

Achieving Financial Autonomy: Income Strategies for the Student Union
(Mencapai Autonomi Kewangan: Strategi Pendapatan untuk Kesatuan Pelajar)

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ABSTRACT

The recent amendments to the University and University College Act 1971 (AUKU) have significantly reshaped the financial landscape for Student Unions (SUs) and Student Representative Councils (MPPs) in Malaysia. This paper explores how these legislative changes have influenced financial autonomy and sustainability among Malaysian SUs by discussing diverse income-generation strategies. A comparative analysis focuses on local SUs, specifically the National University of Malaysia Student Union (KMUKM) and the International Islamic University Malaysia Student Union (IIUMSU), as well as an international model, the Sheffield Students' Union. KMUKM predominantly relies on the fixed Student Activity Fees mandated for all students, providing a stable yet constrained financial foundation. In contrast, IIUMSU, functioning as an NGO, achieves financial independence through a mix of membership fees, sponsorships, and social enterprises, but faces variability in income. The Sheffield SU's model, characterized by substantial university subventions combined with entrepreneurial activities and student fundraising, offers insights into achieving a balanced and diversified revenue stream. The findings underscore the importance of financial diversification, with recommendations for Malaysian SUs to explore alternative income sources, enhance institutional support, and invest in financial management capabilities. By drawing on successful international practices, Malaysian SUs can advance their financial autonomy and effectively support their student communities, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Keywords - AUKU Amendments, Student Unions, Income Generation Strategies, Financial Sustainability

ABSTRAK

Pindaan terkini kepada Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti 1971 (AUKU) telah mengubah secara signifikan landskap kewangan untuk Kesatuan Pelajar (SU) dan Majlis Perwakilan Pelajar (MPP) di Malaysia. Kertas kerja ini membincangkan bagaimana perubahan perundangan ini mempengaruhi autonomi kewangan dan kelestarian SU Malaysia dengan menilai strategi penjanaan pendapatan yang pelbagai. Analisis perbandingan dijalankan dengan memberi tumpuan kepada SU tempatan, khususnya Kesatuan Mahasiswa Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (KMUKM) dan Kesatuan Pelajar Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (KPUIAM), serta model antarabangsa, Kesatuan Pelajar Sheffield. KMUKM bergantung secara utama kepada Yuran Aktiviti Pelajar tetap yang diwajibkan untuk semua pelajar, menyediakan asas kewangan yang stabil tetapi terhad. Sebaliknya, IIUMSU, yang berfungsi sebagai NGO, mencapai kebebasan kewangan melalui gabungan yuran keahlian, penajaan, dan perusahaan sosial, tetapi menghadapi turun naik pendapatan. Model SU Sheffield, yang dicirikan oleh subsidi universiti yang besar digabungkan dengan aktiviti keusahawanan dan pengumpulan dana pelajar, menawarkan panduan dalam mencapai aliran pendapatan yang seimbang dan pelbagai. Penemuan ini menekankan kepentingan pemdiversifikasian kewangan, dengan cadangan untuk SU Malaysia agar meneroka sumber pendapatan alternatif, meningkatkan sokongan institusi, dan melabur dalam keupayaan pengurusan kewangan. Dengan memanfaatkan amalan antarabangsa yang berjaya, SU Malaysia dapat meningkatkan autonomi kewangan mereka dan menyokong komuniti pelajar mereka dengan lebih baik, memastikan kelestarian jangka panjang.

Kata kunci - Pindaan AUKU, Kesatuan Pelajar, Strategi Penjanaan Pendapatan, Kelestarian Kewangan

INTRODUCTION

The amendments to the University and University College Act 1971 (AUKU) have significantly transformed the financial landscape for all Student Unions (SUs) and Student Representative Councils (commonly known as Majlis Perwakilan Pelajar or MPPs). These changes have created opportunities for increased financial independence and sustainability.

Historically, Malaysian SUs have played a pivotal role in advocating for student and national issues, and even international matters (Khairin Sharep, 2019). In the early 1970s, student activism peaked with notable movements at institutions such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Malaya (UM), particularly during events like the Baling protests of 1974 (Zulkifli Hasan, 2021). The introduction of AUKU in 1971, followed by its amendments in 1975, including Sections 15 and 16, imposed restrictions on student political involvement and limited financial autonomy. These legislative changes marked a decline in the scope and impact of student activism, confining it due to legal and governmental constraints, including prohibitions on external affiliations and self-managed finances (Zulkifli Hasan, 2021).

In recent years, however, a financial revolution has begun within Malaysian SUs. The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has initiated steps to grant full financial autonomy to SUs and MPPs, enabling them to manage and distribute Student Activity Fees more effectively. These fees, collected from all undergraduate students at Malaysian public universities, provide a crucial funding base. MoHE's engagement sessions with SUs and MPPs have facilitated the transition towards greater autonomy. The National University of Malaysia Student Union (KMUKM) achieved full autonomy in 2022 (Mohd Suzeren Md Jamil, 2023), followed by other MPPs such as the Student Representative Councils of Sultan Idris Education University (MPPUPSI) and University Malaysia Sabah (MPPUMS). This shift has empowered these student bodies to organize and fund a wide range of activities both on and off campus.

On March 18, 2024, further amendments to AUKU, specifically Section 15A and subsections 48(11) and 48(12A) of the First Schedule, were enacted. These amendments significantly enhance financial autonomy by allowing SUs and MPPs to independently manage and collect funds. This pivotal change is part of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education's (MoHE) broader objective to empower SUs, ensuring they can generate and manage their own revenue streams.

This paper explores the financial strategies and

models adopted by SUs to achieve sustainability and independence. By examining the innovative income-generation methods of multiple SUs, both locally and internationally, this study aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for enhancing financial sustainability. Local universities included in this study are KMUKM and the International Islamic University Malaysia Student Union (IIUMSU). Internationally, various influential SUs, including European Student Unions, are analysed. This comparative analysis highlights the benefits and challenges associated with different financial strategies.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite recent amendments to AUKU granting enhanced financial autonomy, SUs and MPPs face challenges in achieving financial sustainability and independence. Historically, these organizations have relied heavily on Student Activity Fees, which constrains their financial capabilities. There is a pressing need to explore alternative income-generation methods and social enterprise models to establish a stable and independent financial foundation.

OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this paper is to conduct a comparative study of income-generation methods employed by various local and international SUs. This study aims to:

- i. identify and discuss effective income-generation strategies utilized by SUs that contribute to their financial sustainability and independence.
- ii. develop recommendations for Malaysian SUs to enhance financial autonomy and sustainability through diversified income sources.

This study aligns with the MoHE's goal of empowering SUs and MPPs to generate more revenue. By fostering financial independence and sustainability, university student clubs and associations can better support their diverse initiatives, reflecting the spirit of student empowerment, leadership development, and the sustainable growth of student-led activities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative analysis to evaluate

income-generation strategies and financial sustainability among SUs from diverse contexts. The research process involves gathering information through multiple sources, including annual reports of the SUs, interviews with current SU members responsible for financial management, and an examination of open-source information. These methods ensure a comprehensive understanding of the financial practices and challenges faced by the selected SUs. This thorough examination provides a basis for comparing different approaches and drawing actionable conclusions to improve financial sustainability for Malaysian SUs and MPPs.

INCOME GENERATION STRATEGIES COMPARISON

This study examines the income-generation methods employed by local SUs, as well as international SUs. The goal is to understand their approaches to achieving financial sustainability and autonomy. Each SU employs distinct strategies tailored to its unique operational context and funding environment.

In the local context, KMUKM serves as a leading example for other Malaysian SUs and MPPs. Like most MPPs, KMUKM primarily depends on the Student Activity Fees, which are included in the university fees to support student activities. KMUKM's status as the first student-led body given full autonomy over these fees makes it a suitable model for study. IIUMSU is chosen for its unique status as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), separate from the university, and not authorized to manage the mandatory Student Activity Fees. Instead, IIUMSU relies on diverse income sources, including donations, sponsorships, and social enterprises, to maintain financial independence.

On the international front, the Sheffield Students' Union is analysed due to its exemplary performance, including a 95% student satisfaction rate based on the National Student Survey (NSS). The Sheffield SU's success is partly attributed to the extensive experience in financial management found among European students' unions, supported by their long-standing history of autonomy.

By examining these methods, we aim to highlight effective practices and innovative approaches that contribute to financial stability and independence. This comparative analysis provides insights into how different SUs leverage their resources, manage income sources, and navigate financial challenges. The lessons learned from these case studies can enhance financial practices in student organizations, fostering sustainability and independence.

The National University of Malaysia Student Union (KMUKM)

Through the Student Financial Fund, famously known as the TKP23 fund by the UKM students, KMUKM has developed a robust financial model with two main sources of income: fixed and variable sources based on external sponsorships.

The fixed income for KMUKM is derived from the Student Activity Fee, which is mandatory for every UKM undergraduate student (Mariam Masuan et al., 2024). By the 2022/2023 session, the accumulated fund exceeded one million Ringgit Malaysia. KMUKM effectively and equitably utilized these funds, approving allocations amounting to RM 1,386,614.26 for 730 different student activities. The contribution to the Student Activity Fund is crucial in encouraging student participation in programs, thereby enhancing the overall quality of UKM students.

KMUKM is also actively seeking external sponsorships to strengthen its financial resources. This effort is vital in supporting both student activities and KMUKM's initiatives. One key example is the Karnival Konvokesyen (KARKON), a major event fully managed by KMUKM members. The KARKON event in 2023 secured sponsorships amounting to RM 200,000 from various sources such as government agencies and private companies.

In addition to these efforts, KMUKM has received substantial support through food aid contributions. In 2024, KMUKM received food aid contributions from various sources, such as NGOs, local parliament offices, and Members of Parliament. Over 500 food packs have been distributed to students as of July 2024, showcasing the community's support for student welfare.

Furthermore, KMUKM engages in social enterprises to diversify its income. The Program of Post MyMotor is a notable initiative where KMUKM earns commissions for each service used through the Uni Parcel Station, offering discounts to students. This program not only provides a useful service to students but also generates additional revenue for the SU.

KMUKM's comprehensive approach to financial management ensures a diversified income stream, which is essential for maintaining financial sustainability and supporting student-led initiatives. By leveraging fixed contributions from the mandatory Student Activity Fee, actively seeking external sponsorships, and engaging in social enterprises, KMUKM effectively enhances its financial stability and independence. This approach not only secures essential funds but also supports the welfare and development

of UKM students, aligning with KMUKM's motto, "Kesatuan untuk Semua" (Union for All). Through these practices, KMUKM exemplifies how innovative financial strategies can empower student organizations to achieve long-term success.

International Islamic University of Malaysia Student Union (IIUMSU)

Based on the financial statements of the IIUMSU for the financial year ended 31 December 2023 (PSYAP & Co. Plt., 2024), it is evident that IIUMSU has a diverse range of income sources. This diversity in revenue streams not only ensures financial stability but also enhances the union's ability to fund various student activities and initiatives.

IIUMSU stands out as the only SU or MPP from a Malaysian university that is registered as an NGO. This unique status means that IIUMSU does not receive a fixed source of income, such as the Student Activity Fee that supports KMUKM. Instead, IIUMSU is entirely financially independent, relying on various methods to generate its revenue. Specifically, IIUMSU engages its community through membership offers, targeted fundraising, strategic partnerships, and social enterprise activities. This independence requires a proactive approach to income generation to ensure the union's financial health and sustainability.

The union's revenue for the year amounted to RM 16,705, reflecting an increase from RM 9,192 in the previous year (PSYAP & Co. Plt., 2024). This revenue is likely generated from membership fees, general revenue, and miscellaneous activities within the university. Sponsorships represent a significant portion of IIUMSU's income, totalling RM 47,431 in 2023. Although this is a decrease from RM 71,000 in 2022, it still highlights the union's ability to attract external funding from various sponsors to support their programs and events.

Income from events also contributes to the union's revenue, with RM 5,353 generated in 2023 compared to RM 14,168 in 2022 (PSYAP & Co. Plt., 2024). This category includes revenue from ticket sales, participation fees, and other event-related income. While no donations were recorded in 2023, the previous year saw a contribution of RM 14,405. Donations to IIUMSU typically come from the public, including students, lecturers, and alumni, reflecting a broad base of support from the university community.

A notable aspect of IIUMSU's income generation is its involvement in social enterprise activities. For example, IIUMSU has a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Lyftme, a transportation app

tailored for university campuses in Malaysia. Through this partnership, IIUMSU earns a 5% commission on transactions made via the app. This not only provides a steady income stream but also supports the university community by offering a valuable service.

The financial diversity of IIUMSU underscores its proactive approach in seeking various funding sources, ranging from traditional methods like sponsorships and donations to innovative social enterprises. This strategy not only enhances financial sustainability but also aligns with broader goals of supporting student welfare and fostering a vibrant campus environment.

By leveraging these diverse income sources, IIUMSU can continue to fund a wide range of activities, from administrative and welfare expenses to major events and election costs. This financial robustness ensures that the union can effectively support its members and uphold its commitments to the student body, even amid fluctuating financial conditions. IIUMSU's ability to operate independently, without reliance on fixed income from the university, exemplifies a model of financial self-sufficiency that can be instructive for other SUs in Malaysia and beyond.

International Students' Union

International SUs employ a variety of methods to generate income, which are essential for maintaining their operations and supporting a diverse array of student activities. These income generation methods can be broadly categorized into internal and external funding sources.

Internal funding typically consists of membership fees paid by students who wish to participate in union activities. For example, in Finland, SUs such as the Hämeen Ammattikorkeakoulun Opiskelijakunta (HAMKO) receive a portion of their funding from fixed financial aid provided by their universities, which covers approximately 35% of their annual income. The remainder of their income is generated through membership fees and revenue from student-led events like Loppurysäys and Alkupamaus, which contribute around 50% of their total income (Lauri Säilä, 2015). However, membership fees alone are often insufficient to cover the total annual expenses of SUs. Other internal funding sources may include donations from local unions or councils and commercial activities, such as selling services and publications, provided there are no legal restrictions. For instance, in Hong Kong, SUs manage their office buildings, cooperative units, and business enterprises, generating substantial income through these commercial ventures (Xiangli Ou

et al., 2017).

External funding encompasses a broader range of sources and is essential for covering the financial gaps left by internal funding. One significant source of external funding is institutional grants, which are often provided by state authorities or grant-giving organizations. In countries where the government formally recognizes a national SU, such as the Slovenian Student Union (SSU) or Croatian Student Council (CSC), these unions receive annual institutional grants to cover administrative costs and often have offices and other facilities provided by the state (Viorel Proteasa et al., 2009). Another common method of external funding is project-based grants. Many SUs secure additional funds through competitive bidding for these grants, which are awarded by various organizations, including EU institutions, national trusts, and governmental agencies (Viorel Proteasa et al., 2009).

Donations and sponsorships from the business sector also play a crucial role in the financial stability of SUs. Many unions possess websites, bulletins, and other marketing tools that can be offered to companies for advertising in exchange for financial support. Fundraising activities, often involving special events or initiatives, are another significant source of income. These activities can help attract donations and sponsorships, thereby enhancing the financial resources of SUs (Viorel Proteasa et al., 2009). Additionally, in-kind donations, which include non-monetary contributions such as computers, office equipment, and other resources, can be essential for the operations of SUs. Companies might donate used equipment in exchange for promotional opportunities among students and universities (Viorel Proteasa et al., 2009).

The Sheffield Students' Union employs a multifaceted approach to income generation. Approximately 75% of the SU's income comes from a subvention grant provided by the University of Sheffield, which funds core operations and charitable activities. Additionally, the SU engages in primary purpose trading by operating retail outlets, cafes, and event spaces. The surpluses generated from these activities are reinvested into the SU's programs and services. The SU also supports student-led fundraising through the Sheffield Raising and Giving (RAG) Committee, which raised over £100,000 in the 2022-23 financial year for various charities and projects. Donations and sponsorships from external organizations and alumni further enhance the SU's offerings and support specific initiatives (Azets Audit Services Limited, 2023).

Overall, the financial strategies of international SUs highlight the importance of diversifying income streams. By combining internal and external funding

sources, these unions can achieve financial stability, support a wide range of activities, and effectively represent and support their members.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of income-generation methods employed by different SUs reveals significant insights into achieving financial sustainability and autonomy. The diverse strategies observed across local and international contexts highlight both the opportunities and challenges faced by SUs in their financial endeavours.

As with most Malaysian student-government-elected bodies, KMUKM's model is largely dependent on the Student Activity Fees, a fixed source of income mandated for all students. This approach provides a stable, albeit constrained, financial foundation. In contrast, IIUMSU, as an NGO, operates independently from university-mandated funds and relies on a mix of membership fees, sponsorships, and social enterprise initiatives. This model demonstrates a higher degree of financial self-sufficiency but comes with its own set of challenges, such as the need for continuous fundraising efforts and the potential variability in income.

The international perspective, particularly from the Sheffield SU, offers a compelling example of a successful financial model. By combining substantial university subventions with income from commercial activities and extensive student fundraising, the Sheffield SU achieves a balanced and diversified revenue stream. This model highlights the effectiveness of integrating institutional support with entrepreneurial ventures and student-led initiatives.

A key takeaway from this comparative analysis is the importance of diversification in income sources. Both KMUKM and IIUMSU face challenges related to financial sustainability. KMUKM's reliance on Student Activity Fees can limit its ability to fund diverse activities, while IIUMSU's dependence on external sources necessitates continuous engagement with sponsors and donors. The international examples underscore the benefits of a mixed-income approach, where substantial institutional support is complemented by entrepreneurial activities and robust fundraising.

In the post-AUKU context, both universities and the government play crucial roles in supporting SUs. Universities can enhance their support by facilitating access to external funding opportunities and providing infrastructure for revenue-generating activities. Government initiatives should focus on creating a conducive regulatory environment that

allows SUs to innovate in their financial strategies while offering guidance and support in securing alternative funding sources. The lessons from international SUs suggest that a collaborative approach involving both institutional and governmental support can significantly enhance the financial stability and autonomy of SUs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance financial autonomy and sustainability for Malaysian SUs and MPPs, a multifaceted approach is essential, drawing on best practices from both local and international contexts. Key recommendations for SUs and MPPs include diversifying income sources, enhancing institutional support, and developing organizational capabilities. Additionally, the government and universities play crucial roles in supporting these efforts and should adopt specific measures based on successful international models.

Firstly, Malaysian SUs and MPPs should focus on diversifying their income sources. While mandatory Student Activity Fees provide a stable funding base, they should be maximized through transparent and equitable allocation of funds. This would ensure optimal utilization for a wide range of student activities and initiatives. SUs and MPPs should actively seek external sponsorships from government agencies, private companies, and non-governmental organizations. Developing strategic partnerships that align with the union's mission can attract sponsors and secure long-term financial support.

Engaging in social enterprises presents another significant opportunity for income generation. SUs and MPPs can identify opportunities that cater to the needs of the student community, leveraging existing resources to create additional revenue streams. For example, initiatives similar to IIUMSU's partnership with Lyftme could provide valuable services while generating income. Organizing revenue-generating events, such as KMUKM's KARKON, can also be a substantial source of funding. Effective planning and marketing of such events can maximize attendance and financial returns.

Utilizing digital platforms for fundraising is another innovative approach. Digital campaigns can engage students, alumni, and the broader community, securing diverse funding sources through online donations and crowdfunding initiatives. This method can reach a wider audience and increase financial support for the union's projects and activities (Hanudin Amin, 2022).

To support these efforts, universities should

strengthen their relationships with SUs. Building strong partnerships can help secure increased financial backing and access to university resources. For instance, universities could provide financial autonomy agreements, similar to the subvention grants provided by the University of Sheffield. These agreements would ensure a stable funding base while allowing SUs to independently manage and allocate funds.

Investing in financial management training for union members is crucial for effectively managing diverse income sources and ensuring financial sustainability. Universities can support this by offering capacity-building programs in financial management, entrepreneurship, and fundraising. Developing these skills within the union's leadership will enhance their ability to implement innovative financial strategies.

Effective communication and engagement strategies are also vital. Strengthening communication channels, such as social media, newsletters, and campus events, will keep students informed and involved in the union's initiatives. Engaged and supportive members are more likely to contribute to the union's financial goals.

The government also has a pivotal role in supporting the financial autonomy of SUs and MPPs. Legislative frameworks, like the amendments to the AUKU, should continue evolving to provide greater autonomy and flexibility for SUs. The government can facilitate this by offering grants and financial incentives for SUs that demonstrate innovative and sustainable financial practices. Additionally, creating a supportive regulatory environment that encourages external sponsorships and partnerships can significantly enhance the financial capabilities of SUs.

Drawing on international models, the government and universities can learn from the example of SUs in Europe, where institutional grants and support for social enterprises are common. Providing similar grants and encouraging entrepreneurial activities within Malaysian SUs can help build a robust financial foundation. For instance, government-funded grants for project-based initiatives, similar to those available through EU institutions, can provide essential support for student-led projects and events.

By adopting these recommendations, Malaysian SUs and MPPs can enhance their financial autonomy, support a wide range of student activities, and effectively represent and support their members. This financial independence aligns with the broader goals of student empowerment, leadership development, and sustainable growth, ensuring that SUs can continue to thrive and make a positive impact on their communities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evolution of financial autonomy for SUs in Malaysia, driven by recent amendments to AUKU, presents both opportunities and challenges. The comparative analysis of income generation methods employed by local and international SUs reveals the critical role of financial diversification in achieving sustainability. KMUKM's reliance on Student Activity Fees offers stability but limits flexibility, while IIUMSU's NGO model demonstrates self-sufficiency through diverse income streams, albeit with income variability. The Sheffield SU's balanced approach, integrating university subventions with entrepreneurial activities, provides a robust model for emulation.

However, this study has limitations that need consideration. The analysis focuses on only three SUs, which may not fully represent the diverse financial contexts of Malaysian and international SUs. Limited access to detailed financial data, particularly for IIUMSU's sponsorship agreements, constrained the depth of quantitative comparisons. Additionally, reliance on interviews with SU members may introduce bias, as self-reported data may not fully capture financial challenges. Future research could address these gaps through longitudinal studies tracking SU financial performance post-AUKU amendments, broader comparative analyses including private university SUs, and quantitative modelling of income diversification impacts. Exploring the impact of financial literacy training for SU leaders could further enhance their capacity to manage diverse revenue streams effectively, building on successful global student governance models.

For Malaysian SUs to achieve greater financial stability, a supportive environment involving universities, government, the corporate sector, and the community is essential. By drawing on successful international models and adapting them to the local context, Malaysian SUs can enhance their financial autonomy and continue to effectively support their student communities, ensuring long-term sustainability.

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