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Accessing Education in Samarinda City: A Preliminary Exploration of the Experiences of University Students from Nunukan Regency

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Abstract

The pursuit of quality education, as one of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), continues to face multidimensional challenges in Indonesia, particularly in rural and border areas such as Nunukan District, North Kalimantan. The concept of "developing from the periphery," as introduced by Joko Widodo in 2014, has yet to yield significant outcomes. This study aims to explore the experiences of students originating from rural and border regions in accessing higher education in the city of Samarinda. These student narratives are valuable for identifying the unique challenges faced by individuals from border areas, as well as understanding their adaptive strategies during their academic journey. To achieve the objectives of this study, data were collected through interviews and secondary source analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with students from Nunukan District who are currently pursuing higher education in Samarinda. The challenges they encounter are examined from an

emic perspective, emphasizing the subjective viewpoints and lived experiences of the participants. The findings suggest that students from rural areas confront a range of complex issues that extend beyond academic difficulties on campus. The poor quality of primary and secondary education in rural regions significantly contributes to the obstacles they face in pursuing higher education. Nonetheless, strong motivation, positive self-perception, and the creative utilization of support systems—such as family, community, and university resources—enable these students to mitigate and navigate the challenges they encounter.

Keywords: education; access; development; Nunukan District, North Kalimantan

INTRODUCTION

Achieving quality education, one of the core targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), continues to face multidimensional challenges in Indonesia. The country's geographical complexity as an archipelago, coupled with an education development model that is heavily concentrated on the island of Java, has resulted in significant educational disparities in peripheral regions. The dualism and regional inequality in development are not merely perceptions but observable realities across the archipelago (Azis, 2022). The gap in educational advancement between Java and non-Java regions remains wide, with Kalimantan—Indonesia's second-largest island after Papua—experiencing similar marginalization.

In general, development in rural, inland, and border areas lags behind that of urban centers. Contributing factors include vast territorial coverage, underdeveloped infrastructure, and low population density. One such region is Nunukan District in North Kalimantan, a regency that directly borders Malaysia in 17 of its 21 subdistricts.

Disparities in educational access are often mirrored by disparities in human resource quality. In this context,

education should not be viewed merely as a means of personal development, but as a critical input for national human capital advancement (Idzalika & Bue, 2020). It is widely believed that human resources in rural areas are at a disadvantage when compared to their urban counterparts, especially those from major cities in Java. This assumption is frequently internalized by rural communities and youth, who—whether consciously or unconsciously—accept this stigma. As a result, many develop a sense of inferiority when competing for access to public resources.

This sense of marginalization is particularly evident in local responses to the development of the new capital city (IKN). Many young people fear they will be left behind, unable to compete with migrants in securing new employment opportunities. Such anxieties are not without basis, given that the national discourse on education often adopts a neoliberal lens—emphasizing competitiveness and market-readiness, while neglecting the role of education in cultural preservation (Kholiq et al., 2022; Sugiarti et al., 2024).

In light of these realities, targeted policy interventions are urgently needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all children (Idzalika & Bue, 2020). Aligning with the global commitment to “leave no one behind,” development efforts must prioritize disadvantaged regions (UN, 2023). The objective of SDG 4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (Alisjahbana & Murniningtyas, 2018). Achieving this goal requires the effective translation of global development agendas into national and regional action plans (Amirya & Irianto, 2023), thereby ensuring alignment across governance levels.

The call for peripheral development has gained renewed attention since President Joko Widodo’s endorsement targeting the frontier, outermost and least

develop regions—referred to as 3T (Tertinggal, Terdepan dan Terluar). This initiative critiques Java- and urban-centric development patterns and brings hope to communities in remote areas to catch up with national progress. However, the implementation of this vision remains incomplete.

In many cases, students from rural and inland areas are compelled to pursue higher education in urban centers due to limited access to quality local education. This study seeks to examine the lived experiences of students from Nunukan District who are currently studying in Samarinda, East Kalimantan. Although the Indonesian constitution guarantees equal educational rights for all, the reality reveals significant inequalities in access. Students from rural and border areas often encounter more complex challenges than their urban peers.

To better understand these dynamics, this study adopts the concept of ‘access’ as distinct from ‘rights’, following Ribot and Peluso (2003). They define access as “the ability to benefit from things—including material objects, persons, institutions, and symbols.” By shifting the focus from formal rights to actual capabilities, this perspective emphasizes the social relations that enable or constrain individuals’ ability to benefit from resources (Ribot & Peluso, 2003:153–154).

While property denotes legally or socially recognized rights—based on law, custom, or convention—access concerns one’s capacity to act and influence outcomes. It encompasses all mechanisms by which individuals can derive benefits, regardless of formal ownership.

This study thus positions students as active agents capable of mobilizing both material and non-material resources to overcome educational barriers. Drawing on the framework of Prabaningtyas et al. (2023), the study investigates various dimensions of student access: information availability, learning processes, environmental

support systems, motivation, and self-perception. Additionally, it considers the quality of prior educational experiences to illuminate the roots of present challenges. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing literature and offer insights for future education policy reforms in Indonesia's peripheral regions.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method based on subjective information (Densin & Lincoln, 2000). The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of students from Nunukan District who are/were studying higher education in Samarinda City. Following Creswell (2007: 118-120), the choice of location, informants, and the way of collecting data is carefully considered. In addition, rapport with informants need to be established to obtain subjective experiences and good quality data. The selection of informants is based on the following criteria: 1) Male or female, 2) a student currently studying in Samarinda or who has graduated, 3) the informants' previous secondary education (junior high school and/or senior high school) were in the Nunukan District. The latter criterion is used to ensure that informants had a new and different experience of education in Nunukan District and Samarinda City. In addition to interviews, information about the general educational conditions of Nunukan and its socio-cultural context was obtained from literature or secondary data provided by government agencies.

Data was collected by sending questionnaire on Google Form, containing a list of open-ended questions to informants. Based on the answers on the Google Form, some informants were selected to continue with the in-depth interview technique. Interviews were conducted using phone calls or Whatsapp application for efficiency and effectiveness. Interviews were conducted several times to

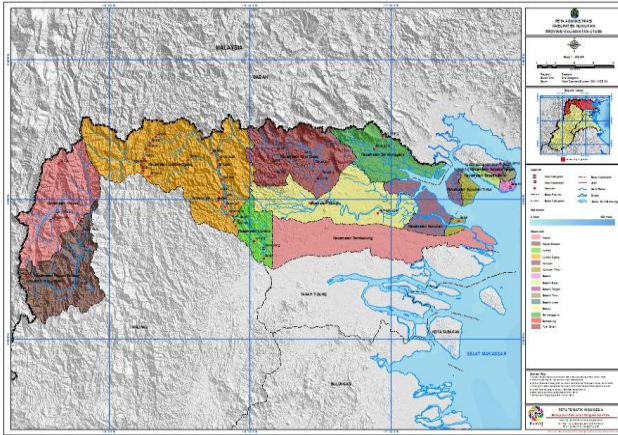
obtain more valid and comprehensive data. Rapport between researchers and informants was built at this stage.

The collected data were processed and analyzed by reviewing the answers of the questionnaire and interview transcripts. Then, the researchers were coding and sorting/categorizing the data. Afterward, finding the main themes, and then connecting between themes to find meaning and interpretation. This process was done carefully and repeatedly to ensure all data was accurate and important findings were not overlooked (Thomas, 2006). The results of the analysis were narrated in a descriptive analysis in the form of an article.

RESULTS

Nunukan District as 3T Region and Border Area

The following is an overview of Nunukan District as 3T region and border area. Nunukan District is geographically located in the northernmost region of Kalimantan, directly bordering Malaysia to the north and west. In addition, Nunukan District is one of five regencies/cities in North Kalimantan Province (Kaltara). Inaugurated on 22 April 2013, North Kalimantan Province is a New Autonomous Region (DOB) resulting from the division of East Kalimantan Province. A total of 17 sub-districts border directly with neighboring Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). In general, border areas are characterized by limited basic infrastructure facilities, including educational facilities.



Source:

Based on data from BPS Nunukan District (2023), several sub-districts that are Krayan Tengah, Krayan Timur, Krayan Barat, Lumbis Pansiangan, and Lumbis Hulu do not yet have primary and junior secondary education facilities. There are at least ten sub-districts that do not have high school education facilities, namely Central Krayan, East Krayan, West Krayan, Lumbis Ogong, Lumbis Pansingan, Lumbis Hulu, Sembakung Atului, Tulin Onsoi, Sei Menggaris, and West Sebatik. It is shown that school-age children have difficulty in accessing affordable education comfortably.

Furthermore, data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2024) indicate that not all residents aged 15 years and above in Nunukan District are literate, highlighting persistent issues of illiteracy. This condition is closely linked to the limited availability of primary and secondary education facilities in several subdistricts. Educational participation also shows a declining trend as students progress to higher levels of schooling. The Net Enrollment Rate (Angka Partisipasi Murni or APM) at the primary level stands at 91.15%, drops to 78.94% at the junior secondary

level, and further declines to 62.75% at the senior secondary level. This pattern reflects a significant decrease in the number of school-age children continuing their education to the next level in accordance with their legal age. These figures suggest that the development of human capital through education remains a pressing social issue in Nunukan District.

Despite these structural limitations, informants reported that they were able to complete their primary and secondary education within the district. Although the educational infrastructure does not match that of urban areas, school buildings and basic learning facilities were generally available and adequate to support in-class learning. However, a major gap identified was the absence of internet access. One informant noted that teachers rarely utilized online resources, resulting in a reliance on conventional teaching methods and limited integration of up-to-date content in classroom instruction.

Moreover, the utilization of library resources and access to reading materials appeared minimal during their schooling experience. Several informants shared that they had little to no experience borrowing books or engaging in study activities within the library, indicating a lack of exposure to independent learning resources during their formative education years.

Road infrastructure to accessing secondary schools in Nunukan District is generally poor, with dirt or macadam roads and some paved sections in poor condition. This is in line with BPS Kaltara data (2023) that roads that are damaged and severely damaged are much longer (around 173 km), compared to roads that are in good and moderate condition (around 41 km) in 2023. Public transportation is not available. All senior high school students walk or use motorcycles to school. As many as 60% of informants admitted that they do not own a motorcycle so they walk to

and from school. It takes between 1 - 1.5 hours each way to walk to school. As many as 40% of the informants admitted to riding a motorcycle to school, which takes between 15 and 30 minutes. In general, the informants come from farming families with small incomes who cannot afford to buy a motorcycle for their children to go to school.

Availability of Information Regarding Education

Access to information about higher education is not accessible in border areas. Continuing studies to higher education is not yet a basic need for most people in the border areas, thus getting information about higher education is still not a priority. According to informants, they get information about higher education from relatives, friends or teachers at school partially. With the information they had, they chose to continue their studies in Samarinda City, East Kalimantan Province, instead of Kaltara Province. The reason they chose to study in Kota Samarinda was that universities/institutions of higher education in Kota Samarinda were more numerous, had a wider range of choices, and were of higher quality than universities in Kaltara, which were generally new. The quality of higher education in Samarinda is considered better, especially in terms of the quality of lecturers and educational facilities, because the universities are older and more established.

In addition to obtaining a quality education, the informants admitted that they wanted to gain a different life experience by living in the capital city of East Kalimantan. Almost all of the informants admitted that they came to Samarinda for the first time after being accepted as students in Samarinda.

Limited information about study programs and higher education institutions may influence students' academic trajectories, particularly in how they navigate their study period. In response to cases where students from rural areas experience prolonged study durations, informants

identified several contributing factors. Drawing from their experiences and observations, they noted that some students from rural backgrounds often end up choosing study programs that do not align with their interests or abilities. This mismatch is largely due to a limited understanding of the academic focus of each program. As a result, students tend to apply for programs perceived to have a higher acceptance rate rather than those that match their aspirations and potential.

All informants acknowledged that they did not receive adequate and comprehensive information about the structure and variety of university-level education. One informant (D) stated: "Many people actually don't understand what study program to choose or which university to apply to. Some teachers did explain a little in high school, but we still didn't fully understand. So, many of my friends realized they chose the wrong major only after a few semesters in college. One of my friends, for instance, initially studied in a Primary School Teacher Education program but eventually transferred to a different university and major because it didn't suit them—and now they're much more enthusiastic."

Motivation to Continue Studies to Higher Education

All informants in this study completed their senior secondary education in Nunukan District. Despite infrastructure limitations, they expressed a strong desire—or received encouragement from their families—to pursue higher education. This differs from the experiences of many rural youth, who tend to enter the workforce after graduating from senior secondary school. Common jobs include agricultural work, such as rice farming, oil palm cultivation, or utilizing natural resources in their surroundings. Moreover, many children in rural areas are accustomed from an early age to contributing to such labor. Those who do not continue their education are also often

encouraged to settle down early. According to several informants, early marriage remains common, with parents sometimes arranging marriages for their children—both boys and girls—from a young age. As such, the opportunity and desire to pursue university education is still seen as a luxury, accessible only to a limited number of rural youth.

The decision to continue studying is also not only a personal decision. Motivation from family is the most influential thing in deciding to continue studying in university. Parents, relatives, and friends who have studied in the city are the most influential parties. Trust and hope for a better future from parents and relatives are valuable moral encouragement for children. Financial support, in terms of both intent and means, is essential to support students' academic journey. Almost all informants admitted that the tuition fees were borne independently by the parents. Some had received scholarships from the government, but the amount was not enough to meet their needs and was not sustainable. Access to scholarships from the government is limited because the requirements cannot be met, and the opportunities are small. One informant stated: "There are scholarships from the district and province. But I have applied several times, both provincial and district, I have never received a scholarship". With limited funds, this student from Nunukan District continued their studies.

Learning Process on Campus

The learning system in universities is very different from the learning system at the high school level. The difference in the learning system can finally be understood by students as they undergo education. They admitted that they could understand and follow the learning system after getting information from the university and friends on campus. The adaptation process to the higher education system is carried out together with other students. "[We are] confused at the

beginning, we did not know that the system in college was completely different from that in high school,” said an informant who studied in the sports study program.

Regarding the learning process and academic achievement in higher education, almost all informants claimed to be able to follow the learning process well. The lecture material was acceptable and they received satisfactory academic grades even though they had never received awards for academic achievement or competition. Lecturers are considered able to provide material well. Some informants stated that the way lecturers gave the material was too fast, making it difficult to understand and heavy. The coursework load can generally be done well, although some informants said the coursework was too much and heavy. “Every course has a work practicum, so the student workload is very large” said F, an agriculture student. In general, students work on college assignments together with friends from the same study program.

In terms of social relations with lecturers and the academic community, they did not have much to say. In general, they are able to establish a good and close relationship with lecturers, especially with lecturers who conduct field activities and practicums. However, their involvement and participation in research and service activities carried out by lecturers is still limited.

There is something interesting about the informants' responses regarding the barriers to the learning process in higher education caused by the low quality of primary and secondary education in rural areas. According to informants, there is a gap in the quality of education between rural and urban schools. Students from Nunukan District admitted to having difficulty adapting to the atmosphere and academic demands of higher education.

The challenges faced by students from rural areas in higher education are not primarily due to differences in the

learning systems between secondary and tertiary levels. Rather, these difficulties stem from the low quality of education they previously experienced in rural and remote areas. The educational process from elementary to high school in these regions is often unable to produce graduates with the same academic preparedness as those from urban schools. As noted by Informant E, a university graduate: “The quality of education in remote villages or rural areas is far behind compared to what is taught in high schools in the city. That’s unfortunate. So, in general, juniors (from rural areas) struggle when studying in the city.” This discrepancy in educational background necessitates additional effort on the part of rural students to adapt to university-level coursework and to keep pace with their peers from more advantaged educational settings.

In addition, an informant who once served as the head of a student association from Nunukan District, revealed that some students from Nunukan District experience problems in communicating formally using Indonesian. “There is a weakness of some friends, in communicating. Usually, in the village, we use the local language (Dayak) because almost all people and school friends come from the same tribe. It is difficult to express opinions using Indonesian formally, let alone doing assignments such as making papers or theses. Not all of them experience this, but some do, and it is difficult to overcome.” They experienced language and cultural barriers when studying in the city, which took time to adapt to.

Environmental Support

The success of pursuing studies is not just a matter of understanding the learning material provided by lecturers on campus. The informants expressed the importance of social support from friends in the same study program, friends from the same village, and family for the success of their studies. Students from Nunukan District developed a

network of friends with at least two groups while studying in Samarinda, which are a network of friends from the same study program and friends from the area of origin. Some student statements regarding social support are as follows:

“For college assignments, friends from the same study program are the most helpful. There are often course assignments that require it to be made per group. Friends from the same study program also help provide information, for example if we do not attend lectures or if there are new regulations on campus. People who like to be alone or don't have close friends will generally miss information”

“We have a class WhatsApp group to share lecture info. Besides being in the same class, we usually have close friends who help each other with assignments”.

“We get information about other things, which are not college matters, from all friends everywhere, for example, friends who hang out or friends who have the same sports hobbies”.

In addition to maintaining good relations with friends from the same campus, the informants admitted to maintaining good relations with friends from Nunukan District, who generally come from Dayak ethnicity which are the Dayak Kenyah, Lundayeh and Kenyah sub-ethnicities. In particular, the organization that the informants joined was the Forum for Dayak Agabag Student Communication (FKMDA). This forum specifically consists of students who come from the Nunukan District region and are of Dayak Agabag ethnicity. The purpose of FKMDA is to help new students who come from Nunukan District to adapt quickly in Samarinda.

The assistance provided is not always related to college enrollment or the learning process on campus, but all needs including information about housing, and other necessary assistance. One informant recounted how he got a laptop

loan from a friend from his village to work on his coursework and thesis. “We borrow laptops from each other if a friend doesn't have one, or if our laptop breaks. We take turns doing the assignment because we don't have a laptop,” said N, recounting her friend's experience. In addition to similarities in regional origin, ethnicity, language and culture, students from Nunukan District generally come from the same socio-economic strata. These similarities make social relations closer.

Informants did not explicitly state that FKMDA, formed by ethnic-based primordial ties, aims to prepare Agabag Dayak youth resources to access political economy opportunities in the region in the future. They stated that FKMDA was formed naturally to fulfill practical needs in Samarinda. However, it is possible that the association was formed based on various concerns about the underdevelopment experienced, especially in terms of human resources. Through the forum that was formed, they sought to increase their capacity to compete on an equal footing with people from other regions and ethnic groups. The awareness of being an ethnic minority and subordinated seems to have strengthened when they lived in the heterogeneous city of Samarinda.

The close social relationship with friends from the same region is also shown in the choice of residence. As many as 80% of informants chose to live in dormitories with friends from the same region. Apart from the cheaper cost, the social network of one region is maintained. This is also in line with their circle of closest friends. They have close friends who generally come from the same area.

Regarding their identity as students from rural-interior-border areas, the informants did not feel inferior. Some informants' statements: “No one discriminates. It's normal for everyone to get along”; “All are good, no one mocks or demeans. It depends on how we behave”. They

also feel treated and valued equally with students from urban areas, both by lecturers, education staff, and fellow students.

DISCUSSION

The descriptions above show that, in general, students from the Kaltara border region felt able to follow higher education in Kota Samarinda. However, there were many obstacles encountered during their studies. The limited educational infrastructure at the primary and secondary education levels in the border areas appears to have greatly affected the readiness of graduates to continue their education in the city. This study of students from border areas corroborates the results of a study by Idzalika & Bue (2020) that the inequality in the quality of previous education is an inhibiting factor from outside the individual that affects the smoothness and success of the study.

The learning facilities of schools in border areas, such as limited buildings, libraries, internet networks, the number and quality of teachers, and the quality of the learning process in the classroom are an accumulation of problems that burden students at the next level of education. Poor road infrastructure and long distances to schools add to the financial and social burden for students accessing education.

The limited academic ability caused by the low quality of education at the previous education level does not make students from rural areas feel inferior. Their self-perception is quite good, where students from Nunukan District feel that they have the ability to accept and follow higher education and get good academic grades. The learning process is followed with all the limitations that exist. In contrast to the study of Sulenino et al. (2021) who found that medical students from Papua experienced low self-perception. The obstacles from within medical students

from Papua are manifested in the recognition that they are not smart enough, slow, unable to focus on learning, and others. Students from Nunukan District realize that there are limitations to their academic abilities compared to children from the city, but this is understood as an implication of the low quality of education they received at the previous education level. In this case, policy interventions are very important to reduce the obstacles faced by students from Nunukan District. Following Hunaepi & Suharta (2024), logistical issues, gaps in the availability of digital resources, and varying levels of teacher readiness are critical constraints that need to be addressed. Improving education infrastructure, particularly in remote and underserved areas, is critical to providing equitable learning opportunities for all. Today, the challenges of information technology-based learning in various regions need to be addressed urgently due to the demands of the times. This is a challenge for individuals and institutions (Rasimin, et al. 2024).

In addition to positive self-perceptions, students from Nunukan District have good motivation and commitment to improve their capacity and succeed in their studies. Limited access to scholarships from the local government did not discourage them from continuing their studies in Samarinda. In their study on the education of refugee children, Prabaningtyas, et al. (2023) revealed that support from the surrounding environment is very important for the learning process of students. The problems faced by students from Nunukan District may not be as complex as the problems of children in refugee camps, but students also experience conditions separated from the physical, social, cultural environment with their hometowns that require adaptability. Students are able to utilize and access the resources of their environment, especially family, regional communities, and university institutions. Students

have parents and relatives who provide encouragement and financial support. The student communication forum united by regional and ethnic similarities (FKMDA) is able to support access to fulfill other needs that are not obtained from the campus. This is a solution and a form of creativity born from the obstacles faced and the concerns felt as young people from the border.

Access to information, learning and academic services from the university is fair. Students from Nunukan District feel accepted and treated equally with students from the city by lecturers, education staff, and fellow students. Feeling accepted and treated equally will strengthen social capital in establishing cooperation and participation in campus activities.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to provide an initial exploration of the experiences of students from the border areas of Nunukan District in pursuing higher education in Kota Samarinda. For many young people growing up in border regions, the opportunity to attend university in the city represents both a bold decision and a rare privilege. These students often encounter greater and more complex challenges than their urban counterparts, including academic underpreparedness upon entering university and the need to adapt to unfamiliar cultural environments. These challenges are further exacerbated by limited access to scholarships and the lack of affirmative support policies from local governments.

The findings of this study suggest that the academic journey of students from Nunukan District cannot be understood solely through the lens of classroom experiences. Internal factors—particularly strong motivation and a positive sense of self—play a significant role in their persistence. Furthermore, support from external

environments, including family, community, and the university itself, serves as a vital resource in overcoming the barriers they face.

Considering the structural obstacles and aspirations voiced by the students, more systematic and collaborative support is urgently needed to ensure their academic success. Local governments should initiate institutional innovations to better prepare prospective students for higher education, as part of broader efforts to enhance human resource development in border regions. Recommended measures include:

1. Collaborating with regional schools to disseminate comprehensive information about the higher education system, ensuring it is accessible to all students.
2. Improving the overall quality of primary and secondary education to bridge the academic gap between rural and urban students.
3. Expanding scholarship programs and providing adequate dormitory facilities to support student well-being.

In addition, universities and higher education institutions in Kalimantan are encouraged to develop curricula that respond to the real challenges and contextual issues faced by communities in the region. Enhancing academic infrastructure—such as increasing the availability of conducive library spaces and ensuring reliable internet access—is also crucial to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

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