

FROM GOOD TO GREAT – HOW CAN AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY BE USED TO ALLOW HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS / HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS (HLIS) TO INNOVATE]



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During the launch of the MEB Annual Report 2018, two fora were held to deliberate on pressing topics surrounding education. The topic of the second forum was 'From Good to Great – How Can Autonomy and Accountability Be Used to Allow High Performing Schools / Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) to Innovate'. The OECD's PISA in Focus 2011 report had claimed that school autonomy and accountability, when done hand-in-hand, had resulted in greater student performance. This claim is backed by the World Bank Group, who had developed their SABER platform to highlight policies that matter to affected schools to facilitate the increase in school autonomy and accountability. Similarly, a report by IDEAS had outlined how Malaysia could benefit by learning from autonomy and accountability in Ghana and Mexico, through the devolution of bureaucratic control, the recognition and support of stakeholder groups, and the designing of new models of evaluation that are aligned with key aspirations.

Zooming in on Malaysia, this forum explores what are our current efforts in fostering autonomy and accountability, the role of data and technology, as well as addressing the optimism gap in society.

PADU: Let's kickstart this forum by asking this simple question: why is autonomy and accountability important, and what are the ongoing efforts undertaken by MOE to achieve them?

Dato' Saleh: Allow me to paint a picture of Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) in Malaysia. There is an enormous diversity in the size of a student body, ranging from 15 students per HLI up to over 30,000 per HLI, and nearly 100 HLIs that have <100 students. When we speak about autonomy, we have to consider the differences in sizes and capability. This is the challenge we face from MOE. It is like playing with a kite; we release and pull, release and pull – while we want to give autonomy and accountability, we need to have certain regulations and guidelines.

As a result, some institutions feel like we are micromanaging them. But in fact, we are not. These guidelines exist to help those who do not know how to bring about autonomy and accountability. But somehow even a simple letter from MOE is seen as a binding instruction – this perception must be changed.

In an ideal world, MOE should only provide national aspirations, national targets, and national strategic directions. As for how we will execute it, that would be done through how we empower the HLIs.

So how have we have worked towards that ideal vision? We have prepared guidelines and playbooks – now we have 6 of them – and the universities are given a choice to either adopt it or use their own methods. We have also served as a platform to share best practices.

Of course, I would be wrong to say that we are absolutely not micromanaging, in some ways we need to. To quote an example, we are disallowing universities to have their in-house English language centres, even if this is a practice across the world. We are sending a signal to the universities that we are not ready to trust them – that more controls need to be set, that we need to benchmark against international standards like IELTS and TOEFL. But it is a journey that we are exploring together.

PADU: Thank you Dato' Saleh for your insights. Moving onward to Danial, how has technology and data contributed to autonomy and accountability?

Danial: Allow me to get straight to the point with an example from the University of Georgia Tech. In this university, a lecturer was being set thousands of emails by students, and when he couldn't respond on time, his students would drop out. A graduate team then created this AI teaching assistant called Jill Watson to answer student questions; the students weren't even aware that Jill Watson was a robot and she was even nominated for an award by the students. However, not all uses of AI will

lead to good results. There is a cautionary tale by USC Hybrid, where AI had taken over the role of teachers and the teachers were put on the sideline. As a result, test scores started declining. When the management returned the funding to the teachers to choose the tech they needed for teaching, test scores started returning to normal. It's never first and foremost about technology – technology is always a means to an end and it's not for everyone.

PADU: That is heartening to hear. However, the one thing we know machines do better than humans is in avoiding irrational scepticism. Nik, how do you think about the optimism gap in education?

Nik: We must be real, and we must be bold. In the face of scepticism, we have to ask – what are we sceptical about? Is it the quality of our education? Or the capacity, or the yield? For the parents out there in the audience, the first thing we have to ask ourselves is this: are we happy with the level of academia that comes out of secondary school – are we looking at the string of As or are we looking at holistic development?

PADU: We do need to look at more than pure academics, and this could be achieved by granting more autonomy. How does autonomy look like in practice?

Nik: In Yayasan AMIR, we give autonomy to our 90 schools across 6 different dimensions – the curriculum, the staffing, procurement, student policies, utilisation of funds, and the timetable and school calendar. Across 9 years, we have been amazed by looking at PGBs who really understand the needs of their schools. Equally, there are others still who don't know the needs of their schools. So autonomy is like a rubber band – are we ready for it, and how far can we stretch it?

Danial: I know of a teacher who did a fantastic project. When I asked her how she did it, she simply told me, 'Buat je'. However, when I asked other teachers if they could replicate the same project, they said that they couldn't do it. There are a spectrum of teachers with different responses, and different levels of management have different levels of bureaucracy – which lead to different exercises of autonomy.

PADU: Moving over to taking questions from the floor, we begin with our first one: Why are so many Malaysian graduates seeking job opportunities overseas, and is the job market unsustainable for our fresh and future graduates?

Dato' Saleh: Firstly, where is the evidence of that? Secondly, I think we should be proud if our graduates are marketable overseas. I think the more important question is whether we are future-proofing our graduates.

Danial: To add on to that, I don't think the job market is unsustainable, but its demands are changing. The World Economic Forum 2018 Future of Jobs Report estimated that there are 75 million jobs that will be lost to automation, and 133 million new roles that will emerge as technology advancers. The question here is, are we preparing our children for the 75 million jobs that are going to be lost, or for the 133 million technology advancer jobs? The short answer is that we are heading towards that direction, but the long answer, well, let me give you an anecdote. OpenLearning had recently tried to hire an engineer, but after many interviews we couldn't find anyone qualified. Now of course anecdotal evidence shouldn't be used to generalise, but at least from our standpoint, we still have a ways to go.

PADU: Another question from the floor: For autonomy, schools need to sustain themselves – they need to manage it like a business. Where are we in the context of this?

Nik: One of the things we do in trust schools is that every year we ensure that the school has a development plan similar to a business plan. When you have autonomy, you have the power to decide how and when to use your resources. Of course, we need to build the capacity for autonomy. In Kedah, we have a programme where we try to marry the school system to the overarching transformation programme.

Dato' Saleh: When we speak about autonomy, I think there are two phases to autonomy: first in delivering the content of education and second in running the education institution. I don't know why we think that when we give autonomy, schools immediately have to generate their own funds. Can we give them the funds, and trust them to deliver the content? This holds true for schools and much more for universities. If we first give autonomy we need to give it in content delivery.

PADU: Our next question is for OpenLearning: Should there be a central coordinator to manage technology used in classrooms, or should private firms be given access to schools/JPN directly.

Danial: Technology should be democratised. We should empower the schools but we cannot deny that they need to collaborate with the private sector. I have seen some people in schools trying to create new platforms, but they would not do it if you can get it off the shelf. What's unfortunately lacking in Malaysia is good content – and nobody can guide that except for Malaysian teachers and lecturers, but they do need the technical expertise with private partners.

PADU: Following that we have a question for Nik: How would you rank a trust school's autonomy against a non-trust school, and is the impact significantly higher given more autonomy?

Nik: In our experience, out of the 6 types of autonomy, schools seem to be happiest with financial autonomy. But to answer the question of whether or not there is a significantly higher impact, BPSH is already working on giving more autonomy to schools, so there is less of a difference now. I would ask one question for schools getting ready for autonomy: If autonomy is given to you, what sort of autonomy would you need? We need to assess school needs; too often what we do is prescribe solutions instead of truly understand root causes.

PADU: Our final question is this: How confident are you with the following statement and its relation to accountability and autonomy? "HLIs are free from politically appointed board members"

Saleh: Some of us have the misconception that appointment cannot be done by ministers, but I argue that we need to differentiate between a minister's appointment and a politically motivated appointment (via a party, for example). Ministers will stand guided by professionals and will be held responsible for those whom they appoint, and so it is different from a politically-motivated appointment. Furthermore, we have been shifting the process of appointment by positions to appointment by skillsets according to university's needs. Board members also have to coordinate with each other and should follow a diverse set of backgrounds and skills.

Danial: This is an issue that is very close to my heart; some of you would have known that I was involved in the UKM4 case. One question I would ask, to board members but especially to younger people is this: If the government gave you autonomy and power, how would you exercise it? Will you be mature, or will you be hot-blooded?

Info on the panellists:

FORUM 2: 'FROM GOOD TO GREAT - HOW CAN AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY BE USED TO ALLOW HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS / HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS (HLIs) TO INNOVATE.'

Panellist 1  **Dato' Prof. Ir. Dr. Mohd Saleh Jaafar**
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Panellist 2  **Mr. Danial Rahman**
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Panellist 3  **Mr. Nik M. Fahmee**
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Moderator  **Dr. Ruhaya Hassan**
Executive Director, Teachers and School Leaders, PADU

YBhg. Dato' Prof. Ir. Dr. Mohd Saleh Jaafar is currently the Deputy Director General of Higher Education in the Department of Higher Education, MOE. He acted as the Deputy Chair during the development of the MEB (Higher Education) and is currently tasked to implement the initiatives outlined for private higher education institutions. Over the years, Saleh has played many significant roles across several Ministries related to research, education and professional practices. During his service, he played a key role in leading the development of rating instruments such as MyRA, MyQuest, Polyrate, and MySpekk, many of which are still being used today. In 2017, he was tasked to revise and develop a new system for SETARA, a rating instrument for higher learning institutions. Saleh is also a registered engineer under the Board of Engineers Malaysia, and a Fellow of the Academy of Sciences as well as a Member of the American Society of Civil Engineers. He is the Founding Council Member European Silk Roads University Consortium (ESRUC) and the Founding Member of the University Networks for Tropical Agriculture. Saleh believes in bringing out the best in people and believes that everyone can create value for the organization. His leadership style can be summed up in three words: Listen, Learn and Lead.

Danial Rahman holds an undergraduate law degree from the International Islamic University Malaysia and Masters in Law from the University of Oxford. He is currently Global Head of Team CSI, which stands for Communications and Strategic Initiatives at OpenLearning.com, an Australian education technology firm. Previously, he was a constitutional and human rights lawyer, after which he joined Malaysia's Education and Higher Education Ministry as a communications advisor. Over the last five years, Danial has been a columnist for TheStar, Malaysia's No.1 English daily, having written over 70 articles on education, technology and society. Danial is a former national debate champion and has trained policy makers, academicians and students all around the world on public speaking and critical thinking. In his free time, Danial manages the Instagram account for his 2 cats, named Ram and Mo.

Nik M. Fahmee or Nik as he prefers to be called, is a father of four – he says this is his priority in life and his job at heart. He graduated as a valedictorian from his University and worked briefly as a computer statistician in Canada, during the birth of the Internet. He then worked with Mesiniaga IBM TACTICS. He was invited to join as a pioneer member of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) initiative. Nik has worked on several other initiatives with the United Nations Development Programme for the Asia Pacific Development Information Programme and later joined the Malaysian AIDS Council as the Executive Director. He is a social entrepreneur, as he is also the co founder and currently the Managing Director of arise Asia – a bespoke consulting and programme design development and implementation outfit. He designs, develops and critically evaluates programme implementation and is currently the Director of Yayasan AMIR for the Trust Schools Programme. He loves to read difficult and passionate authors.