

Tracing Autonomy: Sarawak's Educational Governance from the Brooke Era to MA63

Auzellea Kristin Mozihim^{1*} & Ariff Adi Putera Anwar²

¹Sabah Educators Collective Association

²Institute for Development Studies Sabah

Corresponding Author: zell_kris@yahoo.com

Abstract

The renewed focus on fulfilling the demands of the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) began when Pakatan Harapan formed the government in 2018, which was then continued to be pursued under the Unity Government led by Dato Sri Anwar Ibrahim, established after the 15th General Election in November of 2022, with the issue first raised in March 2023 during the MA63 Technical Committee Meeting. In line with this development, the state of Sarawak emerged as a leader in education autonomy. This article contends that the historical evolution of Sarawak's education system has been instrumental in shaping the state's pursuit of both autonomy and cohesion, ultimately determining how federal Ministry of Education policies are adapted and implemented within the framework of a highly centralized federation. By going through document analysis and analyzing them through a multifaceted theoretical framework—institutional memory, political order and decay, legibility, and dynamic federalism—the study reveals that Sarawak's current assertion of educational autonomy is rooted in a long historical trajectory marked by institutional continuity, elite socialisation, and embedded governance norms dating back to the Brooke era and constitutional safeguards in 1963 as well as the selective application of autonomy under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 which creates an asymmetrical federal arrangement, where Sarawak exercises conditional education governance rather than full policy-making authority.

Keywords: dynamic federalism, education, Sarawak, Malaysia Agreement 1963, institutional memory

INTRODUCTION

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The renewed focus on fulfilling the demands of the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) began when Pakatan Harapan formed the government in 2018. These efforts continued under the administrations of Muhyiddin Yassin and Ismail Sabri in 2020 and 2021, respectively. Under Ismail Sabri's administration, education autonomy for Sabah and Sarawak was included as a new agenda within the MA63 Special Council Committee. This agenda has continued to be pursued under the Unity Government led by Dato Sri Anwar Ibrahim, established after the 15th General Election in November of 2022, with the issue first raised in March 2023 during the MA63 Technical Committee Meeting.

Through the MA63, the federal government has acknowledged the right of Sarawak to maintain control over certain aspects of education, including hiring teachers and planning educational projects, as per the recommendations in the Inter-Governmental Committee (IGC) Report and the provisions of MA63. This means that legislative and administrative measures under Article VIII of MA63 have strengthened Sarawak's position to implement education policies that align with regional priorities.

In line with this development, the state of Sarawak has emerged as a leader in education autonomy, beginning with the delegation of authority to the Sarawak education director to approve school development projects and educational programs funded by the Sarawak government or other parties; the use of English as the medium of instruction for Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Additional Mathematics at the secondary school level; and an agreement in principle for Sarawak to establish a standardized assessment system for the Dual-Language Programme (DLP) Sarawak ("Sagah: Alternative implementation," 2024).

However, there is a question of the degree of autonomy and cohesion that Sarawak has in terms of education because Malaysia, though a federation, has a highly centralized education system. Therefore, this article contends that the historical evolution of Sarawak's education system has been instrumental in shaping the state's pursuit of both autonomy and cohesion, ultimately determining how federal Ministry of Education policies are adapted and implemented in contemporary Sarawak within the framework of a highly centralized federation.

The significance of this study lies in its potential for other states in Malaysia to view Sarawak as a model to localize MOE policies in education either through the process of 'cohesion' or 'autonomy'. Additionally, this study will provide valuable insights into the implementation mechanisms of Sarawak's education system within the context of MA63, serving as a guide for Sabah and other states. Puyok (2024) demonstrates that Sarawak's greater autonomy, compared to Sabah, rests on three intertwined factors: its longer historical trajectory of self-governance dating back to the Brooke era, the dominance of cohesive local coalitions such as GPS, and the strategic leadership of figures like Taib Mahmud, Adenan Satem, and Abang Johari Openg. While his analysis highlights these macro-political determinants, this paper complements this perspective by narrowing in on the education sector as a critical site where these advantages become operationalised. The institutional memory of Brooke-era schooling, constitutional

safeguards under MA63, and the political will of successive leaders converge to make education a domain where Sarawak both resists federal encroachment and projects its distinct identity. In this way, the patterns Puyok identifies at the systemic level are mirrored within education policy, where historical legacies and contemporary leadership combine to sustain an autonomy that is sectorally entrenched as well as politically reinforced.

Next, this paper will examine the existing literature review on education federalism in other countries and the development of Malaysia Agreement 1963 leading to the formation of the federation. Subsequently, this article outlines the chosen methodology which is document analysis (Bowen, 2009), presents the findings, and engages in a comprehensive discussion by situating them within institutional memory (Pollitt, 2009), political order and decay (Fukuyama, 2006), legibility (Scott, 1998) and dynamic federalism (Popelier, 2021). Finally, this paper concludes by synthesizing the discussion and provides the limitations of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education federalism in other countries

The literature on federalism and education highlights the intricate relationship between decentralization, equity, and governance, illustrating how the distribution of power between central and subnational authorities shapes educational outcomes. Federal systems often face trade-offs between regional flexibility and national standards, influencing both policy effectiveness and equity.

Historically, Kaestle (2016) traces the evolution of U.S. federal efforts to ensure educational equity, while Eacott et al. (2020) reveal how Australia's federal and autonomous school systems responded unevenly to the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating disparities in access. Evidence from developing contexts further supports decentralization's benefits: Faguet, Khan, and Kanth (2019) show that Ethiopia's devolved education system improved responsiveness to community needs, and Parvez, Rauf, and Faiz (2021) demonstrate similar gains in Pakistan through provincial control, though success depends on subnational capacity.

Federalism's role in promoting educational equity yields mixed results. In the U.S., Strassfeld (2019) explores how legislative and judicial mechanisms address disparities in special education, while Freitag and Schlicht (2008) find that Germany's early childhood education policies reduce inequality. These studies underscore federalism's dual function: ensuring national equity mandates while permitting local flexibility—outcomes contingent on governance context.

The question of power balance remains central. Pleinies-Matzker (2021) argues for greater state control to meet diverse local needs, while Wong et al. (2017) emphasize cooperative accountability, where subnational governments address local concerns under federal oversight. Bowman (2017) critiques dual federalism for inconsistent quality across states, advocating cooperative federalism to align national and regional standards.

Political dynamics also shape educational federalism. In the U.S., Wong (2020) notes the Trump administration's reduction of federal oversight, enhancing state autonomy but risking disparities. At the global level, Sellar, Lingard, and Obiols (2022) show how PISA assessments push Australia toward centralization while Canada maintains provincial control under a unified national image, demonstrating how international benchmarking pressures federal systems to reconcile global competitiveness with local diversity.

Overall, the literature depicts federal education governance as a dynamic equilibrium of decentralization, fiscal control, and accountability. While devolution can enhance responsiveness (Faguet et al., 2019; Parvez et al., 2021), it can also exacerbate inequality without sufficient capacity (Moffitt et al., 2023). The enduring debate between cooperative and autonomous federal models (Bowman, 2017; Pleinies-Matzker, 2021) reflects the continuing struggle to balance national cohesion with local empowerment in education policy.

The development of Malaysia Agreement 1963

Malaysia exhibits a constitutional asymmetry between Sabah, Sarawak, and the federal government (Asri Salleh et al., 2019). The historical and political contexts of these Bornean states are deeply tied to the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63), which granted autonomy and special rights upon their entry into the federation. Over time, however, many of these rights have been perceived as eroded by federal centralization (Chin, 2019;

Salleh, Puyok, & Bagang, 2019). Following the 14th General Election (GE14), MA63 regained political prominence as leaders invoked it to highlight unfulfilled promises and advocate for a rebalancing of federal–state relations (Chin, 2018).

Sabah and Sarawak enjoy distinctive privileges such as separate ministerial systems, sales tax authority, and enhanced revenue collection powers (Asri Salleh et al., 2019). Yet Article 4(1) of the Federal Constitution limits these powers, granting the federal government ultimate authority, particularly during disputes. Economic inequalities and the uneven distribution of oil revenue have intensified grievances, with Sarawak seeking greater control over natural resources (Min, 2023). These tensions reflect broader dissatisfaction with federal policies perceived as prioritizing national interests over regional development (Min, 2023; Jody, Yusoff, & Hamil, 2024).

Persistent grievances including the erosion of MA63 guarantees, delayed socioeconomic progress, and neglect of key sectors fuel anti-federal sentiments (Firdausi Suffian et al., 2021; Chin, 2019). Issues such as immigration, oil royalties, and regional status have driven movements like the United Borneo Front and *Sabah–Sarawak Keluar Malaysia*, though these remain largely symbolic (Jody, Yusoff, & Hamil, 2024). Under leaders such as Adenan Satem, Sarawak has used its political leverage to advocate decentralization and assert its role as an equal partner in the federation (Michael Gawan & Puyok, 2021). Similarly, Sabah’s high score on the 2018 Regional Autonomy Index demonstrates its growing demand for self-determination (Lai, 2022).

Despite renewed negotiations, federal responses remain slow, prompting continued calls for greater autonomy and a reassessment of federal–state relations (Mohammad Azziyadi Ismail & Mohammad Agus Yusoff, 2022). The enduring relevance of MA63 underscores ongoing struggles to balance national cohesion with Sabah and Sarawak’s distinct historical, political, and cultural contexts (Rahman Tang Abdullah & Pandikar Amin Haji Mulia, 2018). As Puyok (2024) notes, Sarawak’s stronger historical foundations, political unity, and leadership coherence have enabled it to advance autonomy claims more effectively than Sabah. Building on this insight, the present study narrows its focus to the education sector, showing how Sarawak’s institutional legacies continue to shape its educational governance through Popelier’s (2021) federalism framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional memory, political order and decay, and legibility

Institutional memory refers to the tacit endurance of past administrative arrangements, cultural norms, and governance habits. As Pollitt (2009) notes, such memory is not only housed in formal statutes or bureaucratic codes but also in the routines, expectations, and mental models that condition policy behaviour over time. The durability of such practices aligns with broader theories of path dependence; whereby early choices generate self-reinforcing feedback loops that constrain or guide future options (Mahoney, 2006). And it is this path dependence that shall serve as the passive backdrop that provides clarity towards the entrenched understanding of educational autonomy. However, path dependence's broad scope will only be harnessed through the focusing of adjacent ideas.

Memory alone does not account for institutional survival. Francis Fukuyama's work on political order and decay is useful in explaining why certain political institutions persist while others unravel and would serve to expand on this paper's orientation towards path dependence. For Fukuyama, a stable polity is contingent on the balance between state strength, rule of law, and accountability (Fukuyama, 2011). Where this balance is absent, as in post-invasion Iraq or Afghanistan, institutions often decay. But where even informal or hybrid mechanisms (customary law, elite legitimacy, social expectation) act as constraints, political order can be preserved despite weak formalisation (Fukuyama, 2006).

Finally, James C. Scott's concept of legibility and the "hidden transcript" offers a deeper understanding of how these logics are socially reproduced. Legibility, in Scott's work, refers to the way states make populations governable through classification, measurement, and simplification (Scott, 1998). However, over time, these mechanisms of legibility can be internalised not only by state elites but also by subaltern groups as a form of symbolic coherence.

Measuring autonomy and cohesion

According to Popelier (2021), in dynamic federalism, "balance" differs from the traditional idea of a midpoint between centralization and decentralization. Instead, it

refers to the proportion of centralization and cohesiveness required to maintain stability, not necessarily in equal parts but in "correct" proportions. This balance secures autonomy and cohesion while allowing for adjustments over time. The key lies not in a universal formula but in determining the optimal cohesion and autonomy for a specific society. The constitution will use tools to ensure autonomy and tools to establish and preserve cohesion in light of this balance between the two.

‘Autonomy’ refers to the ability of SNEs to self-organize, make decisions, and safeguard their interests in central decision-making, encompassing both self-rule and shared rule. ‘Cohesion’ ensures the system's integrity by fostering mutual respect, solidarity, and shared interests across tiers. This can be achieved through joint decision-making, tools promoting a common public sphere, and encouraging territorial representatives to prioritize general interests. This "balance" between cohesion and autonomy depends on the situation. The function of the state structure as well as societal, political, economic, and geographic elements all play a role.

In measuring cohesion and autonomy, power relations between the central government and SNEs are shaped by three categories: status, powers, and fiscal arrangements. *Status* involves the identification of SNEs, including their territorial boundaries, self-organization, involvement in central and intergovernmental decision-making, and public interest representation. *Powers* pertain to the allocation of legislative, executive, administrative, and judicial authority, along with policy instruments and fields of jurisdiction. *Fiscal arrangements* address financial relations, including revenue powers, expenditures, and financial equalization mechanisms. Each category includes safeguards for autonomy, cohesion, or both.

Dynamic federalism is a theory that merely provides the means to specify the structure of the state and to pinpoint the means of autonomy or cohesion that contribute to altering or preserving the distribution of power (Popelier, 2021, p. 213). Therefore, it must be kept in mind that this theory is neutral on the preferred balance of cohesion and autonomy. Figure 1 shows the elements to measure autonomy and cohesion within a federation. However, in the case of Sarawak’s contemporary education system, not all of the elements are applicable.

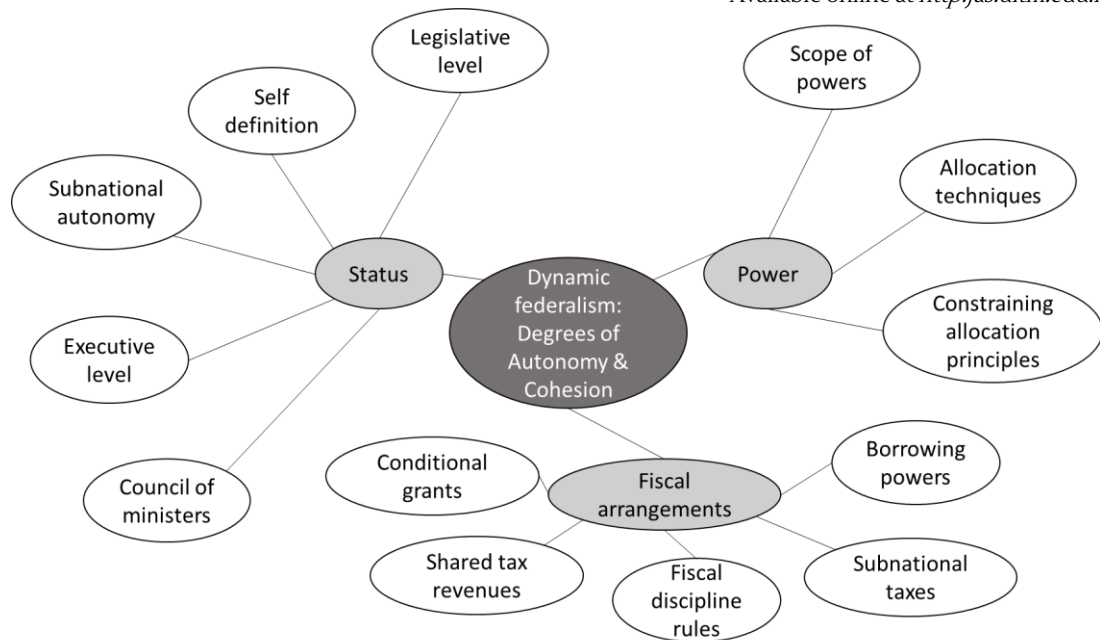


Figure 1: The framework used to measure autonomy and cohesion adopted from Popelier (2021)

This article employs a layered theoretical approach by integrating *institutional memory*, *political order and decay*, *legibility*, and *dynamic federalism* to account for the complex historical and contemporary realities of education governance in Sarawak. The rationale for this multi-framework strategy lies in the multifaceted nature of the research objective: to argue that the historical trajectory of Sarawak's education system has shaped the state's contemporary pursuit of autonomy and cohesion, influencing the ways in which federal Ministry of Education policies are localized within the broader context of a highly centralized federation. Together, they allow for a deeper, multi-dimensional understanding of Sarawak's educational development, one that accounts for both past sedimentation and current policy dynamics and tensions within Malaysia's federal structure.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

Documents related to the history of Sarawak's education governance, Sarawak's initiative to address education infrastructure, the Dual Language Program (DLP), and teacher recruitment were collected for this research paper. Documents were accessed through Sarawak's historical records, ISEAS' survey, books, academic thesis, the websites of online news portals, Sarawak state legislative assembly speeches, and official federal circulars.

Drawing on Bowen (2009), document analysis was employed as a systematic method for reviewing and interpreting electronic materials. This approach enabled the researchers to corroborate and extrapolate data from online documents and archival records, deriving meaning from historical accounts of Sarawak's education sector and identifying state-led initiatives and challenges.

Data analysis

In this paper, the data is analyzed based on understandings of institutional memory, political order and decay, and legibility embedded within the macrocosmic historical trajectory of Sarawak in order to articulate its outlook towards education and the cohesion and autonomy index developed by Popelier (2021), focusing specifically on the allocation of powers between Sarawak and the federal government in addressing educational challenges in the state. The analysis assesses cohesion and autonomy through allocation techniques (Figures 2 and 3) and constraining allocation principles (Figures 4 and 5).

Index 12.1 Cohesion index – allocation techniques

Powers are predominantly allocated on the basis of exclusivity	0
Powers are predominantly situated at the central level, but the application and enforcement is assigned to the SNEs without much discretion	1
Powers are predominantly allocated on the basis of concurrency, with priority given to central legislation in the case of concrete conflicts	2
Powers are predominantly allocated on the basis of concurrency, governed by the principle of field preemption	3
Central powers are predominantly allocated as framework powers, and both the central authority and the SNEs can implement and execute the general framework	4
Central powers are predominantly allocated as framework powers, or under the principle of executive federalism, with both the implementing and executive functions assigned to the SNEs	5
The system of power distribution is predominantly based on a combination of concurrent powers and administrative federalism	6

Figure 3: Adopted from Popelier (2021)

Index 12.2 Autonomy index – allocation techniques

The SNE has mostly administrative or implementation powers, without a guarantee for substantial discretionary space	0
The SNE has mostly administrative or implementation powers	1
The SNE has mostly concurrent powers with priority given to central rule	2
The SNE has mostly concurrent powers with priority given to central rule, but central interference is conditional to subsidiarity or necessity conditions	3
The SNE has mostly concurrent powers with priority given to central rule, but central interference is conditional to detailed subsidiarity or necessity conditions	4
The SNE has mostly exclusive powers (or concurrent powers with priority given to subnational rule)	5
There is no political central oversight	+1

Figure 4: Adopted from Popelier (2021)

Index 13.1 Cohesion index – constraining allocation principles

There is no federal loyalty principle in place	0
There is a federal loyalty principle in place that comprises one of three components	1
There is a federal loyalty principle in place that comprises two of three components	2
There is a federal loyalty principle in place that comprises all components: a negative duty of self-restraint, a process-bound duty of cooperation, and a positive duty to assist	3
The federal loyalty principle binds both central and subnational authorities, in an asymmetrical way	+1
The federal loyalty principle binds both central and subnational authorities equally	+2

Figure 5: Adopted from Popelier (2021)

Index 13.2 Autonomy index – constraining allocation principles

The central government can assume all powers vested in the SNE to keep the SNE in line	0
The central government can assume all powers vested in the SNE to keep the SNE in line, with some substantial safeguards or exceptions	1
The central government can put the SNE under strict surveillance to keep it in line	2
The central government can legislate in exclusive subnational matters to keep the SNE in line	3
The central government can take sanctions with the purpose of keeping the SNE in line	4
The SNE has the opportunity to be heard before measures are taken to keep the SNE in line	+1
SNEs are, directly or indirectly, involved in the procedure to take measures against the SNE, but with no decisive weight	+1
SNEs have decisive weight in the procedure to take measures against the SNE	+2
The SNE can challenge measures taken against it in court	+1
The central government can only use overriding powers to keep the SNE in line on the basis of legal grounds	+1
The central government has no overriding powers that target a particular SNE to keep it in line	10

Figure 6: Adopted from Popelier (2021)

FINDINGS

Education under the Brooke Dynasty and the British Crown in Sarawak

The White Rajahs of Sarawak (1841–1946) established a personal dominion that fused Western administrative rationality with Malay-Bruneian feudal traditions. Rather than replicating British colonial bureaucracy, the Brookes conducted a distinctive state-building experiment—codifying laws, forming a rudimentary civil service, and promoting limited education while preserving indigenous social structures (Runciman, 1960).

Education under the Brookes was selective and stratified. Mission schools, mainly in urban areas, introduced English-medium instruction for small groups of Malay, Chinese, and Eurasian students (Borneo Post, 2023). Education for non-Malay natives was confined to mission schools focused on basic literacy and practical skills, while the Chinese managed their own vernacular schools, often teaching in dialects such as Hokkien or Cantonese. The Brookes encouraged instruction in native languages to preserve cultural integrity (Ong et al., 2014). However, this policy reflected their ambivalence toward mass education, as they feared that Western schooling might disrupt traditional life and provoke rebellion (Gould, 1909). Education thus functioned as a civilising instrument to cultivate loyalty among a small cohort of local elites rather than as a means of social mobility—a tool to produce a legible intermediary class capable of mediating between the rulers and the ruled (Kaur, 1995).

This selective system persisted under British Crown rule (1946–1963). Post-war reconstruction saw modest expansion but little ideological reform. The 1950 Education Ordinance and the 1956 Grants-in-Aid Code formalised financial support for mission and community schools without altering their elitist structure (Crocker, 2018). English remained the language of bureaucracy and elite schooling, as reinforced by the 1954 Woodhead Report, which proposed English instruction from Primary 3 onwards and upheld the plural, decentralised nature of Sarawak's education system (Ottot et al., 2024; Sarawak Tribune, 2019). Missionary and Chinese schools expanded their reach, yet rural and indigenous access to education remained minimal.

Education during the Crown Colony period became more regulated but not more democratic. It remained an apparatus for producing a narrow, English-educated

administrative elite (Porritt, 1994). By the 1960s, the colonial legacies of selectivity, linguistic hierarchy, and bureaucratic reproduction had become deeply embedded in Sarawak's educational culture. Education remained urban-centred, elitist, and bureaucratically selective, shaping the postcolonial discourse of "educational autonomy." In essence, both the Brooke and British administrations used education not as an instrument of emancipation but as a mechanism of control, cultivating loyalty and stability over empowerment and equality.

Contemporary Sarawak under Malaysian federation

This section presents the findings for state-led initiatives and federal policies address the challenges of education sector issues in contemporary Sarawak. The results are organized around the major themes identified from newspaper articles, Sarawak state legislative speeches, and official federal government circulars.

Table 1: *The list of state-led initiatives in addressing education sector challenges*

Education sector challenges	State-led initiatives
Education Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative Decentralization and State-Federal Collaboration • Repairing and Rebuilding Dilapidated Schools • Allocated Special Funding Mechanisms for Mission and Rural Schools
Dual Language Programme (DLP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual Language Programme (DLP) as a Strategy for Bilingual Proficiency • Professional Development and Support for Educators • Assessment Reforms for Quality Assurance
Teacher Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying to Retain Teachers in Sarawak • State-Level Advocacy for Localized Education Policies • Calling for Transparency and Federal Accountability

Education infrastructure

1. Administrative Decentralization and State-Federal Collaboration

Under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) framework, the Sarawak government has secured agreements with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to strengthen collaboration and decentralize specific administrative powers. These include Sarawak's direct involvement in educational development planning and the authority to approve school maintenance projects funded by the state or external partners. The reforms aim to streamline decision-making, improve efficiency, and ensure that Sarawak's unique educational priorities are addressed.

2. Repairing and rebuilding dilapidated schools

A major focus of state–federal cooperation is the repair and reconstruction of dilapidated schools. The Ministry of Education, Innovation, and Talent Development (MEITD) works with the Public Works Department (JKR) and the Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU) to assess and expedite projects. The federal government introduced an alternative implementation model, providing up to RM5 million per school for repairs. Complementing this, Sarawak's *Projek Rakyat* initiative funds new school construction—such as SK Sungai Ulu Segan and SK Merpati Jepang—to ensure safe, conducive learning environments, particularly in rural areas.

3. Allocated Special Funding Mechanisms for Mission and Rural Schools

The Sarawak government has allocated specific funds to address infrastructure challenges in schools not covered by MOE funding. For mission schools, categorized as aided schools, have received financial support through the Sarawak Unit for Other Religions (Unifor) to address their dilapidated conditions. As for rural schools, such as SK Nanga Bena, which face issues like flood damage, have benefited from targeted funding, including a RM100 million allocation from the Sarawak government for repair and reconstruction.

Dual Language Program

1. Dual Language Programme (DLP) as a Strategy for Bilingual Proficiency

Launched in 2020 for Year 1 pupils, Sarawak's Dual Language Programme (DLP) aims to strengthen English proficiency by teaching Science and Mathematics in English,

aligning with the MBMMBI policy and the state's high-income vision by 2030. The programme—expanded to secondary schools with an RM 4.6 million allocation for 2025—provides quality materials such as National Geographic Learning resources and offers optional participation for SJK(C) schools. In line with IR 4.0, the DLP equips students with bilingual and technical skills for global competitiveness, reflecting Dato Sri Roland Sagah Wee Inn's emphasis on language and industry readiness.

2. Professional Development and Support for Educators

Teacher capacity-building underpins the DLP's success. The Ministry of Education, Innovation and Talent Development (MEITD) conducts annual training workshops, reaching 530 teachers across six zones in 2024, to enhance English proficiency and STEM pedagogy. Continuous support includes tailored teaching aids and professional learning programmes. However, teacher shortages and limited development opportunities remain persistent barriers to sustaining high-quality DLP implementation.

3. Assessment Reforms for Quality Assurance

Following the abolition of UPSR and PT3, Sarawak introduced plans for statewide standardized assessments in English, Mathematics, and Science—for Primary 6 by 2025 and Form 3 by 2028—under the DLP. Conducted in collaboration with internationally accredited partners, these assessments aim to uphold global standards while addressing the shortcomings of the School-Based Assessment system. Successful implementation depends on adequate infrastructure, teacher readiness, and training support, ensuring consistent evaluation of bilingual and STEM competencies across the state.

Teacher recruitment

1. Lobbying to retain teachers in Sarawak

Teacher shortages remain one of Sarawak's most persistent educational challenges, worsened by the frequent transfer of non-local teachers to Peninsular Malaysia. Premier Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Abang Abdul Rahman Zohari Tun Openg stressed that local Sarawakian teachers are more likely to stay, reducing disruptions caused by staff turnover. To address this, the Ministry of Education, Innovation, and

Talent Development (MEITD) launched the Sarawak Special Teacher Recruitment Programme. However, Education Service Commission (SPP) decisions to open recruitment to non-Sarawakians have sparked dissatisfaction. As of September 2024, Sarawak recorded 2,229 teacher vacancies, underscoring the urgency of localized recruitment.

2. State-Level Advocacy for Localized Education Policies

The Sarawak government continues to advocate for autonomy in addressing local education needs. MEITD Minister Dato Sri Roland Sagah Wee Inn and Deputy Minister Datuk Dr Annuar Rapae have urged SPP to honor agreements prioritizing Sarawakians in recruitment. Their engagement with MoE and SPP reflects the demand for policies responsive to rural-urban disparities and local talent retention. Yet federal non-compliance—such as recruiting non-Sarawakians—has fueled perceptions of federal insensitivity, straining state-federal relations in education governance.

3. Calling for Transparency and Federal Accountability

Transparency remains a key concern. MEITD leaders, including Dr Annuar Rapae, criticized SPP for failing to disclose recruitment outcomes, including Contract of Service (COS) appointments. The lack of clarity has bred public dissatisfaction and hindered collaborative problem-solving. The Sarawak Teachers' Union (STU) likewise condemned SPP's inclusion of non-Sarawakians as “inappropriate,” arguing it undermines efforts to solve teacher shortages. Despite ongoing dialogues, limited federal accountability continues to erode trust and impede meaningful reform.

DISCUSSION

The discussion section is based on the findings above. These findings will be contextualized within the framework of institutional memory (Pollitt, 2009), political order and decay (Fukuyama, 2006), legibility (Scott, 1998) and the theory of dynamic federalism to analyze the state's degree of cohesion and autonomy, using the index proposed by Popelier (2021) (Figures 3 to 6) alongside insights from previous literature. The following analysis explicitly applies each of these lenses, showing how Scott's legibility explains Brooke-era pragmatism, Pollitt's institutional memory accounts for

continuity post-MA63, and Fukuyama's political order framework situates these dynamics within long-term patterns of resilience and decay.

Sarawak's historical trajectory in education

During the Brooke administration, education in Sarawak reflected a hands-off and minimalist governance model. The Brookes allowed the Chinese community to manage their own dialect-based schools, providing minimal government support but monitoring them closely during the rise of Chinese nationalism in the 1920s–30s. Most schools remained primary-level and urban-centred, while indigenous education emphasized practicality and cultural preservation, largely through missionary efforts. This selective engagement demonstrates that the Brookes were not driven by high-modernist ambitions to reorder society but instead pursued pragmatic legibility, which is a strategy of governing only what was necessary to sustain rule.

In James C. Scott's (1998) framework, this constitutes partial legibility, where the state renders certain groups visible and administratively manageable while leaving others opaque. Education became one of the key instruments through which the Brooke regime "saw" its subjects which were standardizing language, cultivating administrative literacy, and embedding state-sanctioned values. For Scott, such legibility is a political act: it transforms complex, localized practices into simplified, governable forms through tools like censuses, cadastral surveys, and standardized schooling.

Following Malaysia's formation in 1963, Sarawak's leaders sought to preserve the Crown-era educational framework that had evolved under both Brooke and British rule. This aspiration was codified in Point 15 of the 18-Point Agreement, submitted to the Inter-Governmental Committee under paragraph 17, which stipulated that although education would fall under federal jurisdiction (Federal List, Ninth Schedule, Item 13), Sarawak's existing system should remain undisturbed until the state government agreed otherwise. This clause effectively transformed colonial-era autonomy into a constitutional safeguard, granting Sarawak control over curriculum, language policy, and administrative discretion (18 Point Agreement).

Between 1963 and 1988, this arrangement produced a structural duality: education was formally a federal matter yet remained de facto under state control. As Porritt (2007) observes, Sarawak retained significant latitude. Malay was not a required qualification

for educational access, religious instruction was optional, and English could remain the medium of instruction for ten years. This ten-year clause, shared with Sabah, reflected Sarawak's preference for multilingual education and delayed the adoption of Peninsular-centric norms. Although the provision has lapsed, the state continues to invoke its spirit in asserting language and curriculum autonomy.

Sarawak's educational trajectory is therefore best understood as a continuum of institutional reflex, rooted in colonial governance, formalised in MA63, and reproduced through successive state administrations. Pollitt's (2009) concept of institutional memory captures this continuity: practices of English instruction, curricular discretion, and decentralized governance have persisted across constitutional eras. These norms—prioritizing English-medium education and localized decision-making—remain embedded in Sarawak's political imagination and administrative culture.

This institutional reflex is visible in modern policy. In 2015, Chief Minister Adenan Satem reinstated English as an official language alongside Bahasa Malaysia, citing Article 152 of the Federal Constitution to justify its dual status (NST, 2015). His successor, Abang Johari Openg, maintained this orientation. In 2024, Roland Sagah, Minister for Education, Innovation and Talent Development, announced that Mathematics, Additional Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics would be taught in English from 2026 which is an expansion of the Dual Language Programme and a unilateral move that defied federal guidelines (New Straits Times, 2024). Later that year, legal amendments empowered the Sarawak Education Director to approve state-funded school projects without federal oversight (Borneo Post, 2024). These actions reaffirm the enduring validity of the IGC clause that education policy remains under state control “until the government agrees otherwise.”

Sarawak's enduring policy continuity exemplifies institutional resilience against federal encroachment—a manifestation of long-term governance memory rather than episodic defiance. Unlike many post-colonial systems that underwent abrupt administrative ruptures, Sarawak maintained a distinct bureaucratic ethos linking colonial pragmatism to contemporary decentralization. As Puyok (2024) notes, Sarawak's ability to assert autonomy more effectively than Sabah stems from political cohesion, leadership continuity, and historical depth. Education policy demonstrates how these structural advantages translate into sectoral autonomy.

Public sentiment also reinforces this institutional stance. A 2018 ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute survey found 72 percent of Sarawakians supported reinstating English as an official language and 86 percent favoured English-medium schools. Moreover, 63.3 percent identified as “Sarawakian first” (Guan, 2018). Such data indicate that education autonomy enjoys broad legitimacy, functioning as both a cultural marker and a political claim. The pursuit of autonomy is thus not a rejection of the Malaysian project but an ongoing negotiation with it, rooted in Sarawak’s historical self-conception.

This continuity also reflects Scott’s (1990) theory of symbolic order and hidden transcripts. Sarawak’s adherence to English-medium instruction and decentralized schooling is sustained not merely by elite policy but by popular symbolic expectations. As Scott argues, authority persists when it aligns with culturally internalized norms. In Sarawak, these norms—English proficiency, local curricular discretion, and administrative dignity—constitute a symbolic order through which legitimacy is measured. Federal efforts to impose uniformity often provoke resistance precisely because they disrupt this inherited equilibrium.

Consequently, Sarawak’s education autonomy operates as a performative reaffirmation of legitimacy. Decisions such as reinstating English or establishing state-administered international schools are not only pragmatic but ritual affirmations of historical fidelity. By invoking inherited logics of legibility, the state converts historical memory into political capital, positioning education as both an administrative instrument and a theatre of statehood.

Fukuyama’s (2011) framework of political order and decay further explains this endurance. Institutions, once established, exert path-dependent influence, persisting through habit and legitimacy rather than constant reinforcement. The Brooke regime created not a comprehensive bureaucracy but a proto-administrative stratum—English-educated intermediaries who bridged colonial authority and local society. This elite cohort, functionally analogous to the Prussian Junker class, sustained loyalty and bureaucratic continuity without extensive centralization. Though limited in scale, it became the nucleus of Sarawak’s later administrative identity.

In Fukuyama’s terms, Sarawak avoided institutional decay because its governance was grounded in restraint, normative balance, and cultural pluralism rather than coercive uniformity. The Brookes practised a hybrid rule of law: not codified constitutionalism but

negotiated legitimacy, incorporating *adat*, religious ethics, and missionary norms as informal constraints. Authority was sustained through performative accountability and proximity to local communities—forms of legitimacy that replaced formal checks with normative expectations.

This continuity reveals why Sarawak's institutions evolved through equilibrium rather than rupture. The colonial preference for partial centralization produced a bureaucratic habitus that valued elite filtration, English-medium schooling, and administrative loyalty. These traits persisted into the post-colonial period, shaping both governance and identity. As Fukuyama contends, such early-formed institutions endure because they become embedded in collective expectations—their legitimacy reproduced by tradition as much as by function.

Hence, Sarawak's education autonomy today represents an equilibrium of inherited authority and modern adaptation. It is not simply resistance to federal control but the reproduction of a deeply embedded institutional order, balancing continuity with selective innovation. Education, in this context, functions not only as a developmental policy but as a medium of state expression, reaffirming Sarawak's pluralism, autonomy, and cosmopolitan legacy.

Together, the theoretical lenses of Scott, Fukuyama, and Pollitt illuminate how Sarawak's pursuit of education autonomy is less an act of rupture than an exercise in institutional reproduction—a polity negotiating modern governance through the weight of its own memory.

The next section of the discussion will explore how this historical pursuit of education autonomy has continued in addressing Sarawak's contemporary educational challenges within a highly centralized education system.

Education infrastructure

To address issues of education infrastructure, the administrative responsibility for approving the repair and rebuilding of dilapidated schools has been decentralized to the Sarawak State Education Department. This move aims to expedite project implementation by localizing decision-making. Similar decentralization efforts in Ethiopia (Faguet, Khan, & Kanth, 2019) and Pakistan (Parvez, Rauf, & Faiz, 2021) have

shown improved educational outcomes through locally tailored policies. In parallel, the federal government introduced a funding mechanism allocating up to RM5 million per school through the Prime Minister's Department Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU), reflecting shared powers that foster cohesion and cooperative governance—hallmarks of integrated federalism (Popelier, 2021, p.147).

Prior to decentralization, only the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Putrajaya could approve such projects, even when financed by the Sarawak government. This exemplifies exclusive framework powers, where only the central authority can establish rules for project approval (Popelier, 2021, p.144). Within Popelier's cohesion index, Sarawak scores a '5', indicating that while the MoE retains framework powers, implementing and executive functions—particularly for school repairs—now rest with the Sarawak government.

For mission and rural schools, which trace their origins to the Brooke administration (Ong et al., 2014), initiatives such as Projek Rakyat demonstrate Sarawak's commitment to addressing infrastructural challenges. However, limited state resources constrain its capacity, placing Sarawak at '1' on Popelier's autonomy index, denoting primarily administrative powers in school reconstruction.

Under constraining allocation principles, Sarawak's decentralization authority receives a '+1' on the cohesion index, as federal loyalty binds the MoE and MEITD asymmetrically—this privilege being exclusive to Sarawak and Sabah under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63). On the autonomy index, Sarawak again scores '1', since the MoE retains ultimate authority to build new schools. Nonetheless, safeguards under MA63 grant Sarawak limited self-determination while preserving federal oversight, ensuring a balance between autonomy and cohesion within Malaysia's federal framework.

Dual Language Programme (DLP)

The Dual Language Programme (DLP) aims to produce students proficient in English and competent in STEM subjects taught through the English medium. Among all Malaysian states, only Sarawak received a formal circular in 2019 from the Ministry of Education (MoE) (*Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia Bil. 7 Tahun 2019*), signalling federal endorsement for statewide DLP implementation

beginning in 2020 for Primary 1 pupils. This mirrors federal mandates in the U.S. (Strasfeld, 2019) and Germany (Freitag & Schlicht, 2009), where national frameworks in special and early childhood education allowed local flexibility in implementation.

The circular stipulates that DLP instruction must follow the *Dokumen Standard Kurikulum dan Pentaksiran (DSKP)* developed by the Curriculum Development Division (BPK) under the MoE, a federal entity. It delineates roles for JPN Sarawak, district offices, and school administrators—an indication of framework powers whereby Sarawak implements federal directives (Popelier, 2021, p.144). As in earlier discussions on infrastructure, this federal circular establishes the general rule enabling Sarawak's DLP rollout, consistent with Wong et al. (2017) who noted that subnational governments address local needs within federally maintained standards.

Implementation efforts include teacher training workshops and the provision of teaching resources such as guidebooks and National Geographic Learning materials. These initiatives strengthen program cohesion and align with DSKP, placing Sarawak at '5' on Popelier's cohesion index—MoE holds framework powers while Sarawak executes implementation. However, limited curriculum flexibility means Sarawak scores '1' on the autonomy index, reflecting administrative rather than policymaking authority.

Following the abolition of UPSR and PT3 in 2021–2022, Sarawak announced plans for statewide standardized assessments for Primary 6 (2025) and Form 3 (2028) pupils under DLP. Though approved by MoE, these assessments exemplify substantive subnational or parallel powers (Popelier, 2021), exercised concurrently by national and state authorities—*Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia* (LPM) at the federal level and MEITD in partnership with Cambridge University Press, JPNS, and local institutions. This reflects Malaysia's constitutional asymmetry (Asri Salleh et al., 2019), granting Sarawak unique privileges under MA63. Comparable to Australia and Canada (Sellar, Lingard, & Obiols, 2022), Sarawak demonstrates how federations balance national cohesion and regional autonomy, allowing localized innovation within overarching federal frameworks.

Teacher recruitment

The Sarawak Ministry of Education, Innovation, and Talent Development (MEITD) has actively lobbied for more Sarawakian teachers through initiatives such as

the *Sarawak Special Teacher Recruitment Programme*, launched to address teacher shortages in the state. This aligns with Pleinies-Matzker (2020), who argues that subnational governments are better positioned to make education decisions based on local needs. However, conflicting actions by the Education Service Commission (SPP)—such as opening recruitment to non-Sarawakians—have triggered dissatisfaction and calls for transparency.

Under Popelier's autonomy index (Figure 3), Sarawak scores '0', reflecting that it holds only implementation powers without substantive discretion. Recruitment decisions rest with SPP, a federal agency, while Sarawak merely assigns teachers to schools based on federal placements. This structure restricts the state's ability to address teacher shortages according to local priorities, reinforcing administrative dependence. In terms of cohesion (Figure 2), the recruitment power lies primarily with the centre, and Sarawak's role in enforcement—without decision-making latitude—earns it a score of '1'. This demonstrates limited integration and minimal influence over recruitment processes, despite local initiatives like the *Special Teacher Recruitment Programme*.

Within constraining allocation principles, the federal loyalty principle binds SPP and Sarawak asymmetrically, producing a '+1' cohesion score (Figure 4). Recruitment policies are federally set, and states such as Sarawak must comply even when preferring to prioritize local candidates. For autonomy (Figure 5), Sarawak again scores '0', as SPP can assume all recruitment powers to maintain central oversight. This was evident when Sarawak complied with federal recruitment decisions and proceeded to issue appointment letters to teachers selected by SPP.

Consequently, Sarawak functions largely as an implementer rather than a policymaker, limiting its capacity to respond to local conditions or exercise genuine autonomy. Despite the constitutional asymmetry granted under MA63, federal dominance in teacher recruitment constrains Sarawak's ability to resolve staffing challenges effectively. While the state's proactive measures reflect regional initiative, their impact remains largely symbolic, highlighting the enduring tension between centralized authority and subnational empowerment within Malaysia's education federalism.

CONCLUSION

This study complements broader analyses of autonomy in East Malaysia, such as Puyok's comparison of Sarawak and Sabah, by offering a sector-specific perspective that links institutional memory and historical legacies to Sarawak's enduring resilience within Malaysia's federal system. Where Puyok identifies political cohesion and leadership as the basis of autonomy, this study shows that education governance functions as a living archive of those dynamics, sustained through path-dependent practices of elite socialization, mission-linked schooling, and decentralized discretion.

Sarawak's assertion of education autonomy is not a recent divergence but the product of historical continuity. From the Brooke administration to the constitutional safeguards of 1963, the state's education system evolved as both a technical and cultural apparatus that embedded legibility, pluralism, and local agency. This institutional memory is reproduced through networks of actors such as bureaucrats, communities, and missions that collectively maintain a distinct educational order without direct coercion.

The modern state thus embodies a delicate equilibrium between capacity, accountability, and normative governance. Sarawak's initiatives such as partial decentralization for school repairs, the Dual Language Programme (DLP), and state-level standardized assessments, demonstrate limited but meaningful autonomy. The implementation of the DLP similarly illustrates Sarawak's capacity to act within federal frameworks, benefiting from cohesion but lacking substantive curricular discretion, while teacher recruitment remains centrally controlled, exposing the constraints of Malaysia's highly centralized education system.

Consequently, Sarawak's education governance represents a dynamic but asymmetrical federal arrangement. The Malaysia Agreement 1963 provides the constitutional framework for differentiation, yet its selective implementation curtails substantive autonomy. Genuine reform, therefore, requires structural recalibration, empowering subnational actors not only to implement but to shape policy.

This article, therefore, contends that Sarawak's capacity to govern education is not a recent divergence but the continuation of a long-standing political order. The persistence of this order explains why Sarawak can pursue a degree of autonomy without severing its cohesion with the federal system. In doing so, it demonstrates how the

historical evolution of education has been instrumental in shaping the state's pursuit of both autonomy and cohesion, ultimately determining how Ministry of Education policies are adapted and implemented today.

LIMITATIONS

This study possesses several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, it does not encompass Sarawak's state-owned higher education institutions, concentrating exclusively on primary and secondary education. Within these educational levels, only three subject matters—education infrastructure, dual language program (DLP), and teacher recruitment—were addressed, potentially limiting a comprehensive representation of the broader educational landscape. Furthermore, the scope of data collection was confined to documents produced between 2019 and 2024, which may restrict the study's capacity to capture long-term trends or changes outside this timeframe. These constraints may impact the generalizability of the findings and underscore the necessity for further research to investigate additional dimensions of Sarawak's education system, including higher education, a wider array of subjects, and extended data periods.

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