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Dec 4, 1974 – a turning point

MY VIEW -
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THIS date was a turning point for higher education in Malaysia. Dec 4 remains a dark spot in the history of education because it could be directly linked to the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1971. The UUCA was tightened to curtail student activism following the Baling incident in December 1974 where thousands of university students of all races gathered in Baling, Kedah, to show solidarity with rubber tappers struggling to earn a living after the decline of rubber prices.

Post-1975, amendments were made not only to UUCA but also other laws to widen the restrictions on students.

By 1996, the impact was apparent. The then opposition leader described it as the main obstacle to Malaysia producing intellectuals and academic figures of world standard. The then prime minister was reportedly quoted lamenting the “missing ‘spirit of adventure’ among Malaysian students, intellectuals and academicians”.

He was wondering where the spirit had gone – seemingly missing the glaring adverse impact of UUCA creating a “culture of conformity” and herd-mentality, and instilling fear as well as mistrust. This is the crux of the issue that lingers. It has ballooned to such a level that academia has lost its benevolent identity.

Before the Act universities could be likened to a haven of intellectual rigour and courage. Although still in its infancy, the oldest university, University of Malaya, served as a role model of what is to be expected from a responsible institute of higher education.

From its establishment, University of Malaya has lived up to that expectation enviably such that its academic culture took precedence over other vested interests notably narrow partisan politics and businesses.

The University Council then was helmed by an opposition party leader (fondly nicknamed Mr Opposition) who also had a private medical practice.

However, he was foremost a public intellectual best recognised by his newspaper column, “Without Fear or Favour”, which clearly defined who he was and his ideals as a people’s person.

By the time a Malaysian took over as vice-chancellor of UM, the tradition largely continued. The university was respected worldwide although catch-phrases and words like “world-class”,

“ranking”, “corporate culture”, “commercialisation” were not only unheard of but were considered foreign, if not an affront to the *raison d’être* of universities. After all, universities were then the fierce custodians of public good.

Meaning to say among the three Malaysian universities then, UM in particular given its long academic and intellectual history, were comfortable with their identity rooted in knowledge *per se*.

For UM its slogan is *Ilmu Puncak Kemajuan*. Generally, the slant is more towards the community where the university belongs – a testimony demonstrated well by its seventh vice-chancellor, who was renowned for iconic social endeavours like Tabung Haji, Angkasa (the national apex cooperative), and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Unfortunately, such social enterprises are less valued by the current leadership.

University students and even staff do not endear themselves to members of the community, unlike earlier where the community was a source of inspiration. Indeed, therein is the wisdom because they begin to learn and appreciate that not all things are “right” when the community is displaced from the centre of “knowledge” that is to be pursued or disseminated.

At the core is the issue of poverty and inequity across the board, symbolically highlighted by the rural areas where its incidence is most prominent. Despite decades of independence, the poor remain poor, while the wealth of the nation has been siphoned out.

There maybe some light at the end of the tunnel of education. At the same time last year, a historic unanimous vote cutting across the political divide took place in Parliament. It was about “curbing” the UUCA but that has a long way to go.