It's about minds, not marks

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By this week, thousands of new students will begin another phase in their lives as they step into campuses throughout the country. No doubt many will be wondering: How different is a university from their secondary schools? This is a valid question as much has been said on on what a university should be. So what is a university?

The idea of a university has been discussed for years, and a consensus is still elusive. Partly, this is because different people perceive a university differently, especially those who own the university, governments included.

In an autocratic society, for instance, the idea remains fuzzy because of the various limitations imposed on it. Some even have laws to ensure universities are "politically correct", in contrast to more open societies where a university is accorded independence (even though funded by the government).

It is accorded greater latitude of expression, even if it is unpalatable to the ruling government. In fact, there are laws to protect its autonomy.

In the UK for example, "the freedom of speech of academic staff enjoys a special protection under the Education Reform Act 1998, in recognition that it is inseparable from their doing their job properly". (G.R. Evans, Cambridge University, in her book *Calling academia to account: Rights and responsibilities* (1999). Not surprising, then, that when it comes to benchmarking a university, those in the more open West are held up us models.

At the least, a university is a place for dissenting views within its own ethical framework. Thus, openness is important. This follows from the way modem universities function in generating new and original knowledge. Debate and disagreement are accepted, indeed are cherished norms in academe, as exemplified by many of the world's best.

The more intense the quest for original ideas and knowledge, the more drawn out is the crossfire involving prominent scholars and experts. Thus, it is no coincidence that before one is accorded the highest accolade in academic circles, the person has to go through a barrage of comments, criticism and even downright insults from peers in "defending" his/her thesis. The word "defend" is intentionally chosen to indicate the rigour that accompanies the spirit of inquiry that makes a true scholar.

This is part of "the training of the minds" described by Evans as "the supreme distinctive task of universities". In short, this is fundamentally what a university is about.

As a guiding principle, Lawrence Summers, president of Harvard University, recently characterised a university as one that works best when they are driven by the authority of ideas, not the idea of authority; one that seeks eternal truths, not transient reflections; and one where students are taught not specific facts, but broad ways of thinking. This is Harvard, which has a more than 350-year-old tradition, and which Malaysian universities are often called upon to emulate. This also means that their idea of a university must have similarities with Harvard. Otherwise, we may be comparing apples and oranges, and end up university-bashing, as often happens.

Judging from some recent sentiments expressed, our idea of a university seems quite shallow and utilitarian. For example, there are those who categorically perceive a university as an educational mill of sorts that produces "job-ready" graduates for industry. Others talk as if employability is the main determinant. The overall understanding seems to be: the university is created primarily to "educate" students in some tailor-made skills as demanded by the market, a far cry from the Harvard thesis.

Hardly, anyone even bothers to articulate the scholastic and intellectual dimensions of a university. That universities are also instrumental in shaping the future minds of the nation seems less important.

Most find it easier to parrot what appeases the "market" here and now, even at the expense of the "supreme distinctive task". Never mind if the students are not well-rounded. No matter if, as a result of their rigid "education", the students risk being unable to adapt and learn once they outlive their training.

Most are unaware of the fact that unless students are intellectually enriched with the ability to learn and adapt, they have been short-changed, as the facts they acquire have a half-life of five years or less.

Thus, it is urgent for us to pause and reflect on what is it that we want. And to heed the UNESCO director-general's concern, expressed in his discussion on "The University of the 21st Century (2001)", namely, that higher education institutions and systems are "being pushed and pulled towards short-term solutions that may result in a loss of vision about the purpose and value of higher education". This observation mirrors too well what Malaysian universities have been going through lately.

There is in fact a danger that the idea of the university in Malaysia will not be that of an autonomous community of scholars armed with lofty ideals to take the nation to the next level, but degraded to being no more than a group of job-seekers competing for their economic self-interest.

If this trend is unchecked our universities, instead of measuring up to the ideals of Harvard, will become no more than glorified training centres or high schools. That will be a sad day indeed for Malaysian scholarship