

Polarization of Education Towards the Rich and Privileged: A Case Study from the University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The stiff competition for limited but all free higher education opportunities in the state university system, especially in high-demand courses and programs such as Medicine, Engineering, and Science has been in existence for half a century. This stiff competition has fueled a tuition culture that has engulfed the entire education system to a point where it is extremely rare to find a student who has entered university without participating in tuition classes. The tuition industry which is significant in size but at the same time unregulated keeps charging exuberant fees from a student and in some cases up to Rs: 100,000.00 per subject per month for these in-demand courses/subjects thus effectively stopping the poor from accessing tuition classes. Accordingly, the current study tries to understand whether students coming from rich families/ background are more prone to getting selected for high-demand courses like medicine and Engineering. The study was based on the secondary data collected from the completed A/L examinations in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Hence, the data are free from the impacts of Covid-19 and the current economic crisis. The secondary data consisted of 12,277 observations. The results reveal that there is a significant polarization of education to high income category of the society. Results show that students enrolled in Medicine and Engineering degrees belong to higher income cohorts compared to the students in Humanities and/ or Management degree programs. The results find that there is a significant difference (Rs. 634,197) between the average annual family income of a parent of a medical (Rs. 905,548) and humanities (Rs. 271,351) undergraduate during last three years of 2019-2022. While alarmed by the findings we recommend more studies to be conducted covering more universities and to make policy decisions accordingly to slow down the polarization which negates the fundamental meaning of free education.

Keywords: *Free Education, Parents' Income, Polarization, Tuition, Undergraduates,*

Introduction

Sri Lankan children have enjoyed the privilege of free education since 1947. Late Dr. CWW Kannangara introduced the Free Education Act on 30.05.1947. He said in the Parliament “The education which was kept under sealed bound cover as an inherited property of rich and elite in this country was made an easily accessible letter to be read by all the children in this country with no discrimination based on caste, ethnicity or religion” (Liyaganawardena, 2014).

His proposals were based on several pillars. One was to give tuition-free education with a very small facility fee, education in the mother tongue especially in primary education but promoting bilingual education to be a global citizen, a common curriculum to build a Sri Lanka nation. In this historical debate, many views were expressed which have been misinterpreted, and misquoted and the subsequent development of free education has been misdirected. Dr. CWW Kannangara was not against private education and spoke in favor of having private schools if those who are rich and prepared to pay for education could send their children to government-approved private schools in the country but teach the common curriculum to build the Sri Lanka nation (Ranjith, 2019). But CWW Kannangara was totally against private tuition even in 1947 stating that it is destroying the personality development of young children with consumption of their free time available for the acquisition of life skills.

The stiff competition for limited but all free higher education opportunities in the state university system, especially in high-demand courses and programmes such as Medicine, Engineering, and Science has been in existence for half a century. Tuition culture has been in existence for more than 75 years starting on a small scale in this country. Rarely changing curricula with examination-oriented teaching-learning activities has resulted in tuition culture adopting easily into GCE A/L high-performance factories. Selection into universities is based on GCE A/L Z score in most cases either on pure merit (10 courses) or a District Quota System (200 programmes). This has led to the attraction of young university aspirants facing GCE A/Ls towards high-performance factories of university admissions (Asankha, 2012).

This tuition culture has several faces. Individual (1-2), small group (<10), large group (10 -40) followed by massive classes (100 to 1000 or more) are there now physically or online mode. The ability to select the class depends on the affordability of the parents. Studies on this tuition have shown that parents spend anything from 5000 to 50,000 rupees a month for a paid education. Studies in the University show that admission without attending a tuition class is extremely rare to the extent of it

being nonexistent. In this context, we hypothesized that children of families whose income level is higher might have a better chance of entering elite degree programs such as medicine and engineering.

Objectives

Main objective of the study is to analyze the income levels of parents of the students enrolled in the University of Ruhuna and thereby reveal any patterns of income based on the degree program in which the students enrolled.

Methodology

University student affairs service receives limited student details for enrollment after registration by the UGC for degree programmes. However, UoR has been preparing the student profiles since 2019. Data was collected using MIS, Google Forms, Hostel, Bursary, and Mahapola application forms. The profiles of students were analyzed for socio-economic characteristics and compared with a stream of education, and parental backgrounds for the last 3 years. Refer table 01 for detailed information.

Table 1: Distribution of Students in each Faculty.

Faculty	Student Intake								
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	
Agriculture (FOA)	202	154	240	162	253	270	273	230	
Allied Health Science (FAHS)	67	70	108	102	135	244	255	208	
Engineering (FOE)	219	225	225	250	275	532	517	544	
Fisheries and Marine Sciences & Technology (FMST)	27	69	82	70	94	130	136	133	
Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS)	429	439	460	482	470	755	708	805	
Management and Finance (FMF)	319	308	313	394	396	651	627	707	
Medicine (FOM)	171	156	188	191	202	264	257	303	
Science	304	359	347	358	417	659	666	413	
Technology (FOT)	-	130	133	182	185	337	302	341	

Results

The average income of parents per annum in different faculties is given in Figure 1. The mean income of parents of all students of the University of Ruhuna is Rs.547 467.77, 467 787.54, and 414 086.87 for the years 2021, 2020, and 2019 respectively. The FOM parents have the highest mean annual income followed by FOE, FOS, FOT, FOA, FMST, FAHS, FMF, and HSS in descending order generally. The difference between the highest income group and the lowest income group is Rs. 625247.74 (Year 2021), 553561.85 (2020), 586 010.87 (2019). Gender-wise distribution of students is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Gender-Wise Distribution of Students at the University of Ruhuna

Faculty	Male	Female	Total
HSS	320	2308	2628
MGT	744	1599	2343
SCI	967	1229	2196
FMST	220	321	541
AGRI	264	914	1178
MED	431	972	1403
ENG	1512	561	2073
AHS	217	734	951
TECH	735	483	1218
Total	5410	9121	14531

The male (37%)-female (63%) ratio in faculties have female preponderance.

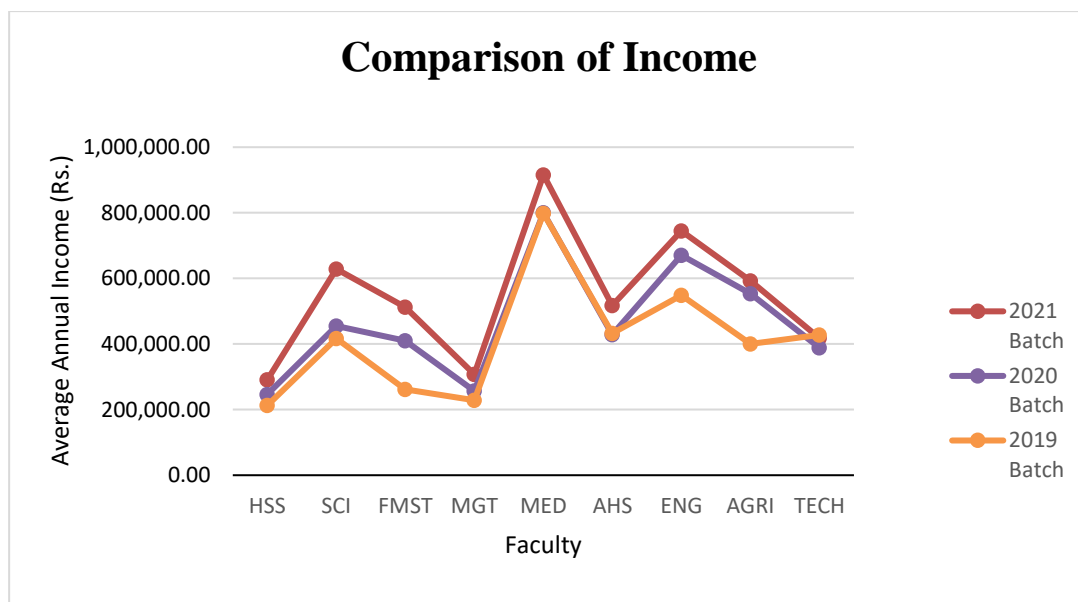


Figure 1: Faculty-Wise Average Income of Parents in 2019, 2020, and 2021 Batches.

Discussion

The University of Ruhuna has consistently increased the intake of students for the last few years as indicated in **Figure 1**. UoR makes profiles of every student entering university and puts efforts to introduce welfare programs as much as possible. In this context, the economic background of the parents of the students of different faculties is vitally important.

The average annual income of parents of students enrolled in FoM, and FoE faculties was the highest while parents of FHSS had the lowest income. This trend is the same for three consecutive years indicating a possible relationship between parents' income and entering into elite degree programs

such as Medicine and Engineering. In Sri Lanka Medical and Engineering degrees are considered elite degree programs. There was a consistent pattern in the annual income of the parents of the students who enrolled their children in these faculties. Several researchers have pointed out the effect of tuition classes on free education in Sri Lanka. The phenomenon we are observing in this paper can be attributed to that students whose parents can spend more money on their education can enter elite degree programs (Gunasekara, 2009).

Further, data collected in this study also revealed that students whose parent's income is below Rs 200 000 are unlikely to enter a university indicating the fate of marginalized communities in accessing higher education such as the estate workers.

Further investigations should be conducted on this aspect of education to reveal disparities and make policies accordingly.

Conclusion

The authors conclude that this trend or phenomenon exists in university admissions, as it is visible in the appearance, and believe that selection into elite programmes is determined by the affordability of tuition. We propose to analyze the university admissions based on the stream and economic, and social, backgrounds of selected students in all streams in all Universities to reveal more information on this aspect.

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