

AUKU Repeal: Academics Call for Changes in University Administration Culture

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Kuala Lumpur: The repeal of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (AUKU) will only be meaningful if it is followed by changes in university administration culture, including strengthening institutional autonomy and guaranteeing academic freedom and diversity of views, according to two academicians.

According to BERNAMA News Agency, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) senior lecturer Associate Professor Dr. Romzi Ationg stated that academic freedom must be supported by clear guidelines to distinguish between academic freedom and responsibility. He emphasized the importance of university autonomy, protection of differing views, and clear guidelines distinguishing academic freedom, student activism, and disciplinary violations within a mature and responsible democratic environment.

Dr. Romzi highlighted the necessity for students to have the space to critique government, university policies, or political leaders based on facts and in a respectful manner without fear of disciplinary action. However, he stressed that such freedom must be accompanied by responsibility, including respect for the law, maintaining public order, and avoiding defamation, incitement, and threats to security.

He further added that once AUKU is repealed, the limits of student freedom should not be determined unilaterally by the government or university administration but should be based on clear laws, human rights principles, and reasonable academic regulations. He called for strengthening checks and balances through genuinely autonomous university governance bodies, independent appeal procedures, and transparent complaints mechanisms, emphasizing the importance of student representation to ensure justice and accountability.

Meanwhile, UMS political analyst Associate Professor Dr. Syahrudin Awang Ahmad remarked that the comprehensive repeal of AUKU had the potential to dismantle an autocratic administrative structure that had long restricted freedom of expression among certain groups, particularly university students. However, he noted that the effectiveness of the move would depend on the formulation of a new, transparent university law rather than merely rebranding the old legislation, while guaranteeing academic freedom for lecturers and students.

Dr. Syahrudin advocated for full autonomy to be granted to university senates to manage academic affairs, research, and scholarly discourse without political control. He also suggested enshrining guarantees for academic career security and the right to express fact-based views in writing, as part of a holistic approach to ensure intellectual freedom thrives within the campus ecosystem.

He further recommended that the government and university administrations amend university statutes to ensure that differences of opinion are addressed through intellectual discourse rather than disciplinary punishment. Dr. Syahrudin proposed establishing a Students' Union that is legally and financially independent of university management and managed by students through transparent elections. Additionally, he suggested the creation of an 'Independent Student Tribunal' or 'Higher Education Ombudsman' to handle and resolve disciplinary disputes fairly and without prejudice.

For UMS Faculty of Tropical Forestry student Sharmina Ibno Hasim, 21, the repeal of AUKU represents a development that would allow students to express their views more openly. She expressed hope that this change would enable students to voice their opinions to ensure the continued development of the country's education system.

Another student, Sharoll Swine Edward, 22, welcomed the announcement, particularly among those who had previously been vocal on various issues. However, she expressed hope that the repeal of the Act would not be misused by students to express inappropriate views.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had earlier announced the government's intention to repeal AUKU to provide greater freedom and democratic space for the student movement in the country, with the matter to be brought to the Cabinet next Wednesday. Following the announcement, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Zambry Abd Kadir outlined a more comprehensive higher education legislative framework to replace AUKU, as part of the "One Higher Education Act" agenda launched last January.