

Strengthening Research Governance and Equity in Malaysia: A Collaborative Initiative

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BACKGROUND

International research partnerships are central to scientific progress, capacity building, and global health impact. However, such collaborations also highlight challenges related to fairness, power asymmetries, and institutional readiness, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts¹⁻². Malaysian research-intensive universities are increasingly participating in global partnerships, yet research management offices, tasked with contract negotiation, compliance, ethics, financial coordination, and partnership management, face limited guidance and uneven institutional support. National strategies, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education², have driven performance and competitiveness, but centralised governance models and fragmented research management structures may constrain institutional autonomy and innovation. Despite emerging global frameworks promoting equitable practice, operational uptake across Malaysian institutions remains limited. Strengthening research governance is therefore necessary to support ethical, equitable, and sustainable international research partnerships.

METHODOLOGY

Phase 1: Baseline Assessment (Completed)

Desktop analysis of governance structures and research management policies across five Malaysian research-intensive universities (Figure 1), plus a Stakeholder Engagement (SE) workshop with Research Management Centres (RMCs), Research Management Administrators (RMAs), and academics to identify operational and equity challenges.

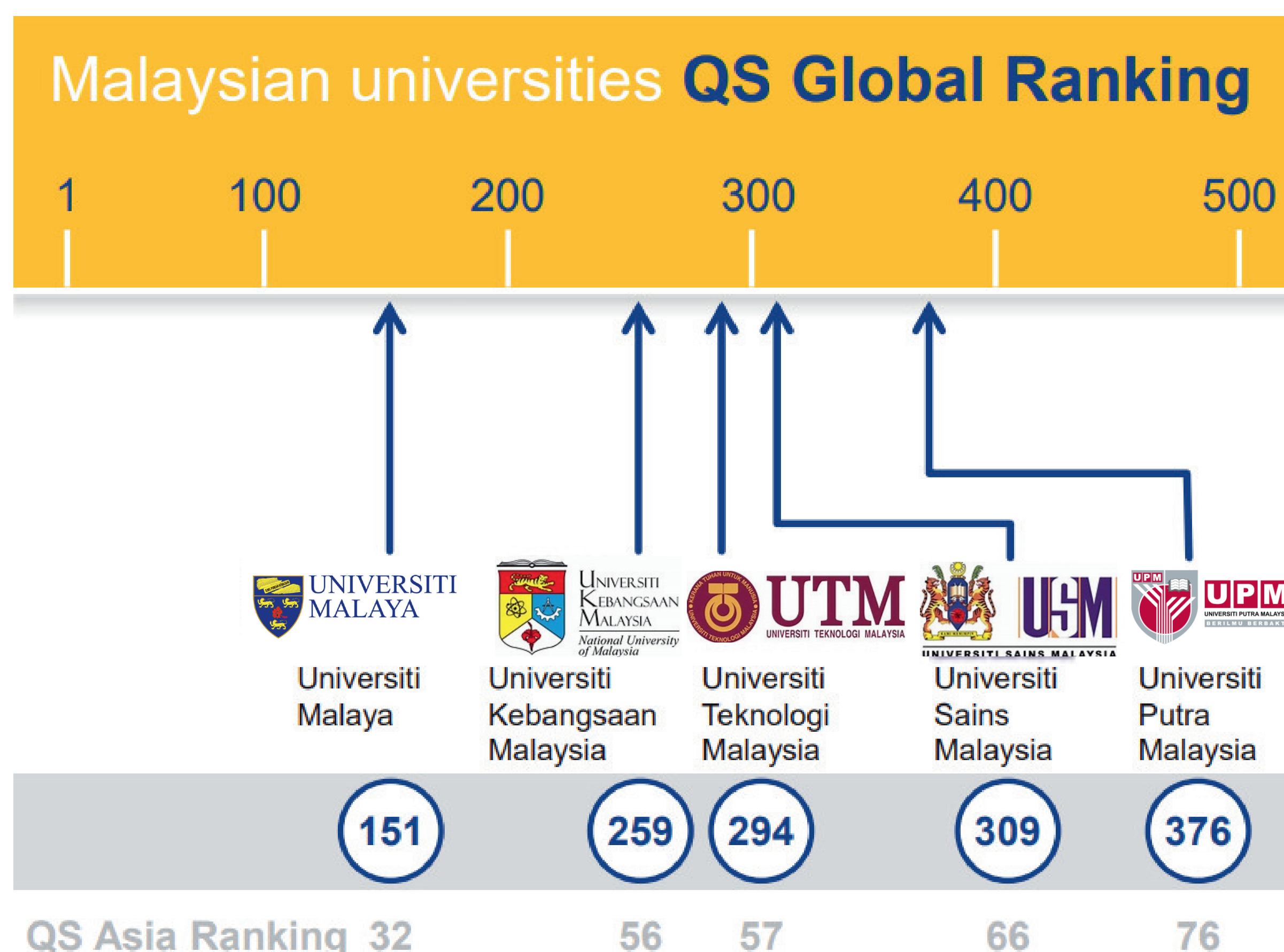


Figure 1: Overall rankings of Malaysian universities

Phase 2: Stakeholder Engagement Workshop (Completed)

A 2-day workshop involving research offices, academics, ethics committees, legal/finance units, funders, and policymakers to discuss governance barriers and equity issues.

Phase 3: Knowledge Exchange Visit (Completed)

Study visit to the University of Edinburgh to observe international research governance and equitable partnership practices.

Phase 4: Development of Equitable Partnership Report (Planned)

Synthesis of findings from Phases 1–3 into a strategic framework and policy recommendations.

Phase 5: Dissemination and Institutional Awareness (Planned)

National dissemination workshop and follow-up activities to support institutional capacity building.

RESULTS

| Phase 1: Baseline Assessment | Phase 2: Stakeholder Engagement | Phase 3: Knowledge Exchange Visit |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fragmented governance and management structures Centralised decisions reduce agility Ethics/compliance uneven across faculties Weak coordination across legal-finance-contracting Limited institutional equity mechanisms <p>→ Insight: Foundations exist but lack alignment for equitable collaboration.</p> | <p>Eight structural challenge domains:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Research Funding Allocation Authorship Policies Ethics and Compliance (including Financial Conflict of Interest) International Partnerships Role of RMCs Institutional Autonomy Performance Metrics RMA Development <p>→ Insight: Equity barriers are structural, administrative and professional.</p> | <p>Observed international enabling practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear roles and partner expectations Transparent funding and financial coordination Contribution-based authorship norms Integrated pre- and post-award support Risk-proportionate ethics oversight Capacity building for researchers and RMAs Coordinated legal-finance-ethics ecosystem <p>→ Insight: Professionalised governance promotes fairness & sustainability.</p> |

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that while Malaysian research-intensive universities possess strong foundations for international collaboration, governance structures, administrative coordination, and professional capacity remain uneven. Stakeholders identified key equity challenges across funding, authorship, ethics, partnerships, autonomy, metrics, and research management roles. International models demonstrate that structured and professionalised governance can enhance fairness, efficiency, and sustainability. Advancing equitable international partnerships in Malaysia will require coherent governance frameworks, stronger institutional coordination, and investment in research management capacity.

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