

STUDENTS' UNION ALLOWS FOR GREATER EMPOWERMENT

There will be more power and freedom but students must realise that these come with a greater sense of responsibility and accountability, writes **DR ZAID OMAR**

IN Malaysia Baru, we fully acknowledge the crucial role of university students in nation building and, more specifically, an effective stakeholder in the higher education ecosystem. It is for this very reason that the Education Ministry is committed to promoting the empowerment of the country's 1.3 million students through various initiatives and policies.

For one, the establishment of the students' union in our universities is expected to pave the way for a democratic and independent student government in campuses, where students are essentially in charge of their own affairs. This marks a departure from the status quo, which dictates the students to rely heavily on Pejabat Hal Ehwal Pelajar (HEP) or the Student Affairs Department to supervise their activities and affairs.

In the students' union era, for instance, activities organised by clubs and societies will no longer require approval by the HEP, rather the student body themselves. Likewise, student representatives will be permitted to partake in university management committees and senate meetings in representing the student interests. Students will have full access to their own finances and accounts currently governed by the university. Campus elections will entirely be run by the student body, with the HEP subsequently assuming the role of advisers and facilitators.

Two, the repeal of Section 15(2)(c) of the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA),



University students during a Merdeka celebration. FILE PIC

tabled by Education Minister Dr Maszlee Malik and passed in Parliament in December, now allows for political involvements on campus. Students are free to declare their political affiliation without prejudice, and political figures from both sides of the divide may now enter campuses to participate in talks, debates and forums.

Indeed, since the proposal was mooted, universities have been very open and active in organising events of this nature. PKR President Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was invited to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), while Pas President Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang gave a talk at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and DAP's Lim Kit Siang returned after 40 years to Universiti Malaya (UM) to speak at a forum. A number of events with other political figures from Amanah, Bersatu, Umno and Pas have also been organised, which augurs well for Malaysia's democracy.

In the midst of all the enthusiasm for this newfound freedom, one thing that may be lost on many is the actual *raison d'être* behind Maszlee's proposal. The establishment of a students' union will allocate greater power and freedom for the students, but they must realise that these come with a greater sense of responsibility and accountability. In managing their organisations and administering affairs on

campus, students are expected to be held to a higher standard in terms of transparency, competency and integrity, similar to any other organisation outside the university. Furthermore, the idea of political participation in a university setting is to spur a culture of healthy debate and intellectual discourse among the campus community, as opposed to mere politics.

As is the norm, we do concede that political speakers will inevitably disagree on a range of issues. Such deliberation is acceptable. However, politicians entering campus must also strive to adhere to a high standard, befitting universities as esteemed institutions of knowledge and learning. Politicking has no place on university campuses, neither should the politicians intimidate the students, or show violent behaviour. The campus community — the management, faculty, students, as well as the public — must be clear and firm to oppose such tactics.

Discussions on students' union have been ongoing at various levels, with good support and positive responses from the public universities thus far. This attests to the readiness of the academic leaders and our student populace in embracing the new framework, as well as their willingness and maturity in allowing the shift in power dynamics between students and university.

The Students' Union Establish-

ment Committee, spearheaded by the Education Ministry, comprises a diverse membership inclusive of three deputy vice-chancellors, a policy researcher, a lawyer, two prominent activists, and a member of parliament.

It is expected that in September, the IIUM will be the first university to partner with the ministry in piloting the Students' Union on campus. Other universities are expected to follow suit by 2020. With regards to the UUCA, student representatives will lead one of the sub-committees on UUCA reform, another initiative by the ministry. It is hoped that the removal of Section 15(2)(c) will be the first step towards wholly abolishing UUCA and establishing in its place a new and balanced legislation for our higher education sector.

Overall, the prevalent view of old that assumes patronage over students and that the "university knows best" is no longer relevant. Our students and youth are the nation's investment. Hence, greater student empowerment will elevate their status as respected members of the society and enable them to become an effective check and balance entity to the government. All this, hopefully, will prepare the students in leading Malaysia towards greater heights in the future.

The writer is the director of student development at the Department of Higher Education, Education Ministry

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