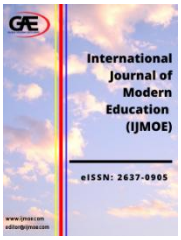
International Journal of Modern Education
EISSN: 2637-0905
IJMOE
Volume: 8 Issue: 30 (June 2026) PP. 689-706



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MODERN EDUCATION (IJMOE)
www.gaexcellence.com/ijmoe

WHAT ETHICAL PRINCIPLES REINFORCE PUBLIC COMMITMENTS TO FREE EDUCATION? A CASE STUDY OF SARAWAK'S FREE EDUCATION SCHEME AND INTERGENERATIONAL FAIRNESS

Ashman Shahrudin Khairuddin[1*]

[1]School of Business & Management, CONTRIBUTE (Centre on Technological Readiness and Innovation in Business Technopreneurship), University of Technology Sarawak, Sibu, Sarawak, Malaysia
ashman.shahrudin@uts.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5249-6920
[*]Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:
Received date: 04.05.2026
Revised date: 17.05.2026
Accepted date: 07.06.2026
Published date: 29.06.2026

To cite this document:

Khairuddin, A. S. (2026). What Ethical Principles Reinforce Public Commitments to Free Education? A Case Study of Sarawak's Free Education Scheme and Intergenerational Fairness. *International Journal of Modern Education, 8*(30), 689-706.

Abstract:

This research observes the government of Sarawak's Free Tertiary Education Scheme (FTES), in a bid to provide free university education to its residents. The study adopts a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 Sarawakians (e.g. students, parents, educators) from different backgrounds and perspectives, focusing on issues like social justice, equity and intergenerational fairness. The main data is accompanied with a comparative analysis of comparable policies of free education. The findings revealed that the respondents largely perceived FTES as a transformative move. Primarily, students observed it as a *"game-changer"* as it removes financial barriers and improves access, while parents expressed the relief of avoiding educational debt for themselves, or their child. Besides, policymakers framed it as fulfilling a shared obligation to future generations, meanwhile, university leaders approved that FTES had equity benefits but noted the need to protect quality of education and sustainable financing. The thematic investigation identified several themes namely, equal opportunity, public vs. private good, intergenerational mutuality, and economic responsibility. The aforementioned insights suggest that FTES mainly embodies morality of justice and the public good by widening access. Yet, respondents also raised concerns about long-term funding, the inclusiveness of non-beneficiaries, and meritocracy. In a nutshell, with sustainable funding mechanisms and targeted equity measures, the long-term paybacks of free tertiary education are expected to outweigh its costs. By intertwining stakeholder voices with ethical and policy perspectives, this study enriches the conversation on higher education reform. In line with international principles that call for free higher education, our findings suggest Sarawak's FTES reflects core ethical values. At the same time, participants stressed the necessity attention to sustainable funding and quality safeguarding.

International Journal of Modern Education
EISSN: 2637-0905
IJMOE
Volume: 8 Issue: 30 (June 2026) PP. 689-706

DOI:10.35631/IJMOE.830044 **Keyword:**

Free Higher Education; Equity; Public Good; Intergenerational Justice; Qualitative Study; Higher Education Policy

Introduction

The landscape of higher education in Malaysia has always been an interplay of public subsidies and private costs. In Malaysia, primary and secondary education are free, but tertiary education has traditionally involved tuition fees, even if subsidised in public institutions, and is often financed by student loan schemes. And the status quo has been that many graduates start their career with debt, as shown by one young Malaysian in this study who said:

"Yes, I was grateful for the loan. ...but didn't foresee that now nearly half my salary still goes to paying my student loan".

In this frame of reference, the state of has made a revolutionary policy turn. In 2026, Sarawak will become the first state in the country to implement a Free Tertiary Education Scheme (FTES) for its residents (Unit Komunikasi Awam Sarawak, 2025; Haizan, 2023). FTES fully covers tuition fees for Sarawakian students doing their first degree at four state-linked institutions and also provides an annual cost-of-living stipend for students from low-income (B40) families. This policy applies equally to the rich and poor alike; with emphasis on courses in technical, science and professional fields deemed vital for employment. The move to free tertiary education in Sarawak is reflective of local hopes and global trends. Globally, there is renewed thrust toward treating higher education as a public good and a right, not a privilege of the few. For instance, Germany have abolished tuition fees at public universities and reaffirming the principle that; ability, not ability-to-pay, should not determine access (Beck, 2022; Thomsen & von Haaren-Giebel, 2016). Correspondingly in Malaysia, debates on education financing often invoke questions of social justice, equality of opportunity, and the role of education in nation-building. Thus, Sarawak's FTES can be seen as a case study in Malaysia for implementing these ideals. This paper expands the analysis of Sarawak's free tertiary education scheme by examining it through normative ethical frameworks and empirical evidence, with particular focus on intergenerational fairness. The study's key research questions include:

1. How does free tertiary education align with principles of equity and the public good?
2. Who benefits from the scheme, and is the scheme fair across generations?
3. What challenges must be addressed to ensure its long-term sustainability and equitable impact?

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Literature Review: Justice, Ethics, and Free Tertiary Education

Normative Theories of Justice in Education

For some time now, philosophers of justice have argued that the distribution of education should be such that it promotes fairness and social equity. For instance, John Rawls's theory of justice stresses "fair equality of opportunity," meaning that offices and positions (and by extension, educational opportunities leading to those positions) should be open to all under conditions that ensure that individuals have a genuine chance to get them regardless of their socio-economic background (Rawls, 2017). In an ideal "Rawlsian" society; no one's life chances (including access to higher education) should be determined through the "accident" of family wealth or belonging. Consequently, providing free tertiary education to all eligible students is consistent with this principle, as it eliminates financial obstacles and creates equal opportunities for students from less affluent families.

Rawls's difference principle would support social investments like education that benefit the least-advantaged groups the most. Capability theory, as advanced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, reinforce this view; and regards education as a fundamental capability that expands individual freedom and opportunity (Fabre & Miller, 2003; Sen, 1999). It was argued that; by providing free higher education, a society expands the capabilities of its youth to lead the lives they value, an ethical good in itself. Additionally, international human rights law frames higher education as a right to be progressively realized. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) enshrines that higher education shall be made "equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education" (Saul et al., 2014). UNESCO echoes this view and emphasizes that states are obliged to move toward free higher education to ensure equal opportunity. In short, the normative consensus in educational ethics leans toward viewing access to tertiary education as a matter of justice and rights, not merely charity.

Is Higher Education a Public Good or Private Privilege?

The question of who should pay for college is often framed within an ethical debate in which higher education is perceived as either a private benefit to the individual or a public good to society (Haneman, 2019). Classical Human Capital Theory recognizes that the individual benefits of higher education are in the form of earnings premium but also recognizes the presence of significant positive externalities: an educated population leads to economic growth, innovation, lower crime rates and greater civic participation (Ciccone & Peri, 2007). As Simon Marginson (2025) and other contemporary scholars argue, higher education possesses attributes of both private and public goods, and excessive privatization (high tuition fees) can undermine both equity and social benefits. Similarly, one analysis found that "high fees reduce both the net private benefits, and the public benefits of higher education" by discouraging potential undergraduates and limiting the general skill base of society (Chakrabarti et al., 2023). In Malaysia, higher education has been a vehicle for upward mobility and nation-building, supported by public investments in the form of subsidies and student loan programs (Khairuddin, 2025; Tee et al., 2017). But the cost-sharing model (e.g. students paying part of the cost) has been challenged on equity grounds. D. Bruce Johnstone's comparative work on higher education financing notes that cost-sharing, while driven by fiscal necessity, often faces "continuing ideological, political, and technical opposition" because of fears that high tuition and debt threaten to undermine equal opportunity (Johnstone, 2004). Similarly, South Africa's

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experience with free tuition policy demonstrates broad support for the idea of free college but deep scepticism about sustainability and fairness if this constrains public budgets (Tewe et al., 2024). The participants in the study of South African public universities welcome 'free' tertiary education as a system, but are sceptical about its sustainability," noting that without funding it could increase the burden on taxpayers and harm public services. These concerns highlight the ethical tension; a universal free tuition policy is praiseworthy for equality but must be financed sustainably.

Empirical Findings on Free Tertiary Education

Studies from all over the world illuminate the results of free college initiatives by providing data on; (1) who benefits, and (2) how policies perform. One of the consistent findings is that reducing or eliminating costs for tuition tends to increase enrolment, especially among low-income and underrepresented students. For example, a study of 33 "promise" programs (tuition-free community college scholarships) in the United States found a 23% increase in enrolments at community colleges that implemented such programs compared to those that did not (Li & Gándara, 2020). Black and Hispanic students – and particularly women in those groups – saw the biggest jumps in enrolments, thus suggesting free tuition can bridge gaps in college access by race and gender. One researcher estimated that tuition-free community college would increase overall college enrolments by 26%, and the number of students obtaining degrees by 20% in an economic analysis using a policy model (Lau, 2020). Interestingly, Lau's (2020) study found that universal free-tuition programs led to larger increases in enrolment and completion rates than more restrictive or means-tested programs. This provides a persuasive ethical argument that universality in social programs can have powerful effects by sending a clear message that college is available to all – raising aspirations across society. The empirical evidence, however, dampens the optimism: completion rates do not always increase in proportion to enrolments. Cross-country evidence points to higher enrolment but not necessarily higher graduation rates for countries with very high subsidies or free college (Ferreyra et al., 2024). For instance, a World Bank study using Colombian data found that "universal free college expands enrolment the most but has nearly no effect on graduation rates". The researchers attributed this to student's effort and preparation – once college becomes free, more enrolees may be academically less prepared or less motivated. Therefore, these students are more likely to drop out unless academic support is enhanced. This data implies that free tuition must be accompanied by quality improvements and student support services to translate access into completion rates.

Another issue raised in the empirical literature is distributional fairness, or who will benefit financially from free tuition? A badly targeted policy may mean that a disproportionate amount of the monetary benefit goes to higher income students (who may otherwise have paid full fees). For example, a Brookings analysis (Chingos, 2016) found that families in the top half of the income distribution would receive 24 percent more of the tuition benefit under a nationwide free public college plan than families in the bottom half in the U.S. That's because richer students tend to go to more expensive schools, or to stay in school longer. These results support the ethical argument for tying free tuition to progressive measures such as stipends or other forms of assistance for low-income students– a design element incorporated into Sarawak's FTES (RM15k living allowance for B40 students) to promote equity. Furthermore, studies of the economic returns to education highlight why eliminating financial barriers to college is both ethically and economically justified. In Malaysia, a university degree translates into much higher earnings, better job prospects and lower poverty rates than a secondary education alone.

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A recent study found that university graduates in Malaysia tend to have higher incomes and are far less likely to be poor than those without a bachelor's degree (Arshad & Baharuddin, 2019). These empirical insights form the basis for an examination of Sarawak's policy; suggesting free tertiary education can promote equality of opportunity and deliver public benefits, but holistic policy design is required to ensure fairness (within the current generation and across generations), and to maintain quality outcomes.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative empirical approach to examine Sarawak's Free Tertiary Education Scheme (FTES) through stakeholder interviews and comparative policy analysis. As the scheme is only scheduled to take effect in the 2026 academic year, comprehensive evidence regarding its actual outcomes is not yet available. In light of this limitation, the study focuses on stakeholders' expectations, perceptions, and concerns regarding the policy. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews involving several stakeholder groups, namely Sarawakian students, parents, educators, policymakers, and university administrators. The aim of conducting these interviews is to explore how different groups perceive the potential opportunities and challenges linked with the free tertiary education initiative. The methodological choice is based on a critical realist standpoint, which has also been used in previous educational policy research. The argument for using this method is that; the approach allows researchers to develop insights grounded in existing realities, while also consider subjective stakeholders' interpretations of possibilities and outcomes.

The development of the interview guide was itself a negotiated process, shaped around three principal themes: educational access, ethical dimensions, and fairness. Rather than delivering a standardised set of questions, this approach was to tailor prompts to the particular vantage points, and responsibilities ascribed to each stakeholder group. For instance, students were invited to reflect on how the FTES might shape their aspirations and future pathways, while policymakers were asked to articulate the rationale underpinning the policy and to comment on the realities of its implementation. At the end, twenty interviews were conducted, with an approximate balance across stakeholder groups. The selection of participants was not random but sought to reflect a deliberate heterogeneity — thus drawing in students from both urban and rural contexts, and parents from a range of income backgrounds. This strategy was intended to produce a diversity of perspectives on FTES, though it is recognised that such sampling can only ever partially capture the complexity of its reception within the society.

Besides the interviews, the research turned to a comparative policy analysis. The study draws together a patchwork of secondary sources, and previous studies on free tuition schemes across diverse settings. For example, scholarship initiatives in the United States, the tuition-free university policies of Germany and the Nordic countries, and Malaysia's own earlier approaches to higher education funding all served as points of reference. Through juxtaposing Sarawak's free education scheme together with these varied models allow closer inspection of the underlying mechanics — namely funding structures, targeting mechanisms, and the framework of student support policies. These aims and operational contours of FTES were pieced together from a close reading of government policy documents and official pronouncements, even though these sources sometimes left as much unsaid as they revealed. In addition, speeches and press releases were examined for their call of ethical justifications, whether in the language of community obligation or the rhetoric of human capital development. Furthermore, the comparative analysis was shaped by economic modelling studies, which,

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while offering projections of enrolment and fiscal impact, inevitably rest on assumptions that warrant scrutiny. Consequently, thematic analysis is adopted to triangulate the interview data with understandings drawn from the literature and comparative policy cases. This approach enabled the identification of several recurring themes, which are: (1) equality of opportunity, (2) public vs private benefits, (3) intergenerational reciprocity, (4) financial sustainability, and (5) implementation challenges.

In examining the findings, references and quotations are set against documented sources or, where direct evidence is lacking, plausible extrapolations. This process serves to ground the qualitative analysis in something more tangible, though the extent to which such attaching is achieved varies across cases. The approach here attempts to navigate between the detail offered by individual narratives and the broader sweep provided by comparative policy review. In the following section, the synthesis of these findings brings stakeholder perspectives on FTES to the forefront and highlighting the recurring issues as well as points of contention that surface through this analysis.

Findings: Stakeholder Perspectives on Sarawak's FTES

Students

Based on the findings with the students; the outlook of university degree had long been shadowed by the uncertainties of cost for students from lower- and middle-income families. This is consistent with other free-education studies, the FTES seems to improve overall access through the opening up new routes for those who once saw university as unattainable (Beck, 2022). As one of the students from a modest background stated, the first family talk about receiving a university offer was rarely about excitement but worry about money; meanwhile while family discussions revolved around loans and the possibilities of debt. The introduction of the scheme, though, has slowly shifted the family discussions to "*studying is now plausible"*, as one respondent stated.

The findings indicate that for a number of families, the scheme has been perceived as extending beyond mere financial assistance. Somewhat, it has enabled students to shift their focus from persistent concerns over economic survival towards fuller engagement with university life. Students themselves say they are able to engage fully in the academically and socially in the university, as they are freed from the immediate pressures of tuition and family burden. However, the degree to which these impacts are consistently realised across different households remains open to question. While the scheme's influence is observable in the routines and experiences of some families, the evidence suggests that; its effects are uneven and mediated by broader structural and contextual factors. Correspondingly, the questions of fairness were raised in the interviews, as many argued that the opportunity to attend university should not to be dictated by birthplace or parental income. One student from the rural interior recalled how capable schoolmates excluded themselves because the costs seemed insuperable. She said:

"Many intelligent schoolmates who didn't even apply to university because they assumed they couldn't afford it. …it's not due to the lack of capabilities or self-confidence."

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Majority of the pupils voiced a sense that the scheme would open doors for students from rural and lower-income (B40) circumstances. Consistently, other free education evidence points to a similar direction, suggesting that free education can begin to slowly erode longstanding inequalities (Chingos, 2016). Several participants anticipated that more young people from these communities would find their way into higher education with financial barriers lowered. As stated by a student:

"While free tertiary education now up and rolling, it meant more students are able to attend. ...especially those from rural areas and B40 families will be able to study without the worry of money."

This quote points to the potential of the policy to reshape opportunity and unsettle entrenched inequalities in Sarawak.

On another note, beneficiaries of the scheme were clear in highlighting the persistence of other financial burdens linked to pursuing a degree. While the abolition of tuition fees is presented as a pivotal intervention by majority of student, other costs of accommodation, food, and transport costs continue to be the main barriers for students coming from less privileged backgrounds. The annual stipend offered by the government are available only to a subset of students, also acknowledged as a mitigating factor by some students. The financial burden was illustrated by the following student receiving the stipend:

"I am delighted for receiving the studying allowance. ...which means I don't have to ask my parents for money every month to sustain myself at university."

The discussion with another student (who did not receive the stipend) moves quickly to inequity for household incomes slightly exceed the eligibility criteria for financial assistance. Although these families experience equivalent financial pressures, these individuals are excluded from support mechanisms from the state. As costs of living are higher in bigger cities, the exclusion is felt for those bound to relocate from rural or remote regions to urban campuses. The following evidence from the student originating from the mountainous interior underscores the compounded nature of these challenges:

"No, my family is not categorized as B40 because of my dad's salary is just slightly above the income threshold. Yes, my family and I have enough for daily needs, but rent in the city is still extra expensive! ...on top of that, I have 4 other siblings my dad has to think about"

The aforementioned statement indicates that even though the removal of tuition fees embodies a transformative policy intervention, it does not, in itself, remove deep-rooted inequalities among students. The interviews reveal several disproportions, particularly in relation to relocating costs and access to additional financial support (annual stipend). In the same line of discussion, the findings also suggest that many students express a sense of gratitude, and an improved commitment to their higher education (which they attribute to the opportunities afforded by tuition-free education). The gratitude sentiment is not universal, as some participants voiced reservations, or highlighted persistent barriers to the scheme. Hence, the data point to the complication of the findings, as expressions of gratitude often exist side-by-side with critical reflections on the adequacy of current support structures.

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Lastly, another theme often emerging from the data is perceived obligation to reciprocate the state's investment. Students speaking a desire to contribute positively to society, or the state, after obtaining their degrees. This sense of mutual responsibility aligns with the broader objectives of free education policies, which aim not only to widen access, but also to foster public engagement and collective advancement. Several respondents expressed a sense of responsibility to contribute to society in recognition of the government's investment in their education: For example, several students expressed a sense of obligation and said:

"*Now that the government has invested in my education, I feel a responsibility to work hard and contribute back to society (or state) after I graduated,".*

Parents and Community

Consistently, the data indicate that parental endorsement of the FTES is most evident among families residing in semi-urban and rural settings, where the prohibitive costs associated with higher education continue to restrict access for many. For a long time in these households, the financial burden of university fees has excluded their children from pursuing tertiary education. The narratives shared by parents, including a farmer who described the scheme as an *"necessary intervention"*, and a school clerk who weighed the lack of support for her eldest child with the opportunities now available to her younger daughter. These statements underscore the policy's immediate impact and parental relief, as well as reveal the extent the scheme has begun to improve expectations regarding educational attainment in communities marginalised by cost barriers. The school clerk said:

"I have a son who graduated, but with a lot of debt. It's tough for him starting out his career. My younger daughter will be in the first batch receiving the scheme …I'm so relieved she won't have the same financial burden as her brother."

There is more evidence from interviews and local media reports that suggest a significant proportion of residents (e.g. recent graduates burdened by student debt) express a strong desire for future cohorts to enter the workforce unaffected by similar financial constraints. This aspiration is linked to the broader expectation that free education could serve as a catalyst for enhanced social mobility, as well as a reduction in entrenched inequalities. Respondents who are parents, specifically, expressed a view that removing financial obstacles may foster greater academic motivation among their children. Besides that, community leaders highlight the potential of such initiatives to address youth unemployment and narrow existing social disparities. Nevertheless, while these perspectives reflect widespread optimism regarding the transformative potential of accessible higher education, there remains considerable contestation concerning the extent to which these outcomes are being realised in reality. The ongoing debate highlights the need for a more critical examination of the mechanisms through which free education policies are implemented and their actual impact on both educational attainment and broader socio-economic indicators.

In a nutshell, although there is optimism about the scheme; both interviewees and local media reports often question whether local universities can handle the expected yearly increase of students without jeopardising its educational standards. These concerns about institutions readiness (ranging from infrastructure to staffing) are common and reflect what the literature advised about the unintended effects of expanding access to higher education (Li & Gándara, 2020). Furthermore, community members see FTES as more than just a social policy and view

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it as an investment in the human capital of the local economy. Generally, parents and community leaders believe that a more skilled workforce will attract businesses and industry, but there is still argument about how much free higher education can actually improve the state's economy.

Policymakers and Government Officials

As for policymakers and government officials involved in the scheme, they frame their rationale in terms of ethical responsibility and social justice. Their positioning is commonly free tertiary education as a mechanism for redistributive equity. This aligns with the broader discourse on education as a public good, as articulated by leading scholars (Marginson, 2025), who argue that free education policies are often justified through appeals to social cohesion and intergenerational reciprocity. The interview with a senior figure in the Ministry of Education, Innovation and Talent Development, as well as state economic advisors, reveal a dominant narrative of collective obligation to reinvest in the community. The senior education officer said:

"The state's resources should benefit its residents. Period. ...by funding education, we are redistributing wealth into human capital – it's the best way to prepare the next generation,".

This view is consistent with the state's leadership, who articulate free education as a vehicle fostering local talent, and also enhancing intellectual capital. Meanwhile, educational experts observe that the FTES is strategically aligned with national and regional development agendas, notably Malaysia Madani and Sarawak's Vision 2030, in which prioritizing the cultivation of a highly skilled workforce as a precondition towards the transition to high-income status.

Moreover, policymakers recognize the immense financial commitment required to sustain free tertiary education and agree that it will require significant public investment. The interviews show that the state's strong fiscal position, supported by resource revenues and a sovereign wealth fund, makes the scheme possible. The state has set aside about RM400 million for the first year, and this amount is expected to grow as more students enrol (Haizan, 2023). The scheme is based on the idea of intergenerational reciprocity; investing in young people's education now should bring economic benefits later, as graduates join the workforce and help fund public services. Surprisingly, some respondents have proposed ideas such as a graduate pledge or community service for the recipients, although these are still being discussed and have not been implemented.

In conclusion, the findings with key officials revealed a heightened sensitivity to the risks inherent in sustaining free education over the long term. The risks are concerns that such funding may involuntarily crowd out other essential development priorities. Several policymakers articulated the need for a more resilient financing structure and pointing to the importance of diversifying revenue streams beyond government allocations. Notably, suggestions included leveraging returns from sovereign wealth funds, fostering industry partnerships, and mobilising philanthropic or waqf-based contributions. The data shows consistency with international recommendation of the German-model where the scheme is reinforced by a web of multi-level funding. However, the Sarawak /Malaysia context presents additional layers of complexity because the normative framing of education as a public good is in tension with the practical rations of the economy.

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University Leaders and Educators

The last stakeholder group: university leaders and educators, perceive the Free Tertiary Education Scheme (FTES) as a positive step for institutional change. Most respondents expect it will help expand access and support social mobility. Yet, they are aware that the scheme will require universities to adapt in several ways. University leaders and educators stressed the importance of strong strategies to handle expected changes in student numbers and how resources are distributed. A Deputy Vice-Chancellor expressed this view in the following statement:

"…universities are preparing for a projected rise in enrolment starting this year (2026). We ned to expand capacity, hire more academics and support staff, and also invest heavily in infrastructure too. …I have to admit, our classrooms seem very small now, after the influx of students."

Besides that, the evidence from academic staff suggests hopefulness on the impact of the scheme on institutional operations. The staff interviewed highlighted that the scheme removes unpredictability by removing worries about financial instability coming from unpaid fees and enrolment figures. Particularly, one staff reported a rise in application coming from mature and working adults, and not only from school leavers. Thus, the changing of applicant demographics pushes universities to reconsider their existing support structures and pedagogical choices. One of the junior lecturers said:

"...I was surprised to see someone older than me joining the class."

Nonetheless, the massification of university expose gaps in institutional readiness, especially non-traditional students. The findings found an important tension; even though policy addresses monetary uncertainties, but there are critiques regarding inclusion and responsiveness within higher education. The big question remains open; are the current systems adaptable enough to absorb these changes?

The interviews with university leaders and educators suggest that the scheme is only considered holistic given the importance of strong academic quality and support systems (e.g. targeted tutoring, mentoring, curative programs, and stipends) to meet the requirements of a more varied student population. Similar to other interview groups, university members see equity as not merely access, as it also meant providing support throughout the duration of studying at university. As there is a shift in focus, university admins are currently reviewing how to allocate resources and the sufficiency of funding.

In addition, the findings revealed the potential of a free higher education scheme in changing the education system and economy for the better. One of the participants linked the scheme to talent management in the region and supporting the local economy. She said:

"The current trend is the smartest students will leave Sarawak for universities, and many of these talents never return to work here. In my opinion, if we can offer them free education at home, eventually, we have a better chance to keep them here."

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In sum, majority of university staff see FTES as a necessary change to change to local universities to be more accessible and attracting high-achieving talents. Several staff also highlighted that the scheme could build stronger linkages between universities, industry/sectors and community. The belief is by removing a major economic barrier (tuition fees) to all residents, universities can improve in supporting and retaining local students. Although administrators are confident about the prospect of higher enrolment figures, half of them also cautioned that these benefits depend on sustainable resource management and maintaining high academic standards at universities. The findings highlighted the challenge of corresponding practical difficulties, with the long-term regional development.

Discussion: Ethical Placement and Intergenerational Justice

In this chapter, the Free Tertiary Education Scheme (FTES) is examined through several ethical frameworks, as well as discussing the scheme's motivation to embody a mechanism for broadening learning opportunities, social inclusion and regeneration.

Equality of Opportunity and Equity

The removal of tuition fees under this scheme establishes an advancement towards realizing the equality of opportunity for access within higher education. The FTES intervention addresses deep-rooted structural barriers and attempting to change the traditional link between socio-economic status and access. The delivery of an annual stipend for B40 households further addresses the complex nature of education inequity by extending support beyond tuition fees. In this respect, this also encompass the broader implication of financial challenges in talent retention and success. Thus, the hybrid model mixes universal access with different support mechanism to improve inclusivity and equity.

Nonetheless, the search for equality of access is also contingent of ensuring students across diverse backgrounds. The influx of students demands the development of progressive institutional support mechanisms (e.g. mentoring, targeted interventions for mature students) to minimize the risk of underachievement. Besides, the pursuit for equity is link to the effectiveness of the policy to include underrepresented groups outside of the current provision. Thus, ongoing initiative by the government, and universities, have to be in-sync with effective feedback mechanisms and addressing gaps in participation and outcomes. In order to achieve "real" equity, proactive identification of challenges related to gender, ethnicity and scheme awareness, as well as the development of support measures to make sure opportunity is accessible for all.

The Role of Higher Education as a Public Good

The implementation of the scheme reflects a commitment to position higher education as both a a public good and a collective social responsibility – aligning with international perspectives (e.g. UNESCO) which emphasize the potential of such scheme in reducing poverty, reducing inequality gaps, and supporting sustainable development. The allocation of public resources to the scheme may have the potential to generate wide-ranging societal outcomes, not just individual graduates (e.g. improved innovation, talent management and public health outcomes), especially in contexts where debt hinders social mobility and economic participation. Therefore, FTES signals a shift from individual achievement to collective investment towards human capital for social and economic resilience.

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However, a critical examination of distributive justice and mechanisms by which who pays, and who benefits from the scheme needs to be further examined. Although universal funding model have raised questions related to equity, FTES uses targeted support for diverse student groups to address these disproportions, or the overrepresentation of privileged groups in universities. Besides, the sustainability of such policies is contingent on its capacity to demonstrate public value and responsive towards evaluation. Still, the broader societal benefits highlight the justification for a collective investment in higher education, consistent with global trends in conceptualizing education as a fundamental right.

Intergenerational Fairness and Multi-Generational Reciprocity

A theme that emerged from the implementation of the FTES is the challenge of intergenerational fairness, namely in the distribution of educational benefits, and economic responsibilities across all age groups. Majority of free education schemes, including FTES, an institutional commitment is observed as the current workforce collectively allocates public funds to expand educational access for future generations In Sarawak, stewardship is done through conversion of profitable state assets (e.g. oil and gas revenues) into investments in human capital. Thus, there is a shift from traditional models that individualize educational debt among youth, to a collective economic approach to attain intergenerational fairness.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the delivery of free tertiary education schemes does not, in itself, secure intergenerational justice. The effectiveness of such policy depends on whether current decisions avoid imposing unwarranted burdens on future generations and how future generations contribute back to the society (e.g. long-term economic feasibility of the scheme, and the degree to which future graduates reciprocate social investments). As mentioned earlier, the diversified revenue streams and a strategy to shift oil wealth into human capital investment highlight the need to balance societal benefits and economic realities of implementation. Still, continuous monitoring and safeguard mechanism are necessary to buffer the scheme against; political, or economic unpredictability, or the breakdown of equitable access. Indeed, another argument in the pursuit of reciprocity is, will the beneficiaries of the scheme give back to the society that paid for their education? In an idealistic situation: the graduates become contributors, not just receivers as they will work, pay taxes and help support mature generations. On the other hand, talented graduates leave the state and taking their skills elsewhere, highlighting the importance of a sense of belonging and not enforcing service commitments. In a collective culture like Sarawak, the findings suggest that many students feel these mutual responsibilities, especially after the freeing from debt makes it easier for them to support their families. In conclusion, the FTES can be a powerful act or service, or stewardship by turning current resources into future opportunities, and also honouring the basis that every generation should invest in the next.

Risks and Perils

Granting the program is reinforced with ethical imperatives, the discussion must acknowledge the structural challenges that could risk its long-term viability. One important step is to maintain transparency and adaptability. The sustainability of the scheme is dependent on the economic stability and political continuity of the state, and how the government approach risk in both domains.

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Volume: 8 Issue: 30 (June 2026) PP. 689-706

The provision of free education must be extended beyond the removal of economic burdens, to include the cultivation of full academic and personal potential while studying at university. The massification of universities, if not matched with quality and rigorous standards, can diminish the value of higher education and wear down institutional trust. As the universities risk of becoming overcrowded, per-student funding have to remain adequate to avoid inequalities in quality and support systems. Thus, real inclusion is not only about access but also supporting holistic development of students. The principle of meritocracy, (meritocracy requires a level playing field where everyone has the same access to education), introduces further complexities to the scheme. As admission and application rates increase, the selection continues to rely heavily on school examination and limited capacities, which may worsen existing inequalities between rural and urban student. The barriers to qualifications can be managed through preparatory programmes for underrepresented groups to reduce the risk of reinforcing existing inequalities. Again, real inclusion, requires not only broadening access, but also about improving admissions processes to facilitate participation for a diverse student population.

Lastly, another consideration is the concerns of graduates who completed their studies just before the implementation of FTES, and those who continue to bear the burden of student loans or debt. Hence, the temporal boundaries of policy will also generate perception of inequity among those excluded because of timing. Indeed, clear policy distinctions are important, but the state can consider targeted interventions (e.g. interest subsidies) to demonstrate institutional responsiveness.

Conclusion

In this section, recommendations based on the findings of the study are provided. The analysis suggests that FTES has the potential to expand access to universities, minimize economic barriers for many families, while also generating social and economic returns for the state. Accordingly, the outcomes include enhanced social mobility and a reduction in socio-economic inequalities as higher education becomes accessible to a wider demographic. Preliminary analysis suggested that, contingent on effective implementation, the gains in productivity and innovation may offset the associated economic investment. Nonetheless, the attainment of the projected outcomes of free tertiary education will depend on continuous policy commitment and adaptive governance. The following recommendations recognize the complex considerations for promoting equitable implementation, and supporting the long-term viability of the policy

No.	Recommendation	Intervention
1	Long-Term Funding through Economic Innovation	Diversified and resilient funding framework through education funds, public-private partnerships, federal collaboration, and alternative financing mechanisms to ensure the long-term sustainability of the scheme.
2	Monitor and Maintain Educational Quality	Strengthen quality assurance systems, adequate funding, and comprehensive student support services to maintain academic standards and improve student success as enrolments expand.

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3	Strengthen Intergenerational Links and Retain Talent	Structured graduate engagement and retention initiatives that promote reciprocity while aligning graduate contributions with Sarawak's socio-economic development priorities.
4	Engage in Ongoing Evaluation and Transparency	Institutionalise periodic evaluations and stakeholder feedback mechanisms to enhance accountability, transparency, and continuous policy improvement.
5	Integrate Economic Planning with FTES Outcomes	Line up educational provision with labour market demands through regular programme reviews and stronger university-industry collaboration to improve graduate employability and maximise the returns of public investment.

As mentioned earlier, the scheme is contingent on the resilience and diversification of funding structures. One approach entails allocating a proportion of state revenues (e.g. oil and gas royalties, or other substantial income) to create an education trust fund to buffer against economic unpredictability and reinforcing instructional commitment. Besides that, broadening the funding pool through public and private partnerships help align industry needs with workforce development (e.g. inviting firms to co-invest in training programmes). International models of free tertiary education suggest that Sarawak might head towards a similar direction: pursue co-investments and matching research grants to improve economic sustainability. Alternatively, the expansion of Islamic finance models (e.g. waqf to education) can be a platform for resource mobilization. In short, developing a robust financial strategy is important in sustaining the scheme over time, and maintaining public trust in times of uncertainty.

The safeguarding of academic standards and simultaneously expanding access demands a continuous quality assurance framework. Currently, the Ministry of Higher Education and participating universities collaboratively govern the quality standards. As the number of students increase, it is vital to monitor key indicators; student-to-faculty ratios, class sizes, resource sufficiency in laboratories and libraries, and student learning outcomes, to avoid overcrowded lectures and inadequate course offerings. Thus, these issues signal deeper organizational strains that need timely and multi-pronged responses (e.g. strategic faculty recruitment, including the short-term engagement of academics or assistants, targeted investments in physical and digital infrastructure, or temporary enrolment quotas in high-demand programs to maintain quality). Moreover, it is important to consider the amount of funding allocated per-student, with real costs of quality provisions. By recalibrating funding formula periodically, it can ensure financial adequacy in the face of inflation and evolving cost structures. Additionally, the institutionalization of holistic student support systems (e.g. well-resourced student support centres, tutoring, remedial instruction in foundational subjects) are equally important to address differences in readiness. Taken together, these measures address the perils of free education schemes in other settings, as it has shown that access does not automatically convert into higher completion rates.

Based on the principle of reciprocity, it requires the development of structured pathways (e.g. targeted incentives for graduates to serve in important industries, or regions can align individual aspirations with state development goal) for graduates to contribute back significantly to the

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local socio-economic priorities. Alternatively, governments can also offer incentives, or loan forgiveness to those serving back at local sectors to improve talent retention. The internalization of networks like FTES Alumni can facilitate engagement and participation in community initiatives, as well as to engage in future contribution to FTES, funds as alumni achieve financial solidity. Thus, embedding a culture of reciprocity and strengthening the social contract. However, if graduates still out-migrate, a systematic analysis of factors in wage disparities or professional opportunities are key. Addressing these structural factors through enhanced employment prospects and research infrastructure is likely to produce better retention.

The scale of this policy necessitates systematic evaluation to ensure its effectiveness and public accountability. For example, independent assessments can be conducted at regular intervals to examine key indicators (e.g. enrolment figures, graduation outcomes, employment, broader economic implication for Sarawak). Subsequently, open dissemination of the findings is critical to maintain public trust because it invites stakeholders to assess the overall impact, as well as finding out key areas that require attention. The use of public forums has the potential to strengthen the legitimacy of the scheme, as policymakers share the progress of the scheme, and inviting input from others. In short, the credibility of FTES is partly dependent on the institutionalization of feedback loops, and the government's ability to response to recurring concerns.

Lastly, and more importantly, the effectiveness of free tertiary education schemes is closely linked to the degree to which graduates joined the workforce in roles that correspond to their attained competencies. This point highlights the importance of regulating education delivery to the evolving economic demands. Therefore, achieving this alignment demands a responsive mechanism for reviewing and updating sponsored fields of study. For example, Sarawak's prioritization of STEMS disciplines reflects an anticipatory orientation towards labour market needs, thereby directing students towards sectors experiencing heightened demand. Indeed, the inclusion of arts and social sciences is equally important for a more diverse and strong economy. Besides, strengthening university-sector linkages by using internships and apprenticeship can ease the transition from education to employment. If the government is able to successfully demonstrate positive graduate outcomes, it would reinforce the economic justification of the scheme and facilitate the long-term viability of investments.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to [University of Technology Sarawak for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.

Funding Statement: This research received financial support from School of Business & management under Grant Number No. 02/26 approved in URC Meeting. The funding body had no role in the design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, or the decision to publish this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE).

Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the UTS Research Policy, Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) of Research Ethical Clearance. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: The author contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Tasks completed include: (1) responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. (2) Management of data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. (3) Contribution to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript.

International Journal of Modern Education
IJMOE
EISSN: 2637-0905
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