

# Race is not a factor in private education

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**T**HE best part of my childhood was spent in St Xavier's Institution, my alma mater in Penang. SXI was a truly multi-racial school although there were more Chinese students, given the racial make-up in the state, but we were never race-conscious.

During my primary and secondary education there, none of the students, as far as I can recall, chose their friends according to skin colour.

Even the teaching staff was racially mixed, ranging from the disciplinarian Caucasian Christian brothers, to Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians.

My friends and I played football and watched movies - third class - at cinemas during weekends and we visited each other during festivals. Until today, the Xaverian spirit prevails and the old boys' networking is active.

My education continued at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia - and suddenly I found myself in the minority. The number of Chinese students was so small that most of us knew or at least recognised each other.

The tendency was for each racial group to stick together and the only time spent with fellow students of other races was during lectures and sports events. As a result, the relationship was superficial and given the short time in campus, the bonding, if any, was weak.

Yes, I made some friends with students and lecturers at UKM but I did not experience the kind of spirit found at SXI.

However, since my graduation in 1984, UKM has changed tremendously - it now has more Chinese and Indian students. Regarded as the heart of Malay student activism and nationalism, the willingness of UKM to increase the non-bumiputra intake is a reflection of its open-mindedness.

Over the past two weeks, the call for national integration in private colleges and universities has grown louder, with Umno Youth leaders pressing for more bumiputra students in private colleges.

At the same time, the Government has decided that Mara Junior Science Colleges will take in non-bumiputra students to promote racial integration and unity.

Without doubt, the current scenario of more Malays in public universities and non-Malay students dominating private colleges is unhealthy.

The same appears to be taking place in primary and secondary schools, with Malays studying in national schools while Chinese parents prefer to send their children to Chinese schools.

As Umno Youth chief, Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein Onn is understandably concerned with the racial imbalance in private colleges.

Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamed

announced that the Government would inject more money into the National Higher Education Fund to increase the number of bumiputra students in private institutions of higher education.

Umno Youth could reduce the Government's burden by working with tycoons to set up something similar to the Kuok Foundation where grants, beside loans, are made available to needy students.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, must be commended for rightly saying there would be no 10% quota for bumiputras in private colleges.

Quota is not an issue here. The 10% quota proposed by Hishamuddin is unusual. Why restrict the number of Malay students to 10% if a college or university can accept more eligible bumiputra students!

Private colleges depend on admissions to survive, and race has never been an entry requirement. They would rather have Malaysians enrol, irrespective of race, then carry out promotion exercises to woo students from China and West Asia.

More importantly, politicians and educators must make an honest effort to find out why bumiputra students shun private colleges.

Is it financial constraint or easier entry into public universities! Are bumiputras staying away because of the lack of information or the use of English as the language of instruction? Or is it because they prefer an environment where the majority is Malay?

Umno Youth and private colleges should seriously consider organising an annual education fair, with the participation of banks and the public sector, to encourage more bumiputra students to enter private colleges.

The newly established Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (Utar) found itself rebuked by an Umno Youth leader in the front page of *Utusan Malaysia* for having only one Malay student. The politician had asked whether any effort was made to explain the university's policies to the community.

Earlier, Hishamuddin was reportedly offended by MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik's statement that there was no need for a 10% quota in Tunku Abdul Rahman College because it would accept any number of bumiputra students.

He also said there was no need for the quota as the Government was giving bumiputras ample opportunities in public universities while excellent students were sent abroad on scholarships and study loans.

The concern shown by Umno Youth should be taken in the right spirit. I am sure Utar would want to have as many Malay students as possible if there was more interest.

According to data obtained, there were only four Malay applicants - three of whom were offered places but only one turned up for registration.

An advertisement was, in fact, placed in *Utusan Malaysia* on March 9 providing information about the university while more advertisements ran the following day in newspapers in Sabah and Sarawak.

Students, regardless of race, cannot be blamed for not placing Utar on their priority list because it is a new university. With only a temporary campus and limited facilities, Utar is bound to be less attractive.

Depending entirely on public donations, Utar would never be able to compete with public universities, not to mention foreign university branches like Monash, Curtin and Nottingham.

But the controversy over the past week, which has been handled sensibly by our leaders, should be further discussed within the Cabinet and Barisan Nasional in order to work out practical ways to ensure better racial balance in our universities and colleges.

It is good to note that Hishamuddin has got down to work by meeting two renowned private colleges.

Education is the concern of all Malaysians and it is encouraging to see our leaders giving it priority. However, it must never be exploited for political gains.

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