

## Learning does not end in the lecture hall

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Universities are charged with nurturing a 'first class mentality'. For this to happen, universities must be allowed to function without outside intrusions.

IT is a relief that the situation over the so-called "textbook" on ethnic relations in a university has been defused.

But a textbook it was not. It was more a course guide or outline of sorts. At best, it as an unfinished lecture note confined to the university.

If at all it was to be used as a "textbook", many could be unaware that at tertiary level, there is no one "textbook" that suffices, unlike in schools.

University students are exposed to a wide array of scholarly works so that they can be well educated in a particular subject.

This cannot be over-emphasised, especially when one is faced with a contentious issue or subject matter, and wants to objectively assess the "truth" as it were, regardless of how sensitive it may be.

In fact, the more sensitive the subject, the more rigorous the scrutiny, requiring comprehensive cross-referencing to avoid rushing into a conclusion.

Properly done, it is one way to "de-sensitise" an issue as one becomes more informed and refined.

As John Stuart Mill remarked, only through debate and a process of refinement will the "truth" be finally discovered. In other words, to an ignoramus, almost everything can be perceived as a "sensitive" issue.

Put another way, no amount of "indoctrination" in the lecture halls can go past a discerning mind without first being objectively queried and clarified in the quest for "truth".

Still the learning process does not end in the lecture hall.

The debates in Parliament can be part of an ongoing learning process as well. But only if the debates are not narrowly framed, meaning to say no emotionally charged accusations and expletives are levelled as this can do more harm than good.

By and large, it tends to create mountains out of molehills, leading to the proverbial "storm in a tea cup". Malaysia has seen too many of this lately, a hallmark of a third-class mentality that feeds on sensationalism.

To put the issue in perspective, perhaps it is worth making it known that in university libraries (at least the credible ones, as in the case of most Malaysian public universities), there is always a collection of banned books kept for scholarly inquiry.

While these are not readily available on the open shelves, they are accessible to those who need to refer to them in their search for the "truth".

By inference, these are collections that are usually deemed as "politically incorrect", some are biased outright, sensitive and even subversive in nature.

The powers that be know of the existence of such a collection and have allowed it to stay for "academic" pursuit.

At one time, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's The Malay Dilemma was kept in this section. That it is no longer in the "exclusive" section is an indication of how subjective "sensitive issues" can be made out to be.

Why then are we petrified by an unfinished work by relatively unknown writers from a university?

Should all the banned and "sensitive" books and materials in universities be withdrawn, since a precedent has been set?

Why did the so-called "textbook" create such a stir? Or does it imply that it is all right to demonise some works and not others.

Not too long ago, a senior politician suggested a revision of the age-long "social contract" but there was no uproar in Parliament.

Neither was he asked to withdraw his statement which arguably was no less "seditious". Are double standards operating here?

What seems amiss is the failure to realise that factual controversies, sensitivities and even errors are not new in academic circles.

The intellectual community is quite capable of looking after its own interest in ensuring that academic integrity is preserved at all cost.

Unfortunately, going by how the guidebook issue has been (mis-)handled, Malaysia is still far from understanding what universities are all about.

Yet the university is being entrusted to raise the capacity for knowledge and innovation, and nurture a "first class mentality" as stated in the second thrust of the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

For this to happen, Malaysian universities must be allowed to function like one.

The last thing they need is being micromanaged or have any outside intrusion.

A seasoned academic-turned-politician (now retired) was quoted during an interview with a Chinese daily recently: "Politicians should not meddle in academia. The ideal situation is for the academia to be free of interference."

As the author of Hubungan Ras dan Etnik, he should know, although ours is not an ideal situation.

In the great academic institutions of the world, the practice of non-interference, called "autonomy with accountability", is a dearly-held principle meant to preserve the sanctity of knowledge and the spirit of free inquiry.

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