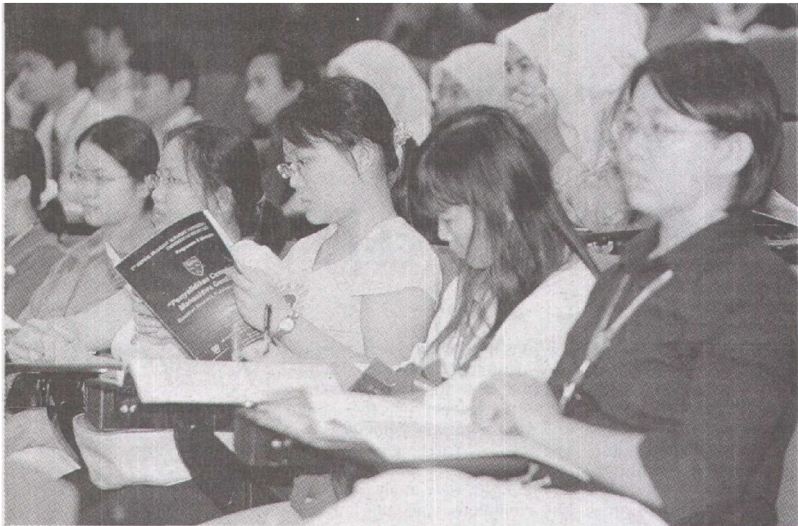


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# Catching 'em young to tackle prejudices

Racial polarisation continues to be the bane of public universities. This scourge must be arrested at kindergartens, writes CHOK SUAT LING



Life at university is a reflection of the world out there.

A STUDENT leader of a public university was recently reported to have written a racially inflammatory statement calling on some groups to be prepared for "any eventuality" in light of the country's political scenario. It warned them not to allow the country to fall into the wrong hands.

While it later transpired that the letter may not have been written by him — he claimed it was a "total fabrication" and lodged police reports — the fact remains that unity and camaraderie among the races were not at a desired level at public universities.

Ethnic polarisation based on language, cultural or religious preferences persists in universities and attempts by government and university authorities to break it down have not been successful.

Universiti Putra Malaysia graduate Simon Ooi Tze Min said there was a need to bring inter-racial interaction on campus to a higher plane.

The secretary of administration for the Malaysia Youth and Students Democratic Movement (Dema) said undergraduates mingled only among their own race, whether at work or play.

The authorities have tried to arrest this behaviour by encouraging the sharing of hostel rooms, setting up unity clubs, drafting an ethnic relations module and discouraging the formation of clubs and societies based on race.

However, as none of this is compulsory, the measures, except the introduction of an ethnic relations module, have all fallen by the wayside.

Ooi said members in campus societies and clubs were represented by one main race, whether it be Malay, Chinese or Indian.

"If a society has largely Chinese members, for example, other students will be reluctant to join.

"Students will also choose to room with others of the same race, and if not guided or advised by lecturers, will clump in mono-ethnic groups for projects and assignments," said Ooi, who graduated two months ago.

Most students attempt to explain it as a "social preference", preferring to be with those who are socially or culturally compatible.

This is based on mother tongue, dialect or geographical origin.

Natasha Razak, a second-year undergraduate at a Klang Valley university, was "more comfortable" with Malay students.

"There is nothing sinister behind this preference. It is just that I find it easier to communicate with Malay students as we share a mother tongue. Chinese students usually converse in English or Mandarin, and Indians in Tamil.

"I also find it easier to confide in someone who shares my language and customs."

She rooms with a Malay girl at the university's residential college. "It is easier this way. I know of a relationship between an Indian and Malay student that turned sour because of religious conflicts. I want to avoid that."

Experts say the root of the problem appears to be parochialism.

Such sentiments, whether intended or not, lead to discrimination and prejudice.

A solution would have to be

one that can untangle this inclination.

However, some academics said at university level, the measures will be too little, too late. Universiti Utara Malaysia Associate Professor Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak said that by then, undergraduates would have developed their own views, inclinations and attitudes.

"Their values have been strengthened at school level. Thus, they must be exposed to our commonalities from an early stage, from kindergarten, then strengthened as they move up to primary, secondary and then university level."

Young children usually have no problems making friends with the other races, he says. "They are not afraid of asking sensitive questions. For them, no subject is taboo. But when we mature, there are many concerns."

When students reach tertiary level, it will be difficult to interact with Malaysians from other backgrounds if they have never mingled with other ethnic groups before, he said.

"It may be odd, even uncomfortable."

He said Chinese students from vernacular schools found it hard to mingle with Malays,

and conversely Malay students who have not had a single Chinese or Indian friend throughout their growing up years will find it tough to interact with them.

"To build trust, we have to start early, before prejudices form. It is not fair to blame undergraduates for not mingling when we have placed barriers before them from a young age. Life at university is a reflection of the world out there."

Polarisation, he adds, is not confined to race, but also between undergraduates from the peninsula, and Sabah and Sarawak.

"The way they speak, even eat, is different. Students from the peninsula find it hard to understand what their peers from Sabah and Sarawak are saying, and vice versa. But now, with more exposure, there has been some improvement."

Ooi agrees. "There is not much that can be done once students are at universities. It is difficult to force them to do anything they do not want to."

He said at school level, certain subjects like history can be used to foster greater racial integration and understanding.

"Unfortunately, the history

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## Lecturers key to dismantling old attitudes

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syllabus does not tell the whole story. Even the ethnic relations module in universities was the same.

"It stipulated that Malays were the only ones who fought for the nation's independence and does not recognise the contribution of the other races in nation-building.

"But there have been improvements in the course since a review."

He said undergraduates' associations and councils must also do their

part. "Dema invites other associations for joint activities. There are forums on sensitive issues like Islamic state and 'ketuanan Melayu'. We have anti-racism and non-discrimination workshops where all students are welcomed.

"We understand the need to break through attitudes and racial stereotyping."

But the ones with the most important role at universities, it has been argued, are lecturers.

How they conduct themselves in class and in their discourses with undergraduates is the key to unravelling this behaviour among students.

Lecturers like Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Professor Dr Yang Farina Abdul Aziz do not believe it is too late to make a difference at university level.

She advises her students to mix freely during her classes. For group projects, she tells them "it would be nice" if they picked members of all races to form their group.

"I tell them they come to university to enrich themselves and that they stand to learn more from others. My students accept this.

"For a recent project on artificial blood, a group of undergraduates comprising a hearty mix of ethnic groups did amazingly well in their presentation. This proves they can work together effectively if they set their minds to it."

Yang Farina believes the attitudes of undergraduates can be shaped.

"This is what the concept of lifelong

learning is about, after all. We have to learn to accept each others' differences and make the most of it."

The most crucial thing, she says, is that there be no pressure or coercion. "We cannot force undergraduates to do this or that. Instead, they need to be intellectually guided."

But she agrees there needs to be some kind of intervention. "Without it, the divide will certainly grow wider."

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