



*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

## **Global University Rankings, a Form of Symbolic Violence <sup>1</sup>**

In this analysis, I will take the kid gloves off. Universities and education systems around the world have been dealt a slow death ever since the university and its services ceased to be the exclusive responsibility of the state (Lucas 2021).

The market economy now runs the show. The global crisis in higher education (HE) has been brewing since the mid-1990s, due to the slow abdication of state responsibility. What was traditionally considered a public good is no longer the case (Hazelkorn and Gibson 2017).

Global university rankings (GURs) can be described as a highly incestuous undertaking. Since the emergence of the first rankers in 2003, GUR companies and a wide range of other businesses have developed excessively close relationships with each other. They are resistant to outside influence. It is also highly unusual that, over the decades, there has hardly been any criticism of the GURs lack of transparency, despite the huge volume of profit raked in annually (Marope et al. 2011).

In businesses that generate revenue through the sale of advertising, data and analytics, one would expect tight monitoring and detailed public scrutiny. Rather, GURs have led to more non-transparent business undertakings, such as consulting and access to events and workshops about university rankings.

***1) This chapter is based on an article written by Sharifah Munirah Alatas. It first appeared in Free Malaysia Today on 16 December 2023. It is reproduced here as it was written, in the first person. Access it here:***

***<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2023/12/16/global-university-rankings-a-form-of-symbolic-violence>***

This incestuous system is built on a mutual dependency between universities, which rely on favorable rankings, and rankers who sell services under the pretext of "helping" universities improve their rankings.

Rankers collect research and publication data. GURs use them to calculate the number of citations of an article in ranked journals. They also calculate the number of articles in ranked journals produced by a university. The number of authors who are affiliated with a university is also calculated.

At the same time, rankers regularly publish hierarchical lists of publishers and journals, classified between "Q1" and "Q4". Throughout my academic career, I have listened endlessly to department colleagues boasting about their Q1 publications.

Universities also post regular congratulatory messages on their institution websites to "highly accomplished" Q1 to Q4-published scholars. Yet, many of these academics remain kangkong academics. Their Q1-level research has hardly impacted people's lives.

Prominent publishing companies such as Elsevier, Clarivate, Wiley, and Springer work closely with databases which rank (index) journals. Examples of journal rankers are Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ProQuest, and International Scientific Indexing ( ISI ) Scopus is owned by Elsevier and was launched in 2004. WoS and ISI are owned by Clarivate.

Reviewing articles is part of an academic's job. It is very time-consuming and intellectually demanding. Yet, we are expected to do it for free.

GURs are a form of symbolic violence. They dominate universities by subtly coaxing the latter to be "actively complicit." They do this through a manipulation of human emotions-shame, humiliation, timidity, and guilt. This is a form of violent assault on human nature.

Furthermore, symbolic violence entails the idealisation of the oppressor, self-denigration and blind acceptance. Therefore, in this "ranking business", universities around the world "actively comply" and willingly accept the domination of four ranking companies (Nassiri-Ansari and McCoy 2023).

GURs play on educators' emotions. To entice universities to participate, they psychologically seduce them (and other HE stakeholders) through the media. GURs manipulate state decision makers by dangling the "prestige and affluence" carrot. The claim is that if one participates in GURs, it is highly probable that one will gain more prestige and international reputation and grow richer in the process (McKenna 2024).

Since 2003, we have been drowning in critical narratives against rankings. The problem is not that we have no evidence or are ignorant of the dangers of GURs. The problem is that our criticism is overshadowed by the logic of efficiency and economic value, pushed by GURs.

Furthermore, publishing such criticism of rankings is the greatest irony of all. It has now become a global business, feeding directly into the very unethical practice we criticise. Critiques of rankings are published widely in indexed journals, rankers' newsletters and book series published by ranking companies (United Nations University 2023).

The critical debates debunking GURs are shrewdly platformed by rankers themselves, to give the impression that they encourage freedom of expression and genuine scholarly discourse.

They want us to think they are sincere about transforming the system. Meanwhile, GURs continue to extract our finances because universities feel they have no choice but to continue participating in the system.

Malaysian universities must embark on alternatives. We must deploy a dual strategy. First, while criticising GURs, we must have the political will to reform our universities and overhaul the HE system. Criticising the exploitation of GURs while we continue to oppress and exploit at home is equally unjust.

Second, begin strategising and clearly identifying alternatives. Start a national debate, organise a series of roundtable discussions, and keep the media narrative transparent, lively and forward-looking. Invite all who are knowledgeable about ranking, both local and foreign to the drawing table. Start organising "strategic plans", mapping university and HE transformation in various stages.

Again, unless we reform our universities, we have no foot to stand on. As it is, the system suppresses academic freedom and critical thinking. It constricts student activism. It discourages open discourse on campus on diverse topics. Tight political interference has resulted in the de-platforming of many public intellectuals over the decades.

Our system condones political appointments to top university managements. It is unserious about eradicating academic dishonesty. Our system props up mediocre academics. Many of these academics fail to articulate that universities in the developed north are slowly losing their identities as bastions of freedom of speech or rigorous intellectual activity.

For example, while the genocide in Gaza goes on, many universities in the US and Europe are silencing their scholars. Scholars are also self-censoring for fear of reprisal if they speak up in support of the Palestinians. Many have been fired for speaking or writing against Israel and US foreign policy.

This reveals the hypocrisy of the "Western education ethos." The GURs are equally reprehensible. It is time for Malaysian universities to be introspective and make a dignified exit.