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Professional Bodies' Perspectives on Corruption Definitions, Risks and Mitigation in the Malaysian Built Environment Sector

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ABSTRACT

The built environment sector is central to Malaysia's national the built environment sector is a critical driver of Malaysia's economic growth and societal development, yet it is widely recognised as highly susceptible to corruption. This study examines corruption risks and mitigation strategies within the sector from the perspective of professional bodies. Employing a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six senior representatives from key professional bodies, which were the Board of Architects Malaysia, Board of Engineers Malaysia, Board of Quantity Surveyors Malaysia, Land Surveyors Board, Board of Town Planners Malaysia, and the Institute of Landscape Architects Malaysia. Participants were selected based on their extensive professional experience and positions of authority within their organisations, ensuring informed insights on governance, ethics, and sectoral practices. Findings indicate that corruption is multi-dimensional, occurring at all stages in the built environment, from tendering to construction and post-contract compliance. Tendering was identified as the stage most prone to integrity risks, driven primarily by large financial transactions, procedural ambiguities, and social pressures. While respondents believe that professionals are generally not the main actors in corrupt practices, they operate within a system that can enable misconduct, highlighting the importance of ethical awareness and institutional guidance. Professional bodies play a crucial role in promoting integrity, through mechanisms such as ethics-based examinations, professional development programmes, whistleblower policies, and collaborative initiatives with the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission. Despite their limited statutory authority, these bodies contribute significantly to safeguarding public interest and reinforcing ethical standards. The study concludes that effective corruption mitigation by the professional bodies requires integrated governance across project stages, strengthened professional ethics, and continuous collaboration between professional bodies and regulatory authorities. These findings provide practical implications for policymakers, professional bodies, and practitioners, offering insights into corruption risks and strategies to enhance transparency, accountability, and professional integrity in Malaysia's built environment sector.

Keywords: Corruption, built environment, professional bodies, risk perception, Malaysia.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The built environment sector is a central driver of Malaysia's socio-economic development, underpinning national growth through its contribution to the economy, physical and social development, as well as environmental sustainability. As it delivers essential infrastructure, the sector supports economic productivity, enhances social well-being, and sustains Malaysia's long-term competitiveness. Yet, despite its strategic importance, the sector remains highly susceptible to corruption. This vulnerability is amplified by the inherent scale of construction projects, the technical and administrative complexity of project delivery systems, and the frequent reliance on high-value contracts involving multiple stakeholders (Sohail & Cavill, 2006; Mohd Nordin, Takim, & Nawawi, 2012).

Although Malaysia has established comprehensive anti-corruption provisions under the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2009 [Act 694], corruption continues to permeate various stages of the project lifecycle. While offences such as bribery or the solicitation of gratification are widely understood, more complex and less obvious forms of misconduct, such as claim falsification, bid rigging, collusive tendering, and the abuse of public office, are often not fully recognised by practitioners. This limited understanding among professionals contributes to a persistent disconnect between the legal frameworks governing anti-corruption and the practical realities of industry operations.

Corruption in the built environment sector has been widely examined across multiple disciplinary perspectives, reflecting the sector's complexity and its susceptibility to integrity risks. Existing research highlights not only the structural and operational vulnerabilities inherent in construction and development processes but also the broader governance frameworks that shape ethical conduct within the sector. A review of the literature is therefore essential to situate this study within established theoretical and empirical debates, to identify prevailing knowledge gaps, and to clarify how professional bodies contribute to strengthening integrity in the built environment. This section synthesises existing research on corruption concepts and typologies, governance mechanisms, sector-specific risk factors, and the evolving role of professional institutions in promoting ethical practice.

Absence of a Sector-Specific Definition of Corruption

While the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2009 [Act 694] outlines a comprehensive set of corruption offences (Sections 16–23) and defines "gratification" in broad terms (Section 3), it does not provide a definition tailored to the unique characteristics of the built environment sector. Given the sector's diverse activities, multi-layered contracting structures, and complex regulatory landscape, these generic legal provisions may not sufficiently reflect the varied forms of corruption that could occur in practice. As a result, professionals may struggle to determine whether certain sector-specific behaviours constitute corruption, leading to ambiguity and inconsistent interpretation.

Growing Number of Corruption Cases within the Built Environment Sector

Corruption remains a persistent challenge globally, and Malaysia is no exception. Numerous studies consistently identify the built environment sector as one of the most corruption-prone domains (Hassan, Seow & Masrom, 2023; Mohd Nordin et al., 2023; Shafien & Sarpin, 2023; Yap et al., 2022; Lee, 2019). Former MACC Chief Commissioner Dato' Abu Kasim Mohamed previously emphasised the scale of corruption in this sector, describing it as severe and systemic ("Rasuah Dalam Industri Pembinaan Serius: SPRM", 2009). Although MACC's annual arrest statistics do not disaggregate cases by sector, overall corruption cases have risen markedly, increasing by 20% in a single year, from 909 reported cases in 2022 to 1,137 in 2023 (MACC Community Education Division, 2023). Given the sector's size, complexity, and high financial stakes, it is reasonable to infer that the built environment may constitute a substantial share of this increase.

Underutilised Role of Professional Bodies in Corruption Mitigation

Professional bodies govern the standards, competencies, and ethical conduct of practitioners across the built environment sector. Their strategic position enables them to shape professional norms, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and promote integrity-driven practices. Yet, their roles in corruption mitigation remain underexplored and, in some contexts, underutilised. Understanding how these bodies perceive corruption risks and their responsibilities in addressing them is therefore essential for strengthening governance across the sector. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining professional bodies' perspectives on corruption risks and mitigation efforts within Malaysia's built environment.

In overall, the existing body of literature underscores that corruption in the built environment sector is shaped by a combination of structural vulnerabilities, governance gaps, and varying levels of professional awareness. While prior studies have provided valuable insights into corruption typologies, sectoral risk factors, and institutional frameworks, limited attention has been given to the specific role of professional bodies as custodians of ethical standards and gatekeepers of professional conduct. This gap highlights the need for empirical inquiry into how these bodies perceive corruption risks and how they interpret their responsibilities in strengthening integrity within the sector. The subsequent section outlines the research methodology adopted to address this gap and to systematically examine these professional perspectives.

Given these gaps, there is a pressing need to better understand how professionals within the built environment perceive corruption risks and how they interpret their roles in upholding integrity. Professional bodies, as regulators of professional conduct and custodians of ethical standards, hold an influential position in shaping sector-wide governance. This paper therefore examines corruption risks and mitigation strategies in the Malaysian built environment sector from the perspective of these professional bodies.

The objectives of this paper are threefold:

i. To identify the perceptions of professional bodies regarding corruption risks across the built environment sector
ii. To assess the perceived roles and responsibilities of professional bodies in curbing corruption within the sector; and
iii. To examine the perspectives of professional bodies on corruption definitions and offences under Act 694.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Corruption within the built environment sector has been widely examined across global, regional, and disciplinary perspectives due to the sector's structural vulnerabilities, financial magnitude, and extensive stakeholder interactions. Existing research highlights that corruption risks are embedded not only in project delivery systems but also in broader governance arrangements that regulate professional conduct and institutional accountability. To situate the present study within these wider debates, this literature review synthesises scholarship on corruption typologies, conceptual definitions, the characteristics of the built environment sector, and the governance roles of professional bodies. Together, these themes provide the conceptual grounding for analysing corruption risks and mitigation strategies from the perspective of professional institutions in Malaysia's built environment sector.

2.1 Corruption in the Built Environment: A Global Perspective

Internationally, corruption in the construction and built environment sector is recognised as a pervasive and persistent problem. The sector has long been regarded as one of the most corruption-prone due to its large-scale, capital-intensive projects and their reliance on long, complex chains of decision-making involving clients, consultants, contractors, suppliers, and regulators (Kenny, 2009). Such characteristics create significant opportunities for misconduct at all stages of the project lifecycle, from planning and procurement to implementation and operation, and ultimately undermining project value, public confidence, and governance structures (Sohail & Cavill, 2006). Studies from emerging economies further demonstrate that corruption inflates project costs, compromises construction quality, leads to delays, and contributes to incomplete or abandoned projects (Doraisamy, Akasha, & Yunus, 2014; Lee, 2019). Empirical findings from Nigeria (Oyewobi et al., 2011), South Africa (Bowen, Edwards, & Cattell, 2012), China (Le, Ming, Chan, & Hu, 2014), and Malaysia (Yap, Lee, Rose, & Skitmore, 2022) collectively illustrate that corruption has become deeply entrenched in the culture and operation of the built environment industry in many countries.

2.2 Definition of Corruption

Scholars classify corruption in the built environment into several identifiable forms, each representing different mechanisms through which unethical behaviour may occur. Bribery and kickbacks involve payments or rewards aimed at influencing contract awards, approvals, or regulatory decisions. Collusion and bid rigging refer to covert arrangements among contractors or suppliers to manipulate tender processes. Fraud and misrepresentation

include inflated claims, falsified documentation, or diversion of project funds. Other forms include cronyism, nepotism, and abuse of office, all of which reflect the misuse of power or influence for personal or organisational gain. These typologies collectively demonstrate that corruption extends beyond simple monetary transactions and encompasses broader systemic misuse of authority, discretion, and professional judgement (Transparency International Malaysia, n.d.; IMF, 2019).

The concept of corruption itself has been defined in various ways by legislation, international organisations, and academic scholars. In general, corruption is understood as misconduct or the abuse of entrusted power for personal benefit. Malaysia's Act 694 does not provide a single overarching definition of corruption but instead defines it through specific offences outlined in Sections 16 to 23. The Act also provides an expansive definition of "gratification," which covers any item of value, service, favour, or advantage that may influence an individual's actions (Section 3).

Internationally, Transparency International Malaysia characterises corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, whereas the International Monetary Fund conceptualises it as a secretive exchange between two parties, typically involving fraud, misappropriation, or manipulation of authority in return for promised benefits. Academic perspectives build on these views by highlighting the contextual and behavioural dimensions of corruption. Lee (2019), for example, associates corrupt practices with the erosion of integrity influenced by economic incentives and institutional weaknesses. Collin et al. (2009), as cited in Yap et al. (2022), argue that corruption is shaped by individual morals, societal norms, personal incentives, and social relationships. Other scholars, such as Cazurra (2015) and Sohail and Cavill (2006), emphasise that corruption is not confined to political and governmental contexts but may arise in private firms, non-profit organisations, and across a range of professional environments, manifesting in diverse forms including embezzlement, extortion, nepotism, fraud, and conflicts of interest.

2.3 Built Environment Sector

Understanding corruption within the built environment sector also requires establishing a clear conceptualisation of the sector itself. The built environment refers broadly to human-made surroundings created to support and enhance human activities, encompassing buildings, infrastructure, public spaces, and facilities (Valence, 2019; Croome, 2004). As a sector, it encompasses the planning, design, construction, management, and operation of these spaces, reflecting a highly integrated system involving multiple professional disciplines (Croome, 2004; Valence, 2019).

Public perceptions commonly associate the built environment with visible structures such as housing and infrastructure, but the sector more broadly represents a society's developmental aspirations and socio-economic goals. It is dynamic and continually evolving in response to changes in societal needs, environmental conditions, technological advancements, and regulatory frameworks.

The delivery of built environment projects is inherently complex, requiring coordination among a diverse range of professionals, including planners, architects, engineers, surveyors, project managers, legal advisors, financial institutions, material suppliers, and regulatory authorities (Valence, 2018; Pearce, 2003). This complexity underscores why the sector is particularly vulnerable to corruption, where the involvement of multiple actors and institutions increases the number of potential areas where discretion may be exercised and exploited.

2.4 Built environment professional body

Within this context, professional bodies play a central role in regulating practice and ensuring ethical conduct across the built environment sector. A professional body is typically a statutory or regulatory institution established under a specific act or legal provision, mandated to oversee the standards, competencies, and ethical conduct of practitioners within a profession. In Malaysia, such bodies include the Board of Architects Malaysia, Board of Engineers Malaysia, Board of Quantity Surveyors Malaysia, and Board of Town Planners Malaysia. These bodies were established under their own act to regulate training, oversee accreditation, maintain professional registers, enforce codes of practice, and administer disciplinary mechanisms.

International literature highlights that professional bodies are crucial custodians of public interest and professional integrity. In jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore, professional

institutions play a strong role in developing ethical standards, issuing practice guidelines, and disciplining members involved in misconduct (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Abbott, 1988). Increasingly, professional bodies are recognised as key actors in anti-corruption governance, responsible for embedding ethical norms, providing continuous professional development in integrity, mediating between industry and government, and reinforcing accountability across project delivery systems.

However, their effectiveness varies across countries, often limited by resource constraints, weak enforcement mechanisms, or insufficient integration with national anti-corruption strategies (Amaratunga & Haigh, 2011). The literature also suggests that in many emerging economies, including Malaysia, the potential of professional bodies to influence anti-corruption outcomes remains underexplored and, in some cases, underutilised.

2.5 Built environment professional body

Corruption risks within the built environment sector manifest across multiple points in the project life cycle, reflecting the sector's inherent complexity, multiplicity of actors, and high transaction value. As highlighted by Sohail and Cavill (2006) and Mohd Nordin, Takim, and Nawawi (2011), construction projects move through a series of decision-intensive stages, each involving specialised expertise, professional discretion, and information irregularities. These characteristics create varying levels of vulnerability to integrity breaches. A clearer understanding of when and how such risks occur is therefore essential for strengthening governance systems and designing more targeted mitigation strategies.

Procurement and Tendering

The tendering stage is widely regarded as one of the most sensitive components of project delivery, given its reliance on fair competition, transparency, and adherence to procedural integrity (Le, Ming, Chan, & Hu, 2014; Yap, Lee, Rose, & Skitmore, 2022). Activities such as bid preparation, tender evaluation, and award processes involve significant financial decision-making and interactions among contractors, consultants, and procuring authorities or clients. Corruption risks at this stage may arise from limited transparency, uneven access to project information, or ambiguous procedural guidelines. Importantly, not all irregularities stem from deliberate misconduct; adjustments to tender specifications, preferential treatment, or sole reliance on familiar contractors may arise from administrative constraints, tight timelines, or established working relationships.

Malaysia has introduced a range of procurement governance reforms in response to these sensitivities. Initiatives such as e-procurement platforms, the Integrity Pact mechanism, and the public disclosure of awarded contracts aim to enhance transparency and reduce opportunities for discretionary bias. Ongoing capacity building, as well as consistent enforcement of procurement rules, remains crucial for strengthening public trust and ensuring equitable participation within the tendering environment.

Construction Stage

As projects progress to the construction stage, the complexity of on-site operations amplifies the potential for monitoring challenges and information gaps. This phase typically involves multiple subcontractors, suppliers, and consultants, each contributing to activities that must be coordinated in real time. Such fragmentation increases the likelihood of corruption risks associated with cost variations, material quality, documentation accuracy, and change order management (Mohd Nordin et al., 2011; Kenny, 2009). Many of these risks may emerge unintentionally due to unclear contract provisions, communication breakdowns, or inadequate supervision. Nonetheless, they create vulnerabilities that, if exploited, can escalate into more severe compliance issues.

Technological solutions have begun to reshape the governance landscape at this stage. Tools such as Building Information Modelling (BIM), real-time project monitoring systems, and performance-based auditing frameworks enhance transparency and support early identification of anomalies. These innovations provide more robust oversight mechanisms and reduce opportunities for administrative errors or deliberate manipulation of project records.

Certification and Compliance

Certification and compliance constitute the final stage of the project cycle, where built assets are evaluated for conformity with design, regulatory, and safety requirements. Because this stage relies heavily on professional judgment, technical assessments, and official endorsement, it plays a central role in upholding sectoral integrity

(Lee, 2019). Common risks include delays in approvals, inconsistent interpretation of regulations, and procedural inefficiencies that may lead to perceptions of unfairness or prompt informal attempts to expedite endorsements. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires clear regulatory guidelines, transparent documentation practices, and efficient approval workflows.

Malaysia's implementation of the Certificate of Completion and Compliance (CCC) represents a significant institutional shift toward professional accountability. By placing responsibility on principal submitting persons, the CCC aims to streamline processes while reinforcing ethical duties. To maintain its credibility, however, the system must continue to be supported by ethics-oriented professional training and digital record-keeping mechanisms that minimise discretion and improve traceability.

2.6 Interconnected Risks and Institutional Considerations

The literature underscores that corruption risks should not be viewed as isolated incidents confined to specific project stages. Rather, they are interdependent and often cumulative (Sohail & Cavill, 2006). Weaknesses in tendering and procurement may create pressures that surface during construction, while poor construction oversight can complicate certification and compliance processes. Effective preventive strategies therefore require an integrated governance perspective that strengthens transparency, documentation, and ethical competence across the entire project cycle.

Recent studies further highlight that improving integrity in the built environment sector cannot be achieved through legislation alone. Transparency International's findings (as cited in Yap et al., 2022) and evidence from field-based professional engagements point to the need for stronger institutional collaboration, particularly involving professional bodies that regulate conduct within the sector. Professionals generally express support for clearer ethical guidelines, more rigorous institutional monitoring, and user-friendly reporting channels to encourage consistent interpretation and application of integrity standards.

Table 1: Summary of Key Corruption Risks and Governance Opportunities Across Construction Project Stages

Project Stage	Potential Integrity Challenges	Underlying Factors	Recommended Governance Enhancements
Procurement & Tendering	Limited transparency, uneven access to information	Complex procedures, time constraints, reliance on discretion	E-tendering, Integrity Pacts, capacity training for evaluators
Construction	Cost variations, supervision gaps, reporting inconsistencies	Project complexity, multi-tier subcontracting, communication gaps	BIM-based monitoring, third-party audits, improved reporting standards
Certification & Compliance	Delay in approvals, differing interpretations, potential favouritism	Manual processes, overlapping responsibilities, procedural ambiguity	Digital certification, ethics awareness, standardised approval criteria

Overall, the literature establishes that corruption in the built environment sector is shaped by interconnected factors, including structural vulnerabilities, governance frameworks, institutional pressures, and the ethical standards upheld by professional actors. While considerable research has explored corruption typologies, sectoral risks, and international governance frameworks, empirical studies focusing on the role of professional bodies, particularly within the Malaysian context, remain limited. This gap highlights the need to examine how professional institutions understand corruption, how they perceive associated risks, and how they interpret their regulatory and ethical responsibilities in strengthening integrity across the sector. The subsequent section outlines the research methodology adopted to address these gaps and to systematically capture the perspectives of built environment professional bodies in Malaysia.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from representatives of professional bodies within the built environment sector. The study focused on six key professional bodies in Malaysia, which were selected for their regulatory and governance roles over practitioners in the sector. These bodies included the Board of Architects Malaysia, Board of Engineers Malaysia, Board of Quantity Surveyors Malaysia, Land Surveyors Board, Board of Town Planners Malaysia, and the Institute

of Landscape Architects Malaysia.

Interview respondents were nominated by each professional body, subject to criteria established by the researchers. To ensure the provision of informed and representative perspectives, respondents were required to be registered members who currently hold, or have previously held, senior positions within their respective professional bodies. This selection criterion was intended to guarantee respondents' familiarity with the governance, operational procedures, and initiatives of their organisations, as well as their ability to articulate collective institutional viewpoints. One representative from each professional body participated in the study, resulting in six interviewees in total.

Data collection was conducted through online interviews between 19 July and 8 August 2024. A total of six interview sessions were completed, corresponding to one session per professional body. Semi-structured interview protocols were employed to ensure a consistent framework across sessions while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging themes. Respondents were asked questions regarding their awareness and understanding of corruption definitions and offences as outlined in the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2009 [Act 694], their perceptions of corruption risks across different stages of construction projects, and the roles and responsibilities of professional bodies in mitigating corruption within the built environment sector.

All interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying patterns, concepts, and insights across qualitative datasets. Through this approach, the study sought to uncover both shared and divergent perspectives among the professional bodies regarding corruption risks and governance practices. The thematic analysis enabled a systematic interpretation of the qualitative data, providing a foundation for subsequent discussion of findings, implications, and recommendations.

4.0 DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The study engaged six representatives from key professional bodies within Malaysia's built environment sector, all of whom currently hold, or have previously held, high-ranking positions such as Chairman, Registrar, or Council Member in the selected professional bodies. These respondents also occupy senior or mid-level roles, such as architects, engineers, planners, quantity surveyors, and project managers, in their respective employment organisations, with active involvement in both public and private sector projects. Their professional experience ranges from five to over twenty-five years, providing a broad and nuanced understanding of ethical practices, governance, and operational realities in project management.

The respondents represented a balanced age distribution, with younger professionals (under 35 years) contributing perspectives on emerging challenges and contemporary awareness of ethical issues, while senior practitioners (above 45 years) offered insights grounded in long-standing industry practices. This diversity allowed the study to capture multiple perspectives on corruption risks, professional ethics, and governance across technical, managerial, and regulatory contexts.

i) Awareness and Perceptions of Corruption

Respondents indicated that defining corruption in the built environment sector is inherently complex, as its manifestations vary according to context and circumstance. Many emphasised that even minor actions, such as a meal or token gift, could be construed as corrupt under certain conditions. Based on the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2009 [Act 694] and their respective professional bodies' Acts, respondents defined corruption broadly as offering or accepting any commission or benefit deemed illegal by the disciplinary committees of the professional bodies. Members are prohibited from providing or receiving advantages to secure work, and breaches of these rules constitute professional misconduct. Several respondents also described corruption in behavioural terms, as seeking excessive profit through improper means, including non-compliance with prescribed requirements or persuading others to overlook breaches. These interpretations highlight both the statutory and ethical dimensions of corruption within the professional context.

The respondents also observed that awareness of corruption among professionals is uneven and often dependent on generational factors, previous exposure to governance training, and professional experience. Younger respondents highlighted emerging ethical challenges, such as pressures from digital procurement systems and client demands for accelerated project delivery, which may create subtle forms of inducement or

expectation. In contrast, senior respondents reflected on systemic risks embedded in long-standing industry practices, including legacy relationships and entrenched informal networks that may influence decision-making. Collectively, these perspectives underscore the need for continuous professional development and institutional guidance on recognising and responding to corruption risks.

ii) Corruption Risks Across Project Stages

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that corruption has become a normalised risk within the built environment sector. The Public Works Department was specifically noted as being among Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission's (MACC) top ten high-risk agencies. While professional bodies do not typically handle corruption cases directly, since such matters are reported to MACC, some cases involving professionals have nonetheless proceeded to prosecution.

Respondents observed that professionals themselves are seldom the principal actors in corrupt activities, as they generally lack ultimate authority, whereas developers, often described as "paymasters," are central to the process.

Corruption risks were identified across all stages of project delivery. During the pre-contract phase, vulnerabilities arise in procurement, project approvals, cost estimation, and tender documentation. Respondents highlighted that tendering processes are particularly prone to corruption due to the large financial stakes and discretionary powers involved. During construction, risks emerge in areas such as expediting payments, obtaining the Certificate of Completion and Compliance (CCC), labour approvals, and phase completion endorsements. Post-contract risks include contractor compliance, adherence to specifications, interim payments, variation orders, misuse of certificates, and verification of payments. Respondents emphasised that these risks are interconnected, with weaknesses in earlier stages often amplifying vulnerabilities in subsequent stages. This finding aligns with the literature, which emphasises that integrity risks are cumulative and systemic rather than isolated (Sohail & Cavill, 2006; Yap et al., 2022).

iii) Factors Contributing to Corruption

Respondents identified multiple factors contributing to corruption within the built environment sector. Financial incentives, particularly large monetary transactions, were consistently cited as the primary driver. Other contributing factors include personal negligence, procedural lapses, intense competition, and life pressures that may motivate individuals to compromise ethical standards. Some respondents highlighted that corruption often begins when professionals take on projects below the prescribed fee scale, resulting in insufficient resources and creating pressure to cut corners or accept inducements to maintain project viability. The respondents also noted that corruption may originate from either contractors or authorities, and in the private sector, bribery is often used to secure projects from clients. Zoning decisions in the public sector, such as converting agricultural land to industrial land, were cited as specific opportunities for corrupt activity, particularly when influenced by political or economic interests.

The respondents further observed that the complexity of construction contracts contributes to systemic vulnerabilities. Full compliance with regulatory and contractual requirements is often difficult to achieve, and shortcuts or bribes are sometimes used to expedite project completion. These observations highlight the multi-dimensional nature of corruption in the sector, encompassing financial, procedural, and social factors.

iv) Roles and Responsibilities of Professional Bodies

Regarding the role of professional bodies in mitigating corruption, respondents agreed that their authority is limited to what is explicitly prescribed in their establishing Acts. Core functions include member registration, management of disciplinary cases, enforcement of ethical standards, and ensuring public and environmental safety. Professional bodies act only on offences explicitly covered in their Acts, typically following the submission of formal complaints. While these Acts do not explicitly define corruption, they encompass principles of integrity, professional governance, misconduct, public interest, and conflicts of interest. Terms such as "misconduct" and "malpractice" are considered sufficiently flexible to safeguard the profession while protecting public interest, and most respondents questioned the need for additional anti-corruption clauses, given the coverage already provided under Act 694.

Professional bodies have implemented various initiatives to foster ethical behaviour and mitigate corruption risks. These include annual roadshows and seminars on legislation, governance, and professional ethics, often supplemented by real-case illustrations to enhance practical understanding. Integrity-related webinars, typically held in conjunction with Integrity Day, provide additional awareness-raising opportunities. Most professional bodies have introduced whistleblower policies that guarantee confidentiality and encourage reporting of misconduct, while collaboration with MACC further strengthens monitoring and education efforts. Membership criteria, professional examinations, and ethics courses collectively reinforce the emphasis on professional integrity, ensuring that practitioners are adequately equipped to navigate complex ethical and governance challenges. Through these measures, professional bodies actively promote a culture of transparency, accountability, and professional excellence.

Integration with Literature

The findings from this study corroborate prior research on corruption in the built environment sector, which emphasises the sector's susceptibility due to high financial stakes, multiple stakeholders, and complex governance arrangements (Kenny, 2009; Sohail & Cavill, 2006; Yap et al., 2022). The respondents' perspectives extend the literature by providing an insider view of the ethical challenges faced by professionals, including the interplay between institutional regulations, individual conduct, and systemic vulnerabilities. In particular, the emphasis on interconnected risks across project stages and the centrality of professional bodies in safeguarding integrity provides practical insights into effective governance strategies.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study explored corruption risks and mitigation strategies in Malaysia's built environment sector from the perspective of professional bodies. The findings indicate that corruption is pervasive and multi-dimensional, occurring across all stages of project delivery, from procurement and tendering to construction and post-contract compliance. While professionals themselves are generally not the principal actors in corrupt activities, they operate within complex systems in which financial incentives, procedural ambiguities, and social pressures create opportunities for unethical behaviour. Tendering processes were identified as particularly vulnerable, reflecting the high monetary stakes and discretionary powers inherent in these stages.

Professional bodies play a critical, albeit constrained, role in promoting integrity and ethical practices. Their authority is limited by statutory provisions, yet their initiatives, such as ethics-based professional examinations, continuous professional development programmes, whistleblower policies, and collaborative programmes with MACC, demonstrate a proactive approach to fostering transparency, accountability, and professional excellence. While explicit anti-corruption clauses are not included in their Acts, the broader coverage of misconduct, malpractice, and integrity principles provides sufficient scope to safeguard public interest and guide professional conduct.

The findings also highlight the importance of viewing corruption risks as systemic and interconnected. Weaknesses in one stage of the project cycle often amplify vulnerabilities downstream, underscoring the need for integrated governance mechanisms that combine regulatory enforcement, institutional oversight, and professional ethics. Moreover, generational and experiential differences among professionals suggest that awareness-raising and targeted capacity-building initiatives remain essential to reinforce ethical norms and reduce tolerance for corrupt practices.

Based on these insights, the study offers several recommendations. First, professional bodies should continue and expand collaborative initiatives with regulatory authorities, particularly MACC, to enhance understanding, awareness and education on corruption risks, and ethical and legal obligations. Second, ethics and integrity modules should be further integrated into professional development programmes, targeting both early-career and senior practitioners to ensure consistent awareness across generations. Third, professional bodies should explore the use of technology-enabled monitoring systems, including digital record-keeping, automated reporting tools, and project-tracking platforms, to strengthen transparency throughout project delivery stages.

Fourth, maintaining flexibility within disciplinary frameworks while ensuring clarity of ethical expectations can help professional bodies respond effectively to emerging forms of corruption without overly complicating their

governing Acts. Fifth, professional bodies are encouraged to enforce and monitor strict adherence to their professional codes of conduct among registered members, thereby ensuring that high standards of integrity are consistently maintained across the sector.

Finally, professional bodies should develop and implement their own Organisation Anti-Corruption Plan (OACP) to systematically address weaknesses in organisational governance, integrity, and anti-corruption practices. The OACP can serve as a strategic platform for internalising anti-corruption values within both the professional body and its members, promoting a culture of ethical behaviour, accountability, and transparency throughout the organisation.

In conclusion, corruption in the built environment sector is a persistent challenge, shaped by structural, procedural, and behavioural factors. Professional bodies are uniquely positioned to mitigate these risks through regulation, education, and governance, thereby safeguarding public interest and enhancing professional accountability. The insights from this study contribute to a better understanding of sector-specific corruption risks and highlight the practical measures that can be undertaken to strengthen integrity governance in Malaysia's built environment sector.

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