

Executive Summary

History and Epistemology of Universities

The purpose of a university is to educate its student, produce leaders and to develop a nation as a whole. For a successful higher education system, there is a need for academic freedom and university autonomy. Does Malaysia have this autonomy?

In this policy paper, Munif Zairruddin Fikri Nordin discusses the history, academic freedom and autonomy of universities, particularly taking a philosophical approach to the purpose and role of a university. He does this by examining the Arabic, Chinese, Indian, European and American traditions of the concept of universities.

The universal idea of universities was primarily for scholars to pursue knowledge without any interference. The idea of knowledge and academic freedom is greatly emphasised as important to achieving a successful higher education system. Academic freedom means liberty, the opportunity to conduct research, publish knowledge and to voice out one's opinion. The need for autonomy arises from academics having to stay true to the pursuit of knowledge which could potentially be jeopardized by the interests of other institutions in society. For instance, in order to introduce a new programme, approval needs to be gained from the Ministry first and is often tied to budget negotiations. This shows that the more dependent a university is on another body, the more questionable the integrity of knowledge generated.

In Malaysia, the purpose of a university is broken down into three dimensions i.e. economic, political and collaborative. From the economic perspective, Malaysian universities aim to bridge the socioeconomic gap. Whereas, from the political aspect higher education institutions such as the Merdeka University and other private universities play a role in representing political ideologies. From the collaborative perspective, there is an important role universities play in bridging a connection between local and foreign governments. Higher Education institutions play an important role in forming a civilised society which is essential for a nation.

The academic culture is weak in Malaysian universities. For instance, the appointment of Vice-chancellors and Deans is not transparent. The Vice-Chancellor is appointed by the Minister of Higher Education. Another challenge to academic culture is, the fact that the knowledge in universities is controlled. Systemic knowledge and structured education is not instilled in the history of Malaysia, hence is new territory for this nation.

Munif provides the following four recommendations:

<p>The Philosophical Concept of Universities in Malaysia Should Be Reviewed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The meaning and purpose of universities should be higher than political and business motives
<p>Strengthening the Epistemological Component of Universities in Malaysia</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More autonomy should be given to universities with less political interference • Our local knowledge, thoughts and theories should be emphasised,
<p>Bureaucracy and tight control on the higher education system should be revisited</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A system should be cultivated that allows students to critically think
<p>Academics should focus on academic matters and not be burdened with administrative tasks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics should view universities as a place for academic freedom and not be burdened with administrative work



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