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Higher Education Taking Action towards the Sustainable Development Goals:
Perspectives from Asia and Europe

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Ethnic Minorities and Statelessness in Improving Equitable Access to Tertiary Education

Higher education institutions in Europe and the ASEAN region should do more to make the application procedure for international students fairer and more equitable especially with regard to ethnic minorities. This concerns the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which is to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2019).

This goal usually involves efforts to improve the quality and equitable access to primary and secondary education. However, with the recent refugee crisis occurring in Europe and in the ASEAN region; it has become increasingly important to address the needs of the large number of young people escaping persecution and seeking a better life. In fact, in this opinion article I will argue that it is not only within higher education institution's interests to better the treatment of ethnic minorities during the application process, but also within larger governmental bodies and the overall country as a whole. Thus, the Sustainable Development Goal 4.3 which is to ensure equal access to affordable quality tertiary education is gaining more significance.

My interest in ethnic minorities and their access to tertiary education stems from my time during my high school education in Brunei Darussalam where I completed the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) in 2014 at Jerudong International School. In order to obtain my diploma, I was required to complete an Extended Essay (EE), which is an extracurricular project that involves conducting research in one of the subjects I found particularly interesting and pursued during the diploma program. The subject I chose was Geography, as an avid geography nerd and interested in poverty alleviation, I was drawn to our school's Penan project that was headed by my biology teacher. This project advocated the rights of the Penan people, an indigenous tribe native to the island

of Borneo, which is where Brunei is located and shares borders with east Malaysia as well as parts of Indonesia.

The Penan people number around 16,000 and traditionally are a nomadic tribe of people located in the eastern Malaysian state of Sarawak and Brunei (Pustaka Negeri Sarawak, 2009). They are one of the last hunters and gatherers practicing tribes in the world though only 200 of them are reported to be practicing this lifestyle. Unfortunately, their traditional lifestyle involving using the rainforest to hunt and gather food has been severely affected by deforestation and clearing land for palm oil production and logging in east Malaysia. I decided to focus my Extended Essay on how deforestation affects the Penan people's way of life and to investigate their emerging socioeconomic status in today's highly globalised and profit-driven world.

From this, I went on an expedition with a group of teachers and volunteers and crossed the border to east Malaysia where I visited a Penan settlement and was able to witness first-

hand and conduct interviews on how illegal logging and deforestation affected their way of life. Although what I saw was harrowing in its own right – I witnessed ramshackle houses and poverty with lack of access to basic modern amenities such as running water and electricity, the focus of this article will be on how ethnic minorities are in many cases denied the right to equitable access to tertiary education. This insight stems from my time spent and interviews conducted with one of the most remarkable young women I have ever met, the first woman from the Penan tribe to go to university – my friend Lonnie.

To make a long story short, she described to me the hardship she and her siblings faced to gain basic education and go to primary and secondary school. It was only over a decade before the interview was conducted, when money largely remained a foreign concept to her tribe and family, and they still led a hunting - gathering lifestyle in the deep rainforest. With illegal logging and deforestation, their environment to hunt diminished and pushed them to the boundaries where they were ill equipped to deal with modern- life pressure, 'without money you cannot live,' and 'to live you need money' which they did not have, explained Lonnie. She explained that in order to lead a better life, she and her siblings required an education, which they doggedly pursued although they faced many challenges including having to trek three hours along the highway to school daily, hitchhiking and facing discrimination from students and teachers alike at the schools they attended.

Despite this, Lonnie and her siblings managed to receive a primary and

secondary education and as previously mentioned, she was the first Penan woman to receive tertiary education and graduated as a role model for other Penan women and young people to look up to in her community. Lonnie's story inspired me to write this opinion article, however, there are two salient points that I gained from her experiences worthy of exposition. These are the two barriers of entry for ethnic minorities to quality tertiary education, which relates to the previously mentioned Sustainable Development Goal 4.3, that is to ensure equal access to affordable quality tertiary education. The two barriers will be discussed and addressed in turn below with policy proposals for higher education institutions and cooperation with other organisations.

The first barrier is the legal status of the Penan people and many other minorities which remain a significant concern as they are often not legally recognised by the state they reside in. Due to several issues including physical barriers due to the remote and difficult to access location of many ethnic minorities, births and deaths are difficult to be recorded and verified. Furthermore, based off my personal investigation and interviews there is a lack of interest by the state to actively give legal status to ethnic minorities. As such, without legal status, ethnic minorities do not have legal protection provided by the state or documents such as identity card or birth certificate needed to access basic governmental services such as state education and healthcare. Both of which are major components affecting the likelihood of gaining tertiary education. Consequently, this largely disadvantages their socioeconomic status which brings me to my next point.

The second barrier for ethnic minorities is the lack of financial capacity, namely, due to the host of reasons discussed above, they often face the lack of financial resources to afford tertiary education even if they manage to be accepted. In Lonnie's case she was able to access quality tertiary education not only due to her own efforts but through the Penan project from our school, that involved selling handicrafts made by Penan women through utilising the school as a platform to advocate their rights as well as raise financial capital to buy school supplies and other basic necessities. This achievement took years and a team of dedicated volunteers and resulted in an inspirational success story.

However, what about countless other young women and men from other ethnic minorities who were not as lucky as my friend Lonnie? When I researched the scholarships and financial grants higher education institutions offer for international students, I found out that there has been a movement and a working group set up for equitable access for minorities; however, this remains in its early stages and has a lot of space to develop. To clarify, the majority of these education grants are offered to citizens of economically developing countries such as Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Afghanistan. Despite this,

from the above discussion I have made clear that many ethnic minorities remain stateless, in fact, according to a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report in 2018, more than 75% of the world's stateless population belong to minority groups with more than 10 million people reported to be stateless. In order for a more sustainable and equitable world to be realised, minority and stateless groups should not be ignored in order to improve equitable access to quality tertiary education.

As such, in order to address these issues, I suggest higher education institutions in Europe and the ASEAN region to improve equitable access for stateless and ethnic minority groups. Those institutions should move away from fulfilling a diversity quota with a predetermined list of countries eligible for applying for financial assistance; and instead broaden their selection criteria to focus on offering financial assistance based on applicant's proven financial needs instead. Doing so will result in increasing the chances for stateless minorities to access the transformative power of education, and thus mitigate potential negative consequences many countries are facing with stateless minorities and migrants due to recent insurgencies and conflicts within Europe and the ASEAN region. In particular, I refer to potential integration, naturalisation and labour force issues posed by young people who are unable to access tertiary education and following that apply for employment and thus improve the country's overall socioeconomic growth.

This proposed larger shift towards emphasising a needs-basis for financial assistance to afford tertiary education is not meant to be the panacea to the equitable access problem to quality tertiary education. This is because this issue requires cooperation between higher education institutions, governmental and non- governmental agencies to adequately address stateless minorities and their access to quality tertiary education. In conclusion, I have argued that more can be done by European and ASEAN higher education institutions to make their tertiary education applications more equitable for stateless ethnic minorities who face two main barriers of entry. These are a lack of legal status and a lack of financial assistance. In summary,

the proposed policies involve the cooperation between universities, governmental and non- governmental agencies to actively address ethnic minorities tertiary education opportunities and a larger focus on providing financial grants from a predetermined list of country to more of a purely needs-basis.

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