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# Education In Brunei

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Historical Development of Education in Brunei
- **Chapter 2** The Bruneian Education System: Structure and Governance
- **Chapter 3** Early Childhood Education: Foundations and Philosophy
- **Chapter 4** Primary Education: Curriculum and Pedagogy
- **Chapter 5** Secondary Education: Pathways and Specializations
- **Chapter 6** Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)
- **Chapter 7** Higher Education Landscape: Universities and Institutions
- **Chapter 8** Curriculum Development and Reform
- **Chapter 9** Teacher Education and Professional Development
- **Chapter 10** Educational Assessment and Evaluation
- **Chapter 11** Special Education Needs and Inclusive Practices
- **Chapter 12** Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education
- **Chapter 13** Language Education Policy and Practice
- **Chapter 14** The Role of Islamic Education
- **Chapter 15** Co-curricular Activities and Holistic Development
- **Chapter 16** Education for Sustainable Development
- **Chapter 17** Internationalization of Bruneian Education
- **Chapter 18** Funding and Financing of Education
- **Chapter 19** Educational Research and Innovation
- **Chapter 20** Challenges and Opportunities in Bruneian Education
- **Chapter 21** Educational Equity and Access
- **Chapter 22** The Impact of Culture on Education
- **Chapter 23** Lifelong Learning Initiatives
- **Chapter 24** Education and National Development
- **Chapter 25** Future Directions for Education in Brunei

## Introduction

Education serves as the bedrock of individual growth and national prosperity, shaping societies and empowering generations. In the heart of Southeast Asia, the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam has long recognized this fundamental truth, steadily investing in a comprehensive education system designed to nurture its citizens from their earliest years through to advanced academic pursuits. This book, "Education In Brunei: A Comprehensive Overview from Early Childhood to Higher Education," embarks on an in-depth exploration of this dynamic and evolving landscape, offering readers a holistic understanding of its structure, philosophy, and future trajectory.

Brunei's commitment to education is deeply intertwined with its national vision, Wawasan Brunei 2035, which aims to transform the nation into one recognized for the accomplishment of its educated and highly skilled people, enjoying a high quality of life. Achieving this vision hinges significantly on a robust and adaptable education system that can meet the demands of a rapidly changing globalized world while upholding the nation's unique cultural and religious values. This book delves into how the Bruneian education system endeavors to strike this crucial balance, examining the policies, practices, and innovations that define its journey.

From the foundational philosophies guiding early childhood development to the intricate pathways offered within higher education institutions, this volume provides a nuanced perspective on each stage of the educational continuum. We will explore the historical influences that have shaped the current system, the governance structures that ensure its stability, and the curriculum frameworks that guide teaching and learning. Beyond the formal structures, the book also investigates the vital roles of teacher education, assessment practices, and the integration of technology in enhancing educational outcomes across the sultanate.

Furthermore, "Education In Brunei" addresses specialized yet equally critical aspects of the system, including provisions for special education needs, the pivotal role of Islamic education, and the nation's proactive engagement in education for sustainable development. As Brunei increasingly positions itself on the international stage, we will also examine the internationalization of its education system and the impact of global trends on local practices. This comprehensive approach ensures that readers gain a thorough appreciation of the multifaceted nature of education within Brunei.

This book is intended for a diverse audience, including educators, policymakers, researchers, students of comparative education, and anyone with an interest in understanding the unique educational journey of Brunei Darussalam. It promises to offer valuable insights into the strengths of the Bruneian model, the challenges it

faces, and the innovative strategies being implemented to overcome them. By providing a detailed and insightful overview, this book aims to foster a deeper understanding of Brunei's educational aspirations and its ongoing commitment to nurturing a bright future for its people.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Historical Development of Education in Brunei

Brunei Darussalam's educational journey is a rich tapestry woven from indigenous traditions, Islamic teachings, colonial influences, and a fierce commitment to national self-determination. Far from a sudden emergence, the structured system seen today is the culmination of centuries of evolving pedagogical approaches, each layer building upon the last to create a distinctive educational identity. To truly grasp the essence of Brunei's modern education, one must first appreciate the historical currents that have shaped its course.

In the pre-colonial era, long before the advent of formal schooling, education in Brunei was intrinsically linked to cultural transmission and religious instruction. Indigenous communities, such as the Dusun, Iban, Belait, and Tutong, relied on informal, community-embedded practices. Knowledge was passed down through oral narratives and hands-on skill acquisition, focusing on essential survival competencies within Borneo's tropical ecosystems, like river navigation, foraging, and communal resource management. Longhouses often served as vibrant hubs for this intergenerational learning.

With the widespread adoption of Islam in Brunei, believed by local historians to have occurred between the 10th and 14th centuries, a new paradigm of education began to take root. Islamic teachings became the cornerstone of early educational programs. These were typically delivered through "balai" education systems in mosques and communal halls, known as *balai-balai*, as well as in private homes. Local *ulama* (religious scholars) instructed children, primarily boys, in Quranic recitation, basic *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and rudimentary Arabic literacy, often utilizing the Jawi script adapted for Malay. The focus was on moral and religious formation, preparing select students for clerical roles. These early Islamic institutions, while informal by modern standards, were the primary avenues for intellectual and spiritual development for centuries.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw foreign Islamic missionaries from regions like the Patani Kingdom and the Sultanate of Sambas actively contributing to Brunei's religious education landscape. Students diligently studied and analyzed works by prominent 19th-century religious intellectuals, further enriching the Islamic pedagogical environment. However, participation in these traditional settings was often sporadic and largely limited to boys from affluent families, with limited involvement from girls until later reforms.

The formalization of education in Brunei began to take shape with the increasing British influence. Brunei became a British protectorate in 1888, and a British Resident was appointed in 1906, advising the Sultan on all matters except those pertaining to religion. Initial British advice focused on infrastructure and healthcare, but by 1911, education started to receive attention. The British Residency recognized the need for a more structured, "Western-style" education system, although its introduction was approached cautiously due to potential sensitivities among the Bruneian population and a lack of funds and qualified local teachers.

The pivotal year for formal education in Brunei is often cited as 1912, or sometimes 1914, with the establishment of the first government Malay vernacular primary school in Brunei Town (now Bandar Seri Begawan). This marked a significant shift from informal Quranic instruction to structured vernacular schooling. Initially, this school operated from a mosque, a pragmatic solution that also helped to reduce parental resistance to this new form of education. The first cohort consisted of 30 boys, a number that grew to 40 by 1915. Over the next few years, similar Malay schools were established in other districts, with Belait getting its first in 1917 and Tutong in 1918.

The curriculum in these early Malay vernacular schools was somewhat limited, conducted in Malay for boys aged between seven and fourteen years. Subjects included reading and writing (in both Jawi and Roman script), composition, arithmetic, geography, history, hygiene, drawing, and physical education. Later, practical skills like gardening and basketry were also introduced. The aim, according to a 1928 government report, was to base the curriculum on that of Malay schools in the Federated Malay States, with a focus on not "tending to drive Malays from their agriculturist pursuits." This suggests an initial emphasis on basic literacy and skills relevant to the prevailing agrarian society.

Alongside the government Malay schools, other educational institutions also emerged. The Chinese community established its first vernacular school in 1916. These private Chinese schools aimed to educate Chinese shopkeepers and were managed by the Chinese community themselves. Later, in 1931, the first non-government English-medium primary school was established in Seria. Another English school, funded by Brunei Shell and the Brunei government but run by a missionary, opened in Brunei Town in the same year. Several more English schools followed, primarily established by Christian missionaries. Religious education, which had always been a cornerstone of Bruneian learning, began to integrate into government schools in the 1930s as extracurricular sessions, eventually becoming a regular twice-weekly subject by 1936, reflecting community demands to counter secular influences.

The period leading up to World War II saw the number of primary schools in Brunei grow to 32, a mix of Malay, Chinese, and English vernacular institutions. However, the war years from 1941 to 1945 brought a halt to educational development, although the

Japanese occupation did include some classes in their own language, with a few promising pupils even continuing their studies in Japan. After the war, Brunei embarked on a period of reconstruction, and the growing revenues from oil and gas highlighted the increasing need for English-educated Bruneians.

A significant turning point came with the establishment of the Education Department in 1951. This marked the beginning of structured educational governance under the British Resident's direction. In October 1951, the first government English school, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien College, was opened in Brunei Town, followed by another in Kuala Belait the next year. This was a direct response to concerns about the religious influence of mission schools and the growing demand for English education among Malay youth. The introduction of English-medium secondary education quickly followed in less than three years, and Malay-medium secondary education was introduced by the government in 1966.

The 1954 National Education Policy, introduced as part of the First Five-Year National Development Plan (1953–1958), laid the groundwork for a national education system. This policy established the Department of Education, tasked with coordinating school development, teacher training, and curriculum standardization. It notably introduced six years of free education in Malay schools for children aged 6 to 14 years. The plan envisioned options for vocational training and higher education, and also provided financial support for Mission and Chinese schools, as well as adult literacy programs. Furthermore, under Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III, the Department of Religious Affairs was established in 1954, followed by the launch of afternoon religious primary schools in 1956, complementing morning secular classes to instill Islamic ethics alongside basic literacy.

The late 1950s and 1960s saw further evaluations and reforms. In 1959, the Brunei government commissioned education consultants Aminuddin Baki and Paul Chang to conduct a comprehensive review of the education system, leading to recommendations that would influence future reforms. Subsequently, an education commission was set up in 1970 to evaluate the 1962 report and formulate policies to raise educational standards. This resulted in the 1972 Education Commission Report, which was a pivotal document for system-wide education reforms. Among its key provisions was the extension of free education from six to nine years, encompassing six years of primary and three years of lower secondary education. The adoption of this report in 1979 also made pre-school compulsory for all five-year-olds before they could enroll in Primary 1. These policies, however, faced challenges due to deteriorating relations with Malaysia, which impacted the implementation of Malay as the primary language of instruction.

Brunei's achievement of full independence in January 1984 served as a powerful catalyst for accelerating reforms and development across all facets of education. Immediately after independence, in April 1984, the government unveiled the Bilingual

Education Policy (Dasar Pendidikan Dwibahasa), which was implemented in 1985. This policy was a significant shift, establishing a structured bilingual framework. Malay was designated as the medium for humanities subjects, including history, geography, civics, and Islamic religious studies, while English was mandated for mathematics, science, and technical disciplines, starting from upper primary levels (typically Year 4 onward) and intensifying in secondary education. This policy aimed to ensure students achieved high proficiency in both Malay, as the national language and symbol of cultural identity, and English, as an essential language for international communication and access to global knowledge. The Bilingual Education Policy was extended to private schools (excluding international schools) in 1992, promoting consistency across the educational landscape.

Following independence, the Department of Education was elevated to ministerial status, becoming the Ministry of Education and Health, before being separated into distinct Ministries of Education and Health in 1989. This period saw the establishment of new divisions and departments, such as Curriculum Development, Examination, and Schools Inspectorate, reflecting a more comprehensive and specialized approach to educational governance. The 9-Year Education Policy was subsequently replaced by the 12-Year Education Policy in 1993, aiming to provide every student with extended educational opportunities. In 1997, the Inclusive Education Policy was implemented, making provisions for students with special educational needs to attend mainstream schools, supported by Special Education Needs Assistants. The Compulsory Education Order 2007 further mandated that every Bruneian child residing in the country, aged between six and fifteen years, receive at least nine years of compulsory education. This commitment to universal education ensures free schooling for all children attending government institutions.

The early 21st century brought about one of the most significant reforms in Brunei's educational history: the National Education System for the 21st Century (SPN21), which was introduced in 2009. SPN21 represents a comprehensive overhaul of the curriculum, structure, and assessment methods, shifting from rote memorization to student-centered approaches that prioritize critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration – skills deemed essential for a knowledge-driven economy and Brunei Vision 2035. This reform introduced multiple pathways at the secondary level, catering to diverse student abilities and interests, and ensures that students complete at least five years of secondary education before pursuing post-secondary options or employment. SPN21 was fully implemented at the primary level in 2011 and aimed for completion by 2015, fundamentally reshaping Brunei's educational framework to align with national aspirations for a developed and prosperous nation.

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