



## Exploring Heads' Perspective on Social Justice for Students in Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan

Muhammad Uzair-ul-Hassan<sup>1</sup>, Anas Zaytouni<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Sargodha, Pakistan. Email: uzair.hassan@uos.edu.pk

<sup>2</sup> Haute Ecole Francisco Ferrer, Brussels, Belgium.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: June 21, 2023

Revised: September 28, 2023

Accepted: September 29, 2023

Available Online: September 30, 2023

#### Keywords:

Social Justice

Equity

Equal Opportunities

Heads Perspective

Higher Education

#### Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### ABSTRACT

Equal opportunity does not imply equal treatment: rather it means fair treatment (Ghosh, 2012). Fair treatment and providing equal opportunities to enhance individual's capability, irrespective of any personal or societal differences, can contribute in providing excellence in education that leads to social justice. The objective of the study was to explore heads' perspectives of students' equitable access to educational resources, equitable participation and equitable outcomes in higher education. The study had also explored heads' perspectives on students' personal barriers to social justice and equity. To explore the perspective of heads on social justice for students in universities, data had been collected from 17 leaders working in higher education, by using multistage sampling technique. An interview protocol was developed to explore the perspective on social justice connected to leaders for bringing improvements in education so that all students get equal opportunities to excel in education. The results presented less positive situation of social justice and equity in public sector higher education. The study recommends that the education system needs to consider social justice and equity to ensure heads' commitment to social justice and equity principles, leading to equal opportunities for making students' capability better in higher education institutions in Pakistan.

© 2023 The Authors, Published by iRASD. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License

Corresponding Author's Email: uzair.hassan@uos.edu.pk

## 1. Introduction

Equal opportunity and fair treatment can play a vital role in social justice to extend educational participation of students in higher education institutions. It nullifies the effects of students' personal barriers that hinder the way to social justice and equity through promoting Rawl's principle of differentiation, implying that society as a whole, and education system in particular needs to work to minimize effects of personal limitations of the students. In addition to this, and according to Ghosh (2012) on the other hand, equal opportunity does not imply equal treatment: rather it means fair treatment. Heads' voices must not be ignored in this regards and be heard as a principle of equity and as a basic right of humanity. Thus, the rationale of our work is that unjust and unfair educational scenario in Pakistan's higher education be addressed through exploring the perspective on social justice. The concept of social justice and equity is that equity should lead from development of fair and inclusive education system, supporting all learners in access, participation and outcomes, irrespective of any differences, overcoming learners' personal barriers to equitable educational attainment and giving voice to the actors in education; where, equity in access is addressed in terms of equitable access to resources, both material and human; equitable educational participation of learners in terms of equitable expectations, equitable treatment, equitable instructional practices and equitable assessment procedures; equitable educational outcomes ensure the extent of students' gains in knowledge, skills and application of knowledge and skills at

learners' individual level. Smith and Gorard (2006) are of the view that in a democratic society, there is a need that learners develop their own concepts of fairness in education; and that the development of students' concept of equitable education comes from their experiences in the educational institutions. According to Willems (2011) equity is a basic human right. Social justice and equity have long been in the agenda of international policies, where equity has been dealt as providing equitable access to the less privileged areas, to resolve access issues to education.

However, research work of Ainscow M. (2006); Gorard\* and Smith (2004); Meuret (2002) extended the understandings of equity to the broader scope, according to which conceptions of equity extend to equity of access, participation and educational outcomes of the students. This is because; addressing equity at an initial level of access only, is limited and thus insufficient to declare equitable character of the education system (Meuret, 2002). In spite of enormous focus of research on equity attainment in education, research in equity is confronted with absence of unchallenged measurement of educational equity (Demeuse, 2004). This is because equity criteria, i.e. expectations of equity of people vary with every changing context or even setting (Ainscow M., 2006). Different countries have their own contexts and thereby own criteria of equity that might not be applicable to other country, thus, the judgments of equity characteristics in particular setting may also vary because of varying criteria or expectation of equity (Meuret, 2002). Demeuse (2004) reasoned out the evolution of plurality of principles of justice as an outcome of debates on Rawl's theory of justice (published in 1971) on matters of equity, and, hence, a system of indicators stands crucial so that it may be fitted in the varied scopes of the varied contexts worldwide. Thus, Demeuse (2004) acknowledged the attempt by Hutmacher, Cochrane, and Bottani (2001) to establish set of international indicators on equity with major contribution of Meuret (2002), which provides a baseline to which the countries of the world may agree. Later, European researchers from 6 European countries also established major equity indicators based on work of Meuret (2002) in a project funded by European Commission. Also, equity research of Ainscow M. (2006), research contributions by Gorard\* and Smith (2004) and research work of OECD (2007, 2008, 2010, 2012) countries have been contributing in exploring equity of the education systems.

The scope of social justice and equity in education is quite wide. According to Mirci, Loomis, and Hensley (2011), scope of equity may extend to ensuring equitable educational practices, including classroom instructional practices, educational resources, teachers' attention, curricula, assessments, interactions, attitudes, language and institutional cultures. Most importantly it focuses on equity with disadvantaged groups. The scope of disadvantaged groups may widen to include all unprivileged groups facing any form of discriminations based on gender, classism, sizeism, ablism and socio economic conditions of parents etc. The suggestions to enhance social justice and equity in higher education are probed, founding the most important element to gain insight into workable ways to establish social justice in higher education in Pakistan. The objective of the study was to explore heads' perspectives of students' equitable access to educational resources, equitable participation and equitable outcomes in higher education. The study had also explored heads' perspectives on students' personal barriers to social justice and equity. Further to seek suggestions from heads for extending social justice and equity in higher education institutions in Pakistan. Based on the objective, we developed the question for our study as: How do heads understand the social justice for students for their equal and equitable educational opportunities in higher education institutions?

## **2. Research Design**

The study was exploratory in nature that made use of qualitative data from heads working in higher education institutions by using interview protocol.

### **2.1. Population and Sample of the Study**

Population of the study was heads of general public universities in Province Punjab, Pakistan. Province of Punjab occupies greater number of public universities. Also, public universities occupy students from varied back grounds with respect to race, class, Urdu/English medium, background education and socio economic status. The study implied purposive sampling for selecting sample on the basis of ease of access of the researchers to

participants from the population. Data were collected from 17 heads of departments in universities.

## 2.2. Research Instrument

Only one open-ended question was formulated for the interview protocol which fulfilled the objective of the study. The purpose of the question was to seek suggestions from heads to enhance state of social justice and equity in higher education. All 17 heads responded on the open ended question. The credibility and trustworthiness of the protocol had been ensured through expert opinion.

## 3. Methods for Qualitative Analysis

The data obtained through interviews were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively by developing codes from raw responses, organizing codes into categories and formulating themes. Mostly responses were in *Urdu* that had been translated in English. According to Cresswell (2007), qualitative research involves building patterns, categories and themes exploiting 'bottom-up' approach, by organizing the data into increasingly more abstracts unit of information which requires researcher working back and forth between the themes until the formulation of a comprehensive set of themes. Saldaña (2021) in '*Coding manual for qualitative researchers*' suggested that the process comprises of formulation of codes from raw data, linking the codes into categories to form patterns and developing major themes, where codes symbolize and represent the raw data (whether narration, audio or visual form). The qualitative analysis of the open ended responses had been done manually by the researcher as qualitative analysis is a creative process, in which the researcher has to go back and forth, create and recreate codes and build patterns, so a human coder can be the best analytic tool in qualitative research. The study used inductive analysis or bottom up approach for analysing qualitative data with intent to link the themes directly with the data. Patton (1990) suggested that in inductive analysis, themes are strongly linked to the data rather than the researchers' preconceived theoretical construct. In analysing the data inductively, the analysis had been performed at semantic level for the purpose of using language of the participants as a tool to understand meanings and experiences. However, they further expressed the need to go beyond the semantics for extracting meaning, assumptions and implications. The analysis of the qualitative data followed the method suggested by Patton (1990), that progressed from description of the data, then organising the data to identify patterns in the form of codes, categories and themes, and then summarising and interpreting, in order to extract the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications.

The question was asked from head as: What role head of department can play for bringing improvements in education so that all students get fair treatment and opportunities to excel in education? Themes for each of the questions mentioned above were identified separately. Thus, the qualitative analysis of the study went through the following steps: First phase included description of the data, assigning identities and developing initial codes. Braun & Clarke (2006) endorsed formulation of categories from codes for organizing large and complex data and for developing meaning within the data. After organizing the data into categories, all the data in '*coding schemes*' were reviewed in order to ensure that all the categories are mutually exclusive and that data extracts in each category consistently reflected the same scheme under which the data were coded, as per recommended by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fourth phase involved development of broader themes by combining categories having similar patterns under one '*theme*'. Coherence with the data had been ensured by following Patton (1990) criteria for judging the coherence, i.e. '*internal homogeneity*' and '*external heterogeneity*'. After the development of thematic maps, themes were defined followed by description of the themes.

The themes from responses of heads had been generated separately, where one question had been inquired from heads each. Themes in each question were emerged separately. The elaboration of the themes emerged from the heads' interview is given below: A total of four major themes emerged on the above mentioned question. The majors themes in the above stated question were; '*Expectations from higher administration*', '*meaningful educational experiences for students*', '*weaknesses in system*' and '*heads attributes*'. The table below presents the summary of the major themes and categories emerged for the heads'

responses. Summary of the themes and categories emerged from heads responses are given below:

**Table 1: Qualitative Analysis of Heads' Responses on the Question**

Themes	Categories
Hopes	Policies Power delegation Discussion forums
Meaningful involvements	Effective learning Knowledge, skills, and Curricula
Feebleness	Evaluation Facilities
Traits	Cooperation Opportunities and discriminations Determination Respect

Table 1 shows that four basic themes emerged from the heads' responses, which were; expectations from higher administration, meaningful educational experiences for students, weaknesses in system and heads attributes. Below is given the explanation of the themes.

### 3.1. Hopes

The theme 'hopes' comprises three categories, which are; 'policies from top are required', 'concerns for power delegation- A way towards having and maintaining quality teachers' and 'discussion forums for heads'. Heads are of the view that legislations and policies are required to bring improvements. A head narrated, "Policies should be implemented from the top. We are already performing our best" (H15). Heads also seemed to be worried about limited powers offered to them. It seemed that frustration prevailed in heads regarding authority of various decisions under their head. The following words reflect that heads needed to have complete authority and independent decision making powers, "Qualified and experienced teachers be inducted in the university and most senior of them should be head of department; Heads should be given complete authority; It should be ensured that heads follow the rules; Rules should not be dealt with flexibility in normal situations; Decisions of heads should not be rejected from higher ups in all circumstances" (H6). One of the head of department felt the need of regular discussion forums with higher authorities. The head stated, "There should be discussion forums on regular basis and various department heads should be asked for giving due advice in this regard. I will give my opinion on this in various discussion forums and I will stay in regular contact with my teachers for better services. A head of department can motivate his/her teachers" (H9).

## 4. Meaningful Involvement

The theme 'meaningful involvement' comprises two categories, which are; 'effective learning environment' and 'practical knowledge, skills, updated curricula'. One of the head recommended that students be indulged in meaningful educational experiences and reflected special care for struggling and disabled students, "Counseling for students with learning disabilities; A different classroom arrangement every time for struggling students to sit on the front seats; Tutorial activities every week; Co-curricular activities; Students' continuous assessments" (H7). Another head also pointed towards regular conduct of tutorials, "There should be a regular conduct of tutorials" (H11). A head also reflected his concerns on curriculum modifications for more practical knowledge and skills. The head was of the opinion that students should not be given theoretical knowledge and should be connected to actual life of community. The words were, "Students should not only be given theoretical knowledge, rather they should be connected with the actual life of community; courses should be benched marked with top ranked international universities; Syllabus should be uniform in all over the country" (H8).

### 4.1. Feebleness

The theme 'feebleness' comprises two categories, which are; 'ineffective teachers' evaluation procedures' and 'lacking basic facilities'. Heads reflected great concerns for teachers' quality. For this, one of the head suggested to arrange for refresher courses for teachers for teachers' code of conduct and fear of Allah. The head also suggested continuous

system of evaluation of teachers to check for teachers' updated knowledge, the head stated, "There should be refresher courses for teachers particularly for teachers' code of conduct and fear of Allah. There should be a continuous assessment of teachers' knowledge after a suitable gap" (H16). One of the head reflected that heads are putting efforts to bring betterments on their part, however directed attention to the fact that hard working teachers' efforts are not being fairly rewarded. In this regard, there is a need to revise teacher evaluation procedure; as in teacher evaluations, those teachers get more marks who keep their students happy and give them more marks. The reflection was as follows, "All head of departments are putting efforts. The most needed thing is that hardworking teachers' efforts need to be recognized and appreciated. Observation shows that teacher evaluation procedure is not appropriate. In teacher evaluation, those teachers get more marks who keep their students happy and give more marks to students. There is not much encouragement given to the teachers who put more efforts in teaching" (H1). The head also showed concerns about lacking basic facilities in government higher education institutions, "University classrooms also are not equipped with latest technologies; few of them are deprived of basic needs. In this regard, whoever the head is, he/she cannot change university policies" (H1).

#### **4.2. Traits**

The theme 'heads' traits' comprises four categories, which are; 'head's cooperation', 'equal opportunities without unfair discriminations', 'heads' determination' and 'a culture of respect'. Heads also realized the need of being cooperative, a head commented, "Cooperation with teachers, understanding issues of the students, create resources, so that basic necessities that are required for effective educational attainment are fulfilled" (H2). One of the head reflected the need of creating an unbiased and non-discriminatory environment, whether everyone feels important and eligible to significantly contribute in educational process. The head stated, "In my discipline, students have equal opportunities to progress, in it, students are not treated biasedly. I personally take care of this thing and personally monitor this aspect" (H3). Heads also completely realized the need of self-determination by them. One of the head reflected, "Educational progress is possible with good will and practices. All issues can be resolved with determination, application and concentration" (H4). Another head realized his/her role and reflected, "WE should work for the sake of serving the community" (H11). The heads also realized that education sector cannot progress without establishing a culture where everyone feels valued and respected. A head narrated, "Maintain close relationships with all teachers; if heads treat all teachers with respect. It will create a culture where everyone respects each other" (H17).

#### **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The study provided a platform to record voices of heads from grass root level in the form of open ended responses. Results of the study revealed prevalence of injustices in our higher education system, whether related to system inequities and/or inequities in the educational process for the students. Students' personal barriers, i.e. poor family background, belongingness to village and remote areas, and personal conditions such as being a struggling or silent student in the class, added to inequities for the students. Earlier studies by Hassan, Awan, and Awan (2018) conducted in Pakistan's public schools on equity also found significant differences in students' expected and experienced equity on basis of rurality, mother tongue, fathers' income, education and profession. Majority heads expressed their wish for freedom of expression. The system lags behind freedom of expression, where students look towards teachers; teachers look towards heads and the heads look towards higher administration that their voice may be listened and actions have to be taken. No system can ever be developed without understanding the concerns of people involved at the grass root level. Here comes the role of higher education, where higher education is not just expected to make policies, but also stay concerned with these issues at micro level. It is, rather the sole responsibility of higher education to ensure just and a fair education system. One of the key aspects highlighted for establishing just education system was, following true merit in each and every ones' selection, which is a key ingredient of bringing and maintain quality in the system. The system desperately needs honest people in each and every tier of education. It was quite a surprising finding that students longed for simple human values such as honesty, devotion, hard work from teachers, heads and the higher education personal. The question ascends, are these all elements missing badly in the system? Where and how are these dishonesties depicted? The dilemma is, the demand of basic human values require no special budget. The change has to be brought about at mental level which in turn will streamline all

the actions. Does treating equally, being fair, giving more attention to the weaker ones, stopping biases and preferring unjustly one over the other costs much? There is simply need of handling social inequalities intelligently and honestly, and providing a secure environment to the vulnerable and disadvantaged students. Research also explored that in countries like Sweden and Netherlands, academic inequalities were well managed by coping with social inequalities instead of mega educational reforms (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993).

Heads also highlighted the grey areas of different nature for enhancing equity in higher education. The injustices in the higher education also reflect the inequitable society at large, in which education operates. The study concluded that justice in education, whether the policies or process is crucial to be brought about for the establishment of stable and just society. Ultimately, students fall prey to many inequities, due to biases and discriminations in the system that cease equal opportunities for the students. Only a bias free, discrimination and fair system with honest and responsive people has potential to offer equal and equitable educational opportunities for all learners, in which students' background does not create any sort of hindrance to gain fuller benefit of educational experiences for them. Higher education needs to work with joined hands to bring calculated reforms at institutional level to reduce injustices and maximize educational opportunities for all, such that unprivileged members are specifically catered leading towards establishment of a just and fair culture at higher education. The leaders may plan training workshops for teachers on equity pedagogy with the agenda of fairness in teaching learning and preparation and marking of assessments. Also, occasional seminars on basic human values, such as equality, honesty, God fearing, should be arranged for the teachers. Special focus of the heads should be on the teachers, who are weak in teaching and who lack updated knowledge in their subjects. Training opportunities for them should be provided, and also periodic assessments of teachers' updated knowledge should be held and adequate feedback on their weak areas be communicated for the sake of educational benefit of the students. Higher education institutions should provide fair opportunities and financial support to all teachers for international exposure. Heads should also provide fair opportunities to all teachers and involve them in a process of shared decision making that will ultimately impact students for addressing social injustices in higher prevailing in higher education institutions.

## Reference

- Ainscow M., D., A., & Kerr, K (2006). Equity in education: mapping the territory. Centre for Equity in Education: The University of Manchester.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cresswell, J. W. (2007). Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches (2nd ed.). . *California: Sage Publications*.
- Demeuse, M. (2004). A Set of Equity Indicators of the European Education Systems. In: Örebro (Sweden): Örebro University.
- Ghosh, R. (2012). Diversity and excellence in higher education: Is there a conflict? *Comparative Education Review*, 56(3), 349-365.
- Gorard\*, S., & Smith, E. (2004). An international comparison of equity in education systems. *Comparative education*, 40(1), 15-28. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305006042000184863>
- Hassan, U., Awan, G., & Awan, A. G. (2018). Effect of school environment on teacher's motivation and self-esteem at secondary level in District-Multan-Pakistan. *Global Journal of Management, Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(1), 211-223.
- Hutmacher, W., Cochrane, D., & Bottani, N. (2001). In pursuit of equity in education. *Using international indicators to compare equity*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-47579-0>
- Meuret, D. (2002). Equity and education: A critical review of sociological research and thought.
- Mirci, P., Loomis, C., & Hensley, P. (2011). Social Justice, Self-Systems, and Engagement in Learning: What Students Labeled as. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development*, 23, 57-74.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*: SAGE Publications, inc.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). The coding manual for qualitative researchers. *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, 1-440.

- Shavit, Y., & Blossfeld, H.-P. (1993). *Persistent Inequality: Changing Educational Attainment in Thirteen Countries*. *Social Inequality Series*: ERIC.
- Smith, E., & Gorard, S. (2006). Pupils' views on equity in schools. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 36(1), 41-56. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920500382465>
- Willems, J. (2011). *Equity: A key benchmark for students and staff in an era of changing demands, changing directions*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the ASCILITE Conference: Changing demands, changing directions, Hobart.