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RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE: LEADERSHIP, ACADEMIC INTEGRITY, AND POLICY CHALLENGES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the critical function of academic experience, academic expertise, and knowledge of quality assurance agencies such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) for vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors. The increasing number of non-academics appointed to senior management positions in private universities has fostered a series of universal issues because of a declining governance foundation, academic integrity, and the further marketisation of education. Evidence from compliance reports, public inquiries, and policy review has confirmed that the focus on profit over pedagogy is having a detrimental impact, resulting in decreased quality of teaching, the failure of quality assurance to be effective, and decreased quality of graduates. These failures of educational leadership have immediate ramifications and heightened implications over the short and long term for decreased institutional reputation, employment opportunities for potential graduates, and destruction of public confidence in the higher education system. Educational technology is often an investment wasted by leaders who lack or do not have an academic background or knowledge, which disrupts what could be a pedagogical transformation, turning life into extensive marketing, which means there is less chance for education. Due to the ongoing promotion of this pattern and without any tighter regulation and intervention, Malaysia may end up with a two-tier structure to its education, which separates the academically managed institutions from "credential factories" to profit from students. This paper also offers recommendations for a restructuring of leadership positions, academic governance, and innovating a transparent and sustainable governance system to clarify the underlying purposes of higher education, as well as its actual existence, to protect and transfer knowledge to develop and advance society. This study adopts a policy-oriented narrative review approach, synthesising secondary sources to provide a conceptual analysis of higher education governance.

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Keyword:

Academic Governance, Higher Education Leadership, Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Private Universities, Quality Assurance

Introduction

The purpose of universities is to create, maintain and share knowledge, an enduring mission that triumphs generations. When the authentic purpose of universities was forsaken or overlooked, the damage done or repercussion is deemed total and lasting (Engwall, 2020). It wreaks and undermines the intellectual and moral foundations of higher education (Engwall, 2020). Recently, various private universities have been undergoing a gradual but distinct trend in their leadership. Senior leaders, including vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, and deans, are increasingly individuals from managerial or corporate backgrounds with minimal (or no) sustained academic experience (Heydari & Keshmiri, 2024). These kinds of appointments might improve certain important metrics in the short-term (e.g., financial or operational efficiency), but often not without a loss of academic depth, intellectual integrity, and institutional credibility over the long term (Heydari & Keshmiri, 2024). Hence, the motivation underlying this paper is to explain why leadership with academic credibility is not a desired characteristic but rather a "must-have" to uphold the main purpose of higher education in any context or setting.

Further, this paper is intended to bring attention to the perpetual administrative and strategic mistakes that happen in private institutions managed by non-academics, while addressing their longitudinal impacts on institutions, the sector and future generations. The authors are compelled to raise this topic because the impacts extend beyond the campus walls and influence the national quality of higher education, workforce readiness, and societal advancement, as well as the unmanageable consequences that are frequently placed on the shoulders of the academicians. Moreover, the impetus for raising this topic is driven by the expanding gap in

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academic quality between institutions spearheaded by scholars and those managed primarily as business/corporate organisations.

Nevertheless, it is pivotal to emphasise that this paper is not suggesting that managerial efficiency is wrong, rather exposing that the absence of academic literacy in leadership can distort educational values, undermine academic culture and, ultimately, risk equitable learning outcomes as coined by previous scholars (e.g., Irlina et al., 2024; Nair et al., 2024). Through this paper, the authors also hope to amplify the voices of researchers, scholars, and other stakeholders (e.g., Engwall, 2020; Irlina et al., 2024; Nair et al., 2024; Tan, 2025) who have consistently advocated for academic integrity. The contributions of these individuals in support of structures such as the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), the Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA) and the Code of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA) should not be forgotten or neglected, as these structures comprise the intellectual architecture of quality assurance in Malaysia's higher education system.

This paper sets out a summary of academic literature which is focused on policy development. It does this by integrating information from government legislation, rules and documents and academic sources to provide information about how we govern universities. This allows us to determine patterns in the way things are done at universities, identify issues that may be relevant to developing policies and provide well-informed recommendations for making changes. In addition to using the literature to support the analysis, two other theoretical frameworks will be used, namely, academic capitalism and institutional theory, to provide an analytical base. Academic Capitalism deals with how market-based behaviours such as generating revenues, commodifying students, and using an increasingly managerial approach to operate universities, are changing the way universities do their work. Institutional theory looks at how systems of governance, legislation, and quality assurance are used to give institutions the legitimacy and accountability they require to operate. When we combine the two theoretical frameworks we will see how market pressures and institutional safeguards work in conjunction with each other and create conflicting pressures, resulting in a negative impact on both academic integrity and educational quality.

Besides, this paper aims to investigate how different types of leadership can either optimise or waste technological investment within institutions of higher education. Needless to say, technology can contribute to the improvement of teaching, learning and institutional governance. However, it's worth is dependent upon the academic knowledge that informs its implementation (Fernandez et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2023). Leadership that sees technology only as a means of cost-cutting or marketing usually does not fully appreciate the true pedagogical value of technology (Graham et al., 2023; Siong & Alias, 2024). Therefore, this paper will discuss how governing situations will have an impact on outcomes such as academic quality, excellence in research, and public trust, using a range of recent policy documents and institutional reports, and taking as evidence the recent audits by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2024) and Penang Institute (Tan, 2025). The discussion will conclude with a series of practical recommendations for policymakers and leaders in higher education, advocating for a return to a model of leadership that facilitates the work of academics and promotes responsible innovation. In doing so, it is hoped that this paper could re-establish and become the basis to strongly support, concretely rationalise and justify that education is indeed not a conventional business and should not be treated as a conventional business, irrespective of context. Education must be treated and perceived as a public mission, which can only be successful if it operates under the administration of leadership that privileges

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and recognises the work of the scholar, the ethical role of the educator, and the collective responsibility of undertaking humanity's knowledge in common with one another.

Research Background - Education Is Not a Conventional Business

Education has never been straightforwardly produced and bought in the same way as a loaf of bread or a smartphone. Education is a "unique yet pure enterprise" at heart, mainly to produce, curate and disseminate intellectual goods such as scholarship, curricula, standards of assessment, academic expert labour, as well as research and teaching (Marginson & Yang, 2024). These goods are unique because their benefits accrue not solely to an individual owner but are dispersed across people and time, often varying in quantity and quality. Most importantly, a university's most valuable outputs are not quarterly profits but its capability in producing highly competent graduates, research impact, civic knowledge and social mobility (Wu & Chang, 2024). These valuable outputs are precisely the public goods justifying the existence of educational, national quality frameworks and accreditation bodies, aiming to regulate higher institutions' standards that extend well beyond viability and survival. In Malaysia, for example, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) (first published in 2007 and then fully implemented in the next decade) was created to serve as qualification classifications and a national benchmark for quality assurance standards to ensure or protect learning outcomes and comparability (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2024).

Nevertheless, in recent years, the higher education governance and funding landscape has shifted, prompting a market-style mechanism (Li & Liu, 2025). Starting from the 1990s, many countries reported having shifted to neoliberal policies and began implementing market-driven policies. This can be seen through the major transition from direct public funding to private provision, overlapping agreements in which institutions develop offshore campuses, and high encouragement of tuition-dependent revenue models (Wu & Chang, 2024). For example, in the UK, the major shift happened with a set of reforms resulting in the post-Browne Review settlement with the introduction of high standardised fees for all students, reduced direct teaching grants, income-contingent loans, and positioning students more as "consumers" with the privilege to choose institutions and courses (Marginson & Yang, 2023; Reynolds, 2022).

This policy shift has turned students into fee-paying consumers, with fees acting as signals of quality, and participants in a partial market, creating a new facet of competition for institutions to recruit, retain students, and/or secure funding (Wu & Chang, 2024). Other aspects of the world, such as Southeast Asia, have also been subjects of similar liberalisation fashions and policy intervention models (UNESCO, 2024). Since the 1900s, the private higher institution sector has expanded rapidly in many Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, affecting the complexities of the private higher education ecology and creating many pressures since enrolment is treated as a revenue generator instead of educational relationships (Chin et al., 2024; Kumaran & Idris, 2025; Tan, 2025).

When higher education institutions begin to behave in ways that are associated with typical commercial organisations, they often follow a familiar path of commercial behaviour. Examples of this behaviour include inculcating the mindset of "student is customer" approach, hence "student or customer is always right". Since student is treated as customer and their enrolment is very important for revenue generation, recruitment and marketing are often aggressive (Howard et al., 2022). Most private universities are now purported to collaborate with international agencies to enhance students' enrolment or appropriately addressed as sales

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nowadays, especially in this neoliberal environment (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021). The other signs of this commercialising shift are through pricing approach that is in favour of expensive programmes, cross-subsidisation between low- and high-cost disciplines, and a drive towards maximising income from short courses, professional programmes (often targeting the postgraduate) and international students (Fathana et al., 2024; Tan, 2025; Xu, 2025).

Institutions are also increasingly utilising corporate managerial approaches such as appointing chief executives with corporate backgrounds, KPI dashboards that reduce academic practice to metrics, and outsourcing of services (Sheikh et al., 2022). Despite the immediate benefit being clear (e.g., predictable income from student tuition fees, investor interest or financial sustainability), these processes can also distort educational or academic priorities. This is, for instance, initiating and subsidising programmes or activities that produce more income, thus compromising those that are genuinely academically or socially necessary (Uysal & Pesteli, 2022; Tan, 2025). This commercialising shift has appeared in several contexts, including the fiscal pressures facing UK universities that are now reported to depend largely on international postgraduates paying the highest possible fees to avert financial failure ("English universities over reliant on overseas students' fees, report warns", 2022; Jack, 2024).

The for-profit educational model has the clearest warning examples of treating education like an ordinary business can eventually fail students and societies (Ramaditya et al., 2022). Numerous high-profile cases, like investigations and settlements against several large for-profit providers in the United States arising from accusations of deceptive recruitment and advertising, have demonstrated how "recruitment emphasising on revenue agendas" can influence institutions to lose their integrity by prioritising enrolment more than learning outcomes, student support and well-being as well as graduate employability (Federal Trade Commission, 2023). Regulatory action, loan forgiveness, and considerable settlements have followed in cases where marketing intentionally or unintentionally misrepresented direct pathways to jobs or falsely advertised or overclaimed employer partnerships (Federal Trade Commission, 2023; Mittal & Jung, 2024). Those examples clearly illustrated that when an institution's business model merely focused on unsustainable cash flows from vulnerable and/or misinformed applicants, a public mission of higher education becomes threatened or put at real risk.

Other than clear for-profit providers, most public and private universities use hybrid business models that are worth examining in detail. A frequently repeated model is: (1) diversify income through international student enrolments, and fee-paying masters programmes; (2) commercialise research through partnerships, spin-outs, and intellectual properties strategies; (3) cut costs through casual/adjunct staffing, and (4) pursue league-table-like metrics that do not contribute to any learning improvements (e.g., through short courses for immediate enrolment and profit boost) (Fathana et al., 2024; Tan, 2025; Xu, 2025). Each of these courses of action contains costs and trade-offs. For example, over-reliance on international fees makes institutions vulnerable to external shocks and potential changes to curriculum decisions. Commercialisation of academic research could be positive as it indirectly encourages researchers to engage in research activities for innovation and new findings but may bias agendas towards the interests of funders.

Besides, casualisation of academic labour undermines staff continuity and supervision quality, concerning the well-being of the students, too. Many postgraduate students have voiced out their frustrations when they must be supervised by different supervisors or must encounter

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supervisor changes multiple times. Such occurrences have tolled their motivation level, subsequently leading to many students "missing in action" or discontinuing their studies (Tan, 2025). The relentless pursuit of rankings can incentivise cosmetic investment rather than deep and meaningful investment to elevate learning quality. The expansion of the private higher education sector in Malaysia has resulted in many small providers dependent on market competition. As a result, any advantages in resource allocation and/or ownership were spread unjustly, thus raising further barriers to even maintaining quality across the sector (Foo et al., 2023; Salam & Ponnampalam, 2023).

Critique of these business models (e.g., the market-style mechanism) suggests alternative priorities and guardrails. If higher education is to continue to serve primarily as a public good, governance must be committed to maintaining academic literacy at the level of senior leadership so that quality frameworks operate in pure intention, complemented with integrity and morality, not just on documentation (Chear & Muhammad, 2024). Regulatory bodies like the MQA must be both funded and supported to prevent a race to the bottom (compromising quality and standards to cut costs or attract more students), and funders must structure funding models in a way that reduces perverse incentives to make short-term income as the primary system of measurement of success. Equity of access, contribution to civil society and graduate outcomes must also be included in success measures instead of revenue-centred alone (Chear & Muhammad, 2024; Gopal Nair et al., 2024; Tan, 2025). Practically, that means rejecting the reduction of students to customers, supporting permanent academic staff and supervision, and establishing business models that see revenue as a means to sustain the academic mission and not the primary objective. Universities can only refuse to reform into a conventional business model whose logic is incompatible with the deeper objectives of scholarship and social mobility by re-establishing its educational purpose that is fundamentally for a different temporal horizon and public benefit.

Problem Statement

Private higher education around the world is reported to encountering a subtle but risky transition. This is because, institutions that once had the privilege of serving as primarily custodians of learning are now far too often act like business entities focused on their growth-driven businesses, privileging market share and short-term revenue instead of striving for the slow and demanding scholarly formation and students' development (Tan, 2025). The transition is not just rhetorical since in Malaysia, for example, private education providers accounted for a great deal of students' enrolment in higher education. In 2023, 558,692 students (about 44.8% of all students in higher education) were in private institutions, a scale that makes the strategies these providers choose a matter of national significance (Tan, 2025; Voon, 2025). When business becomes more a priority than academic at that scale, the implications quickly extend beyond single campuses and into the labour market, citizenship civic life, as well as national development.

A clear indication of the issue is how institutions are working to cut costs and create inflate short-term performance measures. Many for-profit universities depend on the use of adjunct or casual staff because they save money on staff costs, but this harms continuity and stability in leadership, curriculum development, and research mentorship (activities require commitment from staff within the institution) (Alsunaydi, 2020). There is additional evidence of practice that diminishes academic rigour like easier assessments, grade inflation, and expansive curricula that focus on pass rates and retention rather than advancing depth of learning (Dyer, 2023; Yeritsyan et. al., 2022). Such initiative undeniably can keep cash flowing for one semester or two, but the core product provided by universities (e.g., durable competence and critical judgment in graduates) is compromised. These are not false issues since systematic devaluing of assessment standards and staffing practices has been highlighted in reviews and across the sector as a major contributor to quality erosion (Dyer, 2023).

Another widespread distortion is the "student-as-customer" mindset. When leadership sees enrolments as transactions to retain participation using creative marketing, agent networks, or programmes designed primarily to sell versus teach, institutions begin to falsely and unjustly equate satisfaction scores with educational success (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Priestley, 2023). Quality-assurance systems can be minimised to paper exercises, satisfied with checked compliance boxes rather than actual self-improvement. Consequently, transactional quality assurance such as audits and accreditation becomes episodic exercises, suffice to achieve passing inspections rather a continuous process of reflective improvement and enhancement (Lewicka, 2022; Zalec, 2013). The result is also predictable where public confidence in qualifications will diminish, and mission taken upon the educators, which is preparing graduates for the world of work readiness will be seen as ambivalence, and unfairly doubted for their level of competencies by parents and employers (Lewicka, 2022). From an institutional theory perspective, this reflects a decoupling between formal compliance and actual practice, where regulatory processes become symbolic rather than substantive.

The global record offers cautionary, concrete examples of how market-driven models can implode. In the US, recent high-profile institution closures and lawsuits against large, chain for-profit institutions exhibited the risks of prioritising a strategy centred on enrolment-dependent revenue (Kelchen et al., 2024). Deceptive recruitment practices, false placement data and other practices prioritising rapid growth and expansion in term of "wealth/profit" left many students with significant debt and near-worthless credentials (Federal Trade Commission, 2023). The Corinthian Colleges history, along with the subsequent regulation and lawsuits demonstrates how reputational and financial collapse can occur quickly, when the objectives of businesses become more important than education (Cellini, 2021; Ganim & Woyke, 2016). This international insight is relevant to Malaysia and other systems of equivalent. Commodified practices might generate growth for a period of time, but they also generate systemic fragility and major moral hazard.

Collectively viewed, these complications indicate an urgent necessity for structural and oversight reforms that are directed at the public mission of higher education. Policy analysts have argued that the private sector's rapid expansion calls for stronger regulatory oversight, better alignment of funding with learning outcomes, and incentives that reward long-term quality rather than short-term enrolment gains (Chin et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024). In the Malaysian context, one in which a considerable and growing portion of the sector is represented by the private provision makes this all more urgent and pressing. The persistence of these trends will risk or lead to producing graduates who are ill-prepared to engage in work and citizenship, simultaneously allowing the institutions' legitimacy to be questioned and doubted (Tan, 2025).

Therefore, this paper matters for several reasons as most immediately it unconcealed those practices, accounts for their consequences, and urges policy makers and institutional leaders to recentre scholarship and sustained academic staffing. Moreover, this paper aims to urge, advocate and emphasise a meaningful quality assurance to be the underlying mechanisms for not only legitimate and resilient higher education but higher education with high level of integrity, morality and only do the right things.

Evidence and Case Studies

The regulatory challenges facing the private higher education market in Malaysia became apparent through an analysis of regulatory developments from 2019 to 2024. More than 100 investigation papers were allegedly drafted in relation to breaches of regulations by private higher education institutions between 2019 and 2024 and many compound notices and financial sanctions also issued against the same institutions by the relevant authorities (NST, 2024; Vethasalam & Tan, 2024). The range of breaches identified in the investigation papers included failure to comply with licensing conditions, failure to maintain proper records and failure to employ qualified staff. The frequency of these patterns provides evidence that governance failures are not simply isolated incidents but rather constitute systematic issues that require ongoing regulatory scrutiny.

The failures associated with governance in private higher education are not theoretical or hypothetical but are real and grounded on a national scale. In Malaysia alone, parliamentary and journalists' records indicate well over a hundred investigation papers opened against private higher-education institutions for offences that include operating out of unapproved premises, failing to maintain statutory record-keeping requirements, and hiring staff without valid teaching credentials, regulatory actions that occur as systemic non-compliance as opposed to isolated lapses (Vethasalam & Tan, 2024). There is also systematic reporting that dozens of compound notices have been issued to private institutions and fines since 2019 (Vethasalam & Tan, 2025). Such an occurrence reinforces the effort of regulatory intervention that exists to remedy common or routine breaches. Such reporting indirectly implies that an institutional business plan that is solely based on revenue or profit growth can instantly reverberate into legal and administrative consequences, which in turn can undermine public confidence in qualifications. This also rationalises why many individuals, especially the younger generations, are enquiring into the importance of higher academic qualifications or fail to see its importance.

A large body of scholarly and policy research has looked at how higher education commercialisation shapes the intrinsic value of learning. Research, ranging from empirical research on the student-as-customer constructs to policy analysis of higher education marketisation in Malaysia's cultural and institutional contexts, has produced several consistent trends (Tan, 2025). Notable trends include the proliferation of academic contingent workforce and increasing pressure on academics to water down or simplify assessment standards to maintain students, and the proactive reorientation of universities toward generating profit from short courses and short programs (Wan Chik & Rasli, 2024).

The literature further supports that market-based behaviour in universities corresponds with declining levels of deep learning, increased risks to academic integrity, and developing inequities of access to legitimate qualifications (Wan Chik & Rasli, 2024). Furthermore, commercialisation is not simply about diversifying income; it transforms institutional incentives and identities by inserting corporate logics into academic structures such as business-like thinking, priorities, and practices (Howard et al., 2022). In sum, the academic literature provides both theoretical and empirical justification for public and regulatory concern

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and gives policymakers a critical body of evidence for measuring, assessing, and monitoring the impact of higher education commercialisation over time.

In summary of the evidence from real-world cases and research literature, it is clear that there is a credible basis for reforming governance in higher education, and there is indeed urgency to take action. The extreme is worryingly predictable when institutional leadership prioritises enrolment growth, revenue and short-term metrics of financial health over academic stewardship. In addition to regulatory sanctions and the damage to reputation, institutional leadership and appointing competence in governance can cause further harm, potentially compromising the quality of learning or worse, collapse.

For policymakers and governing boards, the literature and practice alike highlight a set of actionable measures like strengthening licensing and inspection frameworks. Strategies such as embedding academic representation and literacy, the inclusivity of whistleblower protections with resourcing and inspection regulations, and funding and performance frameworks that are more focused on quality of education than enrolment alone, can forge a pathway of reformation (Sozon et al., 2024). Such reformations deserve to be pursued to regain appropriate legitimacy for institutions or provide protections for students whose public stake as students is largely overlooked when education is treated purely as a commercial product (NST, 2024).

Consequences: Who Loses When Academic Leadership Is Absent?

When there is (or has been) a lack of academic leadership, quality learning is likely to become the biggest loser and most obvious loser. Taking things to a quick "solution" (money, aggressive recruitment campaigns, aggressive international marketing, and/or to placate faculty respecting full-time commitments of many casual or adjunct staff to not pay their ongoing payroll) inhibits the benchmark of identifying the real strategic decline (Alsunaydi, 2020). In time, internal performance will manifest as a decline in reputation, a decline through weaker research profiles, and/or a collection of senior academics who are the gatekeepers of curriculum and graduate supervision (Fathana et al., 2024; Tan, 2025; Xu, 2025). The recent engagement of compliance audits and enforcement in Malaysia is also or will be noted for future reference. Between 2019 and 2024, more than one hundred investigation papers were opened, in addition to dozens of compound notices issued against private higher education institutions for offences such as operating from unregistered premises and failing to keep statutory records. A growth-at-all-costs strategy often simply leads to regulatory exposure, not sustainable institutional strength (NST, 2024).

When the leadership of an institution devalues academic integrity in favour of generating revenue, the impacts extend past the institution and, in some cases, take on high personal costs for students and their families (Heydari & Keshmiri, 2024). For low-income students in particular, whose future employability would rely on the legitimacy of their academic award, poorly governed programmes can undermine the academic integrity of the qualification (Kumaran & Idris, 2025). Symptoms of this decline manifest themselves through inadequately developed programmes and courses, low-quality assessment, and less experiential learning (Yeritsyan et al., 2022). Consequently, graduates from these programmes will often find themselves unemployed, working in jobs far below their qualifications, or enduring the additional cost of retraining to meet industry or professional regulation requirements.

Recent media investigations in Malaysia and other countries have reported a small number of questionable academic qualifications and degrees obtained from institutions in Malaysia that may not be properly accredited or recognised (Jeevita, 2024; Malay Mail, 2024). Such reports have uncovered indicative systemic weaknesses, such as poorly led or supervised academic programmes and under-staffed or poorly supported academic programmes, which indicate declining academic integrity (Jeevita, 2024). The aftermath of this finding is particularly serious for students from underprivileged and disadvantaged backgrounds. When their degrees or qualifications are rejected by employers or professional organisations, what was once a pathway to upward social mobility often becomes a source of betrayal and disillusionment. The financial, social, and emotional burden resulting from such misleading qualifications can be profound, as the promise of higher education as a means to social advancement is betrayed. What might have served as a stepping-stone to improve one's socioeconomic status could end up setting a student back for a lifetime that impacts student dreams and expectations, as well as the social trust in higher education's capability or force to transform society.

When elements of the education sector begin to act like commodity markets rather than civic institutions, the education sector and public goods suffer. Prominent international cases such as the U.S.-based Corinthian Colleges, where inflated job-placement rates and recruitment practices led to a series of fines, mass closures, and loan-forgiveness actions, demonstrate how quickly marketised behaviour undermines public confidence and disinvestment in the institution's capacity to produce reliable graduates (Ganim & Woyke, 2016). Employers, international partners and research funders become risk-averse in their collaboration, so society's overall knowledge production ecosystem suffers as investment, partnerships and exchanges in student mobility retract in an effort to avoid perceived quality (Kelchen et al., 2024). Furthermore, the long tail of distrust is an institutional systemic loss, not a stain on the accumulation of reputational loss of individual providers (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020).

Lastly, national policy and quality assurance processes do poorly when leadership sees regulation as merely a paperwork exercise instead of an authentic priority for improvement (Marnnoi et al., 2024). Strong frameworks like the Malaysian Qualifications Framework and MQA's Codes of Practice have been developed to protect learning outcomes and institutional accountability but cannot carry out their public purpose when compliance is limited to paperwork. When accreditation and audit processes are considered satisfied only as a compliance exercise, the regulatory architecture loses its capacity to create continuous quality improvement, leaving the state, employers and students vulnerable to the risks of dilution of credentials from poor quality (Marnnoi et al., 2024). Hence, strengthening the connections between governance, academic literacy at senior levels, and meaningful enforcement of quality assurance processes is important to ensure public value in higher education is maintained.

How Technology and Digital Investment Are Wasted

Digital technologies and educational technologies (EdTech) represent promising opportunities. The introduction of adaptive learning machines, learning analytics, and automated assessment support enhanced access for students with disabilities as well as can enhance research collaboration spaces (OECD, 2023). However, the difference between the potential promise and the real promise is an expanse when procurement and implementation are not "academically led". The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) analyses have consistently noted that the influence of technology depends on pedagogical use and professional learning, and it should not be surprising that technology alone is neither the

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answer nor a substitute for curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching expertise (OECD, 2025). When senior teams chase quick visibility or marketing stories, they can procure beautiful dashboards and virtual campuses without changing student learning; they will simply be attributed to new infrastructure with limited instructional value (OECD, 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted this mismatch sharply. A recent review by UNESCO on "An Ed-Tech Tragedy" highlights how swift large-scale investment in digital solutions achieved little for most learners, particularly learners from low-resource contexts, and at times even degraded educational quality where both devices and connectivity were available (UNESCO, 2023). The analysis and surveys indicated that many of the digital initiatives were not framed against the local curriculum or through assessment integrity, and without academicians' support, leading to futile achievement towards improved students' engagement that could be measured through learning (Marnnoi et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2022). It is also important to acknowledge that this finding indicates that attention-grabbing digital rollouts are pedagogically shallow if they are not embedded in an academic understanding of the learning processes. One of the reasons for such occurrence to happen is purported due to poor leadership' performance with lack educational leadership knowledge, skills and experiences (Raime et al, 2024; 2022).

Restoring Academic Stewardship Without Undermining Sustainability

It is undeniable that changing the industry (higher education) leadership appointments process is a critical lever for restoring academic stewardship, and it must start with unambiguous, enforceable criteria that value sustained scholarly experience (Nair et al., 2023). Recent empirical studies have further highlighted the importance of academic leadership competencies in ensuring educational quality and institutional performance (Nair et al., 2023; Raime et al., 2024; Raime et al., 2026). A vice-chancellor and a deputy vice-chancellor ought to be enabled by demonstrable academic leadership, an established track record with a portfolio that includes research supervision, curriculum development, peer-reviewed scholarship, and familiarity with national quality frameworks, rather than their corporate management credentials or short-term financial insight (Rashid et al., 2022). The regulatory architecture in Malaysia that is associated with this expectation has been spelt out in the MQF as well as the broader Codes of Practice. The MQF and broader Codes of Practice outline the principles of quality assurance and the primacy of academic leadership. If academic leadership be made explicitly and frankly adhering to the quality frameworks, aspirations may turn into enforceable practice (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2022).

A practical governance structure should seek a considered dual-competency framework rather than an either/or decision between academics and managers. As shown by qualitative studies of university leadership, when pairing academics in leadership with strong operational officers (e.g., a vice-chancellor of a university with a scholarly background, along with a chief operating officer with financial experience), institutions can achieve pedagogical purpose while remaining financially viable (Alam, 2022). Case studies of Malaysian private providers have shown that these same institutions wrestle with structural instability (financial viability, accreditation deficiency, and bureaucratic complexity) (Nair et al., 2023). Decisions about which competencies to include on governance teams should be considered against the full spectrum of competencies, rather than market forces to supplement academic reasoning (Chang et al., 2020). If the complementary executive model could be standardised in governance based on statutes or accreditation approval, then the coercive incentives created or encouraged for short-term revenue maximising are deemed to possibly become more positive, simultaneously less offensive to academic quality.

Regulators and ministries need to shift from an episodic policing approach to a proactive, risk-based stewardship approach. Moreover, licensing and periodic audits must be taken into consideration too, not just for programme compliance but also the maturity of leadership, transparency of governance and succession planning (Chang et al., 2020). The recent reporting that Malaysian authorities initiated and opened more than one hundred investigation papers and issued dozens of compound notices to private providers between 2019 and 2024 makes the point sharply, as many problems are only identified after they have grown enough to incur formal sanctions, a pattern of cost to students, taxpayers and institutional continuity (NST, 2024). When regulators and ministries shift to a risk-based approach to oversight, require public disclosure of senior leaders' academic qualifications, and make renewal of licenses conditional on governance standards, the oversight is deemed to be more preventative than reactive.

Transparency, accountability and safe spaces for whistleblowing are operational safeguards that materially reduce the opportunities for procurement fraud, credential fraud and the loss of academic integrity (Sozon et al., 2024). Solid measures might include requiring transparency of procurement tenders and outcomes, establishing an independent external member of boards which includes at least one eminent senior academic, and establishing a confidential and anonymous way for staff and students to raise concerns about the quality of teaching or research that are investigated independently instead of being internally hushed up (Tan, 2025). The experience in national and international contexts demonstrates that they work: when a whistleblower is empowered, or independent auditors are engaged, the irregularity is called out earlier and remediated at less cost than when the innocent mistake or deliberate action is ignored until it becomes 'a crisis' (Sozon et al., 2024). The accreditation standards and governing legislation for private providers could embed these requirements within their standards, therefore closing the accountability gap that currently invites opportunism.

Investment in technology should be based on the academic mission, not on marketing promotions (OECD, 2023). Meanwhile, acquisition should be centred on impact, beyond claims of improvements in learning outcomes, retention, and assessment integrity (OECD, 2023). Success stories from several institutions, including Georgia State University, illustrate how predictive analytics and targeted digital platforms, guided by academic mission and bolstered by human intervention, are levelling attainment gaps and meaningfully increasing graduation rates (Schechtman et al., 2025). On the other hand, gear purchased based on minimal headlines, such as virtual campuses or expensive bundled licenses that do not fit into curricular practice, becomes sunk costs with little instructional value. A requirement that institutions submit a pedagogical impact statement, a pilot of data and cost-benefit analysis to the regulator, would save waste and assist in ensuring the technology adds value and directs, instead of obscuring, the academic mission (Oppong, 2025).

To develop a culture of scholarship that is sustainable, institutions need to invest in developing leaders who are committed to the academic mission and are financially savvy (Chang et al., 2020). Creating leadership programs at the postgraduate level, providing an overview of quality assurance principles and regularly recertifying senior leaders will create a professional stewardship model and build the foundation for an institution to be sustainable (Heydari & Keshmiri, 2024). The above-mentioned strategies should be developed in concert with regulatory reform, transparency, and procurement reform to align institutional incentives with a shared mission of creating financial sustainability through research excellence, high-quality curricula, and equitable student achievement; thereby not only serving the institutions but also creating a desirable environment for students. Evidence from Malaysia and other countries with similar higher education systems indicates that this is a feasible, affordable, and much needed model for rebuilding an academic ecosystem that allows for profit making by private institutions, and for meeting their civic, educational, and intellectual obligations (Tajudeen, 2023).

The Ministry of Higher Education may also consider introducing a policy governing the awarding of professorships to individuals who are expected to hold senior university management positions (e.g., Vice-Chancellor or Deputy Vice-Chancellor). Such a policy would help ensure that these recognitions are granted on the basis of legitimate and demonstrable contributions within an individual's field of expertise. For instance, Universiti Utara Malaysia conferred a professorship on Chef Redzuawan bin Ismail (Chef Wan) in recognition of his internationally acknowledged contributions to the culinary field, an example that illustrates appropriate and credible awarding of academic titles. Moreover, a systematic audit process for the conferral of professorships and honorary doctorates should be established to prevent universities from granting such titles arbitrarily or to individuals without substantial scholarly or professional contributions. This is important to avoid the use of academic titles merely as a qualification for assuming key managerial roles.

Appointment policies exist so that all major academic and administrative positions (especially those directly affecting the quality of education) are filled based on independent, validated evidence of individual achievement and not by personal preference. Furthermore, these types of appointments diminish fairness and cause harm to people who are committed to upholding academic integrity. If there are required assessments for academic programmes such as a full accreditation process, it is reasonable to require that the structure of university leadership should also be scrutinised to the same degree. This is because the integrity of a university cannot be maintained unless its management has been held accountable to a standard that is both applied consistently and is transparent in nature.

Research Directions

The first recommendation is for empirical research to operationalise leadership composition in a way that is replicable and straightforward. Researchers should not rely on formal job titles, but rather classify the leader based on their career pathways and trajectories. This involves differentiating between academic careers in which individuals have developed their professions as academic scholars (and have consistently published), hybrid academic-managerial careers, and predominantly corporate or administrative paths. In an academic research environment, measurable proxies such as years in uninterrupted academic employment, previous master's and doctoral students supervised, lifetime citation counts, and position appointments, including in research-intensive departments, would produce a more credible basis for classification.

The empirical work of Amanda Goodall has demonstrated systematic relationships between the scholarly standing of leaders and institutional performance (Goodall, 2012; Goodall et al., 2011). More recent studies continue to reinforce the importance of academic leadership and domain expertise in shaping teaching quality, research outcomes, and institutional effectiveness (e.g., Nair et al., 2023; Heydari & Keshmiri, 2024; Raime et al., 2026; Raime et al., 2024).

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These findings suggest that leadership grounded in academic experience remains a critical factor in sustaining higher education quality.

A further priority for research is to identify and combine outcome measures that are particularly meaningful to policymakers and the public. These outcome measures include graduate employability (e.g., available from MOHE's Graduate Tracer Study or GREaT), externally audited quality outcomes (reported by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency, MQA), downgrades or revocation of program status, productivity and impact of research, student satisfaction, turnover of staff, and the count of compliance or investigatory actions taken by the ministry. Malaysia already has many of these datasets available through public repositories on a routine basis (e.g. MQA annual reports or MoHE's GREaT). Using these official sources of data makes the analysis based on reliable evidence rather than anecdote and permits tracking the longitudinal education outcomes and leadership characteristics of institutions.

From a methodological perspective, a mixed-methods, long-term design would provide the richest understanding. Functionally, panel data about all private higher education institutions (PHEIs) covering at least a decade would allow fixed effect regressions to account for unobserved assortment, or difference-in-differences type analyses around exogenous shifts in leadership (such as transfers that result following governance reform). In terms of causal inference, advanced approaches such as Propensity Score Matching (PSM) and synthetic control methods may be useful in comparing institutions with leaders who have an academic orientation compared to those with a corporate background. However, other methods to address endogeneity include natural experiments resulting from unexpected retirements or other policy/regulatory changes that resulted in changes in leadership, qualitative methods that can help provide context to the findings include document analysis (e.g., MQA audit files), conducting interviews with academic, administrative, student or employer representatives, and ethnographic observations of governance meetings. In conjunction, using a mixed-methods approach allows researchers to provide an understanding of whether and how leaders play a role in shaping academic practices at institutions.

When developing the appropriate timing and lag structure for the analyses, the researchers must consider the fact that leadership can take time to affect the impact of their leadership on academic quality and institutional outcomes. For example, the effects of leadership can take a long time on average between 2-5 years, or even longer, before the effects are visible such as, research productivity, institutional reputation and graduate employment outcome. While changes in variables such as student satisfaction or staff turnover may respond more quickly to leadership transitions, they may serve as early warning signals regarding institutional performance after a leadership transition. Employing event-study analyses, which are well-suited for assessing institutional performance lagged relative to a leadership transition, will strengthen causal inferences and provide a good visual representation of dynamic functions related to a given leadership transition.

Ethical and data-access issues must be addressed transparently. Incorporation of some MQA audit reports, compliance reports at the ministry level, and personnel files of those employed at institutions is transparent, but internal or institutional quality reviews or human-resource data often require institutional agreements and ethics approval. Researchers should set up data sharing agreements that guard anonymity and confidentiality and protect institutional identifiers. At the national level, aggregated or de-identified indicators include the number of institutions investigated for compliance per year (by institution) or change in employment rates

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by cohort. As recently reported, there were more than 100 open investigation papers against private institutions from 2019 to 2024. This evidence supports not only the practice but the feasibility of using government-sanctioned data and data indicators.

In addition to conventional academic outputs, researchers should also seek to offer policy-related outputs that inform direct regulatory and institutional practice. These may include reproducible code and anonymised datasets, and policy briefs with plausible effect sizes related to policies (the change in employment rate of graduates with hiring an academically experienced vice chancellor, as an example). Researchers also might offer case-study toolkits reflecting model governance practice. Comparative cross-national research pairing Malaysia with jurisdictions that exemplify success (e.g., Georgia State University's analytics-driven reforms) and failure (e.g., the collapse of Corinthian Colleges in the United States) can help differentiate contextual effects from generalisable mechanisms. Such transparent, empirically grounded, and policy-facing research would equip ministries, accreditation agencies, and governing boards with evidence necessary to align leadership appointment criteria with public-interest outcomes.

Conclusion

Two critical differences set apart universities from commercial enterprises. The first is that the core product of a university is intellectual capital, in all its facets of generating, codifying, and transmitting knowledge over the generations (Kangas & Aarrevaara, 2020). Secondly, while corporations can expect stockholder dividends in the form of quarterly profits, universities ensure the diffuse, long-term growth of competency in new generations, the production of new knowledge, and society's improved knowledge (Stankeviciute et al., 2024). There are national frameworks, like the MQF and MQA's Codes of Practice, that aid in protecting this public academic mission. Such frameworks have pedagogical standards and research expectations that cannot be reduced to metrics for best financial performance. When senior appointments ignore any indication of this mission, the institution runs the risk of supplying authentic pedagogy with commodified credentials.

The senior management, especially the vice chancellor or deputy vice chancellor, whose responsibilities are mostly academic-oriented, must not only be vetted for administrative skill and experience but also for demonstrated academic credibility and accountability to academic excellence. Academic sobriety is understood as ongoing research, the supervision of graduate or post-graduate research students, and care for course curriculum, while administrative skill includes operational literacy, forecasting and managing financial practices, and engaging stakeholders. The best leadership models must unite these skills, for example, pairing a vice-chancellor with a research-oriented commitment to the academic mission alongside a chief operating officer with financial expertise to ensure that financial sustainability remains supportive of the institutional and public mission.

Empirical evidence and governance evidence indicate consistently that these leadership structures foster dual competency that mitigates perverse incentives that would drive short-term growth through casualisation of teaching (Rashid et al., 2022; Tan, 2025). In Malaysia, there are clinical investigations of more than 100 private higher education institutions from 2019 to 2024 related to issues like unregistered campuses and the use of improper labour (Malay Mail, 2024; NST, 2024), all of which further support the proposition that a growth-first and enrolment-first approach ignores academic integrity and safety. That conclusion was best articulated in the case of Corinthian Colleges in the United States, which highlighted what can happen when the pursuit of profit through growth and enrollment is more valued than adherence to academic integrity and safety. The consequences were the exploitation of students with crippling debt, the collapse of thousands of students, and a need for taxpayer-funded support that cost more than most degrees in expenses (Bunce, 2020; Fathana et al., 2024; Ganim & Woyke, 2016).

Policymakers and governing boards face an important challenge. They must ensure that academic stewardship becomes part of the governance framework without undermining the sustainability of the institution. They can achieve this by formalising leadership competency models, which include academic experience as a primary consideration, facilitating the establishment of measures to assess institutional leadership competency models, strengthening risk-based oversight and accountability measures and linking institutional licencing factors to evidence of student-focused governance. Together, these efforts can assure a commitment toward academic stewardship and not a series of functional efficiencies. They reinforce the idea that sustainability for financial reasons to sustain some of the purposes of teaching, research and equity are acceptable, but not the purpose or premise of going forward. Our persistent indecision risks entrenching a bifurcated (two-tiered) higher education sector: one that is grounded in academic integrity and another that functions as a credentials-producing shadow economy, which is harmful to national competitiveness and social mobility.

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