

Law Students Understanding of the Principle of the Rule of Law in Indonesia

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Abstract: This study aims to describe the level of students' understanding of the principle of the rule of law in Indonesia among 47 first semester students of the Law Program at Universitas Panca Bhakti. The research employed a quantitative descriptive approach, with data collected through a closed ended questionnaire comprising three main indicators: supremacy of law, equality before the law, and fair law enforcement. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to determine the students' level of understanding. The results revealed that 30 students (63.83%) demonstrated a high level of understanding of the rule of law, 14 students (29.79%) were in the moderate category, and 3 students (6.38%) were in the low category. These findings confirm that the majority of students have a solid grasp of the fundamental concepts and values of the rule of law, although a small portion still requires improvement through more contextual and applied learning approaches. This study is expected to serve as a reference for law programs in strengthening learning strategies based on constitutional understanding and enhancing legal awareness from the early stages of legal education.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of national development, law plays a fundamental role as a means to establish order, justice, and legal certainty in the life of the nation and state. The Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, through Article 1 paragraph (3) of the 1945 Constitution, explicitly states that "Indonesia is a state based on law." This declaration underscores that all forms of authority and policy in state administration must be grounded in law, rather than personal will or mere political power. However, in practice, violations of the principles of the rule of law still frequently occur, ranging from abuse of authority and legal uncertainty to inadequate protection of citizens' rights.

Various national and international legal institutions have highlighted these issues. According to the World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index 2024, Indonesia ranks 70th out of 142 countries, with a score of 0.53, reflecting the relatively low effectiveness of law enforcement and justice in the country. In addition, the 2023 report of the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) recorded more than 2,300 complaints of human rights violations, including discrimination and abuse of power by state officials.

These conditions reveal a gap between the ideal principles of a rule of law state as mandated in the 1945 Constitution and the reality of its implementation. Therefore, systematic efforts are needed to instill legal understanding and awareness from an early stage, particularly among law students as future intellectuals and legal practitioners.

Law students occupy a strategic position in the process of national legal development. They are not only recipients of education but also prospective actors who will practice and uphold legal principles in society. A strong understanding of the concept of the rule of law serves as a foundation for building legal character that is just, ethical, and upholds human values. However, research by Sigit & Daryono (2023) indicates that law students in Indonesia often perceive law merely as a set of written norms without exploring the underlying moral and social values. This suggests that the internalization of the principles of the rule of law remains weak in legal education, especially at the early stages.

Previous studies have examined the implementation of the rule of law principles in the context of governance and law enforcement. For instance, Lestari (2025) investigated the application of rule of law principles in regional government management, while Yudhayana & Aziz (2024) analyzed the relationship between legal awareness and societal behavior toward the law. Nevertheless, these studies mainly focus on normative aspects or the broader public, and empirical research specifically examining first semester law students' understanding of rule of law principles remains scarce. This early phase is crucial for developing a systematic and critical legal mindset, highlighting a research gap that this study aims to address.

This gap becomes particularly relevant when considering the actual conditions of law students at Universitas Panca Bhakti Pontianak, especially first semester students who are just beginning their foundational legal studies. Initial observations indicate that some students still exhibit limited conceptual understanding of key rule of law principles, such as legal supremacy, equality before the law, and human rights protection. This limitation could hinder the development of a critical and integrity driven academic character. Hence, an empirical study is needed to depict the students' level of understanding of the rule of law principles and the factors influencing it.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is expected to enrich empirical research on legal awareness in higher education and provide new insights into the dynamics of cultivating legal consciousness among students. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as an evaluative reference for the Faculty of Law at Universitas Panca Bhakti to enhance the quality of foundational law courses, particularly Introduction to Law and Constitutional Law. Thus, this research contributes to building a legal education paradigm that not only emphasizes cognitive aspects but also internalizes values of justice, morality, and humanity, as embodied in the Pancasila based rule of law principles.

METHOD

This study was conducted in the Law Study Program, Faculty of Law, Universitas Panca Bhakti Pontianak, involving 47 first semester students as respondents. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed to describe the level of students' understanding of the

principles of the rule of law in Indonesia (Waruwu et al., 2025). Data were collected through a closed ended questionnaire consisting of 20 statements measured using a five point Likert scale, covering four main indicators: awareness of the supremacy of law, understanding of equality before the law, perspectives on fair law enforcement, and awareness of the limitation of power. The instrument was developed based on fundamental theories of the rule of law and constitutional principles contained in the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, and was tested for validity and reliability prior to use. Data analysis utilized descriptive statistical techniques, including calculations of means, percentages, and categorization of respondents' understanding levels, as well as simple inferential analysis using Pearson's correlation test to examine relationships among indicators. The results were then interpreted to empirically illustrate the extent to which students comprehend the principles of the rule of law, both conceptually and practically.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 47 first semester students of the Law Study Program, Universitas Panca Bhakti Pontianak, to measure their level of understanding of the principles of the rule of law in Indonesia. Based on the results of the questionnaire data analysis, the overall finding indicates that students' understanding falls into the *high* category, with an overall mean score of 4.08 on a five point Likert scale. This result demonstrates that students possess a relatively strong understanding of the fundamental principles of the rule of law as mandated by Article 1 paragraph (3) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis Results of Students' Understanding of the Principles of the Rule of Law

Understanding Indicator	Mean Score	Category	Percentage (%)
Awareness of the supremacy of law	4.21	Very High	84.2
Understanding of equality before the law	4.05	High	81.0
Perspective on fair law enforcement	3.97	High	79.4
Awareness of the limitation of power	4.10	High	82.0
Overall Average	4.08	High	81.6

Based on the table above, the indicator awareness of the supremacy of law obtained the highest mean score of 4.21, indicating that students understand the importance of law as the highest norm in the governance of the state. Most respondents agreed that all government actions must be grounded in applicable law and rejected any form of abuse of power. This finding suggests that students have begun to internalize the fundamental values of the rule of law early in their studies, particularly through the Introduction to Law course.

For the indicator understanding of equality before the law, the mean score was 4.05, reflecting a high level of awareness that law should apply equally to all citizens. However, approximately 12.8% of respondents expressed doubt regarding the practical implementation of this principle in Indonesia's legal system, especially in cases involving public officials. This finding reveals a gap between normative understanding and empirical reality within Indonesia's legal framework.

The indicator perspective on fair law enforcement received a mean score of 3.97, indicating that students comprehend the principle of substantive justice in law, although

some still perceive that law enforcement in Indonesia is not yet fully objective. Several respondents noted that challenges such as political interference and unequal access to justice continue to hinder the realization of an ideal rule of law state.

Meanwhile, the indicator awareness of the limitation of power recorded a mean score of 4.10, showing that students have a solid understanding of the importance of checks and balances within the constitutional system. They recognize that state power must be limited by law to prevent abuse and must be supervised by independent institutions that ensure the balance of power.

The Pearson correlation test between indicators revealed a significant positive relationship between awareness of the supremacy of law and understanding of equality before the law ($r = 0.68$; $p < 0.05$). This finding indicates that the higher the students' understanding of the supremacy of law, the greater their awareness of the principle of legal equality. This interrelation reinforces the view that both aspects constitute integral foundations of a democratic rule of law state.

Overall, the results of this study illustrate that first semester students of the Faculty of Law at Universitas Panca Bhakti have a solid theoretical understanding of the principles of the rule of law. Nevertheless, more practical and contextual learning approaches, such as case analysis, moot court simulations, and jurisprudence studies, are needed to further develop students' conceptual understanding into critical and reflective thinking skills relevant to Indonesia's legal realities.

Discussion

The study revealed that first semester students of the Law Program at Universitas Panca Bhakti demonstrated a high level of understanding of the rule of law principle, with an overall mean score of 4.08. This finding emphasizes that new law students already possess a strong foundational awareness of the concept of rule of law as the cornerstone of national governance. This can be attributed to the effectiveness of the Introduction to Legal Studies course, which instills a conceptual understanding of the rule of law as the foundation of Indonesia's legal system. According to A.V. Dicey, the rule of law comprises three main elements, the supremacy of law, equality before the law, and the protection of human rights (Prabu & Rumiarta, 2022) which served as the analytical framework of this research and were well comprehended by respondents.

In the indicator of awareness of the supremacy of law, the highest mean score (4.21) signifies that students understand the importance of law as the highest norm governing individuals and state institutions. This awareness aligns with Friedrich Julius Stahl's view that law should control power, not be controlled by it. The finding is consistent with Yan (2023), who reported that students exposed to contextual legal learning more easily grasp the relationship between law and justice within Indonesia's constitutional system. Hence, the understanding of Universitas Panca Bhakti students shows a positive trend toward forming an integrity based legal mindset.

The indicator of understanding equality before the law obtained a mean score of 4.05, indicating strong awareness of the principle of equality before the law. However, the finding that about 12.8% of respondents expressed doubt about its real world

implementation reflects a perceived imbalance in law enforcement. Unequal sanctions or differential treatment of offenders often lead to skepticism among students. Therefore, legal education should not only emphasize normative concepts but also encourage critical reflection on legal realities. As Cody (2020) noted, reflective legal education strengthens students' belief in the values of substantive justice.

The indicator of views on fair law enforcement scored 3.97, showing good yet suboptimal understanding. Some students perceived that Indonesia's legal system still struggles to implement objective justice, mainly due to political interference and weak professional ethics. This supports Marda et al. (2023), who found that students' perceptions of legal justice are often influenced by media exposure to injustice. Hence, integrating Aristotle's theory of justice with modern legal practice in learning is essential, enabling students to distinguish between formal justice and substantive justice within Indonesia's socio legal context.

For the indicator of awareness of power limitation, with a mean score of 4.10, students demonstrated a solid understanding of the importance of checks and balances in the state system. This awareness is crucial to a democratic rule of law. In Indonesia, power limitation is embodied in the 1945 Constitution, which stipulates separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The result aligns with Wahyudi (2018), who emphasized that students' understanding of constitutionalism improves significantly when learning is linked to current issues. Therefore, foundational legal education must continue to nurture strong constitutional awareness.

The Pearson correlation test revealed a significant positive relationship between awareness of the supremacy of law and understanding equality before the law ($r = 0.68$; $p < 0.05$). This suggests that both principles conceptually and practically reinforce one another: students who better understand the supremacy of law tend to show stronger awareness of legal equality. This supports Kelsen's view (Kennedy, 2021) that law can only be enforced justly when fundamental norms governing power and equality are applied simultaneously.

From an empirical perspective, this study shows that first semester law students already possess a solid cognitive foundation but require further development in affective and applied dimensions. High theoretical understanding should be balanced with critical, analytical, and reflective thinking toward socio legal realities. Therefore, introductory law courses should not only stress conceptual mastery but also cultivate moral and social awareness through case studies, court decision analyses, and mock trials. This approach aligns with the experiential learning model, which emphasizes direct experience as an effective means of instilling legal and ethical values.

Overall, this research provides an empirical contribution to the development of legal education at the foundational level. The students' high understanding of the rule of law serves as a valuable asset for shaping future legal professionals with integrity and critical reasoning. Theoretically, the study reinforces prior findings on the importance of internalizing the values of the rule of law in higher education. Practically, it offers a basis for law lecturers and curriculum designers to develop more contextual, integrative, and character oriented curricula that promote justice and democracy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study involving 47 first semester students of the Law Program at Universitas Panca Bhakti Pontianak, it can be concluded that the students' level of understanding of the principle of the rule of law in Indonesia falls within the high category, with an overall mean score of 4.08. This finding indicates that introductory legal education at the early stage of university learning has successfully instilled a solid conceptual understanding of the core values of the rule of law, as mandated in Article 1(3) of the 1945 Constitution. Among the four indicators examined, awareness of the supremacy of law obtained the highest mean score (4.21), followed by awareness of the limitation of power (4.10), understanding of equality before the law (4.05), and perception of fair law enforcement (3.97). These results show that students not only comprehend legal principles normatively but are also able to relate them to Indonesia's social and political context. The correlation test revealed a significant positive relationship between awareness of the supremacy of law and understanding of equality before the law, indicating that the higher the students' understanding of the supremacy of law, the stronger their awareness of the principle of legal equality. This confirms that the elements of the rule of law are systemically interrelated and cannot be understood in isolation. Therefore, legal education in universities should be designed not only to strengthen theoretical comprehension but also to develop students' analytical and reflective abilities toward the realities of law enforcement in Indonesia. Theoretically, this study contributes to strengthening the discourse on students' understanding of the rule of law at the early stage of legal education, emphasizing the importance of cultivating legal awareness from the outset. Practically, the results can serve as a foundation for curriculum development and instructional strategies within law faculties particularly in designing more contextual, case based, and value oriented teaching methods that emphasize justice and legal integrity. With a strong understanding of the rule of law, it is expected that law students at Universitas Panca Bhakti will grow into future legal practitioners who are professional, ethical, and committed to justice in carrying out their roles within the legal system.

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