

# (Elite) Private Higher Education in Malaysia and Pakistan: Contributions, Insights, Nuances, and Transformative Possibilities

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Access and geopolitics: Next steps in tackling the equity crisis in global higher education

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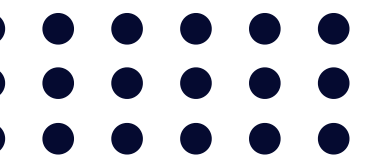


# Abstract

This presentation attempts to highlight the overlooked nuances and contested contributions of (elite) private higher education institutions in postcolonial Malaysia and Pakistan, which are often criticised for perpetuating elitism instead of being recognised for their contributions as providers of higher education as a public good in these Global South contexts.



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# Setting the Scene...



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# Contributions of (Elite) Private Higher Education (PHE) to Public Good in Malaysia and Pakistan



**01** **Bridging social, racial and ethnic gaps**, serving the needs of marginalised, unselected, unrecognised, and underserved population

**02** **Enriching quality education** and providing incentives for public institutions to improve and perform better

**03** **Providing affordable gateways** for international experience and internationally recognised qualifications.

**04** **Unlocking opportunities**, serving as catalyst for employment and upward social mobilities locally and internationally.





# The context of Malaysia

## Historical Development

- **1957:** Malaya's independence from British colonial rule
- **1963:** Malaysia officially formed
- **1971:** The New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced to restructure the socioeconomic imbalances across racial groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indians) after the deadly racial riots in 1969
- **1990s:** The rise of private HEIs (PHEIs) and transnational education (TNE)

## Challenges in Malaysia:

- Larger university admission quota for Bumiputera communities (i.e. Malays and natives of Sabah & Sarawak) = non-Bumiputera access to HE is limited
- Knowledge-based economic transition requires expanded skilled workforce capacity
- Weakening ringgit pressures government to reduce overseas education sponsorship
- Need to retain talent (reduce brain drain) and revenue within domestic boundaries



# The context of **Malaysia** (cont.)

## **PHEIs as providers of public good in Malaysia:**

- addressing unmet HE demand from non-Bumiputera students due to
  - university quota restrictions that favours Bumiputera students
  - lack of recognition for Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) for students from Chinese independent high schools
- TNE providing access to high quality Western qualifications (via twinning programmes, international branch campuses)
- TNE offering cost-effective international education at home
- strengthening graduate employability for PHEI graduates from non-elite background



# The context of Pakistan

## Historical Development

- **1947:** Pakistan's independence from British colonial rule
- **1972:** Private HEIs were nationalised under state control
- **1979:** Policy reversed, enabling renewed private sector participation

## Challenges in Pakistan:

- Restricted public university seats and high PHEI tuition fees create dual barriers for most students to access HE
- Underfunded public universities unable to provide high quality education with adequate facilities
- High graduate unemployment levels due to HE programmes misaligned with labour market demands



# The context of **Pakistan** (cont.)

## **Non-profit-oriented PHEIs as providers of public good in Pakistan:**

- increased access to HE via financial assistance (e.g. tuition subsidies, student loans, scholarships)
- provide employment opportunities to their own graduates
- recruit well-qualified academic staffs to provide high quality education
- prepare students with relevant skillsets and opportunity to access international experiences to enhance their graduate employability
- assist government with policy making, PD training, public health-related crisis
- subsidizing world-class quality of healthcare services to the public
- promote gender equity by increasing women's access to HE and professional careers





# New Insights, New Conceptualisations

In Malaysia and Pakistan, only few PHEIs have successfully achieved a “elite-status” branding.

In their respective contexts, public perceptions of what constitutes “**elite**” and “**elitism**” in the HE context **do not** necessarily conform within Western discourses.



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# New Insights, New Conceptualisations (cont.)


## Malaysia

**Colonial Malaya:** English-medium schools provided greater access to HE, lucrative employment, & elite status to affluent urban Malays, Chinese, and Indians only.

**Today, a select few Malaysian PHEIs could position their branding as “elite”:**

- Global university rankings position international branch campuses (IBCs) of HEIs from the Russell Group (UK) and the Group of Eight (Australia) as “world-class universities” = “world-class graduate”.
- Student demographics in IBCs are predominantly from families with affluent background due to high tuition fees.
- IBC students have better graduate employability in the private sector that prefer hiring graduates with superior English proficiency.

### Implications:

- Risk of further widening socioeconomic disparities between English-proficient and non-English-proficient graduates (a legacy from the British).
  - Non-Bumiputera students could bypass quota restrictions (necessary to promote Bumiputera participation in HE) to access elite pathways.
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# New Insights, New Conceptualisations (cont.)

## Pakistan

**Colonial Pakistan (British India):** English-medium schools were mainly attended by affluent locals.

**Today, PHEIs could be perceived as “elitist” when it:**

- cater primarily to students who could afford exorbitantly high tuition fees & highly proficient in English
- has the ability to provide high-quality educational environment and facilities (in comparison to public HEIs that lack funds)

**But, another form of “elitism” emerges within some PHEIs:**

- Not all PHEIs can be considered as “world-class university” in terms of quality, prestige, and tradition.
  - Only a select few PHEIs (e.g. Aga Khan University & Lahore University of Management Sciences) are listed in global university rankings, and being ranked reinforces their “elite” status.
  - Non-profit nature of (elite) PHEIs committed to improve social welfare through delivering world-class education.
  - Prestige could derived from historical track record for producing prominent leaders & public figures (e.g. Forman Christian College University)
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# Recap: Contributions of (Elite) Private Higher Education (PHE) to **Public Good** in Malaysia and Pakistan



**01** **Bridging social, racial and ethnic gaps**, serving the needs of marginalised, unselected, unrecognised, and underserved population

**02** **Enriching quality education** and providing incentives for public institutions to improve and perform better

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# Transformative Possibilities in the Global South

The assumption surrounding the HE sector within a market- and profit-driven economy can only be seen as **either providers of public good or private good is overly simplistic (Roshid & Phan, 2023).**

This rather superficial and dichotomous perception overlooks the deep complexities and multi-dimensional social realities faced by **aspiring youths who are eager to transform themselves** via HE, even if it entails exhausting their personal resources to enrol into (elite) PHEIs.

**Malaysia:** Non-Bumiputera students could still fulfil aspirations to access world-class education at home and secure high-paying roles locally & globally.

**Pakistan:** Upward social mobility for low-income meritorious students & Pakistan women by accessing high-quality education and professional employment

We need to pay close attention to these complexities.






# Conclusion



However, a critical concern emerges:

**Can an over-reliance on PHEIs as co-providers of HE as a public good become a convenient "band-aid" solution for governments unwilling to address deeper issues?**

Ultimately, PHEIs can act as transformative agents for those living at the fringes of society, but this potential can only be fully realised through collaborative efforts that address existing social issues shaping the HE landscapes in these post-colonial countries.







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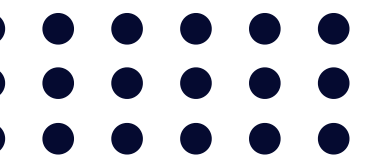
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