

Campus Political Groups Must Take Leap Of Faith

The Straits Times Forum Online Story (September 13, 2011)

CERTAINLY, it is hard to ascertain the levels of political awareness in tertiary institutions because of different individual expectations and - given the increasingly participatory nature of politics - dissimilar attitudes towards socio-economic issues ("2011 Generation"; last Saturday).

Still, excitement from the back-to-back elections has certainly raised interest levels among undergraduates and empowered campus political associations with larger memberships and greater enthusiasm.

But are these groups capitalising on these advantages, or will the interest generated wane as time goes by and pragmatic, personal concerns take the front seat?

University political groups should hold constructive activities to maintain and ramp up interest - introduce focus group discussions, complemented by studies or research; publish policy papers or other documents following dialogues or exchanges; and organise large-scale gatherings for an assortment of causes in school or in the community.

Online insights and opinions can be discussed in smaller focus groups. University political associations can serve as moderators to encourage participants to have their say; the small sessions can also be value-added with invited administrators from the ministries.

The idea is to start moving ideas and concepts into real, implementable policies or initiatives; the fact is that these organisations - well-placed within the local universities - have potentially vast manpower and resources to tap.

The problem with existing forums is that they are excessively large-scale, which makes them unproductive for proper, in-depth exchanges to take place.

The status quo is unsustainable. With events such as focus group discussions and other seminar series, the stakeholders can gradually promote the submission of policy papers and documents to the public service for consideration.

The point is to start showing takeaways from these dialogues, and make a gradual difference through action.

In the long term, our colleges must become hubs of change and activism. Large-scale gatherings might not deliver the most in terms of tangible change, but these activities are useful for raising immediate awareness of pertinent issues and function as conduits for proposals of change in school or in Singapore.

Unless student groups are willing to take a leap of faith and be more adventurous in organising useful vis-a-vis sessions to produce tangible results, not much will change in the years to come.

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