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**Title** Equitable Access to Higher Education in Malaysia: Challenges and Solutions  
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## **Equitable Access to Higher Education in Malaysia: Challenges and Solutions**

### **Background**

This paper will examine the nature of the data and discourse associated with inequalities in access to higher education in Malaysia. In 2015 the Malaysian government launched its 10 year blueprint for Higher Education. The blueprint included a commitment to extend equity in access to higher education but acknowledged some of the challenges here in terms of research and practice.

*'Although there is currently a lack of comprehensive data to effectively assess equity in the system, the Ministry aims to ensure that all Malaysians have the opportunity to fulfil their potential regardless of background. For example, the Ministry is committed to improving the enrolment rate and completion rate of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and communities.'*

In the blueprint the precise target(s) stated are to reduce gaps in achievement by between students from urban and rural backgrounds, different socioeconomic groups, and males and females by 50% by 2020

These goals exist in the context of ambitious targets to extend participation in Malaysian higher education per se to from 36% to 53% over the period 2015 to 2025.

Despite this commitment though there is, as relatively little research into the nature of inequalities in Malaysian higher education in terms of their extent and also what may be done to address these inequalities. The paper will make an important contribution to opening the debate around inequalities in access in the Malaysian context. It will also contribute to how this issue is understood in the south east Asian and also global context. It could be argued that the discourse around access to HE is framed in a primarily western way given that place that it occupies on the political landscape of a number of influential western countries. The paper will go onto reflect on the extent to which the Malaysian experience points to similarities or distinctions between how this issue may be understood in western or Asian contexts.

### **Method**

The paper draws on secondary data looking at the issue of inequalities in HE participation in Malaysia from several perspectives:

- The context of HE access in Malaysia and the data available in the field
- Participation by proxy measures of socio-economic background in one large public university
- Participation differences by gender in Malaysia
- Practices to address differences in HE outcomes in Malaysia

## **Results**

There are limitations in the data available regarding participation in HE by social background in Malaysia. Data is not collected on participation by socio-economic background or ethnic groups. However, examining HE participation in one university indicates that distinct differences in participation by socio-economic background can be ascertained. Where better data does exist is with regard to gender gaps in participation and increasing distances in participation levels with female participation outstripping that of males. In terms of addressing these differences there is a need for more coherent approaches to support for those from different groups to access and succeed in HE, as well as perhaps different forms of HE delivery to reach particular groups. Malaysia while having made impressive gains in social and economic development in recent years, still has communities for whom completion of secondary education is only achieved by the minority of members and also where poverty is very high.

## **Conclusions & Implications for further work**

There is a need to improve the evidence base where the HE participation by social background in Malaysia is concerned. The recent report 'Charting Equity: Drawing the Global Access Map', (Atherton et al 2016) which looked at how to improve data collection globally in this area contains several recommendations in its global equity data charter could be implemented to a degree in Malaysia. Improvements in the data collected would enable the formation of a more developed discourse surrounding equity and access to HE in Malaysia. Issues of participation divides between Chinese and indigenous Malay groups are in need of better articulation, but remain sensitive in public discourse and the system itself divided between public and private institutions is interwoven with the social complexity of Malaysian society. The emphasis is strongly on increasing overall participation and enhancing quality in provision, as in other Asian nations, can obscure the issue of equitable access as these twin priorities are often seen as de facto evidence of commitment to equity in access. While pursuing both these goals are necessary to ensure the progression and success in HE of those from lower socio-economic groups and less powerful ethnic groups they are not sufficient.

## **References**

Atherton, G, Dumangane, C, Whitty, G, (2016) *Charting Equity: Drawing the Global Access Map*  
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