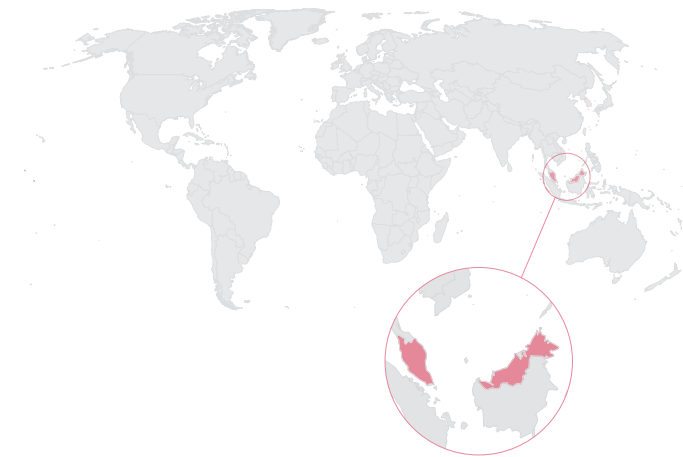# Social Country | Policy Briefs

Dennis Niemann

Education policy in Malaysia: global transformation processes, IOs' influence and cultural spheres

University of Bremen

SFB 1342 Globale Entwicklungsdynamiken von Sozialpolitik /
   CRC 1342 Global Dynamics of Social Policy

A04: Global developments in health care systems and long-term
   care as a new social risk

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Content

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Source: https://ontheworldmap.com/malaysia/ (Accessed July 4, 2024)

1. Introduction[1]

The evolution of Malaysia's education policy is characterized by two interrelated features: an ethnically diverse society and an ongoing economic transformation. First, a highly diverse society with numerous ethnic and linguistic backgrounds is strongly influenced by the Malay majority and their religion, Islam. Because of the dominance of Malays and other "Bumiputera"[2] among the ethnic groups, Malaysia has been described as an ethnocratic state (Samuel & Tee, 2013, p. 137). For the government, a central task of the Malaysian education system is the promotion of a peaceful and harmonious society. However, the composition of Malaysia's society is also reflected in the country's education system that features different education institutions for different ethnicities with different languages of instruction.

Secondly, rapid structural transformations and accelerating economic and technological modernization were also translated into stark adaptations of the education system. Having originally been a producer of primary goods, Malaysia developed into a multi-sectoral economy at the turn of the millennium, focusing mainly on the service sector and production industry, while agriculture only accounts for just over 10% in the late 2010s (M. N. Lee, 2014, p. 235). The formation of human capital and skills was evaluated by Malaysian policy makers as essential for general progress. In this regard, education development plans were anchored in the Western-influenced education discourse on skills, competencies, and human capital generation. While the transformations

2   Malays and the indigenous populations from the regions Sabah and Sarawak form the largest group, the Bumiputera (which translates "sons of the soil" (Chee-Beng, 2000, p. 445)). Other indigenous ethnic groups included in the Bumiputeras are Dayak, Iban, Kadazan, Penan and Senoi (Samuel & Tee, 2013).

were undertaken mainly from the perspective of the Malay majority, it caused even greater educational inequality and increased societal stratification. The educational integration of rural and marginalized communities, such as migrants and refugees, is also challenging because they often have limited access to quality education, leading to growing inequities in learning outcomes.

Although domestic modernization processes and cultural idiosyncrasies were important determinants for transformations in Malaysia's education system, the driving forces for educational reforms must also be also sought outside the country. As education became increasingly internationalized (Martens, Rusconi, & Leuze, 2007) and educational internationalization also increasingly affected developing states of the so-called Global South, a world culture in education manifested (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). The Malaysian education system has been strongly influenced by the global environment and international actors, namely IOs. Particularly, OECD's PISA study and other international lager scale assessments became reference points for Malaysian education policy making. Decisions were taken against the background of IOs' recommendations and international best practices. On the other hand, there are also regional countermovements in the Global South to international discourse, which was criticized to be dominated by Western actors and their values and preferences. Hence, emerging economies, such as Malaysia, are sometimes caught between regional identities and global imperatives in approaching policy reforms. An example of this back and forth regarding internationalization influences in education policy is Malaysia's choice to temporally reinstall the English language as the main language for instruction in mathematics and science between 2003 and 2012 (after English was once abolished in the course of decolonization efforts). English was seen as necessary, on the one hand, for preparing Malaysian students for the increasingly internationalized labor market and, on the other hand, for fostering educational exchange with the international community.

In the case of Malaysian education policy I argue that the historically established formal and informal institutions determined how the country adapted to the external reform pressures and why it implements certain education reforms on its national modernization track. To explore the developments in the Malaysian education system, a qualitative content analysis of documents from the government, the Ministry of Education (MoE), and IOs dealing with education policy in Malaysia was conducted. In addition, two expert interviews were conducted with representatives of IOs working in the Malaysian education sector to gain further insight into the policy-making processes and to validate the information obtained from the documents.

2. Malaysia's Education System

The Malaysian education system is not differently organized than the education systems of most other countries. It comprises the cycles of pre-primary, primary, (lower and upper) secondary, and tertiary education. Primary education is compulsory and parents are free to choose which type of primary school their child attends. It begins for children typically at the age of six or seven, and is six years in duration.[3] Secondary education is five years and comprises lower secondary (three years, at the end of which all students must pass an examination to obtain the lower secondary school leaving certificate) and upper secondary (another two years, after which students have to take the Certificate of Education examination) levels. As of 2024, upper secondary education offers the main educational tracks of literature, science, religion, technical, vocational, and skills.[4]

Although the Malaysian government has invested heavily in the education system (see below in section 2b) and the general school system has been modernized considerably in recent decades, some inequalities persist not only between the different ethnic and socio-economic groups, but also between rural and urban areas. Due to the uneven geographical distribution of the population in some parts of Malaysia, with areas that have only a few inhabitants, smaller villages and settlements have multigrade schools with students of different age cohorts and with different abilities in the same class (UNICEF, 2009). Schools in urban areas "tend to have better infrastructure and more resources than rural schools" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 5). In this configuration, the existing inequalities between ethnic groups are reinforced and socioeconomically disadvantaged families from the minority groups are even more deprived of educational opportunities.

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3   https://www.malaysia.gov.my/portal/subcategory/113, accessed 05/03/2024
4   https://www.moe.gov.my/pengenalan-3, accessed 05/28/2024.

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a. Private Education in Malaysia

In the Malaysian education system, private education also exists in parallel to the public education system. Private education is entirely financed by the private sector, but is subject to supervision by the MoE or, in the case of private universities, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE).5 In the last two decades, private education became more relevant. Between 2010 and 2020, the share of students in private primary education was around 10% compared to only 1-2% between 1990 and 2000. In secondary education, we can observe a surge in the share of students enrolled in private schools from ca. 5% between 2000 and 2010 to 10% in 2020 (Figure 1). In tertiary education, the share of students in private universities was always significantly higher than in the other educational stages and ranged between 30% and 40%. This number temporally even grew to a significant extent in the mid-2010s to almost 50% only to fall back again to approximately 40 % in 2020/2021 (Figure 1). Compared to other Southeast Asian countries and also the group of industrialized OECD countries, the ratio of students attending private schools in Malaysia was for a long time substantially lower at the primary and secondary level. Since the mid-2000s, however, private primary and secondary education in Malaysia has gained in importance and the country has converged towards ratios of other countries in the region (see Figure 1).

Regarding higher education, Malaysia was at or even above the average for Southeast Asian countries and the Malaysian model is generally more similar to that of other Anglo-American countries such as the former colonial power Great Britain. This is also due to the existing path dependencies, as Malaysia had no public universities at the time of its independence in 1957, but private higher education institutions were already established as so-called "tutorial centers" (Tham, 2011, p. 4). In the 1970s, Malaysia established several new universities and, thus, offered public alternatives to private higher education and also decreased the dependence on foreign higher education (Zakaria, 2000).

These developments regarding privatization can be explained by referring to Malaysia's general direction in education policy. The previously low rates in private education enrollment indicate that the public education system was deemed sufficient by the government and the majority of the Malaysian population and, thus, no major market for private schools has emerged. With changing economic circumstances, the educational landscape also changed. The recent increase in enrollment rates in private education institutions has taken place against the background of economic growth in Malaysia. It was observed that the private education industry in Malaysia has grown significantly since the government has supported this in its endeavor to produce a highly skilled workforce for the country's economic development (Zakaria, 2000). For private higher education, affordability "ranges from 34% to 77% of the annual mean household income [...], to as low as 6% for an undergraduate

Figure 1. Share of Malaysian students enrolled in private education (%)

Source: own account

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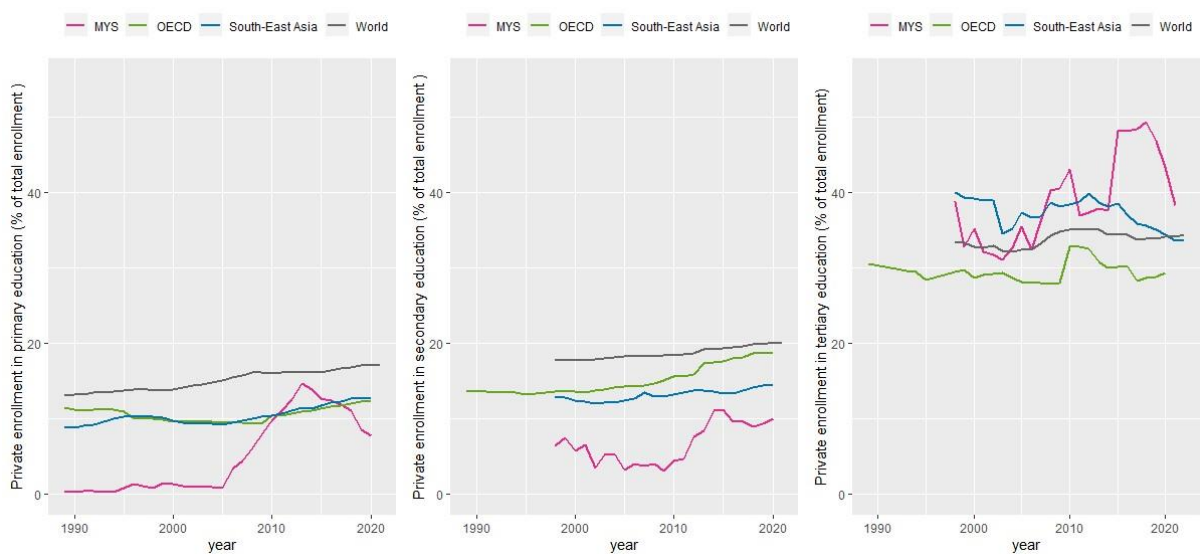
5   https://www.malaysia.gov.my/portal/subcategory/117, accessed 06/19/2024.

program in [...] university colleges" (Tham, 2011, p. 14). Although the figures say nothing about differences in the quality of the provided education, this shows that private higher education per se is not only affordable for the wealthier parts of the Malaysian population, but that also students from low and middle-income groups can attend private universities. The progressive positive economic developments and the growing middle class also increased the demand for high-quality education that is usually, and also in the case of Malaysia, associated with institutions of private education.

While, with the exception of higher education, these developments still indicate a minor relevance of private education in Malaysia, a closer look reveals a reproduction of the existing stratification in the Malayan society. Since private education is not subsidized by the state, only the wealthiest part of the population can afford to send their children to the more expensive high quality private schools (Interview Malaysia #1 and Interview Malaysia #2). Hence, elites in Malaysia tend to reproduce themselves when it comes to education.

b. Educational Funding and Spending in Malaysia

The governmental spending for education in Malaysia substantially varied in the past 40 years. Measured as percentage of the national GDP, it ranges between 7.5% (in the early 2000s) and 3.5% (in 2021). While Malaysia's spending ratio on education has always been above the average for Southeast Asian states since 1970, it was even well above the average of the industrialized OECD countries in the 1980s and early 2000s. However, there were considerable fluctuations (see Figure 2), and after periods of increased expenditure, the proportion quickly fell below 5% which is still comparatively high and above the average for Southeast Asian states. Some of the upward deviation (in the 1980s and 2000s) can be explained by encompassing policy programs that emphasized the aspiration to reform Malaysia's education system. The peak in the late 1990s and early 2000s was a consequence of the Asian financial crisis, which led to an economic downturn while spending remained

Figure 2. Malaysian expenditure on education (% of GDP, 1970-2021)

Source: own account

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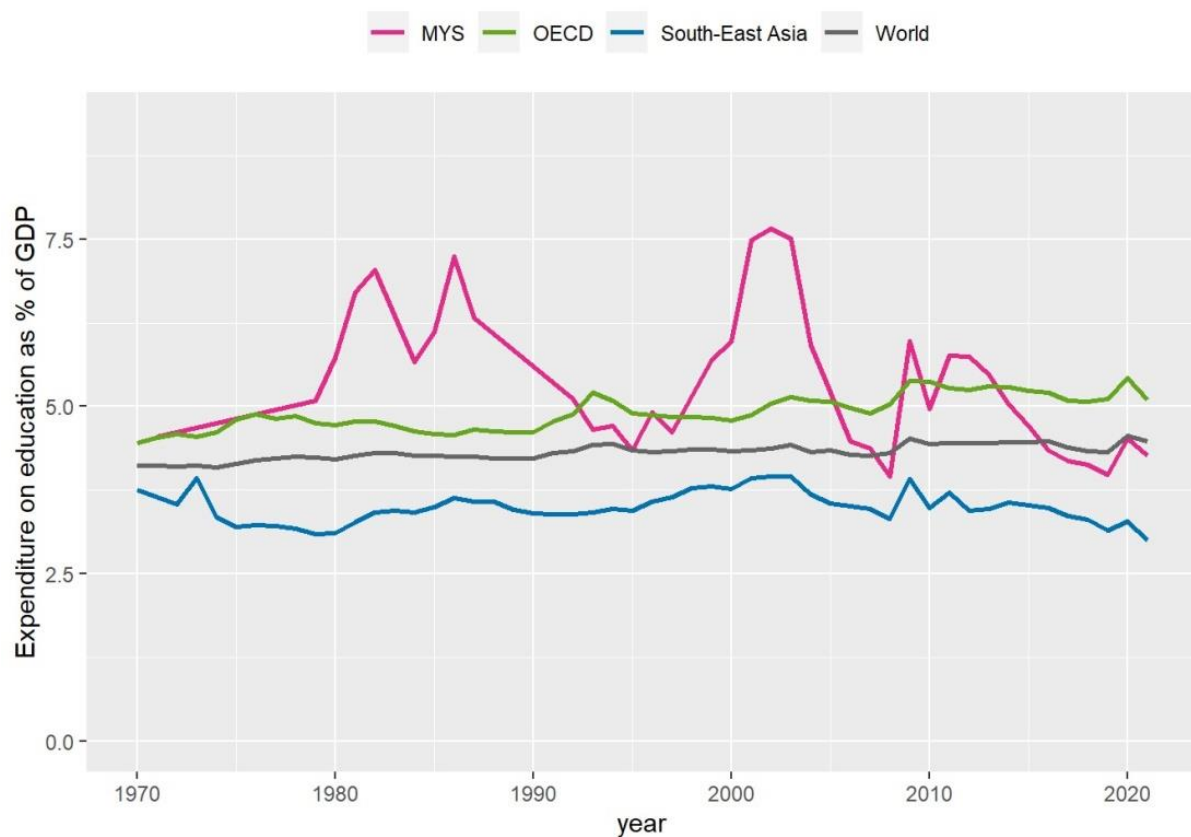
largely stable. Although this was an exceptional period, the funding pattern shows that education continued to be a priority for the Malaysian government, as no significant budget cuts were made to the education sector. However, the phases of intensified expenditure were followed by an instant decline in spending levels. Since 2010, expenditure on education fell from 6.0% of GDP to 3.5% of GDP as of 2021 (Figure 2).

If we compare Malaysia's spending levels to those of Western industrialized states, the governments' expenditures are quite similar (e.g. to the U.S. or Germany). Part of the explanation is that once investments in educational infrastructure and administrative capacities have been made, general spending levels can be reduced as maintenance is less expensive. As a result, phases of expansion are typically followed by phases of consolidation in which the level of expenditure decreases.

Comparing government spending on education to expenditures in other areas, it can be seen that in Malaysia, with few exceptions between 2003 and 2009, the average annual spending on education amounts to around 20% of all public spending since 1991 (see Figure 3). Compared internationally and regionally, this figure is clearly above average. Malaysia spends approximately 5 percentage points more on education than other Southeast Asian countries or countries from the OECD-world. This high rate underscores the importance that is attributed to educational development in Malaysia's public policies.

c. The Polity and Politics of the Malaysian Education System

The Malaysian education policy is strongly guided by the country's development plan in order to advance economically and by political efforts to integrate the various ethnic groups. Both of these interlinked aspects determine how the Malaysian government approaches reforms in the education sector and, as will be shown in Section 4, how the dynamics of cooperation with IOs unfold.

The development plan "Vision 2020" (or "Wawasan 2020") postulated by the Malaysian Government under longtime Prime Minister Mahathir Bin Mohamad in 1991 was an early framework program to foster the

Figure 3. Malaysian expenditure on education as percentage of overall governmental spending
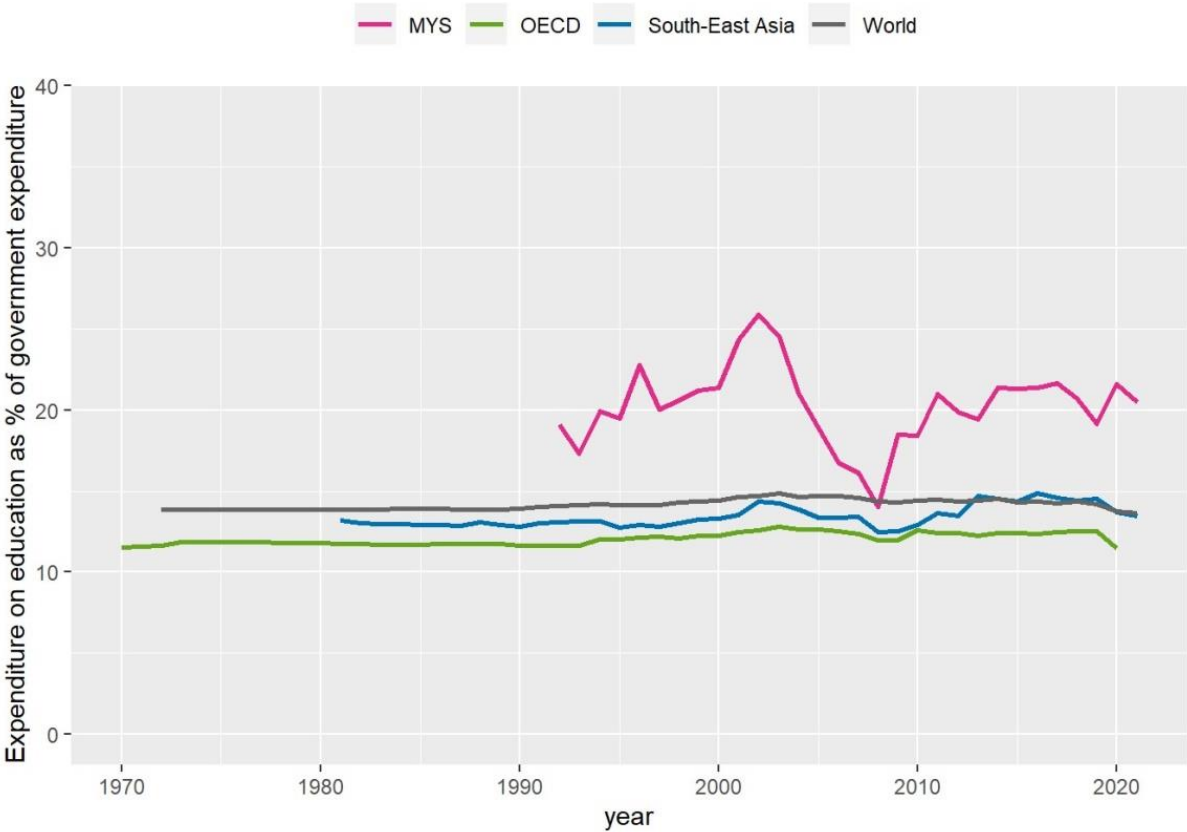
Source: own account

country's overall development by introducing several interlinked projects over time to gradually transform Malaysia's economy.[6] This general program also comprised concrete projects for modernizing the education system. For instance, increased access to higher education was stipulated and private higher education providers were subsidized, "leading to the envisioning of Malaysia as a regional hub for higher education" (Tham, 2011, p. 5).

Furthermore, modern Malaysian education policy is shaped by the National Philosophy of Education (NPE) that was issued in 1988 by the MoE and refers to skill formation, moral and religious values, and a holistic development of Malaysian citizens (Zakaria, 2000, p. 114). The NPE aims to integrate the different ethnic groups in Malaysia and to foster socio-economic development through educational progress (Al-Hudawi, Fong, Musah, & Tahir, 2014; Chassie & Peck, 2023). As Malaysia is an ethnically heterogeneous state, the formation of a cohesive Malaysian identity is one of the government's priorities. The unity of Malaysia's society also functions strongly through education.

Malaysia's education polity is characterized by a high level of centralized federalism (Chin, 2024) and the MoE is responsible for pre-primary, primary and secondary education, while the 2004 established MoHE deals with issues of tertiary education. In 2013, the MoHE was merged again with the MoE and both formally relatively independent bureaucratic entities form one political unit. In 2020, after Muhyiddin Yassin took office as prime minister, another reorganization took place and the MoHE again became an independent department. These developments in the organizational structure of the Malaysian education system show that the policy field is institutionally and politically contested, as the structures are not yet fully consolidated and constant reform efforts are being undertaken to shape the country's education sector.

The multi-ethnic state of Malaysia is not without societal tensions that also reflect back on its education system. In the past, theses tensions even culminated in racial riots between Malays and Chinese in 1965 (as a result of which Singapore had to leave the Federation of Malaysia)[7] and again in 1969. In the course of this violent conflict, the Malay-dominated government introduced policies to further increase the influence of Malays. With the increased implementation of the pro-Bumiputera policies in the 1970s and 1980s, the Malay elites, who dominate the government and generally hold high office in the country, proclaimed a national culture that placed orientation towards the Malay ethnic group at its center.

d. The historical background of Malaysia's education system

The most impactful period in the country's history clearly was colonialism and the effects it still has. Until its independence in 1957, Malaysia – or more precisely Malaya[8], was under (direct and indirect) British rule for almost 150 years. This does not only mean that the British administrative structure was established in Malaysia and educational structures were introduced by the colonial power, but also that Malaysia's education system was subsequently modeled on the British education system (Zakaria, 2000).

Furthermore, the British colonial policy led to a more plural society. While in 1880 around 90% of the population on the Malay Peninsula was of Malay origin, in 1957, the population became distinctively more heterogeneous with 50% Malays, 37% Chinese, 12% Indians, and 1% other groups (Jamil & Raman, 2012, p. 21). These changes in the population have had repercussions on the education system. First and foremost, the Malaysian government introduced policies to advance the Bumiputera groups.

The colonial history of Malaysia can broadly be separated into three major periods. Initial colonization efforts in the 16th and 17th century by European powers (British, Dutch, and Portuguese) saw the establishment of several settlements and trading posts at the coastal regions. In this period, almost no administrative infrastructure was implemented as the interests of European powers were almost exclusively of economic nature (i.e. to extract resources). Nevertheless, some basic territorial structures had already been created that shaped the future structure of the state of Malaysia. The local and regional rulers of the Malay Peninsula (the Malay Sultans) increasingly

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6   https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/sites/default/files/vision%202020.pdf, accessed 05/10/2024.

7   The exclusion of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 had also to do with growing tensions between the Malays and Chinese groups as the Singapore with its predominately Chinese population "threatened the Malay sense of security and their Malayness" (Chee-Beng, 2000, p. 447).

8   The state of Malaysia was formally established only in 1963 and consisted of the Federation of Malaya and North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore. But already in 1965, Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaysia.

sided with the British in the 19th century and in 1824, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty defined the spheres of influence of both European powers, with Great Britain gaining control over the Malaysian territory. Hence, a further consolidation of established structures took place.

After the British became the dominant colonial power in the region in the mid-19th century, they encouraged the establishment of different types of ruling systems in the area. Firstly, federated (with common institutions) and unfederated (without common institutions) British protectorates were governed by local rulers. Secondly, the Crown Colonies of the Strait Settlements on the Malay Peninsula were under direct control of the British government. Subsequently, according to the Divide-et-Impera approach, the British Empire proceeded with the "Malaysian colony" (comprised of the regions Penang, Singapore, and Malacca) as with its other colonies and established administrative institutions that resemble the ones in the British motherland. This also means that the British rulers included selected elites from the Malaysian population to join them in administering their colony. Furthermore, under British rule, the immigration of Chinese and Indian laborers was fostered as they were needed for maximizing the economic, pre-industrial, and agricultural production (Kaur, 2008). Although Chinese have been migrating to present-day Malaysia for centuries, making them the second largest group, the British colonial policies intensified this migration stream. As a result, the composition of societies in the Malay territories changed and generated the multi-ethnicity that characterizes today's Malaysia. Again, the share of Malays and other Bumiputera declined while the percentage of Chines and Indians grew during this period.

The composition of the population has also influenced the design and content of the Malaysian education system. Prior to 1824, education in Malaysia was delivered in a rather non-pedagogical manner that emphasized teaching morals and values, agricultural techniques, fishing and other basic skills (Sivalingam, 2021). Under British colonial rule, these basic skills were regarded as sufficient to do most of the required manual labor. The British colonial administration thus essentially restricted its education policy to the establishment of an elementary school system, which provided basic education for the masses of colonial subjects, i.e. the local population.

While the local elites of the Malay aristocracy were integrated by the British by granting them access to higher levels of education, the other classes of the Bumiputera population remained largely uneducated and worked in agriculture and manual jobs. On the other hand, the British colonial administration was also interested in educating more people in Malaysia so that they could be employed in the flourishing trade. The British established fee-paying primary and secondary schools with curricula based on the ones in Great Britain. These schools were in the end only affordable for a small, relatively wealthy group of people from the cities, mostly Chinese, some Indians and only a few ethnic Malays (Thimm, 2010, p. 3). Essentially, the.

One outcome of this British education policy in Malaysia was the emergence of a socio-economic middle class among the Chinese Malays in particular, who were better off than the majority of ethnic Malays, most of whom lived in rural areas. Therefore, the foundations of educational inequalities were already laid during British colonial rule over Malaysia. The education policy reforms following Malaysia's independence must be seen against this background. Numerous policy measures sought to reduce the previously institutionalized disadvantage of the Malaysian population group. However, this then led to disproportionate disadvantages for minorities.

Eventually, the Razak Report of 1956 ultimately shaped Malaysia's education system in the early years of its independence and the laid the groundwork for the national education system. By reviewing the implementation of the Razak Report in the Education Ordinance, in 1960 the Rahman Talib Educational Review Committee Report were incorporated in Malaysia's Education Act of 1961. This comprehensive law aimed at eradicating illiteracy by, among other things, providing free-of-charge primary education, increasing control mechanisms of primary education, and increasing the influence of the federal government as it became (and still is) responsible for the planning of the curriculum (UNESCO, 1972). At the same time, the 1961 Education Act also resembles a clear cut with former colonial ties as it fostered the use of national languages as languages of instruction, aimed to strengthen cultural identity, and also emphasized religious education.

e. Multi Ethnicity and Education Reforms in Malaysia

Malaysia is an ethnically heterogeneous state. As of 2023, with a population of around 33 million people, the largest minority groups are Chinese (23%) and Indians (7%). The Malay majority (incl. other Bumiputera groups) amounts to almost 70% (with ca. 50% ethnically Malays). Thereby, the proportion of the Bumiputera has increased significantly over time from 50% in 1957, when Malaysia gained independence, while the proportion

of Chinese has gradually decreased from 37% (Jamil & Raman, 2012, p. 21). This demographic development has consolidated the influence of the Malay group versus the Chinese population in Malaysia and also had repercussions for the Malaysian education system. The imbalance between the population groups has also led to Malays having more privileges and influence than other groups, partly guaranteed by the constitution. The Muslim-majority parties often suggest that the multi-ethnic parties that also represent the Chinese population want to abolish the privileges of the Malays in order to gain support. This conflict was particularly prevalent in the 1980s/1990s (Guan, 2002) and since 2018 (Dettman, 2020).

A key feature of the Malaysian education system is the division along ethnic lines that is also reflected in the organization of the state's education system. Differentiation mainly works along the language of instruction. In primary education, there are two school types. First, the "national schools" use Bahasa Melayu as the language of instruction. Secondly, children in the "national-type schools" are taught in Mandarin (for the Chinese-Malaysian minority) or Tamil (for the Indian-Malaysian minority) (UNESCO, 2013). Although no official data is publicized, there is some evidence that the national schools (for the Malay majority) are usually better equipped and better funded than the national-type schools (Interview Malaysia #1). Members of the Chinese and Indian minority who are financially better off tend to send their children to private education institutions. Hence, segregation of the ethnic groups is partially institutionalized by the established school types.

Since imbalances and cultural rifts exist between the various ethnic groups, the Malaysian society is in a constant quest for generating harmony among them and ethnic considerations are central in Malaysian education policy (Jamil & Raman, 2012).[9] Reforms in this policy field were always considered under the auspices of their potential impact on the societal composition. Education was traditionally a means to foster national identity, to contribute to nation-building and to create a sense of "Malaysia-ness" (M. N. Lee, 2014; Samuel & Tee, 2013, p. 137). In the course of ethnic conflicts and because the Bumiputera groups were socio-economically disadvantaged, the Malay-dominated government introduced policies to further increase the influence of the Bumiputera. With the increased implementation of pro-Bumiputera policies in the 1970s and 1980s, the Malay elites, who dominate the government, proclaimed a national culture that placed orientation towards the Malay ethnic group at its center. For instance, in 1969, affirmative action measures were introduced for Malays (and other Bumiputera) to increase their enrollment rate in public universities. To address the dissatisfaction of other ethnic groups, easier access to affordable private higher education was also introduced (Tham, 2011).

An additional step of active government intervention in Malaysia, which focused mainly on improvements for the Bumiputera community, was the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 that aimed at reducing income and social inequalities. The NEP also identified education as an area where improvements were considered imperative in order to achieve the goal of advancing Malaysia. Also, affirmative action policies were passed that introduced admission quotas for Malays to universities (H.-A. Lee, 2012). According to an ILO study of Lucas and Verry, at least two problems occurred following the NEP plan for education. First, the overemphasis on measures concerning higher education led to problems with the quality of primary and secondary education, as resources were not allocated appropriately (Lucas & Verry, 1996). Secondly, although the reforms of the tertiary education sector aimed at expanding general access to higher education institutions, they mainly benefited wealthier students within each ethnic community (Lucas & Verry, 1996).

f. Issues of Contestations: The Languages of Instruction

A central issue of contention in Malaysia's education system is the language of instruction and large parts of the Malaysia's education reforms since the 1950s revolve around the associated division of population groups. Generally, Malaysia's education system recognizes Bahasa Melayu, English, Mandarin, and Tamil as primary languages of instruction. Already pre-independence, in 1951, the Barnes Report advocated the introduction of bilingual schools with English and Bahasa Melayu. Schools that have other languages of instruction, like Tamil or Chinese, were set to be gradually transitioned into the national school system. The proposed new direction in education policy caused vehement protest of the Chinese population (Sivalingam, 2021). In the same year,

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9   Ethnic tensions culminated in racial riots between Malays and Chinese in 1965 (as a result of which Singapore had to leave the Federation of Malaysia as with its predominately Chinese population "threatened the Malay sense of security and their Malayness" (Chee-Beng, 2000, p. 447)).

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the Fenn-Wu Report recommended the preservation of Chinese schools. Eventually, Malaysia's Education Ordinance of 1957 established the system of national schools (with Bahasa Melayu as language of instruction) and the national-type vernacular schools (with Chinese or Tamil as language of instruction). This policy measure significantly empowered the Malay majority by making Bahasa Melayu the de facto standard language of instruction, but without alienating the Chinese and Indian minority groups by politically recognizing their cultural identities through the recognition of their languages as alternative languages of instruction.

After the end of British colonial rule, the National Language Act of 1967 formally established Bahasa Melayu as the official national language. In July 1969, the Malaysian government announced that English national-type schools in Malaysia would be gradually abolished and by 1985, all English National Schools were converted into National Schools (Soh, Del Carpio, & Wang, 2021, p. 239). Chinese and Indian vernacular schools were not affected and continued teaching in Mandarin and Tamil. With this conversion, English became a second language taught at school. English was also abolished as language of educational instruction after gaining independence to counterweight socio-economic imbalances. In pre-independence Malaysian people educated in English were mostly Chinese, Indian and Malay urban elites while the people educated in vernacular languages were usually associated with lower skills (Gill, Nambiar, Ibrahim, & Hua, 2010). Introducing a local language in education, Bahasa Melayu, as the new standard not only served the purpose to foster national identity and integration, but also to reduce socio-economic differences that were rooted in the education system's languages of instruction.

However, Malaysia reverted back to English for mathematics and science education in 2003 (Gill et al., 2010). Before this policy change, students in elementary school studied both subjects in Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin or Tamil, depending on which school they attended, and in secondary school, math and science were taught only in Bahasa Melayu. The move was clearly linked to Malaysia's "Vision 2020" program and its aspirations to advance in economically in a globalized world (Azman, 2016; Soh et al., 2021). In order to educate skilled workers that are able to compete on the international job market and to invite foreign investments in Malaysia, English taught subjects of science and mathematics were seen as an integral building block for achieving this.

On the other hand, the move back to English was met with suspicion and opposition by various social forces within Malaysia. Initial plans to (re-) introduce the English language for all school subjects were quickly buried by the government when protests and universal oppositions surfaced. The compromise then was to limit education in English to mathematics and science. This voicing against reinstalling English has to be seen in the historical context of Malaysia. Establishing Bahasa Melayu as language of instruction was also an expression of cutting ties with Malaysia's former colonial power. At the same time, the mother tongue of the Malay majority served as an instrument for national integration and identity building (Gill et al., 2010).

Ultimately, English as the language of instruction for mathematics and science was once again replaced by Bahasa Melayu in 2012. The change to English in mathematics and science was essentially a top-down policy decision by Malaysia's long term prime minister, Mahathir bin Mohamad (in office from 1981 to 2003 and from 2018 to 2020) who also served as Minister of Education between 1974 and 1978. Eventually this caused major problems in the educational practice because after four decades of Bahasa Melayu being the language of instruction, there was a substantive lack of English proficiency among teachers and teachers' trainers (Gill et al., 2010). The return to the Malay language came against the backdrop of growing opposition from the population and the fact that the teachers' lack of English competency was deemed inadequate for proper teaching (Soh et al., 2021). English once again became the secondary language of instruction in the Malaysian education system, but this time, various policies supported the use of English in schools and aimed to improve the English proficiency of Malaysian students (and teachers).

g. Education and the Increasing Influence of Islam in Malaysia

In Malaysia, Islam is the official state religion, and anyone who is ethnically Malay must be Muslim according to the constitution. In the early 1980s, the Malaysian government initiated a process of increased Islamization by also setting up Islamic education institutions and, in consequence, the Islamic movement gained influence on curricula and school organization (M. N. Lee, 2014). This increased influence of Islam is also reflected in the political sphere. As of the 2022 elections, the Islamic Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, Malaysian Islamic Party) has with 20% of parliamentary seats become the largest party in Malaysia's parliament, the Dewan Rakyat (House

of Representatives), with 20 % of parliamentary seats. Although the rise of PAS has been at the expense of other Islamic parties, it shows that Malay Islamic political parties have significant weight in the legislature.,

While the majority of Malaysia's population has belonged to this religion, minority groups get further excluded by the dominant status of Islam (Interview Malaysia #1). Particularly, the largest minority group, the Chinese, face problems of exclusion. Islamic elites and teachers contributed intellectually to the unification of the ethnic groups of the indigenous Malays under Islam and Malay nationalism and, in relation to the Chinese, forming a more coherent unit within Malaysian society (Chee-Beng, 2000, pp. 448-449). The way Islam is interconnected with the ethnic majority of the Malays reinforces their political power and also supports directions in education reforms. Lee argues that "Islam has become both an agent and a symbol of the many rapid social changes now occurring in Malaysia" (M. N. Lee, 2014, p. 237).

3. INCLUSIVENESS AND SCOPE OF BENEFITS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

In this section, the developments and dynamics regarding the inclusiveness and scope of benefits in the Malaysian education sector regarding gender parity, migrant and refugee education, and educational digitalization will be discussed. Regarding the inclusion of traditionally socially and economically disadvantaged groups in the education system, Malaysia has a mixed record. While the integration of girls and women has made steady progress and is no longer a major concern, the situation of migrant and refugee children in education in Malaysia is difficult. Improvements in education can also be observed for other groups in Malaysia. For example, the inclusion of children with disabilities has been boosted by the Malaysian Zero Reject Policy since 2019 (Chin, 2024). This development can be directly linked to initiatives on the international level, namely SDG 4.

a. Gender Parity in Malaysia's Education System

Gender parity and the inclusion of girls and women in Malaysia's education system considerably improved over time. According to UNESCO, Malaysia has the lowest gender parity gap in Southeast Asia (UNESCO, 2013). This development in gender parity is particularly evident in the areas of secondary and tertiary education, where the enrollment of girls and women matched and even surpassed male enrollment since the 1990s (Figure 4). In primary education, gender inequality was never a severe problem in Malaysia. Since the mid-1970s, girls and boys have been almost equally represented in terms of school enrollment rates. A different picture can be drawn for secondary and higher education. In Malaysia's secondary education, the enrollment rates of girls massively

Figure 4. Gender Parity in Malaysia's education system
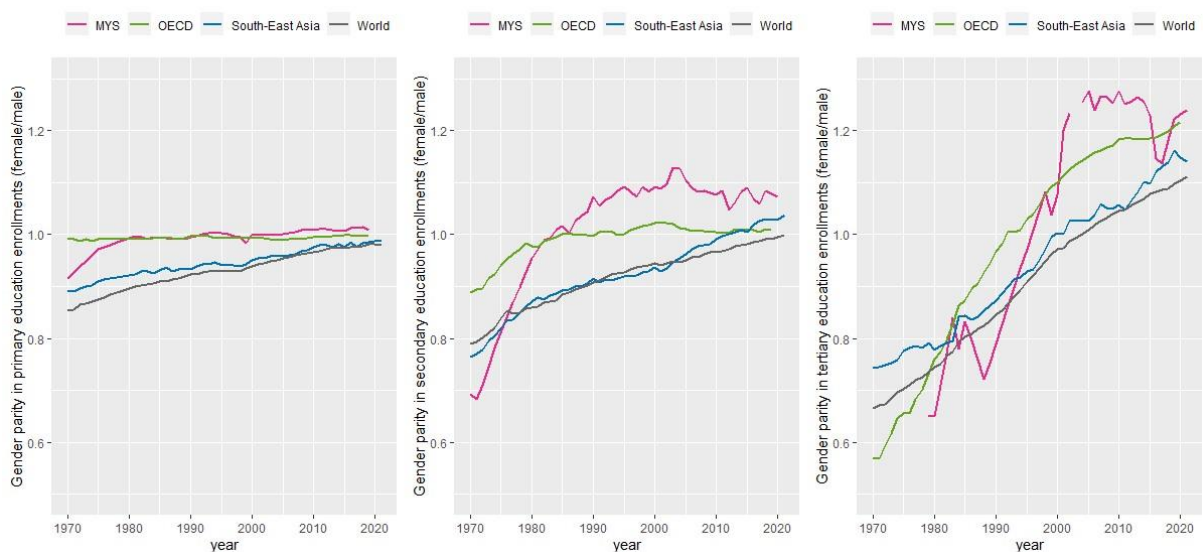
Source: own account

increased in the 1970s and 1980s and are nowadays slightly higher than the enrollment rates of boys (Figure 4). A similar pattern that only materialized ten year later can be observed for tertiary educations: in the 1990s and 2000s, the enrollment rates for girls and women caught up and significantly exceeded those of boys and men after the turn of the millennium.

We can also see that in comparison to other country groups, (OECD countries and Southeast Asian states) Malaysia does a better job in including girls and women in the education system. While gender parity in secondary and higher education was below or at the OECD average until the mid-1980s (in secondary education) and the 2000s (in higher education), Malaysia has caught up, and as of 2021 the country is above the female enrolment rates in the OECD (Figure 4). An even greater upward deviation can be found when comparing the educational gender parity in Malaysia with the average in the Southeast Asian region. However, the overrepresentation of women in higher education does not necessarily lead to equal opportunities on the labor market. Therefore, more detailed studies are needed on the study programs in which women are enrolled and on their transition from higher education to the labor market.

b. The Education of Migrants and Refugees in Malaysia

Malaysia has been a destination for different immigrant groups in the Southeast Asian region and beyond. Due to the country's economic growth rates, Malaysia has attracted foreign workers mostly from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian states. These people have not been integrated into Malaysian society, have hardly any participation or social rights and are expected to leave the country after their employment has ended. The Malaysian government has always been reluctant to grant rights to non-citizens. (Interview Malaysia #2). The issue of immigration was also discussed as a challenge to "maintain an exclusive and narrowly defined national identity" (Gurowitz, 2000, p. 873). For the multi-ethnic state of Malaysia, it was important to keep the population balanced.

The recent influx of refugees was putting additional pressure on the Malaysian society. According to UNHCR, Malaysia hosts close to 200.000 refugees and asylum seekers as of 2024. The majority of them are from Myanmar (85%), mostly from the group of Rohingya.[10] Since Malaysia has not signed the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees remain "under the purview of the existing immigration laws that deem them illegal immigrants and thus subject to the penalties in those laws" (Missbach & Hoffstaedter, 2020, p. 68). Refugees and asylum-seekers, including those born in Malaysia, have no access to the regular Malaysian public education system (Kaur, 2008) and instead have to rely on an informal education system that exists in parallel (Loganathan, Chan, Hassan, Ong, & Majid, 2022; Marcus et al., 2023). UNICEF estimates that only 44% of refugee children attend primary education and only 16% are enrolled in secondary education.[11]

Regarding refugees' education in Malaysia, UNHCR plays an important role in coordination with state agencies, civil society organizations, and other IOs to provide education. As the public education system is not an option for refugee children and the government is reluctant to provide public services to non-Malaysians, UNHCR in cooperation with several partners, such as refugee communities, NGOs, and religious organizations, support learning centers that provide educational services (Interview Malaysia #2). These (around 150) centers are not directly financed or staffed by UNHCR, but the IO sets basic guidelines for official UNHCR recognition and thus ensures a certain basic level of quality assurance.[12] Although the issue of migrant and refugee children's lack of participation in education has been raised by IOs, the Malaysian government has not taken any action to change this situation or even to acknowledge the concerns (Interview Malaysia #1).

c. Digitalization in Malaysia's Education System

The digitalization of the Malaysian education sectors was declared a priority early on and comprehensive efforts were undertaken to realize this aim. Already in the "Sixth Malaysia Plan" (1990-1995) ICT's use for education

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10 https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/malaysia#:~:text=Malaysia%20hosts%20some%20 181%2C000%20refugees,Yemen%2C%20Syria%2C%20and%20Somalia, accessed 05/11/2024.

11 https://www.unhcr.org/my/education-malaysia, accessed 05/29/2024

12 https://refugeemalaysia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/learning-centre-guidelines.pdf, accessed 05/28/2024.

was addressed. Since then, numerous projects, programs, and initiatives have been established in Malaysia. Among them were the Malaysia's National ICT Agenda (NITC), the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996, the Malaysian Smart School Roadmap (2005-2020), the Educational Development Master Plan (EDMP) (2006-2010), Education Strategic Plan (2011-2015), and a study on Teacher and Student ICT Competency Standards (UNESCO, 2013, pp. 11-12).

Particularly encompassing was the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) of 1996. The program was launched in the context of utilizing ICT in the education sector to generate high-value jobs and enhance national performance and competitiveness in the world economy according to Malaysia's Vision 2020 agenda (UNESCO, 2013). The MSC comprised seven different so-called "flagship applications", one of them being Malaysian Smart School Initiative (MSSI) that was started in 1997(M. N. Lee & Thah, 2016, p. 2). Under the organizational umbrella of the MSSI Malaysia since 1999 has invested heavily in ICT in education by establishing public-private partnerships comprising the MoE, administration, the private industry sector, local communities, and parents' representatives. Implemented with continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, MSSI's key components included infrastructure development, training of teachers, integrating ICT into the curriculum, and cooperation with industry partners and the public (M. N. Lee & Thah, 2016). In 2006, the Smart School Qualification Standards (SSQS), which rate schools based on their success in implementing ICT integration, were incorporated into the MSSI framework, and schools achieving certain ratings were categorized as so-called "smart schools". This multi-stakeholder approach of the MSSI also ensured that the techniques and administrative approaches used were demanded by the Malaysian economy and society.

In addition, the "Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025" of 2012 also particularly identified ICT improvements in educations as a decisive field for reforming the Malaysian education system (Ministry of Education (Kementerian Pendidikan), 2012). As teachers have been identified as one of the most important factors in advancing the use of ICT in education, the MoE initiated massive open online courses to train teachers in using digital platforms (UNICEF, 2020). Another big stimulus for ICT in education was, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many other countries, Malaysia quickly introduced online teaching modules and the private sectors and non-profit organizations provided devices as well as digital education plans for students (Interview Malaysia #2).

However, the results for the Malaysian ICT strategy have been evaluated as mixed and after the COVID-19 crisis faded, the digitalization of the education system was also scaled back again (Interview Malaysia #2). Despite the many and extensive programs to integrate ICT in teaching and learning processes, it has been observed that Malaysia is "behind many of its benchmarking countries in the region" when it comes to educational digitalization (UNESCO, 2013, p. 12). Consequently, there is a considerable gap between the outlined aspirations and the actual implementation of the digitalization of the education system. This also clashes with the goals of Malaysia to advance and lead by example.

4. INFLUENCE OF IOS

Like almost all other states, Malaysia was also affected by globalization processes, which also influenced its reform directions in education policy. The influence of the international level on Malaysia's education policy takes place on two interrelated levels. First, the country heavily refers to international initiatives and educational norms. Especially, the OECD's PISA studies became a reference point since 2009 and Malaysian education reforms were also conducted in light of the weaknesses identified by the international comparative assessments. Secondly, cooperation projects with IOs were established to advance the Malaysian education system. These projects were informed by global education norm and the projects' implementations reflect how Malaysia aims to align it with global developments in education.

a. International Education Norms in Malaysia

In its endeavor to advance economically and to be part of the international education community, Malaysia almost always referred to IO programs when introducing education reforms. For example, the Education for All framework was acknowledged in Malaysian education reforms also on inclusive education by "symbolically adopting the language of global education policies as a result of political pressure emanating from international

organization" (Chin, 2024, p. 154). Or, the "Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025" names the developments in the international education sector a reference point for Malaysia's education system and the way future policy direction should be designed (Ministry of Education (Kementerian Pendidikan), 2013). In interaction with the "National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 (from 2007), both programs aimed at modernizing Malaysia's education system and were influenced by international trends. This shows that Malaysia aligns itself with the global discourse on education and adopts the core concepts of this world society. However, the world society theory of Meyer and colleagues is also always aware of misfits between global norms and domestic implementation of these norms, a concept known as decoupling (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). Hence, one should take a closer look at how Malaysia implemented international norms. Especially, two general norms are picked up from the global education discourse: first, the aforementioned Education for All that emphasizes highly inclusive and equal educational provision to all members of the society and, secondly, the global norm of accountability via standardized assessments of educational outcomes. Both norms are well established in the international discourse by IOs that became decisive actors in education policy making (Niemann, 2022) and both are referred to by Malaysian policy makers and stakeholders in the education system.

Particularly, the impact of standardized large-scale educational assessments on the Malaysian education system and policy-making gained trajectory. As a response to the below-average performance results in international learning assessments, Malaysia established in 2012 the Performance and Delivery Unit (PADU). PADU's central task is to monitor the implementation and effects of policy programs that aimed at improving the Malaysian education system.

The empirical evidence on how Malaysia's education system performs compared to other countries has been derived from international large-scale assessments like TIMSS (participated since 1999) and PISA (participated since 2009). Both studies indicated that the outcomes of the Malaysian education system were significantly below the average compared to industrialized states. These results, of course, ran counter the Malaysian aspiration to become an advanced economy. In consequence, the MoE reevaluated its education goals and introduced subsequent reforms (M. N. Lee, 2014, p. 238). After analyzing the alarming PISA 2009 results of Malaysian students, the country introduced reform measures to counteract the diagnosed deficits. A major problem identified in PISA was that although the adult literacy rate was high (90%) and more and more students were graduating school, the competency levels of them remained comparatively low (World Bank Group, 2018). Among other things, Malaysia initiated the program Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) in 2009 to improve the competences of students at primary school (Interview Malaysia #2). LINUS is an example for the turn towards evidence-based policy making in education that other countries have also introduced in response to identified shortcomings of their education systems (Niemann, 2010).

However, in the following PISA studies, Malaysian students also scored below the average and between the PISA 2018 and 2022 the results dropped further (see Figure 5). Since this development is occurring in almost all countries that participated in PISA, the decline in results can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated school closures and other factors that impeded learning during this time. However, some underlying problems troubled the education system of Malaysia. The OECD pointed out that there are very few top performing students at proficiency levels 5 and 6 in Malaysia and that at the same time many students do not even reach a minimum proficiency level (level 2 or higher) in the tested subjects of reading, mathematics and science (OECD, 2023). This finding is especially worrying for a country that has to rely on a large number of well-educated citizens in order to progress economically in a knowledge-based society. Furthermore, the OECD also highlighted the persistently large gaps in education performances between students based on their respective socio-economic backgrounds. The Malaysian education system does not succeed well in equalizing social differences and offering equal educational opportunities for all.

b. Cooperation with IOs in the Field of Education

Regarding the second dimension of the internationalization of Malaysia's education system, several cooperation projects can be identified. In particular, since the early 2010s, exchanges with IOs on education topics have increased, and Malaysia has entered into several cooperation initiatives with IOs to reform the country's education system. Close cooperation exists, for instance, with UNESCO, the World Bank, and UNICEF. The following three examples of IO cooperation show the relevant dimensions in which Malaysia has integrated its education system

Figure 5. PISA scores of Malaysia (2009-2022)
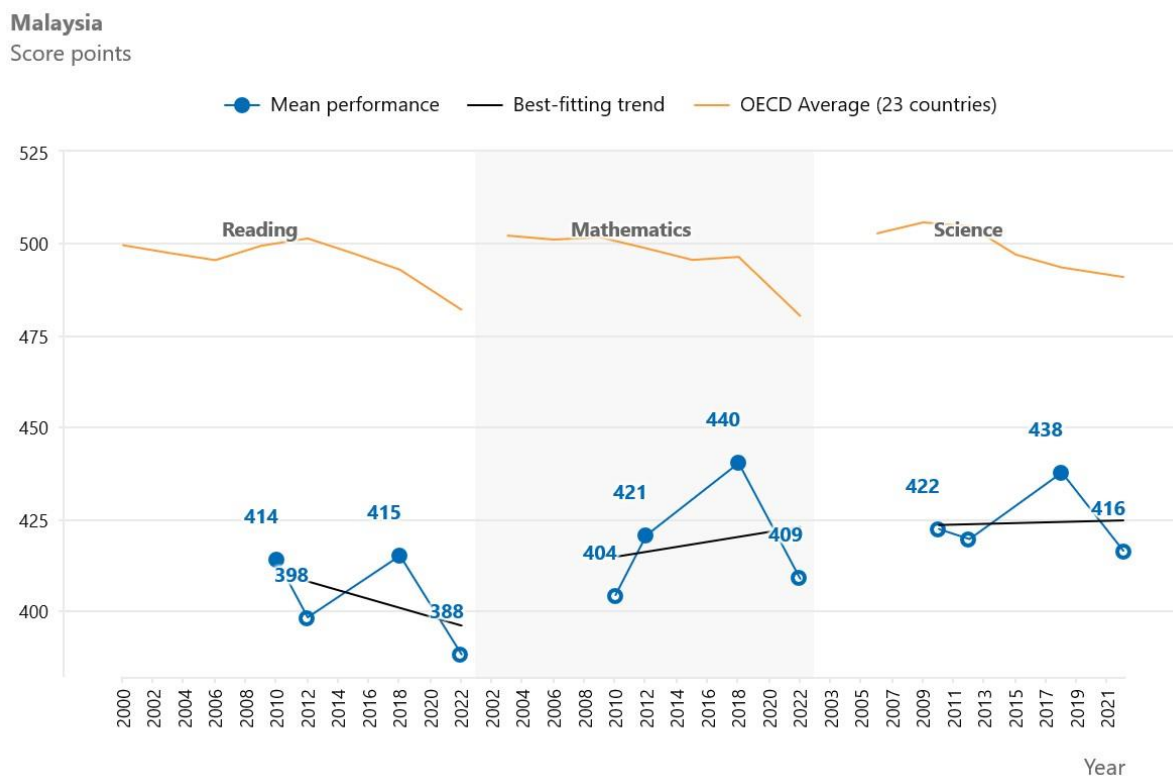
Source: OECD 2023

into the international sphere. These dimensions include conducting evaluations, monitoring progress and setting up pilot projects based on global standards and international best practices.

For Malaysia, UNESCO clearly plays a central role in education cooperation at the international level. In its advisory capacity, UNESCO aided Malaysia in developing the country's Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (UN-ESCO, 2013). UNESCO established the "Malaysia Education Policy Review (M-EPR)" via a Memorandum of Understanding between the IO and Malaysia's government in 2010. In this agreement, UNESCO is tasked to "evaluate the aims, strategies and achievements of the Malaysian education system in relation to its national and international contexts, its stated development goals and in comparison to international trends and standards" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 1). Also, with the assistance of UNECSO, Malaysia strengthened its efforts in the field of educational digitalization. For example, together with UNESCO's International Bureau of Education, the Malaysian government introduced a program in 2015 to increase girls' participation in STEM subjects (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2015). This program also shows that the fields digitalization, gender equality, and international cooperation are interconnected and that the implementation of globally accepted norms (here gender equality) is of importance in the design of Malaysia's education system. Also, the regional section of UNECO is cooperating with Malaysia in the field of education. For example, in 2014, UNESCO's Regional Science Bureau for Asia and the Pacific developed a strategic cooperation program with Malaysia for achieving the Education for All goals, and to strengthen Education for Sustainable Development in Malaysia's national education system (UNESCO, 2016).

Another crucial IO in Malaysia's education policy is the World Bank. One of the World Bank's most important ventures in Malaysia's education system was the establishment of the "Global Knowledge and Research Hub in Malaysia" in 2016. The Hub's overall purpose was to share development knowledge and promote research to enable evidence-based policy making. As it focused on several identified key areas to enhance growth, including sustainable development, inclusiveness, good governance, and human capital development, the Hub also emphasized investments in education as crucial (Interview Malaysia #1). Its main instruments were conducting in-depth studies, providing training and technical assistance to policymakers, facilitating the exchange of ideas

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through conferences, workshops, and publications, and collaborating with local and international institutions, including academia and the private sector. In this regard, the Hub also served as a source of information for other states in the Southeast Asian region by providing best practices that can be applied by other countries facing similar challenges (Kunicova, Govindasamy, & Sondergaard, 2018). With this strategy, the World Bank pursued a holistic development approach in which education was emphasized as a central building block for general development.

Furthermore, UNHCR supported the informal education of refugees' children in Malaysia as members of this group are not entitled to enroll in regular schools. With the IO's activities to provide guidelines for informal learning centers for refugee children, the UNHCR provides a functional equivalent. The activity of UNHCR resembles yet another type of IO activity in the Malaysian education sector as it does not focus on cooperation with the state administration but rather operates in parallel to existing public institutions.

In contrast to cooperation with global IOs, Malaysia's joint projects and coordination efforts with regional IOs, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are rather limited in the education sector. Even the regional IO responsible for education, SEAMEO, has only published general reports and country briefs on Malaysia.

From this synopsis, we can also see that there is a certain division of labor among IOs in Malaysian education. While UNESCO and the World Bank provide empirical information, policy tools, and a general conceptual framework, UNICEF (and NGOs and other international actors) step in for specific educational needs, such as the education of refugee children, where the Malaysian state leaves a vacuum. However, it must be noted that although several IOs are active in Malaysian education policy, their influence has declined since Malaysia's economic rise. Expertise and knowledge transfer are not as important channels of influence as funding and lending. Some issues that IOs brought to the attention of the Malaysian government, like the lacking integration of migrant and refugee children, were mostly ignored or only poorly implemented (Interview Malaysia #1).

5. CONCLUSION

The clash of regional identities, national heritages, and dynamics between ethnic social groups also defined how Malaysia has developed and implemented its reforms in the education sector. While internationalization processes in education are a major driver for reform activities, the actual design of education reforms needs to be contextualized with national particularities. Hence, established domestic structures have been proven to be particularly informative when assessing different outcomes in response to similar stimuli. Established institutions generate path dependencies for future policy decisions and the more and deeper such previous decisions are institutionalized, the harder they are to change or revert.

Taken together, the modern identity of people in Malaysia cannot be understood without referring to the period of colonialism, because it divided the Malay archipelago and formed new political entities and social classes (Chee-Beng, 2000; Jamil & Raman, 2012). This also has had important implications for the composition of the Malaysian population. As typical for colonialism, also in the case of Malaysia a territorial organizational entity was partially externally created by the colonial power – in this case Great Britain. Multi-ethnic groups with different cultures, languages, and norms were amalgamated in a single organizational unit (state).

Malaysia has geared itself towards Western educational discourses and is oriented towards established global IOs in the education sector. This general observation underscores that Malaysia, in its quest for modernization and economic advancement, is seeking to reform its education system by following the models of (Western) industrialized states and the approaches that focus on standardized assessment of educational outcomes. With the instruments of evidence-based policy-making, Malaysia basically followed the established paths of Western countries.

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