

Giving Malaysian youth movement new energy

THE passing of the amendment to the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act, which sets the new legal definition of youth to individuals aged 15 to 30 years, has caused consternation among many members of the national youth movement.

Several state youth leaders have even declared that while agreeing in principle to the new decree, they would continue to abide by the 15 to 40 age range. Many current youth leaders feel that most of the association members below the age of 30 are not yet capable of carrying the mantle of leadership. Some even fear for the continued existence of their associations if left in the hands of a younger cohort of leaders who may or may not be ready for the challenge.

This is a major structural change that will certainly continue to have ramifications on the national youth movement, which is already facing the challenge of declining membership in many of its associations.

How this issue plays out should be of great concern because organised youth associations provide critical non-formal learning experiences that young people cannot get elsewhere.

Youths are often marginalised from society's organisational power structures. As such, they seldom have the opportunity to experience leadership in organisations that are designed around their

needs and interests.

Youth associations also provide young people with opportunities for meaningful experiential, community-based learning. This makes youth associations a natural training ground for young people to acquire the skills of leadership that they cannot get elsewhere, i.e. the "soft" skills that are so essential today for human and career development. This is also why many leaders of youth associations go on to become national leaders in the political and business sectors.

One of the challenges facing the current Malaysian youth movement is the unnatural barrier between the worlds of formal and non-formal education. This barrier is formalised by the separation and lack of historical cooperation between the Youth and Sports and Education ministries. Yet, between these two ministries lies a potential solution to both the declining level of participation by young people in the formal youth movement on the

one hand and the challenge of preparing the under-30-year-olds for leadership in youth associations on the other.

Opening schools up to youth associations and allowing these associations to work as co-curricular bodies would not only be a tremendous boost to membership but would also help the schools to provide more enriching non-formal educational opportunities for their students. It would also create a more holistic and supportive learning environment with older association members working as mentors to the school-going youth.

Partnerships along these lines would make learning more dynamic for students who are often disengaged due to learning being restricted to classroom settings.

While the debate goes on as to whether the definition should round out at 30 or 40 years of age, few have questioned why 15-year-olds, despite being legally within the age of "youth", have been more

or less excluded from active youth association participation.

If youth associations were active in secondary schools, then leadership training could begin at 15 as opposed to 24 or 25, as is often currently the case. With 15-year-olds involved in the work of youth associations, there is no question on whether they can acquire the experience and training needed to take up leadership roles earlier in their lives.

Our research at UPM on youth development has shown that young people's engagement in communities, an important aspect of non-formal learning, is on the decline. This makes sense because, as membership in formal youth associations decreases, so does youth involvement in organised, community-based programmes and projects.

Having youth associations working in schools as part of the co-curricular infrastructure would greatly increase 15- to 18-year-olds' engagement in service and com-

munity activities, thus providing an important link between classroom and community-based learning. This would begin to break down the artificial walls that separate our learning institutions from the real world.

A serious rethink is needed on the current structure of the agencies responsible for education and youth development. It is my humble opinion that an Education and Youth Development Ministry would effectively marry the complementary institutions of formal education with non-formal education to promote lifelong learning. This would advance the nation's aspiration of developing lifelong learners by looking at education more broadly, which is essential for producing world-ready, service-oriented young people.

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