

Instilling nationalism and unity through General Studies

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As the ones who will be holding Malaysia's reins in the future, the nation's young citizens must possess a strong nationalistic spirit and love for the country's diverse society.

General Studies or Matapelajaran Pengajian Umum (MPU) is one course with a few subjects, offered at tertiary institutions in the country to strengthen these values among students. It was first introduced in September 2013 and was made compulsory for all students in public and private higher education institutions in the country.

The Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education (MoE) stated that one of the objectives of the subject was to produce holistic graduates and instill a sense of patriotism and nation building in the younger generation.

According to a statement from the department, graduates need to have intellectual skills to become more responsible citizens. This can be achieved through creating awareness of a national identity and volunteerism which are the main objectives of MPU.

Compulsory only for Malaysian students, Ethnic Relations or Hubungan Etnik is a subject offered in MPU which revolves around the dynamic social relations between Malaysians.

Other subjects offered in MPU include Islamic and Asian Civilisations (TITAS), Malaysian Studies, Entrepreneurship Skills and Bahasa Melayu Komunikasi.

Dr Wendy Yee Mei Tien, member of the Technical Committee for Enhancing General Studies in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions and a Universiti Malaysia (UM) lecturer, said: "The MPU courses comprise four main categories, which are appreciating philosophy, values and history; mastering humanity skills; broadening knowledge about Malaysia and global issues; and developing community-minded skills."

"In Ethnic Relations, which falls under the first category, students learn about the many important core values and concepts with regards to race relations," said Yee.

THE COURSE

Social cohesion is an important concept in Ethnic Relations, according to Yee, who is also the UM Internship Training and Academic Enrichment Centre (Citra) director.

"On social cohesion, we talk about the peace and stability that Malaysia has achieved after 62 years of independence. The state of stability that we enjoy today is due to the strong social bond among Malaysians. This is demonstrated through the consensus, compromise, tolerance and the accommodating spirit that we share," she said.

Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) Tun Tan Cheng Lock Centre for Social and Policy Studies Chairperson Associate Professor Dr Chin Yee Mun echoes the importance of social cohesion.

"In this subject, students are taught about the social reality of Malaysia's multi-ethnic environ-

ment. Malaysians need to live cohesively. There were times in the past when we were in conflict, but we have improved and learnt to appreciate social cohesion," said Chin.

The subject provides students with a better understanding of ethnic relations from both the historical and contemporary perspectives, according to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Ecology Faculty senior lecturer Dr Mohd Mahadee Ismail.

"The course looks into how all aspects of life — politics, law, economics, religion and education — play an important role in establishing a harmonious ethnic relationship.

"For example, students are exposed to the cooperation between race-based political parties in Malaysia. Through such collaboration, we maintained the country's stability and achieved immense progress. So, students will understand the importance of ethnic relations through political cooperation," said Mohd Mahadee.

"They will learn how the nation transformed into a society of interdependence. This brings about a shared sense of belonging," he added.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Pusat Citra Universiti deputy director Associate Professor Dr Mashitoh Yaacob said: "Ethnic Relations is included in the Citra Compulsory Courses category in UKM. The course exposes students to the nation's heritage and history. They will be equipped with noble values to interact with others in a multi-ethnic society."

"The subject teaches students that diversity is a strength for the nation, not a liability. Students will learn about unity in diversity," said Mashitoh, who is also a member of the Technical Committee for Enhancing General Studies (MPU) in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions.

"Students will be aware of cultural exchanges and the common values that Malaysians share. For instance, everyone eats nasi lemak and wears baju kurung. In a typical Malaysian conversation, you will see people speaking in at least two or three different languages in a single sentence," said Yee.



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Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman Creative Industries Faculty Dean Dr David Tneh Cheng Eng (left) with the students who won the king and queen title for Patriotism Day.

Students of various ethnic backgrounds waving the Jalur Gemilang at the Universiti Putra Malaysia 61st Independence Day Celebration.



CONCEPTS

In Ethnic Relations, students delve into the concepts of stereotypes, prejudice, racism and discrimination.

"Students can first reflect upon themselves to see whether they harbour any stereotypical views or prejudice towards other ethnic groups, without realising it. Once they start to recognise their negative tendencies they can become better Malaysians," said Yee.

"Through self-reflection, students will not fear or deny differences. Instead, they develop a deeper understanding of people from different cultures."

Yee also said students attain inter-ethnic maturity and social relations literacy, adding: "Acquiring these tools will enable them to sieve through the negative narratives and influences in their lives. These include biased news, social media reports and political rhetoric. This is important to build the foundation for a stable and harmonious society."

Mohd Mahadee added: "It is important for all Malaysians regardless of race to understand the differences which exist in our society and to develop mutual tolerance."

"We share many similar values which makes

the best foundation in building a united nation. Through this course, students can form a deeper understanding about other cultures."

The subject also exposes students to the sacred and forbidden taboos of an ethnic group. "Students will learn why an ethnic group practises a certain taboo or tradition. It enables students to put themselves in other people's shoes and develop empathy," said Yee.

"Understanding the taboos held by different ethnic groups can encourage mutual respect for each other. This can foster unity among students," said Mohd Mahadee.

Highlighting the importance of empathy, Yee added: "Students need to know how similar we are to each other. The pain of having a fever or of a mother delivering a baby is the same across ethnic groups. The blood that runs in us is the same. We should not be torn apart by superficiality when deep down there are more commonalities within us."

"All UTM students must pass this subject but it does not contribute to their CGPA," said Mashitoh.

"Normally, UPM students score good results in this subject. If they fail, they have to retake the subjects," said Mohd Mahadee.

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COURSE ASSESSMENTS

Coursework is carried out in groups which require students from different races to work together.

Mohd Mahadee said: "Students are strongly encouraged to form a team that can reflect Malaysia's identity. Through a variety of tasks and assignments, students of various ethnic groups get to know and understand each other."

Yee said: "In Universiti Malaysia, we make it compulsory to have group members from different ethnic groups. When students work together, they will develop empathy and compassion that goes beyond their own race."

Chin said: "This subject encourages students to explore Malaysia's society through assignments. Normally, students have to conduct a simple descriptive study on various issues concerning Malaysia's diverse society."

"This assignment will encourage students to come out of their ethnic cocoon to talk to

people from various ethnic backgrounds. Hopefully, this will trigger more interactions and deeper understanding of people from other cultures."

While this subject is compulsory, the grading system is different in each university.

Yee said: "In UM, students taking Ethnic Relations are required to sit for final examinations which contributes 30 per cent to their grade."

"In UKM students of the subject are graded and the grades are included in the students' CGPA," said Mashitoh.

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SIGNIFICANCE

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) vice-chancellor Professor Dr Mohd Azraai Kassim said that the Ethnic Relations subject puts emphasis on developing responsible citizens with positive inter-

ethnic interactions.

"UiTM prioritises the development of patriotic spirit among students to fulfil the government's desire to build a multi-ethnic society with love and respect for religion, race and the nation."

"The courses including Ethnic Relations are very relevant in achieving the Education Ministry's goal in the application of moral values, national identity, cultural understanding, self-awareness and interpersonal skills."

Graduates are also expected to develop moral values, a sense of responsibility and a patriotic spirit," said Azraai.

Yee said that the course is relevant as diversity is Malaysia's greatest asset.

"The course may not directly land you a job or put food on the table but it builds the foundation for a stable society. If a society is unstable

or in conflict, it no longer matters if you score 4.0 or graduate with a top degree. You won't be able to secure a job."

Noting that attitudes do not change overnight, Yee added: "The subject can at least create awareness and give students an opportunity to learn about each other. Without knowing each other, students can become ignorant of other cultures which may lead to suspicion and distrust. This will eventually lead to fear and hatred."

"Dispelling the ignorance is a measure of effectiveness. We may not be able to see immediate result but a transformation will happen."

Mashitoh said: "A conclusive study needs to be conducted to find out whether there is a direct correlation between MPU courses and students becoming better citizens."

"However, in my view, the courses play a vital role. Based on studies conducted by Pusat Citra Universiti, UKM, we have received positive feedback from students who underwent industrial training as well as our graduates. MPU courses, in one way or another, have contributed to them becoming better Malaysians."

According to Chin, while MPU subjects such as Ethnic Relations can educate students, external factors also play a role.

"Developing positive relationships with other ethnic groups is a life-long learning process. We are trying to instil these seeds but there are multiple factors such as politics, family background and peer influence that come into play."

"In my view, the course is significant for nation building. It is an investment to develop a more mature-minded human capital and to maintain the harmony in Malaysia," said Yee.

Mohd Mahadee said: "This subject constitutes a unifying feature of our multiethnic society. We need to continue teaching it to ensure that students appreciate the true identity of Malaysia and become patriotic citizens of our beloved country."

"Without unity, it is possible for the country's wellbeing to be disrupted. We need to unite to reduce ethnic gaps and societal conflicts that could endanger national security."

Having recently revised the curriculum in 2017, the MoE is in the midst of revamping the MPU syllabus again.

"The new syllabus will incorporate more elements on patriotism and ethics. It will also include current issues related to the economic, political, social, cultural and environmental landscape based on philosophical and ethical theories," said a representative from the MoE's Higher Education Department.

Mashitoh, who has been involved in designing and reviewing MPU courses at the national level said: "Changes to the content and focus of MPU courses are inevitable to move forward in meeting the current needs of the society."

"In UKM, changes to the courses are made as a result of rigorous studies and reviews of the structure and curriculum, feedback from both internal and external stakeholders as well as benchmarking exercises with local and international higher learning institutions."

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

The subject enabled UiTM student Vellarie June Jeffrey Lungin, 20, from Penampang, Sabah, to be more educated about Malaysia.

"It is very important for young Malaysians to learn and appreciate the different cultural values because our generation will be shaping the country's future."

"This subject can help students become better Malaysians as we will sit alongside others who are of different religions and races. We work with them, exchange ideas and learn to accept others' opinions."

"Unity is the foundation of a patriotic spirit.

OBJECTIVES OF GENERAL STUDIES:

1. To produce value infused and value driven graduates in line with the goals of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan

2. To produce holistic graduates, instill the values of patriotism and nation building

3. To enhance students' soft skills for graduates' employability

4. To strengthen the knowledge about Malaysia

Source: The Higher Education Department of the Education Ministry

NST

When we're united, we will strive together for the peace and harmony of our country," said Vellarie, who is a Kadazan.

The Ethnic Relations subject is a platform to learn in depth about various ethnic groups according to UM Applied Chemistry student Arif Zuhair Mohd Anuar.

"I learnt about the beauty of the diversity of cultures. I can find the universal values in each culture to apply in my own life. Once we get to know each other, a mutual understanding will develop. This way, we may avoid any inter-ethnic challenges in the future."

UTAR Civil Engineering student Wang Wei Dong, 21, said: "In my opinion, this subject is important. We can learn more about Malaysian history and how our ancestors built a country that we can live in peacefully."

UPM Biomedical Sciences student Yasothaa Velusamy said that the course allows her to understand the issues of ethnic prejudice and discrimination.

"This subject improves our general knowledge in terms of various ethnic relations in Malaysia. More importantly, the younger generation needs to respect each other's religion and culture. By learning this, students become better and more united citizens."

Giving her suggestion, Yasothaa said: "Universities could employ more effective learning methods as some students may feel forced to score in the subject."

Wang said: "Aside from this subject, I think the government can raise more awareness about the importance of patriotism on social media."



Reserve Officers Training Unit (Palapes) marching at the UPM 61st Independence Day Celebration.