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Unity clubs to take off in public universities from next year

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Unity clubs aimed at bridging the gap among students of various races will be set up in all public institutions of higher learning next year.

Students will be able to sign up at the start of the May/June 2003 academic session. Participation is voluntary.

The idea was suggested by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is worried about deteriorating race relations among students.

The Education Ministry has discussed issues like club structure, activities and financing, according to Department of Higher Education director Dr Hassan Said.

Ideas and suggestions from these preliminary discussions will be brought to the meeting between the Education Minister and vice-chancellors and rectors next month.

Hassan said issues of unity and segregation on campus were likely to be high on the agenda.

Though the situation was "under control", he said the department was worried about lack of co-operation among students of different races.

"We have noticed that when one ethnic community is facing a problem, others don't offer to help.

"Shared values are becoming less important to students."

He admitted that many universities had not resolved the problem of students' reluctance to share rooms with people of different races.

"They still have reservations about sharing rooms with students of different religions or cultures."

Shared accommodation was one of the issues raised by Dr Mahathir last month when speaking on racial integration in universities.

He noted that the Government had introduced this as a means of fostering racial integration but added that there had been no positive efforts in this direction at universities.

Hassan said although the ministry did not have a written policy, it had told universities three years ago to make a concerted effort to encourage the sharing of rooms among students of various races.

The ministry had also told universities to approve only those new clubs in which all races were well represented.

Asked how universities could persuade students to join unity clubs, Hassan said activities would be arranged in such a way that they were interesting.

He added that students who did join would be asked to reach out to others who were reluctant to do so.

Hassan said the clubs would be supervised by the university's student affairs division and their progress monitored by the ministry.

Asked why it was necessary to introduce a new club to foster integration in universities, he said: "The problem with existing clubs is that while they have developed strengths in certain fields, they have forgotten the national goal of fostering integration.

"We have always told universities to keep this in mind but I think we have become complacent because Malaysia has always been a peaceful country."

Asked about participation of private colleges and universities, he said they would be invited to join discussions at a later stage.