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Let's all come together

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UNITY clubs in secondary schools, multi-racial clubs in universities. With the recent Government proposal to establish the clubs at both levels of education, racial integration will now be an integral part of the students' learning process.

And if the Government's proposal takes off, students will soon participate in work camps and talks in schools. Later at university level, they will organise courses on cultural issues and sensitivities.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said recently that the multi-racial clubs in universities would "enable students of different races to mingle socially in sporting activities and educational outings."

To make such effort more attractive, the Government is also planning to give incentives to clubs which are innovative in fostering race relations among students.

"But how can we mingle if we don't speak the same language?" asked Mohd Khairi Mohd Jaafar, 20, a political science student at the International Islamic University Malaysia in Gombak.

Khairi said communication problem has led to Malay students shying away from hanging out with fellow Chinese or Indian students as well as those from countries abroad.

"Students of the same race also tend to use their mother tongue when talking among themselves, although students from other races are there, too. Indirectly, they are excluding the others from their conversation," he said.

With the establishment of multi-racial clubs in universities, he hoped that students can learn more about cultural sensitivities. He proposed the use of English as the medium of communication.

"It is also important to educate the older generation as well because children 'learn' from their parents on stereotyping people from different races."

Khairi said programmes in universities such as Integration Week could foster better racial interaction, where students can learn more about other's culture through various activities, including performances and food fair.

He also urged the university authorities to abolish common interest-based clubs such as the Persatuan Anak Negeri (for students who come from a particular State) because it encourages racial division.

Dave Sim, 22, from Universiti Utara Malaysia, said the Government's proposal on giving incentives to encourage students' participation can help attract them to participate in the clubs.

"In some universities abroad, credit hours are given to students who are involved in certain community projects and marks will be given based on their performance," said the Science Management student.

Sim also suggested that multi-racial clubs in universities should not be boring.

"Talks and courses are not the best way to get students to learn about each other's cultural sensitivities and customs. It is better to integrate this in fun activities like mountain climbing," he said.

At the university, clubs that are based on single ethnic groups or religion have been banned to allow better racial integration.

However, Tengku Amylia Tengku Perang, 23, a mass communication student from Universiti Putra Malaysia, said religion-based clubs could actually

help promote racial integration in universities.

"In my university, leaders from these clubs meet regularly and discuss ways to promote racial integration. They also organise major events on campus to bring people together."

She added that the proposed multi-racial clubs in universities should involve equal number of representatives from each race so that decisions are not made based on the majority.

At Universiti Putra Malaysia, the annual Lantern Festival is a good example of how various religious-based clubs work together to organise a successful event.

"The festival used to attract only Chinese students but now, people from various races are joining in too," said Chong Siew Fun.

"Apart from the Chinese cultural performances, we now have silat demonstration from the Malays and poetry recitation from the Indians," she said.

Chong also believes that introducing "incentives" in multi-racial clubs to students will not help make racial integration efforts success in universities.

"In the long run, students will only be motivated in the multi-racial club for the reward, which defeats the purpose of having a club," she said.

Certain colleges at UPM, she added, also help to further promote racial integration by mixing students from various races in the dormitories.

Arul Prasad, 19, from Universiti Tenaga, agreed that university authorities should play a more active role in integrating students.

"Right now, the role of the university is very minimal. Students stick to their own races in the dorms, lecture halls and cafeteria and nothing has been done to rectify this," he said.

Arul also said that the proposed multi-racial club could only work when it is compulsory for students to mingle with those of other races.

"In a football tournament, for example, there should be a regulation whereby participating teams should comprise people from various races."