The student Population of a Southeast Asian University: an Indonesian Example

by

JOSEPH FISCHER

University of California (Berkeley), U.S.A.

UNIVERSITIES in the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa are in many ways excellent units for sociological analysis. This is particularly true in countries like Indonesia, Ceylon, Ghana and Burma where one or two high-prestige universities virtually monopolize the recruitment of select youth into the highest levels of the educational system. From such a position of advantage the university has assumed and still assumes great importance in terms of the recruitment of potential elites. Thus, the university in this context is crucially and comprehensively representative; that is, its students are drawn from all principal age, ethnic, economic, religious, sex and social groups and that these are the recruits who will become members of a technical, political or administrative elite.

In Indonesia during the first dozen years of independence, two universities have dominated the educational scene: the University of Indonesia in Djakarta (which until 1959 also included the Technical Institute at Bandung) and Gadjah Mada University in Jogjakarta. In the past two years Airlangga University in Surabaya has also acquired considerable prestige, but it will not become a full-fledged institution of high status until additional faculties (engineering, social sciences, etc.) are established. Of these three universities Gadjah Mada was selected as being the most appropriate for the study of recruitment in as much as the data reveals\(^1\) it to be the most “national” in terms of its student composition. The University of Indonesia was less suitable due to the large number of Chinese (some 10\%) students enrolled during past years.\(^2\)

Gadjah Mada University is a part of a national system of higher education which is formally under the control of the Department (Ministry) of Education in Djakarta. In practice, however, it has had a considerable degree of autonomy.

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1 The data and information presented in this paper were collected by the author during residence in Indonesia, 1956–1958 and 1960. They were drawn almost entirely from unpublished sources.

2 Estimates made from figures given by the Chinese Student Association, University of Indonesia, Djakarta, 1958.
though in part this has depended upon considerable apathy at the central levels of government. During the past two years the university has been confronted with a vigorous minister of education and has appeared to respond in some measure to state directives. The Department of Education beginning in late 1960 established a system by which, on paper at least, it can regulate the number (but not the quality) of students entering any university faculty (college). But in as much as there are no national matriculation examinations and in as much as each faculty of the university has its own distinctive admission procedures, formal control of enrollment is virtually impossible. The lack of any reliable and uniform instruments of selection and the association of restriction of entry with political issues in ethnically heterogeneous Indonesia, seriously handicaps planned university growth. Gadjah Mada University thus does not in any operational sense "recruit" students. Secondary school leavers with valid certificates from any of the three academic streams (literature, economics and science) cannot be debarred from admission. Each faculty determines in a very ambiguous way the maximum number of new students it can accept and hopes that the numbers game will not engulf them. However, many of the faculties such as economics, law and engineering have burgeoning enrollments out of all proportion to the educational resources necessary to handle them, to the professional manpower needs of the nation, and to the abilities of occupations to absorb them. Thus the term university "recruitment" is somewhat of a misnomer, and it is used here merely to refer to the ethnic, social, sex and religious composition, and the geographic origin of these students who in various ways find admittance to Gadjah Mada. In such an Indonesian context the term in no way applies to any purposeful selection based, in Parson's terms, upon readily discernible ascriptive or universalistic criteria. The relevant question in this paper, then, is who are the students that have been recruited or attracted, not so much how or why they have been.

During the first decade of Indonesian independence, competent students seeking higher education within their own country naturally sought to be enrolled in one of the two high-prestige universities. Gadjah Mada University with a less lengthy tradition than its counterpart in Djakarta nevertheless attracted a large number of students. The university was established during the revolution of 1947 and many of its students, staff and teachers participated in the fighting against the Dutch. For a time the city of Jogjakarta in which

1 Public controversies concerning minority groups and education in Southeast Asia have largely centered upon the language problem. However, one of the significant underlying difficulties is seldom discussed and has yet to be researched. It concerns the relatively high proportion of youth from minorities enrolled in universities and their reputation as better academic achievers than youth from majority elites. Such minorities would include the Karens and Indians in Burma, the Chinese in Thailand, the “burghers” in Ceylon, the Bataks and Chinese in Indonesia, and other Christians in all these countries. It is felt by the majority elite (Sinhalese, Thai, Burmese and Javanese) that standardized entrance examinations would disadvantage their youth in terms of competition with minority counterparts.