

## LEARNING CURVE

# The modern university: Intellectuals still matter

**I**N recent times the discourse on universities is structured with such vocabularies as innovation, competitiveness, creativity, productivity, the market and industry.

Add "globalisation", and the strategy seems complete and perfect.

Over the last millennia, universities have changed. And in the last three decades, we see a sort of revolution — a tacit, silent and diligent one — resulting from the interplay of extreme and contradictory forces — both local and beyond.

But we still live with the idea of a modern university, a Humboldtian one — literally subscribing to the core idea of a holistic combination of research and teaching. This model, after the Prussian philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, calls for integrating the arts and sciences for a comprehensive general learning and cultural knowledge. This search for an impartial truth reached classic form in 19th-century Germany,



Universities are **multifunctional organisations** — producing undergraduates and postgraduates, producing innovations and patents, and demanding creativity and critical thinking.

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which subsequently influenced modern American universities, and much of the rest of the world.

It is the dominant model featuring themes and ideals such as university autonomy, intellectual freedom in teaching and research, and the growth of

independent disciplines with their own standards and priorities. The university is the hub for the generation of scholarship and a setting of intellectuals. Yet, I hardly hear these even mentioned as a matter of concern, or at least as a reminder within the campuses.

Perhaps it would be instructive to remind ourselves of a core feature and manifestation of the university. This is — but not exclusive to it — where intellectuals reside, and where scholarship is produced, challenged and reproduced.

The modern university is a huge, sprawling and multifaceted institution. It includes academic departments, as well as professional schools. In Malaysia, the general body of the university does not seem to be well aware of the nomenclature used and its history and origins — especially why do we house disciplines, or sub-disciplines or academic domains and fields into faculties or schools, or departments? Or the significance of (academic) departments in the



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their non-visibility and gradual disappearance in the nation's academic landscape)?

I thought it would be instructive to recall the theme of "intellectuals" in the last column for the year.

Here, I return to the discussion of the modern intellectual in a university, one that offers insights into the self-identity of academics.

In *Men of Ideas: A Sociologist's View* (originally published in 1965), Lewis A. Coser's examination of the modern intellectual still matters. Coser's honest rendition of the intellectual cites the difference among academics. Some departments within the university live up to the traditional aim of the scholar — in the disinterested pursuit of truth, while others may only be vocational schools in disguise.

Universities in Malaysia are diverse. Their personnel is also varied. Referring to the Western university, Coser makes a distinction between professors.

While most hold PhD degrees, "there are obvious differences between one who teaches Sanskrit and one engaged in research on soil conservation". In the Western tradition, not all hold PhD degrees or all those teaching within a university can be considered intellectuals — "not only because the activities and professional involve-

working time for independent thought and autonomous research.

And fourth, there is — despite academics in public universities considered as public servants — academic freedom in terms of opinion and publication (although some may think otherwise). At a recent roundtable discussion on university autonomy in Kuala Lumpur, and previous interactions with some from the higher education bureaucracy, the issue of academic freedom brings mixed responses. Nevertheless, the common argument is that if the academic is a salaried employee, can he or she claim the licence to disagree in their teaching and writing with the views of those who provide or administer the funds from which the academic is paid? Can he who paid the piper not expect to call the tune?

Intellectuals have largely accepted the situation in abeyance, mindful that their tasks cannot be carried out if their performance is dictated (or controlled) by those who pay for it. And with other organisational and stakeholder expectations, the following remark emerged from an encounter with a colleague on campus: "It has certainly taken away the pleasure of writing."

The first being that the university provides a milieu in which academics share a common concern in the untrammelled pursuit of knowledge. They can communicate with one another and therefore sharpen their minds in continuous interchange.

Second, the academic is institutionally protected from the vagaries of the marketplace, undistracted by economic pressures. Insulated, but not isolated.

Third, the university has institutionalised the time allocation of

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