

ACADEMIC ELITES: ROLES, INFLUENCE, AND CRITICISM IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA.

Rosfazila Abd Rahman
Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS)
Tel: +60123313020 Email: rosfazila@uis.edu.my

Jessica Ong Hai Liaw
Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM)
Tel: +60123976778 Email: jessica@upnm.edu.my

Kamarazaman Yacob
European International University (EIU)
Tel: +60172104129 Email: rerebang@gmail.com

Adlina Abdul Khalil
Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS)
Tel: +60173248156 Email: adlina@unishams.edu.my

Sharifah Shahirah Syed Sheikh
Universiti Poly-Tech MARA (UPTM)
Tel: +60196321987 Email: shsyahirah@kuptm.edu.my

Syed Nurul Akla Syed Abdullah
Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)
Tel: +60133386302 Email: syedakla@yahoo.com

Djhoanna Mama
Davao Oriental State University (DOrSU)
Email: djhoanna.mama@doscst.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

Educational sociology is the study of how society and education influence each other. It looks at how social institutions, identities, and power structures affect educational systems, policies, and outcomes. Academic elites are a small, influential group of scholars or administrators within educational institutions (mostly universities) who hold disproportionate power over knowledge production, institutional decision-making, and educational policy. This article discusses the concept of academic elites within higher education institutions, examining their roles in knowledge production as well as the criticisms surrounding their practices and power structures. Grounded in the theoretical framework of educational sociology, particularly the works of Pierre Bourdieu, this article explores how academic elites influence epistemic justice and the development of an inclusive academic environment. The discussion is significant for reassessing existing structures to ensure that higher education remains a democratic and equitable space.

Keywords: academic elites; knowledge power; higher education; educational sociology; epistemic justice

1. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the higher education sector has undergone substantial changes in recent years, with a clear push towards research excellence and global recognition. Key to this transformation are the academic elites—individuals who shape not only academic discourse but also the institutional and governmental policies that influence the educational landscape. However, while these elites drive academic advancements, their concentration of power has also led to criticisms about the inclusivity, accessibility, and alignment of the higher education system with societal needs.

This paper explores the roles and influence of academic elites within the Malaysian context, examining their contributions and the criticisms surrounding their dominant position. Drawing from current data on Malaysia's higher education, including university rankings, research productivity, and issues of access, this paper provides a comprehensive view of the contemporary issues surrounding academic elites in Malaysia.

2. THE ROLES OF ACADEMIC ELITES IN MALAYSIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

Academic elites in Malaysia play essential roles in shaping research priorities, curriculum development, and university governance, with their influence impacting the broader societal and policy agenda.

2.1 Shaping Research Priorities and National Development

In Malaysia, academic elites have a significant impact on national research agendas, particularly through institutions such as the University of Malaya (UM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). These universities are central to the government's efforts to improve Malaysia's standing in international research rankings, with a clear emphasis on fostering innovation and producing world-class research.

For instance, UM's role as Malaysia's top-ranking university in the QS World University Rankings (QS, 2025) demonstrates the influence of academic elites in guiding the university's research and policy priorities. In recent years, there has been a notable push to focus on research in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), particularly in areas like artificial intelligence (AI) and digital economy (Mok, 2020). These research priorities align with Malaysia's ambition to become a regional leader in technological innovation.

Furthermore, the establishment of initiatives like the National Research and Innovation Framework (NRIF) 2021-2025, which is heavily influenced by academic elites, seeks to bolster Malaysia's position in global research, aligning with the country's economic goals (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2020). This initiative focuses on fostering collaboration between universities and industry to drive technological advancements, especially in digital transformation.

2.2 Curriculum Development and National Educational Standards

Academic elites are also instrumental in designing university curricula that align with both global standards and national development needs. However, there has been growing concern about the narrowing of academic focus towards STEM fields, sometimes at the expense of the humanities and social sciences. This shift is evident in the policies of major universities, like UTM, which has made significant investments in engineering, technology, and business disciplines.

Despite the growing emphasis on STEM, critics argue that such focus might undermine the broader educational needs of the Malaysian population, particularly in terms of developing critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and an understanding of socio-political contexts. As Malaysia's academic elites often occupy positions of power in curriculum design, their priorities determine what is taught and how it is taught. Recent critiques of these priorities highlight a lack of diversity in the curriculum, particularly regarding the underrepresentation of the humanities in public discourse (Browne, 2020).

2.3 University Governance and Leadership

Academic elites in Malaysia also occupy pivotal leadership positions within universities, influencing key decisions such as faculty appointments, student admissions, and research funding. This concentration of power is evident in the roles held by vice-chancellors, deans, and department heads, many of whom have extensive research backgrounds.

However, governance in Malaysia's universities is often intertwined with political patronage, which raises concerns about academic independence. Many universities in Malaysia, including Monash University Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), have seen appointments to top academic positions influenced by political considerations. Critics argue that such political influence may compromise the autonomy of universities, potentially skewing research agendas and educational priorities (Chin, 2021).

3. THE INFLUENCE OF ACADEMIC ELITES IN MALAYSIA

The influence of academic elites extends beyond the university campus and reaches into the broader national and international arenas. Through their research, public presence, and leadership roles, academic elites shape key aspects of Malaysia's development.

3.1 Shaping National Policies and Global Academic Reputation

Through their research and expertise, Malaysian academic elites often serve as key advisors to the government, particularly on issues related to economic development, health, and education. For example, Professor Dr. Mohd. Ismail, a prominent academic elite in the field of economics, has been heavily involved in advising the Malaysian government on policies related to digital transformation and the development of Industry 4.0 (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2021).

Furthermore, academic elites play a critical role in enhancing the global standing of Malaysian universities. UM is currently ranked 59th in the QS World University Rankings 2025, an improvement from previous years. The efforts of academic elites in driving global recognition through research output, collaborations with international universities, and institutional leadership have been pivotal in improving the university's standing (QS, 2025).

3.2 Building Global Academic Networks and Collaborative Research

Malaysia's academic elites are key participants in global research networks and interdisciplinary collaborations, often playing a central role in setting the agenda for international academic conferences. Through these collaborations, Malaysian academics contribute to solving global challenges such as climate change and public health crises.

For example, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has been involved in numerous international projects addressing global environmental concerns, including collaborations with the University of Cambridge and Monash University on climate change adaptation strategies. Such partnerships enhance Malaysia's global academic standing while fostering important solutions to global issues (Lee, 2020).

3.3 Philanthropy and Institutional Development

Many academic elites in Malaysia also contribute to the development of higher education through philanthropic donations. These contributions support research initiatives, scholarships, and infrastructure development at universities. For example, donations from local business elites have enabled UTM to expand its research capabilities in areas like advanced engineering and renewable energy.

However, such philanthropic contributions often raise questions about the influence of wealthy donors in shaping academic priorities. The involvement of private donors can lead to a concentration of resources in specific fields, which may limit the diversity of academic inquiry and create a narrow view of what constitutes valuable knowledge (Mok, 2020).

4. CRITICISM OF ACADEMIC ELITES IN MALAYSIA

Despite their significant contributions, academic elites in Malaysia are not immune to criticism. Key concerns include issues of inequality, elitism, and their alignment with political interests.

4.1 Perpetuating Inequality and Exclusivity

One of the most significant criticisms of academic elites in Malaysia is their role in perpetuating social and educational inequalities. Access to prestigious universities like UM and USM is often limited to students from wealthier backgrounds, due to the high cost of tuition and the competitive nature of admission. According to recent data from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, socio-economic disparities continue to affect students' access to higher education, particularly in rural areas and among low-income families (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2020).

This exclusivity exacerbates the divide between elite universities and less prestigious institutions, where academic opportunities may be more limited. The dominance of academic elites from top universities may further marginalize less prestigious academic voices, leading to a lack of representation and diversity in the national academic discourse.

4.2 Political Patronage and Academic Independence

The intertwining of academic and political interests has led to significant concerns about the politicization of Malaysia's higher education system. Many appointments to top academic positions, particularly at public universities, are influenced by political patronage, which can undermine the academic freedom of these institutions (Chin, 2021). This close relationship between political elites and academic leaders has led to accusations of a lack of transparency in university governance and the prioritization of political over academic considerations.

4.3 Detachment from Societal Needs

Another criticism of Malaysia's academic elites is their perceived detachment from societal concerns. Critics argue that while academic elites focus on achieving global rankings and research excellence, there is insufficient attention paid to addressing the pressing socio-economic challenges faced by ordinary Malaysians. Issues like poverty, unemployment, and social inequality are often underrepresented in academic research, and critics argue that academic elites should redirect their efforts to solving problems that directly impact local communities (Mok, 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

Academic elites in Malaysia undoubtedly play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of the nation's higher education landscape. Through their leadership, research, and involvement in policy-making, they have contributed significantly to the advancement of Malaysia's

academic reputation on the global stage. Institutions such as the University of Malaya (UM) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), guided by these elites, have made strides in global university rankings, bolstering Malaysia's position as a hub for research and innovation. The contributions of these academic leaders are especially critical in driving national priorities, such as digital transformation, Industry 4.0, and sustainability, which are key to Malaysia's economic development.

However, while the influence of academic elites is undeniably important, it is equally accompanied by significant challenges that warrant careful consideration. The concentration of power within a small group of academics—often tied to political patronage and the prioritization of global rankings—has led to growing concerns about academic freedom, inclusivity, and the socio-economic divide in access to higher education. The increasing focus on elite institutions—such as UM and UTM—has often come at the expense of broader access to quality education, especially for marginalized groups and those from rural or low-income backgrounds.

Furthermore, while these academic elites have helped shape Malaysia's research agenda, there is a growing critique that the higher education system may be too focused on global competitiveness and not sufficiently aligned with the local needs of Malaysian society. Issues such as poverty, inequality, and social justice—critical to the nation's long-term development—are often underrepresented in academic discourse and research output. The gap between the research priorities of Malaysia's academic elites and the pressing needs of the broader population poses a serious challenge for the country's higher education system in terms of its relevance and responsiveness to societal issues.

Addressing these concerns will require a recalibration of the priorities within Malaysian higher education. Moving forward, there must be a concerted effort to democratize access to education, ensuring that all segments of society, regardless of background, can benefit from quality higher education. Moreover, there should be a greater focus on inclusive curriculum design, integrating social sciences, humanities, and public policy issues that tackle socio-economic disparities and national development challenges. Additionally, universities should strive to foster greater academic independence, free from political influence, to ensure that the educational system remains a space for intellectual diversity and academic freedom.

In conclusion, while Malaysia's academic elites continue to contribute to the growth and development of higher education, there is an urgent need for greater equity, accountability, and inclusivity. By balancing the global aspirations of the country's academic institutions with a stronger focus on addressing local societal needs, Malaysia can foster a higher education system that not only meets international standards but also serves the broader interests of its people. The role of academic elites will remain crucial, but their influence must be tempered with a more holistic approach to higher education—one that recognizes the diverse and dynamic needs of Malaysian society in the 21st century.

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