

Don't curb students' enthusiasm

N.S.T 9/02/07 M/S 16

OUR students in the UK are, oh, so shy, so unassertive, they keep to themselves, they don't mix? I am surprised that the Minister of Higher Education is surprised. This is not a new problem.

When I was studying in the US in the 1970s and 1980s, there were "kampung Melayus" sprouting on campuses in several universities in the Midwest. Friends complained of surveillance, peer pressure and anonymous letters slipped under their doors or sent home to the Public Service Department by fellow students if they were seen to be too close to too many Americans.

Even in Indonesia, our students don't mix. A friend teaching at the Islamic University in Jogjakarta says the Malaysian students on her campus are so totally unassertive and disinterested and pursue the easiest of courses taught by the easiest of lecturers.

They avoid the many discussion groups that flourish on and off campus which bring together students and activists to discuss the latest books, ideas and debate on current issues. They would not take part in the many training sessions on human rights, democracy and women's rights.

Actually, we the taxpayers are not getting value for the millions of our tax money spent on scholarship for these students who might as well remain in Malaysia if they only want to be "jaguh kampung"

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stepped into campus.

Woe betide those who stepped out of the box. An anonymous letter would be slipped under their door "condemning" them to hellfire and damnation.

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their parents' hard-earned money to beyond the stipend of A1s for which class on having lecturers who

...in Malaysia if they only want to be "jaguh kampung".

Our young adults are losing out in a competitive world that is hungry for talent. In the end, it is Malaysia that will lose out.

In 1980, I wrote about racial polarisation on our university campuses and how some of the bright and articulate students I interviewed at the University of Malaya called it the Pantai Valley High School.

It was not the exciting, enriching university life they envisaged, but a life restricted and regulated by the Universities and University Colleges Act. In school, they had freedom to write letters to whomever they pleased, be it to make a school visit to a factory or a palace museum.

Imagine their shock when they found out that at university, all letters needed to go through the Dean of Student Affairs. And they were often reminded lest they were hatching rebellions, any unauthorised gathering of more than five constituted an offence. How to be assertive?

And the racial polarisation; everywhere on campus Malay students were with Malays, Chinese with Chinese and Indians with Indians — be it at the canteen, at the library, walking the streets from class to hostel and back.

The students spoke of how they were corralled into racial blocs by their seniors the moment they

my education was so shocked by my findings that he decided not to publish the story. It does look that after 26 years, nothing much has changed.

When I recently told this story to a professor at the University of Malaya, she said she would be so lucky today to find a student astute enough to even make a remark about a campus life that is more akin to secondary school.

Most days, she says, she feels like pulling up her students by their collars to breathe life into them.

So dear minister, they are, oh, so shy, so unassertive, so not mixing with others on home ground as well. And it's been going on for over two decades.

There is obvious awareness and concern by the country's leadership that much has gone wrong with our education system, our socialisation and politicisation that have produced these unassertive, inarticulate, intellectually and socially disengaged, racially segregated and unemployable graduates.

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A friend runs a programme that exposes students to literature, music, art, critical thinking and public speaking before they spend more of

their parents' hard-earned money to study abroad.

These are straight A students, whose parents woke up one day to realise that darling Johan and Janine who scored 11 A1s in SPM actually lack the cultural literacy necessary to succeed and get the best out of university education in the West.

My friend and her team of trainers were stunned that these students did not know a single fairy tale. An exercise to rewrite Hansel and Gretel from the witch's point of view drew a blank; when asked if they knew other fairy tales, they did not. They had not heard of Winston Churchill even though they all got A1 for history.

They had never seen nor met a person in a wheelchair; they had never been to an art gallery or a museum, in spite of living in Kuala Lumpur and enjoying annual holidays abroad. One boy was passionate about studying aviation engineering and wanted to own an airline, but had never heard of Tony Fernandes.

Life for these kids revolved around school, tuition, shopping malls and computer games. What they did not know, they felt they didn't need to know.

And yet, they wanted to go to Cambridge or Stanford and wanted to do well in their interviews and essays; but they had nothing much to say about themselves and their interests

beyond the string of A1s for which they were rewarded and their parents applauded. Eleven A1s and not an ounce of zest to spare does not a successful life make.

At the other end of the scale, I do meet students and young people who are far from shy and disengaged. They have friends from different races and different countries, they read voraciously, they go to museums, concerts, plays, they backpack to the islands off Malaysia and Thailand and through God-forsaken countries of the world, they listen to world music, they speak their minds.

I meet young university students who dare to organise events outside the campuses, campaigning against the UUCA and dirty student elections, giving free tuition to squatter kids, cooking free food for the homeless, hanging out with non-governmental organisation activists and theatre practitioners.

These young people live their lives to the full, ever teetering on a fine balance between family, friends, fun and studies or a budding career of their choice.

What makes them different? For some, it might be class, but for most others, it is exposure.

Whether growing up in a family that eats, reads and talks together, or getting exposed to the works of Alice Walker and Maya Angelou in English

class, or having a lecturer who loves the theatre and drags his students to all the plays in KL, or meeting an inspiring aging ex-student leader who wanted to join the university social club but ended up in the socialist club.

By design or by accident, it is exposure to adults who opened up their minds to other possibilities in life that made a difference to the lives of these effervescent young people.

A friend's 15-year-old daughter complained how the teachers at school (a premier school, mind you) say no to everything suggested by the students — be it to organise a talent-time (what would parents say if you kids wear sexy clothes), a Halloween party with the neighbourhood children (oh no, it's Western culture), dance and music classes (cannot, must "jaga diri"), regular field trips to museums, orphanages, school for the blind (too many permissions to ask, forms to fill and transport to organise).

That many of the shy, unassertive students and young graduates have potential is without doubt.

The tragedy is we adults have failed them as we pour cold water over their ideas or just remain indifferent to their natural instinct to explore, discover, innovate, take risks, be different. It is our fault because we shut the doors and windows on them.