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Two-way flow of students will help promote ties

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ONE of the things Sarawak Chief Minister Datuk Patinggi Abdul Taib Mahmud is rather passionate about is to see foreign students from such countries as Australia spending their crucial formative years in Malaysia, in particular Sarawak, where two Australian universities have already helped set up local institutions.

As chairman of the Malaysia-Australia Foundation, Taib is actively looking into arrangements - including scholarships not unlike the Colombo Plan - which will see some reversal of the student flow from Malaysia to Australia.

Just as many current Malaysian leaders, Taib included, studied in Australia and brought back a lifetime of goodwill towards that country, it is assumed the reverse can happen and would be highly desirable not only in terms of continued good relations between Australia and Malaysia but between Australia and the region.

Nothing brings the need for such engagement into sharper relief than the current problem Australia faces in its relations with its Asian neighbours. It is a problem that has to do with serious gaps in understanding each other's collective worldview that, unless corrected and bridged, will doom any engagement.

Many Australians are now tearing their hair in despair over what they perceive to be insensitivity on the part of their Asian neighbours in the latter's reactions to what Australians would regard as sensible and understandable precautions and actions to protect themselves from the harm they were exposed to in the Bali bombings.

I have an Australian friend living and travelling much in this region who, even in the face of news of Australian mosques being vandalised and Australian Muslims being intimidated, intimated with the utmost sincerity and no sense of irony that his country is a model of multicultural tolerance.

Unfortunately, many Malaysian students and immigrants in Australia unquestioningly swallow this somewhat spurious "Australia-as-multicultural-model" story whole, and often go to the extent of comparing their own country unfavourably with Australia. In the process perhaps they help to poison ordinary Australian perceptions of our country, and confirm them in their deep-seated prejudices of their neighbours.

A programme to bring in sizeable numbers of Australian students into the country is therefore, above all, a timely reflection of our confidence that while we may not be perfect in every way, this country stands up well to close scrutiny and serious interaction.

No country can completely please all its citizens and, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said, that cannot anyway be a true test for a country with such unavoidably serious racial fissures as ours.

The true test, he has noted, lies in how we have managed to spread inevitable unhappiness, dissatisfaction and unmet expectations more or less evenly throughout. This shows that no identifiable group in Malaysia gets everything it wants because doing so will necessarily mean taking from others.

Malaysians who have the benefit of soaking in Western cultures while studying in Western countries almost instinctively understand Western thought processes. The reverse needs to happen if countries such as Malaysia and Australia are to develop a fully mature and healthy

relationship.

There will then hopefully be less of the unrealistic exhortations for Australia to become "more Asian" or us to be "more Western" in our respective outlooks.