

Headline **University Act? Whafs that?**
 Date **01. Aug 2008** Language **ENGLISH**
 Media Title **The Star** Page No **N63**
 Section **Nation** Article Size **410** cm2
 Circulation **293375** Frequency **Daily**
 Readership **1026812** Color **Full Color**
 AdValue **13017.79**



University Act? What's that?

Let's hope undergraduates will really revel in their soon-to-be granted newfound freedom to articulate the struggles of a developing Malaysia.

SOME of the best years of my life were spent at university. I know I risk sounding like a tired old man, which I am not, but my college days were very interesting indeed.

Seventeen years old and fresh out of school, I enrolled at what was then known as Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM), after having come to the conclusion that being accepted by Harvard or Oxford was unlikely.

Naturally, the chief stumbling block was the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate, which refused to cooperate in giving me SPM grades that would have supported such academic ambitions.

My somewhat uninspiring performance at the SPM examinations played a key role in this, but darn it, I had given it my best shot.

(Yes, I know the saying: Losers always whine about their best. Winners go home and ... uh, do really interesting stuff with the prom queen - Sean Connery in *The Rock*).

So onwards to UPM it was. Which was not a bad place to be, considering that my father was a graduate of the College of Agriculture Malaya (the predecessor to UPM) and he's done well in life - just look at the fine son he's brought up.

But seriously, my years at UPM in Serdang was an eye-opener in more ways than one.

I learned things like self-discipline (clothes can only go so long

without washing before even your closest friends shun you), financial prudence (blowing the bulk of your scholarship in the first few weeks means a *roti canai* diet for the rest of the semester), and about being discreet (if you don't want to share your steaming bowl of Maggie mee with anyone, lock the door and don't slurp).

But more than anything else, I learned about people.

Having grown up in a primarily urban setting during my childhood and teenage years, my experience of those in my age group was naturally geographically bound.

That changed when I went to UPM, where city kids like me were in the minority.

Around me were people who were born and bred in rural areas. They came from small towns, kampongs, longhouses and settlements.

Their life experiences and, consequently, their outlook and worldview were different from mine.

I met people who came from very poor families, whose parents had to borrow money left, right and centre, just to send their children to university and pay for the enrolment fees.

I knew someone who arrived on campus with all of two shirts and two pairs of trousers, all of them very worn, and who sent back to his parents the bulk of his scholarship money every semester.

And I had a friend who before he set foot in Serdang, had never eaten any kind of *mee* or *kueh teow*. (You know who you are.)

I made friends with many of them soon enough, and over the years we developed a strong bond, united by our love of Heavy Metal, cigarettes, and Thundercats.

What struck me most was,

despite the obvious hardship not a few of my friends went through growing up, and the continued day-to-day struggle of their families back home, they never said much about it, let alone complain.

Outside of the usual fooling around (I will not go into the details of what that meant) that young people everywhere engage in, most of us were very much focussed on the task at hand - our studies.

Activism? You have got to be kidding me.

UPM during my time was no hotbed of student activism.

Of course, we had student leaders, but most of us did not give much thought to politics and such, other than follow the developments in the newspapers and on television.

In my seven years there, there was only one time when the students rose up in protest, and about a couple of thousand of us staged an angry demonstration in front of the university administration building.

What was the issue? Well, the university was late in issuing our scholarship cheques that semester.

There was speculation that the

administration was holding back the money to collect interest on it, which was not true.

The reason was of course, a glitch in the system, but try telling that to a mob of supposedly hungry youths.

We carried placards and shouted slogans, and some brought along packets of Maggie mee to show that they were reduced to eating instant noodles, which was debatable, as just about everyone could eat at their respective residential college cafeterias, where the food was already paid for.

Indeed, we were largely an apolitical lot, and I can say with a degree of certainty that the University and University Colleges Act was not what held us back.

To tell you the truth, many of us didn't know much about the Act, other than the fact that we couldn't join any political party and take part in its activities.

In short, we just did not care.

So will the proposed amendments to the Act spur the current and future generations of students to greater sociopolitical awareness and involvement?

Will there be a rush to join non-governmental organisations and other bodies not blacklisted by the vice-chancellor, who will no longer be a political appointee under the proposed amendments?

Will there be a blossoming of activism and intellectualism, as students revel in their newfound freedom to articulate the struggles of a developing Malaysia?

I sincerely hope so, but don't hold your breath.

Raslan Sharif would like to admit to hauling back a thick stack of posters and flyers from a Barisan Nasional ops room one night and plastering them all over a friend's car in the college parking lot.

»Will the proposed amendments to the Act spur the students to greater sociopolitical awareness?«