



DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PENAN STUDENTS IN TWO PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT OF THEIR SCHOOL LEAVERS

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ABSTRACT

This article documents the demographic background of Penan secondary school students that are studying in two public secondary schools located at the Baram District in Miri Division, Sarawak Malaysia and the academic achievement of their schools' leavers. Ethnographic research methods which include survey questionnaire, interviews and field observations are used to obtain the data. Data from interviews and observations are analysed thematically and Microsoft Excel is used to analyse data related to demographic profile of students such as their age, gender, village and level of education. Data on the cost of transport used to go to boarding schools and information related to the access to the internet and telephone service are analysed to examine students' mobility and accessibility. Access to social services, including the internet and telephone, is important for all people, including Penan populations. In the context of education, internet access allows for learning to take place at any time, any place and at any pace. Through the data on students' demographic profile and academic achievement of school leavers, the study calls for the understanding of Penan education beyond individuals' agency. This includes the understanding of students' mobility from village to boarding schools which interlinked with the idea that education enables and promotes the acquisition of skills, knowledge and broadens individuals' horizons. Moreover, pursuing secondary schools outside students' villages provides opportunities for employment outside their villages after the completion of their SPM or STPM examinations; opens a window to advance their education to tertiary level as an attempt to improve their socio-economic status.

Keywords: *Academic attainment, accessibility, gender, marginalized community and mobility*

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INTRODUCTION

Many studies (e.g. Needham, 1972 and Brosius, 1991) have been conducted on the Penan community in Borneo but according to Sercombe (2010, p. 625), "...relatively little scholarly attention" is given to levels of achievement of Penan people in formal learning contexts. Sercombe (2010, p. 627) has documented that "lack of educational success" is highlighted among Penan in Sarawak and those in Brunei. Recent research by Tom, Awang, Ahmad and Ahmad (2019, p. 140) shows that Penan community is "lagging behind in many aspects especially in the field of education". Limited research on the academic achievement may contribute to lack of understanding and knowledge about the Penan's educational needs and aspirations. Therefore, to shed light on Penan education, this study highlights the demographic background of students (N=191) who are currently pursuing their formal education in