

From Zoning to Domicile: School Admission Reform and Educational Equity in Indonesia

Khotibul Umam¹, Muhammad Farhan Ammar²

¹ Departemen Hukum Islam, Fakultas Hukum UGM, Yogyakarta

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Email: khotibulumam@ugm.ac.id¹ mfarhanammar3@gmail.com²

Article History	Abstract
Received : 08-19-2026 Revised : 09-12-2026 Published : 10-01-2026	In February 2025 the Indonesian government replaced the regulation governing new student admission, substituting a new system for the zoning-based arrangement that had operated since 2017 and that had generated the largest category of complaints received by the national ombudsman in the education sector. The reform renames the process, replaces the zoning pathway with a domicile pathway assessed by measured distance rather than by residence documents, retains affirmative, achievement, and transfer pathways, and introduces a regional allocation mechanism for upper secondary schooling in subdistricts without state provision. This article aims to analyse the reform against the equity objective it claims to serve, to identify which of the problems attributed to zoning it addresses, and to assess whether admission policy is an appropriate instrument for the objective. The study is a qualitative policy analysis combining doctrinal reading of the successive regulations with synthesis of the school choice and educational equity literature; no field data were collected. The analysis finds that the shift from documentary residence to measured distance addresses manipulation effectively, that the regional allocation mechanism addresses a genuine coverage gap, and that neither addresses the generating condition of the controversy, which is the coexistence of unequal school quality with insufficient state school capacity. It concludes that admission reform can redistribute scarcity but cannot reduce it, and recommends that equity objectives be pursued primarily through supply-side instruments.
Keywords: Educational equity; School admission; School choice; Student enrolment policy; Zoning.	

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian state guarantees every citizen an equal right to quality education,¹ and admission to state schools is the point at which that guarantee is operationalised. From 2017 admission was governed principally by a zoning pathway allocating the majority of places by residence within a defined zone, an arrangement intended to end the concentration of academically advantaged learners in a small number of favoured schools and to reduce the distance learners travel.

The arrangement generated sustained controversy. The national ombudsman's supervision of the process identified the zoning pathway as the principal source of complaint, with manipulation of family registration documents a recurrent finding, and its report was transmitted to the legislature and the responsible ministries.² In February

¹Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, Articles 4(1) and 5(1).

²Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia, report on the supervision of new student admission, transmitted to Commission X of the House of Representatives and the responsible ministries, December 2024.

2025 the government issued a new regulation replacing the instrument that had governed admission, renaming the process and restructuring its pathways.³

The new framework retains four pathways. The domicile pathway prioritises learners residing within an area determined by regional government, with proximity assessed by distance from residence to school rather than by the family registration document that had been the object of manipulation. The affirmative pathway serves learners from low-income households and learners with disabilities, with eligibility validated against government social data. The achievement pathway operates at secondary levels using school report marks and academic or non-academic accomplishment. The transfer pathway serves learners whose parents relocate for employment, and the children of teachers at the school concerned. For upper secondary schooling, a regional allocation mechanism addresses subdistricts that have no state school at that level.

The scholarly question is whether this reform addresses the problems attributed to its predecessor. The school choice literature indicates that admission rules allocate access to existing provision and cannot by themselves alter the quality distribution of that provision; where quality varies substantially between schools, any rationing rule will be contested, and families with resources will respond to whatever criterion is adopted.⁴ This proposition is analytically simple but has not been applied systematically to the Indonesian reform, and public debate has largely proceeded as though the choice of criterion were the substantive question.

The objectives of this study are to analyse the reform against its equity objective, to identify which attributed problems it addresses, and to assess whether admission policy is the appropriate instrument for the objective pursued. Three research questions follow: what does the new framework change; which of the problems attributed to zoning does it resolve; and what conditions determine whether an admission rule can advance educational equity?

II. RESEARCH METHODS

The study is a qualitative policy analysis employing doctrinal comparison and critical synthesis. Primary materials comprise the National Education System Law, the regulation governing admission from 2021, and the regulation replacing it in 2025. Secondary materials comprise oversight reports, the school choice and educational equity literature, and Indonesian analyses of the zoning arrangement. No field data were collected, and no claims are made about enrolment outcomes in particular regions.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the two regulations were compared provision by provision to establish what changed in the criterion, the evidentiary basis, and the pathway structure. Second, the problems attributed to the previous arrangement

³Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Number 3 of 2025 concerning the New Student Admission System, replacing Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 21 of 2021.

⁴OECD, *Balancing School Choice and Equity: An International Perspective Based on PISA* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 15–30.

were enumerated from oversight and scholarly sources and classified as problems of criterion, of evidence, or of capacity, since instruments addressing one class do not address another. Third, the reform was assessed against each class. The limitation is that document analysis identifies what a rule provides, not how administrators and families respond to it, and the response is decisive for distributive outcomes.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Three Classes of Problem

The first finding is that the problems attributed to the previous arrangement belong to three analytically distinct classes, and that conflating them has confused the policy debate. Problems of evidence concern the reliability of the information on which allocation depends, of which documentary manipulation is the leading example. Problems of criterion concern whether the allocation rule selects the right basis for priority, for instance whether proximity or attainment should govern. Problems of capacity concern the relationship between the number of places available in acceptable schools and the number of learners seeking them.

Table 1 classifies the principal complaints and indicates whether the 2025 reform addresses each.

Table 1. Problems Attributed to the Previous Arrangement and Treatment in the Reform

Problem	Class	Treatment in the 2025 framework
Manipulation of residence documents	Evidence	Addressed: proximity assessed by measured distance
Weak targeting of affirmative places	Evidence	Addressed: validation against government social data
Subdistricts without a state upper secondary school	Capacity	Partially addressed: regional allocation mechanism
Limited scope for high-attaining learners	Criterion	Addressed: achievement pathway retained and specified
Insufficient places in schools families regard as good	Capacity	Not addressed by admission rules
Quality disparity between schools	Capacity	Not addressed by admission rules

Source: Comparative analysis of the 2021 and 2025 regulations, 2026.

The pattern is clear. The reform is effective against problems of evidence and makes a defensible adjustment to the criterion, while the two problems in the final rows, which are the generating conditions of the controversy, lie outside what any admission rule can reach. This is not a criticism of the drafters, who have addressed what an admission regulation can address; it is a criticism of the expectation, widely expressed in public debate, that admission reform will resolve a distributive conflict produced by scarcity.

B. Why Measured Distance Is a Genuine Improvement

The second finding concerns the substitution of measured distance for documentary residence. This change is more significant than its technical appearance suggests. A

criterion evidenced by a document is vulnerable to manipulation of the document, and the cost of manipulation falls unequally: families with administrative knowledge and resources can relocate a registration entry, while families without them cannot. The apparent neutrality of a residence rule therefore conceals a regressive distribution of the ability to satisfy it.

Measured distance removes that vulnerability because the evidence is a physical fact rather than an administrative record. The residual vulnerability is actual relocation, which is far more costly and therefore far less prevalent. This is a well-designed response to a documented problem, and it illustrates a general principle: where a rule is evaded, the productive question is whether the evidentiary basis can be made resistant rather than whether the criterion should be abandoned.

The affirmative pathway's validation against government social data operates on the same logic, replacing self-declaration or locally issued certification with an external dataset. Its effectiveness depends on the accuracy and currency of that dataset, which is a known limitation, and households experiencing recent impoverishment may be absent from it. The design implication is that an appeal route must exist for households whose circumstances the data do not reflect, failing which an improvement in targeting becomes an exclusion mechanism for the most recently disadvantaged.

C. The Limits of Rationing Reform

The third finding concerns what admission policy cannot do. Where schools differ substantially in quality and demand for places in the better ones exceeds supply, an admission rule determines who obtains those places but does not change how many exist. Each possible rule produces a distinct distribution and a distinct set of aggrieved parties: proximity advantages those who live near good schools, which is itself a function of housing markets and therefore of income; attainment advantages those whose prior education was better resourced; lottery allocation removes systematic advantage but offends the expectation that effort should be rewarded.

The comparative literature on balancing choice and equity reaches the same conclusion, finding that admission arrangements shape sorting patterns but that the magnitude of between-school quality variation is the principal determinant of how consequential sorting becomes.⁵ Systems with low variation in school quality experience admission as an administrative matter; systems with high variation experience it as a distributive conflict, irrespective of the rule adopted.

The policy implication is uncomfortable but clear. If the objective is equity, the instruments that reach it are supply-side: increasing the number of state places where they are insufficient, raising the quality floor across schools through teacher allocation and resourcing, and supporting private provision where public provision cannot meet demand. The regional allocation mechanism for upper secondary schooling in unserved subdistricts is a genuine step in this direction, since it addresses coverage rather than

⁵OECD, *Balancing School Choice and Equity*, 45–60.

rationing, and its extension is more promising than further refinement of pathway percentages.

D. Recommendations

Three recommendations follow. First, evaluation of the reform should be framed against the problems it can address, namely evidentiary reliability and pathway specification, rather than against the reduction of admission conflict, which depends on capacity. Framing it otherwise guarantees a finding of failure and invites a further round of rule revision that will not help.

Second, an appeal route should be provided for affirmative-pathway applicants whose circumstances are not reflected in the social dataset, with a defined decision-maker and timescale operating within the admission cycle.

Third, equity objectives should be pursued primarily through instruments that raise the quality floor and expand capacity where it is short, with admission rules treated as an administrative mechanism rather than as a redistributive one. Reporting on admission should accordingly include the number of applicants unplaced in state schools by area, since that figure measures the capacity problem directly and is the indicator against which supply-side policy should be judged.

E. The Private Sector and the Capacity Question

One element of the current policy discussion addresses the capacity problem directly and deserves analytical attention. Ministerial statements accompanying the reform indicated that learners who cannot be accommodated in state schools would be directed to private schools with financing provided by regional government.⁶ This is a supply-side instrument rather than a rationing rule, and it is the only element of the reform that addresses the capacity constraint identified above.

Its design raises three questions that the regulation does not settle. The first concerns the funding basis: whether the payment covers the full cost of a place or a portion, since a partial payment transfers the residual to families and reproduces the inequity the measure is intended to remedy. The second concerns selection: whether the private school or the authority determines which learners are placed, since school-side selection would permit the exclusion of costlier learners. The third concerns quality: whether placement is limited to schools meeting defined standards, since placing unplaced learners in the weakest available provision converts an access remedy into a stratification mechanism.

These are familiar questions in the comparative literature on publicly funded private provision, where the consistent finding is that outcomes depend on the specification of these three parameters rather than on the presence or absence of private

⁶Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, statements accompanying the introduction of the new admission system, Jakarta, March 2025.

involvement as such.⁷ The instrument is therefore promising and underspecified, which is an argument for elaborating it rather than for abandoning it, and its elaboration would do more for equity than any further adjustment of pathway percentages.

F. Limitations

Two limitations should be noted. The analysis is documentary and comparative, so it establishes what the rules provide and what comparable arrangements have produced elsewhere, not what will follow in Indonesian conditions, where administrative capacity varies substantially between regions and the same rule may operate quite differently across them. Second, the classification of problems into evidence, criterion, and capacity is an analytical device; particular complaints may belong to more than one class, and the boundary between a criterion problem and a capacity problem is not always sharp, since dissatisfaction with a criterion is often dissatisfaction with scarcity expressed in the vocabulary available.

A third qualification concerns time. Admission rules are evaluated each year against the experience of the most recent cycle, which is a short horizon for a policy whose distributive effects accumulate over cohorts. A rule that produces complaint in its first application may nonetheless be preferable over several cycles, and one that produces satisfaction initially may generate adaptive responses from families that erode its effect over time. Annual revision in response to annual complaint is therefore a predictable but unproductive pattern, and stability of rules has an independent value that the debate rarely acknowledges, since families and schools can only plan against arrangements they expect to persist.

Finally, the analysis has treated the four pathways as a fixed structure and has not examined the allocation of proportions among them, which is where much practical contestation occurs. Proportional allocation is a genuine policy choice with distributive consequences, and it deserves separate treatment; the argument advanced here is only that no allocation of proportions among pathways can resolve a shortage of acceptable places, and that debate conducted exclusively at that level will continue to disappoint the expectations placed upon it.

A related point concerns data. Evaluation of any admission arrangement requires information that is not currently published in a comparable form across regions, notably the number of applicants per state place by area, the distribution of placements across the four pathways, and the number of applicants who obtained no state place at all. Without these, assessment of the reform rests on complaint volumes, which measure dissatisfaction rather than distribution and which respond to the salience of the issue as much as to its severity. Establishing a standard reporting format would be a modest administrative measure with a substantial effect on the quality of the debate, and it would allow the capacity question identified throughout this article to be discussed on evidence rather than on impression.

⁷OECD, *Balancing School Choice and Equity: An International Perspective Based on PISA* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 60–75.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study asked what the 2025 admission framework changes, which attributed problems it resolves, and what conditions determine whether an admission rule can advance equity. It found that the reform effectively addresses problems of evidence, substituting measured distance for manipulable residence documents and external social data for self-declaration, and that it makes a defensible adjustment to pathway structure while adding a regional allocation mechanism that addresses a real coverage gap. It found that the generating conditions of the controversy, namely quality disparity between schools and insufficient state capacity, are not reachable by admission rules of any design.

The theoretical implication is that admission policy should be analysed as a rationing mechanism, whose distributive effect is determined jointly by the rule and by the scarcity it rations, so that reform of the rule alters who bears scarcity rather than how much there is. The practical recommendations are to evaluate the reform against the problem class it can address, to provide an in-cycle appeal route for affirmative applicants absent from the social dataset, and to direct equity policy toward capacity and quality-floor instruments while reporting unplaced applicants by area as the primary indicator. Subsequent research should examine placement outcomes under the new pathways and should test whether measured-distance assessment reduces documented manipulation as intended.

REFERENCES

OECD. *Balancing School Choice and Equity: An International Perspective Based on PISA*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019.

Regulations and Policy Documents

Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System.

Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 21 of 2021 concerning New Student Admission.

Regulation of the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Number 3 of 2025 concerning the New Student Admission System.