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Gender Equality in **Brunei Darussalam** and ASEAN Higher Education

September 2025

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Report by

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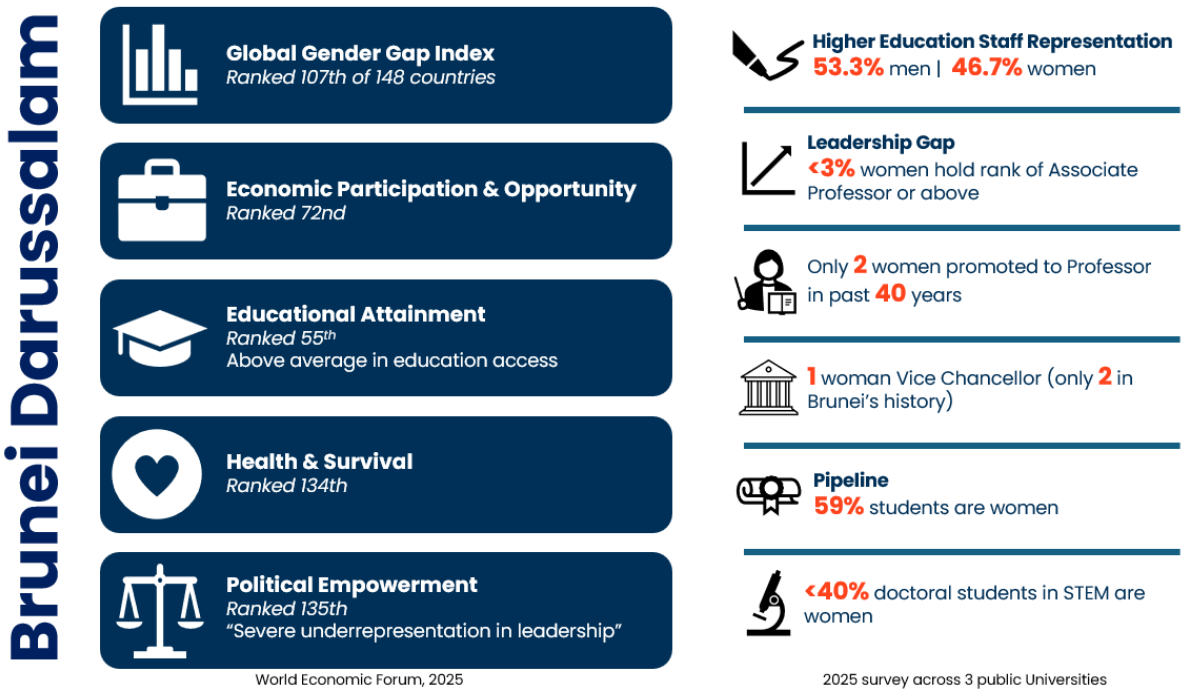
Executive Summary

This report assesses gender equality in Brunei's higher education sector, benchmarking progress against nine other ASEAN member states. The analysis focuses on four key dimensions: student enrolment, academic staff representation, leadership positions, and the policy frameworks shaping gender equity.



Brunei demonstrates strong performance in educational access. Women now outnumber men in higher education enrolment and make up nearly half of academic staff, indicating that faculty representation is broadly balanced. However, these gains are not reflected at senior levels. Women remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making roles, with only 1 female Vice-Chancellor currently serving in Brunei's universities (the 2nd female in Brunei's history of tertiary education). While women are well-represented at the Lecturer level, their representation diminishes at Senior Lecturer and drops sharply at Associate Professor and Professor levels, where fewer than 3% of positions are held by women.

The broader national context reinforces these dynamics. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025), Brunei ranks 107th of 148 countries overall. Its performance across sub-dimensions highlights both progress and persistent challenges:

- Economic Participation & Opportunity (72nd): relatively strong female workforce participation, but continuing leadership gaps.
- Educational Attainment (55th): confirmation of Brunei's success in achieving gender parity in education.
- Health & Survival (134th): persistent demographic and health-related disparities influencing wider equality outcomes.
- Political Empowerment (135th): very low female representation in parliament and national decision-making.

These results underscore that Brunei has largely solved the challenge of access, particularly in education, but continues to face systemic barriers in progression, leadership, and broader societal representation.

Policy developments, such as the 2023 National Plan of Action on Women, signal positive momentum. Yet, compared with regional peers such as the Philippines and Malaysia, Brunei lacks institutionalised gender offices, mentoring schemes, and structured leadership pathways—critical mechanisms for translating access into advancement.

To address these gaps, the report outlines six priority actions:

1. Institutionalise gender equality and diversity policies within universities.
2. Foster women's leadership through structured pathways and role-model visibility.
3. Strengthen academic support via mentoring and sponsorship programmes.
4. Promote career advancement with transparent promotion criteria and equitable recognition systems.
5. Deepen regional collaboration to learn from effective ASEAN practices.

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6. Engage men as allies, embedding gender equality across institutional culture.

Together, these measures provide a roadmap for Brunei to consolidate its achievements in educational access, address persistent structural barriers, and position itself as a regional leader in advancing gender equality in higher education.

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1.0 Introduction

Gender equality in higher education is a vital component of inclusive development, and ASEAN countries have made varied progress on this front. This report provides a detailed comparative analysis of Brunei's standing in gender equality within higher education relative to its nine ASEAN counterparts—Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Key dimensions of analysis include gender-disaggregated student enrolment and academic staff data, the representation of women in university leadership, national gender equality, diversity, and inclusion (GEDI) policies, and notable institutional practices.

The analysis identifies areas where Brunei leads or lags relative to its neighbours and offers culturally informed recommendations aligned with the objectives of the EDI-Brunei-HE project. While Brunei demonstrates strong performance in educational access, gaps remain in senior academic progression, STEM participation, and leadership.

Brunei's latest performance in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025) underscores these dynamics. Out of 148 countries, Brunei ranked 107th overall. Its performance across sub-dimensions reveals specific strengths and persistent weaknesses:

- Economic Participation & Opportunity: Ranked 72nd, reflecting relatively strong female workforce participation but persistent leadership gaps.
- Educational Attainment: Ranked 55th, confirming Brunei's achievement of gender parity in access to education.
- Health & Survival: Ranked 134th, highlighting demographic and health-related disparities that influence broader gender equality.
- Political Empowerment: Ranked 135th, reflecting very low female representation in parliament and decision-making roles.

Together, these figures show that while Brunei has succeeded in expanding educational access for women, the benefits are not yet fully translating into leadership, political empowerment, or sustained workforce participation.

2.0 Comparative Overview: ASEAN Gender Parity in Higher Education

Across ASEAN, female participation in higher education has risen significantly over recent decades. In fact, in most ASEAN member states today, women enrol in tertiary education at rates equal to or greater than those of men. Female participation in higher education has grown across ASEAN in recent decades. Today, most ASEAN countries see women enrolling in universities at the same or higher rates as men, a significant shift from the past. Still, progress is uneven. Women may outnumber men as students, but they are often underrepresented as faculty and in top leadership roles. National policies and university practices differ significantly, which affects the outcomes of gender equality and inclusion. A recent study found that, as of 2020, the proportion of the female population enrolled in tertiary education was higher in countries such as Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand, with Brunei ranking around the midpoint (5th) among the 10 ASEAN nations. In Brunei, for example, female enrolment has exceeded male enrolment for years; in 2017, there were approximately 1.62 female students for every 1 male student in Brunei's tertiary institutions. The Philippines exhibits a similar pattern; between 2005 and 2017, the female-to-male ratio in Philippine tertiary education hovered around 1.32, indicating that women consistently outnumbered men in college. Malaysia and Thailand also report women comprising well over 50% of university enrolments in recent years, reflecting a region-wide trend where "males in most ASEAN member states are less likely to enrol in university compared to their female peers".

2.1 Gaps and exceptions

Not all countries have achieved parity. In Cambodia, female students remain a minority in higher education. Cambodia was ranked last in the region for female tertiary enrolment, and it has even seen slight declines in women's enrolment rates in recent

years. Laos and Vietnam have historically had lower female enrolment rates compared to some of their neighbours, although these rates have been improving. Overall, however, the gender parity index (GPI) for tertiary enrolment is at or above 1.0 in most ASEAN countries, indicating equal or greater female participation. This reflects a broader global trend noted by UNESCO: by 2020, there were 113 women enrolled in higher education for every 100 men worldwide, and Southeast Asia is a key contributor to that female enrolment surge.

2.1.1 Field of study differences

Despite strong overall enrolment numbers, women's representation remains uneven across various fields. Commonly, ASEAN women dominate fields such as education, healthcare, and the social sciences, whereas men often outnumber women in engineering, information technology, and other STEM fields. This "gender tracking" in fields of study, where women are channelled into traditionally "feminine" disciplines and men into technical or scientific ones, persists across countries and can influence future career and leadership opportunities. Addressing gender equality in higher education thus also means encouraging women into a broader range of academic programs (and similarly, supporting men to enter female-skewed fields), a challenge recognized region-wide.

2.2 Academic Staff Gender Composition

In ASEAN, countries with a high proportion of female students do not always have a corresponding high representation of women among their academic staff. The proportion of female faculty varies widely across the region, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Female representation among tertiary students and academic staff in ASEAN countries. (Sources: UNESCO Institute for Statistics and national reports)

Country	Female Students (%)	Female Academic Staff (%)
Brunei	56% (GPI ≈ 1.6)	48.1%
Malaysia	55–60%	53.8%
Indonesia	50%	43.3%
Philippines	55%	51.9%
Singapore	52%	37.0%
Thailand	55%	56.6%
Vietnam	50%	48.5%
Cambodia	<30%	20.5%
Lao PDR	45%	39.7%
Myanmar	50%	84.5%

*Female students' column is an approximation based on recent data or gender parity index; values over 50% indicate women outnumber men in enrolment.

As Table 1 illustrates, Brunei's academic staff is about 48% female, essentially at parity. This places Brunei in the middle of the ASEAN range. Countries like Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines have slightly higher proportions of female faculty (around 52–57%), meaning women form the majority of lecturers and professors. On the other hand, Indonesia, Laos, and Singapore have a male majority on their faculties; for example, only 37% of Singapore's tertiary faculty are women, and Laos stands at about 40%.

The most extreme cases are Cambodia, where women constitute just 20% of academic staff, and Myanmar, where an extraordinary 84% of tertiary educators are female (reflecting that many academic roles in Myanmar are dominated by women). Such disparities highlight that higher female student intake does not automatically translate into proportional representation in faculty positions across all countries.

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2.2.1 Factors affecting female faculty representation

Several factors influence the share of women academics. In countries like Myanmar and Thailand, historical norms and the prominence of education as a female-friendly profession have led to a high concentration of women in teaching roles. By contrast, in countries where academia is more research-oriented or where hiring/promotion practices may be less accommodating to women (due to implicit bias or family career-break penalties), the female faculty share is lower (e.g., Singapore's research universities have struggled to reach even 40% women faculty).

Cultural expectations can also play a role: in Cambodia and Laos, fewer women historically attained the advanced degrees necessary for faculty positions, a gap that is only slowly closing through scholarships and capacity-building programs for women. Additionally, while women may enter academic ranks in large numbers, they often cluster in lower or mid-level positions; fewer advance to senior lectureships or professorships due to the "leaky pipeline," where family responsibilities or lack of mentorship disproportionately impact women's career progression.

2.3 Women in University Leadership

Across ASEAN, women's ascent to top leadership positions (such as University President, Vice-Chancellor, or Rector roles) remains limited. This is a common challenge globally; estimates suggest that only about 15–20% of universities worldwide are led by women, and ASEAN is no exception. In this context, Brunei's track record, while showing some milestones, also reflects the regional pattern of underrepresentation at the top.

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2.3.1 Brunei

Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), the nation's flagship university, appointed its first-ever female Vice-Chancellor only in 2015 (Datin Dr. Anita Binurul Zahrina). She served until 2022, after which the role reverted to a male appointee. As of 2023, only one of Brunei's public universities is headed by a woman—marking just the second instance of female leadership at the highest level in the nation's history of tertiary education.

2.3.2 Malaysia

Despite women forming the majority of students and even academic staff in Malaysia, female leadership in universities remains disproportionately low. Out of 20 public universities in Malaysia, only two had women as Vice-Chancellors as of the end of 2022 – that is a mere 10%. This includes notable trailblazers such as Prof. Datuk Dr. Asma Ismail (the first woman to lead Universiti Sains Malaysia and later appointed to Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia), and Professor Dr. Roziah Janor (the first female VC of Universiti Teknologi MARA, appointed in 2021). The Malaysian government had at one point set a target or "quota" for women in top university leadership (in line with a broader national goal of 30% women in decision-making roles), but "that quota…has not yet been met". In other words, women remain greatly outnumbered in the strategic echelons of Malaysian higher education governance.

2.3.3 Philippines

The Philippines has a strong history of women in politics and education; however, in the state university system, women remain a minority among heads. According to the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), as of the mid-2010s, only 15% of presidents of public state universities and colleges were women. CHED's former Chairperson Patricia Licuanan highlighted this gap, noting that "men outnumber women in the top-level posts of the educational system" even though women outpace men in college graduation. Many Philippine universities (especially private institutions) have had

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female presidents or chancellors, but system-wide, leadership remains male-dominated. The Philippines example encapsulates a phenomenon seen elsewhere: even in countries with a large pool of qualified female academics, structural barriers and perhaps prevailing gender norms mean relatively few reach the very top posts.

2.3.4 Other ASEAN countries

Similar patterns hold in varying degrees:

- Singapore – With only a handful of universities, Singapore has seen some progress recently (e.g., Singapore Management University is led by a woman, President Prof. Lily Kong, as of 2019, a first for a Singaporean public university). Still, among the six autonomous universities, women leaders remain an exception (roughly ~17% of university heads). Top-tier institutions like NUS and NTU have yet to be led by a woman.
- Indonesia – Indonesia has hundreds of universities, including both public and private. While a few prominent public universities have broken the glass ceiling (for instance, Gadjah Mada University had its first female Rector in 2014, and Institut Teknologi Bandung appointed its first female Rector in 2020), the vast majority of Indonesian HEIs are led by men. There are no comprehensive statistics, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the percentage of female rectors is likely in the low teens or single digits overall. Leadership roles often involve political appointments or networks that have been traditionally male dominated.
- Thailand – In recent years, some leading Thai universities have appointed women as rectors or presidents (e.g., Thammasat University's Rector in 2018). Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in top posts across the many public and private Thai HEIs. Estimates put Thailand somewhat ahead of the ASEAN average, but still far from parity (perhaps on the order of 10–20% of institutions headed by women).
- Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos – these countries have traditionally had very few women leading universities. In Vietnam's extensive public university and college network, leadership is often government-appointed and tends to be skewed

toward men, although a handful of women have risen to rector positions in recent years. Cambodia and Laos still have extremely scarce female leaders in higher education (Cambodia's higher education expansion has seen nearly all rectors being male, often senior academics or former ministers; Laos similarly has had minimal female representation at the rector level).

- Myanmar – An interesting outlier due to its female-majority academic workforce, Myanmar has had a significant number of women in administrative roles within universities (such as department heads or deans). There have been women rectors of some universities in Myanmar, although data is sparse. It is plausible that Myanmar might actually lead ASEAN in the share of institutions led by women, but given the upheavals since 2021, current data is not easily available. Historically, however, the high feminization of the academic sector in Myanmar did translate to better odds for women attaining senior posts; yet, even there, the very top positions (e.g., heads of major universities) were often occupied by men or appointees from government ranks.

2.3.5 Barriers to female leadership

Common challenges emerge across these countries. The pipeline issue is key – although many women are in academia, fewer hold the senior professorial ranks that are often prerequisites for top jobs. Women face greater obstacles in accumulating the lengthy experience often deemed necessary for leadership, partly due to career breaks or heavier family responsibilities. Additionally, implicit bias and gender stereotypes in Asia (e.g., perceptions that leadership is a "man's domain") can influence selection committees or appointment processes.

Networking and patronage, which in some countries play a role in high-level appointments, have traditionally excluded women. Encouragingly, there is growing recognition of these issues, and several ASEAN initiatives are now focused on grooming women leaders in higher education – for example, mentorship programs and regional workshops for women's leadership (such as those by SEAMEO RIHED and various university networks). However, overall, the gap in female university leadership remains one of the most persistent issues of gender inequality in ASEAN higher education.

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3.0 National GEDI Policies and Frameworks

All ASEAN countries have, to varying extents, articulated policy commitments to gender equality and broader inclusion – though the specificity and enforcement of these policies in the higher education sector differ.

3.1 Brunei

Brunei Darussalam is in the process of strengthening its gender equality policy framework. In 2023, the government announced its first-ever National Plan of Action on Women, aimed at ensuring women's equitable development and participation in national goals (Brunei's Vision 2035). This plan's objectives include developing women's full potential through gender equity in areas like capacity building and education.

While Brunei's higher education institutions have not historically had stand-alone gender policies, this national Action Plan, along with existing commitments under CEDAW and other international frameworks, is expected to spur more gender mainstreaming in education. The plan emphasizes improving data collection on women and addressing areas where women's potential is not fully realized. This suggests that Brunei will identify gaps (possibly including those in academia and leadership) and formulate policies to address them. Culturally, Brunei emphasizes that empowering women is key to unlocking national development (women make up ~47% of Brunei's population) and aligns such efforts with Islamic values and community cohesion.

3.2 Malaysia

Malaysia has a relatively robust policy environment for gender equality. A National Policy on Women has been in place for decades (updated in 2009), and the government's five-year development plans routinely include gender empowerment targets. The Ministry of Higher Education, in line with national goals, has encouraged universities to increase women's representation in senior roles and in STEM fields. For example, Malaysia aimed to have 30% women in decision-making positions (a general government target), and this has been echoed in the context of university leadership and governing boards. While no explicit quota system exists for university leadership, public discourse, including coverage by local media, has pressured institutions to consider more female candidates for leadership positions.

Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) also acknowledged gender imbalances and the need to tap into the talent pool of women graduates. Additionally, Malaysia has gender mainstreaming guidelines for ministries, meaning public universities (as government entities) are encouraged to implement Gender Focal Points or units. However, enforcement is patchy, as evidenced by the fact that formal "quota" aspirations for female academic leaders have not yet been met. On diversity and inclusion more broadly, Malaysia's higher education sector has also been concerned with ethnic and socioeconomic inclusion (e.g., policies historically favouring Bumiputera students); gender equality is one pillar in this broader EDI landscape.

3.3 Indonesia

Indonesia established a robust gender mainstreaming (Pengarusutamaan Gender) policy across all sectors in the early 2000s. The Ministry of Education (now Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology) has a Directorate or unit focusing on gender in education. Many Indonesian universities have Women's Studies Centers or Gender Studies programs that originated from government encouragement to integrate gender perspectives into their academic programs. National development plans and the Ministry for Women's Empowerment set goals for increasing women's participation in higher education and research. For instance, Indonesia's government

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has promoted initiatives to get more women into STEM and academia, and to counter gender-based violence on campuses. Still, challenges remain in implementation, as cultural norms in some regions and decentralization mean that the commitment to GEDI can vary by institution.

In recent years, Indonesia has also introduced policies to enhance the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education and access for remote populations, broadening the "diversity" agenda. These efforts complement the gender focus and demonstrate Indonesia's recognition that inclusive education must address multiple dimensions of diversity (gender, region, disability, etc.).

3.4 Philippines

The Philippines stands out for its strong legal mandates on gender equality. The Magna Carta of Women (Republic Act 9710 of 2009) is a comprehensive law that requires all government agencies, including educational institutions, to pursue gender mainstreaming and eliminate discrimination. Under this law, universities (especially state universities and colleges) must establish Gender and Development (GAD) programs and allocate at least 5% of their budget to GAD initiatives. In practice, many Philippine universities have GAD Offices or focal persons who conduct gender sensitivity training, review curricula for gender bias, and create programs to support female students and staff. CHED has issued memoranda to implement these, requiring higher education institutions to submit GAD plans and reports.

Thanks to this framework, the awareness of gender issues in Philippine academia is relatively high: for example, workshops on gender-fair language, prevention of sexual harassment, and support for women in research are common. Beyond gender, the Philippines also has laws for the inclusion of persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples in education, aligning with a broad EDI perspective. Thus, the national policy environment strongly supports gender equality; however, as noted, gaps such as the low percentage of women in university president positions indicate that policy alone isn't a panacea without accompanying cultural and institutional shifts.

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3.5 Singapore

Singapore approaches EDI through pragmatic policy and legal equality rather than sector-specific quotas. There is no gender quota in academia; however, the government has launched initiatives in recent years to support women's development, such as the 2022 White Paper on Women's Development, which includes measures to advance women in the workforce and leadership. While this White Paper is not specific to higher education, its ethos influences all sectors; proposals such as flexible work arrangements and combating gender bias also apply to universities as employers. Singaporean universities have responded with their own actions, for instance, creating task forces to promote faculty gender equity and to address campus sexual harassment (after high-profile incidents, the National University of Singapore formed a harassment task force and improved safety policies).

The government also funds programs to encourage girls in STEM (e.g., scholarships, coding camps, mentoring), which several universities actively implement. On diversity, Singapore emphasizes multiracial harmony nationwide; universities follow suit by ensuring that campus practices respect racial and religious diversity (for example, providing prayer spaces and diverse food options). However, given Singapore's majority-Chinese population, ethnic representation among faculty/students isn't as much a policy target in higher education. In summary, Singapore relies on the integration of gender equality into general policies and expects institutions to self-regulate improvements in EDI; this has led to gradual progress but also means change (like increasing women faculty) can be slow without explicit mandates.

3.6 Thailand

Thailand's government has endorsed gender equality through constitutional commitments and specific measures (e.g., National Economic and Social Development Plans often mention gender equity). The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation, with support from organizations such as UN Women, has worked on increasing women's roles in science and research. Some Thai public universities have internal policies such as maternity leave benefits for graduate

students and anti-discrimination codes. Thailand also has innovative inclusion policies, such as a quota for students from ethnic minority backgrounds in some universities, aimed at improving access. While that quota addresses ethnic diversity, it demonstrates a commitment to enhancing the inclusion of underrepresented groups.

In terms of gender, there is growing attention to leadership training for women, evidenced by Thai universities participating in regional workshops on gender and leadership. Additionally, Thailand's Gender Equality Act (2015) broadly prohibits gender discrimination, which also applies to educational institutions. Enforcement is still evolving, but at least one recent case saw a university's policy (barring pregnant students from enrolling in teacher training) challenged under this act, reflecting an increasing legal awareness of gender rights in education. Overall, Thailand's national policies support gender equality, but, like its peers, translating that into a higher proportion of women in rectors or professors remains a work in progress.

3.7 Vietnam

Vietnam has a long-standing commitment to gender equality as part of its socialist ethos. The Vietnam Gender Equality Law (2006) sets objectives for equal participation in politics, the economy, education, and other areas. The government's National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021–2030 includes targets that by 2025 and 2030, women should assume higher proportions of leadership roles across sectors (for example, targeting 30% of legislative seats for women, etc.). While higher education is not explicitly singled out, universities fall under the public sector goals. Many Vietnamese universities are government-run, and there is an expectation (though not always met) that women should be represented in management.

The Vietnam Women's Union and other bodies have championed women's advancement in academia, including through recognition awards for female scientists and incentives for women lecturers to pursue PhDs. Still, conservative attitudes can persist in academic circles, and women often find it challenging to ascend the hierarchy. Vietnam has made strides in fields such as biotech and education, where women researchers are prominent, but less so in leadership roles. National policies

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provide a supportive framework, and efforts such as requiring gender-disaggregated data reporting in education help monitor progress. Vietnam is also notable for promoting the inclusion of ethnic minorities and scholarship programs that enable rural women to attend university, effectively blending gender and diversity objectives.

3.8 Cambodia and Laos

Both Cambodia and the Lao PDR, as lower-income members, have worked closely with international agencies to formulate gender and inclusion policies. Cambodia's Ministry of Women's Affairs and Ministry of Education jointly developed a Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan for Education (sometimes referred to as "Neary Rattanak" strategic plans under Cambodia's gender empowerment program). These plans aim to increase the number of female teachers, school principals, and scholarship recipients pursuing higher education. For higher education specifically, Cambodia's Royal University of Phnom Penh and a few other institutions have gender mainstreaming action groups, often supported by development partners (like UNESCO or ADB projects). Despite policy efforts, Cambodia's challenge is building a pipeline: few women complete postgraduate studies, so the pool for faculty and leadership is small – something the policy tries to counter via incentives (e.g., reserving scholarships for women).

Lao PDR also has a National Strategy for the Advancement of Women, which covers education and training; the Lao education ministry has a Gender Unit. Quota systems (like reserving a percentage of seats for women in certain training colleges) have been used in Laos to boost female representation. Both countries also emphasize inclusion of rural and ethnic minority students (often overlapping with gender since girls in rural areas are least likely to access higher ed). The policy frameworks exist, but limited resources and deeply ingrained cultural norms (early marriage in some areas, biases against women in leadership) make implementation slow.

3.9 Myanmar

Prior to the 2021 political upheaval, Myanmar had developed a National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013–2022), which included education and training as a key domain. Under that plan, universities were encouraged to adopt gender-sensitive policies and increase women's participation in decision-making. Myanmar's academic culture historically had high female involvement at lower levels, but women faced barriers moving into senior posts (often due to mandatory retirement ages and fewer opportunities for advanced study during years of isolation).

The GEDI situation in Myanmar is now uncertain due to the turmoil, but the pre-2021 trajectory was toward formally recognizing women's contributions and identifying gaps (for instance, surveying the number of women in university management). Myanmar was also part of regional initiatives (with ASEAN and international NGOs) focusing on women in STEM and leadership. In summary, the policy groundwork was laid, though its future depends on broader political stabilization.

Across ASEAN, a common thread is that policies alone are insufficient; they must be accompanied by institutional will and societal support. Nevertheless, these national frameworks are crucial in signalling commitment. They often provide the mandate (and sometimes funding) for universities to launch their own GEDI initiatives, as we will see next.

4.0 Institutional Practices Promoting Gender Equality and Inclusion

Beyond laws and official policies, the actions of universities themselves, their institutional practices, are where meaningful change happens on the ground. Many ASEAN universities have adopted practices aimed at fostering gender equality and broader inclusion. Below, we highlight some notable practices and trends, some of which could serve as inspirations for Brunei's institutions.

4.1 Gender Offices and Units

An increasing number of universities in the region have dedicated offices, committees, or working groups focused on gender or EDI. For example, numerous Philippine universities have GAD (Gender and Development) Offices staffed by trained coordinators, reflecting the mandate of the Magna Carta of Women. These offices conduct gender sensitivity training for faculty/staff, ensure compliance with anti-sexual harassment laws, review campus policies through a gender lens, and often provide counselling or support services. In Indonesia, many campuses host a Women's Studies Center, initially academic in nature, but these centers often also serve as advocates for gender-inclusive campus policies.

In Malaysia, some universities (like Universiti Sains Malaysia) have research centers on gender studies and gender committees that advise the university management on issues such as childcare provision or hiring practices. Having formal structures helps keep gender equality on the agenda and coordinates initiatives (for instance, the University of Malaya's Women in Leadership Programme was spearheaded by its academic staff association in collaboration with such committees).

4.2 Leadership Development and Mentoring

Recognizing the dearth of women in senior roles, several institutions have introduced leadership development programs specifically for women academics. Mentorship schemes that pair junior female lecturers with senior mentors have been launched in universities in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. For example, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore operates a mentorship program for early-career researchers, which, although not exclusively for women, ensures balanced gender representation and provides mentorship on career progression, benefiting many women.

There are also regional networks, such as the Asian University Leaders Program for Women, in which some universities participate, sending their promising female faculty

members to leadership training. Such programs help build confidence, skills, and networks that enable women to advance in their careers. The impact is gradual but visible in anecdotes of more women becoming deans or vice-deans after participating in the program.

4.3 Family-Friendly Policies

A key area where institutions can make a difference is by implementing family-friendly policies that particularly help women (who often shoulder greater family responsibilities). Flexible work arrangements and paid parental leave are becoming more common in the academic HR policies of ASEAN universities. For instance, universities in the Philippines must, by law, grant maternity leave (and paternity leave) to employees, and some have extended benefits for nursing mothers (like lactation rooms on campus). In Malaysia, universities have introduced schemes like allowing women lecturers to extend their tenure clock or postpone certain work duties around childbirth.

On-campus childcare centres are offered by a few progressive universities (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, for example, operates a daycare for staff and students' children). While not yet widespread, these practices are crucial for retaining female talent; they prevent women from having to choose between family and career during critical years. Brunei's UBD and other local institutions might consider such models, especially given cultural emphasis on family; having a supportive environment could increase women's longevity in academia.

4.4 Anti-Harassment and Safe Campus Initiatives

Ensuring a safe, inclusive campus climate is another aspect of EDI. Many universities have instituted anti-sexual harassment policies and grievance mechanisms. The impetus has come from both policy (e.g., laws in the Philippines and Malaysia) and

incidents that sparked action. As noted, NUS in Singapore formed a high-level task force to tighten campus safety after cases of sexual misconduct; it resulted in improved surveillance, stricter penalties for offenders, and better support for victims. Universities in Thailand and Indonesia have also begun to actively address harassment; for example, Chulalongkorn University has a clear Code of Conduct on Harassment and an office to handle complaints confidentially.

These measures, while not exclusively "gender equality" programs, are vital for gender inclusion because women are disproportionately affected by campus harassment. A safe environment allows women to participate and lead without fear. Similarly, anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies that protect anyone regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation are slowly making their way into university statutes across ASEAN, often in line with international best practices.

4.5 Curriculum and Research Initiatives

Universities also promote gender equality through the courses they offer and the research they conduct. Gender Studies courses or modules are now offered in many institutions, ensuring that all students gain some awareness of gender and inclusion issues. Some have even made such courses part of general education requirements (for instance, a Philippine university might require an undergraduate course that covers gender sensitivity as part of civic education).

On the research front, institutions (often with encouragement from funding bodies) are pushing for sex-disaggregated data in research and more studies on gender issues. For example, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) occasionally sponsors research on women's leadership or gender-based analysis in education, and member universities participate, thereby cultivating local expertise that can inform policy. AUN, in collaboration with the EU's SHARE program, also organized dialogues on GEDI in higher education, indicating an increasing interest among institutions in basing their actions on evidence and shared learning.

4.6 Inclusive Admissions and Scholarships

In terms of diversity beyond gender, some institutional practices worth noting include targeted admissions and scholarships to underrepresented groups, which often indirectly assist women. For instance, universities in remote parts of Indonesia or the Philippines may offer bridging programs for indigenous students (many of whom are female, given the out-migration of males for work).

Thailand's quota for ethnic minorities is implemented by universities, such as Chiang Mai University, as a social inclusion effort. Vietnam and Cambodia have scholarship quotas for female students from rural areas to enter university, aiming to close the rural-urban gender education gap. While these measures address intersectional issues (combining gender with ethnicity or location), they ultimately contribute to greater gender parity by empowering women from all backgrounds to access higher education.

4.7 Role Models and Visibility

Universities have also found that celebrating successful women and making them visible can help change the culture. Many institutions now highlight the achievements of their female faculty and alumni, for example, by holding award ceremonies for outstanding women scientists on International Women's Day or profiling women leaders in university publications. The symbolism of having women in convocation stage parties, as keynote speakers, etc., is not lost on students. Some universities pair this with outreach: sending teams of female scientists and scholars to high schools to inspire the next generation of girls. Such practices help erode stereotypes over time and build a pipeline of confident female students who aspire to academic and leadership roles.

It's important to note that not every institution in ASEAN is implementing all these practices – the picture varies widely. Generally, more well-resourced and autonomous universities in urban centres are at the forefront of EDI initiatives, while smaller or newer institutions may lag behind or focus on more basic capacity issues. Nonetheless,

across the region, there is a clear momentum within higher education to create more inclusive and equitable environments. Brunei's universities, which are fewer in number and centrally governed, are well-positioned to learn from these diverse experiences and adopt best practices suitable to the local context.

5.0 EDI-Brunei-HE Survey Methodology (June–August 2025)

Data for this project was collected from three public universities in Brunei Darussalam: Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB), and Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA). The collection period took place between June and July 2025. The primary objective was to obtain gender-disaggregated data that could provide insights into patterns of representation across both academic staff and students.

The project collected data directly from administrative records in the three universities, covering both staff and student populations. For staff, data included totals by gender and their distribution across the academic hierarchy, from Lecturer through to Professor. For students, data were disaggregated by gender across undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD enrolments. Where available, faculty-level PhD splits were also collected (e.g., UBD's Faculty of Integrated Technology, the School of Digital Science and the Center for Advanced Material Sciences). This approach enabled identification not only of the current state of gender representation but also how representation changes along the academic pipeline.

A cross-institutional lens allowed the analysis to account for institutional differences, particularly between a comprehensive university like UBD, a technical university like UTB, and a faith-based institution like UNISSA. This dataset provides a robust baseline for evidence-based policy development and comparison with regional patterns in ASEAN.

Data analysis items:

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- Academic staff by gender (institutional totals and by faculty/centre)
- Academic staff by rank (Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, Professor) and gender
- Student headcounts by gender at Batchelors, Masters, and PhD levels
- Where available, faculty-level PhD splits
- Period: most recent snapshots compiled June–July 2025

Analytic steps:

1. Institutional profile: overview of each university in the aggregate.
2. Discipline effect: comparison of STEM vs non-STEM and Islamic/MIB (Melayu Isam Beraja, or Malay Islamic Monarchy) faculties.
3. Rank progression: analysis of entry → mid-rank → senior rank; identification of "cliffs" in career progression.
4. Pipeline continuity: tracking student progression from undergraduate → postgraduate → PhD → academic ranks.
5. Limitations: administrative snapshots reflect evolving series; cross-institutional differences in reporting may limit direct comparability.
6. Findings emphasize patterns and directions of change, rather than solely point estimates.

Data sources:

- Data were provided directly by the universities, drawing on their internal administrative and human resources records. Where possible, official institutional statistics and published reports were also consulted to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Limitations:

- The analysis is based on data supplied by the institutions, reflecting the accuracy and completeness of their internal reporting systems. Variations in reporting practices across universities may limit direct comparability. In addition, the study focuses on gender as a binary category as reported by the institutions, which may not fully capture the diversity of gender identities present in the academic community.

5.2 Findings: Institution-by-Institution Results

5.2.1 Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD)

At Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), overall gender representation among academic staff appears balanced, but discipline-specific analysis reveals significant disparities. Men dominate technical and STEM-related faculties (FIT, SDS, CAMES), while representation is more balanced in social sciences and humanities.

When disaggregated by academic rank, the data highlights a clear progression gap. Gender parity exists at lecturer level, but men hold the majority of senior lecturer roles, and women are almost absent from associate professor and professor positions, comprising less than 3%. Notably, only two Bruneian women have ever been promoted to full professor.

These findings indicate that while access to academia is relatively equal, structural barriers persist, creating a "glass ceiling" that limits women's progression into senior academic and leadership positions.

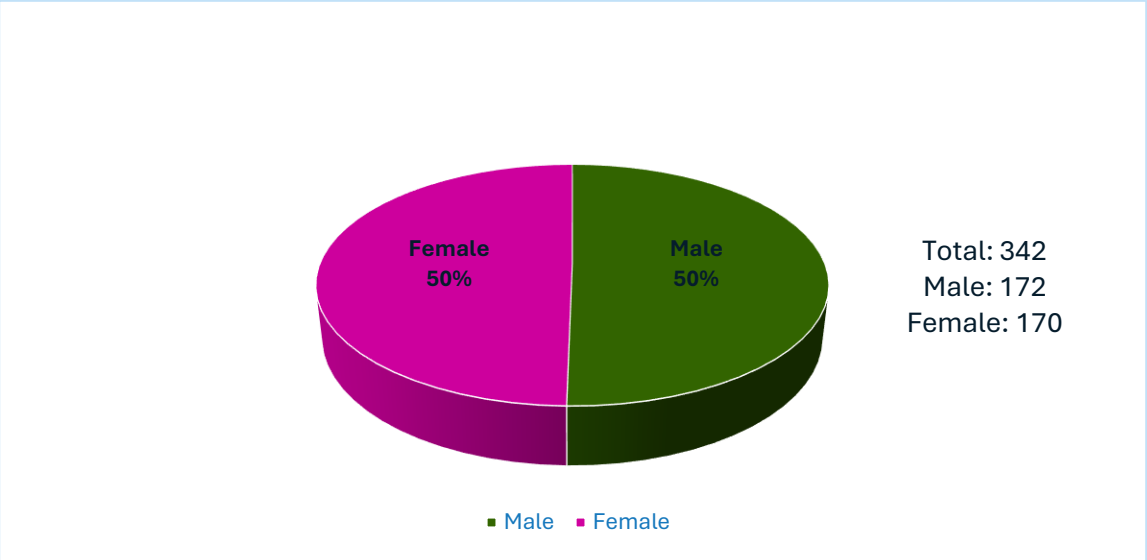

Figure 1: UBD academic staff by gender

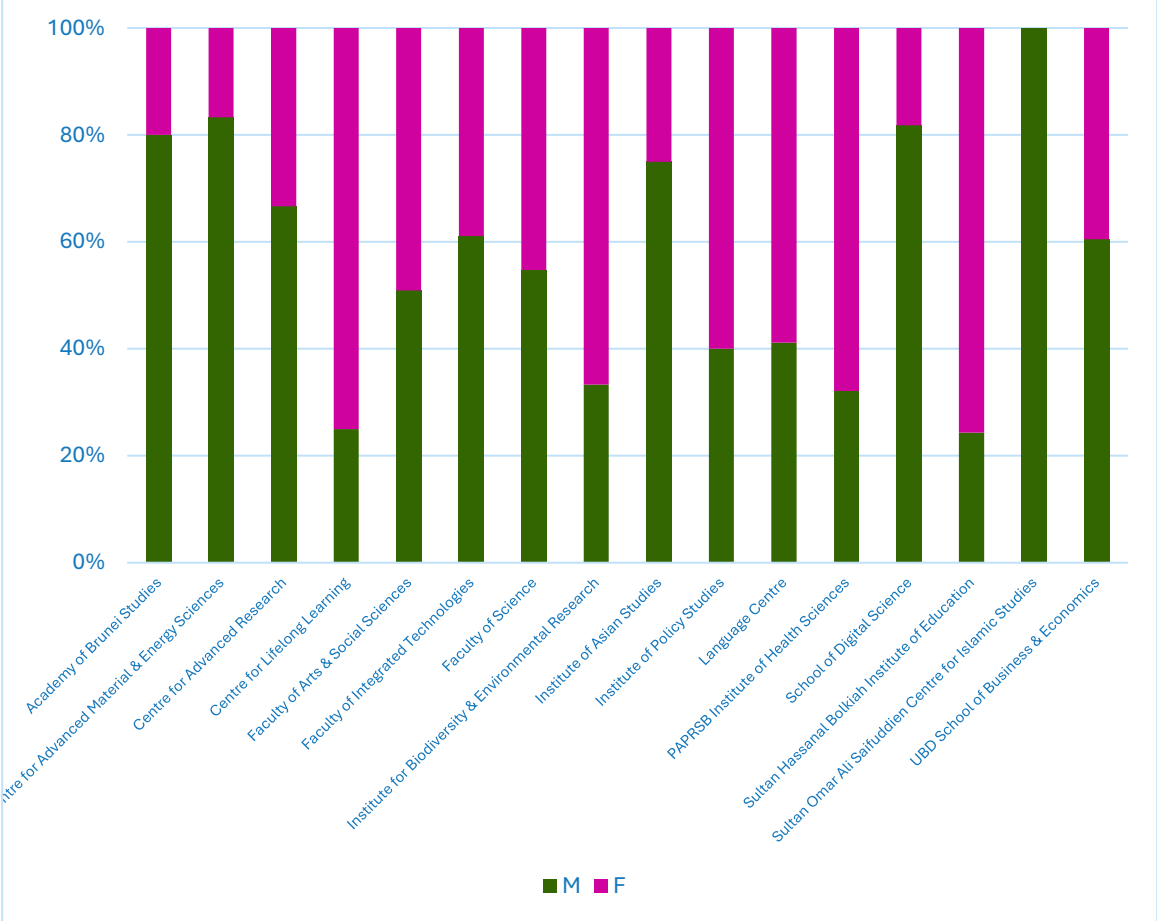

Figure 2: UBD academic staff by gender and faculty

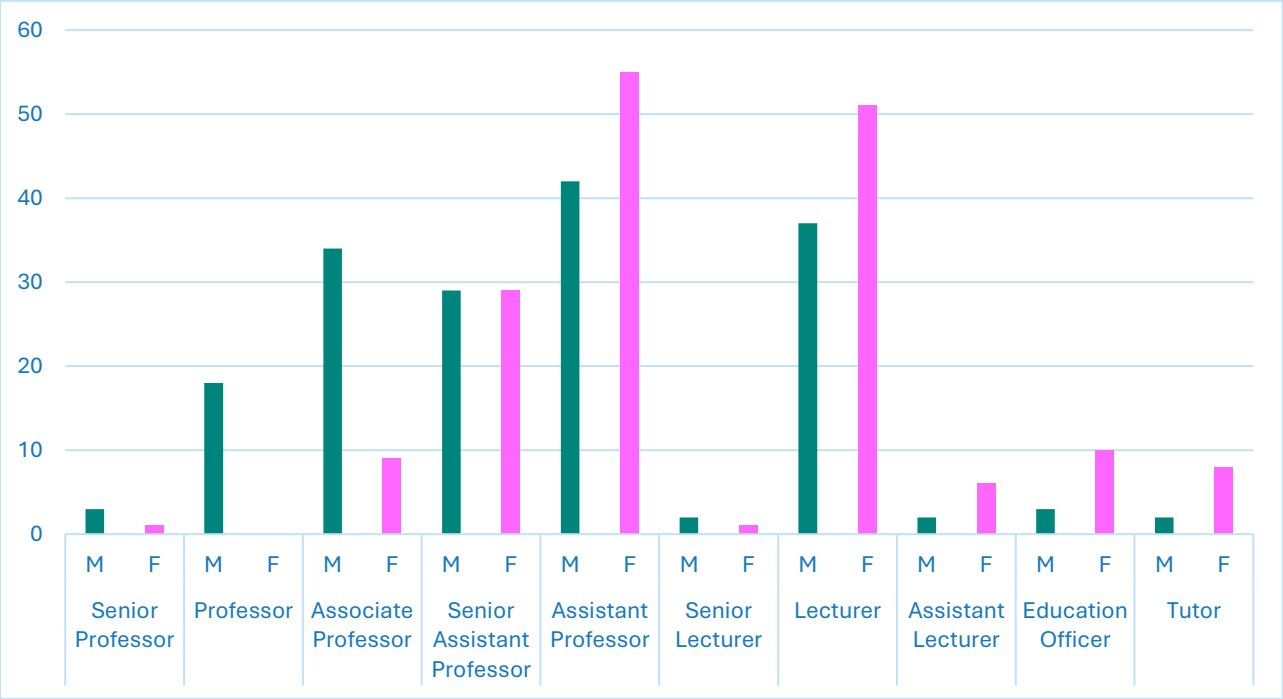

Figure 3: UBD academic roles by gender

5.2.2 Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB)

At Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB), women make up just 36% of academic staff, with particularly low representation in engineering and technical faculties, reflecting global STEM trends. Gender gaps are evident at entry level and become more pronounced at senior levels, where women are almost entirely absent from associate professor and professor positions. This dual challenge of limited entry and restricted progression makes UTB one of the most difficult contexts in Brunei for advancing gender equality in academia.

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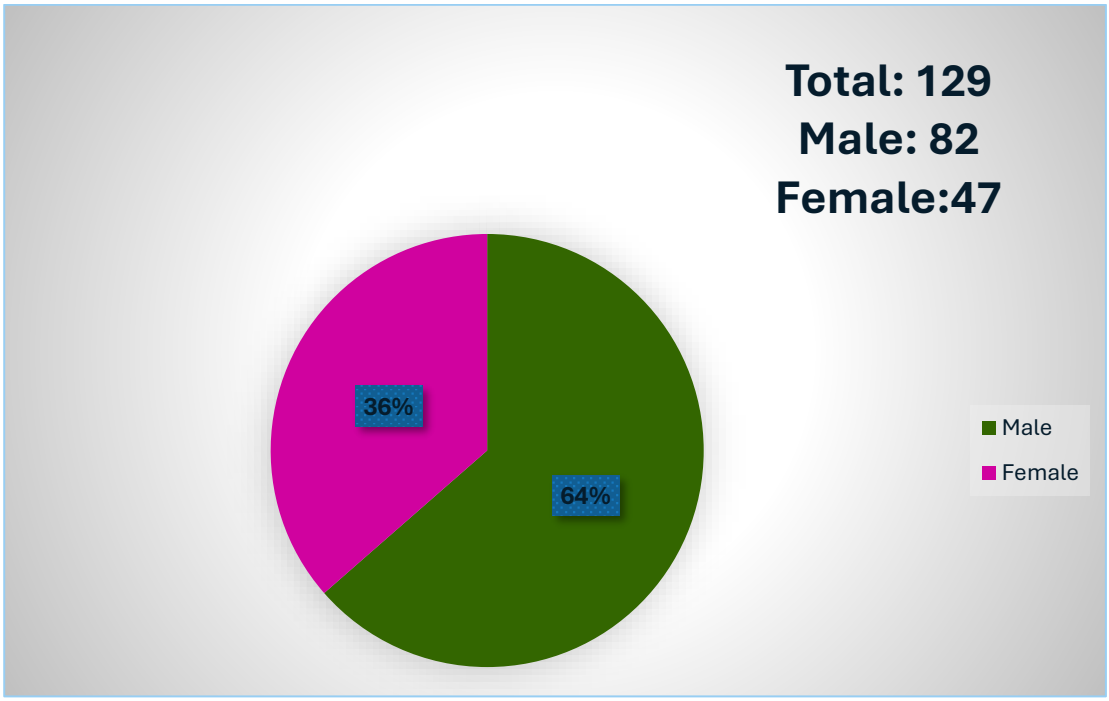

Figure 4: UTB academic staff by gender

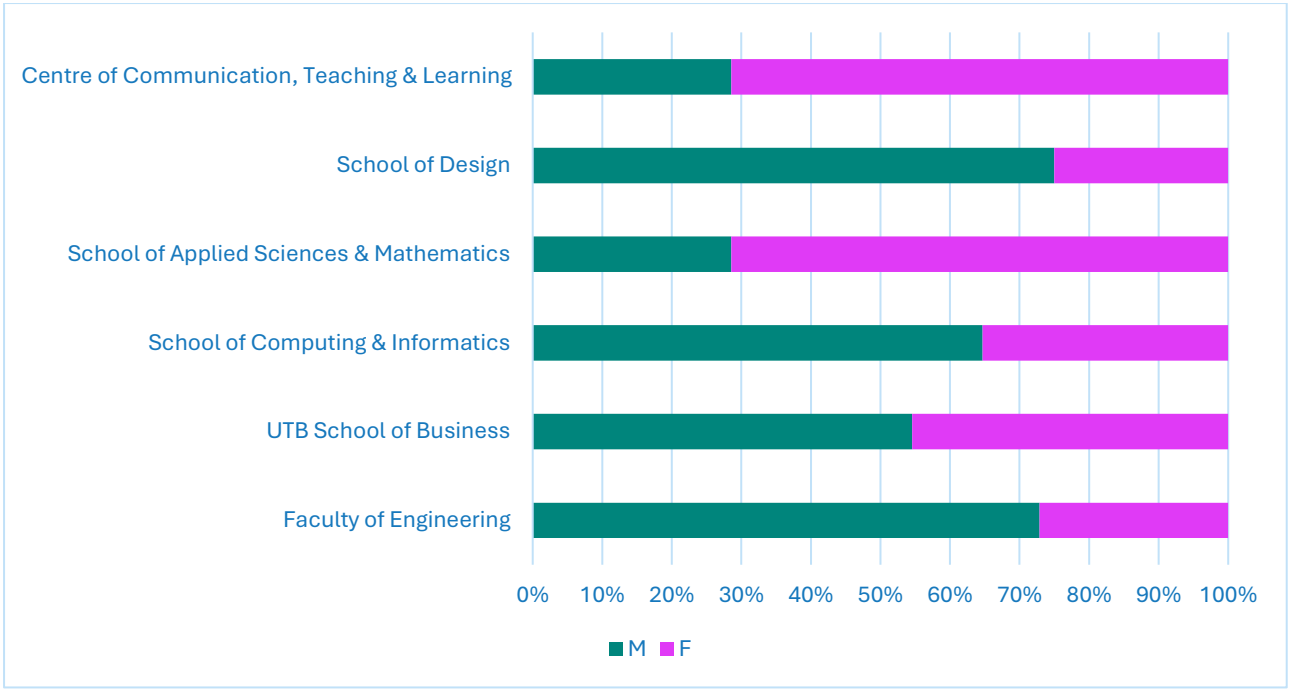

Figure 5: UTB academic staff by gender and faculty

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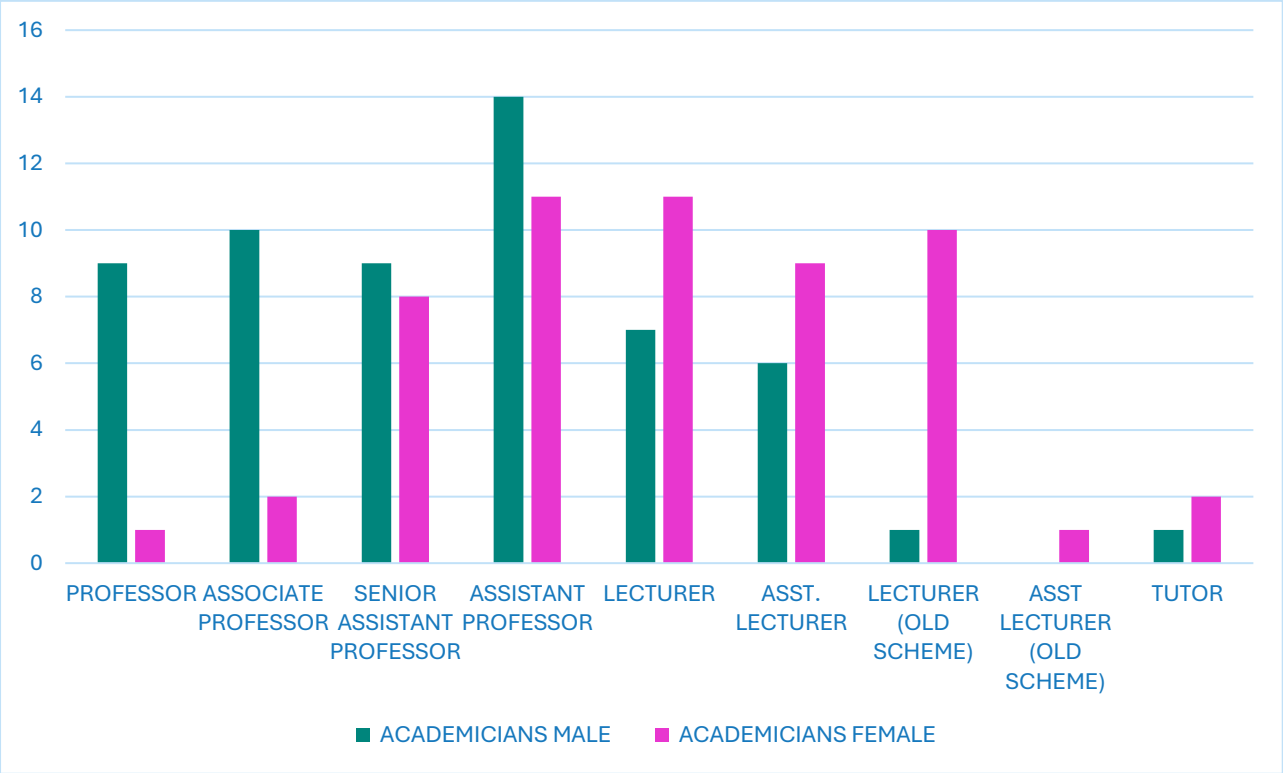

Figure 6: UTB academic roles by gender

5.2.3 Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA)

At Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), overall gender balance among academic staff is strong, with women forming more than 60% of staff in faculties such as Shariah and Islamic Economics & Finance. This highlights how institutional mission and culture influence participation, contrasting with the male dominance seen in STEM-focused universities. While representation at lecturer level is balanced, women remain underrepresented in senior academic ranks, showing that even where women enter academia in high numbers, structural barriers to progression persist.

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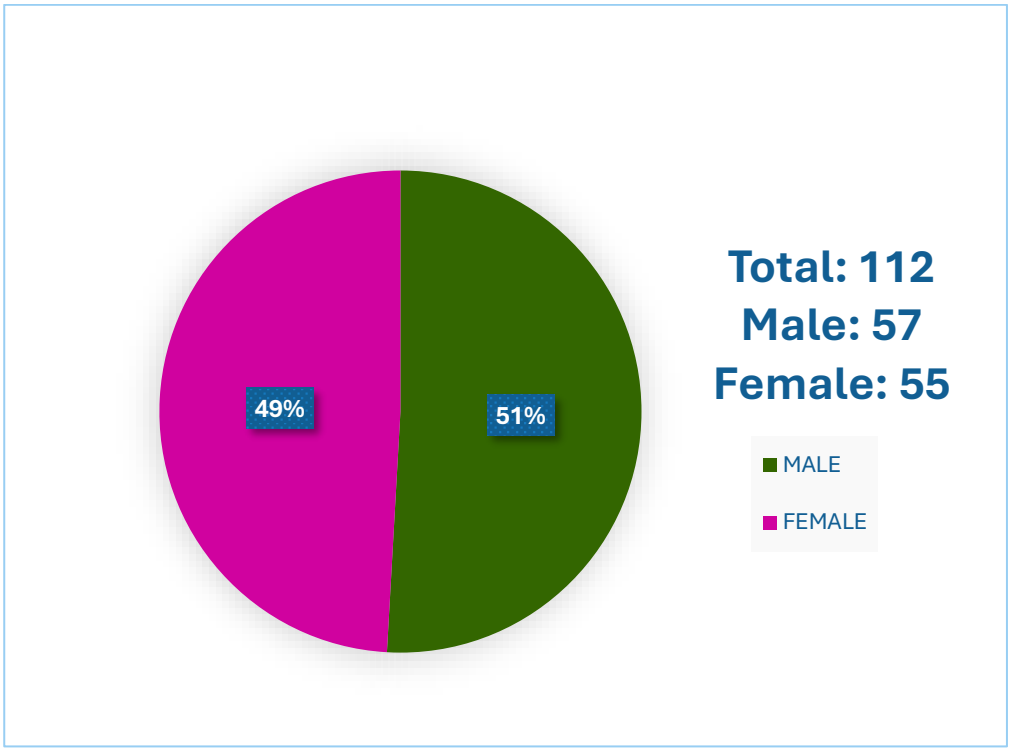

Figure 7: UNISSA academic staff by gender

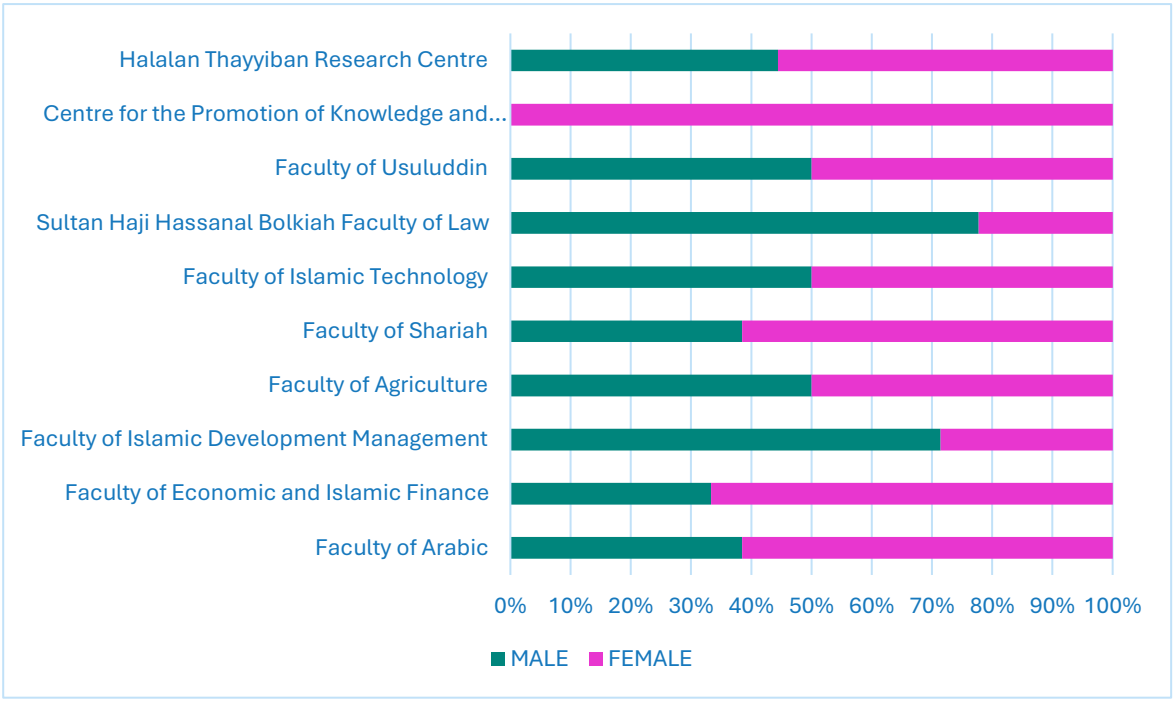

Figure 8: UNISSA academic staff by gender and faculty

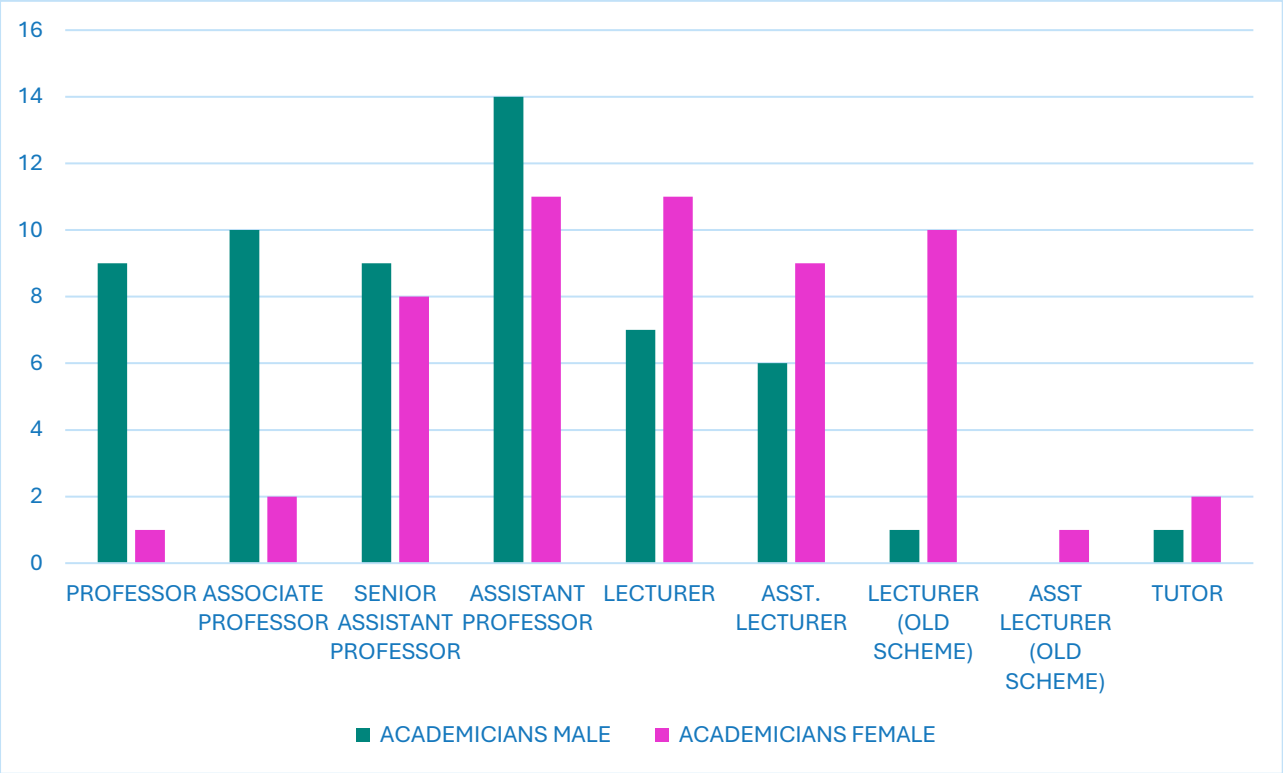

Figure 9: UNISSA academic roles by gender

5.3 Comparative analysis discussion

The mapping of gender representation across Brunei's public higher education institutions reveals a consistent pattern: strong gender parity at the point of access but persistent underrepresentation in senior academic ranks, STEM disciplines, and leadership roles.

5.3.1 Access and Early Career Representation

Women constitute approximately 59% of university students nationally, indicating that access to higher education is no longer a barrier. At the institutional level, UBD demonstrates near parity, UNISSA shows female-majority profiles in key faculties, and UTB remains male-skewed, with women comprising roughly 36% of academic staff. Entry-level academic positions, such as Lecturer, are similarly balanced, reflecting successful entry of women into academic careers.

5.3.2 Doctoral Pipeline and Disciplinary Patterns

Despite strong entry-level representation, the gender balance declines in postgraduate and PhD pipelines, particularly in STEM disciplines. For instance, doctoral programs in UBD's Faculty of Integrated Technologies, the Centre for Advanced Material and Energy Sciences, and the Faculty of Science (FIT, SDS, and CAMES) report more than 60% male enrolment, suggesting that the future pipeline of technical and scientific leaders remains male-dominated. By contrast, UNISSA shows stronger female participation in PhD programmes, especially in Islamic studies and related faculties, highlighting the role of institutional culture and mission in supporting women's academic advancement.

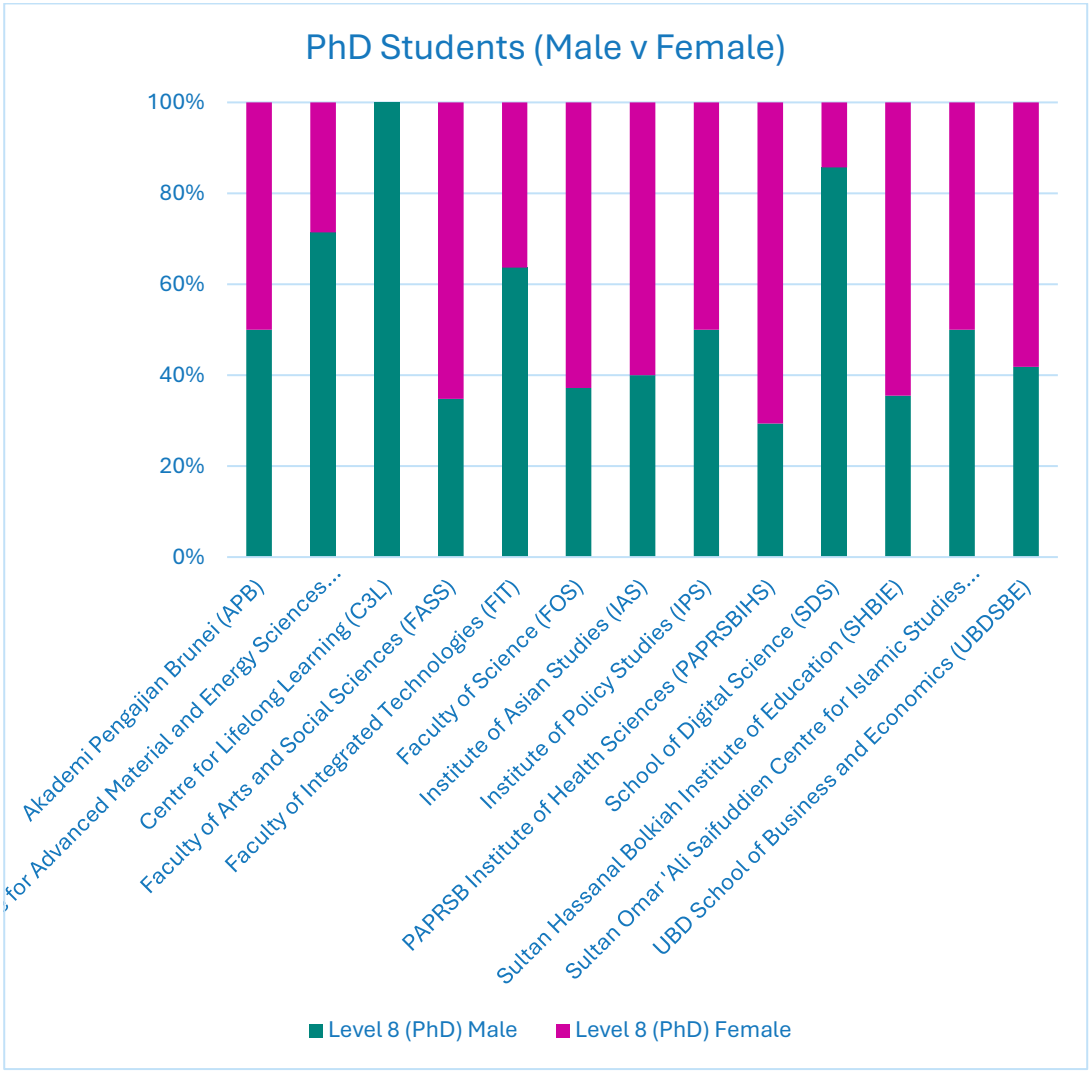

Figure 10: UBD PhD students by gender and faculty

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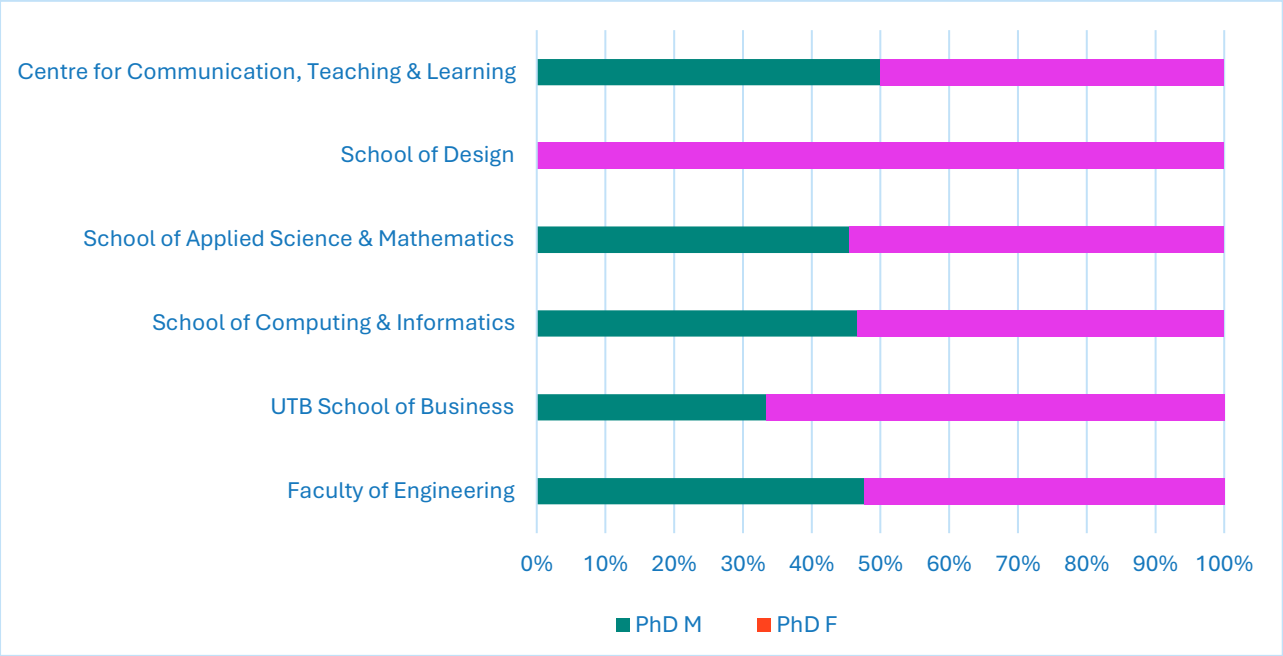

Figure 11: UTB PhD students by gender and faculty

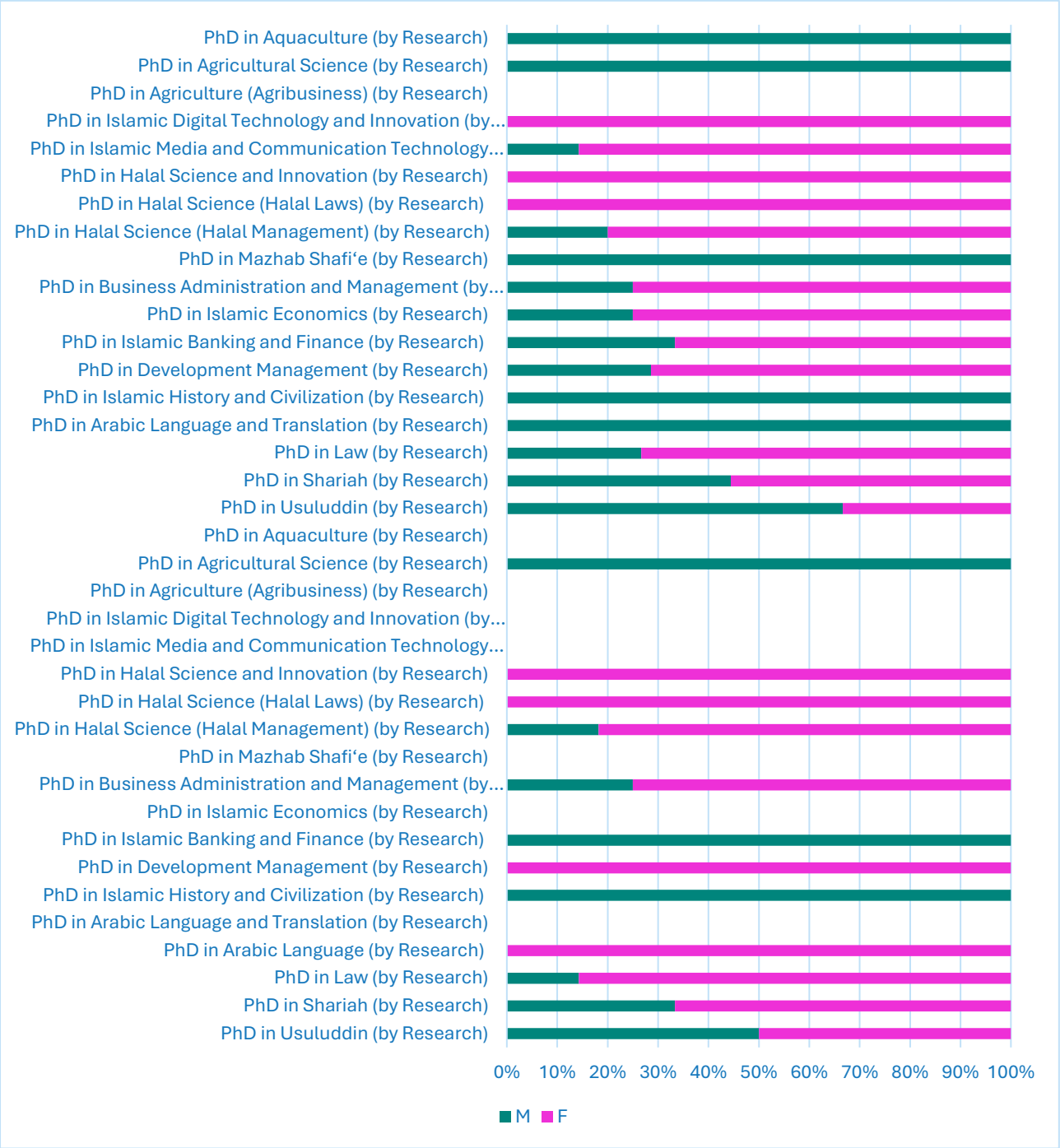

Figure 12: UNISSA PhD students by gender and faculty

5.3.3 Academic Progression and Seniority

The data reveal pronounced "cliffs" along the academic career ladder. While women are well-represented at the Lecturer level, their representation diminishes at Senior Lecturer, and drops sharply at Associate Professor and Professor levels, where fewer than 3% of positions are held by women. Only two Bruneian women have been promoted to full Professor over the past four decades. These patterns indicate that the barriers are not at entry, but in mid- to senior-career progression and promotion, particularly in STEM fields where cultural and structural challenges persist.

5.3.4 National Context and Workforce Implications

Institutional patterns are reflected nationally. Women, while dominating student enrolments, constitute only about 53% of the workforce and occupy roughly 37% of leadership positions (World Bank report, 2025). Political representation remains low, with women holding 11.8% of parliamentary seats. This indicates that Brunei has largely solved access to education, but challenges remain in translating educational attainment into workforce participation, leadership, and societal influence. The system is not failing at the door; it is failing along the stairs of progression and seniority.

5.4 Cross-Cutting Patterns

Three major patterns emerge:

1. **Pipeline attrition:** Women dominate at entry-level positions but decline at doctoral and senior academic levels. Without targeted interventions, top-level imbalances will persist.
2. **Disciplinary disparities:** STEM fields continue to underrepresent women, whereas Islamic and social science faculties sustain more equitable participation. Strategies must therefore be discipline-specific.
3. **Promotion:** Career progression stalls are structural, not a result of supply. Addressing promotion criteria, recognition processes, and committee practices is essential for systemic change.

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5.5 Challenges Identified

The primary challenges include:

- Persistent glass ceilings at senior academic ranks.
- Underrepresentation in STEM at both staff and doctoral levels.
- Weak transition from PhD to leadership positions.
- Cultural and structural barriers, including caregiving responsibilities, limited childcare support, and opaque promotion processes.

5.6 Recommendations and Way Forward

The evidence suggests that solutions must focus less on access, which has largely been achieved, and more on progression, leadership, and cultural reform. Universities should prioritize mentoring and sponsorship for female academics, particularly in STEM fields. Promotion processes should be made transparent, with clear criteria and recognition for teaching, service, and impact. Committee composition and training should be addressed to reduce bias. Targeted incentives, such as scholarships and research assistantships, are needed to balance the pipeline for women pursuing STEM PhDs. At the national level, a requirement for regular gender-disaggregated reporting would enable transparent monitoring and accountability.

The case of UNISSA demonstrates that balance is possible where culture and institutional mission are aligned. Brunei can build on this strength while addressing the structural and cultural barriers that persist in STEM and in career progression more broadly. By embedding GEDI principles into institutional frameworks and national policy, Brunei can ensure that its strong foundation in access is matched by inclusivity in leadership and innovation.

To ensure accountability and measure progress, the following KPIs are recommended:

- Female representation at Associate Professor and Professor levels (institution- and faculty-level).

- Female participation in STEM PhD programs (e.g., FIT, SDS, CAMES).
- Time-to-promotion by gender (Lecturer → Senior Lecturer → AP → Professor).
- Gender composition of search and promotion committees.
- Mentor coverage (% of early-career women with a named mentor/sponsor).
- Leadership pipeline metrics (# of women appointed to HoD, Programme Lead, or Associate Dean roles annually).

6.0 Brunei's Position: Strengths and Gaps

Placing Brunei's position in the broader ASEAN context, the country presents a mixed but distinctive profile in terms of gender equality within higher education. At the entry point, Brunei performs strongly, with women not only having equal access but in fact constituting the majority of students in higher education. However, this strength is offset by continuing weaknesses at the higher rungs of the academic ladder. The challenge in Brunei is not one of access, but of progression, seniority, and leadership, particularly in technical disciplines and decision-making structures.

6.1 Student enrolment

Brunei has effectively closed the gender gap in university enrolments, with women consistently representing between 59 and 65 percent of the student body across the main public institutions. This puts Brunei among the strongest performers in ASEAN in terms of women's access to higher education. Women are well represented in the social sciences, business, arts, and education, and they also participate in science faculties at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. However, the picture is less balanced in STEM disciplines.

At Universiti Teknologi Brunei and within STEM-intensive faculties at UBD, men dominate the pipeline into technical fields, particularly at the doctoral level. In units at UBD such as the Faculty of Integrated Technologies, the Centre for Advanced Material and Energy

Sciences, and the Faculty of Science (FIT, CAMES, FDS), more than 60 percent of PhD candidates are male. This imbalance highlights that Brunei's story is one of broad access but discipline-specific gaps that have significant implications for the future leadership pipeline in science and technology.

6.2 Academic staff

The national picture of academic staffing shows near parity overall, with women constituting approximately 48 percent of staff. At UBD and UNISSA, the distribution of male and female staff is relatively balanced, while at UTB, women represent only 36 percent of academic staff, the lowest among the three institutions. These figures confirm that Brunei has been effective at bringing women into academic careers, reflecting the legacy of generous government scholarships that enabled women to pursue higher degrees abroad and return to university teaching roles. Yet the data also reveal that balance at the point of entry does not extend evenly across disciplines, with male dominance in engineering and technical faculties at UTB and parts of UBD.

Without many senior women, the pipeline for leadership is thin. This is evidenced by the leadership data, which shows that only two women has ever reached a Vice-Chancellor position in Brunei. So, the gap is not in attracting women into academia, but in retaining and advancing them to the top. Compared to ASEAN peers, Brunei has a more gender-balanced faculty than Cambodia, Laos, or Indonesia, but it trails nations like Thailand and Malaysia, where women form a small majority of the faculty. Still, Brunei's position here is relatively strong; it has a foundation of qualified women educators to build upon for leadership roles if given support.

6.3 Leadership and decision-making

Leadership positions in Bruneian higher education remain overwhelmingly held by males. While one woman is serving as Vice-Chancellor, this totals two in Brunei's entire history of tertiary education . Women are present in some middle-management positions, such as deputy vice-chancellors, institute directors, or deans, but these roles remain the exception rather than the norm. Compared to ASEAN neighbours such as

Malaysia or the Philippines, which have seen 10–15 percent of universities headed by women, Brunei falls below even modest regional averages. The lack of women in senior leadership has both symbolic and practical consequences: it limits the diversity of perspectives in decision-making, weakens the visibility of role models for younger generations, and risks marginalizing issues that disproportionately affect women staff and students.

On a positive note, Brunei did break the glass ceiling (two Vice Chancellors in its history), proving that capable women are present. Moreover, women hold some leadership at middle management levels (for instance, it's reported that Brunei's universities have had female Deputy Vice-Chancellors, institute directors, and deans in various faculties). However, compared to a country like Kazakhstan (outside ASEAN), where 25% of rectors are women, or even compared to Malaysia/Philippines, Brunei has room to improve representation at the top.

This gap matters because leadership sets the tone and priorities, and without women at the table, issues particularly impacting female staff or students may receive less attention. It also means a lack of role models for Bruneian girls to see academia as a path to leadership. In short, Brunei's scorecard on women's higher education leadership is a concern, lagging behind the aspirations of regional frameworks that call for women's equal participation in decision-making.

6.4 Policy and institutional framework

Historically, Brunei's higher education sector has not had dedicated gender equality mechanisms, relying instead on a meritocratic ethos in recruitment and scholarship allocation. This explains why access parity has been achieved but also why leadership outcomes have stagnated.

The forthcoming National Plan of Action on Women provides a new policy vehicle to embed gender equality, diversity, and inclusion into national and institutional strategies. The EDI-Brunei-HE project itself demonstrates an appetite for institutional reflection and reform; however, the sector still lacks permanent structures, such as gender equality committees, formal mentorship schemes, or transparent promotion

tracking systems. Building such frameworks will be essential for Brunei to translate its strong record of access into equitable outcomes at the highest levels.

In terms of institutional practices, Brunei's universities have taken some steps (UBD, for instance, has an implicit culture of inclusion and recently has been involved in dialogues on women's empowerment with the EU). Yet, formal structures such as GAD offices and mentorship programs are not as visible in Brunei's HEIs as they are in some ASEAN universities. The EDI-Brunei-HE project itself is evidence that this issue is now being addressed, indicating Brunei's intent to evaluate and improve equality, diversity, and inclusion within its higher education system.

6.5 Cultural context and outcomes

The cultural setting in Brunei strongly shapes outcomes. The country's close-knit society, Syariah-influenced norms, and family-oriented values simultaneously encourage women's education while reinforcing traditional caregiving roles that can deter or slow career progression. Many women who achieve doctoral qualifications may consciously opt for slower career paths or avoid senior leadership due to these expectations. At the same time, the supportive welfare state and family structures have facilitated women's enrolment and participation, meaning the issue is not whether women can enter, but whether they can rise. This cultural nuance underscores that numerical targets alone will not suffice; institutional reforms must be complemented by broader community engagement, including that of religious leaders and families, in redefining women's roles in leadership as compatible with Bruneian values.

Brunei also has a relatively low population of disadvantaged minorities (ethnically, it's majority Malay, and religiously, majority Muslim). Thus, "diversity" in Brunei's context is more about accommodating different gender roles or perhaps the small non-Malay communities (Chinese, indigenous) in education. There is little data suggesting that those groups face discrimination in higher education, but inclusion efforts should ensure they feel represented as well. Essentially, Brunei's strengths lie in broad access and a foundation of gender-equitable human capital, while its weaknesses lie in the upper tiers of influence and in the absence (until now) of explicit EDI mechanisms.

In summary, Brunei does not have a gender access problem in higher education; it has a gender leadership and policy proactivity problem. The comparative lens reveals that for Brunei to become a leader in ASEAN on gender equality in academia, it must emulate and adapt best practices from its neighbours and address the cultural barriers that currently limit women's full participation in higher education leadership.

7.0 Recommendations for Brunei

The findings of the EDI-Brunei-HE project demonstrate that Brunei has achieved a remarkable level of gender parity at the point of access to higher education; however, it continues to face systemic bottlenecks in academic progression, senior leadership, and STEM representation. The recommendations below aim to address these gaps through integrated policy action, institutional reforms, and cultural engagement, ensuring that the significant human capital of Bruneian women is fully realised in higher education and national development.

7.1 Formalize and Implement Gender Equality Policies in Higher Education

7.1.1 Institutionalize GEDI Commitments

The forthcoming National Plan of Action on Women provides an opportunity to embed gender equality, diversity, and inclusion (GEDI) explicitly within higher education. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports, should develop clear directives that require all universities to adopt GEDI action plans tailored to their respective institutional contexts. These plans should be more than symbolic; they should include timelines, measurable objectives, and publicly reported monitoring mechanisms.

7.1.2 Gender Mainstreaming in University Governance

Each institution should establish a standing Gender and Inclusion Committee reporting directly to the Vice-Chancellor or Rector. These committees would be tasked with auditing admissions, hiring, promotion, and campus policies to identify hidden barriers. For example, promotion criteria could be revised to recognise career interruptions due to caregiving responsibilities, or recruitment policies could be adjusted to ensure shortlists include qualified women candidates. Embedding GEDI into governance ensures that equity becomes an integral part of the decision-making culture, rather than an afterthought.

7.1.3 Data Tracking and Transparency

A critical enabler of reform is reliable data. Brunei's higher education institutions must be required to collect and publish gender-disaggregated data across student enrolments, scholarship allocations, academic hiring, promotions, and leadership positions. A national "Brunei Higher Education Gender Equality Report" could be issued annually, providing benchmarks and accountability. The maxim "what gets measured gets managed" is especially relevant here; transparent reporting would highlight progress while revealing areas requiring additional support.

7.1.4 Set Aspirational Targets

Rigid quotas may not be suitable for Brunei's cultural context, but aspirational targets can play a crucial role in signalling commitment and shaping institutional behaviour. For example, the Ministry could set a target of 30 percent of senior leadership positions (Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, and Deans) to be held by women by 2030. Institutions would be encouraged to chart their own roadmaps to achieve this. Such targets, if framed carefully, can act as motivators rather than rigid mandates, aligning with Brunei's preference for gradual but steady reform.

7.1.5 Broader Inclusion Commitments

Although gender is the most visible dimension of disparity, Brunei's higher education sector should also embed broader commitments to inclusion, such as supporting persons with disabilities or minority communities. Early adoption of inclusive practices will ensure Brunei's higher education is future proofed against evolving societal needs.

These policy actions, taken at a national level, will provide the enabling framework for change. They show top-down commitment and hold institutions accountable, which is necessary given Brunei's centralized education structure.

7.2 Strengthen Female Leadership Pipelines

To address the glaring gap in women's representation at the top, Brunei should proactively cultivate future female leaders in academia:

7.2.1 Leadership Training and Mentoring

Brunei needs to cultivate the next generation of women leaders in academia. Establishing a Women's Academic Leadership Development Programme under the EDI-Brunei-HE framework would provide structured training in areas such as strategic planning, university governance, and research leadership. Mid-career female academics could be paired with senior mentors, including international partners, to enhance their confidence, expand their networks, and increase their readiness for senior positions.

7.2.2 Networking and Regional Exchange

Female academics should be actively supported to join ASEAN and international leadership networks. Participation in forums such as the ASEAN University Network's gender platforms or global programmes like the HERS Institute would expose Bruneian women to role models and practical strategies for navigating leadership pathways.

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These exchanges would also enhance Brunei's visibility and reputation within the regional academic community.

7.2.3 Interim Appointments and Rotation

Given the relatively small size of Brunei's higher education system, opportunities for leadership experience are limited. One practical approach is to rotate acting or interim leadership positions—such as department headships or deanships—among qualified women academics. While this practice already exists to some extent, key decisions continue to be made predominantly at higher levels. Expanding such rotations would not only provide valuable leadership exposure but also help normalise women's presence in positions of authority, gradually shifting institutional and societal perceptions of leadership roles, and eventually generating participation in decision-making.

7.2.4 Recognition and Reward

Implement an award or recognition for Outstanding Women in Brunei Higher Education. This could be an annual award given by the Ministry or university to a female academic or administrator who exemplifies leadership, innovation, or service. Such recognition boosts the visibility of women leaders and sends a message that women's contributions are valued at the highest levels. It may encourage more women to put themselves forward for leadership roles and assure them that their work will be acknowledged.

7.3 Enhance Support for Women Academics and Students

Creating an environment where women can thrive academically and professionally is crucial. Brunei's cultural emphasis on family and modesty should be integrated into support measures:

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7.3.1 Family-Friendly Campus Initiatives

Bruneian universities should introduce policies that help balance work and family commitments, which often disproportionately affect women. For example:

- Establish an on-site childcare centre or crèche at major campuses (perhaps starting with UBD as a pilot). This would greatly help both female staff and students who have young children, reducing career interruption and stress. Given Brunei's size, even a centralized high-quality childcare facility serving multiple institutions could be considered.
- Offer flexible scheduling or remote work options for lecturers when feasible (as learned during COVID-19). This can be especially helpful for academic mothers of young children or those caring for family. It should be structured to maintain productivity (e.g., offering flexible hours for research days) without creating a stigma.
- Extend maternity and paternity leave benefits in line with or exceeding national labour laws for university employees, and crucially, ensure that taking leave does not derail promotion prospects. For example, allowing an extra year on the tenure clock after maternity leave is a practice elsewhere that could be adapted.

7.3.2 Mentorship for Students

Pair female students (especially in male-dominated fields like engineering or IT) with female mentors from faculty or industry. A "Women in STEM mentorship scheme" could be launched jointly by UTB and industry partners, where female engineering students meet regularly with women engineers or professors for guidance and support. This can enhance female retention and success in these fields, thereby contributing to the pipeline of future academics and professionals.

7.3.3 Safe and Inclusive Campus Culture

While Brunei is generally safe, it's important to maintain that safety and sense of inclusion proactively. Universities should adopt a clear zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment and ensure that there are confidential channels for reporting any issues. Regular awareness seminars about respectful behaviour, perhaps framed within Brunei's values of respect (adat) and community (musyawarah), can be conducted. Also, make sure campus facilities cater to women's needs, provide adequate lighting, safe dormitories, and transportation for students at night, etc., so that women feel secure fully participating in campus life (be it late-night library study or research fieldwork).

7.3.4 Address Stereotypes through Education

Incorporate content on gender equality and respectful relationships into student orientation or general studies courses. For instance, a module on "Gender and Society in Brunei" could be introduced, highlighting how Islam and Bruneian culture support the education and leadership of women (examples: historical prominent Bruneian women, or interpretations of Islamic teachings that encourage both daughters and sons to seek knowledge). By rooting the discourse in a cultural context, it dispels the notion that gender equality is a "Western" idea and fosters pride in local pathways to inclusion.

7.4 Promote Women's Career Advancement in Academia

To move women from entry-level academic positions into senior ranks, we propose the following initiatives.

7.4.1 Research Grants and Opportunities

Ensure women academics have equal access to research funding and development opportunities. If the analysis of the data reveals that women apply for grants at lower rates, consider initiating a support system, such as grant writing workshops targeted at

female lecturers or a small seed fund earmarked for projects led by women researchers. Successful research leads to publications, which lead to promotions. This addresses one subtle barrier that may cause women to hesitate in competing or have heavier teaching loads that reduce their research time.

7.4.2 Transparent Promotion Criteria

Universities should review their promotion criteria to ensure they are fair, transparent, and equitable. Emphasize that the quality of contributions (teaching, research, service) is valued, not just longevity or networking. Sometimes women don't put themselves up for promotion as early as men do. Having clear criteria and perhaps even a gentle nudge system (e.g., HR alerts eligible staff when they meet the criteria) can encourage more women to apply for Associate Professor or Professor positions when they are ready. Additionally, include at least one woman on promotion review committees to provide diverse perspectives and mitigate unconscious bias.

7.4.3 Inclusive Decision-Making

Even before women reach top positions, include them in decision-making bodies. For example, when a university forms a strategic planning task force or a curriculum review committee, ensure that women academics are well-represented on it (aim for gender-balanced committees). This gives women experience in governance and raises their profile. It also improves the quality of decisions through diversity of thought. Brunei's small academic community often means the same few people carry out many roles; proactively rotating women into these roles will help build their leadership skills.

7.4.4 Showcase Role Models

Leverage the example of Datin Dr. Anita (former UBD VC) and any other prominent Bruneian women in education by involving them in public forums, talks, or perhaps appoint one as an Honorary Adviser on Gender Equality in Higher Education to the

Ministry. Her insights and visibility can inspire current staff and signal that the organization is serious about advancing women. Similarly, invite successful women alumni who have become leaders in other sectors to campus events. This broadens the vision of what female graduates can achieve and how academia can serve as a stepping stone for them.

7.5 Leverage Regional and International Collaboration

Aligning with EDI-Brunei-HE's outward-looking approach, Brunei should continue to draw on international support and comparisons:

7.5.1 ASEAN and AUN Initiatives

Actively participate in ASEAN forums on higher education and GEDI. For example, Brunei could host a regional workshop on "Women in Higher Education Leadership in ASEAN," inviting counterparts to share best practices and challenges. This not only brings global knowledge to Brunei's doorstep but also positions Brunei as a leader on the issue (peer learning is a two-way street and hosting shows initiative). It can be tied to Brunei's turn to showcase progress under ASEAN commitments. The SHARE project's study and similar research should be utilized; perhaps Brunei can volunteer as a case study site for pilot interventions recommended by ASEAN or UNESCO.

7.5.2 Academic Exchanges and Scholarships

Encourage more women to pursue PhDs and postdoctoral research through scholarships. The government might introduce a "Women in STEM PhD Scholarship" specifically to increase the number of female faculty in underrepresented fields. Upon return, ensure these scholars are fast-tracked into meaningful academic roles. Partner with foreign universities (maybe via MoUs at UBD or UTB) for exchange programs where Bruneian women academics spend a semester abroad and vice versa; exposure to

different academic cultures (some where women are more prevalent in leadership) can shape expectations and bring back new ideas.

7.5.3 Monitoring and Evaluation with External Input

Consider inviting an external review or audit (perhaps via an organization like Advance HE or UNDP) of Brunei's universities on EDI metrics after a few years of implementing new measures. An outside perspective can validate success and highlight blind spots. This doesn't have to be punitive; frame it as a supportive consultancy to benchmark against international standards. It will help sustain momentum and accountability for the recommendations that have been put in place.

7.6 Engage Men and the Wider Community

Lastly, any culturally informed approach in Brunei must bring men on board as partners and resonate with societal values:

7.6.1 Male Ally Programs

Develop initiatives that encourage male academics and students to champion gender equality. This could include workshops for male faculty on how to be mentors and allies for their female colleagues, or student campaigns led by both genders promoting a respectful campus culture. When men understand that improving gender equality is not a zero-sum game but a benefit to the institution (e.g., a more diverse leadership leads to better governance outcomes), they are likely to support it. In the Bruneian context, emphasizing protectiveness and provision can be re-framed as supporting female family members' education and career, a point of pride rather than a threat.

7.6.2 Community Outreach

Work with Brunei's community and religious leaders to reinforce the message that educated, empowered women are an asset to the nation and fully in line with cherished values. Perhaps through forums like mosque gatherings or village committees, promote the success stories of Bruneian women scholars and their contributions to society. If there are lingering conservative sentiments that women "don't need" higher positions, these can be gently countered by respected figures citing examples (including from Islamic history, like scholars or leaders who were women). This societal buy-in is crucial in Brunei, where community opinion holds weight.

7.6.3 Student Organizations and Clubs

Support the formation of student clubs that focus on gender equality or SDG 5 (Gender Equality). These can organize dialogues, volunteer work (e.g., tutoring girls in schools), and awareness events, such as International Women's Day activities on campus. Empowering youth to take ownership of EDI helps ensure the sustainability of efforts. Given that Bruneian youth are globally connected and many are passionate about social issues, harnessing that energy will naturally embed gender-inclusive values in campus life.

By implementing these recommendations, Brunei can make significant strides toward an inclusive and equitable higher education system. Importantly, each recommendation has been tailored to resonate with Brunei's context: leveraging its strong government support structure, aligning with cultural and religious values, and taking advantage of its small size to pilot changes quickly. Brunei has already achieved enviable success in educating its women; now it is about unleashing the full potential of that educated female talent for the benefit of higher education and the nation. With committed policy action and institutional reforms, Brunei can both catch up to and even leapfrog some of its ASEAN peers, becoming a model of how a small, tradition-rooted country can champion gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in higher education.

8.0 Conclusion

Brunei stands at a pivotal juncture. It has successfully provided women with access to higher education and built a solid foundation of female academic staff. The task now is to dismantle the bottlenecks that prevent women from advancing into senior leadership roles. Through a combination of policy reform, institutional restructuring, targeted support, and cultural engagement, Brunei can transform its higher education landscape into one that not only educates women but also empowers them to lead. In doing so, Brunei will align itself with ASEAN's broader GEDI aspirations and demonstrate how a small, tradition-rooted nation can become a model of inclusive academic leadership.

Addressing these gaps requires systemic, multi-level interventions tailored to Brunei's sociocultural context. Establishing formal GEDI mechanisms, mentoring networks, and gender-sensitive policy reforms within universities is essential to breaking the leadership ceiling. At the same time, efforts must align with national values and institutions to ensure community-wide buy-in.

With targeted policy action, regional learning, and strong government backing, Brunei is well-positioned to become a regional exemplar of how small, culturally rooted nations can achieve gender equity and inclusive excellence in higher education. The EDI-Brunei-HE initiative offers a critical window to catalyse this change.

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