



*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 III:  
RANKINGS,  
INTELLECTUAL  
IMPERIALISM,  
AND ACADEMIC  
PERFORMANCE



# Addressing Intellectual Imperialism and Mediocrity in Malaysian Universities: Relevance of the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences <sup>1</sup>

To build a new Malaysia requires knowing what has gone wrong thus far. The old Malaysia is still very much with us.

Economically, Malaysia is an upper-middle-income country. We have done relatively well over the decades since Merdeka, but now remain stuck in the middle, unable to make it to high-income status. This is a reference to the middle-income trap that arises from our not being able to match economies like Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore in productivity, innovation and competitiveness (Sundaram 2023).

Clearly, revamping our education system is required to help us get out of the middle-income trap. Here, I would like to focus on the arts, humanities and social sciences in our universities. The arts, humanities and social sciences are a vital component of a university education because they help to foster creativity and allow for the critically minded to explore new domains of thought.

Subjects such as anthropology, sociology, political science, geography, history, literature, philosophy, cultural studies and others allow students to develop the capacity to think abstractly, to relate interesting theories and ideas to the real world and to be critical of commonly accepted views. Furthermore, an education that trains the critical mind serves to put a check on the spread of extremist ideas. These skills are necessary, not only for those who specialise in the arts and humanities but also for those who wish to become practitioners in the physical and natural sciences or who wish to become administrators in corporations and the public sector (Chao Jr. 2018).

But there is much that is wrong with our universities, such that they are unable to produce talented and competent graduates with the necessary intellectual skills to get us out of the middle-income trap. In fact, Malaysian universities suffer from two great problems, one is intellectual imperialism and the other is academic mediocrity.

By intellectual imperialism, I mean the state of knowledge in which our lecturers merely imbibe ideas from the Western centres of knowledge, what we may call the knowledge powers of the world—in particular the US, the UK and France—without contributing new ideas and concepts in their respective fields of research ([SH] Alatas 2000 Serizawa and Choksi 2022).

Our students are taught to simply apply theories and models developed elsewhere to Malaysian data rather than develop new theories and models based on Malaysian data. This is true of all the fields in the arts, humanities and social science.

We would be hard-pressed to identify Malaysian scholars who have made a name for themselves internationally in the sense of contributing new ideas or perspectives, although there are some exceptions. Even then, their legacies are not being inherited by the current generation ([SF] Alatas 2006).

It is quite remarkable that even in the field of Malay studies, Malaysians have generally not made their mark. The field of Malay studies is cultivated by scholars in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Australia, the US, France, the Netherlands and the UK. There are even scholars of Malay studies in Russia and South Korea. But it is interesting to note that the vast majority of theoretical perspectives and discoveries in the field have not come out of Malaysia or the Malay world.

For example, the concept of *aliran*, or cultural streams, was developed by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz and has become a central idea in Indonesian anthropology (Geertz 1965; Wertheim 1968). Geertz's work on Indonesia is well known among scholars who do not specialise in Indonesian or Malay studies. There are several other examples of American, British and Dutch scholars who have made innovations in the study of the Malay world in different fields in the arts, humanities and social sciences. The same cannot be said of local scholars working in Malaysia or the Malay world. It is difficult to speak of an intellectual "Legacy" in Malaysia.

I refer to this state as one of intellectual imperialism because there is a domination of the social sciences and humanities in Malaysia by ideas and a research agenda from Western centres of knowledge. It has to be admitted that our university administrators and scholars enthusiastically participate in this regime of domination ([SF] Alatas 2006). But our problems do not stop there.

Apart from the problem of intellectual imperialism, our universities also suffer from low academic standards. In general, our scholars are not able to publish in the more reputable international scientific journals or with the well-known university presses. Here, I refer specifically to the social sciences and humanities. Needless to say, even among these disciplines there are exceptions to what I am claiming. Our quantitative output is also poor. According to data provided by the Social Sciences Citation Index <sup>2</sup> for the years 2000 to 2018, Malaysian scholars in the arts and humanities published only 11,401 articles, lagging behind Singapore (23,193), South Korea (44,633) and Taiwan (45,875) (Davarpanah 2009).

At the same time, some Malaysian universities have become obsessed with increasing their output to the point of engaging in unethical practices. One such practice is the co-authoring of articles with their graduate student supervisors. In some of our local universities, it has become mandatory for graduate students to put the name of their supervisors as co-authors of articles they publish. If a lecturer has five students and each student produces two articles in a two-year span, the lecturer would have 10 articles attributed to him, even if he had not done the required work.

There are two problems with this shameful practice. First of all, students should not be forced to include their supervisors as co-authors of their publications. They should be free to invite their supervisors to be co-authors of their work. Secondly, if there is a mutual agreement to enter into co-authorship, the research and writing of the articles must be divided between students and their supervisors.

What has happened in many cases in our universities is that supervisors' names are included as co-authors of articles written by their students without the supervisors actually having done any of the research and writing. This is an extremely dishonest practice, as there is a false attribution of authorship of the articles published. The practice encourages lecturers to ride on the backs of their students rather than exert their own intellectual abilities. The practice is also a reflection of the lack of integrity, at least for those lecturers who willingly and enthusiastically engage in this practice. I personally know of many lecturers, however, who are against the practice of coercive co-authorship.

There are indeed many other problems that beset Malaysian universities. These problems have set in over the course of several decades. Many Malaysians today hope the new government will make a concerted effort to tackle these problems, so our universities can join the ranks of the world's prestigious institutions of higher education.