

# Racial barriers still evident

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** The canteen at Universiti Malaya's science faculty was bustling with chatter at 9.30am when I walked in yesterday.

I was there to observe the level of racial integration among students.

I had done the same last November, and it gave me an opportunity to see if there had been any changes since.

At first glance, the canteen crowd was multiracial.

The canteen was three-quarters full and bustling with chatter in Malay, Tamil and Chinese dialects. Just a few spoke in English.

I saw a group of Indian students and many groups of Malay students sitting at round tables, which could seat up to eight.

Not all the seats at the tables were occupied.

So when the canteen seats start-

ed to fill up fast, some students shared the tables with others, regardless of race.

The ones seated earlier obliged in a friendly manner.

But once they had settled down, there was an absence of communication among the different racial groups.

But I noticed a pair — a Chinese and a Malay girl — who were obviously good friends. They spoke mostly in Malay.

A group of three Malay girls came to sit with them.

But the new group did not talk to them, not even to the Malay girl.

It made me think that maybe the students of the same race were not sitting together because they just did not know each other.

Some light was shed when science students Anuradha Kanasan, 23, and Nur Afini Md Saad, 22,

came to sit near me.

They became friends two years back just by saying "Hi" when they sat next to each other in a class during their second year.

It was the start of a close friendship when they both found out that they were from Kedah.

Since then, they have studied, eaten and shopped together.

I asked them about the racial segregation apparent in the canteen.

"I think they do not eat with one another because they do not know each other," Anuradha said.

"I think language also plays a part. If you can't speak another language well, it is difficult to interact," said Afini.

During their first year, they experienced "culture shock" when they saw only students of the same race mingling with each other.

The lecturers had to ask students to mix during their lectures.

"You will see students sitting with other races because they are forced to," said Anuradha.

Lee-Pei Pei, a 23-year-old from Ipoh, attributed it to "the school system and the environment they grew up in".

Student Law Yee Song said he had friends of his own race until Form Two when he was made prefect at SK Datuk Abdul Rahman Andak.

"My added responsibility forced me to get to know students of all races."

But he often mixed with his Chinese friends.

"It is a cultural thing. I like Chinese movies and Chinese food. Only my Chinese friends would be interested in joining me." — By Rina De Silva