Advancing the common good
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IT was US President Woodrow Wilson who remarked that “My own ideals for the university are those of a genuine democracy and serious scholarship. These two, indeed, seem to go together.” President Wilson’s observation may seem idealistic to many as his foreign policy was labelled during his time.

After all, what has democracy to do with universities? Surely tertiary institutions are all about simply teaching students and producing research that counts towards giving the learning institutions a good rank?

The role of a university is to teach students and conduct research. That is its critical function and talk of democracy or involvement in engaging and helping resolve the problems of civil society are besides the point to a university’s mission.

While learning institutions may productively engage with business and industry to advance useful and productive knowledge, involvement in the complex issues of civil society and advancing the agenda of democratic change and reform is more properly the arena of politicians, not universities.

So goes the critique of those who oppose any idea of connecting the mission of universities to the goals of democratic reform, social justice and developing the goals of sustainability, social inclusiveness and dignity.

Advocates of a narrow mission for universities can point to the fact that measuring the success of their mission is easier and more definable than trying to quantify the extent to which a university contributes to the goals of sustainability, inclusiveness and positive democratic cultural advancement.

After all, if it can’t be measured does it really count? Why should we seek to advance goals that are hard to measure, sometimes difficult to define and perhaps even controversial? It seems the advocates of the narrow mission win the day.

"Slam dunk” you might even say! If only arguments were that easy to win. If only the advocates of engaging universities in societal reform and social justice would accept that they have no place in our educational discourse.

Here is the thing. Those who argue for the university to be concerned with sustainability, inclusiveness and civil society don’t fold so easily.

Here is why. Universities rely on their continued acceptance and relevance to society by the fact that they are seen as legitimate institutions in society addressing real concerns.
An over narrow focus on performing against rankings tables without consideration of the good that universities can contribute to society may lead to a “delegitimation” of tertiary institutions in many people’s eyes. Of course, in principle higher education institutions should be able to perform well in rankings and serve the greater social good.

However, in practice if we curtail our notion of a university’s mission to winning on rankings tables, more often than not the more difficult tasks of ensuring that our universities still do the practical and time-consuming work of engaging with sustainability and inclusiveness gets buried beneath the need to get “points on the board”.

Winning on ranking points tables may make good press, but are we advancing the social mission of our universities in the process?

Some may argue that universities need to narrow their focus on outcomes that support the economic aims of national development.

There is no necessary contradiction between this and advancing the social justice agenda.

In fact if we take the current agenda seriously as revealed in the New Economic Model (NEM), we find recognition that national development requires us to engage with the problems of inclusiveness and sustainability as effective preconditions for sustained and realistic development and growth.

Taken at its word the New Economic Model and its discourse of social inclusion provide support for those who advocate a broader agenda for universities in advancing the common good.

Are there any practical examples that I can point to illustrate the argument above? There are many. Universities throughout Malaysia are making significant contributions to advancing the common good and addressing pressing concerns in various ways.

Instances that come to mind include Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s South East Asian Disaster Prevention Research Institute (SEADPRI-UKM), University Malaya’s Centre for Civilisational Dialogue and Universiti Putra Malaysia’s Laboratory of Social Change, Economics and Peace.

I will focus, however, on one case which I think also deserves some mention and acknowledgement. The work of the Right Livelihood College (RLC), which is hosted by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) under the university’s Centre for Policy Research and International Studies (CENPRIS). The RLC’s aims include “education, scientific research, public understanding and practical activities which will contribute to global ecological balance, aim to eliminate material and spiritual poverty, contribute to lasting peace and justice in the world” (http://www.rightlivelihood.org/college.html).
The fact that USM is supporting and housing the RLC is one of many positive articulations of the commitment by it to principles of social justice and reform.

Among the aims of the RLC is to “provide a hub and an incubator for promoting and multiplying the most successful solutions to urgent global problems through the development of information, communications and education activities including web-based learning materials, meetings, networking and an internship and research scholarship programme” (http://www.rightlivelihood.org/college.html).

The work of the RLC in promoting positive examples of best practice in the realm of social justice and advancing alternative ways to recognise and draw attention to positive contributions to improving our common good can be seen, for example, in its support for initiatives such as the Alternative Nobel Prize.

The work of the RLC in promulgating a discourse of concern for human betterment also provides a good case of commitment and support by a university for its social mission.

Universities can contribute positively to issues of social justice and advance an agenda addressing the “urgent global” and local problems that best us without giving up on their research and teaching missions.

Directing universities towards addressing social problems and promoting the common good reinvigorates the sense of public purpose and mission for universities that appear to go missing in contemporary higher educational discourses on ranking, performance indicators and commercial interest.

Compounding this argument is the fact that Malaysian public policy under NEM also recognises the critical ways that inclusiveness, sustainability and social justice must inform development and growth.

Enhancing the way universities engage with issues of democratic empowerment, inclusiveness and sustainability is an important part of the educational input to national development.

Finally, I began the column with a quote from President Wilson. While the sentiment in the quote may be seen as idealistic, there is a developing realisation both within Malaysia and elsewhere that realistic development of our societies must be informed by commitment to ideals in the service of the common good.

Higher educational institutions have a role to play in developing this. Recognising the positive work done towards this agenda and naming some of these contributions is a small way to further the agenda.

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