

The struggle for autonomy

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Comment

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THE struggle for any form of liberties, including that of academic freedom, is similar to that of challenging the status quo.

In the case of academic freedom, it is about changing the rules of the game that have long curtailed the spirit of intellectuals ranging from dampening it through to a number of bureaucratic processes, legal or otherwise. The more tedious the process, the more intense the struggle. Still, autonomy is essential for universities and higher education to surge forward.

The Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) status is governed by the principle of three As — autonomy, accountability and audit. In the course of the last year after Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) achieved APEX status, we have seen the implementation of the last two As in a rigorous manner. But we have yet to see autonomy for a university — protected by legislation and charters of its own — to compete globally. We have such a long way to go to achieving autonomy that it might even threaten the end-state of an APEX university itself by 2013.

The negotiation for autonomy was initiated in February 2009 but there are many hoops to jump through! The agreed deadline of June this year has passed without fanfare.

The Conference of Ethics and Values in Higher Education in the Era of Globalisation held in Vilnius, Lithuania last week is relevant here. Some 250 participants from about 30 countries discussed the set of fundamental ethical values and principles that make up a bona fide universitatum. This includes a number of suggested components such as institutional autonomy, academic freedom and integrity as well as sustainable development. These basic principles will enable academic communities to translate ideals into missions.

Institutional autonomy entails research and teaching that must be morally and intellectually independent of political authority and economic power. Academic freedom is about rejecting intolerance and being open to dialogue since a university is regarded as an ideal meeting ground for teachers capable of imparting their knowledge and well equipped to develop research and innovation, and for students entitled, able and willing to enrich their minds with that knowledge. These principles have been articulated in the Magna Charta Universitatum.

Based on the understanding of these two principles alone, it is suffice to say that by withholding institutional autonomy and academic freedom from a university, there is a breach of fundamental ethical values and principles of a bona fide university. The so-called tertiary institution is then an extension of a government department where autonomy and freedom are less prized as opposed to a command-and-control model. The latter is incompatible with this new age of creativity and innovation, where institutional autonomy and academic freedom are a "must" — and are duly recognised in the New Economic Model. The question, however, is whether we are able to walk the talk in quick time because this can degenerate into a game of power play (instead of fair play).

The principle of academic integrity is also regarded as fundamental. According to The Centre for Academic Integrity in the United States, this is a commitment to values such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. These values encompass the quest for truth and knowledge without resorting to dishonest behaviour — including intellectually — and fostering a climate of mutual trust and respect for dignity, ideas and opinions in the context of collegiality and inclusiveness. Academic integrity demands accountability and responsible participation of all human beings.

Lastly, it recognises sustainable development as part of fundamental ethics and values embracing the natural environment and creating healthy, safe, clean and pleasant university campuses conducive to the search of knowledge.

Issues relating to a bona fide university cannot be understood without ethics and values leading to "excellence with soul". Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are at the core of the implementation of ethical values and principles, supported by the notion of academic integrity and sustainable development.

Unless this is acknowledged and deeply understood, the struggle for autonomy and academic freedom can turn into one to maintain a command-and-control power structure, at once negating the notion of a bona fide university.

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