

Bei Muij Universiti: Disseminating Higher Education Awareness to Indigenous Youngsters

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history:</p> <p>Received: 7 March 2023 Revised: 12 March 2023 Accepted: 25 March 2023 Published: 1 April 2023</p>	<p>In addition to the significance of education for improving economic growth and skill development, higher education is also crucial for the indigenous community, better known as Orang Asli in Malaysia. Unfortunately, many Orang Asli ethnic minorities living in remote areas or highlands of Peninsular Malaysia face high dropout rates across all educational levels. This is often due to a lack of awareness of the importance of education, as well as limited access to educational institutions. As a marginalized community that has been neglected for decades, achieving higher education can significantly contribute to reducing poverty and improving their quality of life. In general, this study aimed to enhance the quality of indigenous education in Malaysia and promote the importance of higher education for Orang Asli students. The study was conducted using an exploratory sequential mixed-method design at SMK Sultan Ahmad Shah in Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands, where data was collected from 29 Form Six (pre-university) students. The results showed a significant increase in their awareness of furthering their studies in tertiary education. Before the program, only 19 out of 29 students believed that pursuing higher education was important for them, but after the program, all of them expressed an interest in doing so.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p> <p>Digital Solutions Higher Education Tertiary Education Indigenous Knowledge Transfer</p> <p> OPEN ACCESS</p>	

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INTRODUCTION

The word "educate" is derived from the Latin term "educare," which means "to lead out" (Karnel, 2018). Education refers to the process of systematically teaching and learning, typically within a school or university setting (Cobb et al., 2003). It is increasingly crucial for individuals seeking a better and more comfortable life during their time on earth. In Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country spanning the Malay Peninsula and Borneo Island, the government has historically placed great emphasis on education. However, despite significant investments and attention devoted to the education sector, progress among the Orang Asli community, the Indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula, lags far behind other ethnic groups, such as Malays, Chinese, and Indians.

This disparity in educational progress is a critical issue that requires urgent attention. While the government has allocated substantial funding towards the education sector, it is evident that these efforts have yet to be adequately directed toward the Orang Asli community. As a result, many Orang Asli individuals lack access to quality education and are, therefore, unable to take advantage of the benefits education provides (Md Nor et al., 2016). This situation has contributed significantly to the marginalization and poverty experienced by the Orang Asli community. It is imperative that the Malaysian government takes concrete steps to address this issue by directing more resources toward improving educational opportunities for the Orang Asli community (Abdullah, 2022). This would involve increasing access to schools and universities, providing financial support, and promoting awareness of the importance of education within the community. By doing so, the government can help bridge the educational gap between the Orang Asli community and other ethnic groups, thereby promoting social and economic equality in the country (Rosnon & Talib, 2019).

The term "indigenous" has its roots in Arabic, where it means "original." It can also be used to describe a society descended from a country's first occupants. In other words, indigenous peoples are the original inhabitants of a given country. In Malaysia, the indigenous population is made up of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia, as well as the Natives of Sabah and Sarawak. The term "indigenous peoples" is widely recognized by the international community and features prominently in international legal instruments concerning their rights, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007 (UNDRIP). The UNDRIP has led to increased global attention on the postcolonial plight of indigenous peoples. The legal recognition of indigenous peoples and their rights is a critical issue in many countries worldwide (Mohd Adnan et al., 2021). In Malaysia, the Orang Asli community faces numerous challenges and continues to be marginalized, despite government efforts to address the issue. The UNDRIP, along with other international agreements, provides a framework for promoting the rights of indigenous peoples and achieving greater equality for these marginalized communities. It is essential that the Malaysian government takes concrete steps to implement the provisions of these agreements and ensure that the Orang Asli community is not left behind (Kamaruddin & Jusoh, 2004). By recognizing and supporting the rights of indigenous peoples, Malaysia can help build a more just and equitable society for all its citizens (Nordin et al., 2020).

The education of the Orang Asli people is a major concern for many groups, including the government, due to a variety of factors that contribute to the problem. Research has shown that only 50% of Orang Asli students pursue their education beyond primary school, which has a significant impact on the number of students who enroll in secondary and tertiary education. The rate of students dropping out of secondary school is even higher than that of primary school, exacerbating the problem of limited access to higher education institutions such as universities and polytechnics for the Orang Asli (Sawalludin et al., 2020). In summary, the low percentage of Orang Asli students continuing their education after primary school and the high dropout rates in secondary schools create major barriers to higher education and limit opportunities for this community.

Accessing quality education is crucial for the economic, social, and cultural development of the Orang Asli community, and it is essential for the government to address the challenges they face in doing so (Mohd Noor, 2012). By promoting equal access to education, the government can improve the well-being and progress of the Orang Asli community and Malaysia as a whole. Therefore, the government must prioritize improving education outcomes for the Orang Asli community (Mohd Adnan et al., 2021). To achieve this goal, a program called *Bei Muij Universiti* was conducted in April 2022, which means "let's go to university" in Orang Asli (Semai) language. The program aimed to provide exposure to higher education institutions to Orang Asli students at

SMK Sultan Ahmad Shah, Pahang, Malaysia and promote the School of Computing at Universiti Utara Malaysia. This article describes the impact of the program, based on investigations conducted both before and after its implementation.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of the *Bei Muij Universiti* program, which was designed to raise awareness among Orang Asli students at SMK Sultan Ahmad Shah, Pahang, Malaysia, about the importance of pursuing higher education. The exploratory sequential mixed method research design was utilized, and both pre-test and post-test were administered to the students. The pre-test was conducted through qualitative interviews, while the post-test was done using a quantitative survey. The data collection was carried out face-to-face, and the researchers recorded the details of the student's responses to ensure comprehension and allow clarification when necessary. Figure 1 depicts the research design of this study.

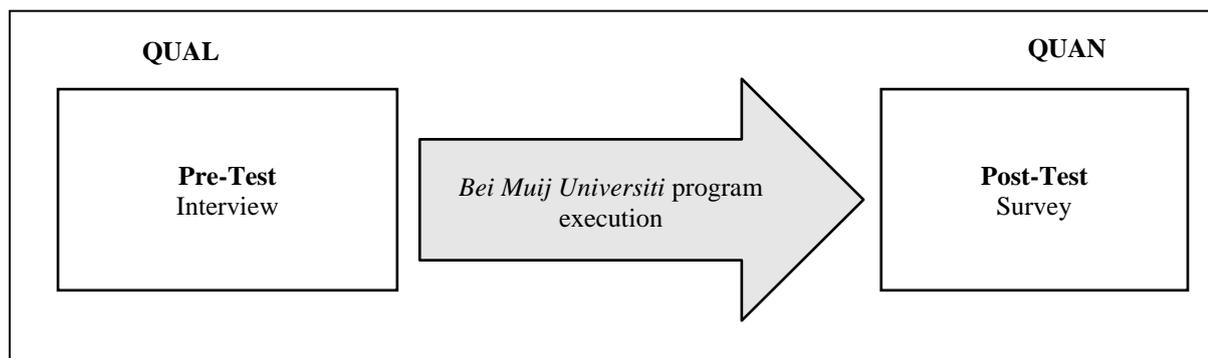


Figure 1: Exploratory Mixed-Method Research Design to Gather Pre and Post Data

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study was conducted on 29 respondents, with 24 (82.8%) females and only five (17.2%) males. The majority of respondents were from Kampung Sungai Ruil, with nine respondents (31.0%), while Kampung Sungai Loon, Pos Telanok, and Kampung Sungai Renglas, Pos Telanok, tied for second place with 4 respondents (13.8%) each. Three respondents (10.3%) came from Kampung Sungai Ubi Bharat Tea, and two places, Kampung Sungai Teji, Pos Telanok, and Kampung Pos Lemoi, each had two respondents (6.9%). The remaining one respondent (3.4%) came from five different locations: Kampung Telimau, Pos Lemoi, Kampung Susu, Pos Telanok, Kampung Kuala Boh, BT19, Jalan Pahang, and B4-10 Puncak Arabella. The demographic data collected also included information about the respondents' preferences, with 10 respondents (34.5%) selecting sports as their self-quality, and six (20.7%) choosing singing as their preferred activity. Other interests included learning, drawing, art, painting, visual arts, and dancing, each selected by one respondent (3.4%).

When asked which subject they were most interested in, Malay Language was the most popular choice, with 17 respondents (58.6%) indicating an interest. Pendidikan Seni Visual was chosen by four respondents (13.8%), and Sejarah was chosen by three respondents (10.3%). Other subjects of interest included Moral Education, Islamic Education, Science, English, and Multimedia. When asked about the subject they found most challenging, Mathematics was the top choice, with 27 respondents (93.1%) finding it difficult. English was the second most challenging subject, with eight respondents (27.6%), followed by History, with four respondents (13.8%). Only one respondent (3.4%) found Science to be a challenging subject.

Pre-Test

Qualitative data for the pre-test was collected through interviews two months prior to the execution of the *Bei Muij Universiti* program. This pre-test aimed to assess the awareness of Orang Asli students about the benefits of tertiary education. The interview consisted of two questions. The first question inquired about their willingness to leave their families to pursue higher education. Out of the 29 respondents, only six (23.1%) expressed their readiness to do so. Their responses revealed two main themes: [i] a willingness to make sacrifices for success in

life (n=3, 11.2%), and [ii] a desire for knowledge acquisition (n=3, 11.2%). The majority of respondents (n=23, 79.3%) were not willing to leave their families, and six themes were extracted from their answers. These themes indicate the major hindrances that deter them from pursuing higher education away from home. The themes are [i] financial instability (n=10, 34.5%), [ii] lack of confidence in their academic abilities (n=3, 11.2%), [iii] lack of interest (n=4, 13.8%), [iv] responsibilities to take care of their families (n=3, 11.2%), [v] preference for work (n=2, 6.9%), and [vi] uncertainty (n=1, 3.4%). A summary of the themes identified from the thematic analysis of the first pre-test question is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of the Respondents' Readiness to Stay Away from Families

Themes	Sub Themes	Frequency
Not Willing to Stay Away	Financial Instability	10
	Not Clever Enough	3
	Not Interested	4
	Need to Take Care of The Family	3
	Prefer to Work	2
	Not Sure	1
	TOTAL	23
Willing to Stay Away	Sub Themes	Frequency
	To be Successful in Life	3
	To Acquire Knowledge	3
	TOTAL	6

The second question asked about respondents' perceptions of the importance of higher education to themselves (Table 2). The finding is quite surprising, whereby most of them (n=19, 65.5%) believed that higher education is important. Two main themes appeared from their statements, which are: [i] for future betterment (n=10, 34.5%), and [ii] to get better jobs (n=9, 31%). On the other hand, ten respondents (34.5%) stated that tertiary education was not their priority. In this regard, the analysis only produced one theme, which indicated that they prefer to work after finishing secondary school. In sum, the pre-test analysis concluded that even though the respondents do not prefer furthering studies in tertiary education, they still agreed that higher education is beneficial to them. This is a good sign, whereby the *Bei Muij Universiti* program has a better chance of changing their attitude and awareness towards higher education.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Respondents' Views on the Importance of Higher Education

Themes	Sub Themes	Frequency
Important	for future betterment	10
	to get better jobs	9
	TOTAL	19
Not Important	Sub Theme	Frequency
	Job is more important	10

Post-Test

Bei Muij Universiti has been designed and implemented by incorporating engaging, fun, educative and exciting elements. This program aimed to highlight the positive sides of being a university student in particular, through activities such as experience sharing, games, role play, presentation, and group work. After the program, post-test data collection was done using a qualitative survey method. The questionnaire consists of six questions, which were designed in conjunction with the pre-test interview protocol. The first question re-asked them about their willingness to stay apart from their families. Interestingly, most of the respondents chose YES, of which

28 respondents (96.6%) and only one (3.4%) chose NO. The second question re-asked their intention to further studies at a higher education level. The finding also indicated a positive transition in the respondents' attitude, whereby all 29 respondents (100%) chose YES for interest in continuing studies to a higher level.

Participants were also asked about the specific fields of study they were interested in pursuing in higher education and were introduced to the offered programs at various universities. The most popular field was Technical and Vocational, with 14 respondents (48.3%) expressing interest. The second most popular fields were Sports Science and Linguistics, with 5 respondents (17.2%) each. Pure Science was the third most popular choice, with four respondents (13.8%) expressing interest. Economics and Business came fourth, with three respondents (10.3%) interested. Engineering and Social Sciences were tied for fifth place, with each field attracting 2 respondents (6.9%). Finally, three respondents (3.4%) expressed interest in other fields such as Tourism and Culture.

The next questions asked respondents about their preferences for types of higher education institutions. The majority of respondents, 13 in total (44.8%), expressed a preference for public universities. Teacher's institutes were the second most popular choice, selected by eight respondents (27.6%). Six respondents (20.7%) chose polytechnic institutions, while every three respondents (3.4%) expressed interest in Foundation/Matriculation programs or other types of higher education available after completing their form six program. Finally, participants were also asked about their career ambitions after completing higher education. The survey offered options including the government sector, private sector, self-employment, and "Don't want to work." All 29 respondents (100%) expressed an interest in pursuing a career in the government sector.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Education is the key to civilization. Unfortunately, the Orang Asli community faces challenges in the realm of education, with statistics indicating that the Orang Asli have one of the worst educational records among major races such as Malays, Chinese, and even Indians. According to previous studies, numerous aspects contribute to that particular condition. One of the reasons would be the Orang Asli community's knowledge of education, as well as the Orang Asli community's accessibility to their nearest educational institution. To address these issues, the responsible parties should launch a public awareness campaign emphasizing the value of education for the Orang Asli population, as well as fix and improve access for the Orang Asli to their nearest school. These solutions may be able to ensure that the Orang Asli community's educational advancement does not remain stagnant, but rather becomes a tremendous leap forward that will drive and benefit the people toward a more prosperous and progressive community in the future. Current challenges or issues that influence indigenous education must be identified straight away in order to raise the quality of education for indigenous students.

In response to this call, this study has successfully designed and implemented a program called *Bei Muij Universiti*, with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of tertiary education to the Orang Asli youths. The findings from the pre-test and post-test indicated a very positive and promising future for this group of unsung communities. Hence, it would be beneficial to expand this program to a wider audience, and if feasible, on a national level. This program could also be improved in the future. An effective awareness program to promote the importance of further studies in higher education for indigenous youths should be centered around the benefits and opportunities that come with it. Activities such as inviting successful indigenous professionals to speak about their education journey, organizing college campus tours, and offering scholarship application workshops can help to inspire and motivate indigenous youths to pursue higher education. The program could also include counseling and mentoring sessions to provide guidance on academic planning, financial aid, and personal development. By providing access to resources and role models, the program can empower indigenous youths to achieve their academic and career goals and ultimately contribute to their communities and society as a whole.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is supported Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) University Grant Scheme: S/O Code: 21347.

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