

## Book Review

*Pengajian Tinggi: Pendemokrasian, Pengkomersialan dan Pengantarabangsaan*, by Qasim Ahmad. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2022, 607 pp. ISBN 978-967-488-163-4.

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At a glance, *Pengajian Tinggi: Pendemokrasian, Pengkomersialan dan Pengantarabangsaan* seems like a formidable book to take on. It is 12 chapters and is 484 pages long. Its reference section is an additional 110 pages, with thousands of materials cited throughout the book. Weaved into the writing are stories and experiences of 34 interview respondents who are household names within the Malaysian higher education community, and once held posts at the top echelons of the country's higher education system.

However, as one goes through the book, it becomes less formidable to read. At last, there is a written record of current events and happenings in the Malaysian higher education system. For a country with a system life cycle of five years (read: the Malaysia general election), our record-keeping habits leave much to be desired. As leaders and allegiances change, institutional memory gets swept under the carpet or wiped off altogether, leaving little (if any) traces of what is being thought of and carried out throughout the years.

Through *Pengajian Tinggi: Pendemokrasian, Pengkomersialan dan Pengantarabangsaan*, the author attempts to review three themes shaping the development of the Malaysian higher education system. They are democratisation (*pendemokrasian*), commercialisation (*pengkomersialan*) and internationalisation (*pengantarabangsaan*). Across the three themes, the theme of internationalisation commands the heaviest discussion, covering a total of four chapters (Chapters 8 to 11). The next theme in focus is commercialisation, with two chapters (Chapters 5 to 6) allocated for the subject. The theme of democratisation is only

discussed in Chapter 4. There were two additional themes that the author includes in the book: first, the role of higher education and university (Chapters 2 to 3), and secondly, institutional autonomy and accountability (Chapter 7). The last chapter of the book (Chapter 12) is not a conclusion to the discussion on hand; rather, it presents perspectives that were otherwise not discussed in the preceding chapters, such as ethics and moral values, and an invitation to reimagine Malaysian higher education, particularly in a post-pandemic world.

One can read the chapters in sequence, or dive directly into individual subjects of interest. There is a constant flow to the way each theme is presented. It starts with a presentation of the operational definition for each theme, followed by an extended review of case studies from the US, the UK, and Australia, before a description on the Malaysian context. Presented in Malay language, the book makes for good reference material for domestic scholars studying the system, particularly for postgraduate students and early career researchers. An English version of the book would be of interest to the international market, provided the content is condensed to feature discussions specific to the Malaysian higher education context.

On the democratisation of higher education (Chapter 4), the author maintains his stand to use the term “democratisation”, rather than a more popularised term “massification”. He argues that the former describes the idea that everyone should be given an opportunity to enter higher education, while the latter denotes institutional response towards the idea, by (1) opening various admission pathways, (2) accepting a diversified student population on campus, and (3) aiding populations who may encounter challenges to enter higher education. Using medicine and dentistry as case studies, the author highlights the challenges that occur when a paper qualification alone is not sufficient in securing post-study employment, in particular skills development for graduates and moratorium for new programmes and higher education institutions.

On the commercialisation of higher education (Chapters 5 to 6), the author focuses his discussion on the increasingly complex public/private distinction in Malaysian higher education. Examples cited throughout these chapters include the corporatisation of public universities, academic managerialism, as well as various income-generation initiatives carried out by public universities to cover insufficient public funds received. The author also highlights two cases unique to the Malaysia context: first, the privatisation of public higher education, where public institutions offer higher education opportunities to students for increased premium, and secondly, the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional, or PTPTN), a study loan for Malaysian students to pursue their studies at public or private higher education institutions in the country.

On the internationalisation of higher education (Chapters 8 to 11), the author provides an extensive review on the business of international student recruitment and transnational education across the global higher education landscape, and Malaysia's participation in both endeavours. As Malaysian institutions intensify their educational export initiatives, they face challenges in managing their international students, in terms of their English language proficiency, socialisation with domestic students, and academic misconduct in various forms. The author emphasises that internationalisation increases competition, rather than collaboration among countries and institutions, and cautioned academics to uphold the spirit of excellence and integrity as core values in higher education.

Taken together, the book covers pertinent conversations on contemporary issues affecting the Malaysian higher education system, at least for the past twenty years. There were brief descriptions on the COVID-19 pandemic as the new wave of change, most likely added post-production to keep the manuscript up to date for its readership. However, the commentary is limited to the impact on teaching and learning, international student enrolment, and the fate of private higher education institutions in weathering the ongoing storm. Putting the COVID-19 commentary aside, the author argues that the three themes are instrumental in shaping the system to its current form. The impact is systemic, affecting higher education at all levels; that said, must the system respond to every wave of change that comes its way, and to what end?

A word of caution though: thread carefully. One must see the forest first, before zooming in on the individual trees within the forest. A good read to complement discussions featured in the book is Chang Da-Wan and Morshidi Sirat's *The Evolution of Corporatisation of Public Universities in Malaysia* (2018). This article features a figure on key events in chronological order that directly and indirectly shape Malaysia's higher education, which enables readers to make sense of the system in greater clarity. The commentaries featured in the book have left out key incidences that also indirectly shape the system. One example is the merging/unmerging episode between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education in 2013, 2015, and 2018 to 2020, which is worthy of mention but not highlighted in the book. This episode in history reflects the highly political nature affecting the system, with far-reaching implications on strategy and initiatives across all levels of implementation.

*Pengajian Tinggi: Pendemokrasian, Pengkomersialan dan Pengantarabangsaan* is a required read for policymakers at the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), as it gears itself to prepare for a continuation/replacement of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education), which is about to reach the last implementation wave

in 2025. An effective and cost-saving way to prepare for the review process is to extract key issues from the book and run points with the existing 10 shifts featured in the blueprint. The other option is to use this book to develop plausible scenarios for the Malaysian higher education system beyond 2025. The business-as-usual model is predicated on the assumption that we continue to ride on democratisation, commercialisation, and internationalisation as key waves of change will subject the system to more stress and uncertainty. Graduate employability, global prominence, and widening access to higher education are tangible goals to pursue, but they are not the only goals that define the relevance of higher education to Malaysia's development. Finally, is the State ready to further loosen its grip over the higher education institutions? On the flip side, are the institutions ready to embrace a future with less MOHE intervention in their decision-making processes?

## **References**

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