

Political VCs, free speech problem at universities

GEORGE TOWN: Education Minister Maszlee Malik's order for public universities to freely organise forums and other such events has been generally welcomed but one academic views it as only a short-term solution for free speech on campus.

Associate professor Azmi Sharom of Universiti Malaya believes the crux of the problem lies in the political appointment of vice-chancellors, who are heads of universities.

Maszlee has directed universities to allow open participation in academic programmes such as debates, forums and other forms of intellectual discourse, in line with worldwide practices.

While agreeing with Maszlee's order,

Azmi said "you still do not want the minister telling you what to do" and that universities should have allowed for free debates and forums on their own without having to wait for a minister to tell them.

"As long as the vice-chancellors are politically appointed, as they used to be, this becomes an issue," he said. What was required was for amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act, a full review of all university rules, and the appointment of vice-chancellors who are independent of the ministry.

Otherwise he believed there might be a danger of Barisan Nasional, if they won a future general election, clamping down again.

Prof Mohd Tajuddin Rasdi of UCSI University, who also agreed with the minister's order, said universities had been a place for political control but should, instead, "evolve into whatever we think is best for all others beyond the walls of the universities, and not just for some specific people".

He pointed out that Maszlee himself had been barred from participating in such programmes in the past, and the ministry's decision would inspire students who wished to see universities free from restrictions, especially in sharing knowledge.

"Academics have a role to help and elevate the public's knowledge on sustainability, harmony, finance, and economics. But the problem now was that most of them only think about their own self-promotion.

"Nobody goes to conferences except for those who want to present papers. Nothing is reported out of it. Academics don't really care about it," he told *FMT*.

Student activist Ho Chi Yang said local

universities had long been abused by the previous Barisan Nasional government to suppress the thoughts of students, by trampling on freedom of expression and academic freedom of students, academics and researchers.

He cited the example of disciplinary action taken against students who had protested against the 1MDB scandal at a townhall meeting by Universiti Malaya and the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Khas in 2016.

Ho said the university administration had allowed 1MDB chief executive Arul Kandasamy to talk to students but prevented any opposition politicians or government critics from taking part.

Universiti Malaya's rise in world rankings "will be meaningless if we do not promote academic freedom and freedom of expression and a safe environment to pursue knowledge and conduct research without fear," he said. The university has risen to 87th place in the latest QS World University Rankings.

Ho said the minister's directive would not be sufficient without substantial reforms such as the abolition of the University and University Colleges Act, as promised by Pakatan Harapan.