IVORY TOWER REFORM

A Vision for Higher Education in Malaysia

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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

Radicalising the Debate on Global University Rankings [1]

It is time to radicalise the debate on global university rankings (GURs). We must problematise the practice within mainstream challenges in our universities. This includes academic dishonesty, mediocrity in teaching and supervision, the reverence for quantity over quality, a high volume of irrelevant research output, and unemployable graduates.

It is time for the government and academics to both create more awareness and embark on concrete changes. The GURs game is extremely unethical (United Nations University 2023).

It is time to do something about it. Merely talking about why it is a bad thing is not enough. In this piece, I discuss GURs from a decolonial perspective, [2] which might help to radicalise our thinking and prompt bold changes.

A decolonial perspective of GURs is a conceptual addition to the existing critiques of GURs. Criticism of GURs has been around for almost two decades, ever since the ranking game began in 2003 (Shahjahan et al. 2017). Yet the momentum to rank has become even more giddy despite the growing body of criticism against it.

To generate more anger and bold resolve to reduce GURs exploitative influence, this re-conceptualisation is necessary. We hope that the Madani government will embark on systematic strategies to arrest this hideous worship of GURs as soon as possible. A developing nation like Malaysia does not have the luxury of time. Endlessly calling out GURs for their lack of logic or ethics is useful, but not enough. We need alternatives, or at least, we must ask ourselves if there are alternatives.

GURs are a colonial, hegemonic, and intrusive project. Ranking is a predominantly Euro-American-centric process. It is hegemonic because it dominates financially. Any university anywhere in the world that wants to participate in this annual ranking exercise must pay a lot of money. It is expensive to be ranked (Yat 2011). The ranking process is an asymmetrical (uneven) system of power competition. It creates "centres" (controlled by ranking companies mainly in the West) and "peripheries" (the rest of the world).

Rankers are hegemonic because they are geographically centred in "Big power" territories and exert influence over vast expanses of other territories. The most influential rankers are based in the US, UK, and China. Apart from China, most of the familiar ranking companies emerged in countries which were former colonial powers (Bailey 2015).

1) This chapter is based on an article by Sharifah Munirah Alatas, which first appeared in Free Malaysia Today on 14 December 2023: https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2023/12/14/radicalising-the-debate-on-global-university-rankings/.

2) Through his work on equity and knowledge production, Riyad Shahjahan asks questions that push the boundaries of current knowledge. He utilises theories that challenge dominant ways of thinking. A recent Call for Papers (CFP) from the journal Comparative Education Review solicited work that explores the rethinking of social science from postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. This CFP was aimed at a deeper inquiry into how the Global North dominates the comparative education field. This domination hinders our ability to imagine alternatives outside of mainstream modernity discourses.

These approaches are now converging onto other platforms, including the hotly debated topic of global university rankings (GURs). This phenomenon is widely critiqued, but not through postcolonial or decolonial lenses. See the work of Shahjahan and his colleagues here: "Imagining the Unimaginable: Decolonising Global University Rankings from Southern/Decolonial Perspectives", in the CHAE Report (2016).

3) Among the dozens of global rankings, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, the QS World University Rankings and the Shanghai Rankings have for many years been seen as the most authoritative. The university league tables pioneer, US News, has also recently branched out into ranking universities globally, launching its Best Global Universities Ranking in 2014.

Furthermore, the dynamics of relations in a hegemonic relationship are as follows: the hegemon convinces smaller entities that the hegemon's interests should be the interests of all. This characterises the GURs.

The ranking project is extractive, financially. Universities, including those in poor countries, which happen to be most of the nations in the global south, are told that if they pay, they have a chance to increase their academic reputation (Bailey, 2015). Year after year, many universities spiral down the ranking ladder, yet still pay exorbitant sums annually, hoping to regain their reputation.

The ranking process is biased (United Nations University, 2023). It normalises ranking criteria, creating universal standards. The "universalisation of excellence" is based on Western criteria. This means that the data collected favours the English language. The heavy emphasis on Anglophone journals and bibliometric systems creates an unfair advantage to English-speaking authors and universities in English-speaking countries.

There is also a strong science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) bias. The privileging of STEM subjects diminishes the importance of the humanities and social sciences. This has led to a recent number of silly comments by politicians for universities to stop teaching "useless subjects" like philosophy and art (Free Malaysia Today 2021; Chua 2022). The fault lies in part with the GURs. They have characterised non-STEM subjects as parochial, inefficient and stifling international reputation. Gullible politicians are so easily influenced by GURs.

it is clear that GURs operate to marginalise diversity. To as have a preference to "subdue" diversity, so it is easier to dominate and control the business of profit-making. This is so typical of colonialism in the past, or any neo-colonial project today.

The practice of homogenising regulations across cultures and geographies makes it easy to control and exploit. In the process, regional, national, political, cultural, and economic differences among countries are minimised, even "cancelled".

Everyone under the GURs umbrella has hardly any choice but to follow standard operating procedures set by a handful of for-profit organisations. This sidetracks many countries from focusing on nation-specific problems, which may entail culture-specific SOPs.

Who or what are these ranking organisations? In the literature, there are four companies which are most referred to. These are Quacquarelli Symonds, US News and World Report, Times Higher Education, and the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. These are the most influential GURs. All are for-profit private corporations. They are the most powerful leaders of the "capitalist knowledge economy".

These companies align themselves with major publishing businesses such as Elsevier, Clarivate, Wiley, and Springer. Both conglomerates extract data, time and other resources from thousands of universities worldwide.

The ranking customers or "clients" are our universities, ministries and various associated government agencies. Clients dutifully provide data to these greedy capitalists annually. This, in turn, creates a web of demand for analytics and data consultancy products and services.

The entire process is exploitative, time-consuming, and stressful. Universities have been conditioned to participate in this expensive, hierarchical "league of competitions". They make rankers very rich.

In poorer nations with limited budgets, data collection is extremely financially exploitative. Competitors are tricked into thinking they can win, but in the process, national budgets are strained, the quality of higher education dwindles, and national resources are drained.

GURs are very intrusive. In a developing country like Malaysia, the system influences social and political policy. They shape academic governance. For example, ministries feel pressured to standardise curricula and to push academics to "publish or perish".

On top of this pressure, the GURs' business model distracts universities from their core academic focus. They are distracted from teaching and engaging in problem-specific research agendas. Lecturers devote less mental energy to quality supervision. They are more concerned with how many supervisees they can accumulate and graduating them on time, if not faster.