

Tuesday, November 09, 2021

[HOME](#)[CAMPUS](#)[I IUMENULIS](#)[LIFESTYLE](#)[OPINION](#)[MULTIMEDIA](#)[LOCAL](#)[CONTACT](#)[ABOUT US](#)[GUEST SUBMISSION](#)[ACADEMICIANS](#) [LIFESTYLE](#) [OPINION](#)

Academic Citizenship Post-Pandemic: A Call for Praxis, Fairness and Quality

[Guest Submission](#) [October 29, 2021](#) [No Comments](#)

By Nor Diana Mohd Mahudin

Before 2000, not only do we hear little of perverse incentives in the news, we know almost nothing about hyper-competition and academic capitalism. Now, these phenomena have seen widespread uptake both in academia and universities, including those in this country.

Evidence has been stacking up on questionable or unethical practices, such as plagiarism and self-plagiarism, fabrication of research data, salami-slicing, publication in predatory journals, guest authorships, and falsification of expertise or credentials as a publishing strategy and authorship abuse. Another more insidious practice includes “gaming the system” by manipulating the peer review process or forming citation cartels to boost ratings.

The days of universities promoting altruism and good academic citizenry are fading away. Like a second skin, these phenomena have imprinted themselves upon the academics’ psyche. After 19 years of service, I do wonder about the strange climate that the universities and academia as a whole have ended up pursuing.

Funding, Ranking, Standing

In 2017, Professor Marc A. Edwards and Dr. Siddhartha Roy published a paper warning of the tendency of academic research and universities to create perverse incentives and promote hyper-competition for funding, ranking, and high standing. Since then, more and more experts have written journal articles, policy papers, books, and op-eds on the need to address issues ranging from university rankings, intellectual culture, and academic freedom to academic citizenship, collegiality, and professional values. Concerns raised by these experts are now a reality – the “*What ifs*” have turned into “*Now what*”.

So, now what? The great critical dilemma, to which acclaimed luminaries such as Prof. Emeritus Tan Sri Dato’ Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, Prof. Datuk Dr. Asma Ismail, and the academic body, Pergerakan Tenaga Akademik Malaysia (GERAK), have rightly directed our attention, has had its long roots in the pressure on universities to generate income and increase their status in global rankings. This, in turn, resulted in brutal competitions and demands for research grants, publications, outputs, industrial commercialisation, and public engagements.

Often, all these have to be achieved with dwindling resources and little administrative support. Academics are told what to teach,

how to teach, what research to conduct, where to publish, and which route to commercialise, with increasingly high key performance indicators – sometimes with promotion, tenure, and compensation penalties attached.

Unrecognised But Catastrophic

There is a common perception that teaching and research are the sole activities carried out by academics. The reality is that there are a multitude of service duties and responsibilities that academics have, both within and outside the university, beyond the core tasks of teaching and research. Hours are spent conducting consultations for students and parents; supervising postgraduates and researchers; mentoring colleagues; serving on university committees; undertaking leadership, management, and administrative roles within the university; working as an external examiner; and serving on public inquiry committees.

Yet, there are still much more to do – peer-reviewing for journals or funding bodies; organising conferences, webinars, or other scholarly activities; participating in professional and academic societies; editing journals and books; bidding for grants and other potential sources of funding; developing links with industries; and ultimately, engaging with local communities and the general public.

Even before the pandemic, this pace was already daunting for many overstretched academics. COVID-19 further added to this where hurried responses to the urgent need for remote teaching and learning had to be done. Such pressure led to declining student mental health over the years. Faculty members do not sleep well too. Academics in the USA, UK, and Australia have reported that COVID-19 triggered emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and fear.

Supporting students in mental and emotional distress has also taken a toll on their own mental health. At length, the struggle to meet stringent performance specifications and expectations can irreversibly harm one's health. Other pitfalls also include work withdrawal behaviours, fatigue, and burnout – certainly not a

pattern to be followed by new academics eager to deliver outstanding records for the better of science and society.

Praxis Not Vanity; Quality Not Quantity

In these moments, when doing the right thing hinges on explicit ethical stance, greater coordination and rigour matters. Despite the many systemic and deep-seated problems surrounding universities, I take heart from the new expectations about how academics are appraised now, at least in IIUM. Changes to the Ihsan Indicators (IIs) that take into account fair output assessments, equality, diversity, and sustainability or other society-focused agendas can measure what matters the most. Ultimately, if universities change the policies and performance metrics, everything will be in place again. The culture of collegiality will be restored, and academic citizenship will be acknowledged for advancements.

More crucially, we need to return to depth and quality instead of quantity. This means developing skills for quality teaching, investing enough time to investigate and understand a phenomenon in research, and focusing on substantive, knowledge-generating and thought-provoking publications. Equally important is to avoid placing too much credence on vanity projects and metrics that only promote selfishness and individualism. All these would require trusting academics to exercise their intellectual faculties and professional autonomy.

Concentrating on praxis and quality could better align the university's and academics' expectations for fair and responsible performance metrics. It might also help relevant authorities to wise up to the existing rankings' limitations and to exercise due caution when using them for decision-making. Either would be progress and solutions for all.***

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nor Diana Mohd Mahudin is an academic in Department of Psychology, KIRKHS. She is an Ergonomics Trained Person (ETP), specialising in transport crowding, demand management, and commuting stress.)

Author Recent Posts



Guest Submission
