
History and Epistemology of Universities

Munif Zarirruddin Fikri
Nordin

Introduction

A university has its various roles. It is an indicator of civilization; it serves to develop a country, educate its students, and produce leaders for the needs of the nation. In a successful national higher education system these roles are closely associated with academic freedom and university autonomy.

Although autonomy generally refers to independence in formulating strategies and the freedom to choose appropriate management methods to implement a government's strategy, its understanding and implementation in universities needs to be improved, especially in Malaysia.

In the Malaysian context, the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) status which was introduced by the Government in August 2008 is one of the examples of university autonomy in terms of governance, finance, academic and other aspects necessary for the university to excel.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the history of universities with particular attention on academic freedom and university autonomy.



Dr. Munif Zarirruddin Fikri Nordin is an Associate Professor at the College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia. His areas of expertise are discourse analysis, Islamic discourse analysis, theolinguistics and sociolinguistics, among others. He holds a Masters in Modern Language Studies from the University of Malaya and a Bachelors degree in Islamic studies and Arabic linguistics from Al-Azhar University, Egypt.

¹ "A future haunted by Ghosts of the Past" S Chan, New York Times, 22 September, 2016, online edition. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/world/europe/a-future-haunted-by-ghosts-of-the-past.html> accessed on the 25th October, 2016.

2.0 The Philosophical Concept of a University: Its Meaning, Purpose and Role

2.1. Arab Tradition

In Arab-Islamic tradition, the concept of a university was developed by authoritative scholars and supported by the generous patronage of wealthy individuals and rulers. The great Muslim higher educational institutions were jami'ah, and madrasah (zawiyyah in Morocco and West Africa, or tekke in Turkey, and pesantren or pondok in the Malay world), which built their vision and programs around prominent charismatic scholars, who became institutions (Wan Mohd Nor, 2013).

Under these traditions, the purpose of a university was basically to produce God-conscious (taqwa) people who serve Him and who are aware of their individual relationship with Him and their social relationship with their fellow human beings (Rosnani, 2007). However, the purpose was extended for economic development, social progress, and national security. Its orientation is divided into three: religious-philosophical idealist, national-development, and economically pragmatic institutions (Wan Mohd Nor, 2013).

The University of al-Qarawiyyin in this tradition is recognized by UNESCO as home to the first and oldest university in the world to award degrees. The university was founded in 859 as a madrasah (a centre of learning for religious studies). Since 1963, the university has become a state university in Morocco (Wan Mohd Nor, 2013). The encounter with the West changed the second university, the al-Azhar University institutionally; from a mosque in 972 into a madrasah, a modern system at the end of the 19th century, and a modern university with secular faculties in 1961 (Muhammad Hashim, 2011).

Academic freedom and university autonomy were important characteristics of these universities. The madrasah, for instance, was built on a waqf (endowment) concept and this arrangement has assured the al-Azhar of its survival until today. According to Makdisi (1981), in terms of organizational and financial aspects, as the madrasah was funded by waqf and as such was relatively independent of state control (cf. Wan Mohd Nor, 2013), giving the university total academic freedom and complete autonomy.

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2.2. Chinese Tradition

Traditional Chinese higher institutions can be traced back to as early as the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (771-221 B.C.). By the Tang Dynasty (618-907) there was a whole range of higher institutions, headed by the Guo zixue (School for the sons of the Emperor) and the Tai xue - which took major classical texts of the Confucian school as their curricular content. There were also professional schools for law, medicine, mathematics, literature, calligraphy, and Daoist studies. In the later Song Dynasty (960-1279), the Confucian classics were reordered to form a knowledge system that had to be mastered by all aspiring to become scholar officials in the imperial civil service (Hayhoe, 1989, in Brandenburg and Zhu, 2007).

Although the education of adolescents from noble aristocratic families dates back to as early as the 16th century B.C., education for ordinary citizens and higher education for different classes in society only developed in the in Shang Dynasty (1523-1027 B.C.) (Surowski 2000, in Brandenburg and Zhu, 2007). The very first steps taken in realising mass higher education occurred and took three centuries to develop in the very last years of the 19th century (Brandenburg & Zhu, 2007).

Modern Chinese higher institutions started when Emperor Guangxu (1871-1908) of the Qing dynasty approved the idea of establishing a new style of institution of higher learning. Peiyang University in Tianjin (now Tianjin University) was established on 2 October 1895.

In the modern education system, university autonomy played an important role in the survival of universities. In the 1980s, China initiated reforms in the fields of economics, politics, and science and technology and academic freedom which also had repercussions on the chinese higher education system. The overall objectives of the reform were to smooth out the relationship between the government, society and universities, as well as to set up and perfect a new system. The state is responsible for the overall planning and macro management. The universities follow the laws and enjoy the freedom of providing education according to the needs of the society (Ministry of Higher Education 2007, in Brandenburg & Zhu, 2007).



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2.3. Indian Tradition

Traditional Indian higher education had great universities that flourished when most of the western world was in the dark. The Indian higher education structure can be traced back to the Nalanda and Takshashila institutions. Those were the halcyon days when India led the world in scientific knowledge and philosophical speculations (Santosh & Mahesh, 2012).

The foundation for modern education in India was developed by the British. They set up a network of schools to impart western education in the English medium (Perkin, 2006 in Santosh & Mahesh, 2012). The first such college that adopted the western education system was founded in 1818 at Serampore near Calcutta. Over the next forty years, many such colleges were established in different parts of the country at Agra, Bombay, Madras, Nagpur, Patna, Calcutta, and Nagapattinam (Santosh & Mahesh, 2012).

Then in 1948 the Radhakrishnan Commission was tasked with reviewing problem in education developing a wider conception of the duties and responsibility of universities as well as expanding their autonomy. There was a need to meet the increasing demands for higher education literature, scientific, technical and professional knowledge. Academic freedom in this regard would enable the country to attain, in as short a time as possible, the application and development of scientific and technical knowledge (Sujit, 2008).

2.4. European Tradition

The Akademia founded by Plato in 387 B.C. in Athens epitomizes a centre of education and learning equivalent to a university of the modern age. The medieval universities in Bologna (1088), Oxford (1096), Paris (1150), and Cambridge (1209) had close relations with the Church. One of their major responsibilities was to train clerics to serve in various capacities in the Church (Chang, Morshidi and Dzulkifli, 2015).

The idea of a university in the medieval times was mainly constructed as a centre of education and learning with strong religious influence, and differ from the construct of a university we know now.

Scholars argue that the universities we observe today are “modern” universities. One of the characteristics of the “modern” university is one which departs from the control and influence of religion or secularisation and research has become a crucial part in the defining purpose of the university (Chang et al, 2015).

The modern university with its mix of teaching and research functions was the brain child of the Prussian educational philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt. He founded the University of Berlin in 1810 and his idea became a model for other universities in Europe and the United States. Humboldt made research a vital complement of teaching, by emphasizing science, by urging traffic across disciplinary boundaries, and by attempting to make the university contribute more directly to economy and society (cf. Ruegg, in Shahid, 2007).

In the last two decades, there was marked interest all over Europe, in increasing the institutional autonomy. In 2005, the EUA (European Universities Association) highlighted the need for institutional autonomy in the so-called Glasgow Declaration, calling for immediate and decisive actions in order to radically increase the legal, administrative and financial autonomy of European universities. In this regards, it is quite possible to have institutional autonomy without academic freedom. As shown in many European historical cases. It is equally possible to have almost total academic freedom without institutional or financial autonomy (Nybom, 2008).



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2.5. American Tradition

The American university, of course, has its roots in Europe. The European university is itself one of the great institutional success stories of all time and American universities cannot compete with their European counterparts in terms of longevity. But they have done amazingly well in the short time they have been in existence.

Harvard University, one of the leading universities then and in more recent times was founded in 1636. Currently, there are more than 4,500 degree-granting institutions, public universities, private universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges (Education USA, 2016). One explanation for this huge number of institutions is the rise of the U.S.'s economic and military dominance in the 20th century. Apart from that is the emergence of English as the prime international language, which has given U.S. universities an enormous advantage in reaching a global audience and drawing world-class talent.

There is a correlation between university autonomy and academic freedom. For instance, all American private universities do not seek budget approval from the Government. They ensure and ensure academic freedom by controlling the selection of their students, controlling faculty hiring and salaries, owning their own buildings, and getting a negligible share of their budget from core government funds (Aghion, Dewatripont, Hoxby, Mas-Colell and Sapir, 2010).

In the 1950s, the governance of public universities in the U.S. was studied by a national commission. The commission identified three variables defining autonomy: a university's freedom from centralized purchasing, a university's freedom from needing to get its budget approved, and a university's freedom to hire and pay personnel without government control or the need to follow civil service pay rules (Aghion, et al, 2010).

² <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/80inar.pdf>

³ <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/88inar.pdf>

3.0 The Epistemological Component of a University

3.1 Knowledge and Academic Freedom

A university is not an ivory tower isolated from the interests and influence of the society, state and public agencies. Although these elements have a relationship with universities, universities should maintain its freedoms in teaching, publishing and conducting research (Mohamed, 2013) in dealing with knowledge and seeking the truth.

What counts as knowledge at a university? Leaman (1999) proposes that there are two kinds of knowledge, either real objects or those formed through mental construction. Academic disciplines in universities are categorized based on these kinds of knowledge, covering facts and ideas concerning man, society, and the physical and biological world in all branches and fields of learning, for instance, hard sciences and soft sciences. From an other perspective, based on Marsh et al.'s (2005) idea, Nolan, Hanson, Grant, Keady, and Magnusson (2007) extended the suggestion that knowledge is the integration of evidence, practitioner wisdom, service user and carer experiences and preferences. Hence, evidence according to them is the integration of research findings and the interpretation of these findings (Nolan et al., 2007).

Knowledge in a university develops together with academic freedom. In the American context, the idea of academic freedom was debated in 1915 aiming at resolving conflicts about the relationship between religious and secular institutions, power and knowledge, politics and truth, action and thought by positing a sharp distinction between them (Scott, 2015).

Academic freedom is about the liberty and obligation to study, to investigate, to present and interpret, to discuss, to conduct research, to teach, to speak, and to publish the knowledge (Mohamed, 2013). It develops the university from a storehouse of knowledge to a locus of knowledge development with the new mission of changing the portfolio of subjects. The process went along with the more active role of universities in society and economy and by equipping students with technical skills (Altmann and Ebersberger, 2012).

3.2 Knowledge and University Autonomy

The universal idea of the university is that it is a community of scholars, free to pursue knowledge without undue interference from any quarters. Every university has its own laws or edicts which spell out the functions of the various organs in the institution such as the governing council, senate, committee of deans, faculty, department and so on (Ekundayo and Adedokun, 2009).

However, who actually controls knowledge in universities? The original idea of knowledge and universities is embedded in the philosophy of liberalism, rationalism and empiricism, i.e. liberation of the mind based on true, empirical knowledge. European universities during medieval times upheld this philosophy. The masters or academics provided tutelage to a small group of students of the elite class to become leaders of society, men of letters, and learned men of the upper class (Veysey, 1965 in Sufean and Wong, 2014).

University autonomy arises in this context as a form of sentiment and conscience to protect university academics from being influenced and corrupted by the interests and powers of other institutions in society, thereby jeopardizing the pursuit of true facts, concepts, and knowledge. The more dependent a university is on other institutions, the more it lacks autonomy, and the more questionable the integrity of knowledge generated will be (Sufean and Wong, 2014).

In terms of academic autonomy, key issues include the ability of universities to decide on their academic profiles, (especially educational responsibilities like conferring degrees in certain areas), introducing and terminating programmes and the ability to select students. The introduction of new programmes usually requires some form of approval by the relevant Ministry or by another public authority and is often tied to budget negotiations, which shows again the interdependence of different dimensions of autonomy (Estermann and Nokkala, 2009).

4.0 Key Observations

4.1. The Philosophical Concept of Universities in Malaysia: Its Meaning, Purpose and Role

The meaning of universities in Malaysia is associated with an ivory tower where gurus and research centres are, to gain knowledge and transform the nation. The establishment of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in 1958 followed by a number of other universities until the present day shows that the university has an important meaning in the Malaysian context. Soaib Asimiran and Sufean Hussin (2012) categorise the development of Malaysian universities into the Malaysianisation era (1960-1980), the progressive era (1980-2000), and the new era (post-2000).

In the new era, the analytical framework to understand the purpose of the university has three dimensions: economic, political, and collaborative (Morshidi, 2016). From the economic perspective, it aims to bridge the socioeconomic gap between ethnic groups and societies by providing opportunities for local people, and to internationalise higher education by offering international students the chance to study in Malaysia. From the political perspective, the university plays a vital role in representing political ideologies, such as the Merdeka University and other private universities. From the collaborative perspective, the university is important in connecting the Malaysian government with foreign governments on a public and private relationship basis, such as in the establishment of the Malaysian branch of Nottingham University (Morshidi, 2016).

The role of the university in particular is about the education and training of personalities in forming a civilised society for the sake of the nation. Therefore, the role of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) covers all levels of higher education, from community college to university. The ministry outlines higher education policies to standardise and to be followed by all higher education institutions.

There are lower skills education offered at community colleges and polytechnics; medium skills at technical and vocational colleges (TVET); high skills, industry and intellectual needs at public and private universities (such as UTP, MMU, Uniten, Unisel etc).

As far as finances are concerned, there is no free higher education even in the public universities. However, educational sponsorships and loans are provided by the Government, Government Linked Companies (GLCs) and financial institutions.

Analytical framework for public universities

Economic

Bridging the social economic gap in society

Political

Representing political ideologies

Collaborating

connecting the Malaysian government with foreign government

In order to fulfil the needs of people and the needs of students, universities offer various areas and levels of programmes. Public universities offer specific programme which are supported by the government while private universities are funded by GLCs and private companies. The current programs offered are better than those in the last 10 years, especially in connection with the expertise that we have.

On one hand, the needs of the people include industrial, employable and economic skills, and to fulfil this, the number of universities is being reduced whilst the number of polytechnics is being increased. However, the programs offered cannot cater to the needs of the nation as a result of budget cuts and financial problems. The critical areas to be offered are medicine, transportation and infrastructure (Ghauth, 2016). On the other hand, the needs of students are indicated by encouraging them to continue pursuing their studies at universities for lifelong learning purposes.

The universities in the Malaysian context need to be in line with the meaning, purpose and role underlined in the Bangkok Declaration on Higher Education: Diversity and Harmonisation 2006 which states that universities must strive to be above politics and business interests and serve their societies and communities by providing a voice and space in which to cultivate rational, mutual and moderate dialogues that will shape intellectual, cultural and economic development on a shared basis within and across boundaries and nations (Dzulkifli, 2016). They have to serve their societies and communities on an academic basis or provide a voice and space in which to cultivate rational, mutual and moderate dialogues that will shape intellectual, cultural and economic development on a shared basis within and across boundaries and nations.

4.2 The Epistemological Component of Universities in Malaysia

4.2.1 Knowledge and Academic Freedom

There are 20 public universities comprising 5 research universities, 4 comprehensive universities, and 11 specialized universities in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2016). There are also some 50 private universities, including a number of branch campuses of foreign universities (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2016). Each university has its own uniqueness by taking into consideration its academic focus, research interests and programmes offered, although there is an overlap in of programmes at various universities, particularly in some areas such as medicine, law, accountancy, engineering and sciences (Soaib and Sufean, 2012). A study conducted by the Oxford Business Group (2014) reports that Malaysian universities scored well in the QS rankings in the technical and scientific fields.

An indication of academic freedom in Malaysia is academic culture, which is clearly weak in universities and includes a lack of a reading culture in universities. The type of academic discourse tends to be pro-popular discourses as opposed to Western countries where the debate is more critically oriented. (Ahmad Murad, 2016). In this regard, there are also conflicts in Malaysian academic culture relating to the relationship between power and knowledge. This negative culture flows from the wrongful appointment of vice-chancellors and deans, which has been practiced for a long time.

It is understood that political culture outside the campus influences the academic culture inside the campus. Political interference determines the academic culture in Malaysian universities. Therefore, universities need to become more autonomous while resisting political interference (Inayatullah and Milojevic, 2016) in moving towards academic freedom.

In terms of controlling knowledge in universities, a clear academic culture does not actively develop because ethnocentric mindsets has been taken for granted. Knowledge is something new for Malaysia (Mahathir, 2016). The establishment of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in 1958 is also something new. The reason is because systematic knowledge and structured education had not been well-established in Malaysian history. The coming of Islam with its revealed knowledge and Arab-Islamic education were not sufficient in cultivating a proper academic culture in Malaysian universities.

After having academic culture, there is a challenge in creating and sustaining intellectual tradition, such as the traditions of Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard. Malaysia has a part of the tradition, but because of an identity crisis, it is not well studied and not well maintained (Ahmad Murad, 2016). For instance, the Attasian school of thought which is referred to as al-Attas's Islamisation of knowledge is being closed down. Although the Islamic tradition and a mixed batch of things or diversity is a basis for Malaysia's academic culture, there is another challenge in managing its academic dependency (dependence on others' recognition) effectively (Syed Farid, 2016).

4.2.2 Knowledge and University Autonomy

Since the 1980s, university development has been an important agenda of the Malaysian Government. Public universities in particular are subject to national policies, and the MOHE's regulations and procedures. Autonomy is important to minimize the influence of government bureaucracy. Soaib Asimiran and Sufean Hussin (2012) explain that the establishment of the MOHE resulted in increased bureaucracy and tighter controls on higher education system. Ranking, accreditation and quality assurance were some of the popular terms used for control and regulation preferred by political elites. This bureaucracy resulted in the pervasiveness of passivism and pessimism amongst intellectuals and academics (Soaib and Sufean, 2012).

However, little attention has been given to similar pressures exerted by the managerialism provided by market forces. Academic freedom which is an essential component of institutional autonomy can be negatively affected by managerialism (Dzulkifli, 2011). This can be seen on what happened to academics and students at the London Metropolitan University. There they were forced to adopt a strict utilitarian approach in determining what to research and what to study. Universities are being forced to "rebrand" to compete for market share, rather than co-operate as collegial, scholarly adventures. Hence, research output is being skewed, while independent learning and critical thought are being erased by a creeping culture of "service provision", turning students into customers (The Guardian, 2012).

Without clear autonomy, knowledge is controlled by one party. The consequences resulting from this kind of academic dependency are:

- the de-emphasis on publications in local journals to the extent that local journals are not listed on the international rankings,
- the devaluation of local journals and
- the underdevelopment of social scientific discourse in local languages.

Academic dependency also introduces Malaysian journals, departments and universities in the international ranking system for universities which results in their following Western ideas, theories and methods blindly. This refers to the syndrome of the captive mind (Syed Farid, 2016).

Apart from academic dependency, another problem is that Malaysian local knowledge is not as well-recognised as local contributions (Morshidi, 2016). Some Malay Studies Chairs abroad have been closed, including in Leiden. This leads to another failure in promoting Malaysian knowledge internationally. The failure can also be seen in the connection between knowledge and work to be done. It is unclear whether knowledge in a very sound education system is related to the quality of a university graduate.

5.0 Recommendations

5.1. The Philosophical Concept of Universities in Malaysia Should Be Reviewed

The meaning, purpose and role of universities should be above politics and business interests. The Malaysian world-view of universities is to serve societies and communities by providing a voice and space in which to cultivate rational, mutual and moderate dialogues that will shape intellectual, ethical, cultural and economic development on a shared basis within and across boundaries and nations.

5.2. Strengthening the Epistemological Component of Universities in Malaysia

There is a need to revisit academic freedom in Malaysia by giving more autonomy and reducing political interference. Individual freedom and authority to voice out views without fear based on scientific evidence should be given to academics as well as students. A variety of interests and different ideas as well as a good academic culture should also be encouraged. Any differences in academic and intellectual discourse should also be managed effectively.

There should be knowledge paradigms as well as behavioural paradigms. The knowledge paradigms would determine the basic principles, concepts and values for each discipline of knowledge while the behavioural paradigms would determine moral boundaries (*adab*). In order to do this, a clear Malaysian epistemology should be formulated by taking into consideration religious elements and cultural heritage, and strengthening the Malay language.

The Malaysian epistemology should be restructured based on the Malaysian world-view representing 'who we are' and 'where we are at the moment'. Our local knowledge and thoughts should be highlighted by decolonising Malaysia universities from the Western hegemony of knowledge and promoting our theories and methodologies.

Intellectual tradition should be enriched by making Malaysian tertiary education truly global and, at the same time, socially relevant and by encouraging European knowledge centres to make way for the review, teaching and expansion of the vast knowledge of other societies and cultures. The suppressed knowledge of entire Malaysian studies should be recovered and its rich heritage should be reconnected with. This can be done by:

- Liberating academic dependency from the syndrome of the captive mind;
- Introducing a strong philosophy and humanities foundation in our higher education system to develop local schools of thought;
- Producing not only social scientists, but scientists in various areas;
- Appointing suitable people to the institution of the vice- chancellor, professorship, deanship, etc., by establishing scholars and training good administrators; and
- Looking for what is the best in other traditions, and what are the obstacles in discovering the traditions of our intellectual heritage.

5.3. Revisit the bureaucracy and tight control on our higher education system

Academic culture should be cultivated actively inside and outside universities by introducing a system that creates thinking skills, critical methods, logic, rhetoric and liberal arts in our higher education. This is to ensure that the students are independent-minded instead of conformists and are able to think critically on difficult subjects or topics and solve problems correctly.

In this regard, the actual function of the National Council of Professors should be empowered like the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), not only in giving the right advice to the Prime Minister, but in demonstrating the truth through scientific evidence and systematic argument. Our academic support system should also be strengthened by facilitating application procedures, for instance, sabbatical leave and attending conferences abroad.

5.4. Academics should focus on academic matters and not be burdened with administrative tasks

Attention should also be given to the pressures exerted by the managerialism of market forces which negatively affects academic freedom. The increase of market-orientation and managerialism should not mechanically affect academic work. The institutional culture of a university must provide a 'protected space' to allow people, individually and collectively, to think the unthinkable, to push the limits of the possible, to reflect and re-assess. A university must be a safe environment set apart from the interests, orthodoxies and pressures of the day.

6.0 Conclusion

What is the philosophical concept of universities and what is the epistemological component of universities in Malaysia? The paper has discussed the meaning, role and purpose of Malaysian universities vis-a-vis the epistemology of what counts as knowledge and who controls the universities and knowledge in relation with academic freedom and university autonomy.

Philosophically, universities in Malaysia have become one of the platforms for national development, thus their meaning, role and purpose have fallen under Government influence. Government control on universities is linked to higher education planning, financing, appointment of top management staff and university governance as well.

Epistemologically, knowledge in Malaysian universities is represented by academic focus, research interests and programmes offered, including social sciences, human sciences, medicine, law, accountancy, engineering and sciences disciplines. The paper has revealed some issues relating to the academic culture, intellectual tradition, influence of the Ministry, commercially driven private sector and a lack of indigenous identity to address Malaysian universities unique needs, where academic freedom and institutional autonomy are important to put things in order.

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