

Welcome change

MOST Malaysians have traditionally chosen to read political science, sociology, anthropology and the other social sciences in English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, not France or continental Europe.

The possible collaboration between Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Paris Institute of Political Sciences), often referred to as Sciences Po, and Malaysian tertiary institutions will expose Malaysian students to a different form of social science.

"France and Germany are two of the social science powers, apart from the UK and the US, but, most of the time, there is a blind spot to our modes of learning due to language.

"Reading French works on history and sociology will provide a different cultural context on intellectual production from that part of the Occident," says Universiti Teknologi MARA's (UiTM) Centre for Intellectual History and Malay Thought chairman Associate Professor Dr Ahmad Murad Merican.

Ahmad Murad is commenting on Sciences Po's interest in linking up with Malaysian tertiary institutions.

Agreeing with Ahmad Murad, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia social anthropologist and director of Institute of Ethnic Studies (or its Malay acronym KITA) Professor Shamsul Amri Baharuddin says: "The majority of the great classical social philosophers are not from English-speaking intellectual traditions and their original works are in French, German or Italian and translated later into English.

"This partnership will connect us directly with one of the most important sources of the world's academic and intellectual traditions in the Occident."

Malaysian institutional educational collaboration with France was created a few years back with the establishment of Malaysia-France Institute (MFI), which prepares Malaysians who have been selected to go to France for further studies, Shamsul says.

However, MFI deals mainly with candidates who are doing basic and applied sciences.

Malaysia needs to establish a collaboration with France in the field of social sciences, an area that the French are reputed to be the most inventive and intellectually at the forefront.

"Malaysia can benefit much intellectually as well as in terms of developing its resources on policy studies and issues as Sciences Po is one of the leading research universities in the social sciences in Europe," says Ahmad Murad.



Original works are in French, German or Italian, says Shamsul

"The time has come for us to venture into studies of the social sciences from non-English-speaking nations — not only France, but also Germany, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, and perhaps Italy and Spain," he says.

"We take for granted that knowledge and perspectives are the same, but they are different depending on which language we read," says Ahmad Murad.

Much of Malaysia's social sciences has been imported from England via the colonial administrators and many Malaysians assume that there is only one form of social sciences.

There are variants and significant differences — intellectually and ideologically — on certain themes, such as development studies, international relations, communication, sociology and anthropology, between the UK and continental Europe, and among the European countries themselves.

The collaboration between Sciences Po and Malaysia also indicates that the French are opening up and looking east.

Sciences Po has made commitments with countries such as China, India, Japan and Korea by establishing chairs at its Asia Centre.

These developments, indicative of the French effort at globalising knowledge, are aimed at developing its own curriculum and studying issues pertaining to economics, development, governance, poverty, demographics and society in Asia and the east.

The interest in Malaysia is due to its economic dynamism in recent decades. It has been shown over the years that scholarly and academic interests on nations and societies correlate with strategic and



Perspectives depend on language, says Ahmad Murad

hegemonic interests.

"The field of social sciences in Malaysia has grown exponentially over the last 50 years, in terms of empirical data and quantitatively, but it is still much underdeveloped qualitatively," says Ahmad Murad.

In a sense, this is a wake-up call for Malaysian social science scholars to develop and enhance conceptual and theoretical discourses, and not merely function as second-rate intellectuals by providing empirical labour to the partner institution outside.

This is a significant move — not so much a moving away from English-speaking social science traditions, but more of a diversifying of Malaysian sources of knowledge in the field.

"We have to internationalise ourselves where intellectual traditions and modes of knowledge production are concerned," Ahmad Murad says.

Different cultural and language traditions produce varied intellectual perspectives and world views.

The Germans, Dutch, Scandinavians, the different European societies surrounding the Mediterranean, the Slavic world and the Russians have their own intellectual traditions.

The French idea of history, or communication, or international relations, for instance, is distinct from that of the British or Germans.

"As such, knowing the social sciences through the different traditions would lead us to view politics, culture, secular life and even the sacred from totally different dimensions and perspectives.

"And perhaps, too, this would further enrich our lives in how we translate our everyday thoughts and actions," says Ahmad Murad.