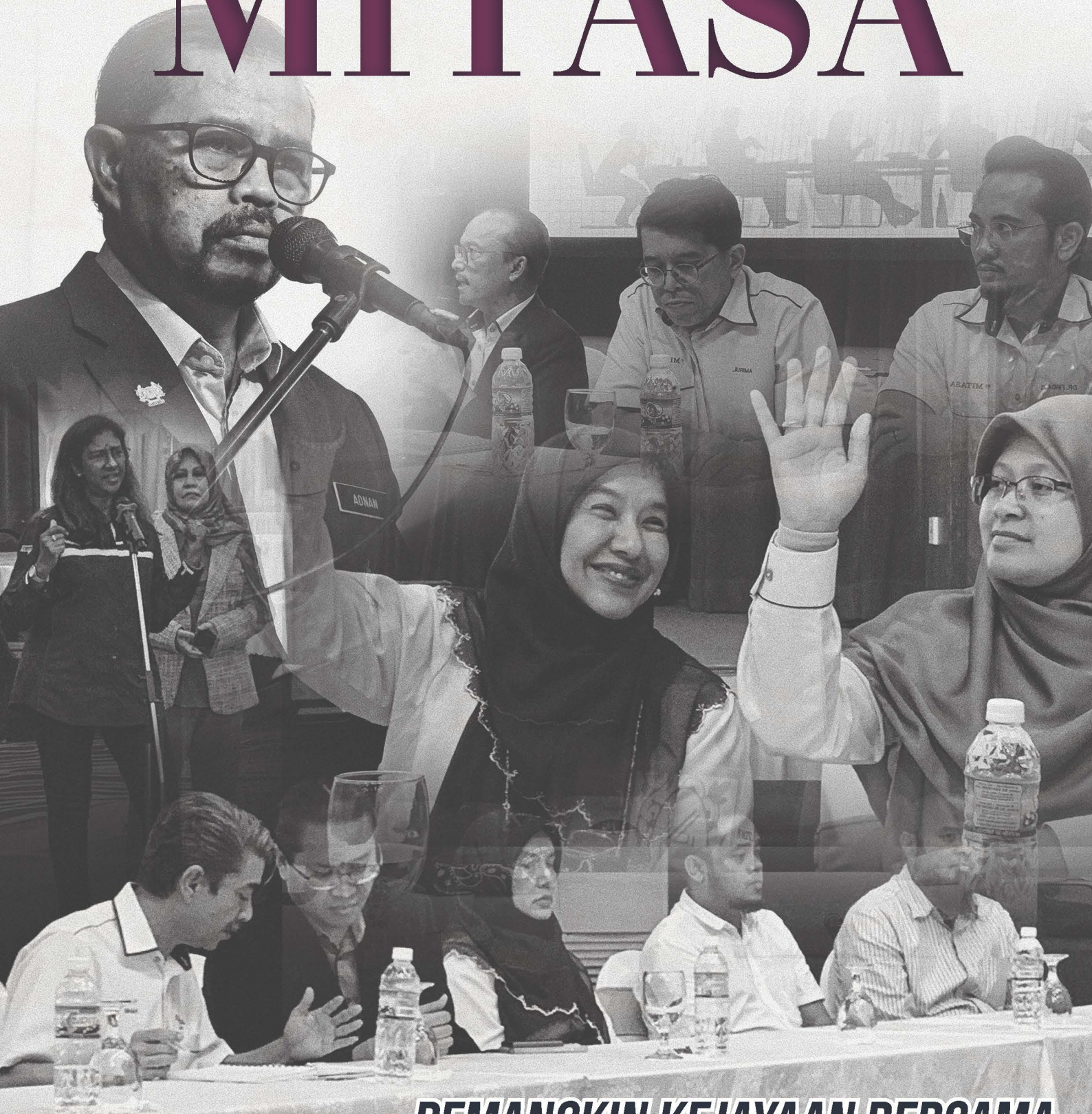MITASA

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

Suara MITASA

PEMANGKIN KEJAYAAN BERSAMA

OMBUDSMAN DAN UNIVERSITI

MESYUARAT AGUNG TRI TAHUNAN MITASA 2025-2028

MAJLIS SAMBUTAN HARI DAN BULAN AKADEMIA UITM 2025

PEMBENTANGAN LIMA KERTAS KERJA KESETERAAN PENYELIAAN MELIBATKAN KENAIKAN PANGKAT

WACANA TOKOH: BAHASA DAN JATI DIRI BANGSA DI KONVENSYEN 152 PERINGKAT KEBANGSAAN 2025

Building Ferraris with Kancil

Irwan Affendi Md Naim
Pensyarah Pusat Asasi, UiTM

Oftentimes, when talking about graduate employability, we look at how a big chunk of our local graduates failed to secure jobs due to the same, recurring issues – weak language, poor communication skills, etcetera. These young, polished minds of the country spent a good 3 or 4 years mastering the knowledge, skills and all the art of their trades – some with blood and sweat and family fortunes invested – only to get a NO from employers for failing to express and impress with words.

Many turn to university lecturers, especially the 'language people', for failing to equip these graduates with the necessary language skills and persona to display in job interviews. Why focus solely on the finished product? Shouldn't the raw materials also receive close scrutiny? OK. Let's peruse the literature and ask the right questions.
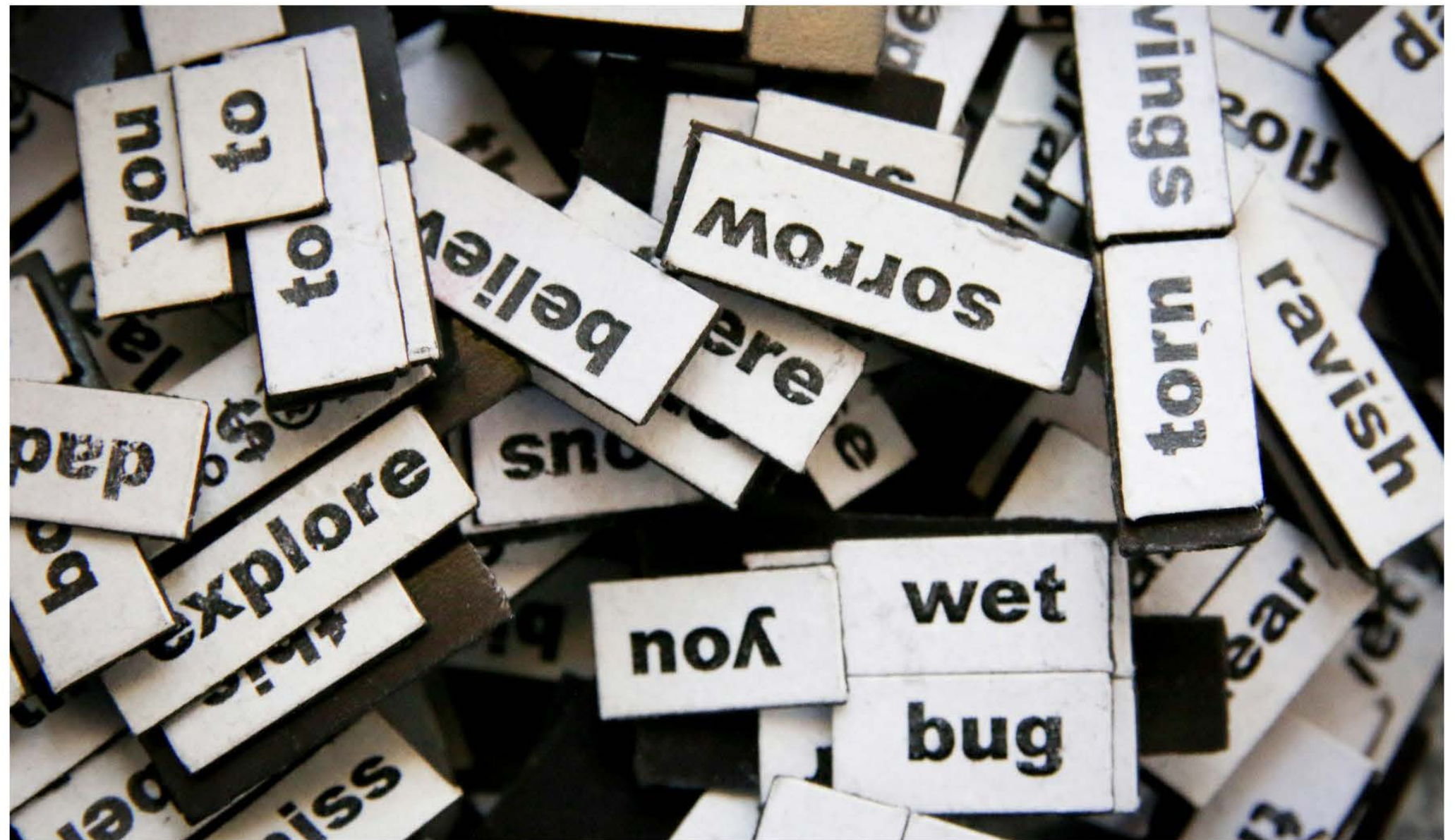
Data from studies done in Malaysia and abroad recently reveals a persistent and, more significantly, a quantified disparity between the lexical knowledge required for successful tertiary-level academic engagement and the actual measured vocabulary size of university students. In layman terms, studies have found that our students simply don't have the numbers (hmm, that sounds familiar).

Alright, Ng et al. conducted a pivotal corpus-based study on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) reading comprehension texts from 1999 to 2019 (20 years). MUET is critical, as the test serves as a gateway to and a benchmark of university-level proficiency. Their analysis of these CEFR-aligned texts concluded that in order for students to achieve 98% comprehension, which is the level required for effective reading, students require a vocabulary size of 8,000-word families from the academic vocabulary.

This 8,000-word demand stands in sharp contrast to the measured "supply" found in student populations. How do we know this? Researchers consistently found that many of our university students lack the academic vocabulary they need to succeed. A study by Md Naim et al. suggests this, based on research conducted with 500 Semester 1 pre-university students at a Malaysian public university. A diagnostic test consisting of 300 selected words from the Academic Word List (AWL) was administered to examine students' coverage of academic vocabulary in the first week of university.

This is to rule out inclusion of academic vocabulary resulting from university study and to ensure that the vocabulary they possess is 'fresh from school'. Results reveal a very wide range of scores (lowest: 58, highest: 150), reflecting significant variability in academic vocabulary knowledge within the cohort. The fact that some Students possess very low academic vocabulary knowledge, even though they are This designation of 'best students' indicates that they lack preparedness for the lexical demands of university.

Meanwhile, a 2024 study in Malaysia by Amir and Sulaiman also highlights this problem clearly. They tested 66 undergraduates using a 140-item instrument derived from two foundational word lists, the Academic Word List (AWL) and the Academic Vocabulary List (AVL). The results were startling. The largest group of students (27 of them) only knew 21% to 30% of the words. The second-largest group (13 students) knew even less, scoring between 11% and 20%. These numbers show a significant vocabulary gap.

PERFECTION IS NOT ATTAINABLE.

BUT IF WE CHASE PERFECTION,
WE CAN CHASE

EXCELLENCE,