

Post-AUKU Reforms: Implications for Leadership and Governance Universities in Malaysia
(*Pasca-Reformasi AUKU: Implikasi terhadap Kepimpinan dan Urustadbir Universiti di Malaysia*)

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ABSTRACT

Following the amendment of the Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU), significant changes in Malaysian university leadership and governance have emerged. This paper examines how these reforms have redefined the roles of university leaders and governance structures. By focusing on enhancing institutional autonomy and student empowerment, the amendments have enabled greater flexibility in decision-making and academic pursuits. The study investigates the evolving landscape of university governance post-revision, highlighting the challenges and opportunities faced by leaders in adapting to these changes. Through qualitative research and case studies of several Malaysian universities such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Malaya (UM) and Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). The findings indicate that while the reforms have granted students more autonomy, they have also introduced complexities in balancing student independence with accountability. Effective leadership now requires balancing the promotion of student empowerment and freedom with transparent and accountable governance practices.

Keywords - AUKU reforms, Malaysian universities, leadership, governance, institutional autonomy, student freedom

ABSTRAK

Selepas pindaan Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti (AUKU), perubahan penting dalam kepimpinan universiti dan urustadbir Universiti di Malaysia telah berlaku. Kertas ini mengkaji bagaimana reformasi ini telah menentukan semula peranan pemimpin pelajar di universiti dan struktur urustadbir. Dengan menumpukan kepada peningkatan autonomi institusi dan pemeraksanaan pelajar, pindaan tersebut telah membolehkan lebih banyak fleksibiliti dalam membuat keputusan dan mempertingkatkan kualiti akademik. Kajian ini menyelidik landskap pentadbiran universiti yang berkembang selepas pindaan, menilai cabaran dan peluang yang dihadapi oleh pemimpin pelajar dalam menyesuaikan diri dengan perubahan ini. Melalui penyelidikan kualitatif dan kajian kes beberapa universiti Malaysia seperti Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Malaya (UM), dan Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa reformasi telah memberi lebih banyak autonomi kepada pelajar; ia juga memperkenalkan kompleksiti dalam menyeimbangkan kebebasan pelajar dengan akauntabiliti. Kepimpinan yang berkesan kini memerlukan keseimbangan dalam mempromosikan pemeraksanaan dan kebebasan pelajar dengan amalan pentadbiran yang telus dan bertanggungjawab.

Kata kunci - reformasi AUKU, universiti Malaysia, kepimpinan, pentadbiran, autonomi institusi, kebebasan pelajar

BACKGROUND OF THE AUKU REFORM

In March 2024, the Dewan Rakyat passed the Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Bill 2023 after it was read for the second and third times by YB Dato' Seri Diraja Dr. Zambry Abd Kadir, Minister of Higher Education. A total of 23 members participated in the debate, focusing primarily on topics such as student disciplinary committees, management of student union finances, the tenure of the Student Representative Council elections, and others.

These amendments stem from a series of consultations conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) with public university student leaders since 2021. It represents a progressive step by the Government to invigorate organizational culture and rejuvenate student movements in line with their capacity for self-management and maturity.

The bill encompasses a total of five chapters, incorporating six provisions that include specific details such as Section 15A, which authorizes the Student Representative Council and Student Bodies to solicit funds and receive contributions. Additionally, Section 16B pertains to the transfer of Student Disciplinary Authority within universities. The bill also addresses provisions like Section 48(4) of the First Schedule, which outlines the term of office for the Student Representative Council aligned with the academic calendar, and Section 48(11), which grants the Student Representative Council the authority to manage funds or accounts. Moreover, Section 48(12A) of the First Schedule empowers the Board to establish regulations regarding fundraising under Section 15A. Lastly, Section 49(2) of the First Schedule allows for the application of provisions from Section 48 to other Student Bodies. These provisions collectively shape the framework for governance and operational procedures within educational institutions, emphasizing financial management, disciplinary authority, and regulatory oversight related to student organizations.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has placed a strong emphasis on supporting and nurturing student organizations, aiming to facilitate their growth and impact within university communities. By providing substantial resources, funding opportunities, and administrative backing, MOHE has created an environment where student organizations can flourish. These groups serve as vital platforms for students to coordinate events, advocate for various causes, and actively engage with their communities. Such initiatives not only enhance the vibrancy of campus life but also empower students to take ownership of their educational journey and contribute meaningfully to broader societal issues. The amendment seeks to further enhance student

leadership development within universities, aiming to empower students to emerge as effective leaders who make positive contributions to their communities and future careers. This strategic approach not only enriches the overall educational experience but also equips students with the skills needed to address real-world challenges with confidence and competence, particularly in terms of fostering accountability and responsibility.

Through this legislative initiative, the Student Empowerment Agenda can be significantly advanced, marking a pivotal moment as amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act are proposed to elevate the status and influence of students and scholars within public universities. This amendment underscores a commitment to fostering a supportive environment where students can thrive academically, socially, and professionally, ensuring they are well-prepared to contribute meaningfully to society beyond their university years.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized qualitative methods to explore the detailed insights and viewpoints of student leaders engaged in the amendments to AUKU. This approach was selected to thoroughly examine the reasons, obstacles, and results of student involvement in legislative procedures. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were employed to collect comprehensive and descriptive information directly from student leaders.

Three distinguished universities UKM, UM, and UPSI were selected based on specific criteria highlighting their dedication to fostering student empowerment. These institutions excel in creating environments where students actively participate in university governance, contribute to policy-making processes through robust student councils, mentorship programs, and platforms for student input. This approach encourages students to take ownership of their educational experiences and contribute meaningfully to campus life.

Additionally, these universities are committed to supporting students in managing their finances independently. They offer transparent fee structures such as Student Union or SRC fees, accessible financial aid options, and programs aimed at promoting financial literacy among students. This comprehensive support system helps students navigate financial responsibilities effectively during their academic journey.

Moreover, UKM, UM, and UPSI have established themselves as leaders in fostering

student activism and civic engagement. They actively endorse and support student-led initiatives, facilitate discussions on pertinent social issues, and provide avenues for advocacy and community involvement. This commitment fosters a culture where students feel empowered to initiate positive changes within the university and broader society. These universities' emphasis on student empowerment emphasizes their role not only in academic excellence but also in nurturing socially responsible graduates capable of making significant contributions to their communities and beyond.

The selected case studies employ a research methodology that includes closed-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions. These methods are utilized to gather comprehensive data on students' perceptions, encompassing their attention, expectations, and experiences across different facets. The research design focuses particularly on exploring the direct experiences of student leaders who have been actively involved in advocating for amendments to AUKU, especially in areas concerning university governance.

In addition to quantitative approaches, qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and document analysis are employed. These qualitative methods aim to delve deeper into understanding the challenges encountered by student leaders, the strategies they have employed, and the broader impacts of their leadership on legislative reforms within the academic context. Through this multifaceted approach, the study seeks to provide a nuanced exploration of the dynamics and outcomes of student leadership initiatives in shaping policy and governance frameworks in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the amendment of the Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU), significant transformations in Malaysian university leadership and governance have unfolded. These revisions have fundamentally reshaped the roles of university leaders and the structures that govern them. The amendments were designed to enhance institutional autonomy and empower students, thereby fostering greater flexibility in decision-making processes and academic pursuits within universities (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2022.). The amended AUKU also marks a pivotal shift towards empowering students and increasing their involvement in university governance.

Empowerment has been extensively debated across diverse fields, yet its widespread usage has introduced ambiguity and misunderstanding. According

to Perkins (2010), genuine empowerment is a deliberate and continuous process rooted within local communities. It involves mutual respect, critical reflection, empathy, and active group involvement, allowing individuals to gain increased access to and control over important resources. Perkins defines empowerment as enabling individuals to achieve mastery over their lives, actively participate in democratic community processes, and deeply comprehend their surroundings.

In academia, leadership development and student empowerment are interconnected, aiming to foster influential leaders equipped with knowledge, autonomy, and self-assurance. Consistent with Bandura's (1994) theory of self-efficacy, this review argues that self-efficacy, the belief in one's abilities, forms the foundation of empowerment and leadership. The importance of self-efficacy aligns with the view that effective leaders emerge from empowered Individuals."

Dynamic autonomy is conceptualized as a nuanced understanding of autonomy that adapts and evolves based on changing circumstances and contexts (Smith, 2018). Unlike static autonomy, which implies a fixed or unchanging state of independence or self-governance, dynamic autonomy acknowledges the fluidity and variability of autonomy across different situations (Jones & Brown, 2016). This concept underscores the idea that autonomy is not a singular, stable condition but rather a dynamic process influenced by interpersonal, social, and environmental factors.

THE PRACTICE OF STUDENT AUTONOMY IN UKM, UM & UPSI

Student empowerment through autonomy in financial matters and active participation is essential for fostering a comprehensive educational experience. Providing transparent fee structures, accessible financial aid options, and resources for financial literacy allows students to manage their finances independently (Smith, 2023).

In UKM, the decision-making process for approving funds for each program is entirely under the control of KMUKM, specifically the president and treasurer. The module we utilize includes comprehensive guidelines and governance procedures for fund approval by KMUKM, which will be elaborated upon in this section. KMUKM will emphasize four key points that form the core principles of our module: guidelines ensuring financial approval, establishment of budget details, application evaluation criteria, and the role of the KMUKM Financial Secretariat in the process. (Mariam Masuan, 2023). In 2024, KMUKM embarked on a transformative journey

by introducing pioneering guidelines prioritizing transparency and accountability. This groundbreaking initiative not only empowers students with clear pathways but also catalyzes the creation of impactful programs funded directly by student contributions. This forward-thinking approach marks a pivotal moment in KMUKM's history, fostering a dynamic and inclusive environment where student initiatives drive meaningful change. Furthermore, these guidelines have garnered recognition across universities and were prominently featured in presentations at MPPK (Majlis Perundangan Pelajar Kebangsaan), underscoring their influence and relevance in shaping national student governance practices. This endorsement highlights KMUKM's leadership role in advancing standards of governance and student empowerment across Malaysia's higher education landscape.

Foremost among its roles is representation in the Senate, the highest academic authority within UKM. As a Senate member, KMUKM also influences academic policies, curriculum development, and other strategic initiatives crucial to maintaining academic standards and advancing educational excellence. KMUKM's involvement extends to the Welfare Council, showing its commitment to student well-being and campus life enhancement. By actively participating in this council, KMUKM champions initiatives aimed at fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for students, addressing their welfare needs, and promoting a conducive learning atmosphere. Beyond these autonomies, KMUKM also plays a pivotal part in the main decision-making processes of the university. This involves participation in high-level discussions, deliberations, and decision-making forums where strategic directions, institutional priorities, and resource allocation are determined. Such involvement underscores KMUKM's influence in shaping the future trajectory of UKM, ensuring alignment with its mission and vision.

While in UPSI, similar to KMUKM, the decision-making authority for approving funds for each program rests entirely with the university's leadership, including the president and treasurer. The procedures we employ encompass comprehensive guidelines and governance protocols governing the approval of funds at UPSI, which will be detailed in this section. Moving forward, UPSI has fully authorized financial decisions while considering the welfare, cultural, social, and other pertinent aspects. This approach ensures that funds are allocated in alignment with the university's overarching goals and values, promoting effective resource utilization and enhancing the overall academic and extracurricular experiences for our students and community. UPSI has established governance structures

that involve stakeholders in financial matters, including students and administrative bodies. This participatory approach fosters a culture of shared responsibility and enhances decision-making processes related to financial autonomy.

MPPUPSI's primary responsibility is to represent the collective interests and concerns of UPSI students. Through regular meetings and engagements with university officials, MPPUPSI articulates student feedback on various aspects such as curriculum development, campus facilities, and extracurricular activities. This dialogue ensures that UPSI remains responsive to the evolving needs and expectations of its diverse student community. Moreover, MPPUPSI's involvement extends beyond mere representation to proactive engagement in enhancing student life at UPSI. By collaborating with university departments and faculty members, MPPUPSI advocates for initiatives that promote student welfare, inclusivity, and overall campus well-being. This includes organizing events, workshops, and activities that foster a vibrant and supportive campus environment conducive to holistic student development. In the realm of governance, MPPUPSI contributes to the democratic processes at UPSI by offering student perspectives on important university policies and decisions. Its participation in strategic planning sessions and policy formulation ensures that student interests are integrated into the broader institutional framework, thereby fostering a culture of transparency and accountability within UPSI's governance structure.

In University of Malaya (UM), One of University of Malaya Student Union (UMSU) significant responsibilities is managing an annual budget of approximately RM200, 000 allocated for student programs. This funding enables UMSU to organize diverse activities such as academic events, cultural celebrations, and recreational outings that enrich the university experience and foster a vibrant campus community. By allocating these resources thoughtfully and transparently, UMSU contributes to the holistic development and well-being of UM students.

Moreover, UMSU holds a seat in tender meetings related to essential university services, including bus transportation, cafeteria operations, and other university-related tenders. This involvement ensures that student perspectives are considered in decisions affecting campus amenities and services. By advocating for fair and inclusive procurement processes, UMSU helps uphold standards of transparency and equity within UM's operational framework.

Beyond its role in governance and procurement, UMSU owns assets such as rental properties aimed at providing students with affordable housing options

amidst Kuala Lumpur's high living costs. This initiative underscores UMSU's commitment to addressing student welfare concerns by offering practical solutions to housing challenges. By managing these assets responsibly, UMSU not only supports students financially but also contributes to a supportive and inclusive campus environment.

UMSU's multifaceted contributions extend beyond financial management and procurement to encompass advocacy for student rights and representation. Through active engagement with university administration and faculty, UMSU amplifies student voices on issues ranging from academic policies to campus facilities improvements. This dialogue ensures that UM remains responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of its diverse student body.

THE IMPACT OF STUDENT AUTONOMY TO UNIVERSITIES GOVERNANCE

The empowerment of students through autonomy is an increasingly significant feature of higher education governance. Granting autonomy to student's means involving them directly in decision-making processes related to financial management, academic policies, curriculum development, and campus activities. This participatory approach not only fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among students but also ensures that decisions reflect their actual needs and aspirations (Smith et al., 2020). In doing so, universities create an environment conducive to innovation, creativity, and leadership development. However, as Malaysia considers amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU), it is critical to examine not only the benefits of student autonomy but also the necessary conditions for it to function effectively-particularly the role of integrity and transparency in student governance.

At Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), the delegation of autonomy to the student body is prominently exercised through Kesatuan Mahasiswa UKM (KMUKM). As the principal student representative body, KMUKM is entrusted with responsibilities ranging from managing student welfare to overseeing financial allocations and program development. Notably, UKM delegates approximately RM1.2 million annually to KMUKM, underscoring the administration's confidence in the student union's capacity for financial governance. This significant delegation of responsibility reflects UKM's broader commitment to nurturing a dynamic and student-led campus environment, where students play an active role in shaping university life and policies.

Nonetheless, such autonomy must be matched with a strong commitment to integrity and accountability. The risk of financial misconduct, mismanagement, or non-transparent practices cannot be overlooked, especially when large sums of public or institutional funds are involved. Therefore, it is imperative that student bodies like KMUKM operate within clear ethical and financial guidelines, supported by robust internal audits and transparent reporting practices. Embedding these safeguards not only protects the reputation of the student union but also strengthens the legitimacy of student governance as Malaysia moves towards more liberal interpretations of AUKU. The emphasis on ethical conduct reinforces the argument that student leaders are capable not only of contributing meaningfully to governance but of doing so responsibly and transparently.

The importance of these principles is equally evident at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), where the student representative council has demonstrated financial stewardship through strategic budget allocations. During the 2023/2024 academic term, UPSI's student representatives allocated RM75, 274 to international and mobility programs, RM17, 859.30 to student clubs, and RM34, 157.00 to student development initiatives. These allocations are not merely financial transactions-they represent targeted investments in student growth, global exposure, and campus engagement. International programs provide students with cross-cultural competencies and broaden their academic perspectives, while student clubs serve as platforms for leadership, collaboration, and personal development. Meanwhile, student development initiatives reflect a holistic approach to education, incorporating mental health support, career readiness, and civic engagement.

However, as in the case of UKM, the integrity of these financial decisions is paramount. To maintain trust and institutional legitimacy, universities and student councils must ensure that every ringgit is accounted for and used in alignment with the intended purpose. This necessitates transparent governance structures, regular financial audits, and open communication with the student body. By embedding ethical standards into student-led governance, UPSI models a sustainable approach to autonomy-one that aligns with the proposed AUKU amendments by demonstrating that student representatives can manage both freedom and responsibility effectively.

A similar commitment to inclusive governance is evident at the University of Malaya (UM), where the University of Malaya Student Union (UMSU) has focused on enhancing student welfare through cultural and community-building initiatives. In the academic

year 2023/2024, UMSU allocated funding to support multiracial ethnic celebrations on campus, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting intercultural understanding. These efforts demonstrate how student autonomy can be harnessed to cultivate inclusive and respectful university communities. Moreover, such initiatives are testament to the potential of student leadership in shaping social harmony and cultural awareness within higher education institutions.

Despite the many benefits of student autonomy, the model is not without its challenges. The increasing recognition of students as “customers” within higher education introduces additional pressure on universities to meet student expectations, often amid limited resources. Furthermore, while a customer-centric approach can improve services and responsiveness, it must be carefully balanced against academic standards, institutional integrity, and governance priorities. The success of student autonomy thus depends not only on providing students with a voice but also on equipping them with the tools, training, and ethical frameworks necessary for effective leadership. Furthermore, UMSU has prioritized sponsoring bus services to facilitate students' travel back home during holidays and breaks. This sponsorship alleviates financial burdens on students and ensures safe and convenient transportation options, enhancing overall student well-being and connectivity with their families. Moreover, UMSU has proactively supported students in need through targeted financial assistance programs. Whether facing unexpected financial challenges or requiring support for academic pursuits, UMSU has been instrumental in providing aid and resources to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to thrive academically and personally.

In parallel with its welfare focus, UMSU has emphasized student empowerment through a comprehensive literacy program. This initiative aims to enhance students' academic skills and knowledge through workshops, seminars, and resources focused on literacy development. By investing in literacy, UMSU equips students with essential tools for academic success and lifelong learning, thereby empowering them to reach their full potential.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE IMPLEMENTATION AUKU REFORM

The AUKU has shaped Malaysia's higher education landscape for over fifty years. Initially created to authorize university establishments, it has evolved alongside the country's social, political, and economic changes, significantly impacting university governance

and authority over students and academics.

Reforming the AUKU in Malaysia involves several challenges related to preparing students for governance skills, accountability, and legal issues. To ensure that students are not only academically competent but also equipped with practical governance skills requires a comprehensive curriculum that integrates theory with real-world applications. This includes offering courses on leadership, policy-making, and stakeholder management. Every institution must develop programs and opportunities for students to practice these skills, which requires significant resources and commitment from faculty and administration. Providing genuine opportunities for students to participate in governance processes can be challenging. Institutions must create platforms where students can engage in decision-making processes and contribute to university governance.

Transitioning to decentralized leadership in higher education encounters significant challenges, particularly in addressing deeply ingrained institutional traditions and procedures resistant to change. Convincing stakeholders of the merits of decentralized models such as heightened responsiveness to student needs, streamlined decision-making processes, and enhanced innovation is pivotal. Reference to successful case studies from peer institutions and tangible improvements can substantiate arguments and bolster confidence in the transition. Furthermore, fostering a cultural shift within the institution is imperative. Embracing decentralized leadership necessitates a transformation of organizational norms to prioritize collaboration, initiative, and shared responsibility. Establishing an environment conducive to decentralized decision-making involves promoting open communication, inclusivity, and a willingness to experiment and learn from failures. These cultural adaptations are essential for creating supportive conditions that facilitate the effective implementation of decentralized governance structures.

Creating legislation for granting autonomous status to universities is a complex endeavor that requires careful consideration of various frameworks and approaches adopted by different countries. Countries such as Indonesia and Thailand have established frameworks for autonomous universities, as evidenced by studies like Lao (2019) and Pannen, Wirakartakusumah, and Subhan (2019). These frameworks can serve as valuable references for countries looking to grant universities autonomy while defining the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved.

In Indonesia, for example, the framework for autonomous universities has evolved over the years,

aiming to empower institutions to make strategic decisions independently. This includes decisions related to curriculum development, research priorities, and administrative policies (Lao, 2019). Thailand, on the other hand, has also developed its own approach, which similarly emphasizes giving universities more freedom in governance and financial management, thus fostering innovation and academic excellence (Pannen, Wirakartakusumah, & Subhan, 2019).

When crafting legislation for autonomous student leadership in universities, policymakers must consider several key aspects to ensure its effectiveness and fairness. Firstly, the legal framework should be meticulously designed to clearly define the scope and extent of autonomy granted to students. This involves striking a delicate balance between fostering student freedom and ensuring robust public accountability.

Central to this framework is the need to delineate specific areas of autonomy, such as academic freedom, financial management, recruitment policies, and governance structures. Academic freedom ensures that students have the liberty to pursue intellectual inquiry and expression without undue interference. Financial management guidelines should empower students to manage resources responsibly while being transparent and accountable to stakeholders. Recruitment policies must be fair and inclusive, promoting diversity and meritocracy within student leadership.

Moreover, the legislation should outline mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the performance of autonomous student leadership. This ensures that while students have the freedom to innovate, they remain accountable for their actions and outcomes. Effective monitoring mechanisms can include regular audits, performance reviews, and reporting requirements to regulatory bodies or government agencies.

CONCLUSION

Empowering students with autonomy cultivates a sense

of responsibility, independence, and critical thinking, essential qualities for navigating academic challenges and preparing for future endeavors.

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