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`Students should share meaningful experiences'

IT'S not a new phenomenon. Neither is it confined to public institutions of higher learning. In private colleges and universities too, students tend to veer to those of the same race.

But it was only natural, said Malaysian Association of Private Colleges president Tengku Shamsul Bahrin.

Students in private colleges were allowed to choose roommates and inevitably selected a friend from the same ethnic group while others chose to live alone, said Tengku Shamsul, who is also the president of Nilai College.

However, he does not characterise the problem as serious or worrisome so long as the students do not reject each other outright or, worse, fight.

Neither does Dr Mohamed Thalha Alithamby, at least not in private educational institutions.

Thalha, who is president of the National Association of Private Educational Institutions in Malaysia, said this was because students in private colleges, even the minority Bumiputera students, had two things in common - they were urbanites and they felt comfortable communicating in English.

There's even less to worry about in Inti College and its vice-president of administrative affairs, Dr Koo Wee Kor, said an international student population made race consciousness quite irrelevant.

It was quite the reverse in public institutions, said Thalha.

Further, he said, in public universities, there was a tendency for the majority Bumiputera students to expect the minority to blend in and if they did not, they were ignored.

But fostering integration is a twoway effort, and all sides must be willing to work at it.

Tengku Shamsul said students could not be made to integrate through enforced policies like sharing rooms with someone of a different race. "They need to share meaningful experiences instead."

In Nilai College, where Malaysians make up 60 per cent of enrolment, the college organises projects which give students the chance to learn about each other.

Thalha said this would be a better than creating a single unity club.

He believes existing clubs should organise activities that make students take on challenges together and build relations, activities where unifying factors, like common interests, are emphasised.

"Not a unity club, but unity in every club," said Thalha.

In Inti College where there were 60 student clubs, instead of formalising efforts to promote racial unity, it simply insisted that both local and international students were represented in all events and projects, said Koo.

Also, universities should discourage organisations that amplify differences between races, like language-based clubs and encourage those that thrive on commonalities.

"Students will form closer bonds during a twoweek field study than they ever will through simply sharing rooms for three years," said Tengku Shamsul.

When students found common ground, it was so much easier to make a connection, he said, citing the example of rugby players who will seek out other rugby players regardless of race, as will those who love drama or

history.

However, if the authorities wanted to pursue the unity club plan, Tengku Shamsul said they should include private colleges in discussions. After all, half of all post-Form Five students study in private institutions.

In fact, one private institution, Sunway College, has already set up such a multi-racial club called "Projecting Racial Integration in Sunway Malaysia" or Prism.

Among the activities planned are Music Appreciation Day, when songs in several languages will be played on campus, and Greeting Day, which calls for everyone to greet one another in a language other than their mother tongue.

Club adviser and college deputy chairman Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam said besides fostering greater cultural understanding, the club aimed to develop prototype programmes that other colleges could adopt.

Both Thalha and Tengku Shamsul said the idea of unity clubs, if well planned and executed, would help bridge the gap between the races. However, larger problems clouded the issue of integration, they added.

"Why pick on the students alone? Check any golf course and see how many adults are playing recreational golf with people of different races," said Tengku Shamsul.

Thalha said what seemed like a lack of integration in universities was, to some extent, a reflection of what was going on in society.

"Each ethnic group has its own political party, life is played out within these organisations and this is carried through to universities."

This is the larger picture that both want the authorities to see, that the coming together of races envisioned by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, will take a lot of hard work and clubs are just a small part of it.

"If universities are thinking about unity clubs, why not look at integration at the primary, secondary and matriculation levels?" asked Tengku Shamsul.

"Why only in universities or colleges, what about housing estates and the workplace?"

"It's all a process. If mixing is a continuous thing, it will be very unusual to find one race rejecting another."