

Malaysia's scholarly publishing ecosystem: An insider appraisal of established and emerging models

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses Malaysia's scholarly publishing ecosystem by analysing five models: university-based journals (UBJs), society journals, independent academic-led publishing initiatives, commercial partnership agreement, and ministry/government-sponsored journals. Drawing on over two decades of experience and the authors' roles in national journal assessment, it examines the structural, ethical, and financial challenges shaping these models, particularly the tensions between Diamond and Gold Open Access frameworks. The findings indicate a system at a pivotal point, where commercial sustainability often conflicts with the principles of equitable knowledge dissemination. The authors argue that publishing models should be explicitly included as evaluation criteria in national frameworks, such as MyCite, to align with international practices. Recognising publisher credibility, governance, and financial transparency as core indicators of quality would help address existing legitimacy gaps. The article concludes with policy-oriented recommendations to reinforce community-controlled publishing, including the establishment of a National Council of Journal Editors. Such initiatives are vital to preserving Malaysia's scholarly voice, values, and intellectual heritage within a balanced and globally connected knowledge infrastructure.

Keywords: Scholarly communication; Open access; Academic publishing; Scholarly journals; University-based journals

INTRODUCTION

This article provides an insider appraisal of Malaysia's publishing ecosystem, informed by the authors' sustained engagement and previous roles as editors-in-chief. Having served as stewards of Malaysian scholarly journals, our perspective is rooted in firsthand experience with the operational realities and strategic challenges of sustaining homegrown publications – challenges that continue to define the landscape. We affirm that these journals, embedded within the national academic ecosystem, are central to disseminating locally relevant research and upholding scientific integrity, equity, and progress. However, we recognise that their

value and sustainability are critically challenged by what Larivière et al. (2015) describe as an “oligopolistic global publishing market,” which dominates global knowledge flows. This contested landscape is undergoing profound transformation, shaped by evolving open access (OA) frameworks, rising infrastructure costs, and changing research assessment practices. From our editorial perspective, we observe Malaysia’s national journals, which publish in local and/or English languages while serving domestic knowledge needs, navigating acute tensions: between international visibility and local relevance, and between commercial viability and their core scholarly mission.

Originating from the learned societies of the 17th century (de Solla, 1963), scholarly communication has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar industry dominated by giants such as Elsevier and Springer Nature, as well as newer open access-focused publishers like Frontiers and MDPI. Unlike mission-driven academic or society-based publishing, this commercial sector is fundamentally accountable to shareholders – an orientation that has attracted significant criticism for prioritising profit over the core tenets of scholarly progress (Buranyi, 2017; Larivière et al., 2015). Critics argue that the profit motive in academic publishing can distort editorial priorities, promoting novelty at the expense of methodological rigour (Smaldino & McElreath, 2016). It also creates financial barriers to knowledge access, as seen in the high article processing charges (APCs) imposed by many hybrid open access journals (Pinfield et al., 2016). In response, a growing consensus among scholars and policymakers emphasises the urgent need to realign the system with the foundational principles of scientific publishing. Reform advocates are calling on funders, governments, universities, and research institutions to take decisive action – a push championed by organisations such as the International Science Council (ISC). Central to this realignment are principles such as affordable and universal access for both readers and authors, open licensing, rigorous and timely peer review, sharing of underlying data and evidence, preservation of the scientific record, respect for disciplinary and regional diversity, adaptability to change, and ultimate accountability to the research community (International Science Council, 2023).

This diverse ecosystem, comprising both internationally competitive and regionally focused journals, exists within a global publishing landscape increasingly dominated by a few commercial giants. Such concentration of control and influence reinforces structural inequalities that privilege journals with strong financial and technical support, while marginalising those sustained by universities or scholarly societies (Larivière et al., 2015). The resulting imbalance affects not only journal visibility and citation performance but also determines whose knowledge gains legitimacy in international evaluation systems (Goyanes et al., 2022; Pölonen et al., 2021). These global asymmetries are reflected in Malaysia’s own publishing ecosystem. Malaysian scholarly journals operate within a complex environment that offers opportunities for strategic development in management, efficiency, and quality. A central consideration, as discussed by Abd-Shukor (2020), is balancing a commitment to high-quality editorial processes with the operational efficiency required for timely publication. This balance is critical as the community prioritises maintaining high standards in peer review and publication ethics (Yeon, 2021). However, these efforts are challenged by persistent institutional pressures that prioritise international metrics. Academics remain strongly incentivised by university key performance indicators (KPIs) to publish in high-impact, internationally recognised journals, a dynamic that continues to marginalise local publications (Nathan & Shawkataly, 2019). Compounding this, a perception persists among Malaysian researchers, as shown in the study by Jamali (2024), that nationally titled journals have limited reach and prestige. This perception discourages submissions, stifling the development and impact of these vital local publications. Despite the clear call by Bodahgi et al. (2015) for enhanced policy and structural support – including the formal integration of national journals

into research assessment frameworks, emulating examples from India and Australia – these systemic issues persist, underscoring the need for renewed and decisive institutional action.

Since the establishment of the Malaysian Citation Centre (MCC) in 2011, efforts have been made to strengthen national infrastructure through *MyCite*, the country's citation index, and MyJurnal, the national hosting platform (Abrizah, 2016). These foundational systems have since been consolidated and replaced by the unified MySitasi portal (<https://mysitasi.mohe.gov.my/login>), which now serves as the Ministry of Higher Education's primary journal information system. The country's journal landscape comprises around 1,064 active titles registered in MyJurnal. Of these, 101 are listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), a significant indicator of their commitment to open access principles and alignment with global trends towards freely accessible research (Liu et al., 2024). Over 400 journals are indexed in *MyCite*. However, a significant number still fall short of inclusion due to inconsistent publishing frequency and technical limitations. Although more titles are covered in MyJurnal, the performance of many cannot be reported due to failure to meet *MyCite* journal selection criteria, especially regarding timeliness and accessibility. While their visibility and international recognition are evidenced by indexation status in universal databases (Abrizah et al., 2013)—namely, 118 journals in Elsevier's Scopus and 83 journals in Clarivate's Web of Science (WoS), comprising 13 titles in SCIE, 1 in SSCI, 1 in AHCI, and 68 in ESCI as of 24 May 2024 (Table 1)—these achievements highlight an uneven landscape where visibility often depends on institutional resources rather than scholarly merit.

Table 1: Number of Malaysian journals listed/indexed in various databases*

Indexed	Number of journals
MyJurnal (listed)	1064
<i>MyCite</i>	432
DOAJ	101
Scopus	118
WOS - SCI, SSCI & AHCI	15
WOS - ESCI	68

* as of 19 December 2025

This article draws on the authors' long-standing involvement in Malaysia's national journal assessment exercises, informed by creative discussions, academic meetings, and presentations at a recent session on journal evaluation, specifically the Workshop on the Evaluation of Malaysian Scholarly Journals (*MyCite*) held on 8–9 September 2025 at the Royal Park Hotel@UNITEN, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Kajang, Selangor. With more than two decades of collective experience, we recognise Malaysia's publishing ecosystem as a diverse network comprising university presses, commercial publishers, and society-based entities, each representing distinct yet interconnected models. Within this landscape, the growing segment of independent academic-led publishers stands out as a particularly promising alternative, characterised by strong editorial leadership from active scholars and a commitment to scholarly rigour, accessibility, and community-driven values rather than commercial gain. This paper explores how these publishing models can collectively address systemic challenges – specifically those related to management, efficiency, quality, and institutional support – while strengthening Malaysia's scholarly independence and long-term publishing sustainability. The Malaysian scholarly context is characterised by a globalised academic incentive structure that prioritises publication in internationally indexed journals, with English as the dominant language for scholarly communication.

While national journals are recognised for their distinct value in bridging local research and practice and enhancing the visibility of domestic scholarship (Jamali et al., 2022), a key factor influencing their sustainability remains unexamined. Our experience assessing journals for national indexation in *MyCite* identified a critical oversight in current evaluation frameworks: the systematic omission of the publishing model – specifically its governance, revenue structure, and operational control. The identity of the "publisher" is a decisive yet overlooked element that fundamentally shapes a journal's ethical alignment, long-term viability, and contribution to national scholarly priorities, necessitating this analysis. This gap is particularly significant, as a journal's fundamental organisational structure directly determines its financial accessibility (whether it imposes financial barriers on authors (APCs) or readers (subscriptions), editorial independence (whether its policies prioritise commercial motives or scholarly merit), and strategic alignment (whether its mission serves global shareholders or local research communities).

Moving beyond purely quantitative measures, this paper adopts Black's (2003) public-good framework as its core analytic lens to assess publishing models for Malaysian journals. As Black (2023, p. 54) explains, 'Online scholarly periodical literature naturally lends itself to be treated as a public good. Public goods are consumer goods that, when made available to anyone, can be made available to others at no additional cost.' This normative approach shifts the evaluative focus from output to value, centring on how publishing models function as community-owned services for the validation, dissemination, and long-term preservation of knowledge. In our assessment of journals for indexation, we identified what we believe is a significant oversight in the current journal evaluation framework in *MyCite*: the exclusion of publishing models as an assessment criterion. We believe that by incorporating an analysis of publishing models – including their governance, funding mechanisms, and editorial structures – into the evaluation framework, it becomes possible to address a critical gap in understanding the determinants of journal sustainability, visibility, and quality. To this end, we examine the strengths and challenges of the publishing models, highlighting the trade-offs that shape the Malaysian ecosystem while also identifying opportunities for building a sustainable, ethical, and globally connected publishing environment. Given the scope and purpose of this article, a standalone literature review is not included; instead, relevant scholarship is selectively integrated into the analysis to contextualise the categorisation of publishing models.

METHODS

This study used a basic qualitative descriptive design, informed by the authors' long-standing experience as assessors for the national journal quality evaluation committee. Drawing on this insider perspective, the analysis categorises Malaysian scholarly journals into publishing models based on governance, funding structures, and editorial practices, thus addressing a gap in existing assessment frameworks in *MyCite*. The qualitative descriptive approach was selected for its suitability in systematically characterising institutional practices and governance structures within real-world contexts.

Malaysian journals should ideally be defined as scholarly journal titles published and governed by institutions or agencies based in Malaysia (Abrizah et al. 2013). Ownership, governance, and long-term sustainability are important criteria for this classification. Currently, journals produced by international or regional associations whose editorial offices are temporarily located in Malaysia are also included in *MyJurnal* and, in some cases, indexed in *MyCite*. Recognising this distinction provides a more accurate picture of the publishing landscape and informs more nuanced approaches to journal assessment and support.

Three main sources informed the analysis: (a) the *MyCite* list, which provided journal-level metadata including publisher type, discipline, and indexing status; (b) MyJurnal and Scopus records, which offered historical and operational information on journal ownership, publishing arrangements, and transitions (e.g., from print to online, subscription to open access); and (c) internal observations and deliberation notes generated during journal evaluation exercises, which highlighted governance and sustainability issues. Other data sources included institutional records, national assessment reports, and publicly accessible information from journal websites.

The categorisation process was inductive and iterative, conducted between 8 September 2025 and 24 November 2025. The analysis drew on a comprehensive dataset of journals indexed in *MyCite* (n = 432), alongside comparative data from Scopus. We first extracted structured information on publishers and publisher identity from these sources. We then conducted an evaluation using the following criteria: (a) the legal and institutional identity of the publisher, (b) the primary sources of funding and revenue, (c) governance and editorial control structures, and (d) operational publishing practices (e.g., access models). Through this review, recurring features and distinctive patterns of ownership and governance emerged, which were synthesised into the publishing categories presented in the findings. The categorical framework focuses on the most prominent models shaping Malaysia's current scholarly communication landscape. While it captures systemic patterns, the approach is inherently interpretive and reflects the evaluators' normative stance that publishing should function as a community-owned infrastructure for knowledge validation and dissemination.

FINDINGS

Current publishing models in Malaysia

Our analysis of the Malaysian scholarly publishing ecosystem identifies five dominant models: university-based journals (UBJs), commercial partnership arrangement, society or sponsored publishing, ministry or government-sponsored journals, and independent academic-led initiatives. These models have undergone significant digital transformation, evolving from traditional print-based operations to predominantly electronic formats. Many Malaysian publishers initially adopted a hybrid phase before fully transitioning to digital dissemination. The shift from basic e-journal hosting platforms (Ngah et al., 2005) to specialised systems such as Open Journal Systems (OJS), along with inclusion in the DOAJ (Liu et al., 2024), demonstrates a strong commitment to open access. This digital transformation has been especially significant for university-based journals and society-sponsored titles. OJS, in particular, has enabled more journals to adopt the Diamond OA model, charging neither readers nor authors. The establishment of MyJurnal and *MyCite* in 2011 further accelerated this transition by promoting wider accessibility and visibility, providing national journals with a sustainable platform to operate under a Diamond OA model.

Table 2: Distribution of publishing models among journals indexed in *MyCite* (n=432)

Publishing model	No of journal titles	Percentage
University-based journals (UBJs)	323	74.7%
Independent academic-led initiatives	52	12.0%
Society or sponsored publishing	34	7.9%
Ministry/government-sponsored journals	21	4.9%
Commercial partnership arrangement	2	0.5%
Total	432	100%

A. Abrizah et al.

The distribution of the 432 journals indexed in *MyCite* across the five publishing models is shown in Table 2. It reveals a strong predominance of UBJs, which account for 74.8% of the indexed titles. The independent academic-led model is the second-largest category at 12.0%, indicating its growing significance. The remaining journals are distributed among society-sponsored (7.9%), ministry-sponsored (4.9%), and commercial partnership (0.5%) models.

University-based journals (UBJs)

These are journals published, hosted, or managed within a university environment, whether through a university press, library, department, faculty, or research institute. We use this broader phrasing instead of ‘university journals’ to reflect the varied governance and publishing arrangements across Malaysian universities, including those without a centralised university press. These journals are typically established to showcase institutional research, enhance visibility, and strengthen the academic reputation of the university, and there are many of them. This prominence is reflected in *MyCite*, which initially focused on capturing journals from the higher education sector. Four of these journals have achieved international recognition, being indexed in the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE) (*Malaysian Journal of Computer Science; Sains Malaysiana*), Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) (*Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science*), and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (AHCI) (*Al-Shajarah*). Furthermore, the majority of Malaysian journals indexed in Scopus and Clarivate’s Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) belong to this category, a prominence likely attributable to their prior inclusion and quality vetting within *MyCite*, which provided a foundational platform for their subsequent global visibility. Since 2023, ESCI journals have also been assigned Journal Impact Factors. However, they differ from SCIE, SSCI, and AHCI titles in terms of selectivity, as ESCI journals are considered emerging sources that undergo further evaluation for possible promotion into the flagship indexes.

A growing number of established Malaysian UBJs are transitioning to the Gold OA model, reflecting a broader global shift that, as Asai (2021) notes, capitalises on authors’ willingness to pay publication fees for increased visibility and perceived prestige. This approach has enabled some UBJs to reinvest revenue to strengthen editorial capacity and technical infrastructure, particularly addressing the limitations of open journal management platforms (Sohani et al., 2021; Verma, 2021). While such efforts demonstrate a pragmatic response to funding constraints, they also expose structural vulnerabilities. International evidence shows that APCs bear little relationship to journal prestige or impact (Haustein et al., 2024; Maddi & Sapinho, 2022; Yuen et al., 2019), raising concerns about the sustainability and fairness of this model. Although Malaysian UBJs typically maintain modest APCs – ranging between MYR200 (~US\$50) and MYR2,000 (~US\$500)—to remain inclusive, the normalisation of fee-based publishing risks transferring financial responsibility to universities and researchers, particularly those from underfunded backgrounds and institutions (Borrego, 2023). This shift could inadvertently reproduce inequalities that OA publishing was designed to mitigate. Moreover, scholars have warned that a financial model reliant on APC-generated revenue risks incentivising journals to prioritise quantity over quality, a practice that can compromise editorial standards and erode public trust (Haustein et al., 2024; Hanson et al., 2024; Petrou, 2023; Sammour & Shahiwala, 2023).

Commercial partnership arrangement

A small number of established Malaysian journals have entered publishing partnerships with international commercial publishers. This model involves a contractual agreement in which a commercial publisher assumes responsibility for production, marketing, distribution, and sometimes hosting of the journal. In return, the journal typically adopts the publisher’s business model, most often Gold OA with APCs. The primary incentive for such partnerships is access to the publisher’s established ecosystem: these collaborations often provide

enhanced technical infrastructure, wider global visibility, and inclusion in major indexing services such as the Web of Science and Scopus.

A notable example is the *Bulletin of the Malaysian Mathematical Sciences Society* (BMMSS) (SCIE, Scopus), published by Springer on behalf of Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia and the Malaysian Mathematical Sciences Society. Similarly, the *Journal of Rubber Research* (also indexed in SCIE and Scopus) operates through a collaboration between the Malaysian Rubber Board and Springer. This is under the transformative agreement between Springer Nature and KONSEPt, in which more than 20 Malaysian institutions participate, based on the Springer Nature–KONSEPt open access agreement (Springer Nature, 2005). Corresponding authors from these institutions are eligible to publish their articles open access with full APC coverage in Springer Nature's portfolio of hybrid journals, including BMMSS. However, journals under this partnership may cede a degree of editorial control, divert limited institutional funds to foreign publishers, and create financial barriers for local researchers outside the agreement who wish to publish OA.

Another notable example within this partnership model is the *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health* (SCIE, Scopus). Although published by the international commercial publisher Sage, the journal's editorial operations are managed by the Faculty of Medicine at Universiti Malaya, making its de facto location Malaysia. This collaboration has clearly enhanced the journal's international profile and performance metrics. However, a significant drawback has arisen regarding its national accessibility: because MCC must purchase a subscription to the journal from Sage, it remains excluded from MyCite (Pusat Sitasi Malaysia, 2013). This case highlights the complex trade-off between achieving global reach through a commercial partnership and maintaining seamless integration within national scholarly infrastructure.

Another illustrative example is the collaboration between Universiti Malaya and De Gruyter Brill for the journal *Al-Bayan* (indexed in ESCI and Scopus, but not in MyCite). Published under this arrangement since 2011, *Al-Bayan* is a subscription-based, print-only journal. Despite its traditional format, the partnership leverages Brill's international distribution network to extend its global reach. As noted in its publication details, the journal "*continues to be edited and hosted at Universiti Malaya. Firmly rooted in Malaysia, the journal has a highly respected international editorial board*" (Brill, n.d.). This model demonstrates how a commercial partnership can enhance a journal's prestige and international profile while allowing it to retain its local editorial identity and academic focus.

Society or sponsored publishing

Society or sponsored publishing represents a mission-driven model. These journals are published by professional associations, learned societies, or research institutes with the primary aim of serving their specific disciplinary communities, advancing their field, and strengthening scholarly identity, rather than generating profit (Hopkins, 2011). Funding typically comes from membership fees, conference surpluses, or grants, enabling many to operate under a Diamond OA model with no charges to authors or readers. However, in some cases, societies partner with commercial publishers to secure professional publishing infrastructure, indexing, and greater global reach (e.g. BMMSS, Malaysian Mathematical Sciences Society).

In our assessment of these partnerships, we observed two collaboration models: (a) a conventional society-university framework, where the learned society provides academic legitimacy and editorial leadership, while the university contributes publishing infrastructure and operational stability (e.g. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* [Scopus], a collaboration

A. Abrizah et al.

between the Malaysian Economic Association and Universiti Malaya); (b) a reversed allocation of roles, as exemplified by *Neurology Asia* (SCIE, Scopus). In this model, the ASEAN Neurological Association primarily secures publishing infrastructure and ensures sustainability, while editorial expertise and business correspondence are managed by the Universiti Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC). This inverted arrangement demonstrates the flexibility and, in our observation, the strategic adaptability of such collaborations within Malaysia's scholarly publishing landscape.

Society journals are highly valued for their strong community focus and deep disciplinary relevance. To improve their visibility and sustainability, some have adopted strategies such as appointing teams of Editors-in-Chief that include both Malaysian and international experts (e.g. *Jurnal Tribologi* [ESCI, Scopus], Malaysian Tribology Society). However, they continue to face significant challenges in balancing financial sustainability, broad accessibility, and editorial independence. In response, several society journals in Malaysia have introduced Gold OA models with article processing charges (APCs), typically ranging from MYR 200 to MYR 2,000; for example, *Tropical Biomedicine* (SCIE, Scopus) (Malaysian Society of Parasitology and Tropical Medicine), *Malaysian Journal of Pathology* (Scopus) (Academy of Medicine Malaysia), and *Malaysian Journal of Soil Science* (Scopus) (Malaysian Society of Soil Science). To reduce cost barriers, waiver or discount policies are often offered based on society membership categories. Although these APCs are relatively affordable, they can still pose obstacles for some researchers. Notably, *Malaysian Family Physician* (Scopus) (Academy of Family Physicians of Malaysia) offers a full waiver for corresponding authors affiliated with institutions in less-developed countries, helping to maintain equity in publishing opportunities.

Ministry / government-sponsored journals

Ministry or government-sponsored journals are publications funded by government ministries, agencies, or national research councils or institutes, with the explicit aim of advancing national research priorities and upholding knowledge as a public good. These journals play an important role in disseminating research in areas of strategic importance, such as health, agriculture, education, and national development. A limited number of these journals have gained international recognition and are now indexed in WoS and/or Scopus. Examples include the *Journal of Oil Palm Research* (Lembaga Minyak Sawit Malaysia), *Planning Malaysia* (Malaysian Institute of Planners), *Journal of Tropical Forest Science* (Forest Research Institute Malaysia), *Bulletin of the Geological Society of Malaysia* (Persatuan Geologi Malaysia), and *ASM Science Journal* (Akademi Sains Malaysia). However, the *Journal of Oil Palm Research* is notably absent from the *MyCite* database. This omission is primarily due to constraints related to subscription or purchase requirements, which limit *MyCite*'s ability to harvest and process its content.

Typically published as Diamond OA, these journals charge neither readers nor authors APCs, as their operational costs are fully subsidised by public funding. The strengths of this model include exceptional accessibility and direct alignment with public policy objectives. However, these journals often face challenges related to long-term funding stability, achieving visibility in major international indexing systems, and expanding their readership beyond domestic or specialist audiences. Many journals in this category have undergone formal assessment and are included in *MyCite*, reflecting their compliance with national scholarly standards. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of these journals remain underrepresented in *MyCite*. This includes, for example, publications produced by specific divisions or departments within ministries, as well as those issued by colleges and polytechnics that operate outside the direct purview of the Ministry of Higher Education. The impact and reach of such journals are frequently overlooked, not due to a lack of academic quality or relevance, but because they

often lack visibility, have limited or no digital presence, and as a result, have not been systematically identified, evaluated, or incorporated into national databases such as *MyCite*.

Independent academic-led publishing initiatives

Independent academic-led publishers represent a relatively new and distinctive category within Malaysia's publishing ecosystem – one that did not exist when *MyCite* was first established. These scholarly publishing ventures are initiated, governed, and sustained primarily by academic networks in partnership with service-oriented publishing providers, rather than by commercial publishing houses or formal university presses. Their emergence reflects both a response to gaps in institutional publishing capacity and a growing alignment with global movements towards open science, transparency, and community-controlled knowledge dissemination.

This initiative can be distinguished through two editorial models: (a) those co-managed by collaborative networks of local and international academics, and (b) those established and managed exclusively by local academic communities. Operating largely outside traditional institutional frameworks, they adopt affordable Gold OA models (e.g., Semarak Ilmu Publishing) or Diamond OA principles (e.g., Zibeline International Publishing). Several of these journals have gained measurable international recognition through inclusion in major indexes such as Scopus. Examples include the *Journal of Advanced Research in Micro and Nano Engineering* (Semarak Ilmu Publishing), the *Journal of Advanced Research in Experimental Fluid Mechanics and Heat Transfer* (Akademia Baru Publishing), and *Water Conservation and Management* (Zibeline International Publishing Sdn. Bhd.).

While these entities are entrepreneurial and often mission-driven, their structures reveal both opportunities and vulnerabilities. They derive academic legitimacy primarily through the involvement of academics and scholars in editorial boards and advisory roles, but their operations extend into commercial services such as editing, training, translation, and conference management. For example, Zibeline collaborates with Volkson Press – which also has a branch in China – for conference proceedings (see Zibeline International Publishing, where special arrangements with Volkson Press for publishing conference proceedings are outlined), while Semarak Ilmu partners with Akademia Baru Publishing to diversify into book publishing (see online information used in this assessment, where they are evaluated as separate entities despite possible shared management or related structures). AlamBiblio, in turn, positions itself as a multipurpose publisher, producing journals, eBooks, eCards, and conference outputs. It also organises academic conferences and provides technical event support, with stated ambitions to expand into additional open-source journals and eBooks via PKP's OJS/OMP platforms. However, despite these ambitions, its structure raises critical questions about sustainability and credibility. Both of its existing journals (*ASEAN Journal of Electrical and Electronic Engineering* and *Journal of Sustainable Engineering and Science*) share the same editorial leadership – an international academic based at a Malaysian public university – suggesting a concentration of editorial authority and limited diversity in governance.

Collectively, these publishers have expanded the avenues for disseminating Malaysian scholarship and demonstrated adaptability within a competitive publishing environment. However, the recent discontinuation of several journals from Scopus on the grounds of “publication concerns” and “outlier behaviour” underscores the importance of strengthening editorial consistency and enhancing quality assurance standards across these publishing entities. Without robust institutional support or stronger governance and ethical oversight mechanisms, their long-term contribution to scholarly communication risks being perceived

as fragmented or overly commercialised, rather than as part of a durable, ethically grounded, community-owned publishing infrastructure.

Journal publishing models in the Malaysian context

In examining Malaysia’s scholarly publishing landscape, the five identified models can be compared across their core characteristics, strengths, and limitations. Each model represents a distinct balance of legitimacy, sustainability, and alignment with the broader mission of scholarly communication. Table 3 presents these models in a comparative format, providing a clear overview of their operations and highlighting areas of convergence and divergence in serving the research community. The comparison shows that, while all five models contribute to Malaysia’s publishing ecosystem, their sustainability and international reach differ significantly. In particular, university-based and government-backed journals have stronger institutional foundations, whereas independent academic-led entrepreneurial publishers face greater challenges in establishing long-term credibility.

Table 3: Overview of journal publishing models in Malaysia, outlining their main characteristics and approaches

Publishing model	Philosophy / legitimacy	Economic model	Strengths	Limitations
University-based journals	Extension of university mission to disseminate research	Typically subsidized by university budgets; Diamond OA common; transitioned to Gold OA	Stable institutional backing; nurtures local scholarship; aligned with academic mission	Limited professional publishing expertise; sustainability vulnerable to budget cuts
Commercial partnership arrangements	Professional publishing standards, global visibility, prestige	APC-driven Gold OA or hybrid; revenue may be shared with university	Enhanced visibility and citation impact; international reach; professional workflows	High APCs burden local researchers; reliance on foreign publishers; profit-driven orientation
Society or sponsored publishing	Community-owned, tied to disciplinary legitimacy	Funded by membership dues, sponsorships, or subsidies; often Diamond OA	Strong disciplinary legitimacy; trusted editorial leadership; community-driven	Financial vulnerability if membership/sponsorship declines; limited scalability
Ministry / government-sponsored journals	Serve national priorities and uphold knowledge as a public good; legitimated by government mandate and policy alignment.	Fully subsidized, typically Diamond OA (no APCs; costs borne by ministries, agencies, or research councils).	Free access, inclusivity, strong alignment with national development goals, a few indexed in WoS/Scopus, compliance with MyCite standards.	Funding instability, limited international visibility, underrepresentation in MyCite due to weak digital presence or fragmented oversight, sometimes perceived more as policy communication tools than competitive scholarly outlets.
Independent academic-led publishing initiatives	Community-driven, rooted in academic values; legitimacy from scholar involvement in editorial and advisory roles.	Non-profit, low-cost operations; relies on volunteer labor, in-kind support, and affordable Gold OA or Diamond OA models.	Equitable access; editorial independence; agility in adopting practices; broadens opportunities for Malaysian scholarship.	Sustainability challenges without stable support; lower global visibility; reliance on voluntary contributions may affect consistency; potential duplication across ventures.

While each model has distinctive strengths and vulnerabilities, their future potential depends on how they adapt to global shifts in scholarly communication, respond to evolving standards of quality and visibility, and position Malaysia's journals within increasingly competitive international publishing ecosystems. UBJs could become more professional publishing units if given sustained investment and training. Commercial partnership arrangements, though costly, may increase international visibility if balanced with equitable access policies. Society and sponsored publishing, with their disciplinary legitimacy, could enhance sustainability through society–university partnerships and diversified revenue streams. Ministry-sponsored journals remain crucial for advancing national visibility, yet their long-term impact is often limited by inconsistent policy support, which risks reducing their responsiveness to scholarly needs. Independent academic-led initiatives, though values-driven and community-oriented, face significant challenges in building credibility, securing stable resources, and competing with established international publishers. Collectively, these models present both challenges and opportunities: their evolution will determine whether Malaysia develops a publishing ecosystem that is not only globally competitive but also ethically grounded and socially responsive.

DISCUSSION

In this discussion, we focus on UBJs, a type of university scientific periodical that forms an essential component of the scholarly communication infrastructure (Kolesnykova & Kliushnyk, 2015) and the backbone of Malaysia's scholarly publishing ecosystem. UBJs represent over 70 percent of active titles, an increase from the 55.5 percent reported in Zainab et al.'s (2012) journal audit. Our interest, shaped by direct involvement in managing and assessing journals for national indexation, reflects the central role UBJs play in sustaining academic communication, nurturing local scholarship, and ensuring equitable access to publishing opportunities for Malaysian researchers. Many have historically embraced the Diamond OA model, reflecting a commitment to equitable access without imposing financial barriers on authors or readers; yet, they continue to grapple with enduring challenges of sustainability, visibility, and quality, often constrained by limited institutional resources and professional support. At the same time, their position within universities affords them unique opportunities to enhance institutional reputation, nurture local scholarship, and contribute to strengthening Malaysia's presence in the global research landscape. Within the context of the proposed National Knowledge Infrastructure (NKI) (Universiti Malaya, 2024), UBJs are envisioned as critical nodes in a more integrated and interoperable ecosystem for Malaysian research dissemination. Strengthening these journals through the NKI framework is therefore not only a matter of improving visibility and technical standards but also a strategic investment in national research sovereignty, open access sustainability, and the long-term vitality of Malaysia's knowledge commons.

UBJs, although ideally positioned to serve as key pillars of institutional scholarly output and to expand journal publishing within Malaysian universities (Pusat Sitasi Malaysia, 2013), exhibit substantial structural and operational diversity that often hampers their sustainability, consistency, and professional development. In principle, these journals represent the academic reputation of their host universities; however, in practice, their organisational models vary widely, resulting in different governance, funding, and quality assurance mechanisms. Some journals are published under a formal university press, managed either by academics (as in UKM, UPM, and USM Press) or by university libraries (as in UMK). In contrast, Universiti Malaya Press, administered by professional non-academic staff, does not publish journals, focusing instead on books and monographs. University presses often benefit from

clearer administrative support, dedicated funding, and coordinated dissemination strategies, although their effectiveness can still vary depending on leadership structures. Universiti Malaya, however, has no press-based journal programme, resulting in a more independent system in which journals are managed at the faculty, departmental, or research institute level. In such cases, editorial responsibilities are typically assumed by academics as part of their service workload. While this approach fosters grassroots ownership, it often lacks the sustained professional infrastructure found in centralised press-based models. More broadly, university presses, though traditionally focused on books, have become increasingly engaged in journal publishing, usually in collaboration with journal editorial boards from faculties or departments, or in partnership with university libraries (Hérubel, 2023; Late et al., 2020).

Malaysia has emerged as one of the fastest-growing countries in terms of the number of journals indexed in Scopus (Erfanmanesh et al., 2017). However, this growth has not been matched by equivalent progress in developing robust publishing infrastructure and digital management practices. Based on our experience, many UBJs, particularly those hosted on open journal management platforms, continue to face technical and administrative challenges such as incomplete automation of editorial workflows, reliance on static PDF formats, and inconsistent metadata quality. These issues are often compounded by server downtime and limited technical maintenance, which further exacerbate the problems, disrupting access, submission processes, and the overall reliability of the publishing platform. These infrastructural weaknesses have direct implications for journal evaluation and indexation in *MyCite*, where criteria such as Digital Object Identifier (DOI) activation, metadata completeness, and stable online accessibility are mandatory. Although DOI implementation has become a mandatory criterion for *MyCite* indexation, a significant number of journals have been unsuccessful in meeting this requirement – either because they have not integrated DOI registration systems (e.g., Crossref) or because the assigned DOIs are inactive or inconsistently applied. In recent evaluations, several UBJs were found to be unsuccessful in meeting these requirements, underscoring the need for sustained technical capacity-building and centralised support for digital publishing infrastructure. Similar challenges have been reported across developing countries, where limited institutional investment constrains innovation in journal management and digital publishing (Nwagwu, 2013; Zell, 2025).

Based on our experience as former editors-in-chief of UBJs, securing timely peer reviews remains a persistent and critical operational challenge for these journals. Reviewers, though central to maintaining academic quality, often receive little formal incentive or absence of recognition systems (Woldeamanuel, 2025), with few platforms like Publons available to acknowledge their efforts. In contrast, commercial journal publishers employ structured peer review systems that integrate accountability and recognition mechanisms – an approach that, as Malički and Mehmani (2024) note, enhances the consistency and reliability of the review process. However, our experience managing journals on the open journal management platform highlights opportunities to improve the peer review process. The current built-in review templates, while functional, could be more robust. Additionally, dedicated resources for system customisation and integration with academic recognition tools would further support journals in standardising and strengthening their peer review workflows. Dimitrov (2022) suggested that universities and research institutes, with government support, should formalise peer review as part of academic workload evaluations to ensure reviewers receive proper credit for their contributions. Similarly, Frank et al. (2023) emphasise the need for recognition, stronger incentives, and institutional support mechanisms to encourage high-quality peer review and sustained engagement. Collectively, these structural and motivational gaps constrain the capacity of Malaysian journals to maintain international visibility and

rigorous publishing standards, even as they make commendable strides towards broader indexation and credibility.

Additionally, we observe that an increasing number of Malaysian UBJs, which have already demonstrated their quality in WoS and Scopus, are considering partnerships with commercial publishers to enhance their global impact. In our view, this trend reflects strategic ambition rather than necessity. They are leveraging publishers' advanced marketing, technology, and global platforms to overcome local infrastructure limitations and raise their international profile. Furthermore, advanced production capabilities – such as enriched XML, interactive content, and hosting on globally recognised platforms like ScienceDirect or SpringerLink – directly address common limitations in local university infrastructure. In our view, the objective is not merely to maintain standards, but to enhance the experience of readers and authors to match the journal's academic quality.

However, we also have a growing concern about this trend – one that goes beyond financial implications to the core identity and mission of national journals. Strategies such as mergers and partnerships are increasingly used to improve quality, streamline operations, and reduce the overall number of titles. For example, approximately 60 percent of Springer Nature journals and 45 percent of Elsevier journals are published on behalf of research organisations (Asai, 2022), illustrating how large commercial publishers are increasingly collaborating with institutional publishing ecosystems. While these approaches can strengthen journal management and visibility, they also introduce new complexities that require careful consideration. The pursuit of global reach must be balanced against risks such as the potential loss of editorial independence, the imposition of APCs on previously Diamond OA journals, and the shifting of financial burdens from publishers to universities, which may ultimately bear higher long-term costs. Evidence from existing Gold OA UBJs, such as the *Malaysian Journal of Mathematical Sciences*, which charges RM1,200 (~US\$300) per article for Malaysian-affiliated authors (<https://mjms.upm.edu.my/charge.html>), shows how publication fees are increasingly being institutionalised within the national publishing ecosystem.

A recent study found that Malaysian social science researchers have expressed strong concerns over the rising publication fees in open access publishing, viewing such costs as prohibitive and inconsistent with the inclusive ideals of open scholarship (Razlan et al., 2024). Many indicated a preference for OA journals with reasonable fees, suggesting that modest administrative charges, around US\$100, represent a practical and sustainable model for maintaining equitable access to scholarly communication in the Malaysian context. They further emphasised that university-affiliated Diamond OA journals are often of excellent quality and rarely impose publication fees, reinforcing the belief that a journal's merit lies in its scholarly rigour and editorial integrity rather than its cost structure. This perspective reflects a broader ethos within the Malaysian academic community, which continues to value accessibility, integrity, and national relevance over commercial prestige. As universities increasingly explore partnerships with major publishers, the key challenge will be to uphold these principles, ensuring that the pursuit of global visibility and competitiveness does not undermine affordability, editorial independence, or the journals' core mission of advancing regionally significant scholarship.

In relation to APCs, within Malaysia's scholarly publishing landscape – and across many emerging economies – affordability serves as both an ethical strength and a structural vulnerability. On one hand, Diamond and affordable OA models reflect a principled commitment to equitable knowledge dissemination, aligning with the International Science Council's (2023) vision for inclusivity and fairness in global scholarly communication. On the

other hand, this same affordability can be misinterpreted as an indicator of lower quality or limited prestige, particularly when contrasted with the high-fee, high-impact journals of major international publishers. During national journal assessments, we have observed that several good quality Diamond OA UBJs receive lower scores or remain unindexed, not due to shortcomings in scholarly rigour, but because of limited institutional resources for platform upgrades, metadata enrichment (including peer review metadata), and DOI registration. This situation reflects a growing inequity in the global publishing ecosystem, where journals in emerging countries are disadvantaged by infrastructural and financial constraints. As a result, technical capacity, rather than scholarly merit, too often determines visibility, credibility, and access to international recognition.

This perception is compounded by global pricing inequities, where journals from developing regions charge nominal fees while major publishers charge the highest (Solomon & Björk, 2012). These imbalances create a legitimacy gap: journals that prioritise inclusivity and the public good are often undervalued in systems that reward branding and citation metrics over ethical and equitable publishing practices. This imbalance not only marginalises UBJs but also risks reinforcing dependency on commercial platforms. To address this, we argue that affordability must be reframed as a strategic asset, that is, a deliberate choice towards sustainable and responsible scholarship. In this regard, national journal evaluation mechanisms such as *MyCite* and the Ministry of Higher Education's journal assessment exercises play a pivotal role. By broadening their assessment criteria to value accessibility, transparency, and long-term public benefit alongside citation impact, these systems can actively incentivise high-quality Diamond OA models. Such an approach ensures that the pursuit of global visibility strengthens – rather than diminishes – Malaysia's capacity to sustain ethically grounded, nationally relevant publishing ecosystems. In doing so, it preserves the nation's scholarly voice and intellectual heritage as vital contributions to a balanced global knowledge commons.

This mission is rooted in the indispensable value of national journals themselves. They uniquely link research to local practice, sustain domestic scholarship, address regionally vital topics, and provide early-career researchers with a supportive entry into academia. Therefore, investing in these journals – through robust infrastructure, equitable policy, and recognition of their public-good role – is an essential investment in Malaysia's epistemic sovereignty. It fosters a resilient, contextually rooted publishing landscape that can authentically serve national needs while enriching a truly diversified world of knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Scholarly journals published within a country are essential for advancing national and global scholarship, providing a vital alternative to the commercial dominance of international publishing. In Malaysia, however, many university-based, society-led, government, and independent publishers lack a coherent national strategy to synergise efforts and improve scalability. Strengthening this ecosystem requires institutional publishing policies that promote professional management, technical reliability, and sustainable funding mechanisms. In line with the observations of Oh and Kim (2025), the long-term viability of Malaysian journals depends on developing contextually grounded publishing models. This approach is necessary, rather than replicating Western systems – typically characterised by commercial, APC-driven frameworks – which may not align with local funding realities, research missions, or linguistic contexts. To achieve this, national policy efforts should prioritise capacity building in digital infrastructure, metadata quality, and editorial professionalism, while promoting

ethical open access and equitable publishing practices. Through targeted investment and coordinated institutional support, Malaysia can cultivate a trusted, competitive, and contextually relevant publishing ecosystem that preserves its scholarly voice and cultural heritage, while contributing to a more balanced global knowledge infrastructure.

With over two decades of experience as editors-in-chief and evaluators within Malaysia's scholarly publishing community, we believe the time is right to formalise editorial and publishing coordination at the national level. Following the example of countries with established organisations for journal editors, we propose that Malaysia either establish an independent National Council of Journal Editors or expand the mandate of MAPIM (Majlis Penerbitan Ilmiah Malaysia) to include a dedicated division representing editors across all models: university-based, society-led, government, and independent. Such a body would provide a much-needed professional forum for editors and publishers to share expertise, uphold ethical and editorial standards, and engage collectively in policy development. From our long involvement in journal capacity building, we have seen how the absence of a unified platform has led to fragmented efforts, inconsistent quality benchmarks, and limited advocacy for non-commercial publishing models. A national council could bridge these gaps by promoting professionalisation, cross-sector collaboration, and national recognition of the editorial community's role in advancing scholarly communication. Moreover, this council could serve as a strategic partner in implementing the NKI, ensuring that journal development is integrated into broader national initiatives for open science, research data management, and equitable access to knowledge. In doing so, Malaysia would not only strengthen its publishing ecosystem but also reinforce its scholarly voice and values within a globally connected research environment.

This article makes a significant contribution to Malaysian scholarly publishing by proposing that publisher type and publishing model be systematically included as core evaluation criteria in Malaysia's national journal assessment. While current frameworks such as *MyCite* primarily emphasise bibliometric performance and editorial quality, we argue that a journal's underlying mission, governance, and financial structure are equally critical to its credibility and sustainability. This approach aligns with international practices such as the Web of Science triage process, which requires that the publisher's name be clearly defined and that a verifiable physical address (not a P.O. Box) for the publisher's business office be provided. If there is a society affiliation or ownership, this should be stated, and verifiable contact information must be provided (Clarivate, 2025). We believe this requirement reflects the publisher's credibility, ethical standards, and the robustness of its publishing infrastructure, all of which are essential indicators of journal quality. By explicitly distinguishing between journal publishing models, this requirement addresses a key gap in current evaluation systems, providing a more holistic and ethically grounded basis for policy development, funding prioritisation, and capacity-building initiatives that reflect the diverse realities and goals of Malaysia's scholarly publishing ecosystem.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests, including no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. For full transparency, one author serves as an honorary editor of this journal but was not involved in the peer review or editorial decisions for this manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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