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Balancing Free Speech and Institutional Integrity: A framework for vetting guests and speakers at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

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Abstract

This study analyzes the balance between free speech and institutional integrity at UiTM via a literature review and proposes a vetting framework for guest speakers. This framework promotes cultural values while encouraging academic diversity, ensuring that diverse viewpoints resonate with community sensitivities and uphold UiTM's core principles. It supports the Bumiputera community and maintains academic freedom alongside institutional integrity, fostering respectful discourse. The implementation of this framework enhances UiTM's cultural commitment, enriching academia by promoting critical thinking and responsible leadership, preparing students to engage thoughtfully with diverse perspectives, and empowering future leaders to tackle contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Academic freedom, Free speech, Institutional values, Vetting process

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1.0 Introduction

Academic institutions are primarily recognized as platforms for open inquiry and debate. As noted by Heriot-Watt University, universities play a crucial societal role by facilitating discussions that allow for the examination and challenge of contested ideas (Heriot-Watt University, 2023). However, in practice, universities must balance their commitment to free discourse with other values, such as protecting students from harassment and upholding institutional missions. The issue of free speech on campus becomes particularly contentious in multicultural societies, where the rights of diverse groups must align with universal principles of expression.

This paper explores these tensions within the framework of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), a Malaysian public university with a historical focus on empowering Bumiputera communities. We utilize UiTM's official mission — "to lead the development of agile, professional Bumiputeras" through advanced curricula and research (UiTM, 2024) — to provide context for our discussion. After reviewing relevant theories and policies on free speech in multicultural academic environments, we propose a structured framework for

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vetting external speakers that upholds academic freedom while respecting UiTM's community values. Established sources are cited throughout to substantiate key points and adhere to scholarly conventions.

Accordingly, this paper aims to develop a context-sensitive framework for vetting external guests and speakers at UiTM that aligns with Malaysian law, UiTM's mission, and widely recognized principles of academic freedom. It has three specific objectives: (i) to place campus free-speech debates within Malaysia's constitutional and multicultural context, along with UiTM's institutional role; (ii) to synthesize relevant literature, legal provisions, and policy examples into a conceptual basis for structured vetting; and (iii) to translate these principles into a practical, checklist-based process to guide transparent and consistent decision-making.

2.0 UiTM's Mission and Institutional Context

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) is a public university in Malaysia with a distinctive mission. Originally established as a college for Malays, it operates under national affirmative-action policies and is committed to empowering Bumiputera individuals, who are primarily indigenous and Malay, through education. Its official mission is "to lead the development of agile, professional Bumiputeras through state-of-the-art curricula and impactful research" (UiTM, 2024). The university's vision emphasizes producing world-class Bumiputera scholars who can lead in various professional fields (UiTM, 2024). UiTM aims to "enhance the knowledge and expertise of Bumiputeras across all disciplines" through rigorous academic programs and ethical community engagement (UiTM, 2024). These foundational objectives have been reaffirmed in recent years, with UiTM's administration publicly committing to an admissions policy that prioritizes Bumiputera students, aligning with the university's mission (BERNAMA, 2024).

This focus significantly shapes the campus's cultural landscape. UiTM operates as a multi-campus system with over 100,000 students, primarily from the Malay/Muslim demographic (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2022). The admission of Non-Bumiputera students is allowed only through notable exceptions, as outlined by the UiTM Act 1976 (Lee, 2012). UiTM's specialized mission aligns with national goals to reduce ethnic disparities and cultivate a new elite among Malay professionals (Shamsul, 2001; Lee & Tan, 2008).

However, this approach presents challenges: critics argue that such a singular focus may limit exposure to diverse perspectives (Guan, 2005). In the multicultural context of Malaysia, universities are expected to facilitate national integration (Milner, 2009; MOHE, 2020). Despite its ethnically specific charter, recent policy discussions have underscored the need for greater pluralism and campus dialogue (Mustafa, 2021). In this context, UiTM must balance its Bumiputera-focused mission with broader societal principles such as inclusivity, tolerance, and academic diversity (Nor & Yusof, 2020).

3.0 Free Speech and Multicultural Theory: A Theoretical Framework

Free expression is widely recognized as an individual human right and a fundamental principle of liberal democracy. John Stuart Mill famously argued that silencing an opinion deprives humanity of truth (Mill 1859/2008). In Malaysian law, freedom of speech is protected under Article 10 of the Federal Constitution. However, it is subject to strict limitations on security, public order, and morality (Federal Constitution of Malaysia 2020). These restrictions are particularly significant in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society.

Analyses indicate that the government has consistently enforced strict controls over expression to maintain ethnic harmony in a multicultural context (Weiss, 2020). Additionally, Malaysian leaders express caution about speech that may disparage religion or its followers, given that Islam is the state religion (Article 3 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia 2020). Thus, in the Malaysian context, free speech is not an absolute right; it must be balanced against the constitutional obligation to preserve racial and religious harmony.

From a theoretical perspective, multiculturalism presents intricate challenges for free speech. Scholars differentiate between "soft" multiculturalism, which emphasizes individual cultural rights, and "hard" multiculturalism, which prioritizes group autonomy (Kymlicka, 1995). The conflict becomes evident when free speech is compared to the demands of certain groups that may seek to avoid offense. As Eriksen and Stjernfelt (2012) note, incidents such as the Muhammad "cartoon crisis" exemplify the tension between universal human rights, like free speech, and the group rights asserted by complex multiculturalism. Some interpretations of cultural sensitivity may advocate for restrictions that encroach on individual rights, including free speech. If group-defining norms are enforced rigidly, they may elevate cultural or religious authority above universal democratic principles (Eriksen & Stjernfelt, 2012).

Conversely, proponents of unrestricted free speech argue that liberal values actually promote diversity. Nadine Strossen asserts that "cultural diversity is so obviously fostered by free speech—far from being hindered by it" (Strossen, 2018, p. 154). She contends that robust speech protections enhance the expression of diverse voices, including those of cultural origin (Strossen, 2018, p. 155). In contrast, restricting speech often serves to shield prevailing cultural values, leaving marginalized perspectives unheard.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework highlights a tension: while liberal free speech principles support individuals' rights to express and hear diverse viewpoints (Mill, 1859/2008), a multicultural ethos may impose specific norms on different groups. Effective campus policy must navigate this dilemma, ensuring that universities protect open inquiry (AAUP, 2014) while also respecting community values and legal requirements (Ontario Tech University, 2020). The following section examines how these principles are put into practice on campuses.

3.1 Campus Free Speech and Institutional Norms

Universities around the world face the challenge of balancing free speech with their institutional values. In the United States and the United Kingdom, debates over campus speech have intensified, particularly over issues such as race, gender, and ideology. Recent controversies have included student protests against speakers perceived to promote hate speech, disinvitations, and "no-platforming"

campaigns, where individuals or groups are denied the opportunity to speak due to their views (The New York Times, 2023; The Harvard Crimson, 2022).

Some institutions have enacted formal policies to navigate these tensions. For example, Ontario Tech University emphasizes the protection of lawful expression, stating that even controversial or unpopular opinions should be allowed, provided they do not incite violence or harassment (Ontario Tech University, 2020). Similarly, University College London and several other universities have adopted codes of practice to ensure invited speakers can express their views. At the same time, administrators manage potential disruptions and uphold principles of equality, such as equity and inclusion (The Harvard Crimson, 2022).

In contrast, the parameters for permissible speech in Malaysia are narrower. Legal instruments and cultural norms set boundaries around speech that may insult religion, challenge royal institutions, or disrupt ethnic harmony (Weiss, 2020). Consequently, universities must carefully distinguish between legitimate academic critique and speech that crosses into incitement or disrespect. While students and academics may draw inspiration from Western discourses on free speech and academic freedom, Malaysian institutions cannot simply replicate such models without considering local legal and cultural constraints.

At UiTM, there are additional expectations. As a Bumiputera-only institution, UiTM is constitutionally and politically tasked with advancing the interests of Malay and Bumiputera communities. This includes protecting Islam as the religion of the Federation and safeguarding the dignity of the Malay rulers. Therefore, speaker vetting at UiTM must consider not only general concerns about public safety and academic freedom but also the institution's obligation to uphold these values in all academic and public discussions.

4.0 Methodology: Literature-Based Analysis

The research employs a literature-based analysis methodology, a qualitative framework that examines existing literature, theoretical models, legal documents, and institutional reports. This approach offers in-depth insights into free speech policies, cultural practices, and regulatory frameworks relevant to UiTM's vetting procedures.

Key components of the literature-based method include:

4.1 Data Collection: Relevant sources, such as academic journals, legal documents, and policy papers, were selected using keywords like "free speech," "institutional integrity," "vetting practices," and "cultural values in education." These sources were chosen to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and strategies related to free speech within academic institutions, particularly in Malaysia's sociopolitical context.

4.2 Analysis Technique: Content analysis was utilized to identify patterns and themes in the literature, focusing on limitations on free speech, institutional integrity, and the necessary balance in multicultural contexts. This approach allowed for the synthesis of diverse viewpoints, offering a nuanced understanding of UiTM's vetting framework.

Consequently, the literature-based analysis establishes a solid academic foundation for developing a framework to vet guest speakers in alignment with UiTM's values, while addressing the broader implications of free speech in Malaysian higher education.

5.0 A Proposed Vetting Framework for UiTM

To balance the demands of academic freedom, national law, and institutional values, UiTM requires a comprehensive vetting process for guests and speakers. The following framework, which is based on international academic best practices and Malaysia's sociopolitical context, is proposed.

5.1 Pre-Screening by the Inviting Department

All external speaker proposals must undergo a thorough pre-screening process conducted by the inviting faculty or department, using a standardized checklist. This checklist evaluates the speaker's background, including their previous talks, publications, affiliations, and social media activity. Key considerations during this evaluation include whether the speaker has made public statements that contradict UiTM's core values, such as respect for Islam, Malay culture, Bumiputera empowerment, and the monarchy, as well as any history of inflammatory or divisive rhetoric.

5.2 Legal and Cultural Compliance Screening

Following the initial review, submissions will be screened for legal and cultural compliance by a central office, such as the Office of the Vice-Chancellor or the Legal Advisory Unit. This review ensures compliance with relevant legislation, including the Sedition Act of 1948 and the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998, as well as UiTM's internal policies on religious and cultural sensitivities. Consultation with Shariah advisors, the Office of Royal Relations, or the Ministry of Higher Education may be conducted to address any concerns.

5.3 Risk Assessment and Mitigation

If a speaker is deemed likely to provoke public controversy, the Security and Communications departments will conduct a risk assessment. Should the speaker receive approval, specific mitigation strategies may be implemented, including limitations on audience size, the presence of a moderator, or pre-approved discussion topics.

5.4 Final Approval and Conditional Invitation

The ultimate decision on the invitation rests with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor or the Vice-Chancellor's Office. Upon receiving approval, the speaker must sign a Code of Conduct agreement, affirming their commitment to UiTM's values and Malaysian law. Conditional invitations may also specify prohibited topics or themes that must be observed.

This framework aims to maintain academic autonomy while fulfilling UiTM's obligations to the state, its foundational mission, and its stakeholders.

The following table (Table 5) displays the detailed checklist:

Table 5. Vettors' Checklist for Guest Speakers at UiTM

Criteria	Yes/No	Comments/Notes
1. Alignment with UiTM's Mission		Evaluate if the speaker's values, subjects, and messages support UiTM's mission of promoting education, cultural integrity, and national identity.
2. Islamic Integrity		Confirm if the speaker has been evaluated by the Islamic Advisory Council for adherence to Islamic teachings.
3. Respect for Bumiputera and Malay Rights		Ascertain that the speaker recognizes and respects the rights and interests of Bumiputera and Malay communities.
4. Respect for Malay Royals		Check if the speaker demonstrates respect and acknowledgment of the Malay monarchy's role in Malaysian society.
5. Political Neutrality		Ensure the speaker is devoid of divisive rhetoric or political biases that may polarize the university community.
6. Academic Credentials		Verify the speaker's academic achievements and relevant professional experience.
7. Ethical Integrity		Investigate any past ethical violations or controversies that could tarnish the university's reputation.
8. Public Perception		Assess the speaker's public image and the potential impact on the university's reputation.
<p>Instructions for Use: Mark "Yes" or "No" for each criterion based on the speaker's compliance. Utilize the "Comments/Notes" section for detailed insights related to each criterion. If any critical criteria are marked "No," further evaluation or consultation with appropriate authorities is advisable prior to inviting the speaker.</p>		

The checklist offers a straightforward, structured approach to evaluating guest speakers, ensuring all relevant factors are considered. It also promotes transparency by documenting the rationale behind decisions, which can be helpful for internal review and accountability. Suppose critical criteria fail to meet the standards (marked as "No"). In that case, further evaluation is required, and the proposal may need to be revised or escalated to higher authorities before the speaker is approved, thereby ensuring careful consideration of all aspects.

This organized checklist ensures a thorough vetting process and helps decision-makers make informed choices about speaker engagements at UiTM, prioritizing the values and standards necessary to the institution.

6.0 Discussion

The proposed framework may seem restrictive from a Western liberal perspective, but it is well-suited to Malaysia's diverse legal and cultural context. It embodies a concept of "bounded openness"—an institutional model that facilitates meaningful discourse within legally and morally accepted boundaries (Tan, 2012; Whiting, 2019). This model aligns with both the Malaysian constitution and international governance practices in Asian and Muslim-majority countries (Zin et al., 2021).

Moreover, the framework aligns with UiTM's unique mission. A truly inclusive university should respect indigenous priorities rather than replicate Euro-American standards. As Islamic educational theorists have noted, hikmah (wisdom) involves integrating knowledge with ethical values and community principles (Al-Attas, 1995). Allowing speakers who disparage Malay culture, undermine Islamic beliefs, or disrespect royal institutions goes against this principle of integration.

Additionally, the framework opposes arbitrary censorship. By requiring justification for dis-invitations and ensuring due process in vetting, it avoids outright bans on controversial ideas. This approach aligns with scholarly views that emphasize the importance of protecting unpopular opinions, provided they do not incite hatred or violence (Strossen, 2018; Eriksen & Stjernfelt, 2012).

Crucially, this vetting process does not diminish academic freedom; instead, it contextualizes it. As Kymlicka (1995) suggests, liberal rights frameworks should align with local cultural meanings—especially important in postcolonial countries like Malaysia, where freedom should foster rather than hinder nation-building. Therefore, the framework should be viewed as a theoretically informed starting point for institutional policy rather than a conclusive or empirically validated solution. It also invites further discussion and refinement within UiTM and similar universities.

7.0 Conclusion

Free speech is essential to modern universities, but it cannot be unconditional. For UiTM, discourse must be balanced with core values—Islam, Malay identity, Bumiputera empowerment, and royal respect—that shape its institutional ethos. In a multicultural nation like Malaysia, speech that threatens inter-ethnic harmony or religious unity can cause significant damage. Accordingly, universities have a responsibility to carefully vet speakers.

This paper proposes a structured vetting framework that honors academic freedom while protecting UiTM's mission and situating campus discourse within Malaysia's unique constitutional and cultural landscape, ensuring that free inquiry does not undermine the institution's foundational principles. Thus, UiTM can serve as a model for how universities in multicultural societies can navigate the tension between open discourse and identity-based responsibilities.

This analysis has several limitations. It relies on document and literature-based sources and does not examine specific speaker cases or stakeholder perceptions at UiTM. Future research could test the checklist on actual invitations, explore how staff and students experience the framework in practice, and compare UiTM's approach with that of other Malaysian or Muslim-majority universities. Nevertheless, the paper contributes conceptually by framing academic freedom at UiTM as "bounded openness" and practically by offering a transparent, transferable template for policy development.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to higher education policy and cultural studies by:

1. Introducing a Context-Specific Vetting Framework: It presents a structured process for evaluating guest speakers at UiTM, aimed at balancing free expression with institutional integrity, while incorporating Islamic principles and respecting Bumiputera rights.
2. Addressing Theoretical and Practical Disconnects: By merging Mill's harm principle with local sociopolitical realities, it tackles the conflict between academic freedom and cultural preservation, providing practical guidelines for similar institutions.
3. Fostering Inclusive Academic Discourse: The framework promotes diversity and critical inquiry without compromising cultural identity, positioning UiTM as a model for empowering marginalized communities.
4. Providing a Model for Institutional Policy: The adaptable framework serves as a guide for universities facing challenges in balancing free speech with cultural sensitivities, demonstrating how vetting can maintain institutional integrity while promoting diversity.
5. Contributing to Scholarly Dialogue: It enhances discussions on academic freedom in non-Western contexts, highlighting the university's role in fostering responsible citizenship.

Overall, this work enriches our understanding and approaches to managing free speech in complex academic settings.

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