

## Free spirit of inquiry is cornerstone of a varsity

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Comment

[New Sunday Times - 11/02/2008](#)

WE have heard about "free" school before. What about a "free" university? Here, the word "free" carries a far deeper intellectual notion than the superficial idea of higher education as a commodity or a traded service with a hefty price tag.

A good illustration, perhaps, is the Free University of Brussels or Universite Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Established in the early 1800s, it was "independently" set up by a number of provinces that broke away from the Kingdom of the Netherlands which formed the Belgian state in 1830. Then, they were already three state universities in the country at Ghent, Liege and Leuven, but none in Brussels, though it had been promoted to the rank of capital city.

According to its official website, a group of eminent personalities in the various academic field of arts, science and education took the responsibility to set up a university for Brussels in 1831. Taking advantage of the Belgian Constitution, a "free" university was conceptualised, moving away from being another state university. Moreover, state authorities then were not too keen, given the financial burden imposed by the three existing state universities.

As a result, the organisers of the Brussels university project, decided to establish what was originally known as the Free University of Belgium. By then the Catholic University at Mechelen had also been set up as a non-state entity. Ever since, ULB has remained "free", notably in "demonstrating its spirit of independence each time democracy and basic rights have been threatened".

For example, it shunned any collaboration with the Nazi occupier in 1941 and kept true to the principle it was founded on in the 19th century, that is, "Freedom of Inquiry".

This lofty philosophical principle was strengthened by statute reform in 1970, rejecting any form of dogma or control. Accordingly, the governance is based on a participatory representation reflecting the diversity of the university community and society at large. It also sets policies for the university. Despite this, however, it continues to be recognised and subsidised by the public authorities. The allocation currently amounts to 60 per cent of its budget, but the university still keeps its intellectually-free status.

Another classic example in the same league is the Free University of Berlin (Freie Universitat Berlin), the second largest university in Berlin, where the First Asem (Asian-Europe Meeting) Rector's Conference was held last week. It is an appropriate choice given the history of the university which was founded in West Berlin just after World War 2 in 1948.

Then, following the division of Berlin, a group of professors and students broke away from East Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm (now Humboldt) University (founded 1809). A "free" university was set up where it was "free" from any political ideology and influence to seek academic freedom.

The university's seal to this day bears the Latin terms for "Truth, Justice and Liberty". And the university continues to present "Freedom Awards" to personalities who have made a special contribution towards the cause of freedom.

Interestingly enough, in October last year, the university was awarded "elite university" status by the German Science Foundation under the German government's Initiative for Excellence which the German federal and state governments passed on June 23, 2005. The goals of the Initiative are similar to that of the Apex (Accelerated Programme for Excellence) programme recently announced by the Malaysian government.

After two cycles, to date, Germany has nine such "elite" universities, while Malaysia is starting with its first, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

What seems to be the vital ingredient in the success of these universities is the free spirit of inquiry that must be the cornerstone of any idea of a university.

As Asia in general is experiencing an emergence of autonomy at many of its universities, this is an important consideration to be kept in mind. In fact, this is one of the opportune moments that must not be squandered in the quest to create a new future for higher education.

To be sure, this is the first point of departure that must be put in place in the implementation of the Apex programme. After all, autonomy is one of the 3As stipulated under the programme; the other being accountability and audit. Executed simultaneously, they would better ensure that Malaysian institutions of higher learning will have a place in the rapidly changing landscape of global higher education.

When the world celebrates the 19th anniversary of the collapse of the Berlin Wall next week, the meaning of the word "free" will resonate even louder in all spheres of life, starting, of course, with education!

[Terms & Conditions](#)