

Play and work groups forge racial unity

SUN 12 OCT 2002
by Collin Abraham

THE renewed public interest, as shown in the local press, in the setting up of "racial unity" clubs as a solution to the problem of racial polarisation in campuses is encouraging.

The prime minister's call to address deteriorating relations among students of different races at universities by setting up such clubs led to lively debates, with interesting suggestions on how to achieve the objective.

Put succinctly in one of the dailies, "feeling that the universities had made no effort to foster social integration among their students he (Mahathir) had proposed the formation of unity clubs with members of all races".

The universities cannot be entirely blamed for such polarisation for the simple reason that, as is well known, Malaysian society itself is polarised at almost every turn in the pattern of social interaction among individuals and groups from the different communities.

But it is a clear indictment of the universities, that over these past 20-30 years there has been little, if any, evidence that the matter had been seriously researched with a view to being meaningfully addressed.

Either for reasons of lack of concern or limited capacity/capability or both, the approach to problem solving appears to have been bureaucratic, ad hoc and unrealistic, sometimes actually making matters worse.

An initial step in studying the problem was the survey of the 4,000 undergraduates registering for the 2000/1 academic year at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Although limited to basic "profile-type" data, it has been possible, through the application of a theoretical framework to arrive at certain preliminary findings that appear to be relevant not only to campus polarisation itself but particularly to the concept of racial unity clubs.

The main finding is that the concept of integration is not limited to actual physical interaction but also, and more importantly, includes the limited exposure to knowledge and understanding of the divergent life experiences of other groups.

The pattern of responses suggests that on joining the university, students know little about the day-to-day life and aspirations of the other communities.

As a consequence students have a myopic view of many social issues and prob-

lems and tend to see them primarily from the viewpoint of their own racial/ethnic group.

Family background in residential areas more or less sets the basic stage for this limited or lack of social consciousness among students for interaction along multi-ethnic lines.

For instance, the majority of students from mainly mono-ethnic residential areas stated that they interacted only with others from their same ethnic group.

This means that from an early school-going age, when students are most perceptive and least inclined towards racial/ethnic consciousness and stereotyping, they are denied the opportunity for real life exposure to the interactive experiences of multiracial groups.

The meaning of this comes across quite clearly in preferences for sharing hostel rooms. Sixty-four percent of students in mainly mono-ethnic residential areas preferred room mates from the same racial/ethnic groups, whereas only 45% from mainly multi-ethnic areas chose the same.

There were also findings that might be useful for possible activities of racial unity clubs. Just over 80% of respondents from the different racial/ethnic groups were student leaders with experience in organising extra-curricular activities.

They were particularly active in societies and uni-formed groups. The vast majority (including women)

were also active in sports.

It would seem, therefore, that the proposed racial unity clubs should focus on activities where students can work together in areas of common interest rather than simply learn about the different customs, traditions, and religions in abstract.

The responses suggest that students want hands-on shared experiences and one tested way to achieve this is by involving them in socio-economic research and project assignments both within the campus and in planned outreach projects.

There are a whole range of activities designed to improve the quality of life, particularly of low-income groups, also undertaken by certain non-governmental organisations, where the involvement of students during week-ends/vacations would be welcome.

In this way, students will be exposed to new practical situations and develop more realistic experiences in racial/ethnic interactions and at the same time to course syllabi encompassing intellectual and academic concerns.

The impact of this combined approach was proved through the involvement of USM undergraduates in the entire socio-economic field research for the Johor/Pahang regional master plans.

The writer is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research at University Sains Malaysia.