



Academia's Search for the <sup>1</sup>

Formal education exists in the form of schools and universities because it is human nature to search for the truth about the nature of life, humanity, the external environment we co-exist with, and our inner existential anxieties about the purpose of "how and why things are. Yet, while supposedly searching for truth, most universities in Malaysia continue to ignore dishonest, unbalanced, excessive and obsessive practices in academia (Jeh et al. 2018). Therefore, this begs the question: What is the fundamental "purpose" of the university?

Very simply, there are two. First, universities are meant to be safe spaces where clarity, freedom and honesty of thought are nurtured. Second, they are environments that value intellectual curiosity for its own sake, in the pursuit of knowledge so that human beings may satisfy their sense of curiosity and improve both the spiritual and material conditions of life. Both of these purposes seem to be lacking in Malaysian campuses today.

Universities emerged centuries ago as spaces for intellectual exploration. Subsequently, they evolved as places where lecturers and students are encouraged to participate in debates, critical thinking, and probing research, where it is acceptable to ask all forms of "what if" and "why" questions.

***1) This chapter is based on an article which first appeared as a column in Malaysiakini on 2 June 2023. The author, Sharifah Munirah Alatas, spent her academic career at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Many of her popular writings are a reflection of the decades she experienced, first-hand, with the decline in excellence and the lack of shame about this, among academicians. This "scenario" has come to define our universities and academic "culture" in Malaysia today. The article in its original form can be accessed here: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/667259>. It can also be accessed on Gerak's website at <https://Gerak-akademik.org/2023/06/02/academias-search-for-the-truth/>.***

There is an important book that all Malaysians, especially the political leadership and many top civil service administrators in the Ministry of Higher Education<sup>2</sup>, should read. The Good University by Raewyn Connell is a critique of the declining quality of higher education globally, the corporatisation of knowledge production, and how chasing profits has ruined the original purpose of the university (Connell 2019). It is an important book, not only because of its content, but also for its emphasis on the additional role academics must play in society. The book is the product of an intellectual who recognises the valuable link between a scholar's profession, knowledge production at the university, which includes theorising, and its practical application over a cross-section of society. The ultimate purpose is to improve the conditions of citizens without destroying the ecological balance that sustains life. The purpose of the university is to guarantee that whatever is researched and taught within the confines of academes "ivory towers" connects with the larger society so that peoples lives will improve.

Connell is a sociologist who is also a Professor Emerita. Her academic training and scholarly interests lie in gender studies, masculinity, and the theory of gender order. This in itself should form the basis for genuine "soul-searching" among the Malaysian academe to discern their purpose in Malaysian society. Connell's efforts in writing this book are a manifestation of her commitment, as a genuine scholar who has ventured beyond the confines of her academic discipline, to be relevant to society and to address most aspects of a nation's challenges. Her probing analyses throughout the book focus specifically on the declining quality of universities globally, and she relates this to the wider impact this has on the progressive development of communities globally.

**2) *The governance of Malaysia's education is divided among two ministries-the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). The formal pre-university education system under the MOE is divided into Pre-School, Primary School, and Secondary School. The MoHE is responsible for universities, polytechnics, community colleges, student loans, and academic programme accreditation. For details, see <https://www.moe.gov.my/>; [https://www.mohe.gov. my/en](https://www.mohe.gov.my/en); <https://story.motherhood.com.my/blog/all-you-need-to-know-about-government-and-private-schools-in-malaysia/>; and Ong Sheau Wen and Ithediwa Samuel Chibundu. "Debating Vernacular School System in Malaysia: A Comparative Analysis of Multi-Lingual Local Newspapers," *The Journal of the South East Asia Research Centre for Communication and Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018): 87-114.***

Scholars must always be conscious of outdated pedagogy, the exploitation of young staff, the growing phenomenon of fake and recycled research, the rising cost in student fees, the outrageous salaries for top university managers (including vice-chancellors), and the dominance of corporate values on campuses (Connell 2019, 1-10; The Malaysian Insight 2024). Connell's vocation as a Sociologist, her role as a member of the academic staff of her university, and her interaction with colleagues and students have allowed her to observe the bigger picture of higher education, its corporatisation, and the commercialisation of academia globally. Connell's reflection on higher education's declining quality as a result of the feverish pursuit of financial profit over intellectual quality is relevant for Malaysia (Connell 2019, 115-139).

The original purpose of the university centuries ago was to teach the classics. It was not merely to conduct research. Research was introduced as an added purpose around the period of the Scientific Revolution (mid-16th to 17th centuries) (Grosfoguel 2013). Later, in the 19th century, coinciding with the Industrial Revolution, the role of research in the university was enhanced. The 19th century was also the peak of European colonial expansion throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Universities, the military and the corporate industrial complex, and the bureaucratic nation-state among the Western colonial powers worked in unison to operationalise extractive colonialism and economic exploitation in the colonies. Hence, colonial capitalism became the driving force leading up to the global economic boom of the early 20th century ([SH] Alatas 1977).

By this time, there were specific plans and trajectories organised throughout the teaching and research curricula at universities throughout Europe and North America. By the early 20th century, and before the start of the decolonising process worldwide, colonial powers nurtured their universities into "knowledge production" centres to support both the material and intellectual justification for the colonial cause (Grosfoguel 2013; Acharya 2019; Tucker 2018).

Subsequently, during the period of decolonisation and after the end of World War II (WWII), both research and pedagogy evolved to serve the heightened technical and industrial development of the victorious post-war capitalist nation-states of the former Allied Powers (Acharya2023). In particular, teaching in the United States, Britain, and several other Western European universities had been gradually eclipsed by research, slowly becoming less glamorous and prestigious. Instead, embedded in the higher education ethos today is the obsession with job seeking and creating "human capital". The following quote accurately suggests learning over job-seeking as the fundamental purpose of higher education:

***A successful education sees the development of the whole person. In higher education, with most undergraduate students transitioning between teenage years to adulthood, the university provides a rite of passage and journey from dependence to independence (Carroll-Mechan and Dunbar-Morriss 2022).***

From a nation-building and policy perspective, universities are meant to offer different analytical angles to crises, or suggestions on how to avoid future socio-economic or political challenges, or even offer solutions to them. Therefore, it is obvious that students and lecturers must be free to intellectually explore, which includes elements of existential "soul searching" about the purpose of life, death, and everything in between. The mind should not be shackled.

However, the search for truth enabled by intellectual curiosity is no longer the "order of the day" at universities. Political interference, chasing global university ranking positions, and heavy bureaucratic nonsense have replaced the Malaysian university's fundamental purpose. Since the mid-2000s, universities have indulged in the "publish or perish" culture, platforming an ethos which prioritises quantity over quality. These values spill over into society. We now have an oversupply of poorly-qualified, unemployable graduates. Quantity but no quality (Rahim et al. 2023).

Ideally, academics publish (articles and books) because they want to play a gatekeeping role in communicating new knowledge. Journal editors and peer reviewers decide what kind of research to disseminate in a particular discipline's network (e.g. International Relations, Nuclear Physics, Computer Science, or Economics). These editors and reviewers are themselves pedantic and robust scholars of some credible standards.

Journals, in particular, are considered important knowledge platforms in research because they communicate accredited and current conceptual and empirical knowledge. They do this much more quickly than books and book chapters. This, in turn, affects material payoffs for the published authors in the form of academic promotions, job security (tenure) and status in universities and society. Therefore, academics publish because their social and economic status depends on it.

However, ideals do not reflect the current reality. In the current prevalent "publish-or-perish culture" in academia, those who publish less will not be promoted (Rahman 2024). The fallout from this is that society may view less-published academics as failures. Their publications, however relevant and profound, will most likely not be read as well.

Over the last two decades, the impression that a majority of Malaysians have of our universities and their professors has progressively changed. Increasingly, the public is waking up to the fact that we are producing too many mediocre professors (including professor emeriti) because of the endless nonsense they publish and utter<sup>3</sup> (Leong 2024). The impression is that there is a wasteful web of meaningless work produced in the academy (Yunor 2024). For context, the number of journal articles published yearly in Physics has increased a thousandfold. from 200 articles in 1900 to 200,000 in 2010 (Sinatra et al. 2015).

The guarantee of integrity in peer review and the quality of assessing findings during the peer review process have become increasingly difficult. Scholars are human and can only handle so much material during the peer review process. Eventually, many will break down and become intellectually careless or cynical. More is not better, obviously. At some point, quality gives way to quantity. Publishing in academia has already reached this point in most universities in Malaysia and throughout most disciplines.

***3 ) A recent embarrassing revelation was made by a French historian based in Melaka, about what a Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Professor Emeritus mentioned during his presentation at a seminar. This professor made several erroneous statements about Melaka's history.***

We should therefore collectively reject the "publish-or-perish" culture. Instead, we must bring back the culture of publishing quality articles, book chapters and books. This will force young and mid-career lecturers to think and reflect seriously on their discipline, writing and analytical skills. Furthermore, both lecturers and students should be challenged to write relevant analyses that benefit society and improve every Malaysian citizen's life rather than selfishly focusing on themselves, their specific academic discipline and their own job prospects.

What about "knowledge production and assimilation?" Currently, most academics write superficial anecdotes in sentences that can reach 10 lines long. For example, the following sentence in a scholarly book won first prize in a "bad writing" competition in 1998<sup>4</sup>

***The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power (The Guardian, 1999).***

The obscure and tedious sentence above was written and published in 1997 by a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature at an American university. Her article entitled "Further Reflections on the Conversations of Our Time" was published in the scholarly journal *Diacritics*. Unfortunately, many scholarly articles and books are written in such a manner. They are in a ridiculously complicated language and intellectually inaccessible to many in the field, let alone the general readership. Such "standards" are most often set by the so-called "knowledge centres" of the developed world, which include the United States and the United Kingdom.

***4) In 1999, a 99-word sentence won first prize in the world's "worst writing competition. Each year, the academic journal *Philosophy and Literature* runs a "bad writing" contest.***

Furthermore, many academics cut and paste content from their previous publications into their current and future academic work, in the frenzy to publish more. They then dishonestly declare that a "new" article has been written by them. In reality, all they have done is merely rearrange paragraphs, produce a new title and reword an existing conclusion. They may even bring on board a co-author or two. These masters of deception have taken academic recycling or "self-plagiarism" to new heights (Horbach and Halffman 2019). While recycling household refuse can

be very beneficial to the environment, economy and society, the recycling done by our academics often has zero positive impact on the environment, communities or the ordinary Malaysian.

Unless we adopt a system that values quality over quantity, our universities will continue to publish useless fluff, pretending to be profound and duping society in the process with their ranking scores and such. Unfortunately, the global peer review process is also fraught with deficiencies (Retraction Watch 2022).

While recognising that reviewers of journal articles are only human, and that there are bound to be mistakes, shoddy work is becoming more apparent in "credible" journals. (Subbaraman, 2024). Therefore, it is time to re-evaluate our universities' preference for quantity over quality. It is better if our universities focus on the teaching and research capabilities of professors. Universities should insist that professors devote more time to teaching, mentoring and supervising their students.

Students, after all, look up to their professors. They would want to emulate professors who are intellectuals and whose works are relevant to them, to their parents, and to their friends with whom they grew up. Most crucially, their university education must positively impact their children's future. In the social sciences, for example, it is such a waste that most of the research done by Malaysia's social scientists has brought minimal benefit to the nation. Many public universities in Malaysia advertise themselves as engaging in "social research with impact". Where and what is the impact, though? (Wan and Sirat 2018). Even more challenging is the lack of primary research and critical discourses initiated by Malaysia's universities, on the impact of science, social science and humanities research on society. The government and the Higher Education Ministry must consider this neglect seriously, especially within the public higher education institutions.

Moreover, teaching and pedagogy have been in a subordinate position in the field of higher education for far too long, and this makes absolutely no sense. The current practice is that in the measure of an academic's performance, called the key performance indicators (KPIs), more points are awarded for said academic's published research, as opposed to teaching capabilities. Even so, most of the research conducted in universities today remains obscure and irrelevant to the country. This is especially so in the social and human sciences disciplines.