

Autonomy in universities comes with accountability

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Comment

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THE need for autonomy in institutions of higher learning has been the subject of controversy for a long time in many parts of the world.

In Malaysia, it was more so after the 1974 student demonstrations. Underlying it was the issue of mistrust that resulted from such activities.

This was followed by the amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act (Auku), meant to "curb" and act as a deterrent for a wide range of student activities.

Be that as it may, it did not change the fact that autonomy is still a relevant issue for the proper running of a university. What comes as a surprise to many is that the impression most universities in the West have achieved complete autonomy is not quite true.

Counterparts from many of the universities have argued that they, too, are still engaging the powers that be for greater "autonomy". Some have characterised the situation as "emerging".

In other words, there seems to be no one-size-fits-all as far as interpreting or implementing autonomy. Hence, there is no one model that can be considered "ideal" without taking into account the varying socio-cultural contexts within which a university is situated or how it evolves.

This was made clear at the recent Conference of Association for Southeast Asia Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) which dealt with the theme "University Autonomy: Interpretations and Variations".

From the various country papers presented, including one from Japan and Europe, there was ample evidence of the diverse ways autonomy has been conceptualised and implemented.

Each seems to have evolved rather differently to meet its own needs. In fact, the Japanese experience shows that at times, too much autonomy can present problems as well. In contrast, it can be met with stiff resistance from the stakeholders, including students, suspicious that autonomy is an excuse to hike up tuition fees and other payments.

Still, it was the Japanese government that voluntarily decided to give its national universities more autonomy in the form of "corporations" in April 2004.

One important reason for this was to separate the universities from the government structure or civil service. This way, Japanese universities were entitled to more institutional autonomy than before to enable them to be responsive to the changing environment.

In more recent times, however, other countries like Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Singapore are also beginning to make their universities autonomous. And Malaysia did the same by tabling the Auku (Amendment) Bill 2008 recently.

In general, the principle of institutional autonomy can be defined as the necessary degree of independence from external interference that the university requires in respect of its internal organisation and governance, the internal distribution of financial resources, the generation of income from non-public sources, the recruitment of its staff, the setting of conditions of study and, finally, the freedom to conduct teaching and research.

This is based on the policy statement issued by the International Association of Universities based in Paris.

Against this background, the recent amendment to Auku, which was passed by Parliament, has given universities much more room to act. It is a healthy indication that the trust lost previously is now being cultivated again as the universities are expected to take on a myriad of new roles currently.

They are no longer just "factories" that must be heavily regulated to produce tailor-made products for the consumption of the market place. With the recent collapse of the financial market, universities need to break loose from the pressures of the market that in many ways have long compromised their autonomy as an institution of learning.

Thus, while one often hears that autonomy is important to minimise the influence of governmental bureaucracy, namely, the mindless conformance to the rules and regulations imposed by government agencies, little consideration has been given to similar pressures exerted by the "corporatocracy" and managerialism of

market forces. In both these cases, academic freedom, which is an essential component of institutional autonomy, can be negatively affected.

Hence, increasingly, universities are losing their distinct educational missions to the lofty goals of shaping minds for the future. Instead, they will be bogged down with meeting the needs of the diminishing demands of today. As a result, tertiary education is skewed to offer what is marketable in the shortest possible time. Under such circumstances, students are more keen to "earn" than to "learn".

In other words, the role of autonomy in the new economy cannot be underestimated. It goes together with the recognition that the issue of accountability, as an integral part of autonomy, is equally essential as a basis to rebuild the trust that was once taken for granted. It is only with trust being fully restored that autonomy will be more meaningful to everyone.

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