

Academics and intellectual honesty

IN academic circles, intellectual honesty is deemed a prized item as this is what defines knowledge, the way it is generated and disseminated. Knowledge is debated and scrutinised publicly to ensure that the highest level of honesty is maintained. It is open to all forms of critique by just about anyone interested in the subject. This is a safeguard against any devious agenda held by vested interest groups in promoting the so-called knowledge in the interest of many.

One way to deepen this is to understand intellectual dishonesty as “a failure to apply standards of rational evaluation that one is aware of, usually in a self-serving fashion. If one judges others more critically than oneself, that is intellectually dishonest. If one deflects criticism of a friend or ally simply because they are a friend or ally, that is intellectually dishonest.”

The need for this rigorous and stringent framework is quite plain, namely, for knowledge to be shared it must be well conveyed and be beyond reproach. Only when this is allowed to happen will the majority benefit from it. That is indeed the ultimate purpose of

knowledge and education; the rest are secondary.

Peer reviewed seminars and publications are among the conventional practices to systematically monitor that agreed-upon standards and behaviour are adhered to. Any deviation can result in a “rejection” as an indication that it has not arrived at the desired standards. A revision therefore could be required, although this may not necessarily imply intellectual (dis)honesty per se.

Nevertheless, it does give some impression of how the academic world tries to regulate itself without fear or favour. Being staunchly disinterested parties, academics are bound by their own ethical considerations to stay “neutral” and “autonomous” especially from toxic commercial and political interferences. Otherwise, it could lead to compromises at the expense of knowledge sharing processes which at the end of the day could destroy the very foundation on how knowledge is to be developed to better human civilisation.

Such misrepresentation is a real challenge that can give rise to many types of pseudo- or fake knowledge that tend to “adulterate” the academic mind.



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What is more when such knowledge acquires “commercial” value in a tussle for influence and power. Knowledge quickly becomes commoditised for business.

Some are “manufactured” for interest groups that are bent on manipulating knowledge for their own benefit. Attempts to corrupt knowledge in this way are well known, inciting many to argue for the “humanising” of knowledge, notably in many former colonies.

Through this process, many assumptions can be put up for scrutiny so they too can be regarded as intellectually honest once the gruelling process is over. But this is not easy, because under such circumstances, what is most worrying is whether the operative ambient is ready to promote and protect such honesty. Unfortunately, the short answer is “no” since the ambience is still wanting where academics by and large are “cowed” by the ideas of authorities rather than the authority of ideas. They easily submit to the former as a matter of convenience in playing it safe, thus invariably opening up many more windows to be intellectually dishonest.

In the end, it corrupts the very citadel of knowledge that could no longer be expected to speak up in the search for truth and justice notably for the poor and the marginalised.

The signs of this have been there for a while now. It was not until the issues related to the Rome Statute made it apparent how high the stakes are if the academics remain to be subservient to others by being intellectually dishonest in their career path.

The lessons from the now defunct Majlis Profesor Negara are still fresh in our minds of how things can go ethically wrong when the independence of the academia is taken for granted. Or has no one learnt from such episodes at the risk of history repeating itself? Not only will it bring much disrepute to the already difficult state of affairs we are placed in today, it could well be the final blow over what is left of the fledgling academe locally.

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