

FROM I-IT TO I-THOU: RETHINKING PUBLIC EXPENDITURE ON HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH MARTIN BUBER'S DIALOGICAL ETHICS

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Abstract

Higher education policy is often framed in economic terms of efficiency, productivity, and human capital formation. While such perspectives are valuable, they risk reducing students and communities to data points or economic inputs. Drawing on Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, this paper reconsiders the meaning of public expenditure on higher education through the shift from an I-It relationship to an I-Thou encounter. Tamil Nadu, with its strong tradition of social reform and progressive educational policies, provides a concrete setting for this exploration. Using a mix of policy reports, budget documents, and insights from student experiences, the study examines how public investment can move beyond technical allocation toward fostering dignity, recognition, and equity. The analysis highlights that genuine educational access is not only about enrollment numbers or infrastructure expansion, but also about the relational quality of governance: whether students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, are treated as full participants in a shared future. By integrating dialogical ethics with economic policy debates, the paper suggests that equity in education financing must be grounded in respect for personhood as much as in material distribution. This approach invites a rethinking of higher education as a space where policy and philosophy meet to shape more just and inclusive development outcomes.

Keywords: Martin Buber, I-Thou, Higher Education, Public Expenditure, Equity, Tamil Nadu, Educational Economics, Policy, Governance, Dialogical Humanism

Introduction

The last decades considered the public spending on higher education mainly in terms of human capital, efficiency and economic growth. Although these methods reinforce the connection between education and national development, these methods commonly overlook the relational and ethical aspects of policy, e.g. student dignity, participation and justice. It introduces a gap in research: the current studies have addressed financial reasons or the general equity measures more than the moral and relational components of governance.

The philosophy of dialogue by Martin Buber can be a powerful solution to this void. His classification of I-It and I-Thou relationship brings out the point of whether the education policy is object-oriented or participatory because it is important to understand whether the students are treated as objects in the education process.

Applying this view to higher education stimulates the intellectual capacities to think ethically and rationally even in the economic context so that the investment made by the state can benefit society and humanity.

The example of Tamil Nadu is an exemplar, since the state has a history of social reform, policies of inclusive reservation and a stable history of state investment in education. Through the application of Buberian dialogical philosophy with the application of economic theories like Human Capital Theory or the Public Goods approach, this paper aims to understand how taxation spending can be used to create inclusive, equitable, and ethically oriented systems of higher education.

Here, the paper aims to learn how the I-Thou framework as presented by Buber could be applied to the ethical assessment of government spending, how the higher education policies of Tamil Nadu can be evaluated in accordance with the dialogical traditions of relational equity, and how the alliance of philosophy and policy can enhance participatory and inclusive governance. The paper reviews the literature and theoretical frameworks of the matter first before analyzing the policies and investments in Tamil Nadu. It then proceeds to study the relational aspects of educational access and finally a synthesis of philosophy and policy is made to provide the findings, discussion and practical recommendations on the promotion of inclusive development.

1. Review of Literature

The review is based on economic and philosophical view on higher education. Economic literature focuses on efficiency, equity and government spending in benefits promotion and quality whereas philosophical literature focuses on the moral and relationship aspects of policy evaluation which are usually ignored on the policy analysis. Based on the I-Thou model proposed by Martin Buber, this part places education as a dialogical and ethical process as opposed to economic investment. It also examines the policies and patterns of expenditure on higher education in Tamil Nadu to determine the extent to which equity and inclusivity are translated in the current system, or not.

1.1 Philosophical Foundations of Dialogue in Education

A philosophical basis of dialogue in teaching is seen in the idea that the essence of meaningful learning lies in the process of the real human contact. It is based on Martin Buber and his philosophy of dialogical approach, which underlines the importance of respect, reciprocity, and genuine relations between teachers and students and transforms education into a common course of cognition instead of a teaching process.

1.1.1 Martin Buber's I-It and I-Thou Framework

The philosophy of dialogue by Martin Buber is a profound philosophy in human relations within the educational process. He differentiates between two ways of relating the I-Thou mode of relating, which is founded on openness and respect, and the I-It mode of relating, where people are objects.

Within the education industry, I-It can be converted to I-Thou by transitioning on mechanical teaching to actual interaction wherein the student is regarded as a person with a sense of dignity and potential. According to Zhao (2021), these relationships facilitate some dialogue between teachers and students. On the same note, Yu-le (2004) focuses on the fact that the change makes education an environment of human contact, but not of transacting.

1.1.2 Dialogical Ethics and Its Relevance to Educational Policy

His concept of dialogical ethics by Buber considers education as a moral and reciprocal relationship instead of one-way exchange of knowledge. It requires equality, trust and shared accountability among the teachers, students and policymakers. Wu (2007) says that in such an approach, educational management is redefined through this approach that encourages collaboration and respect. Also, Morgan and Guilherme (2013) mention that hierarchical structures may be turned into participatory environments, which promote individuality and mutual understanding, through dialogical ethics.

1.1.3 Applications of Buber's Philosophy in Contemporary Education Studies

The thought of Buber is still inspirational in modern education research. As noted by Kotova and Dukkhan (2022), empathy, reflection, and social awareness are developed among students through a true conversation, as Buber imagined. Yu-le (2004) goes further to state that his philosophy redefines the work of the teacher, who now is a guide, a person to show his/her learners how to discover themselves and to grow morally. These views create an awareness of the reasons why the views of Buber still resonate in the construction of inclusive and value-driven educational practices.

1.2 Public Expenditure and Higher Education

Higher education expenditure in the society is crucial in developing the knowledge economy of a country. It does not only decide who should access higher learning but it also determines the level at which education benefits the economy and the society. The challenge is on balancing between quality, equity and efficiency using limited public resources.

1.2.1 Economic Perspectives: Efficiency, Productivity, and Human Capital Formation

Greater amounts of higher education spending, which are generally regarded as an investment in human capital, are also viewed as a driver of national growth. It also increases the earning capacity of the individuals and leads to the increased productivity and revenues in taxation (Raymond Bara et al., 2000). Yet, as Kim (2024) notes, the countries, which increase their access due to heavy government financing, are not always able to remain competitive on the global level. In this way, spending efficiency must be well balanced between inclusivity and academic excellence.

1.2.2 Public Goods Approach to Higher Education Financing

Higher education is more than a personal good since it produces far-reaching social good, including enhanced civic engagement, innovation and social mobility.

According to Williams (2016), equality and democratic participation are promoted by the public investment, and the policymakers are reminded that education is a common good. However, the increase in the trend of privatization is jeopardizing this social purpose, which needs policies to maintain access and financial stability in the long term.

1.2.3 Equity and Social Justice in Public Investment

Fairness in education expenditure is a thorn in the flesh. According to Mukherjee (2007), there is a tendency to allocate funds towards higher education more than the primary and secondary education, which increases social gaps. Matamoros Tomalá and Castillo Padrone (2025) continue by stating that the lack of transparency and accountability would ensure that even the most well-intended funds would not reach the most vulnerable. It is important to ensure that education is treated fairly and with good governance so as to be a true tool of social justice.

1.2.4 International Comparisons in Higher Education Expenditure

Comparative evidence indicates the conflict between access and excellence in international education systems. Kim (2024) concludes that nations having more public investment are prone to minimizing the unemployment rate among the youth but might not be able to maintain the world-class universities. These trends imply that third world countries should shape their expenditure policies to achieve a balance between inclusivity and innovation that would allow including many people and maintaining high quality education.

1.3 Higher Education in Tamil Nadu: Policy and Practice

The system of higher education in Tamil Nadu is an expression of a long-term policy of social justice and inclusiveness. The state has made an effort to increase access and to deal with historical inequalities in order to turn education into an instrument of empowerment as opposed to a privilege.

1.3.1 Historical Context: Social Reform and Educational Expansion

The Dravidian movement influenced the emphasis on equality and social reform in Tamil Nadu with priority given to schooling among the marginalized groups. Such policies as 69% reservation were designed to address the imbalance of caste and provide wider involvement (Mathew, 2025). Such activities show the commitment of the state to utilizing education as a tool of social change.

1.3.2 State-Level Investment Trends in Higher Education

In the past, Tamil Nadu has spent much on education, and the state funding was lowered in the 1980s and 1990s due to economic reforms. This motivated institutions to depend more on self-funded models and unorganized financing (Chandrasekaran and Kumar, 2016). Although it increased institutional capacity, there was also the issue of affordability and quality when it came to the privatization (David, 2014).

1.3.3 Access, Equity, and Inclusion in Tamil Nadu's Higher Education Policies

The state has achieved a lot in terms of expansion of access with policy that allows de-elitization and supporting rural students (Mathew, 2025). Economically disadvantaged segments have been helped by scholarships, waiving of fees, and hostels, although there have been issues of gender inequality, quality assurance, and rural and marginalized groups. So, to achieve real equality, it is still necessary to reinforce and focus on particular interventions.

1.3.4 Challenges of Privatization and Uneven Resource Distribution

Privatization has boosted capacity, however, it has also led to an increase in tuition, increasing disparity between urban and rural institutions (David, 2014; Mathew, 2025). The state has had poor funding and decentralization which have compromised quality and accessibility (Chandrasekaran and Kumar, 2016). Competition can enhance efficiency, but it also creates the danger of marginalizing those who are poor, thus pointing to the current conflict between the market and social equity in post-secondary education.

1.4 Relational Dimensions of Educational Access

The relational aspects of access to education investigate the intersection of policies, experiences and governance structures to determine the quality and inclusiveness of higher education. In addition to statistical indicators and enrollment data, the lived experiences of the students, the acknowledgment of their dignity and personhood, and the need to govern through dialog are highlighted in this section, and especially addresses the marginalized communities.

1.4.1 Beyond Numbers: Students' Lived Experiences in Higher Education

The experiences of students demonstrate the combination of institutional structures and personal identities. Barriers such as implicit biases, lack of sufficient representation, and finances usually impact marginalized students with access and retention (Rout, 2022). These realities cannot be solely quantified through the numbers, and a combination of both numbers and qualitative stories demonstrates how interaction is determined by culture, language, and social identity (Amiri, 2025). The strategy puts the emphasis on the access achieved but access experienced, laying stress on empathy and inclusion.

1.4.2 Recognition, Dignity, and Personhood in Education Policy

Justice education needs to recognize both the personhood of every student, not merely his or her institutional presence. The policies in Brazil and South Africa, e.g. focus on recognition and access to make sure that the students are not treated as beneficiaries (Smith et al., 2025). Disregarding the concepts of respect and dignity will symbolically cause exclusion despite the availability of material resources. The policies of dialogues based on the I-Thou framework of Buber are useful to establish new educational environments where individuality and belonging can be respected.

1.4.3 Marginalized Communities and the Question of Equity

Equity exceeds equal opportunity to justice in results and estimations of historical disadvantages. The vulnerable populations remain exposed to structural injustices in the absence of specific assistance (Harvey and Stokes, 2019). The interventions, like scholarships and affirmative action, should be used to decrease the economic and cultural barriers, and the local communities should be included in the planning and assessment of inclusive policies (Amiri, 2025). Education should be seen as a social good but not a commodity.

1.4.4 Governance as Dialogue: Rethinking Policy Implementation

Governance is central to the factor of whether access to education would translate to empowerment. The traditional models rooted in the top-down thinking do not always represent the voices of people who have to endure the policy decisions. However, dialogical governance, in which policymakers, educators and students conduct a long-term dialogue, has the capacity to form responsive and humane education (Amiri, 2025). It is also informed by the work of Espinoza-Bravo and Cabezas-Cabezas (2024) who emphasize the place of dialogue in transforming an institution into a more inclusive and participatory one.

Rout (2022) also stresses that, when it comes to equitable governance, distribution of resources is not the only thing but rather a mutual respect, openness, and accountability have to be nurtured. When the governance becomes dialogical, the policy ceases to be an administrative one, but rather relational, i.e., it creates a culture of trust and co-creation. This is in line with I-Thou ethics proposed by Buber where policy is never forced down the throats of the individuals but rather it develops through real dialogue which appreciates the agency of the individuals.

1.5 Integrating Philosophy and Policy in Educational Research

The combination of philosophical ethics and educational policy assists in dealing with the moral and social aspects of higher education. In the modern world of metrics, markets and economic rationality apparently assuming the forefront of decision-making process, the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber reminds us of the human aspect of education. It promotes a move away of impersonal and technical policy stance towards relational justice-based governance that cherishes dialogue and moral accountability. The segment underscores the use of ethical reflection, dialogical, and inclusive practices to inform the education research and policy.

1.5.1 The Need for Ethical-Philosophical Lenses in Education Economics

Policies are commonly discussed in terms of efficiency and growth without considering dignity, fairness and respect of relationship. Morgan (2013) points out that ethical reflection is very critical as it helps in making sure that the aim of education is not just instrumental but also makes, it a human service. This degradation of education into human capital will overlook the ethical intent of education and the society it fosters.

Moses (2017) further notes that realistic philosophical approach, which acknowledges that there are certain injustices about, enhances the policy analysis because it makes the process more sensitive to the needs of the society. Ethical enquiry can enable us to identify the effects of resource allocation, curriculum and governance decisions and their effects on personhood and justice. Another important aspect that Tesar (2016) makes us aware of is that this kind of reflection disrupts the objectivity that we tend to believe in when it comes to education policy, and it reminds us that education is more of a moral project than an economic one.

1.5.2 Dialogical Approaches to Equity and Justice in Higher Education

Dialogical ethics is based on the philosophy of I-Thou by Buber and educational equity takes the form of a participatory and reciprocal process. According to Roelens (2023), dialogical methods allow the admission of multiple voices, including students, teachers, administrators, and communities into the policymaking process, which establishes a collective moral accountability.

Seiça (2022) goes on to state that the idea of inclusion cannot be achieved without acknowledgment and continuous communication, as opposed to legislation or redistribution. As a practice, dialogical involvement converts the policy into a top-down imposition and a mutual morality. In this way, institutions would be able to shift toward the vision of Buber of real relationality, where the governance relates in an important way with the lived experience of people.

1.5.3 Toward Inclusive Development: Bridging Policy and Philosophy

The interconnection between philosophy and policy is a way of inclusive development through the integration of ethical consideration and action. According to Roelens (2023), the ethical inclusivity should consider the individual dignity and the well-being of the collective and make sure that the institutional structures meet the needs of both individual and society. Morgan (2013) also urges similar policies that are founded on moral vision and community cohesion where education would promote human flourishing.

According to Tesar (2016), the gap between philosophy and policy has to be filled through ongoing deliberation, making abstract ideals practical. This guarantees that development is not only quantified in terms of enrolment or financial resources but also in terms of equity, compassion and relevance.

Finally, dialogical ethics redefines the educational policy as a common human project. It advances the concept of governing people instead of governing on behalf of people pointing out that the legitimacy of higher education lies in mutual respect and relational understanding. Through philosophy and policy, higher education is able to seek development that is fair, inclusive and moral.

2. Theoretical / Conceptual Framework

The present research is based on the philosophy of dialogical, which is highly relational in nature, as outlined by Martin Buber.

The I-Thou encounter is honest and mutual relationships wherein each individual is respected in his or her humanness. When applied to higher education, public expenditure is regarded not as financial investment, but as a moral action, which acknowledges student dignity and potential.

This theory is complemented by the Public Goods Theory of education (Williams, 2016) and the Human Capital Model (Raymond Bara et al., 2000) that substantiate the spending on education economically. A combination of Buber ethics expands these models by bringing about relational justice, respect, dialogue, and participation as critical aspects of equity. Educational policy in this sense is neither just examined in terms of its efficiency but also as a dialogical process of shared human development.

3. Research Gap

Despite the current research on higher education that focuses on the economic efficiency, social justice, and policy frameworks of higher education, not many studies have incorporated philosophical ethics in the analysis of policies including the dialogical philosophy of Buber. Relational and moral aspects of educational governance have not been explored in most studies which concentrate either on the financial rationales or on the general equity indicators. This gap is addressed in this paper where I am able to integrate ethical reflection, economic reasoning and governance analysis to determine how the process of public spending can be combined with inclusion and dignity.

4. Research Questions

The present research is informed by the following questions:

- i. What does I-Thou system by Buber tell us about the morality of higher education budgets?
- ii. How are the policies of higher education in Tamil Nadu any or less dialogical and relational in terms of equity?
- iii. What can be the benefits of involving philosophy and policy to make higher education participatory and inclusive?

5. Methodology

The research of the study is a qualitative and interpretive one relying on document analysis and philosophical questioning. Data sources include:

- Government budget reports and education policy documents (20102025) Tamil Nadu.
- Publications in the field of research and cross-country comparisons (OECD, World Bank),
- Secondary sources explaining the dialogical ethics of Buber.

Thematic analysis is used to establish the patterns in three dimensions:

1. Ethical-philosophical principles: conversation, honor, and friendship,
2. Economic reason: effectiveness, justice and inclusivity,
3. Orders of governance: involvement, reward and equality.

This method is not empirical but interpretative, and would seek to accomplish the enlightenment of how philosophical principles can inform fair policy and practices of an inclusive higher education. The limitation of the study lies in the secondary data and analysis by interpreting the data, and it is advisable to conduct future research to confirm the results using empirical research by going to the field.

6. Analysis and Discussion

This part will make sense of the findings of the study by incorporating philosophical understanding, as well as economic views on higher education. It discusses how the dialogical philosophy of Buber can be used to enhance the public policy by bringing ethical and relational aspects to the economic analysis. The discussion discusses the three research questions through the exploration of the moral basis of educational policy, dialogical means of equity and justice, and the combination of philosophy and policy to inclusive development.

6.1 The Need for Ethical-Philosophical Lenses in Education Economics

The issue of education policy is that it tends to place importance on quantifiable results such as enrollment rates, productivity and economic returns and ignore the ethical issue. As it will be seen in answering Research Question 1, the necessity of incorporating the dialogical philosophy of Buber is that the policy decisions respect the dignity of human beings and relational justice. According to Morgan (2013), moral reasoning is the reason why education should remain focused on human well-being instead of instrumental values. According to Moses (2017), the identification of social injustices enhances the responsiveness of policies, and Tesar (2016) writes that it is possible to establish a government that is responsive to ethical values and concurrently efficient in economic terms due to the resistance to strictly technical analyses.

6.2 Dialogical Approaches to Equity and Justice in Higher Education

To answer Research Question 2, dialogical ethics explains equity as an active and processual relationship. Roelens (2023) demonstrates that policies that are made by dialogue are imbued with various voices that include students, teachers, and communities in decision-making. Seiaca (2022) emphasizes that inclusion must be noted and discussed, not only with the rules and the allocation of resources. In the context of Tamil Nadu, participatory options may serve to make sure that the students and marginalized groups become active partners and have the policy congruent with the aspects of moral dimensions of education identified in the conceptual framework.

6.3 Toward Inclusive Development: Bridging Policy and Philosophy

In the case of Research Question 3, philosophical understanding can be incorporated with policy development to serve as inclusive and ethical governance. Roelens (2023) focuses on the issue of balancing individual dignity and collective welfare whereas Morgan (2013) stresses the necessity of moral cohesion in the process of institutional decision-making.

According to Tesar (2016), continuous communication between philosophy and policy practice helps to turn the abstract ideals into the practical policies. The experience of Tamil Nadu, of associating social justice reform with the state investment, shows that it is possible to achieve the I-Thou vision of Buber, in which education is a moral project shared among individuals to encourage mutual knowledge and development.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This paper hypothesizes that the humanization of policy and governance can be achieved by reconsidering the idea of public spending on higher education using the dialogical ethics made by Martin Buber. Education becomes an aesthetic relationship based on morality and dignity and respect when the students are referred to as Thou instead of It.

This paper shows that the concept of humanizing policy and governance based on Martin Bubers dialogical ethics is achievable by looking at the concept of public expenditure on higher education. Education ceases to be merely an instrumental process in the sense of a program or curriculum designed to provide learners with skills, competencies, and knowledge applicable in the workplace, and turns into a moral and interpersonal practice when the students are treated as Thou and not It. Ethical reflection, participatory governance, and care about dignity help change policy administrative actions into inclusive and justice-related interactions. The case of Tamil Nadu can demonstrate the value of social justice-oriented investments in the promotion of access and equity that can serve as an excellent example to other areas.

Key Recommendations

- Implement dialogical training initiatives and participatory policy forums in institutions of higher learning in order to reinforce relational governance.
- Re-model budget evaluation measures to include ethical and relationship measurements like student voice, inclusivity and community participation.
- Encourage cross-disciplinary research among educators, philosophers and economists with the view to development of holistic and ethically sound policy frameworks.
- Enhance community-based monitoring structures to guarantee fair distribution of resources and accountability which minimizes the disparity related to urban and rural institutions.

Introduction of the I-Thou philosophy into the educational policy may allow the institutions to balance the economic efficiency with the inclusion as an ethical and ethical setting where the empathy, respect, and mutual development may flourish.

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