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Note: A corrected and updated version of this article [appears in my blog](#).

Universities: Misunderstood goals

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MALAYSIAN universities today are very different from those of 10 years ago.

Today, greater emphasis is placed on research output, a measurable quantity that supposedly indicates the overall quality of research done at a university.

Consequently, university lecturers are pressured to publish as many papers as possible at a rapid rate. Furthermore, lecturers are seen as successful researchers if they can patent or commercialise their research findings.

But we should ask: how many Nobel Prize winners have patented or commercialised their research findings?

Knowledge from public universities should always belong to the people (public domain knowledge) for overall social good, and not be protected like some anti-piracy, anti-theft or anti-know-how product.

A lecturer's quality in research work is measured by the number of papers published and where those papers have been published.

Recently, there have been plans to introduce some sort of ranking system where every lecturer will be ranked from No. 1 (top researcher) to the last.

I find this worrisome because one of the reasons I became a lecturer and not some salesman is because I hated the ubiquitous use of "salesman ranking" in the sales sector, where every salesman has not only a target to achieve but also to be the top dog.

Recently, Professor Datuk Zakri Abdul Hamid's comments were published about the irrelevance of university rankings ("Universities and their irrelevant rankings" -- NST, Aug 26).

A Malaysian university, rather than competing with other universities, should aspire to excel in its practical contributions in solving problems locally and abroad.

In other words, a successful university is one that puts theory into practice to solve real problems. Matters such as research output, though important, distract universities from what is actually needed today.

Zakri was also correct to say academic teaching in universities has been unfairly sidelined. It is as if teaching has taken secondary importance (and become almost a distraction) to research.

I firmly believe that the primary purpose of a university is to help in the development of intellectuals.

The university is the highest level at which knowledge can be taught (or learned).

Consequently, a successful university is one that passes down the latest understanding from the knowledge

frontier.

More importantly, a successful university is one that changes and shapes the thinking of students, from a thinking that is narrow and prejudiced to one that is broad and tolerant, from ignorance and aversion to cognisance and appreciation, and from phobia and illiteracy in science to passion and proficiency.

These students, after graduation, are forever altered and in turn contribute in their own way to the positive development of their country and society.

A university can be seen as a mental gym where students enrol to exercise and build their mental muscles and health so that after graduation, they carry with them healthier, stronger, effective and more potent mental prowess to solve problems.

A country full of intellectuals is a successful and peaceful nation, in contrast to one that is cursed with irrational, narrow-minded, intolerant and ignorant people.

The development of intellectuals had been the core purpose of universities in the past, but somehow, this noble purpose has been diluted.

Today, universities are seen by the public as "long-term job training workshops" for employees-to-be.

Universities are supposed to train these people so that they can "hit the ground running" on the first day of their respective jobs.

Yes, I agree that universities should provide the necessary training for students for their career interest, but this training is done as part of the students' intellectual development rather than solely for their future jobs.

Imagine this scenario: a student has been trained for civil engineering at a university but later decides to be an entrepreneur, opening a restaurant instead.

With our current perception of universities, this engineer-turned-entrepreneur is said to have wasted his or her time and money at the university, studying for something that is not being used to earn an income.

A member of the public would feel that a successful university is one that produces top-notch workers, while a member of a university would say a successful university is one that produces lots of research papers and patents and commercialises research findings.

However, both these parties miss the whole point of a university.

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