Pendidikan dan hak asasi kanak-kanak: Satu tinjauan cabaran dan hala tuju pendidikan awal kanak-kanak Orang Asli di Kompleks Belum–Temenggor
Juli Edo, Siti Nor Awang, Kamal Solhaimi Fadzil, Rosilawati Zainol & Wan Suzita Wan Ibrahim

‘Bertunjangkan akar yang sama, pokoknya tidak semestinya serupa’: Identiti kemelayuan Melayu Bangkok
Siti Munirah Kassim & Mala Rajo Sathian

The Hijab: A tourism image in the Arab world
Dayangku Ida Nurul-Fitri, Sharifah Fatimah Syed Ahmad, Lisbet Bruel & Jamie Murphy

Penglibatan masyarakat Iban dalam aktiviti pembangunan luar bandar di Daerah Song, Sarawak
Kwok Chin Hoe & Haris Abd Wahab

Institutions and institutional change: The case of Malaysian bureaucracy.
Abdillah Noh & Makmor Tumin

Tekanan kerja, kecerdasan emosi dan prestasi kerja dalam kalangan anggota polis.
Emi Prihatin Ningsih Eddie

Peranan iklim organisasi dan kepimpinan transformasi terhadap komitmen dan prestasi guru
Farah Azura Shamsudin, Nor Shafiza Abdullah & Mohd Awang Idris

Konflik kerjaya – keluarga dan konflik keluarga – kerjaya dalam kalangan guru
Nur Syahida Mohamood, Nor Shafiza Abdullah & Mohd Awang Idris

Komunikasi anak-anak dan ibu bapa dalam kalangan remaja Melayu
Asbah Razali

Aplikasi Teori Peranan dalam pelancongan: Perspektif komuniti
Noni Lela Hayati Ayob & Rosilawati Zainol
Institutions and Institutional Change: The Case of Malaysian Bureaucracy

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Abstract

Change, most often, conjures immediacy: one that is discrete, drastic or a total break from past practices. New works on institutional change, however, reveal that contrary to popular opinion, change is often gradual in nature but no less transformational over the long duration. More importantly these works also reveal that there are different typologies of incremental change. In addressing the problem this research looked at a Malaysian bureaucracy, Malaysia's Administrative and Modernization Planning Unit or MAMPU to trace its institutional quality as well as assess the type/s of incremental changes that it has experienced. The research is qualitative in nature. It employed mixed methods where data was obtained from secondary sources combined with in-depth interviews with officials from MAMPU and civil servants. The research found that in the case of MAMPU, the pace of change in the Malaysian bureaucracy was incremental but no less transformative when viewed from a long term perspective. The research also found that the institutional change that MAMPU had experienced was one of both “conversion” and “displacement”. The research concluded that the case of MAMPU demonstrates that institutional change, most often, is continuous, incremental but no less capable of being transformative. In explaining institutional change the research highlights that normative and cognitive considerations plus historical imperative play a no less important role in understanding change in the Malaysian bureaucracy. Indeed the case of MAMPU has also demonstrated that in making change, ideas which at one time may stand at the periphery can over time gain centrality.

Keywords: Malaysia, bureaucracy, institutions, institutional change, incrementalism.

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