

Set them free

by

Dasapta Erwin Irawan ([ORCID](#) | [Scholia](#))¹ and Juneman Abraham ([ORCID](#) | [Scholia](#))²

¹ Lecturer and active researcher in hydrogeology working at [Institut Teknologi Bandung](#)
Co-founder of The [RINarxiv](#)

² Lecturer and active researcher in psychology working at [Bina Nusantara University](#)

... If you love someone, set them free - Sting

Inspired by “Set them free”, a song by Sting, had I written this.

Merely an object

When you love your country, you do things to keep them free from the new age of imperialism. Imperialism has come to the point that anyone who wishes to be promoted is requested to speak and write in a language which they don't natively speak. All of this is in the name of international recognition. Various offers -- be they-- calls for a paper or a book, invitations to webinars on how to publish in high impact journals, bundled subscription for access to databases and paywalled journals, to editing services -- are flowing to the email inbox of Indonesian academics practically daily. The senders are publishers, paid database indexing service, and also companies providing editing services. Not only individuals are targeted, but also institutions. Academics are now merely the object not the subject in the development of knowledge.

Academic imperialism: a new age of imperialism

Imperialism is the state policy, practice, or advocacy of extending power and dominion, especially by direct territorial acquisition or by gaining political and economic control of other territories and peoples. - [Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

Historically, we learn so many empires have ruled the world. We know [The Roman Empire](#) (27 BC - 476 AD), [The Mongol Empire](#) (1206 until 1368), and [The British Empire](#) (late 16th to early 18th centuries). All of them as also the others were known for their thirst to exploit resources and left less to nothing for the natives.

Indonesia itself has been imperialized for 3,5 half centuries and now the situation has not completely changed, especially in the academic ecosystem. This academic imperialism comes in a different form, using brains instead of ambush tactics, using emails instead of guns, and smiles instead of scowls.

Imperialism itself has successfully shaped the perception of academics connecting quality with product branding, especially journal branding. In Indonesia we have a term for Scopus or WoS indexed-journals (the journals that are listed in Scopus or Web of Science database) and Q1 journals (the journals that are listed in the first quartile of Scimago Journal Rank) as prestigious journals. Hence the researchers that could publish their work in them would be automatically classified as prestigious researchers. More incentives, advantages, and opportunities then would be systematically poured to these researchers because the criteria of elite journals has been explicitly written in our national regulations regulating the key performance indicators and rank promotion criteria.

While they may argue that the criteria of journal selection are generic (eg: good journals offer robust peer reviews), those criteria are wrapped in a way that would entice the academics for global acceptance.

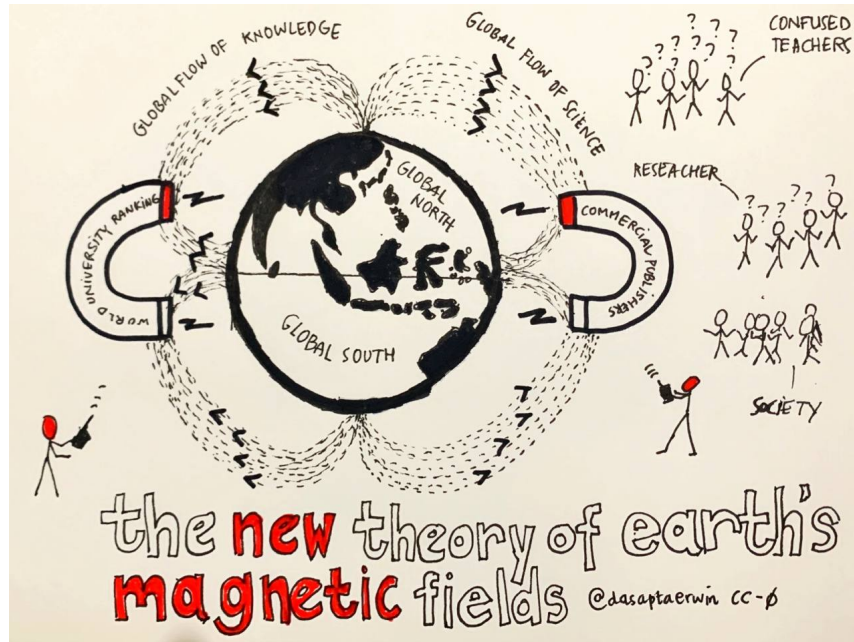
Following those regulations, universities throughout Indonesia, regardless of their current state of infrastructure, their preliminary vision and mission, would immediately use the prestige-based indicators to create a roadmap of development plan, budgeting, and the allocation of human resources. The same situation can also be seen in how the Indonesian government allocates budget for education, especially the funding that goes to [The Ministry of Research and Technology \(Kementerian Ristek/BRIN\)](#) and [The Ministry of Education and Culture \(Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan\)](#). Such situations are the exact copy with how we define “imperialism”.



The new form of imperialism CC0 from bit.ly/osdrawings

World Class University Rankings and the shifted poles

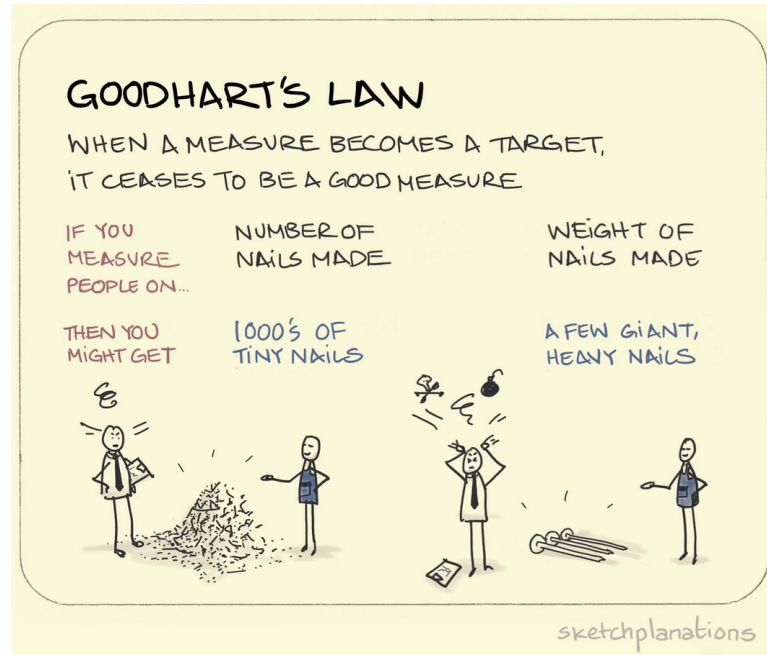
The above-mentioned situations are very much connected to the rankings launched by three institutions: Quacquarelli Symonds ([QS](#)), Times Higher Education ([THE](#)), Academic Ranking of World Universities ([ARWU](#)). All three rankings are using metric/prestige-based indicators in their equations. Therefore the conversations of Indonesian academics would revolve around how we can get to the top of the chart, instead of how we stay relevant with the problems in society. The conversation in various meetings, most of which have been moved online, are not far from comparing notes on how to increase their world-class rankings and what new agreements they made with commercial publishers. Such conversation has no longer discussed the relevancy to solve the problem of the nations, but rather, on how to be on top of the chart as fast as they could using whatever means they could dispose of.



The new theory of earth's magnetic fields CC0 from bit.ly/osdrawings

The time when a measure becomes a target

As a result, the reorientation of rankings [has been creating damaging consequences](#), providing another factful proof of the phrase “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure”, from Goodhart’s Law: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. We came to this conclusion after evaluating popular university rankings, THE and QS, which generally consists of research metric (number of international publications in a certain database, number of citations), teaching metric (number of foreign staffs and foreign students), and reputation metric (based on a survey to external evaluator from international universities and industries).



Goodhart's law from [Sketchplanations](#) CC-BY-NC

Instead of coming up with good research and teaching activities, Indonesia's universities try to fit those metrics by inviting even hiring external researchers (usually diaspora or people with a good record of publication) with a contract of producing articles in prestigious journals. They might also invite prominent international researchers to spend sabbatical in Indonesia (known as adjunct professorship), with an agreement to focus on the publishing papers rather than to design meaningful research or teaching activities. For teaching metric, the universities are inviting foreign researchers to come to Indonesia for online or on-site guest lectures, therefore they can claim such activities as a proof of participation from foreign faculties in teaching and submit the claims to THE and QS. They might also create extension programs (eg: summer schools) to invite foreign students with the motivation of claiming those classes to increase the number of foreign students participating in the teaching process. Moreover for reputation metric, Indonesia's universities have been building a database containing a list of potential researchers which might be invited by ranking providers respondents.

While expected to have real and substantial impact for the university, those strategies are considered practical which are designed only to increase chances of gaining more scores in research, teaching, and reputation measurement imposed by ranking providers. By launching such programs focussing to create more scores, it's fairly obvious that those faculties are failing to develop their critical thinking (considering [potential flaws](#) in the ranking methodology), although they endorse students to develop a skill of critical thinking on a daily basis. [Aforesaid](#)

[actions potentially resulting in budget mismatch and misallocation of resources](#) following too much conflict of interests between what they need to do and what they want to achieve. These were the [unintended consequences](#) of Goodhart's Law that could potentially lead to [dubious practices](#) and [mis-measurement](#) in higher education.

Diversity locked out

According to the [Higher Education Database](#) (managed by the Ministry of Research and Technology and Higher Education), there are more than 4,500 universities (15% of them are vocational education) with more than 36,000 programs, managed by almost 300,000 lecturers and attended by more than 8.7 million students. Those numbers are taken from all islands in IndonesiaIndonesia, meaning there will be disparities in infrastructure which will lead to the disparities of the qualification of lecturers and students.

Such a diverse situation of universities has not been completely considered in the performance measurement. All education levels, including vocational institutions, are expected to reallocate their resources [to maximize their support in achieving the international rankings](#) as targeted by the ministry in a firm national regulation. More fund flows to institutions, mainly the big universities in Java island as they most certainly can achieve the target, [leaving behind so many small to mediums universities](#) in the other islands.

The focus on the achievement of World Class University has made regulators of higher education as well as research and publication in Indonesia forget what is essential for embracing diversity in the Indonesian academic system. Meanwhile in Africa, there has been awareness to make de-imperialism efforts by encouraging "[good-quality institutional archiving, instead of publication in globalized/Northern journals](#)", Indonesia has "forgotten" (or "skipped") such concern on open infrastructure development. Even sadder, Indonesian academics, psychologically speaking, are afraid to save their work on the preprint server for [fear of being indicated as double submission or multiple publications](#), which is categorized as [a violation of academic integrity](#). It is not surprising that one of the Indonesian preprint servers, namely *INA-Rxiv*, although is ever recognized as an important "[source of information on the latest Indonesian research](#)", it has experienced failure of sustainability; although soon supported by Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) with the establishment of [RINarxiv](#).

Adopting rankings recklessly has the risk of locking out diversity and preventing it to play an important role in strengthening local universities.

Some takeaways

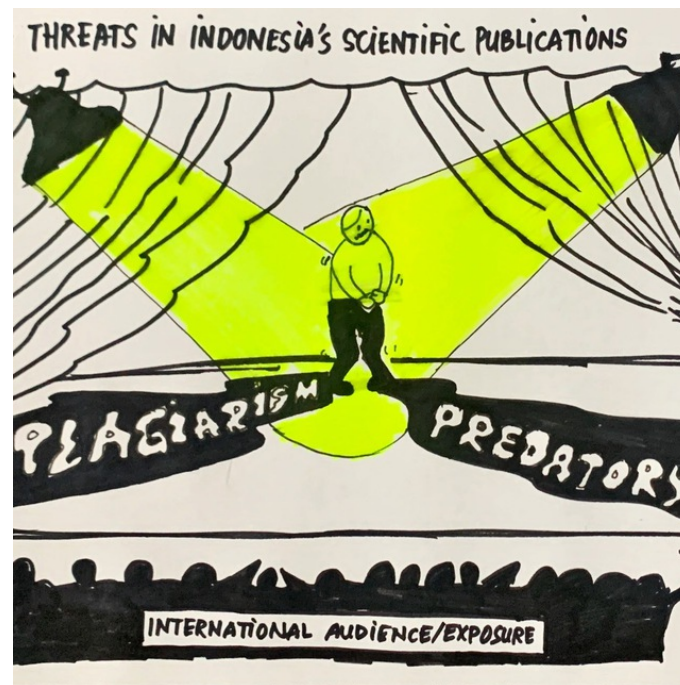
Through this article, we recommend Indonesian Government prioritizing the capacity development of physical (including digital) [open infrastructure as well as leveraging the human resources competency](#) in order to support such infrastructure that appreciates the diversity of cognition, affection, conation, behavior and culture of the Indonesian people (as opposed to continuously feeding [self-serving academic system](#)). For us, this is truly the mandate of the Indonesian Constitution (UUD 1945, especially UUD 1945 Article 28C paragraph 1, stating that “Indonesian citizens [are entitled to education, science and technology, arts and culture](#) in order to improve their quality of life”) and [Pancasila/The Five Principles](#), the foundation of the Indonesian state (especially the principles of democracy and social justice for all the peoples of Indonesia).

We suggest [a rethink of rankings](#) in form of three levels of intervention to mitigate the impact of academic imperialism and even de-imperialism, namely individual, cultural, and structural interventions. Those ones mentioned above lie at the structural level. Another thing that also needs to be considered at the structural level is the Government cooperation with international institutions in the context of the academic measurement ecosystem and public information services. For example, we still question the urgency of cooperation [between Indonesia and certain commercial institutions to obtain their publication data](#). Why, for example, does Indonesia not optimize the collaboration with ORCID which has a more multi-axis measure of research achievement which includes [not only the elements of publication, but also the elements of people, organizations and resources](#) involved in it? In addition, we need to constitute a system which can detect the [correspondence between scientific publication and its significance for Indonesian public policy](#) and everyday’s society practices.

At the individual level, there should be a [growth mindset among individual Indonesian academics](#). Shifting our way in assessing and valuing research is not [a form of mission impossible](#), following bold initiatives like [Leiden Manifesto](#) and [SFDORA](#). This mindset implies an individual’s attitude that is open to all possible modes of conducting research and publication, followed by critical thinking on [the limitations of ranking methodologies](#). Do not rush to categorize or label an act of research and publication as “*unacceptable*” just because it is

not popular or available in the WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) countries. For example, recently, *Anima*, one of the oldest psychology journals in Indonesia, decided to publish all of its articles in bilingual, [English version in the left column, and Indonesian version in the right column](#). Individual's growth mindset will view this *Anima*'s pioneering work as a maturation phase of scientific journals in Indonesia in terms of democratizing the national language, namely Indonesian, while at the same time not ignoring the aspirations of internationalization. However, some will see such kind of effort as [detrimental for journal inclusion in global indexation](#) and want to reject this practice [by positing that all journal texts should be fully in English for indexing purposes](#).

At the cultural level, raise critical consciousness towards the research and publication ecosystem from an early age. For example, do not let a single definition of “predatory publishing” and plagiarism dominate the world of Indonesian scholarship. Cultivate academic integrity that prioritizes not only intellectual modesty, but also intellectual honesty, instead. Our academic system must be [honest and accurate in determining the criteria for predatory journals](#), for example. So far, our criteria for predatory journals are seemingly excluding most [big publishers](#), even though the essential criteria for predatory journals could touch on the operations dimensions of big publishing. Predatory publishing is not just, thus, ["no peer review, no point"](#). Beyond that, we need to change how [we judge research](#).



Threats in Indonesia's scientific publications (bit.ly/osdrawings CC0)

In addition, we need to seriously revive an alternative culture among academics who are able to counter the "publish or perish culture" that has also hit Indonesia. The Indonesian Open Science Team has participated in building this alternative culture by presenting the Indonesian translation of "[*Democratising Knowledge*](#)" (the French manuscript can be [accessed here](#)). This document, published by Education International, is an urgent call to all higher education consortia (including the research institutes and libraries within it) to jointly uphold academic freedom as well as to form and organize coalitions. Coalitions can be a strategic vehicle for social movement to negotiate on a structural level with the "big players" in the scientific publications and their measurements, i.e. world publishers and rankers, for having more responsible practices benefitting science and society development rather than self-prestige.

Sarah's comments:

I really like the idea of this piece and how it gets into important conversations about how big publishing companies are perpetuating literally imperialist systems. The visuals and illustrations you made help demonstrate some of the points you're making too. As a draft though, it's very abstracted in my opinion, and I think it could benefit from some expansion and digging deeper into some ideas in addition to adding some particular examples. Especially having particulars would help a reader understand these bigger concepts you're introducing and discussing.

The ending is also really abrupt. What are some key takeaways? What do you want the reader to come away with? How do the disparities and diversity in Indonesian universities tie into the picture painted about imperialism? I'm also extremely curious about how all of this ties into the creation and the unfortunate dissolution of the Indonesian preprint server, and what that means in this complex context you've described in the piece so far.

Catherine's Comments:

Thank you so much for writing this. I find your straightforward identification of these practices as imperialist invigoratingly clear. It also positions your personal experience and observations about the academic prestige system in Indonesia as a case that represents the pernicious effects of this system in many other countries. I recommend framing it as such to drive this home for more *Commonplace* readers. A version of what you describe is happening at their institutions. It's happening everywhere (with different nuances, of course). I would also even go a step farther to say that these institutional rankings are themselves racist. Because of how they apply a consistent set of metrics (derived in the West) across global institutions (and even drastically different institutions within one country, as you note), rankings flatten diversity toward a single definition of "best." They skew institutions away from learning and education and towards winning in a contrived competition.

I'll risk making the following assumption: the failed Indonesian preprint server was a casualty of this skewed system because this system was not able to value scholarship that does not directly support, if not improve, institutional rankings. If this is the case, I would begin and ground your story with this event. Again, the loss of spaces that are community-led and support alternate models is an event many groups have experienced. I would use this as your entrypoint into the larger matrix of failures at work. Why was this platform helpful to you and others? What did it offer? And what was lost when it folded (both literally and in the symbolic sense)?

I think this also gives you a clearer way to end: a call for new metrics of success as a call for greater equity and inclusion in higher education and research. Who do you think has the power to make this shift? How do we start to effect change?