



*Ivory Tower Reform: A Vision for Higher Education in Malaysia* is a bold and urgent exploration of Malaysia's academic landscape, chronicling decades of critique, resistance, and calls for university reform. Drawing from hundreds of media statements, seminar reports and public interventions over more than three decades, this book highlights the painstaking work of The Malaysian Academic Movement (*Pergerakan Tenaga Akademik Malaysia*) or Gerak.

*Ivory Tower Reform* dissects the structural decay, political entanglements, and ideological conflicts that have shaped Malaysian universities since independence. With clarity and conviction, the authors unpack the tensions between academic freedom and state control, exposing how global pressures, neoliberal metrics, and internal political dynamics have undermined the integrity of higher education in Malaysia. More than just a critique, the book offers a holistic, historically grounded, and deeply human call for educational transformation—one rooted in justice, autonomy, sustainability, and inclusivity.

Accessible yet rigorous, this work is essential for scholars, policymakers, educators, and any Malaysian invested in reclaiming the university as a vital space for thought, change, and social purpose.



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PART I:  
“SOUL-SEARCHING”  
AND  
POLITICAL WILL

# Vacuous Minds Who Give PhD's a Bad Name <sup>1</sup>

An opposition MP created shock waves recently with a ridiculous allegation against a politician of a different political party<sup>2</sup> The latter has since taken legal action. What is of interest to me is the fact that the opposition MP is said to have a PhD conferred by a well-known public university up north.

Interestingly, there are many PhDs of such caliber milling around town. It is a commonplace to find the "lights on, nobody home" syndrome among these PhDs. The growing cynicism in Malaysia about the superfluosity of a doctoral academic degree is obviously justified.

The late Malaysian scholar and public intellectual Syed Hussein Alatas coined the term "profesor kangkung" a long time ago to describe the number of vacuous dummies parading as full professors in our universities.

They have PhDs, yet are often incapable of critical or rational thinking. Many love to be on camera or to be quoted in the media. The public sees through them, and their ignorance of the field in which they claim to be experts.

**1) This chapter is based on an article which first appeared as a column piece, written by Sharifah Munirah Alatas. Get full access to the original article here**

**<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2023/11/14/vacuous-minds-who-give-phds-a-bad-name/>**

**2)Parti SeMalaysia Islam (PAS) MP Siti Mastura was sued by 3 members of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) on 23 November, 2023 for defamation. See**

**<https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/474104> for the details**

Worse still, many are aware of their ignorance but choose to do nothing to improve themselves. Ultimately, their penchant for politicking, patronage, toxic behavior, stroking their own egos, and "fast-tracking" up the promotion ladder overrides any embarrassment their public stupidity might bring them.

Do we need PhDs, then? What about abolishing PhD programmes in our public universities? These are questions that have often been asked. Before we attempt to answer, it is best to recap the important role of universities and academia in general, in public life and social change. Many around the world criticise universities as being "ivory towers". Academics are accused of having little relevance to the "real" world.

Most of the criticism is true, unfortunately. Research output remains esoteric, unreachable to the general society, written in an inaccessible language, with too much theoretical jargon. This is especially so in the social and human sciences.

Yet these academics multiply and receive tenure to continue producing such useless nonsense. Many continue to be the "go-to" people for our media whenever comments are sought on a burning news item of the day. Often, this results in embarrassing situations.

We might recall the analysis given by an associate professor of a public university in October 2022 when asked on national TV what to expect of the then-UK prime minister Liz Truss (Astro Awani 2022).

Critics lambast most PhDs as being arrogant and entitled dilettantes. Many are perceived by the general public as idiots who fail to prove to society that their doctorates are justified.

Also, to the younger generation, a PhD is a bad idea anyway, to them, a PhD holder is not necessarily one who is well-paid. Besides, it is expensive if you have to pay your own way towards a doctorate, though the cost of a PhD in Malaysia is considerably less when compared regionally and globally (Azuar 2022).

There is also the issue of "lost earnings" if you choose to do a PhD instead of entering the workforce immediately after your basic degree, while there are others who feel that having a PhD would open up the path to their "dream job" in academia.

On that score, the reality in Malaysian higher education today is twofold: First, there are far more PhDs being mass produced than there are academic jobs available; second, even if our 20 public universities and the scores of other private higher education institutions hire these PhD holders, many will struggle to find a permanent position.

And when they do obtain a permanent job, the majority remain of poor scholarly quality. This is neither helpful to society nor nation-building in the long run. Some may not want to be an academic but think getting a PhD will increase their marketability. However, unless they are seeking a research job or have accumulated a set of other skills that are of value to an employer, they could find themselves being both "over-credentialled" and under-experienced for many jobs once they graduate.

By the way, one must be careful not to use the word "over-qualified" because the very quality of our PhDs is doubtful to begin with (Ramasamy 2023).

Many may want to do a PhD for the sake of "completing" their education. They may hope to educate society in a formal university setting. They would want to experience the process of knowledge production and receive funds for relevant research, so that they can impart this to the next generation in a classroom setting.

The ultimate aim is to contribute to the "bigger picture" of nation-building, quality of life and humanity. This can be a powerful motivation, but must one have a PhD to be able to do this?

Even today, it is widely perceived that having a PHD is still more legitimate than not having one. The general Malaysian public still looks up to someone with a PhD. That is obvious because the first thing we question in any politician who says or does something stupid is their academic qualification. If they have a PhD, both the politician and the university which conferred it will be verbally crucified.

One may not have a definite answer to the question "Why get a PhD?" or "Is a PhD of any use in today's socio-economic environment?"<sup>3</sup>

**3) The author Sharifah Munirah Alatas had this to say in the original version of the article: "There was a combination of reasons as to why I did a PhD. I come from a family of scholars, and this was a passive "push factor". My personality is such that I love engaging in critical debate and questioning my surroundings. I have a passion to educate and a love for simple writing. I knew from my secondary school days that I did not want a "9 to 5" job. My personality naturally gravitated towards the controversial and to be discerning about my surroundings. These are necessary qualities if one wants to live the life of a scholar. Maybe I have indirectly answered the questions".**