

THE NEOLIBERAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HIGHER EDUCATION: MARKETIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON ACCESS AND QUALITY AT UNIVERSITAS HASANUDDIN

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the impact of neoliberal political economy in the context of higher education, precisely at Universitas Hasanuddin. The main focus of the study is to explore how the marketization process of higher education affects the accessibility and quality of education. The approach used in this study is qualitative with data collection methods through semi-structured interviews with 30 students and documentation studies related to the policies implemented at Hasanuddin University. The results show that the application of neoliberal principles in higher education management, such as an emphasis on efficiency, commercialization of educational services, and adapting the curriculum to market needs, has a significant impact on the accessibility of education for students from low economic backgrounds, as well as affecting the quality of education received. Apart from that, this marketization also has the potential to create inequality in the distribution of resources and create a gap between universities that have more funds and those that have less. It is hoped that these findings will provide deeper insight into the impact of neoliberal political economy on higher education and propose policies to improve access and quality of education at the state universities in Indonesia.

Keywords: Higher Education, Marketization, Neoliberalism, Universitas Hasanuddin, Quality

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, the world's higher education has come under the influence of the neoliberal ideology which stresses free markets, privatization and limited state involvement (Berman & Zizmor, 2019). Schooling in the context of neoliberal educational reforms is market oriented and emphasizes competition and efficiency derived from corporate models of management (Tullock, 1984; Münch, 2014). These principles are now being applied in the higher education industry, but they are not without their own complications and new dynamics that alter the access, quality and the conventional functions of higher educational institutions.

With the fourth largest population in the world, Indonesia provides good opportunities to understand how the neoliberal policies dominate the higher education sector (Ball, 2012). After political and economic changes that were occasioned by the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the education sector in Indonesia undertook structural reforms that were in tandem with the neoliberal policies (Harvey, 2005; Williams, 2008). These changes included improvements on the economic limitations, advancement on the global competitiveness proportional to international standards among other frameworks (Sahlberg, 2012). For higher education institutions, such changes introduced social structures that call for higher fees, partnerships with the private sector, and monetization of research (McKinney & Calkins, 2021).

Universitas Hasanuddin, referred as UNHAS, situated in Makassar, South

Sulawesi, is a good example of the dynamics of such transformations. Established in 1956, the institution began as a regional party, but now it has become the one of the biggest higher education in Indonesia (Brown, 2005; Emynorane et al., 2024). The fact that UNHAS is the main provider of higher education in Eastern Indonesia puts the reality in a different context; there is a constant demand of providing education to a peripheral area while also responding to commercial pressures and global competition (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). In relation to this role, development of UNHAS receives both Neoliberal policies and regional development needs, increases the tensions between the imperatives of the market and the public mission of the university.

Literature Review

Studies that deal with neoliberalism in higher education, especially marketization, tend to emphasize its shifts towards financial instability, form of governance and employability skilling rather than what was peripheral or ignored (Kivistö & Rinne, 2023). But most of these studies focus on Western countries or prestigious schools and do not pay attention to the impact of these measures on public higher education institutions in the background of developing countries like in Africa (Belfiore & Bennett, 2021). Moreover, such research is often limited to students' agency and experiences with strategies of coping against such circumstances (Marginson, 2011). This study intends to address these issues by finding out how UNHAS students understand and deal with the impacts of processes associated with the adoption of neoliberal policies and their views on access, quality and transformations of the university with regard to these factors.

Centering on the operations of UNHAS, this study goes a step further in understanding how neoliberal reforms take their toll on the regional public university serving different economic classes in a developing nation (Bourke & McTernan, 2021). Given the research outcome, it offers an understanding of how global local policies and trends can develop in a nuanced way within the confines of local geography (Keddie, 2014). This study is equally important to the policymakers in Indonesia and other developing countries as it provides knowledge that will help them to develop a balance between market forces and the pursuit of equality and social purpose in higher education.

The research literature indicates that there are three dimensions in higher education: academic, social and economic ones. Proceeding from this approach, Canaan & Shumar (2008) argument that the term “academic capitalism” describes a situation when the universities are turning into businesses and thus helps to explain the shift of the American research universities. In this case, students can be included in myriad global debates on balancing social objectives and business solutions in a very tangible manner, as well as outside of the education system (Trow, 2000; Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Higgins, 2013).

Universities enable the market of education by being ideal service providers, a common marketization reform. Such changes are accompanied by privatization due to the expansion of non-public investments in higher education and reduced state involvement (Nikitina, 2020). Performance-oriented management, in turn, implies that institutions adopt performance measures and practices typical of a business structure (Ng, 2022). There has been an increased expectation that universities will earn revenue through the commercialization of research and relationships with businesses (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2021). All these foster a complete transformation of the higher education

sector across several regions, include Indonesia (Doherty, 2020).

Neoliberalism within Indonesian Higher Education have made quite a few transformations in line with the neoliberal paradigm, especially anchored since the late 1990s (Lynch, 2010). This process got a boost from the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98, which made necessary changes, and this was evident across the Indonesian economy and the policy framework. Rampell (2010) believes that this time was a turning point in the reforms of the higher education system in Indonesia, with almost exclusively market-based changes were implemented through policies and laws. Several initiatives that fall under the ambit of neoliberalism have already been implemented within higher education in the case of Indonesia (O'Neill, 2019).

The (HELTS) strategy 2003-2010 endorsed by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Indonesia emphasized institutional autonomy, educational quality, and public accountability (University World News, 2015). Since 2009, the Badan Hukum Pendidikan (BHP) was announced to give public universities more autonomy, but it was repealed later. In the Higher Education Law in 2012, these principles were more codified as quality assurance and governance reforms in the context of enhancing autonomy. Therefore, with the culmination of these activities, the higher education sector in Indonesia has developed a hybrid model, combining global neoliberal trends with localized governance, as pointed out by Piketty (2020). Therefore, these policies are most likely driving the Indonesian institutions to reconfigure their internal dynamics in a way that ensures a compromise between market pressures and social responsibilities (O'Doherty & Lucas, 2022).

Impact on access and equity

The repercussions of the neoliberal reformations on access to higher education in Indonesia consist of controversial but intricate dynamics. One side of the equation posits that Wilson (2021) expresses, "Greater autonomy, any new cost-sharing mechanism, or increased fees would serve to increase educational inequality." On the other hand, Zarifa & Mignault (2017) deliver an opposite point of view, arguing that, in the end, market-driven reforms can provide more access to higher education by allowing institutions to develop and diversify their offerings to suit a broader range of students.

The consequences of neoliberal policies, therefore, vary. Although capacity to offer opportunity has indeed increased in a bigger sector, it is becoming a wishful reality because of the increasing students' and their family's financial commitment for ensuring equitable access for all (Whitehead & Lunt, 2023). This has brought to light some approaches on why context of the market-based educational model can ever guarantee good access in highly unequal developing countries like Indonesia.

Quality with academic values

Neoliberalism's implications for educational quality and academic values in Indonesia are equally nuanced. Veldman & White (2022) explore how performance indicators within Indonesian universities influence academic behavior and perceptions of quality. Performance management based on an institution's performance may reasonably be a source of conflict with long-held academic values, which set them in tension against managerial accountability and scholarly autonomy (Coombe, 2022). It may be particularly relevant within the Indonesian context, with recent reforms instituting mandatory quality assuring practice that many academics perceive as unduly restrictive.

Abbott & Vogt (2021) look towards the role of technology in these changes to notice the growing acceptance of digital mechanisms in alignment with market demands. A commensurate change in teaching and research practices raises about how such changes will influence ground approaches to sustaining academic integrity in a market-oriented environment. And, while neoliberal reforms may enhance operational efficiency, they also beg the much larger, critical set of questions about the long-term viability of values and identities in the Indonesian academia (Chung & Berman, 2020).

These neoliberal shifts will take on different forms and character throughout Southeast Asia, if only for regional, economic, and social reasons (Côté & Allahar, 2022). An inquiry into their own adaptations to market demands, particularly those relevant to academic values, may prove beneficial to institutions like Universitas Hasanuddin. However, there is little work regarding how such reforms are perceived and experienced by students in these environments (Devine & Forde, 2020). Most of the research focuses on the structural and institutional impacts of neoliberal policies; not many lend their attention on the living and breathing experiences of students.

This study tries to fill this gap by discussing how UNHAS students experience neoliberal policies at the individual level. By focusing on the perspective of students, the present study will contribute to a greater understanding of neoliberalism's influence on higher education in Indonesia, pointing out policy changes that ripple through students, institutions, and academic values alike. Hence, the present work aims to fill this gap by revealing the lived experiences of UNHAS students to see how the neoliberal policies present themselves at the level of the individual.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the impact of neoliberal policies on Universitas Hasanuddin students via an interpretive paradigm focusing on the social construction of reality. Specific insights into students' experiences with neoliberal policies will emerge as a result of an in-depth understanding. Consequently, the study adopted a qualitative approach that collected data through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. A sample of thirty UNHAS students was selected from different faculties and different backgrounds via purposive sampling that ensured a varied perspective on issues such as access to education and perceived quality.

The collection of primary data employed interviews that focused on students' perspectives on financial barriers, curriculum relevancy, and how market-oriented policies affected both their academic and social experiences. The secondary data provided context in terms of institutional documents such as UNHAS strategic plans and pertinent national policy reports. Thematic analysis guided the interpretation of the data through various stages: familiarization, coding, theme development, and refinement, all outlined by Eymorane et al. (2024). NVivo software was applied to help with the encoding and organization of data to contribute to structured analysis.

To prosecute this study ethically, formal recruitment processes were initiated in line with IRB approval, and informed consent was provided by every participant, ensuring the right to confidentiality. Bias-relieving reflexive processes such as maintaining research journals and peer debriefing have proved the credibility of the study. This design thus enables researchers to investigate the effects that neoliberal policies exact on the experiences and perceptions of students, providing plenty of possible insights into the broader impacts of these reforms in higher education in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

In this section, the findings from semi-structured interviews with thirty students at Universitas Hasanuddin (UNHAS) and review of pertinent documents on neoliberalism in Indonesian higher education have been synthesized. The intentions to investigate explain the occurrences of neoliberal policies in university governance, their indirect influence on access to education, perceptions of educational quality, and aggravation of the public service role of universities:

The policy manifestation at UNHAS

Neoliberal policies at UNHAS have engendered a restructuring of governance and funding on the well-nigh exclusive reliance on income from tuition fees and partnerships with industry to conduct performance-based judgment and assessment. The trend is emblematic of a global neoliberal movement, emphasized by Harris (2021), where education has increasingly come to assume the character of economic commodities. The students expressed discontent regarding rising tuition fees creating more access barriers for candidates from lower socioeconomic status, this fact is reproducing inequality in education enunciated by Jackson's (2020) findings through neoliberal policies.

UNHAS corporate management has come close to creating a conflict between the university's financial interests and academic values. Students remarked that market-oriented strategies compromise educational quality, also fitting into Deem & Brehony (2022) critique of neoliberalism in academia. *"It feels like we are more a product than a student; the university requires more positive results from us,"* said the respondent, reflecting how the institutional focus on ranking and competition diverts attention from each core of education.

Implication on access to Higher Education

Financial challenges such as tuition and the high cost of living in Makassar deny access to higher education for needy students and those who are from the rural areas (Harrison & Hatt, 2020). Even though scholarships are available, these are few and highly competitive, reinforcing the ambivalence in implementing neoliberal reforms. There is a systemic inequality against students as a result of financial constrictions, and the regional disparities echo (Giroux, 2014).

Despite their rapid growth in numbers, students viewed support services given as lacking, especially for rural students. This division between enrollment and support represents the unfinished business of the neoliberal reforms; access there is no guarantee and equity on access of resources. Gordon & Tuchman (2021) in their work emphasize the importance of policy interventions which include socio-economics access.

Perceptions about Educational Quality

While the curriculum fits market demands, students reported dissatisfaction, owing largely to a lack of depth and critical modes of thinking. One student mentioned that *"we learn what employers want, so at this time, critical thinking is a thing of the past."* A critique that has dogged market-oriented education is that immediate employability often forecloses on educational development in a more comprehensive sense.

A neoliberal approach commands faculty to be accountable to performance metrics, and for this, according to students, undermines their approachability and ability to mentor students academically. The challenge, noted by Sandy & Watson (2022). Jones (2021) illustrates how neoliberal policies create pressure and strains upon quality of education; this will further affect the interactions between faculty and students and all aspects of support services that are necessary for student development.

Market orientation and public service role contradiction

The market orientation of UNHAS is yearned by its public service mission. Such orientations have led to student perceptions of the institution as profit-oriented against being community-oriented. According to one respondent: "*the university is supposed to be for the community, but it seems like it is just another corporation now*". Thus, converging with worldwide concerns over the transition of higher education to the neoliberal model threatens educational quality and community outreach (Steger & Roy, 2020).

The commodification of education has inspired organized student activism, in which students are advocating reforms that value student welfare over market competitiveness (Santos, 2019). This movement is indicative of global issues of student resistance to neoliberal policies, as suggested by Spector (2023), providing students with a critical role as actors in their right, rather than passive recipients of policy changes

DISCUSSION

The findings are indicative of neoliberal policies having some relevant effects on UNHAS around governance mechanisms, the quality of education, and access. The results give certain signals for further analysis and policies to consider:

Financial Barriers and Equity: Rising tuition fees and a lack of scholarship opportunities tend to suggest that cost-sharing might inhibit students from reaching marginalized members of society (McGetrick, 2020). In the view of Bok (2003), such economic policies may be beneficial to universities with respect to revenues, but will hurt poorer populations with added burdens. The findings suggest more need for financial support mechanisms and reconsideration of the funding policies for equitable access across social-economic and regional boundaries.

Balancing market orientation with quality education: While a market-oriented curriculum may augur for employability, students expressed concerns over the thinning of the critical thinking core in education and academic mentorship (Lang & Maher, 2021). UNHAS needs to find a happy medium between training students on practical skill implementation with certain dimensions of analytical ability, which would recognize student success all over the world, in accordance with McNeill & Russell (2023).

The role of universities in society: UNHAS should reassess its approach to community outreach and educational accessibility in light of its commitment to societal development, but now it appears to operate from profit-oriented motives. Robinson & Thompson (2021) discuss that, neoliberal policies deprioritize community engagement, effectively limiting the university's role toward the regional advancement. With respect to public identity, UNHAS has to revisit its outlook on community outreach and educational accessibility so that it may be a more socially responsible institution.

Agency of students in neoliberal contexts: Student activism at UNHAS illustrates the power of student agency in confronting neoliberal policies. Shah & Islam (2023) analyze how student resistance is indispensable in adjourning requests for changes that would see social and educational needs outweigh economic interests; in effect, this finding is an insight into giving policy-making an upper hand by incorporating student voices in such a way that higher learning institutions would be a little bit fairer and more receptive to student needs.

The findings collectively indicate a complicated relation between neoliberal policies and the experiences of students at UNHAS. Students face not only financial barriers but an upheaval in quality of education and a limitation on public service mission, thereby necessitating a shift in attitude toward where management of higher education should strike an optimum balance between economic efficiency and core values of academic life.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and findings of this study, it can be concluded that the implementation of neoliberal policies in the higher education sector, especially at Universitas Hasanuddin, has the potential to worsen inequality in access to education. By prioritizing market principles, such as competition and efficiency, this policy encourages reductions in public budgets and increases education costs, which has an impact on students from the middle to lower economic backgrounds. Their inability to access quality education is increasing due to higher tuition fees and dependence on the private sector in financing education.

Another significant impact is the decline in the quality of education at Universitas Hasanuddin. To maintain competitiveness and optimize income, universities should focus more on developing programs that are financially profitable, such as study programs that are in demand by the market, while many other study programs that are not profitable are neglected. This has also led to a decline in attention to basic and scientific research, which is very important for the advancement of knowledge and the overall quality of education. This decline in quality threatens the sustainability of higher education which is based on the principles of social justice and inclusive intellectual quality. Therefore, evaluation and policy reform are needed to prioritize equal access and improving the quality of higher education. Education policies must pay more attention to social and humanitarian aspects, not just on orientation to economic benefits only. Universities, especially those with state status such as Universitas Hasanuddin, must be able to maintain a balance between economic efficiency and social responsibility to provide quality education for all levels of society, without exception. Reforms based on social justice will greatly determine the quality of higher education in the future.

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