Comment: Pride and rankings
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THE late Arthur O. Lovejoy, historian of ideas, philosopher and public intellectual, wrote in Reflections on Human Nature that, "the question whether 'pride', admittedly a universal and exceedingly potent passion in Man, has chiefly benign or chiefly harmful consequences in individual and social life".

Lovejoy's Lecture VII The Indictment of Pride in the above volume reminds us that for many thinkers, pride is a primary motivation for human progress and that without it we would fail to compete and move forward. For others, however, pride is the root of all evil and a blight on our human condition.

One way of trying to engage the positive or negative role that pride plays in human affairs is to consider the issue: what is it that we are proud of? If human progress is the result of pride then it follows that for pride to be justified it must engender and inspire positive development. Progress, we can safely assume, entails advancing the common good, social justice and developing human knowledge. For example, in our educational institutions we can justifiably have a sense of pride when we see their contribution to national development, social justice and inclusiveness. There is a lot to be proud of when we consider our educational institutions against such a measure.

The recent release of rankings data from both QS and Times Higher Education has again thrown open the debate on its value for university performance. From higher educational institutions that do well in rankings data we see expressions of pride and congratulation on a job well done. Pride in our universities for some seems to derive from their position on rankings tables. Questions of methodology, validity, reliability and fairness in rankings tables seem to fade under the onslaught of simple rankings tables and their easy to understand presentation.

The higher our institutions go on the tables, the more pride we have in them. Let's for the moment not clutter our thoughts with the problems of validity or fairness. Our institutions place on the rankings tables is the thing. Many of us simply do not know what goes on within our universities and their position on rankings tables is the basis upon which we decide on their success or otherwise. We feel pride when our institutions rise and for some, shame when they fall. Position on the table is the key, what universities do or don't do to get there less well known, and debates over validity, reliability and fairness less understood even more.

The questions that suggest themselves to me are the following. What is it that we are proud of in regards to university achievement, position on a rankings table or the substantive contribution and value that our universities provide to our society? Which is more deserving of our pride?

To illustrate something that we can all agree is a legitimate and well deserved object of pride, let us remember that a few weeks ago Malaysians celebrated Merdeka. This event demonstrated genuine and deep pride for many Malaysians in the achievement of independence from British colonial rule. The growth of national
consciousness, the development of economic security and the maintenance and development of a multi-racial democracy are indeed great achievements and sources of genuine pride.

As I followed Merdeka Day celebrations, I re-read Malaysia's famous Declaration of Independence, (Permasyhuran Kemerdekaan Persekutuan Tanah Melayu). It ends with the following lines: "the Persekutuan Tanah Melayu comprising the States of Johore, Pahang, Negri Sembilan, Selangor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu, Perak, Malacca and Penang is and with God's blessing shall be forever a sovereign democratic and independent State founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of its people and the maintenance of a just peace among all nations."

Despite the many issues and problems that still beset Malaysia, a truly sovereign state was established, one that has maintained parliamentary democracy, advanced a peaceful and constructive foreign policy and pursued economic development in tandem with advancing programmes of social and economic equality and progress. On balance these goals and achievements are a source of real pride for Malaysians. They are substantial goals, and there have been considerable achievements. These targets and accomplishments were set by Malaysians in their own interests and according to their own values. National dignity and pride in this case is based on a balanced appreciation of the advances and values that Merdeka signifies and continues to challenge Malaysians with. The thing is the pride of Malaysians is not arrogant, nor is it uncritical of work yet to be completed and the difficulties of the task. However, it is based on objectives, values and achievements set by Malaysians themselves.

Pride in the achievements of Malaysian independence like pride in Malaysian educational institutions ought to be based on an appreciation that they fulfil goals and values that Malaysians recognise as important. Dignity, which is essential to all human beings, is one of the stakes in this debate. The question that we need to ask ourselves is not where institutions stand in rankings tables. The question is to what extent Malaysian higher educational institutions realise the values, aspirations and goals set for them by Malaysians. Pride as a motivator of human progress can benefit us all. The point, however, is pride in what and to what end? Pride by itself that is not derived from and tied to dignity, social progress and properly directed human development is a questionable human trait.

Lovejoy's essays on pride reminded me that pride in our tertiary institutions and their reputation must be based on a proper and deep appreciation of their contribution to human betterment, dignity and progress. There is much good that is achieved and done in Malaysia's higher educational institutions. Pride in their accomplishments and publicity of the substantive contributions they make to national development and the common good can be a source of genuine improvement and a spur to further work and development that is also needed. Addressing problems and issues in tertiary education is a vital job. The ups and downs of placement on rankings tables seem to me to be of much lesser importance.
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