

UNIVERSITY of Malaya (UM) vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Mohd Amin Jalaludin was recently quoted as saying that the university is committed to "academic freedom and rights with responsibility and accountability".

"Universities are not mere transmitters of knowledge but, more importantly, places where new ideas and truths are discovered. It is a place to produce individuals who think critically and who govern and justify their acts with principles," he said.

"This requires an uninhibited environment for the free flow of ideas, free expression of thought and action with the overarching guarantee of academic freedom."

This refreshing stance of the oldest and premier university of the country sends a very important signal as to what education is all about in an era where the role of tertiary institutions is highly contested. Many tend to forget that higher education institutions are in the pursuit of knowledge that safeguards the welfare of the community at large.

Of late, the government has initiated a number of steps to promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy to take the university to the next level. This has had a very positive impact as seen at the recent Conference on Leadership and Governance of Public Higher Education Institutions with its emphasis on autonomy. Hosted by UM and the Higher Education Leadership Academy of the Education Ministry, the focus on public universities raised an interesting observation which implied that their private counterparts have been

# Academic freedom, bedrock of new social contract

more autonomous for a long time.

Metaphorically, the differences between the two have been likened to two vehicles travelling on the same highway but one is subjected to too many toll gates. It is not surprising that private universities tend to be well ahead in carrying out substantial changes, although several of them are led by former vice-chancellors or deputy vice-chancellors of public universities. The latter's loss is the former's gain, facilitated by a greater scope of autonomy.

The oft-repeated reasoning is that since public universities are funded by taxpayers' money, they must be tightly (literally) controlled — at the expense of allowing a university to function like one.

The International Association of Universities, of which UM is a member, is affiliated to the United Nations Organisation for

Education, Science and Culture (Unesco) and based in Paris, has helped to clarify the issue since 1988. It has issued a statement called Academic Freedom, University Autonomy and Social Responsibility that is widely endorsed. Therein the principle of academic freedom is defined as freedom for members of the academic community — scholars, teachers and students — to follow their scholarly activities within a framework



Academic freedom includes striving to advance the frontiers of knowledge through research.

determined by that community in respect of ethical rules and international standards, and without outside pressure.

Academic freedom engages the obligation of each member of the academic profession to strive for excellence and innovation, and to advance the frontiers of knowledge through research and the diffusion of its results through teaching and publication.

It also engages the ethical responsibility of the individual and the academic community in the conduct of research, both in determining the priorities of that research and in taking account of the implications which its results may have for humanity and nature.

For its part, the university has an

obligation to uphold and demonstrate to society that it stands by its collective obligation to be ethical, fair and tolerant; set and upkeep standards when applied to research and teaching; practise due process and institutional review; render account to society; self-verify; and be transparent in the conduct of institutional self-government.

All these go to show that the worth of a university is recognised by its academic freedom and institutional autonomy which are endorsed by Unesco. Since its earliest days, the university has professed intellectual and spiritual engagement with the principles of "universalism" and "internationalism" while academic freedom and uni-

versity autonomy evolve within the setting of the historic national community. Academic freedom and university autonomy must form the bedrock of a new social contract — an agreement to uphold values common to humanity and meet the expectations of a world where frontiers are rapidly dissolving — before universities can serve world society.

It is therefore imperative to respect both academic and institutional autonomies if the boundaries of knowledge are to be enlarged, with universities playing their rightful roles meaningfully.

The writer is president of the International Association of Universities.