Journal of Human Capital Development (JHCD)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.54554/jhcd.2026.19.5

A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION ON TRADE NEGOTIATION COMPETENCY IN MALAYSIA: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Muhammad Rudy Khairudin Mohd Nor[1*], Siti Hasliah Salleh[2], Nor Ashikin Mohamed Yusof [2]

[1]Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur

[2]Faculty of Artificial Intelligence
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur

*Corresponding Author's Email: mrudykhairudin@gmail.com

Article History: Received 26 Jan 2026, Revised 24 June 2026, Accepted 30 June 2026, Published 30 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Malaysia's trade policies emphasize the negotiation of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), creating a critical need for competent trade negotiators to secure trade deals. However, despite the well-documented economic effects of FTAs, little attention has been given to competency governance. This study examined the challenges affecting TNC in Malaysia's public sector and the relevant recommendations. By conducting elite interviews with five key government officials who are central to the TNC agenda at the national level, this study obtained high-level institutional views from stakeholders directly involved in TNC. A thematic analysis using NVivo found three issues affecting TNC in Malaysia: (1) institutional fragmentation that has weakened the strategic alignment for the trade negotiation agenda across the government agencies; (2) weak talent retention approach that has caused the loss of trade negotiators' institutional knowledge; and (3) competency gaps that affect trade negotiators' capacity. The study suggests the instigation of a governance framework that can realign TNC strategies across government agencies, the establishment of a talent retention initiative for trade negotiation as a specialized competency, and the creation of a structured competency development programme for trade negotiators. The study fills the literature gaps on TNC governance in developing countries and provides policy guidance for strengthening the country's trade negotiation capacity.

Keywords: *Trade Negotiation; Institutional Governance; Competency; Talent Management.*

JEL Codes: F13, H83, J24, M51

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The quality of deals a country secures from international trade is influenced by its negotiating ability. Trade negotiation is a process of engagement to achieve a mutually agreed rule for trade between countries (Jarman, 2017). The slow progress of multilateral and unilateral negotiations of the Doha Round under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has motivated many countries to speed up the liberalization process through Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) (Athukorala, 2020; Chaisse & Dimitropoulos, 2021; Yao et al., 2021). FTA is defined as a legally binding treaty (Bagwell & Mavroidis, 2011; Kepaptsoglou et al., 2010) between two or more countries that agree on obligations that affect trade between them. Often, an FTA is used to liberalize trade through the granting of preferential treatment (Quintieri & Stamato, 2023; Yao et al., 2021) in which tariffs are eliminated (Athukorala, 2020) or reduced (Baena-Rojas & Herrero-Olarte, 2020) and non-tariff barriers are addressed (Cipollina & Demaria, 2020). The removal of these barriers facilitates the movement of goods, people, and investments between borders (Betz & Pond, 2019).

FTAs were given top priority in the 12th Malaysia Plan 2021-2025 to negotiate new FTAs to broaden opportunities for local industries in the global market. The National Trade Blueprint 2021-2025 also emphasizes the government's role in improving existing FTAs and negotiating new FTAs to further expand Malaysia's exports. In addition, the policy instrument calls for the government to address non-tariff measures by negotiating the recognition and harmonization of technical standards between trading parties (Ministry of Investment Trade and Industry, 2021). Subsequently, the New Industrial Master Plan (NIMP) 2030 suggested that Malaysia diversify its trading partners by negotiating new FTAs and reviewing existing ones to secure better concessions for products important to Malaysia (Ministry of Investment Trade and Industry, 2023). Malaysia's trade policies place strong emphasis on the importance of FTAs as a tool to facilitate trade, underscoring the critical role of trade negotiators.

However, the strategy to secure trade negotiation competency remains unclear in Malaysia's policies, and there is a lack of literature that highlights the importance of the governance framework on TNC. There are reports that the government's competency management policies are not effective in fulfilling the civil service talent requirements (The Economic Planning Unit, 2021). For example, the regular job rotation policy by the Public Service Department (JPA) has led to the loss of trade negotiators' tacit knowledge (Tham, 2010), causing Malaysia to depend on a small number of trade negotiators, which has affected its participation in negotiations (Nawawi, 2010). Against this backdrop, this study will address the literature gap on trade negotiation competency governance in Malaysia. It draws on the perspectives of key government officials involved in overseeing or coordinating the TNC agenda to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the challenges to trade negotiation competency in Malaysia?

RQ2: How to overcome the challenges to trade negotiation competency in Malaysia?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Trade Negotiation: A Challenge for Developing Countries

FTAs are not necessarily beneficial for all countries (Timsina & Culas, 2020). The legally binding nature of FTAs may force countries to make institutional, judicial, and policy reforms to meet specific obligations (Trang et al., 2023). This could affect the government's autonomy to reintroduce and implement measures (Kidgell et al., 2020), including those that are important to address the public interest, such as subsidies (Friel et al., 2020). Trade liberalization can increase market access through the removal of tariffs and non-tariff barriers, which can flood the market with cheaper imported goods (Mohaghegh & Valipour, 2021), which can create competition for local industries, including the more fragile SMEs (Haseeb et al., 2019). FTAs also risk creating competition for the local workforce through increased migration (Kidgell et al., 2020), which can affect labour-intensive industries, predominantly in less-developed and developing countries (López Vicente et al., 2020), resulting in increased inequality and poverty (Anderson, 2020).

In addition, modern trade agreements have expanded beyond trade-related tariff and border matters by integrating issues such as governance, regulatory standards, intellectual property, and other non-traditional trade matters (Ray & Meena, 2022). This increases the risks of trade agreements having implications for a country's sovereignty and the people's livelihood (Sharma et al., 2022). It also makes negotiating modern trade agreements more complex (Altschul, 2007; Bagwell & Staiger, 2011; Dias, 2020) and controversial (Chapman et al., 2017; Helmold, 2020) where TNCs become paramount. Hence, governments must assign trade negotiators who are highly competent to ensure that the country's interests continue to be protected (Abman & Lundberg, 2020; Dardak, 2020; Hussain & Ali Shah, 2022).

Existing literature suggests that TNC is a common challenge for developing countries (Ayub, 2010). Jones (2013) noted that the limited institutional capacity affects developing countries' competency to negotiate with more powerful countries. With a lack of bargaining position and negotiation skills, developing countries often did not get the results they desired from the FTAs (Darmastuti et al., 2022). The lack of TNC limits their capability to negotiate and implement trade agreements, which will hinder the potential to become a competitive player in international trade (Asian Development Bank, 2008; World Trade Organization, 2023).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Institutional Theory

Organizations behave according to shared rules, routines, and beliefs in the systemic environment in which they operate. The institutional theory argues that rather than being driven by rational considerations and individual capacities, organizational actions are shaped by normative frameworks, either formal or informal (Scott, 2014). Pioneered by Philip Selznick (1957), the theory suggested that organizations develop a new identity beyond their formal structures based on norms and values. The concept of institution is further explained by North (1990) as the 'rules of the game' to reduce uncertainty in organizational actions. This is manifested through regulations, procedures, and arrangements. Richard Scott (2014) introduced the 'pillars' of institutions: (i) regulative, which comprises formal laws and policies that determine the appropriate behaviour, (ii) normative, which constitutes professional standards and corporate values for proper behaviour; and (iii) cultural-cognitive, which represents the shared understandings, ideas, and habits that eventually become institutionalized. These complementary pillars help to explain why organizations exhibit consistent behavioural patterns despite shifting external circumstances.

In public administration, institutional theory has been frequently used to explain bureaucratic conduct, policy execution, and organizational continuity. To increase efficiency and to gain legitimacy within the larger institutional context, public organizations often adopt certain structures and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio & Powell (1983) argued that organizations are becoming more alike due to the institutional framework's 'pressure' of compliance from the government, professional societies, and uncertainty.

Trade negotiation is not just a personal human resource issue, but an institutional consequence dictated by the structure of institutional governance and policy agenda. Hence, institutional theory is an appropriate framework for investigating TNC due to its shift from studying individual negotiators to the governance structures that affect competency development. It allows researchers to assess whether government policies, organizational structures, and interministerial connections create an environment that enables or hinders TNC.

2.2.2 Policy Administration Coordination Framework

Institutional forces help to align government strategies, visions, duties, and activities. However, government effectiveness is not represented by the individual agencies' performance, but by the coordination between different agencies (I. Scott & Gong, 2021; Senninger et al., 2021). As governments deal with policy concerns that cut beyond organisational lines, policy coordination has grown in importance in the study of public administration. Government agencies must work together to achieve common policy goals and address public issues, including trade concerns.

Peters (2018) defined coordination as the intentional alignment of institutions, policies, resources, and administrative operations across organizational boundaries to produce consistent policy outcomes. It seeks to ensure that government departments pursue complementarity rather than conflicting goals, duplicative effort, and inconsistent implementation. One of the government's most coordination-intensive tasks is trade negotiations. Trade negotiations involve multiple agencies, specialized expertise, different areas of jurisdiction, and substantial stakeholder participation. It necessitates simultaneous contributions from ministries in charge of finance, agriculture, intellectual property rights, labour, environment, and others. While the coordinating ministry incorporates many national interests into a cohesive negotiating position, each ministry provides technical knowledge and negotiation mandate. As a result, the government's capacity to organize knowledge across ministries is just as important to negotiation competency as technical proficiency.

The literature on policy coordination described coordination in two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. Vertical coordination refers to hierarchical ties that provide coherence between policy strategies and implementation, while horizontal coordination involves coordination across government agencies at the same administrative level (Bouckaert et al., 2016; I. Scott & Gong, 2021). Since the policy decision for trade negotiation requires a mandate from various agencies, it generally involves horizontal coordination.

However, effective coordination relies on the policy capacity across various government departments, which is categorized into three dimensions: (i) *analytical*, which is the capacity to collect and use evidence in policymaking, (ii) *operational*, or the ability to administer resources and actors, and (iii) *political,* in engaging and gaining stakeholders' support (Wu et al., 2015). The government's capacity to combine these dimensions is important to strengthen its coordination capacity.

Thus, the policy administration coordination framework enhances institutional theory by emphasizing the administrative procedures through which TNCs are mobilized across government agencies. Trade negotiation is intertwined within the complex policy functions. While the institutional framework may reinforce strategic alignment between government agencies, the silos created by organizational authority need to be addressed through coordination.

2.2.3 Competency Theory

Competency has been regarded as the most rational predictor of job performance. The competency theory by McClelland (1973) advocated competency or character attributes as indicators of one's capability to perform a task successfully. Competency includes both observable and unobservable attributes, with the latter often shaping behaviour and having more influence on job performance. Thus, McClelland proposed competency assessment to include both cognitive and personality factors (Smolinski & Xiong, 2020) to assess and develop an employee's competency systematically.

Boyatzis (2008) highlighted that a person's competency has a causal relationship to effective work performance, and this can be learned within a suitable environment. He also noted that while a person's competency is described by their personal attributes, it can also be influenced by the organizational environmental aspects, including structure and systems. These factors are predicted to have a significant impact on the demonstration of competencies and/or the design of jobs and roles (Wong, 2020). When a person's competency is consistent with the job specification, maximum work performance will be achieved (Daniali et al., 2022).

The important linkage between competency and performance has encouraged the institutionalization of competency in the field of human resources management. Spencer & Spencer

(1993) developed prescriptive competency models and behavioural indicators for various jobs, enabling organizations to apply competency-based approaches to enhance work performance in practice. The methodical, behaviourally based approach to understanding the motivation for exceptional performance has been extremely beneficial for talent management, leadership development, and organizational success.

Nevertheless, even though public departments understood the importance of competency management, competency systems often failed due to political unpredictability, shifting administrative goals, and a lack of organizational commitment (Strużyna et al., 2021). To mitigate these risks, competency management should be integrated into institutional practices to align competency systems between all government departments, to support a sustainable arrangement for competency development (Saputra et al., 2024).

2.2.4 Conceptual Framework

When taken as a whole, the three viewpoints offer a complete conceptual framework (Figure 1) for analysing how institutional governance influences TNC. Institutional theory supports aligning the country's trade strategies. Public administration coordination facilitates the efficient government mechanism, and competency theory reflects the desired capabilities and outcomes.

Institutional Framework

↓

Effective Coordination

↓

Efficient talent management approach

↓

Reduced competency gaps

↓

Improved negotiation effectiveness

Figure 1: The Effect of Institutional Framework on Trade Negotiation Competency

2.3 Trade Negotiation Competency Governance

As implemented in some parts of the world, institutional frameworks have been proven effective in fostering inter-agency coordination and enhancing trade negotiation competency. The Government of the United Kingdom (UK) introduced a strategy to coordinate the roles of different government departments in the UK towards aligning its trade measures. This includes the establishment of the Department for International Trade (DIT) to consolidate the UK's efforts in enhancing trade negotiation capacity. The DIT imposes strict selection procedures and employs talents with trade experience from the whole civil service and outside of the civil service to fill the experience gap in the negotiating team (National Audit Office, 2019). To develop trade negotiation competency, the government also established a dedicated Trade Policy and Negotiations Faculty within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Under the direction of a former UK trade negotiator at the European Commission, the training curriculum emphasizes experiential learning. The competency development continues at the workplace through mentoring by experienced negotiators and exposure to actual trade negotiations (Ilott et al., 2017).

In the United States (U.S.), the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) provides trade policy and trade negotiation leadership to multiple government agencies through the chairing of the Trade Policy Review Group and the Trade Policy Staff Committee. Being a section under the President's Executive Office, USTR is in a strategic position to influence presidential decisions on trade negotiations. The department also houses the country's trade negotiation experts, with a centralized approach to recruitment and selection, development, and retention (Office of the United States Trade Representatives, 2024). On competency development, trade negotiation programs are widely established at public and private higher learning institutions in the US. For example, the Trade and Negotiations Programme at the Harvard Kennedy School offers degree programs and executive courses that provide the required competency for trade negotiation (Harvard Kennedy School, 2025). The Institute of International Economic Law, a private university, offers various academic programs on trade laws and negotiations (The Institute of International Economic Law, 2024).

The Government of the Kingdom of Bhutan (2021) has adopted a nationwide approach to defining and developing specific trade negotiation competency, with the development of a competency-based framework for trade officers. The framework specifies the competency areas, key competencies, and relevant behavioural indicators of trade negotiators, to guide policymakers from various government agencies in assessing and strengthening the relevant competencies. The competency framework also serves as a strategic guideline to streamline the management of trade negotiation talent across the government agencies in Bhutan.

In Thailand, Suphachalasai et al. (2020) noted that the absence of a national strategy on trade negotiation has weakened the regulatory alignment and institutional coordination, which have affected the country's implementation of trade commitments. They recommended the development of an institutional framework to improve the integration of institutions and processes on FTA implementation.

For Malaysia, Nawawi et al. (2010) highlighted the institutional challenges in embracing the complex nature of FTAs, and flagged the role of policy as the key determinant to improve Malaysia's trade negotiation capacity. A clear policy direction is emphasized as of utmost importance to strengthen negotiation capacity (Nawawi & Somchit, 2010). Therefore, Nawawi & Ayub (2010) recommended the establishment of appropriate infrastructure to support trade negotiations. This includes a coordinative institutional framework to guide policy decisions (Tham, 2019) and an integrated framework for talent management (Abraham et al., 2023). Sauvé (2018) highlighted that Malaysia must update its domestic policies and trade strategy to remain competitive in the global economy. He suggested strengthening the institutional framework, addressing structural issues, and closely aligning trade and investment policies with international measures to handle the complexity of global commerce. This is supported by Lee (2021), who calls for the strengthening of the institutional framework while promoting human capital development to improve Malaysia's readiness to reap the opportunities of economic integration.

Policy-based frameworks have proven to have a positive effect on trade negotiation capacity through aligning TNC strategies between government agencies and influencing the organization's approach to talent management. This can strengthen the approach to competency development and address the competency gaps among trade negotiators. A strengthened TNC increases the potential of achieving favourable deals in international trade negotiations.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research utilized an elite interview research design (Figure 2) for an exploratory policy study. It aims to gather a high-level perspective of the situation of TNCs in Malaysia at a macro level. It focused on government officials who hold authority or control over the trade negotiation agenda, such as heading, coordinating, or overseeing the process. The participants play a central role in the subject of the study and possess the appropriate authority, level of knowledge, and experience (Ntienjom Mbohou & Tomkinson, 2022)

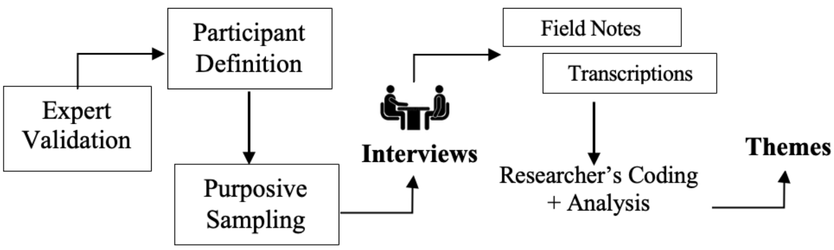

Figure 2: Elite Interview Research Design

Purposive sampling was conducted through website searches and telephone enquiries to government agencies that are linked to trade negotiation and FTAs. Through the policy or international divisions of the agencies, the research identified five individuals who are structurally central actors to the subject of trade negotiation competency in Malaysia (Table 1). The officials are all high-ranking officials who head the departments that oversees of coordinates Malaysia's participation in trade negotiation, or in organizing trade negotiation training programmes. The officials were formally approached through e-mails and agreed to participate in the interview.

The first four officials are from the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (MITI), Malaysia, who hold key positions in coordinating Malaysia's participation in trade negotiations. Their areas of responsibility range from coordinating Malaysia's participation in trade negotiations to overseeing Malaysia's trade negotiations at an international body, and up to leading the trade negotiation agenda at the ministry, which put the officials in suitable positions to comment on the subject of TNC. The fifth official is from the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) who coordinates trade negotiation training courses for civil servants. These training courses are the only structured trade negotiation skill training programmes by a public training institute for the Malaysian civil service. Based on the experience in conducting the training courses, the official is in a central position to comment on the competency of Malaysian trade negotiators who attended the programme. Other than the five participants, the study viewed no other officials in a comparable position to provide a perspective on TNC in Malaysia at a macro level.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Elite Interview Participants

ID	Organization	Role/Involvement in Trade Negotiation
P1	MITI	Oversees Malaysia's negotiation activities at an international trade organization.
P2	MITI	Coordinates Malaysia's participation in FTA negotiation.
P3	MITI	Leading the planning and implementation of trade negotiation agenda for Malaysia.
P4	MITI	Coordinates Malaysia's participation in FTA negotiation.
P5	INTAN	Coordinates training programme on trade negotiation for the public service.

Semi-structured interview questions were developed to collect the participants' views on the key challenges affecting trade negotiation competency in Malaysia, and their suggestions on the ways to address them. The instrument was verified by policy studies experts. Each interview session took between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted at the participants' offices. The data were collected over a period of two months to accommodate the participants' schedules. The interview scripts were recorded, transcribed using an AI transcription tool, and then submitted to the respective interviewees for member checking and validation. Using NVivo, the interview data were coded and categorized. From these categories, the key themes were extracted.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results in Table 2 show the first research question on the issues that hinder TNC in Malaysia.

RQ1: What are the challenges to trade negotiation competency in Malaysia?

The study found three key challenges to TNC in Malaysia (Table 2): (1) institutional fragmentation; (2) weak talent retention; and (3) competency gaps.

Table 2: Codes and Themes for Challenges to TNC in Malaysia

Codes	Category	Theme
1. Recognition of FTA 2. Relevance to jurisdiction	1. Poor awareness	1. Institutional fragmentation
3. Anxiety of FTA impact 4. Burden of new obligations 5. Protectionism/silos	2. Lack of support	
6. Job rotation policy 7. High turnover	3. Loss of institutional knowledge	2. Weak talent retention
8. Unutilized talent 9. Competency not recognized	4. Shrinking talent pool	
10. Lack of knowledge 11. Lack of preparation 12. Poor selection process	5. Lack of skills	3. Competency gaps
13. Little exposure 14. Lack of guidance	6. Lack of experience	
15. Work burden	7. Lack of priority	

4.1 Issues Affecting Trade Negotiation Competency in Malaysia

Theme 1: Institutional Fragmentation

The participants noted that institutional fragmentation in trade governance is the major hindrance to TNC, which has weakened the strategic alignment for the trade negotiation agenda across the government departments. This is contributed by the lack of awareness and recognition of the importance of FTA. The agencies view that FTA concerns only the trade ministry and the industry. Thus, the importance of FTA to the nation's agenda is not shared by all government agencies:

> *"I think some ministries do not see FTA as one of the elements to realize the trade agenda. The current policy does not look at FTA from a larger perspective. FTA is more than just an issue for businessmen"- (P1).*

> *"Ministries must be clear on the link between their areas and trade. Some ministries, we find them very skewed to multilateral agreements and with no nexus to trade... We see a disconnection there."- (P2)*

Consequently, there is a lack of support from these agencies for FTA. The agencies are anxious that FTA would impose upon them, new obligations and disciplines that could affect their autonomy, and add new procedures and costs to their operations. This perception has influenced the agencies to become disinterested in FTA and become protective of their jurisdictions.

> *"Some ministries are reluctant (to support FTAs). They foresee new requirements and costs."*- (P1)
>
> *"It was difficult to modify this situation (silos) because trade negotiation was not something that Malaysia (government agencies) gave much attention to…"- (P3)*
>
> *There is a bureaucratic resistance to get the buy-in from other Ministries - (P4)*

As a result, government agencies tend to work in silos and become protective of their jurisdictions, which makes it difficult for trade negotiators to formulate a cohesive and streamlined policy decision for the negotiation. The absence of support from the agencies has a major influence on the process of the negotiation due to the long process of consultation to reach a decision:

> *"If we can't get the support from other ministries, the negotiation becomes a complex, complicated, and challenging journey. This is why some negotiations take a long time because we have to resolve internal issues."- (P1)*
>
> *"Some decisions need to be made quickly, but some ministries need more time (to consider the impact). This delays the process of the negotiation"- (P2)*

The lack of institutional framework and coordination reflects the failure in policy capacity and horizontal coordination (Bouckaert et al., 2016; Peters, 2018; I. Scott & Gong, 2021; Wu et al., 2015). This finding provides evidence that governance issues continue to affect Malaysia's TNC (Nawawi & Somchit, 2010; Tham, 2010).

Theme 2: Weak talent retention.

The participants stressed the lack of emphasis on talent retention in the current public service human resources development policies. For example, the job rotation practice that applies to all civil servants, including trade negotiators, is seen as the key contributor to the high turnover of trade negotiators. This has caused the loss of institutional knowledge and expertise that are not easily replaceable:

> *"Job rotations make us lose the expertise."- (P2).*
>
> *"Trade negotiation competency is an institutional memory that is built over years. Losing an experienced trade negotiator means losing a national asset; the knowledge of past (free trade) agreements, counterpart behaviour and strategic nuances that cannot be quickly replaced."- (P4).*

Weak talent retention has also reduced the size of Malaysia's trade negotiation talent pool. Trade negotiators who were rotated to other organizations are often assigned to positions where their competency is not being utilized. This lack of recognition of trade negotiation as a specialized competency has the potential to weaken Malaysia's capacity in international negotiations:

> *"We actually have a good set of negotiators, but they are spread across various ministries where they do not do negotiations anymore. We have lost very qualified and experienced negotiators."- (P2)*

> *"We don't have many people involved in trade negotiations."- (P5)*

> *"The number of officers involved in FTA (trade negotiation) is diminishing. This will impact the country."- (P1)*

The talent pool is further affected when the positions vacated by the trade negotiators who have undergone job rotation are replaced by personnel who do not possess the required competency. The absence of the relevant background and knowledge widens the competency gaps among Malaysian trade negotiators. This has also placed a burden on the coordinating ministry to continuously educate ministries and agencies on TNC to perform their roles effectively:

> *"The role of trade negotiator is not easily replaceable. When someone (experienced trade negotiators) vacated a position, the position was sometimes filled by someone with a non-FTA background." -(P1)*

> *"This shortage (of negotiators) forces us to delegate FTAs to officers in other divisions, who often lack specialization and handle them as additional side work…"- (P4)*

> *"Because the turnover in the other ministries is quite high, we find that we need to educate them to help them understand the terms in the agreements."- (P2)*

The findings above showed that job rotation policy continues to affect the retention of trade negotiators' tacit knowledge as it was decades ago (Tham, 2010), causing a persisting dependency on a small number of trade negotiators (Nawawi, 2010). This provides evidence that the success of retaining TNC is a shared responsibility and can be effectively implemented through policy capacity (Wu et al., 2015) and coordination between government agencies (I. Scott & Gong, 2021).

Theme 3: Competency gaps.

With the generally weak talent retention approach in the government policies, the competency gaps among trade negotiators are becoming wide. The participants viewed that trade negotiators, particularly the 'new' officers, are generally lacking in negotiation skills and experience. This gap is more apparent in the new and specialized areas of trade:

> *"On the scale of 1 (incompetent) to 10 (competent), I would rank their (trade negotiator's) competency between 4 to 6". - (P5)*

> *"That is also when I picked up on the inadequacy of our negotiating team…"- (P3)*

> *"There is a competency gap in rapidly evolving areas like digital trade, green economy standards and complex services regulations…"- (P4)*

The lack of skills is attributed to the ad hoc approach in the identification of officers to become trade negotiators. The poor selection process and criteria for trade negotiators risk the appointment of

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54554/jhcd.2026.19.5

officers who do not possess the relevant experience and the required competency. The incompetency is reflected in the lack of grasp of the principles of FTA and the national policies, which can negatively impact their negotiation competency:

> *"Some of them are very new, but they have already become lead negotiators"- (P1)*
>
> *"Ministries choose the wrong people. They (the trade negotiators) are not interested, and they are also incompetent."- (P3)*
>
> *"It is currently not optimal. The (selection) process often prioritizes internal seniority and availability over demonstrable aptitude or specialized technical skills."- (P4)*
>
> *"There are some who do not know what FTA is. They are new, and if they don't understand the policy of the ministry, that's an added challenge to understand why the policy is this way, and what the FTA is asking you to do"- (P2).*

The second factor to competency gaps among trade negotiators is the lack of experience. The lack of experience in Malaysia's trade negotiators is due to the lack of exposure to trade negotiation before an officer is appointed to lead a negotiation. This is further hindered by the lack of coaching and guidance from more experienced negotiators, which halts the transfer of institutional knowledge.

> *"The competency gap is due to the lack of experience in trade negotiation."- (P5)*
>
> *"I don't blame them (the new trade negotiators) because the seniors may no longer be involved in trade negotiations. In some Ministries, there are only a few officers doing negotiations, and there is no coaching."- (P1)*

The opportunity for trade negotiators to improve their competency through learning is further impeded by their existing workloads, creating difficulty in allocating their time and effort to learn and prepare for trade negotiation. This affected the prioritization of trade negotiation as a core business and the commitment to pursue competency development.

> *"For some trade negotiators, trade negotiation is not their core business, so they don't give it a priority. The new trade negotiators are busy with other things. They don't spend time learning from experts."- (P1)*
>
> *"Most trade negotiators don't do anything after each (negotiation) round. But this is mainly because they have other jobs to do. They don't have time."- (P3).*

As a consequence, the competency gaps are perceived to have affected the trade negotiators' cognitive capacity and skills, which could jeopardize their capability to perform well in the negotiation. This would affect the trade negotiator's control over the negotiation process, and the country's strategic position in the negotiation. It also reflects the country's lack of competency and preparation:

> *"We lost the grasp (of trade negotiation) when we don't get the right people to lead (the negotiation)."- (P1)*

> *"A lot of times, Malaysia is very defensive in the negotiation. For some areas, we don't seem to know what our offensive interest is. The trade partners can see very quickly if we don't have the knowledge and the background."- (P2)*

The findings enrich the literature that the competency gaps in developing countries (Asian Development Bank, 2008; Darmastuti et al., 2022; Jones, 2013) are also faced by Malaysia. It highlighted the link between TNC and negotiation capacity (Boyatzis, 2008; Smolinski & Xiong, 2020).

4.2 Recommendations to Address Issues Affecting Trade Negotiation Competency in Malaysia

The results in Table 3 show the answers to the second research question on the recommendations to address issues that hinder TNC in Malaysia.

RQ2: How to overcome the challenges to trade negotiation competency in Malaysia?

The study found three key recommendations to address the challenges that hinder TNC in Malaysia, namely, (1) a governance framework for TNC; (2) a specialized talent retention initiative; and (3) a structured competency development programme.

Table 3: Key Recommendations to Address Issues Hindering TNC in Malaysia

Codes	Category	Theme
1. Consultation and engagement 2. Respect of jurisdiction	1. Whole-of-government	1. Governance framework for TNC
3. Increase awareness on FTA 4. Linkage with national policy	2. Alignment of Strategy	
5. Retain trade negotiators 6. Long-term placement	3. Retain institutional knowledge	2. Specialized talent retention initiative
7. Special career track 8. Trade negotiator's cadre	4. Build talent pool	
9. Knowledge sharing by experts 10. Practical simulation	5. Classroom teaching	3. Structured competency development programme
11. Exposure to real negotiation 12. Coaching and mentoring	6. Experiential learning	

Recommendation 1: A Governance Framework for Trade Negotiation Competency

To address the issue of institutional fragmentation, the participants envisioned a governance framework that promotes a whole-of-government approach to FTA and TNC, and an aligned strategy. It should drive a collaborative effort in realizing the trade agenda and strengthen TNC. To achieve this, the strategy must be clearly communicated and receive support from all relevant agencies:

> *"We need a broad strategy. A unifying policy on FTA implementation. This must be articulated well so all ministries will understand".- (P2)*

> *"There must be one ministry that takes charge of this and puts a proposal (for competency governance). Identify the issue, including the lack of competency. Get the backing (support) of other ministries."- (P3)*

To foster the whole-of-government approach to FTA and TNC, the participants underscored the importance of collaboration between government agencies, acknowledging each agency's expertise and their jurisdictions. The participants also affirmed the importance of engagement and consultation to understand the nature of the current policy and implementation in pushing forward the trade agenda:

> *"We need closer cooperation between strategic partners like MITI and the ministries and agencies involved in trade negotiation."- (P5)*

> *"We rely on the competency of other ministries. We need to engage with them to better understand the issues."- (P2)*

> *"We must foster a 'whole-of-government' approach to negotiations…"- (P4)*

The governance framework can align the strategies of various government agencies and promote a shared vision for trade policies. This can be achieved by increasing the agencies' awareness of trade, the relevance of FTA to the national policies, and the importance of TNC to the ecosystem:

> *"We need to tell them about the FTA and the connection with their ministry, and why some chapters fall under their jurisdiction, and that they are supposed to be in charge of those chapters."- (P2)*

> *"We must link the policy to a national strategic plan, like the New Industrial Master Plan, for budget allocation, and establish an inter-ministerial committee to formalize a whole-of-government participation."- (P4)*

There is general support for an institutional framework to foster a whole-of-government approach to developing TNC. The framework can assist in creating a supportive environment for TNC, through a shared vision to trade, encouraging coordination, and fostering cooperation across agencies (Lee, 2021; Nawawi & Somchit, 2010; Sauvé, 2018)

Recommendation 2: A Specialized Talent Retention Initiative

To address the loss of institutional knowledge and expertise due to weak talent management in public service human resource development policy, the participants call for a specialized talent retention initiative for trade negotiation. This initiative should empower agencies to retain talent that is considered important for the organization's involvement in FTA. In addition, a long-term placement at an agency can also mitigate the risk of the job rotation policy on trade negotiators:

> *"If the ministry wants to retain the officers for their competencies, JPA should allow that to happen."- (P3)*

> *"We could implement longer-term postings to allow negotiators to complete a negotiation cycle and mentor juniors."- (P4)*

> *"The government must find a way to retain competent trade negotiators in the ministry. If they move somewhere, you will not be able to retain the institutional memory"- (P2)*

The participants also emphasized a stable supply of trade negotiators by proposing several measures to secure TNC. The first measure is through the introduction of a special career track, where experienced trade negotiators can continue doing trade negotiation regardless of their placement. The participants also propose the establishment of a database and a cadre of trade negotiators, from which the specialized competency can be deployed when needed:

> *"We should reintroduce the subject matter expert career path for trade negotiation so we can have a database on trade negotiators."- (P5)*

> *"Whenever trade negotiators were due for promotion, we ask JPA to keep them at MITI and give the promotion there. This way, they will do the new job scope while doing trade negotiation."- (P3)*

> *"We should establish a specific talent pool or 'cadre' for trade negotiation."- (P4)*

The findings suggest a policy reform to the public service job rotation policy to shift to an integrated talent management approach (Abraham et al., 2023) to preserve the country's negotiation capacity. The aspiration to retain TNC as a specialized talent and with a special career track mirrors the practices of some developed countries (National Audit Office, 2019; Office of the United States Trade Representatives, 2024).

Recommendation 3: A Structured Competency Development Programme

To address the competency gaps, the participants agreed that the competency of trade negotiators must be strengthened through a structured competency development programme that is designed to equip trade negotiators with the relevant competencies. This programme can be done in two approaches: training and practical. The training component involves a 'classroom' approach through sharing of knowledge by experts, combining theoretical teaching and simulation activities. However, this approach is perceived as effective in providing only the basic knowledge and understanding of trade negotiation:

> *"We can get an experienced trade negotiator, get a bit of theory. Get the experts to come to Malaysia. This way, you can train a lot more trade negotiators."- (P3)*

> *"Simulations and role-plays can expose them (the participants) to effective negotiation techniques." - (P5)*

> *"However, formal training often lacks depth in advanced, technical subjects and it's too general, reducing its overall impact on specialized competency."- (P4)*

To develop TNC more effectively, the participants stressed the importance of experiential learning. This approach refers to exposure to the actual work environment and the real negotiation settings, where trade negotiators can observe and understand the dynamics of the negotiation process.

Experiential learning can also be achieved through coaching and mentoring by experienced trade negotiators, who can provide guidance and wisdom in handling the negotiation:

> *"Basic training cannot be avoided, but we must allow more experienced trade negotiators to bring along new trade negotiators during a negotiation (to gain experience)."- (P2)*
>
> *"Trade negotiation is not easy to pick up and train using a curriculum. It is from observing and your own involvement."- (P3)*
>
> *"Exposure and mentorship are the most effective elements, as negotiation skills are learned by doing."- (P4)*

The findings reinforce the competency theory on the link between competency and job performance (Boyatzis, 2008), where the participants viewed competency as a predictor of Malaysia's trade negotiation capacity. The recommendation for a structured approach to competency development echoes the formalized approach advocated by Spencer & Spencer (1993) to improve job outcomes. The findings are also in line with the suggestion by Saputra et al. (2024) to integrate competency development models into the larger governance framework to ensure consistency and sustainability.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The preliminary study concluded that the current approach by the government is ad hoc and unstructured. Three key challenges were identified: institutional fragmentation, which leads to uncoordinated approaches to managing TNC; a weak talent retention approach that causes high turnover rates and the loss of expertise; and competency gaps that affect trade negotiation capacity. The lack of a shared vision on the trade negotiation agenda has resulted in government agencies working in silos and not seeing the relevance of trade to their areas or responsibilities. This led to a lack of appreciation of TNC at the organizational level, causing ineffectiveness in the institutional development and management of TNC. As a result, there is a perceived lack of competency among new negotiators due to the absence of mentorship and limited exposure to real negotiating experience. Overall, the study concluded that challenges to TNC in Malaysia are not the individual capacity of trade negotiators, but the larger governance framework. It also provided evidence that institutional challenges that affected trade negotiation in Malaysia, as provided by the literature, remain unaddressed.

To overcome these challenges, the study recommended three policy interventions. First is the initiation of a policy framework that can align the strategic visions across all relevant agencies towards the same goal. The framework can enhance coordination between different jurisdictions, break silos, and increase awareness of the importance of trade negotiation. Second is the creation of a specialized talent retention initiative to mitigate the impact of the job rotation policy, including through a cadre of competent trade negotiators. This could stabilize the trade negotiation talent pool and retain institutional memory. Finally, the establishment of a structured competency development programme that balances classroom training and experiential learning, supported by mentoring and practical insights. These recommendations can guide policymakers to strengthen the policy environment towards enhancing TNC.

Trade negotiation is not an exclusive agenda for the trade ministry, but involves the expertise of various government agencies. It highlights the importance of agency coordination toward supporting the nation's trade priorities. Hence, a systematic governance framework for TNC could bridge a gap between policy objectives and implementation. By having and implementing this framework, Malaysia can develop a team of highly skilled and effective trade negotiators who can secure beneficial trade deals, strengthen policy implementation, and enhance the country's position in the global marketplace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors thanked the key officials from MITI and INTAN for their participation in the interviews and their input for the study. The authors also appreciated the contributions of the reviewers for their comments and suggestions in strengthening this manuscript. The authors gratefully acknowledge that this research forms part of the corresponding author's PhD study at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

DECLARATIONS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

The authors did not receive any internal or external funding for this study

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study obtained approval from the UTM Research Ethics Committee (Ref: UTMREC-2025-167).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) DECLARATION

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools (such as ChatGPT or similar technologies) were used to assist in language editing and improve the readability of the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54554/jhcd.2026.19.5

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: M.M, S.S, N.M; Methodology: M.M, S.S; Data: M.M; Analysis: M.M, S.S; Writing -Original Draft: M.M, Writing-Review & Editing: M.M.

REFERENCES

Abman, R., & Lundberg, C. (2020). Does free trade increase deforestation? The effects of regional trade agreements. *Journal of the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.1086/705787

Abraham, M., Kaliannan, M., Avvari, M. V., & Thomas, S. (2023). Reframing talent acquisition, retention practices for organisational commitment in Malaysian SMEs: A managerial perspective. *Journal of General Management*. https://doi.org/10.1177/03063070231184336

Altschul, C. (2007). Internal coordination in complex trade negotiations. *International Negotiation*, *12*(3), 315–331. https://doi.org/10.1163/138234007X240655

Anderson, E. (2020). The impact of trade liberalisation on poverty and inequality: Evidence from CGE models. *Journal of Policy Modeling*, *42*(6). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpolmod.2020.05.006

Asian Development Bank. (2008). *How to design, negotiate, and implement a free trade agreement in Asia*. Asian Development Bank.

Athukorala, P. C. (2020). Free trade agreements in the world trade system: substance and semantics. *Foreign Trade Review*, *55*(1), 13–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/0015732519886771

Ayub, A. J. (2010). What's in the bowl? Analyzing FTA models. In *Complexity of FTAs: A Key Issue in Malaysian Trade Policy* (5). Khazanah Nasional Berhad.

Baena-Rojas, J. J., & Herrero-Olarte, S. (2020). From preferential trade arrangements to free trade agreements: One of the downturns of cooperation in international relations? *Social Sciences*, *9*(8). https://doi.org/10.3390/SOCSCI9080139

Bagwell, K., & Mavroidis, P. C. (2011). *Preferential trade agreements: a law and economic analysis* (Kyle W. Bagwell, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511976445

Bagwell, K., & Staiger, R. W. (2011). What do trade negotiators negotiate about? Empirical evidence from the World Trade Organization. *American Economic Review*, *101*(4), 1238–1273. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.101.4.1238

Betz, T., & Pond, A. (2019). Liberalization. In A. Clunies-Ross & P. Sudar (Eds.), *Albania's economy in transition and turmoil, 1990–97* (pp. 72–81). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429459450-5

Bouckaert, G., Peters, B. G., & Verhoest, K. (2016). *Coordination of public sector organizations: shifting patterns of public management* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54693-7

Boyatzis, R. E. (2008). Competencies in the 21st century. In *Journal of Management Development* (Vol. 27, Number 1). https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710810840730

Chaisse, J., & Dimitropoulos, G. (2021). Special economic zones in international economic law: towards unilateral economic law. In *Journal of International Economic Law* (Vol. 24, Number 2). https://doi.org/10.1093/jiel/jgab025

Chapman, E., Miles, E. W., & Maurer, T. (2017). A proposed model for effective negotiation skill development. *Journal of Management Development*, *36*(7). https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-01-2016-0002

Cipollina, M., & Demaria, F. (2020). The trade effect of the EU's preference margins and non-tariff barriers. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, *13*(9). https://doi.org/10.3390/jrfm13090203

Daniali, S. M., Barykin, S. E., Khortabi, F. M., Kalinina, O. V., Tcukanova, O. A., Torosyan, E. K., Poliakova, S., Prosekov, S., Moiseev, N., & Senjyu, T. (2022). An employee competency framework in a welfare organization. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, *14*(4). https://doi.org/10.3390/su14042397

Dardak, R. A. (2020). Plans and experiences to improve agricultural trade in the Asia Pacific region: overview of agricultural trade in Malaysia. *FFTC Journal of Agricultural Policy*, *1*, 60–68. https://doi.org/10.56669/QQTR1622

Darmastuti, S., Bainus, A., Sumadinata, R. W. S., & Heryadi, R. D. (2022). Free Trade Agreement (FTA) through economic diplomacy strategy: study of Indonesia-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (IJEPA). *Revista UNISCI*, *2022*(58), 107–123. https://doi.org/10.31439/unisci-135

Dias, M. de O. (2020). The four-type negotiation matrix: a model for assessing negotiation processes. *British Journal of Education (BJE)*, *8*(5), 27–45. https://doi.org/10.37745/BJE/VOL8.NO5.P40-57.2020

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*(2), 147–160. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101

Economic Planning Unit. (2021). *Twelfth Malaysia Plan, 2021–2025*. Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia. https://rmke12.epu.gov.my/

Friel, S., Schram, A., & Townsend, B. (2020). The nexus between international trade, food systems, malnutrition and climate change. In *Nature Food* (Vol. 1, Number 1). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-019-0014-0

Harvard Kennedy School. (2025). *Trade and negotiation programs*. Mossavar-Rahmani Centre for Business and Government. https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/programs/trade-and-negotiations-program

Haseeb, M., Hussain, H. I., Kot, S., Androniceanu, A., & Jermsittiparsert, K. (2019). Role of social and technological challenges in achieving a sustainable competitive advantage and sustainable business performance. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, *11*(14). https://doi.org/10.3390/su11143811

Helmold, M. (2020). Competencies and criteria for successful negotiations. In *Management for Professionals: Part F426*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33483-3_3

Hussain, C. M., & Ali Shah, S. Z. (2022). Firm level assessment of Pakistan and Malaysia Free Trade Agreement. *Asia Pacific Management Review*, *27*(4), 265–275. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apmrv.2021.10.001

Ilott, O., Stelk, I., & Rutter, J. (2017). *Taking back control of trade policy*. www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/brexit

Jarman, H. (2017). Trade policy governance: What health policymakers and advocates need to know. *Health Policy*, *121*(11), 1105–1112. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthpol.2017.09.002

Jones, E. (2013). *Negotiating against the odds: a guide for trade negotiators from developing countries*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137320247_6

Kepaptsoglou, K., Karlaftis, M. G., & Tsamboulas, D. (2010). The Gravity Model Specification for Modeling International Trade Flows and Free Trade Agreement Effects: A 10-Year Review of Empirical Studies. *The Open Economics Journal*, *3*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.2174/1874919401003010001

Kidgell, D., Hills, D., Griffiths, D., & Endacott, R. (2020). Trade agreements and the risks for the nursing workforce, nursing practice and public health: A scoping review. In *International Journal of Nursing Studies* (Vol. 109). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2020.103676

Lee, C. (2021). Globalisation and economic development: Malaysia's experience. In *Globalisation and its Economic Consequences: Looking at APEC Economies* (pp. 129–163). Taylor and Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003138501-6

López Vicente, F., Timini, J., & Cortinovis, N. (2020). Do trade agreements with labor provisions matter for emerging and developing economies' exports? *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3625547

McClelland, D. C. (1973). Testing for competence rather than for "intelligence." *American Psychologist*, *28*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034092

Ministry of Economic Affairs, B. (2021). *Competency-based framework for trade officers*.

Ministry of Investment Trade and Industry. (2021, September). *National Trade Blueprint 2021-2025*. Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry, Malaysia. https://www.matrade.gov.my/documents/ebook/ntbp/2/

Ministry of Investment Trade and Industry. (2023). *New Industrial Master Plan 2030*. Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry, Malaysia. https://www.nimp2030.gov.my/

Mohaghegh, M., & Valipour, A. S. (2021). Triggering economic growth: trade liberalization as the prominent Factor in less-developed countries. *Business and Economic Research*, *11*(2). https://doi.org/10.5296/ber.v11i2.18491

National Audit Office. (2019). *Preparing for trade negotiations*.

Nawawi, W. K. (2010). Interlinkages in the universe of agreements. In *Complexity of FTAs: A Key Issue in Malaysian Trade Policy* (6). Khazanah Nasional Berhad.

Nawawi, W. K., & Ayub, A. J. (2010). Services-related provisions in trade agreements. In *Complexity of FTAs: A Key Issue in Malaysian trade Policy* (7). Khazanah Nasional Berhad.

Nawawi, W. K., Ayub, A. J., Abdul Ghani Azmi, I. M., Jalil, I. N., Yean, T. S., Somchit, S. C., & Ahmad Radhi, N. (2010). *Complexity of FTAs: a key issue in Malaysia trade policy*. Khazanah Nasional Berhad.

Nawawi, W. K., & Somchit, S. C. (2010). The future for FTAs. In *Complexity of FTAs: A Key Issue in Malaysian Trade Policy* (10). Khazanah Nasional Berhad.

North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press.

Ntienjom Mbohou, L. F., & Tomkinson, S. (2022). Rethinking elite interviews through moments of discomfort: the role of information and power. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *21*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221095312

Office of the United States Trade Representatives. (2024). *Mission of the USTR*. Office of the United States Trade Representatives. https://ustr.gov/about-us/about-ustr

Peters, B. G. (2018). The challenge of policy coordination. *Policy Design and Practice*, *1*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2018.1437946

Quintieri, B., & Stamato, G. (2023). Are preferential agreements beneficial to EU trade? New evidence from the EU–South Korea treaty. In *World Economy* (Vol. 46, Number 12). https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.13445

Ray, R., & Meena, R. (2022). Application of dispute settlement in Free Trade Agreements (FTAs'): a cross country analysis of modern FTAs. *Global Trade and Customs Journal*, *17*(Issue 7/8), 317–324. https://doi.org/10.54648/GTCJ2022044

Saputra, N., Putera, R. E., Zetra, A., Azwar, Valentina, T. R., & Mulia, R. A. (2024). Capacity building for organizational performance: a systematic review, conceptual framework, and future research directions. *Cogent Business & Management*, *11*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2434966

Sauvé, Pierre. (2018). *Malaysia's trade governance at a crossroads*. Khazanah Research Institute.

Scott, I., & Gong, T. (2021). Coordinating government silos: challenges and opportunities. *Global Public Policy and Governance*, *1*(1), 20–38. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43508-021-00004-z

Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations: ideas, interests, and identities* (4th Edition). Sage Publishing.

Selznick, P. (1957). *Leadership in administration: a sociological interpretation*. Row, Peterson.

Senninger, R., Finke, D., & Blom-Hansen, J. (2021). Coordination inside government administrations: lessons from the EU Commission. *Governance*, *34*(3), 707–726. https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12525

Sharma, S. K., Lahiri, T., Neogi, S., & Akhter, R. (2022). Revisiting domestic support to agriculture at the WTO: Ensuring a level playing field. *The Journal of International Trade & Economic Development*, *31*(3), 358–374. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638199.2021.1967429

Smolinski, R., & Xiong, Y. (2020). In search of master negotiators: a negotiation competency model. *Negotiation Journal*, *36*(3), 365–388. https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12332

Spencer, L. M. J., & Spencer, S. M. (1993). *Competence at work: models for superior performance*. John Wiley & Sons.

Strużyna, J., Marzec, I., & Bozionelos, N. (2021). Competency management in bureaucratic organizations: evidence from the Polish public administration. *European Management Review*, *18*(2), 43–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12437

Suphachalasai, S., Mephokee, C., Yoonaidharma, S., Khumon, P., Chan, N., Winyuhuttakit, P., & Jarungsri, N. (2020). Thailand institutional framework for FTA negotiation. *HCMCOUJS - ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION*, *8*(2). https://doi.org/10.46223/hcmcoujs.econ.en.8.2.161.2018

Tham, S. Y. (2010). Evolution of trade policy formulation in Malaysia. In *Complexity of FTAs: A Key Issue in Malaysian Trade Policy* (3). Khazanah Nasional Berhad.

Tham, S. Y. (2019, September 28). *Why is Malaysia slow to ratify the CPTPP?* ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/why-is-malaysia-slow-to-ratify-the-cptpp-by-tham-siew-yean/

The Institute of International Economic Law. (2024). *Courses offerings*. Georgetown Law. https://www.law.georgetown.edu/iiel/student-opportunities-2/academic-opportunities/course-offerings/

Timsina, K. P., & Culas, R. J. (2020). Impacts of Australia's free trade agreements on trade in agricultural products: an aggregative and disaggregative analysis. *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, *64*(3), 889–919. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8489.12377

Trang, P. T., Hiep, T. X., Tho, D. T., Tuan, T. T., & Nguyen, T. C. (2023). Impact of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) on agricultural product export enterprises in Vietnam. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2023-0010

Wong, S.-C. (2020). Competency definitions, development and assessment: a brief review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, *9*(3). https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarped/v9-i3/8223

World Trade Organization. (2023, February 9). *Building trade capacity*. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/devel_e/build_tr_capa_e.htm

Wu, X., Ramesh, M., & Howlett, M. (2015). Policy capacity: a conceptual framework for understanding policy competences and capabilities. *Policy and Society*, *34*(3–4), 165–171. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2015.09.001

Yao, X., Zhang, Y., Yasmeen, R., & Cai, Z. (2021). The impact of preferential trade agreements on bilateral trade: A structural gravity model analysis. *PLoS ONE*, *16*(3 March). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249118