malaysia has been extremely sensitive to the regional, ethnic and social imbalances that persist in its society. Numerous economic and social programmes and projects have been initiated with a view to eradicating these imbalances. High on priority are efforts to improve educational opportunities of the depressed groups with the implicit assumption that increased educational opportunities for all and special sponsorship of the disadvantaged groups will produce the necessary changes in the social structure. Malaysia hopes to 'restructure society' by correcting economic imbalances, primarily through education playing a vital role.¹

Post-war Malaysia inherited the class system of a colonial society, described by Furnival as 'plural'.² It was a society based on 'race' as a criterion for social prestige.³ At the top was the European Veneer and below it, three parallel ethnic social systems of the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. Differences of language, custom and religion ran parallel with distinctions of race. Unequal degrees of urbanisation and industrialisation or participation in the modern sector of the economy led to differential rates of economic development, incomes and educational achievements.⁴

The small group of elites consisted of Malays in the administrative service, and Chinese and Indians in the professions and business enterprises. However, in the small middle class, the more urbanised Chinese and Indians were over-represented while the more rural-based Malays, engaged primarily in agricultural activities, made up the bulk of the lower status group. Efforts at industrialisation and modernisation, generally, succeeded in the advancement of the already advantaged Chinese and Indians. Instead of breaking down ethnic barriers and eradicating social and economic differences, the process of industrialisation adjusted to the patterns of race relations in the country. Ethnic differences and imbalances were thus to all intents becoming further entrenched. Race riots in May 1969 drew dramatic attentions to these imbalances and impressed upon the government the need to re-shape the social system to a 'just society'.

The New Economic Policy

It is in the context of serious dissatisfaction with a social structure where race and economic function ran parallel that the Malaysian Government has set out to formulate the policies that have guided national and educational development in the 1970s. The underlying policy, generally referred to as the New Economic Policy (NEP), is clearly enunciated in the Second and Third Malaysia Plans. The educational implications of the NEP are numerous but briefly, education is expected to help eradicate poverty by providing educational and training programmes to enable persons to move from the traditional to the more productive modern sectors of the economy. Education may also be expected to help restructure society by providing improved education and training programmes so that the identification of race with particular forms of economic activity will disappear. Closing the gap in educational opportunities among regions and races is stipulated as one of the major educational objectives of the NEP. The need to extend greater educational opportunities among those in the lower income groups and regions in the country is further reiterated in the Third Malaysia Plan.⁵

Education and Social Mobility

The faith placed by the Malaysian authorities in education as the agent of social restructuring appears justified in view of the large body of sociological theory and empirical research which establishes a positive link between education, that is the process of formal instruction in schools, colleges and universities, and social mobility. Education is recognised as an agent or channel of upward social mobility. High educational achievement is pursued by members of all social groups in order to maintain existing high social positions or to improve upon low social status.

Recent research in education and social mobility has revealed that education alone does not play a vital role in status attainment. Rather, it is education buttressed by social origins that ensure high social status. While numerous studies have questioned the *primary* role of education in promoting social mobility, all the studies have ascertained the persistence of status dependence upon educational attainment. It would appear that, other things being equal such as social origins, high educational attainment may make a significant difference in status attainment.⁶

The link between education and social position is clearly occupation. Education is expected to promote mobility primarily by training lower status youths to take positions in tertiary occupations. The role of education is especially clear in the movement of persons into the top echelons of society. Access to formal education channels is certainly a prerequisite for entry into the established professions.⁷

Higher Education and Social Mobility in Malaysia

An investigation carried out in Petaling Jaya in 1974 into the relationship between education and occupational status in a Malaysian community revealed that education in general, and higher education in particular, play a vital role in the movement of persons from low social origins into high social status. The rate and intensity of mobility are related to the level of education. Those with a high level of

education—college or university education—are the most likely to move and they move a greater social distance than others with lower levels of education, namely secondary and primary schooling. Higher education plays the most significant part in ensuring a high status first job which, in turn, sets the person on the path to further career mobility. With good career beginning, there is very little chance of sliding down. Hence, the surest guarantee for mobility seems to be a high point of entry on the occupational and social scale.⁸

In view of the fact that higher education promotes the greatest mobility, attention must necessarily be focussed on the accessibility of higher education to persons from different social groups in any evaluation of the role of education in social mobility and restructuring. In Malaysia, for instance, higher education generally has expanded at a rapid rate with enrolments growing from 13,324 in 1970 to 31,529 in 1975, marking an increase of 136.6%.⁹ While it is satisfying to note such rapid increase in higher education opportunities, it is of crucial importance to studies of social restructuring to take cognizance of the social origins of those in institutions of higher learning.

The Survey and Its Findings

For the purpose of determining the extent to which institutions of higher learning in Malaysia are promoting the mobility of youths from lower social groups, an established institution of higher learning—the University of Malaya—was selected for study. A representative sample of final-year students was selected in 1976 from the existing Faculties of Arts and Social Science, Science, Economics, Education, Engineering, Dentistry, Law and Medicine. It was assumed that since these students were at the end of their university studies, they would soon move into high managerial, executive, and professional jobs that would most certainly place them in the upper crust of Malaysian Society. An expose of the social origins of the final-year students of the University of Malaya would certainly establish the extent to which this university, in particular, and other institutions of higher learning, in general, acted as agents of social mobility and restructuring in Malaysia.

A total of 678 students were surveyed and information pertaining to their social origins (race, sex and course of studies) was gathered through a structured questionnaire.

Father's occupation was used as the primary measure of status of origin. Occupations were rated on a five point prestige scale as follows:

1. high professional, managerial and administrative
2. semi-professional, lower level managerial and executive
3. clerical, sales, supervisory and technical
4. skilled-manual
5. semi-skilled and unskilled-manual

In presenting the data, however, the first two categories were collapsed to represent the high status occupations and the last two categories were collapsed to represent the low status occupations. The middle category was retained as representative of the middle-level status occupations.

To ascertain the opportunities of students from different social backgrounds to pursue higher education, the overall pattern of recruitment into the University of Malaya was studied. The data were further analysed to gauge the extent to which the University of Malaya acted as a channel of mobility for each ethnic and sex group. Finally, an attempt was made to determine which faculties were more 'open' or acted more effectively as channels of mobility, allowing a freer entry of students with low status origins.

(A) Social Class Recruitment Patterns in the University of Malaya

The data establish conclusively that the University of Malaya promotes very effectively youths from lower status homes to high professional occupations, a movement which certainly ensures them a place in the upper stratum of the Malaysian society (See Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of University of Malaya Students by Social Origins

Father's Status Category	Number	Percentage
High	86	12.7
Middle	195	28.7
Low	397	58.6
Total	678	100.0

Table 1 reveals clearly that more than half (58.6%) of the students in the final year at the University of Malaya had origins in low status families which comprised the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers. Many of them were in fact from the lowest social category, that is, their parents were among the poor farmers, rubber tappers, labourers and other manual workers. Only a very small proportion of the students (12.7%) had parents in the high status group, that is, the professional, managerial and executive groups, while 28.8% had parents in the middle-level clerical sales and supervisory groups. Dividing the parents into two major groups, the manual and non-manual, it may be concluded that only 41.4% of the parents of students at the University of Malaya worked in non-manual occupations.

These findings appear startling for a developing country such as Malaysia where it may be naturally assumed that the children of the professional, managerial and clerical classes enjoy an edge over the children of manual workers to acquire higher education. However, these findings should not be taken to mean that among Malaysians generally, the children of manual workers are getting better opportunities to obtain higher education. It should be firmly borne in mind that there are as many students overseas in universities and colleges as there are in Malaysian institutions of higher learning and among these overseas students, the children of the upper social group predominate. We may legitimately assume here that the University of Malaya and probably other tertiary institutions in Malaysia cater effectively for the group of students who, otherwise, would not be able to afford to pursue higher education.

These results are the outcome of a deliberate policy to improve the position of the disadvantaged and close social and economic gaps. They are achieved by a policy of favouring disadvantaged and poor social and economic and regional groups essentially through the award of scholarships and loans which govern admissions. As an agent of social mobility, the University of Malaya performs its function admirably.

(B) Ethnic Patterns of Recruitment

In Malaysia, where ethnic imbalances and their rectification are matters of great political significance, it is necessary to ascertain whether the University of Malaya has acted equally or differentially as a channel of upward social mobility for each of the major ethnic groups. These findings are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Distribution of University of Malaya Students by Race and Social Origins

Race		Father's Status			
		High	Middle	Low	Total
Malay	N	34	68	133	235
	%	14.4	28.9	56.7	100.0
Chinese	N	38	108	239	385
	%	9.9	28.0	62.1	100.0
Indian	N	9	12	14	35
	%	25.6	34.3	40.1	100.0

From Table 2, it may be summarised that for both the major ethnic groups, the Chinese and the Malays, the University of Malaya almost equally provided higher educational opportunities to children from lower status families. Among the Malays, 56.6% and among the Chinese, 62.1% of the students were the children of low status parents. On the other hand, only 14.2% Malays and 9.9% Chinese students had originated in the high status group. Both ethnic groups had about 28% students from middle class families.

In view of the socio-economic backwardness and the special sponsorship of the Malay community, it was anticipated that the places reserved for the Malays would be taken up largely by students from lower social status groups. On the other hand, because of the large number of Indian and Chinese students competing for the remaining places, and the natural tendency of the upper classes to exert their influence, a larger proportion of the students at the University were expected to be of high and middle class parentage. That this was not the case for the Chinese might reflect the fact that the Chinese from the upper classes were mostly abroad, leaving places at the University of Malaya for those from lower socio-economic status groups. Thus, contrary to expectation, the Chinese, as well as the Malays in the University of Malaya, were mostly recruited from the lower social groups.

The Indians, however, revealed the pattern of recruitment that was anticipated. Among the Indians, 40.1% of the students had their origins in low status, 34.3% in middle status, and 25.6% in high status families. Compared with the Chinese and the Malays, a higher proportion of high and middle status Indian students entered the University of Malaya. Nearly 60% of the Indian places were taken up by students from the non-manual classes. This may be reflective of the lower overall position occupied by the Indian community and the inability of their upper classes to seek higher education elsewhere. In the competition for the limited places locally, Indians from low status were decidedly disadvantaged and seemed unable, to the same extent as their counterparts in the Malay and Chinese communities, to avail themselves of the educational channel to social advancement.

(C) Sex Differences in Recruitment Patterns

It was expected that compared with girls, boys would enjoy greater opportunities for social mobility through higher education. In other words, there would be a greater proportion of boys than girls from lower social origins in the University of Malaya, low status origins acting as a greater barrier to girls than boys in their efforts to lift themselves from their low status of origin. This phenomenon would reflect the fact that among girls, higher education is more readily available to those from high than low social status because of the sponsorship provided by the high status parents who, generally, do not differentiate between the sexes in providing education. There is also the possibility that fewer parents are willing to send their daughters abroad for higher education. There is, thus, a larger number of girls seeking admission from the upper stratum and providing stiffer competition for those from the lower stratum.

Table 3: Distribution of the University of Malaya Students by Sex and Social Origins

Sex		Father's Status Category			
		High	Middle	Low	Total
Male	N	39	101	270	410
	%	10.4	24.6	66.0	100.0
Female	N	47	94	127	268
	%	17.4	35.1	47.5	100.0

The results, as shown in Table 3, confirm these assumptions. As expected, more males than females from low social origins attended the University of Malaya. There were 66.0% males from the low status category but only 47.5% females from the same category. On the other end of the continuum, more females had better social background than the males. Among the female students, 17.4% had parents in the high social category while only 10.4% males had similar social origins. The data clearly affirm that the University of Malaya accelerates the movement of more males than females from low social origins to high occupational status.

(D) Patterns of Recruitment into Faculties

While it is generally true that university education leads to high social status, some types of university education provide better and more certain opportunities for social mobility than others. For instance, it is probable that graduates from the Medical Faculty are better assured of jobs and can make more rapid advancement in their careers compared with their counterparts from the Arts, Economics and Education Faculties. Certainly, in our society, doctors enjoy greater prestige and remuneration than graduate teachers.

With this in mind, the data were examined to determine if students from different social background had equal access to the different faculties of the University of Malaya or was it the case that students with high social parentage monopolised the prestigious courses. The results are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Distribution of University of Malaya Students by Faculty and Social Origins

Faculty		Fathers Status Category			
		High	Middle	Low	Total
Arts	N	7	30	55	92
	%	7.6	32.6	59.8	100.0
Dentistry	N	3	6	7	16
	%	18.8	37.5	43.7	100.0
Economics	N	5	24	49	78
	%	6.4	30.8	62.8	100.0
Education	N	7	31	81	119
	%	5.8	26.1	68.1	100.0
Engineering	N	9	30	92	131
	%	6.9	22.9	70.2	100.0
Law	N	18	11	8	37
	%	48.6	29.7	21.7	100.0
Medicine	N	21	31	43	95
	%	22.1	32.6	45.3	100.0
Science	N	16	32	62	110
	%	14.5	29.1	56.4	100.0

The distributions that stand out as different and merit note are those for the Faculties of Medicine, Law and Dentistry. However, the number of students in the Faculty of Dentistry was too few to warrant serious conclusions. The Faculties of Arts, Economics, Education, Engineering and Science revealed a rather similar pattern, reflecting the recruitment pattern for the total population.

Among the future lawyers and doctors, especially the former, there was an exceptionally high group from the high and middle level status categories. Of the Law Faculty students, 48.6% had fathers in high level occupations and 29.7% had fathers in the middle status occupations. There were only 21.6% fathers in the low status jobs. Although the pattern for the Medical Faculty was not so marked, here again, compared with other faculties, a significantly high proportion originated in the high and middle level categories.

Thus, while in the Faculties of Arts, Economics, Education, Engineering and Science, about 50-70% originated in the manual occupations, in the Faculties of Law and Medicine, only 21.6% and 45.3% respectively had origins in the same categories.

It may thus be concluded that, on the whole, the process of recruitment into the Law Faculty primarily and, to a lesser extent, into the Medical Faculty is more selective than in the other faculties. Possibly, because law and medicine are the traditional professions, they are aspired to and vigilantly pursued by those from high social status families as a means to entrenching their places in the upper stratum. To those from the lower status groups, mere entrance into the university is a great achievement and they are less likely to be adequately prepared to enter these faculties. Those with professional parents are aware of the better opportunities in these professions and therefore seek admission into them more ardently so that almost immediately on graduation, they would be assured of employment in a high prestige occupation.

Conclusion

The primary conclusion reached is that the University of Malaya acts as an effective channel of upward social mobility for youths from low status origins. Nearly 60% of its recent graduates have been youths whose fathers work in low prestige manual jobs and who, having acquired professional training at the university, are employed in the modern and prestigious sectors of the economy as administrators, civil servants, doctors, lawyers, dentists, teachers, economists and scientists.

The findings pertaining to ethnic differences confirm the commonly accepted view that university education is one of the primary agents for Malay mobility. However, this survey establishes that the university is equally an agent of social mobility for the low status Chinese. It is only the low status Indians who compared to the low status Chinese and Malays do not seem to enjoy opportunities for entry into the university.

The low status females, compared with the males, are still disadvantaged with seeking admission into the university.

Except in the case of law and medical students, the University of Malaya offers almost equal opportunities to children of low status origins to acquire training for high status professions through the Faculties of Arts, Economics, Education, Engineering and Science. Law and medicine appear somewhat to be the prerogative of those from the upper status group. Those with low status origins have made considerable inroads into these fields of study but they remain the privileged domain of

the elite, thus introducing an elements of status perpetuation in the case of the elite professions.

On the whole, the University of Malaya must be regarded as one of the most efficient channels of upward social mobility. It provides high professional training to large numbers of the sons and daughters of farmers, peasants, rubber tappers, skilled and semi-skilled urban workers, thus enabling them to be employed in the upper echelons of the Malaysian occupational structure.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Second Malaysia Plan, 1971-75*, Kuala Lumpur, Government Printers, 1970, p. 1.
2. J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, New York University Press, 1948, p. 307.
3. W.F. Werthesm, *Indonesian Society in Transition—A Study of Social Change*, W. Van Hoeve Ltd., The Hague, 1956, p. 137.
4. T. Silcock, 'The Effects of Industrialisation on Race Relations', in G. Hunter, (ed.), *Industrialisation and Race Relations: A Symposium*, Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 178-79.
5. *Second Malaysia Plan, 1971* Government Printers, Kuala Lumpur, pp. 4-6, p. 232, and *Third Malaysia Plan, 1976*, Government Printers, Kuala Lumpur, p. 384.
6. C.A. Anderson, 'A Skeptical Note on Education and Social Mobility', in A.H. Halsey *et al*, *Education, Economy and Society*, New York, The Free Press, 1961, pp. 164-79 and P.M. Blau and O.D. Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure*, New York, John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1976.
7. J. Gerstl and R Perucci, 'Educational Channels and Elite Mobility: A Comparative Analysis', *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 38, 1964, pp. 224-5.
8. Jasbir Sarjit Singh, 'Education and Social Mobility in Malaysia: A Case Study of Petaling Jaya', unpublished Ph.D. thesis presented to the University of Malaya, 1973, pp. 229-36 and pp. 283-5.
9. *Third Malaysia Plan, op. cit.*, p. 387.