

Empowering Democracy through Education: The Role of Student Leadership at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of student representative leadership at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) on promoting democratic values and civic engagement within Malaysian higher education. Student leadership is recognized as a platform for nurturing future leaders with integrity, accountability and ethical awareness which are the qualities that are increasingly important in both national governance and global diplomacy. The research aligns with Malaysia's broader commitment to democratic principles and its role in advancing soft power through educational institutions. Using a cross-sectional survey approach, data were collected from final year students in two academic programs at UMT. The study examines how demographic factors such as gender, age and ethnicity influence perceptions of student leadership and democratic awareness. It also investigates the relationship between student leadership experience and understanding of democratic practices. The findings aim to provide valuable insights into the role of higher education institutions sustaining democratic citizenship and participatory governance. By reinforcing student engagement in campus governance, universities contribute not only to domestic educational reform but also to Malaysia's international image as a democratic and diplomatically engaged nation. Using leadership theory, this study proposes the potential of student leadership as a strategic tool in shaping youth diplomacy and fostering a more inclusive, informed and participatory academic culture.

Keywords: Engagement, Leader, Reform, Governance, Democratic.

INTRODUCTION

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Leadership development within higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping future national and global leaders (Gauttam et al., 2024). Malaysian universities serve not only as academic institutions but also as strategic platforms for cultivating democratic values, civic responsibility and ethical leadership, traits essential for good governance and soft power projection. For example, at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), core subjects such as Community and Governance System ASEAN (POL4623) and International Relations (POL4643) are designed to embed these values, thereby fostering visionary and morally grounded leadership.

Hence, this emphasis aligns with Malaysia's strategic agenda under the National Transformation 2050 (TN50) initiative, which aims to position the country among the world's leading nations in innovation, governance and societal well-being. University students are considered critical agents in achieving this national vision by embodying democratic values and leading with integrity and civic awareness. In this context, democratic education becomes essential, promoting understanding of political rights, institutional accountability and active participation in governance.

From an Islamic perspective, the integration of democracy into education supports a holistic approach to character development. Ibn Khaldun's educational philosophy emphasizes the balance between knowledge, ethics and spiritual growth, reinforcing the importance of nurturing leadership that is both intellectually capable and morally grounded. Recent political reforms, notably the 2019 amendment to Article 19 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution that lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, reflect Malaysia's commitment to empowering youth in democratic processes. The *Undi18* initiative, spearheaded by then former Minister of Youth and Sports, Syed Saddiq, marks a turning point in expanding political participation among youth. However, this development also raises questions regarding the readiness of young voters and the effectiveness of current educational efforts in fostering democratic awareness (Noraini Misran & Azman Othman, 2011; Mohd & Abu, 2020).

In contrast, despite educational interventions, challenges such as declining civic engagement, weak political literacy and youth disengagement persist. The emergence of grassroots movements like Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH) underscores public demand for stronger democratic institutions and youth involvement. While student representative councils in universities provide avenues for experiential leadership, their actual impact on democratic awareness and civic participation remains insufficiently studied. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the influence of student representative leadership at UMT on the democratization of education. It also aims to determine whether such involvement contributes meaningfully to the development of democratic values and civic engagement among university students. This research highlights the intersection between student leadership, institutional governance and national political education. Furthermore, the legal context provided by the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1970 is critically examined. The UUCA not only outlines the administrative and governance structures of higher education institutions

but also significantly shapes the scope of student political expression and democratic participation on campus.

By addressing these dimensions, the study contributes to ongoing discourse on how universities can serve as instruments of soft power and youth diplomacy. The findings are expected to offer practical insights for policymakers and higher education stakeholders seeking to enhance student leadership programs and embed democratic values into institutional frameworks ultimately contributing to a more informed, engaged and participatory generation of Malaysian youth.

Background

Leadership development within higher education institutions plays a critical role in fostering ethical practices, competent and socially responsible individuals who can lead in an increasingly complex and globalized society (Kim & Choi, 2025). The student leadership model centred on the interplay between leaders, peers and institutional actors has evolved in response to shifting societal needs, technological advancements and the expanding role of universities in civic formation (Guthrie & Chunoo, 2023). Modern leadership education emphasizes ethical decision-making, digital literacy, global perspectives and inclusivity, integrating insights from psychology, sociology and organizational behavior to build adaptable, community-oriented leaders (Arshad et al., 2022; Gauttam et al., 2024). In Malaysia public universities, recent political reforms such as lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, have significantly influenced the discourse on youth engagement and democratic readiness. Hence, the 15th General Election in 2022 served as a practical test of youth political maturity, revealing both promise and gaps in civic awareness (Dzaki, 2022; Awang Besar, 2023).

The concept of democratic education is multidimensional, encompassing students political freedoms, awareness of Malaysia's parliamentary constitutional system and understanding of democratic governance (Aziz & Ariffin, 2024). Student leadership in universities, particularly within student representative councils, offers a potential avenue to foster democratic values and civic engagement. However, the effectiveness of these platforms in instilling a deep understanding of democratic principles remains underexplored. Higher education institutions must ensure that leadership opportunities translate into meaningful democratic participation, especially

in contexts where legal frameworks such as the UUCA still shape the scope of student political activity.

Moreover, democratization in higher education extends beyond leadership development. It includes widening access to education across socioeconomic strata and promoting equitable participation in the academic and civic spheres. Economic growth, improved infrastructure and demographic shifts have contributed to a more diverse student body in Malaysian universities (Qasim, 2022; Rashid & Ariffin, 2024). With this increased diversity comes the need for policies that ensure all students not only those from elite or urban backgrounds can access leadership training and democratic education.

The intersection of political participation, civic activism and student leadership is also significant. According to Taib and Yaakop (2017), political activism, particularly in the form of protests, often stems from youth dissatisfaction with systemic inequalities. Universities, traditionally seen as ivory towers, are now central to shaping informed citizens and responsible leaders. Democratization in this context must include not only the structures that allow for participation but also the values, knowledge and skills that enable it to be constructive and informed (Abdullah, 2017).

Therefore, this study examines how student representative leadership at UMT contributes to the democratization of education and civic readiness (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Specifically, it investigates how variables such as gender, ethnicity and academic level influence students' engagement with democratic education and whether student leadership roles foster a deeper commitment to civic participation and national development. The findings will inform institutional and national policies on leadership development, citizenship education and youth engagement in Malaysia's democratic processes.

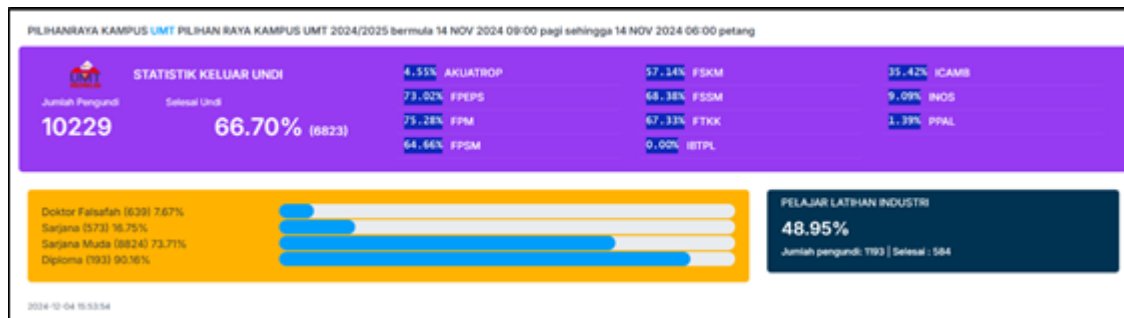


Figure 1: UMT Campus Election 2024/2025

Sources: Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Office of Student Affairs and Alumni, 2024



Figure 2: Faculty of Economics, Business and Social Development, UMT Campus Election

Sources: Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Office of Student Affairs and Alumni, 2024

This study contributes to the existing literature in several aspects. The researchers document the systematic literature review of the past studies on educational governance since 2016 to 2024 to align the studies democratic on education globally. Our findings also suggest that the exposure of educational governance in term leadership can be improve align with the stabilization of public governance. This evidence implies that the leadership style influences the educational governance on campus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the conceptual and empirical foundations supporting the present study, which investigates the relationship between student leadership and the democratization of education at UMT. Student leadership is a multidimensional concept encompassing leadership behaviours exhibited by student representatives, their interaction with peers and institutional authorities. Based on Guthrie and Chunoo (2023), student leadership education has evolved in response to the changing needs of a technologically savvy and globally aware student population. Integrating perspectives from psychology, sociology and organizational behaviour, modern leadership education emphasizes internal growth, global citizenship and social responsibility.

Ethical leadership has gained prominence in addressing global challenges such as climate change, social injustice and political instability. Arshad et al. (2022) argue that leadership training must prioritize ethical decision-making, integrity and the capacity to lead with empathy and inclusiveness. For instance, student leaders are not only expected to represent their peers but also to model ethical standards and civic values reflective of democratic societies.

The democratization of education involves more than curricular inclusion of civic subjects, it also requires structural openness in allowing students to participate in governance and decision-making processes (Aziz & Ariffin, 2024; Pangrazio et al., 2023). Democratic education, as defined in this study, entails instilling political literacy, encouraging active citizenship and fostering an appreciation of constitutional rights and responsibilities. Rashid and Ariffin (2024) emphasize that democratic education in Malaysia aims to ensure equitable access to education and political representation, regardless of socioeconomic background. This includes integrating citizenship education, student parliaments and university elections into the broader framework of civic development.

Malaysia's parliamentary democracy is built upon a constitutional monarchy. Prior to independence, the region practiced absolute monarchy, however, since 1957, the country has transitioned into a system where executive authority is exercised by elected representatives and the monarch assumes a symbolic role. As Nurdeana and Nadzri (2022) reported, the King is bound by constitutional limitations, although debates continue over the extent of royal influence in governance. The rotation of the

Yang di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA) among the nine Malay rulers every five years reflects a unique feature of Malaysia's system, combining traditional authority with democratic procedures. Understanding this governance structure is central to democratic education. It is imperative that students comprehend the balance between symbolic authority and elected power, as well as the roles of the executive, legislative and judiciary branches. Equipping students with this knowledge fosters informed and responsible participation in democratic processes, especially in light of policy changes such as the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 under the *Undi18* initiative.

Furthermore, the democratization of higher education also refers to the expansion of access to university-level learning, particularly among underserved populations (Aziz & Ariffin, 2024; Kim & Choi, 2025). Rashid and Ariffin (2024) highlight that democratization includes not only admission policies but also curriculum design and community engagement strategies aimed at empowering students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Qasim (2022) further notes that economic growth, demographic changes and infrastructure development have enabled greater inclusivity in tertiary education, reinforcing its role as a vehicle for social mobility.

Table 1:

Compilation of few past studies on the Democratization of Education

No.	Authors	Title	Year	Source title	Research Aim	Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Theories	Method	Country Studies	Findings
1	Ibrahim	The Influence of Student Leadership in Public Universities on Citizenship Development and Democratic Education in Malaysia	2016	Thesis, Universiti Utara Malaysia	This study focuses on the influence of student leadership among students in Malaysian public universities.	Citizenship development and democratization of education in Malaysia.	Influence of student leadership in public universities.	Great Man Theory.	Cross-sectional survey.	Malaysia	The finding prove that the citizenship development acted as mediators in the relationship between Student Leadership and Democratization of Education.
2	Suhaيمي	Exploring the Concept of Public Participation in the Context of Governance from the Perspective of Youth Leaders	2022	International Journal of Law, Government and Communication	This study aims to identify the concept of public participation and practise of youth leaders.	Youth leaders' perspective.	Public participation in the context of governance.	Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation.	Thematic method.	Malaysia	The findings of the study show that the understanding of the concept of public participation among the top youth leaders is still low.
3	Ismail et al.	Students' Perception of the Enforcement	2024	Jurnal Kejuruteraan	This case study aims to find suitable approaches to	Students' perception.	Enforcement model approach.	Altbach theory.	Close-ended questionnaire and focus group	Malaysia	The overall mean for the findings to identify the factors of student

		Model Approach towards Radicalism Movement in Malaysia Higher Learning Institutions			review the relevance and suitability of AUKU.				discussion.		acceptance of the Universities and University College Act in Malaysia.
4	Othman et al.	The credibility of student leadership in empowering youth voices: reforming a progressive society	2023	International Journal of education, psychology and counselling	The purpose of this research is to focus on youth involvement and voting 18 in developing appropriate strategies.	Empowering youth voices.	Credibility of Student Leadership.	N/A	Secondary data content analysis methods.	Malaysia	The findings, it is critical for the country to recognise the role of students in raising people's issues, because students are the driving force behind a civilised society.
5	Bakar et al.	The Nature and Political Behavior of Undi 18 Voters in Private Higher Education Institutions in	2022	Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities	This study focuses on the amendment to the voting age from 21 to 18 years old in Private Higher Education	Undi 18 voters in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Penang.	Political traits and behaviour.	N/A	Mixed methodology.	Malaysia	The findings of the study are related to the most popular political leaders among Undi 18 voters and which leaders are preferred.

		Penang <i>Tinggi Swasta</i> <i>(IPTS) di</i> <i>Pulau Pinang</i>			Institutions (in Penang.						
6	Dwijaya nto et al.	Managing demcracy in Malaysia	2020	Jurnal Aristo (Social, Politic and Humaniora)	These studies aim challenge presented by the new opposition	Identity, minorities and representation.	Managing democracy.	Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation.	Theoretical and empirical observations.	Indones ia	Democracy in Malaysia, as a multicultural and multiracial nation, has gradually shown the ability to address issues of identity, ethnicity and minority representation.
					Alliance.						
7	Samuels & Vagas	Democracy, rural inequality and education spending	2023	World development	Given the differential impact of education spending on the power of landed elites.	Education spending.	democracy, rural inequality.	N/A	Time series cross-section, difference-in- differences.	United States	The findings in this paper also have implications for understanding subnational.
8	Desai & Wanw	Educating courageously: Transformative pedagogy infusing	2022	International Journal of Education Research	The present socio-political climate seems to be at a critical juncture with opportunities to	Festering civil society and democracy.	Transformati ve pedagogy infusing spiritually in K-12 education.	Anti- colonialism.	Qualitative.	Canada	Democratic societies with engaged citizens cannot be created without TP which teaches students

					revisit in various contexts.						to acquire both the 3Rs.
9	Kaftan	Party competition over democracy: Democracy as electoral issue in Germany.	2024	Politics and Governance	The degree to which democracy in general and liberal democracy should be conceptualized as valence and positional issues in multiparty electoral competitions.	Democracy as electoral issue in Germany.	Party competition over Democracy.	N/A	Survey data curation.	Germany	Democracy has been a mixed issue and that liberal democracy has been a positional issue in Germany
10	Chen	Land reform, emerging grassroots democracy and political trust in China	2024	World Development	The “exercises of power” given to villagers and the political consequences in rural China.	Political trust.	Land reform, emerging grassroots democracy.	N/A	Data empirical strategy.	China	The extent to which participatory democracy in forestland reform could engender greater trust for local cadres by villagers in China.

Notes: Author’s own work (2025).

Table 1 outlines a diverse range of studies conducted between 2016 and 2024 that explore the themes of student leadership, public participation and democratic education. Ibrahim (2016) emphasizes the role of student leadership in promoting citizenship development within Malaysian public universities, highlighting how leadership practices serve as mediators in the democratization of education. To compare, Othman et al. (2023) argue that the credibility of student leadership is pivotal in amplifying youth voices and fostering a progressive, democratic society. These findings underscore the growing recognition of students as key agents in national democratic transformation, particularly in the context of the *Undi18* initiative and institutional governance reforms.

Additional Malaysian based studies further contribute to the understanding of how governance, participation and legal frameworks affect student democratic engagement. As such, Suhaimi (2022) found that public participation remains conceptually underdeveloped among youth leaders, while Ismail and Habib (2024) explored perceptions of the enforcement approach under AUKU, pointing to the ongoing debate around student political freedom in higher learning institutions. Bakar and Esa (2022) provide valuable insights into political behavior and leader preferences among *Undi18* voters in private universities, affirming the influence of generational political shifts. These findings are particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where higher education institutions function as controlled environments for civic formation (Aziz & Ariffin 2024; Mohd & Abu, 2020).

In contrast, comparative studies from countries such as Indonesia, Canada, Germany, China and the United States expand the perspective on democratization and education (Pangrazio et al., 2023). For instance, Desai and Wanw (2022) highlight the importance of transformative pedagogy in strengthening democratic societies, while Kaftan (2024) and Chen et al. (2024) explore the dynamics of democracy in electoral competition and grassroots trust building, respectively. These global studies show that while the cultural and political contexts differ, democratic education remains a universal priority in fostering responsible citizenship.

Theoretical Approach

Leadership theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals influence, motivate and guide others toward the achievement of shared goals. These theories explore key dimensions such as personal attributes, leadership styles and strategies used to manage group dynamics. Central to leadership theory are elements like effective communication, sound decision-making, adaptability to situational challenges and the ability to foster a supportive and high-performing organizational environment. A thorough understanding of leadership theories equips

individuals with the tools to adopt contextually appropriate strategies, enhance institutional effectiveness and promote cohesive teamwork and collective success.

The pioneer model, which is Trait Theory, posits that effective leadership stems from inherent personal characteristics such as intelligence, self-confidence, charisma and physical presence. Proponents argue that these innate traits distinguish leaders from non-leaders, suggesting a more fixed approach to leadership development (Shi et al., 2024). To differ, the Behavioral Theory shifts the focus to observable leadership actions, asserting that effective leadership can be cultivated through learning, training and experience. This perspective suggests that leadership is not solely an inborn capacity, but a set of behaviors that can be developed over time (Chan Yet Shi et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, building on these views, the Contingency Theory introduces the concept that leadership effectiveness is contingent on situational alignment. It emphasizes that no single leadership style is universally effective; instead, leaders must adapt their behavior based on contextual factors such as team dynamics, task complexity and external pressures (Shi et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the Transactional Leadership Theory, grounded in the work of Max Weber and later expanded by Bernard Bass, conceptualizes leadership as an exchange-based relationship. Leaders provide rewards or impose sanctions in response to follower performance, reinforcing a hierarchical and structured leadership model (Ishak & Nuslan Mohd Nor, 2023).

Complementing this approach, the Transformational Leadership Theory adopts a more dynamic and human-centric view. It emphasizes three core dimensions: charisma, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Mokhtar et al., 2023). Transformational leaders inspire through vision and personal appeal, encourage innovation and critical thinking and attend to the personal growth and needs of each follower. Such leaders aim not only to achieve institutional objectives but also to nurture a shared sense of purpose and long-term commitment among team members (Mokhtar et al., 2023).

Together, these theories offer valuable insights into the nature and application of leadership within higher education. In the context of this study, leadership theory serves as the primary lens for analyzing how student leadership practices influence democratic engagement and governance. The decision to focus on leadership theory is informed by

its strong explanatory power in capturing the behavioral, contextual and ethical dimensions of student leadership, particularly in shaping participatory cultures within universities. Based on the previous arguments, we hypothesize that (Hypothesis 1):

H₁. *There is a significant difference in student representative leadership and democratic education based on demographic factors at UMT.*

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a structured and systematic research design to examine the influence of student leadership on democratic education within a higher education setting. A quantitative research approach was employed to allow for objective measurement and statistical analysis of the relationships between variables. Specifically, a cross-sectional survey design was utilized to collect data at a single point in time from a defined sample, ensuring practical implementation and contextual relevance.

The unit of analysis comprised final-year undergraduate students from UMT, enrolled in two academic programmes: the Bachelor of Policy Studies with Honours (SMP Policy) and the Bachelor of Natural Resource Economics with Honours (SMP Economics). Both programmes are housed under the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Development. These students were selected based on their exposure to leadership roles and civic engagement activities throughout their academic progression, rendering them suitable respondents for the study's objectives.

In term population and sample, the target population consisted of 281 students divided between 146 from the SMP Policy and 135 from the SMP (Economics). Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table and after data screening, a representative sample of 100 students was selected, comprising 53 students from the SMP Economics and 47 from the SMP Policy. A simple random sampling technique as probability sampling method were utilized to ensure every respondents have equal opportunity for selection. As the study specifically focused on comparing students residing on campus and off campus, participants randomly chosen from two course with difference classes to complete the distributed questionnaire,. This approach minimized sampling bias and enhanced the generalizability of the findings. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, divided into four main sections:

- Section A:* Demographic information
Section B: Measurement of student leadership
Section C: Assessment of citizenship development
Section D: Evaluation of democratic education

All items in the questionnaire were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*), enabling consistent evaluation of perceptions and attitudes. To ensure instrument validity and reliability, a pilot study was conducted involving students from the same academic programmes. The questionnaire underwent face and content validation by subject matter experts to confirm its clarity and relevance. The pilot study yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient exceeding 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency and supporting the reliability of the instrument in measuring the targeted constructs (Rahman et al., 2022; Abdullah, 2017). The data collection process was conducted in two phases (a) an initial pilot test, followed by the (b) main survey. During the main data collection, the questionnaire was distributed electronically via Google Forms, with the link disseminated through WhatsApp and Telegram channels. Respondents were given a two-week window to complete the survey, providing sufficient time for thoughtful participation.

Meanwhile, data analysis was carried out using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 25.0 software between univariate and multi-regression analysis. For univariate, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics and variable distributions, while multiple regression analysis (OLS) were conducted to examine relationships and group differences. Prior to these analyses, tests for normality and homogeneity of variance were performed to verify that assumptions for parametric tests were met, ensuring the validity and robustness of the statistical inferences.

Table 2:
Demographic of Respondents

	Variable	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	33	33	33
	Female	67	67	100
Ethnicity	Bumiputera	5	5	5
	Chinese	8	8	13
	Indian	5	5	18

	Malay	82	82	100
Venue	On Campus	64	64	64
	Outside Campus	36	36	100
Age	21-22 years old	41	41	41
	23-24 years old	46	46	87
	Above 25 years old	2	2	89
	Below 21 years old	11	11	100
Course	SMP (Economics)	53	53	53
	SMP Policy	47	47	100

From Table 2, a total of 100 students from UMT successfully completed the distributed questionnaires. Demographically, 67% of the respondents were female while 33% were male. In terms of ethnicity, Malay students comprised the majority (82 percent), followed by Chinese (8 percent), while Bumiputera (*non-Malay*) and Indian students each represented 5 percent. A total of 64 percent of students lived on-campus, whereas 36 percent resided off-campus due to limited accommodation availability. The age distribution revealed that most respondents were between 23 to 24 years (46 percent), followed by those aged 21 to 22 (41 percent), under 21 (11 percent) and above 25 years (2 percent). Meanwhile, based on programme differences, 53 percent were from the SMP (Economics) and 47 percent from the SMP Policy.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 3, students reported high engagement in leadership practices, with a mean score of 3.85 (SD = 0.54), indicating active involvement in student governance, organisations or related roles. Citizenship scored the highest among the three constructs, with a mean of 4.10 (SD = 0.47), reflecting a strong awareness of civic responsibilities, national values and mutual respect. Meanwhile, democratization yielded a moderately high mean score of 3.65 (SD = 0.60), indicating fair engagement in democratic processes such as decision-making, expression of opinion and campus elections.

These descriptive results affirm the presence of a supportive institutional environment for leadership and civic development but also highlight room for improvement in enhancing democratic education experiences, particularly for underrepresented or less active student groups.

Table 3:
Descriptive Statistics for each variables

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Student Leadership	RO1.1	1.00	5.00	4.52	0.82	-2.12 0.24 5.36 0.48
	RO1.2	3.00	5.00	4.51	0.67	-1.05 0.24 -0.11 0.48
	RO1.3	2.00	5.00	4.47	0.76	-1.17 0.24 0.28 0.48
	RO1.4	3.00	5.00	4.39	0.76	-0.80 0.24 -0.83 0.48
	RO1.5	1.00	5.00	4.47	0.83	-1.71 0.24 2.94 0.48
	RO1.6	2.00	5.00	4.35	0.78	-0.97 0.24 0.15 0.48
	RO1.7	2.00	5.00	4.46	0.74	-1.14 0.24 0.32 0.48
	RO1.8	3.00	5.00	4.42	0.71	-0.82 0.24 -0.60 0.48
	RO1.9	3.00	5.00	4.70	0.54	-1.64 0.24 1.82 0.48
	RO1.10	3.00	5.00	4.55	0.66	-1.17 0.24 0.19 0.48
Citizenship Development	RO2.1	2.00	5.00	4.34	0.81	-1.05 0.24 0.43 0.48
	RO2.2	2.00	5.00	4.36	0.80	-0.99 0.24 0.07 0.48
	RO2.3	1.00	5.00	4.31	0.81	-1.21 0.24 1.78 0.48
	RO2.4	3.00	5.00	4.46	0.67	-0.87 0.24 -0.39 0.48
	RO2.5	3.00	5.00	4.44	0.66	-0.76 0.24 -0.47 0.48
	RO2.6	3.00	5.00	4.49	0.64	-0.89 0.24 -0.26 0.48
Democratic Education	RO3.1	2.00	5.00	4.32	0.80	-0.77 0.24 -0.63 0.48
	RO3.2	3.00	5.00	4.54	0.64	-1.09 0.24 0.08 0.48
	RO3.3	1.00	5.00	4.13	1.03	-1.11 0.24 0.79 0.48
	RO3.4	1.00	5.00	4.30	0.82	-1.06 0.24 1.11 0.48
	RO3.5	1.00	5.00	3.81	1.21	-0.81 0.24 -0.05 0.48
	RO3.6	2.00	5.00	4.33	0.79	-0.79 0.24 -0.54 0.48

Notes: Five-point Likert scale: 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2: Disagree, 3: Neutral, 4: Agree, 5 Strongly Agree.

From the findings, it underscore the role of educational governance as a tool of soft power at UMT, where student representation mechanisms function not only as platforms for participation but also as strategic avenues for national identity, democratic values and institutional legitimacy. Through structured involvement in governance, UMT empowers students as key stakeholders, subtly reinforcing state and institutional ideologies while fostering a generation of civic-minded, responsible leaders. However, the relatively lower score in democratization also highlights the need to strengthen

inclusivity and engagement, particularly among underrepresented or less active student group embedded within educational governance structures as shown in Figure 3. These aligned with the past studies arguments (Sy Sair, 2016; Guthrie & Chunoo, 2023).

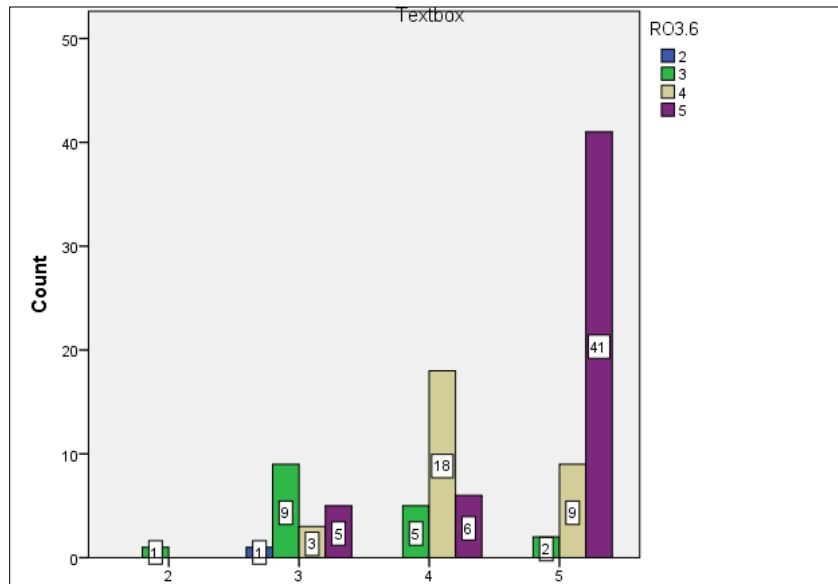


Figure 3: Research Objective 1: I Understand the Meaning of Democracy
Sources: SMP Policy and SMP (Economics) students, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu

For instance, Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between students perceptions of Malaysia's democratic system (RO3.6: I agree with the Democracy System Practiced in Malaysia) and their self-reported participation in campus electoral activities (RO3.2: I am involved in Campus Election Activities as a Voter). This comparative analysis offers insights into the extent to which students attitudinal support for democracy is reflected in their actual democratic participation within the university environment. Additionally, the figure reveals a positive and consistent trend, whereby students who strongly agree with the statement affirming Malaysia's democratic system also tend to report higher levels of participation as voters in campus elections.

For instance, a majority of students who selected "4" or "5" (*Agree* or *Strongly Agree*) for RO3.6 also indicated active participation in campus voting activities (scoring

similarly high on RO3.2). This suggests a positive association between national democratic belief and institutional democratic engagement, highlighting that students with strong political trust in national systems are more inclined to exercise their civic rights within academic settings.

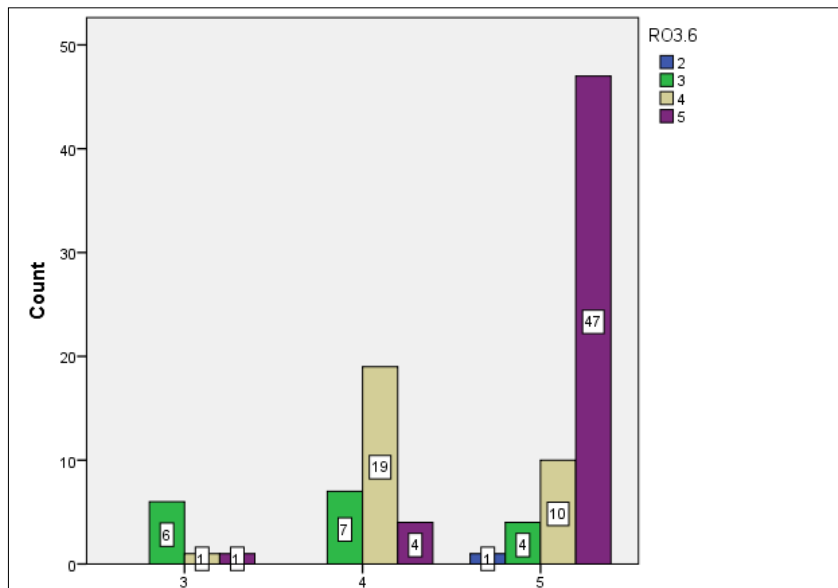


Figure 4: Research Objective 2: I Understand the Duties of a Voter
Sources: SMP Policy and SMP (Economics) students, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu

For this study, Figure 4 also identifies a smaller group of students who, despite expressing agreement with Malaysia's democratic model, reported limited or no involvement in campus elections. As explain in the the attitude–behavior gap that may result from limited awareness, low interest in student politics, and perceptions that campus elections lack authenticity compared to real-world democratic processes, reducing student civic engagement, this attitude behavior gap may stem from various contextual factors, such as lack of awareness, disinterest in student politics, or a perception that campus elections do not mirror real-world democratic processes. Such findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that cognitive alignment with democratic values does not always result in active participation, especially in the

absence of strong civic education and institutional support (Suhaimi, 2022; Rashid & Ariffin, 2024).

Furthermore, in terms of educational implications, Figure 4 underscores the importance of fostering both civic literacy and electoral participation at the institutional level. While students may hold favorable views of democratic governance, universities must ensure that structures exist to translate these views into meaningful engagement (Muhamad et al., 2021; Pangrazio et al., 2023). This includes expanding access to campus electoral processes, increasing visibility of student council roles and embedding participatory governance in the student experience (Sair, 2016). For instance, institutional efforts are needed to bridge this gap, especially within the context of the *Undi18* policy, which aims to enhance political maturity and participation among youth. Therefore, student leadership programs and campus election mechanisms should be leveraged as active tools for democratic education and civic empowerment (Gauttam et al., 2024).

Table 4:
Crosstab Statistics

Items			RO3.6 I agree with the Democratic System Practised in Malaysia				Total
Five-point Likert scale			2	3	4	5	
Course	SMP (Economics)	No.	1.0	13.0	17.0	22.0	53.0
		Total	1.0%	13.0%	17.0%	22.0%	53.0%
	SMP Policy	No.	0.0	4.0	13.0	30.0	47.0
		Total	0.0%	4.0%	13.0%	30.0%	47.0%
Total		No.	1.0	17.0	30.0	52.0	100.0
		Total	1.0%	17.0%	30.0%	52.0%	100.0%

This study also explored how student representation at UMT reflects broader themes of educational governance functioning as a tool of soft power (Table 4). The *t*-test results revealed no statistically significant differences between male and female students, $p > 0.05$), indicating that democratic learning experiences and leadership opportunities are fairly distributed across genders. This suggests that institutional governance at UMT promotes inclusive student engagement in line with soft power strategies that emphasize equality, participation and representation. In addition, the researchers also conduct the one-way ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in perceptions of democratisation education across age groups, *F*-value (2,147) = 4.32, $p < 0.05$. Subsequent post hoc analysis (aged 21-22 years old, aged 23-24 years old and above 25 years old) reported significantly higher scores compared to

other age groups (Figure 5). This age cohort is more frequently engaged in student governance, campus initiatives and political dialogue, potentially increasing their exposure to democratic practices (Sugara, 2022). Such engagement aligns with the university's strategic emphasis on developing youth leadership as a form of soft power, positioning student leaders as representatives of institutional values and democratic principles (UMT, 2024).

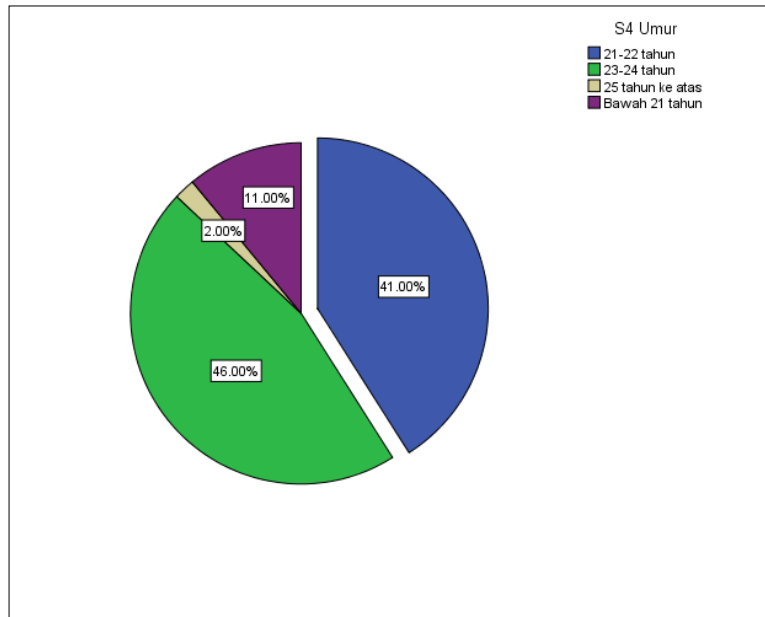


Figure 5: Respondents Age

Sources: SMP Policy and SMP (Economics) students, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu

Table 5:

Multiple Regress OLS between On Campus and Outside Campus

Multiple Regress OLS between On Campus and Outside Campus											
	Model	β	t-value	On Campus			Outside Campus				
				p-value	Collinearity Statistics		β	t-value	p-value	Collinearity Statistics	
					Tolerance	VIF				Tolerance	VIF
Democrat Engage	RO3.4	-0.04	-0.33	0.74	0.39	2.57	0.29	1.68	0.10	0.42	2.40
	RO3.3	0.26	2.27	0.03 **	0.45	2.21	0.44	2.52	0.02* *	0.41	2.42

	RO3.2	0.56	5.99	0.00 ***	0.65	1.54	-0.77	-3.93	0.00* **	0.33	3.06
	RO3.1	0.21	2.06	0.04 **	0.53	1.87	0.85	4.59	0.00* **	0.36	2.77
	Adj R ²			0.636			0.57				
	Durbin-Watson			2.184			1.55				
	F-value			28.53			12.36				
	Sample Size			64			36				
	Dependent Variable: The Democratic System Practiced in Malaysia										

Table 6:
Multiple Regress OLS for the Citizenship Development

Variables	β	t-value	p-value	Collinearity Statistics	
				Tolerance	VIF
RO2.1 I am able to work in various changing situations	0.07	0.43	0.67	0.29	3.47
RO2.2 I can work in a Variety of Constantly Changing Situations	0.28	1.58	0.12	0.27	3.70
RO2.3 I Act Based on Personal Values	0.16	1.55	0.13	0.77	1.30
RO2.4 I am Seen as a Cooperative Person	0.23	1.67	0.10	0.40	2.50
RO2.5 I am Open to a New Ideas	0.31	2.33	0.02* *	0.41	2.45
RO2.6 I can Distinguish Between Negative and Positive Changes	0.06	0.42	0.67	0.37	2.68

Dependent Variable: The Democratic System Practiced in Malaysia

A multiple regression analysis OLS was performed to assess the influence of civic awareness and leadership-related variables on students' perceptions of Malaysia's democratic system (*Sistem demokrasi yang diamalkan di Malaysia*), with separate models for on campus and off campus students (Table 5). Among on-campus students ($n = 64$), the model was statistically significant and accounted for 63.6 percent of the variance in their support for the democratic system ($\text{Adj } R^2 = 0.636$, $F\text{-value } (4,59) = 28.53$, $p < 0.001$). For the reliability and validity test, the Durbin-Watson statistic suggested no issues with autocorrelation.

However, belief in political tolerance (RO3.4) was not a significant predictor ($p = 0.74$), implying it had limited influence on students democratic perceptions in this group. In addition, further sensitivity analysis was conducted to examine how civic

awareness and leadership-related variables predicted students agreement with the democratic system in Malaysia (*Sistem demokrasi yang diamalkan di Malaysia*), with separate models for on-campus and off-campus students. For on-campus students ($n = 64$), the model was statistically significant, explaining 63.6 percent of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.636$, F -value $(4,59) = 28.53$, $p < 0.001$), with no major autocorrelation concerns (Durbin-Watson = 2.184).

Among the predictors, belief in political tolerance (RO3.4) was not significant ($p = 0.74$), suggesting it did not meaningfully influence on-campus students perceptions of democracy in contrast with Othman et al., (2022). To differ, for off-campus students ($n = 36$), the regression model was also significant, accounting for 57.0 percent of the variance in democratic support (Adj $R^2 = 0.570$, F -value $(4,31) = 12.36$, $p < 0.001$), with acceptable residual independence (Durbin-Watson = 1.55). Notably, understanding of voting duties (RO3.2) had a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.77$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that greater civic awareness was linked to lower agreement with the democratic system.

Sensitivity Analysis

Robustness multiple regression OLS analysis in Table 6 examined how selected leadership traits (RO2.1 to RO2.6), representing adaptive leadership and interpersonal competencies, predicted students agreement with Malaysia's democratic system (*Sistem demokrasi yang diamalkan di Malaysia*). The researchers found that only one variable "I can accept any new ideas" (*Saya boleh menerima sebarang idea-idea baharu*) (RO2.5) significantly predicted support for the democratic system ($\beta = 0.31$, $t = 2.33$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that among the leadership qualities assessed, students willingness to consider new perspectives is the strongest contributor to their positive views on democracy similar with Abdullah (2017) and Aziz and Ariffin (2024).

DISCUSSION

Based on the results and findings, the findings highlight the vital role of student engagement in campus activities such as elections and student debates as suggested by Abdullah (2017). Even though, this study show no significant differences were found based on gender, however, according to Abdullah (2017) and Aziz and Ariffin (2024),

in term of educational governance, the students have equal exposure to democratic education.

For the research implications, first, the findings support the student leadership model proposed by Guthrie and Chunoo (2023) and align with the democratic education framework outlined by Ationg et al. (2020). The results indicate that student leadership plays a significant role in enhancing university students understanding of democracy and civic values. Secondly, from the practical discussion, these findings provide valuable insights for university administrations in designing and strengthening student leadership development programs especially for UMT. Lastly, based on the arguments that there is a significant difference in student representative leadership and democratic education based on demographic factors at UMT, our findings indicate that gender disparity contributes to this difference, alongside factors such as student leadership, civic development, and democratic education, not necessary supporting (H_1).

Finally, the impact mechanisms such as student parliaments, structured leadership training and civic awareness campaigns should be further expanded. Furthermore, universities are encouraged to offer elective courses on democracy and civic leadership, in line with the *Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint 2015–2025*, to cultivate ethical, civic-minded, and forward-thinking graduates (Abdullah, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the discourse on educational governance as a form of soft power by examining student representation and democratic engagement at UMT. Findings highlight the institution's role in fostering civic-minded student leaders through participatory governance, thereby promoting democratic values and national identity. However, despite its contributions, our study has several limitations such as the study's focus only on final-year students from two academic programs at a single institution limits the generalizability of its findings. This study is limited by its focus on only two academic programmes at UMT, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to the broader student population. The views and experiences captured may not fully represent the diversity of perspectives across other faculties or disciplines within the university. Future research should further refine a broader institutional sample to enable comparative insights into governance structures, leadership norms and student political socialization.

In term of limitation of the study, the rising influence of digital media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and X in shaping youth political expression and leadership calls for further inquiry. Understanding digital political literacy and online activism would add a timely dimension to the study of soft power in higher education. Although this study contributes to the discourse on educational governance by examining student representation and democratic engagement at UMT, several limitations should be noted.

First, the research focuses solely on final-year students from two academic programmes within a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider student population. The views captured may not fully reflect the diversity of perspectives across other faculties or universities. Future studies should include broader institutional samples to enable comparative analysis of governance structures and student political socialization. Second and lastly, the growing influence of digital media platforms in shaping youth political expression was beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, exploring digital political literacy and online activism would provide a more comprehensive understanding of student leadership and democratic engagement in Malaysia's higher education context.

Overall, this research affirms the importance of student representation in advancing democratic engagement and calls for more comprehensive, digitally aware approaches to understanding student leadership in Malaysia's higher education landscape.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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