



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

‘Kangkung’ Professors and PhD’s¹

On 27 November 2023, Higher Education Minister Khaled Nordin told the Dewan Rakyat that more stringent conditions would be imposed on candidates who want to pursue a doctorate (Nik Mat and Mustaffa 2023).

The minister was responding to Jelutong MP RSN Rayer ² who asked the Higher Education Ministry to check and monitor universities to ensure only those qualified could obtain PhDs (Abdul Patah 2023).

The issue was brought up following a controversy sparked by Kepala Batas MP Siti Mastura Mohamad (sic), who has Lee Kuan Yew's family name wrong and alleged that DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang is a cousin of Singapore's founding prime minister and also related to former Communist Party of Malaya leader Chin Peng.³ Siti Mastura holds a PhD conferred by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).⁴

The issue is not new and has been discussed by concerned academics and reported in the media repeatedly, with no progress forthcoming. No politician thus far has the political will to effect change. As such, discussions are now beginning to sound like a broken record.

Perhaps change is not forthcoming because those in authority do not know what to change. Is it enough just to impose more stringent conditions on candidates, as the minister suggested, or perhaps checking and monitoring how a PhD is being conferred on the candidate by the universities, as suggested by Rayer, is more important?

As a retired academic in the field of social science, I am certainly not convinced by the minister's answer that imposing more stringent conditions on candidates will ensure better quality PhDs.

For a start, those in authority should understand what is meant by quality PhDs and quality research in social science disciplines. Perhaps after understanding the tedious process of producing a good quality PhD thesis, the minister will agree with Rayer to check and monitor how PhDs are being produced in the universities.

A PhD programme is an educational journey for those who would like to learn how to carry out proper scientific research that will add "valid" and "reliable" knowledge to society.

A good PhD will also provide representative data on the subject matter. As such, there are proper procedures to be followed. How these procedures are carried out will determine how credible and valid the PhD is.

A PhD student will definitely need the guidance of his or her supervisor; normally, a senior lecturer or professor. A credible supervisor will be able to guide and impart good step-by-step research knowledge to his or her students.

In general, a social science PhD thesis will have the following chapters with the word limit of 80,000 to 100,000:

Chapter 1: Introduction.

Introduction.

Problem statement.

Objectives of research.

Definition of concepts.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses, or Conceptual framework.

Significance of research.

Limitations of research.

Chapter 2: Literature review.

Chapter 3: Methodology.

Chapter 4: Analysis of data and findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion.

Chapter 6: Conclusion.

Chapter 7: Bibliography.

Chapter 8: Appendices.

1) This chapter is based on a Gerak article, which was originally published as a 'Letter to the Editor' on 30 November 2023. It was written by one of Gerak's life members, retired Professor of Criminology and Sociology Teh Yik Koon, in her personal capacity as an experienced academic. Teh had encountered several instances of mediocrity and academic dishonesty during her long tenure of service at one of Malaysia's public universities. See <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/688423>; See also S.Morhan, <https://thesun.my/malaysia-news/credible-or-kangkong-BJ11814522>, a follow-up news item which continued Teh's critique of Malaysia's professors and academe.

2) The full name of the Member of Parliament for Jelutong is Sanisvara Nethaji Rayer A/L Rajaji. See Parlimen of Malaysia's website for details of this elected official. <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/profile-ahli.html?uweb=dr&id=4089>.

3) The controversy emerged after damning accusations were made by PAS politician Siti Mastura against Democratic Action Party (DAP) lawmakers. These accusations were not only ludicrous but were also not backed by any empirical evidence or historical fact. See <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/11/07/debutant-pas-lawmaker-tastes-wrath-of-dap-female-mps-for-guan-eng-chin-peng-blood-link-claim/100781>.

4) Siti Masturah Muhammad's Wikipedia entry, under "Education", indicates that she won the 'Best Thesis Award' for her PhD. See https://ms.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siti_Mastura_Muhammad#Pendidikan.

5 The thesis-writing journey is different for each individual, depending also on personality and attitude of the candidate, as well as the type of campus culture

Each chapter of the thesis will be carefully written as every word that is penned has a meaning. For example, a student writes that there is a significant difference between males and females in how often they read. When the word "significant" is used in the thesis, an examiner would expect the hypothesis or assumption to be tested rigorously using the correct statistical test and not simply inferred because there are 20 per cent more females than males who read every day.

A good supervisor will read every word that the student has written and ensure that the thesis has reached the quality that is expected during the "viva voce", which is the oral examination that a PHD student undergoes in the process of gaining their PhD qualification.

The literature review is where the student will show that he or she is well read and informed on the subject matter before embarking on his or her research. Besides reading the literature review, the examiner will also check every reference in the thesis to ensure that they are from credible sources and not false statements.

The methodology of the research will be critically examined for two important factors: "validity" and "reliability." If the research method employed is not correct, then the thesis will have failed the quality test.

Analysis of the data is another crucial aspect. If the wrong method of analysis or the wrong statistical test is being used, the thesis could be rejected. The findings of the analysis will provide the answers for discussion and conclusion to meet the objectives of the research.

The thesis will also be carefully examined for plagiarism.

It is tedious and hard work supervising, as well as examining, PhD students. ⁶ Normally, a supervisor will only be able to supervise two or the most three students at a time. However, in our local universities, it is not uncommon to find supervisors having more than 10 students and proudly showing off to other colleagues. The more students they supervise, the more marks they will get for their yearly performance appraisal, and the faster they will get their promotion.

With such a large number of students, can one believe that such supervisors could do a good job and that the students could learn substantially from them? Moreover, with the complaints that there is a substantial number of "kangkung" ⁷ (low quality) professors in our academia, will they produce good PhDs or "kangkung" PhDs?

As for Siti Mastura, how could she get Kuan Yew's family name wrong? ⁸ Secondly, if you are a PhD holder, you should have been trained to always refer to credible sources, and if you are making an allegation, you should double-check your facts. This is one of the major rules in research. How could she have gone so wrong?

If the minister of higher education is serious about upholding the quality of PhDs, I would suggest that besides having more stringent conditions, he should take up Rayer's advice to check all the theses produced within the last 10 years to determine the extent of the rot in the academia before taking steps to fix it and to monitor the quality in the universities to ensure that only those who are qualified could obtain PhDs.

However, be warned that it will not be easy, because there will be resistance from the "kangkung" professors and lecturers.

6) There are several anecdotes which refer to teaching and supervising PhD students For a comical yet realistic portrayal, see Sian Townson's "I was a Terrible PhD Supervisor Don't Make the Same Mistakes I Did", <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/mar/24/i-was-a-terrible-phd-supervisor-dont-make-the-same-mistakes-i-did>.

7) The term "profesor kangkung" was coined by the late Malaysian sociologist, Syed Hussein Alatas. Alatas was describing professors who are "devoid of knowledge to the core" and whose claim to be scholars and thinkers are undeserved. It is often erroneously understood to mean professors who "lack sophistication" (low-class), and are "simple-minded", cheap and of low quality (since kangkung is a staple of the poor). This is definitely not what Alatas meant by a "kangkung professor". Kangkung is certainly not a vegetable of "low quality", as it has high nutritional value. Rather,

he meant to subtly link two main defining characteristics shared by both. First, the intellects of these non-performing professors are similar to the vegetables long, hollow, and malleable stems. Second, these types of professors and their "vegetable counterparts" (i.e. kangkung)

can be found in abundance, "growing wild and available everywhere" in Malaysia. So, both are hollow and easily available.

8) Lee Kuan Yew was referred to as "Lim" Kuan Yew by Siti Mastura. See a short clip of her speech here: https://youtu.be/etAPnTF7y3c?si=zi8Z_qkgnZEjZm6h.