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Varsities should not be mainstream but at the margins

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ALMOST everywhere, universities are in the race for numbers and quality. There are many institutions called or given the status of universities which are really not universities in substance, spirit or tradition. To be truly a university requires more than official recognition and compliance to regulatory requirements.

A university is an idea, a state of mind, a supreme intellectual existence, a capacity to understand, a consuming passion for some calling, some mission for humanity.

A university does not happily imitate mainstream policies and practices, oblivious of the realities at the margins. A true university has the mission of the abolition of ignorance and the assumption of knowledge, the creation of luminosity of knowledge, the ascendance of the civilised.

Universities are about intellectual character, caring, compassion and enduring imagination. Universities are not just about conformance and mainstreaming.

Universities are really about being at the margins. The margins, metaphorically, are the frontiers, the zones of overlaps between the rivers and seas, the deserts and the verdant lands, the horizons when the lands and seas seem to meet the skies.

Universities are not about comfort and complacency but are about the challenge, the untried and unknown, the unfamiliar and the not understood.

But how do Malaysian public and private university communities see themselves? Universities are institutions where professors and students,

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learners all, have the passion for truth, knowledge seeking, justice and to educate learners and improve society.

In universities, there is the collective sense of awareness and consciousness of Eric Hoffer's insight that in times of drastic changes, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world which no longer exists.

Do universities recognise that these are times of drastic changes? Are passions for creative, constructive imagination unleashed and is there preparedness for drastic changes in the future or is academic complacency the cultural norm?

Excellence and continuous betterment are not just about imitating the so called "best practices" but are about balancing the best of mature knowledge considered correct, and the excitement of learning from errors, and charting out new territories -- terra incognita -- the unknown territories of mind, matter and energy.

Great universities with great teachers and knowledge leaders do the following:

THEY are on the eternal quest for truth.

THEY go beyond teaching for survival to teaching for wisdom and balance, dialogically and dialectically.

THEY reflect the genuine passions of scholars and are not about pretensions of scholarship.

THEY serve humanity beyond their parochial existence.

THEY teach and conduct research at and across the margins.

THEY foster understanding of teaching for happiness as wealth.

THEY cultivate multiple intelligences, not just disciplinary modes of thinking, teaching and learning.

THEY grow paradigm pioneers.

THEY create life-changing learning and living experiences for students and staff.

THEY are the guardians of high culture and celebrate exquisiteness of life's/human refinements.

THEY foster the development of imagination to confront the challenges of the times.

THEIR knowledge becomes the basis and principles of moral authority of their society, the conscience of their civilisation and of mankind.

The easy part of managing and leading a university is about numbers and material indicators. The climate, ethos, conscience and moral authority and character of a university would be the harder challenges of the meaning-making of universities.

The excellence and real impact of any university is really what they do at the margins, at the leading edge. When universities become all too familiar and alike, teaching more of the same that schools teach, then these institutions are extensions of high schools.

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When universities are institutions of indoctrination demanding conformity from all, staff and students and administrators, then these are group-think training camps and not universities.

When universities merely respond to the needs and demands of employers for robotic beings, then the institutions are not universities but are production plants.

When universities merely deliver the knowledge defined as final by professional bodies, professional inertia and academic malaise set in. A university inherits the received wisdom of the past but must in turn create its own definitions of the present, contribute to and map out its own new terrains and universes.

In the context of the rapid expansion of different models of universities and the policies of democratisation of higher education, are Malaysian universities developing cultures of mainstream compliance or meeting challenges at the verdant margins?



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