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THOUGH most tertiary students will not be returning to campus until October, public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) have been putting in effort to ignite the Merdeka spirit among staff and students.

The celebrations will be a unique one this year, as the country continues its fight against the Covid-19 outbreak.

The pandemic however, can be viewed as an uncustomary way of appreciating the true spirit of Merdeka, academics believe.

Prof Datuk Dr Mohd Hamdi Abd Shukor said Covid-19 has taught Malaysians the value of freedom.

"Many of us were 'trapped' in our own home for months when the infection was rampant.

"This experience could probably be the closest thing the younger generation will understand what it is like to not have independence," he said.

The Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia vice-chancellor emphasised that the pandemic should not be a hindrance to National Day celebrations and concerted efforts should be made to organise other forms of activities that bring equal, if not more, values to the spirit of Merdeka.

Sharing his concern over the lack of 'multiracial friendships' among the younger generation, he said this independence day should be utilised to remember and embrace the collective sacrifices made by our forefathers who fought tooth and nail for the nation's independence.

Be more open towards social interaction with other races as it can increase mutual understanding, he advised youths.

It removes the feeling of insecurity and prejudice among communities, while acting as a catalyst in broadening our knowledge.

Reading and learning about each other's religion, culture and language is a must, he added.

# Igniting the Merdeka spirit

## Covid-19: A valuable lesson in "freedom" as the nation celebrates its 63rd National Day



**Commemorating Merdeka:** Universiti Sains Malaysia flooded its whole campus with as many flags as it could to boost the Merdeka spirit.

"Find a common ground to strengthen the bonds that hold us together.

"Talking to someone in their mother tongue is an effective way to break the ice. People will appreciate the effort you made and will be more open to befriend you," he said, stressing that social media should not be used to incite anger and hatred.

HEIs play a role in ensuring that the Merdeka spirit lives on for generations to come, he said.

He noted how patriotism reduces with each passing generation, stating that it is the strongest among those who were physically present when the country gained independence.

Malaysia's strength lies in its diverse groups of religion, race, ethnicity and culture, he stressed, adding that people have been living harmoniously with each for 63 years.

"Malaysians are like siblings. There may be times we argue and

fight with each other, but we still look out for one another at the end of the day. We are lucky to have a diverse community."

Like Prof Hamdi, Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Social Sciences Political Sociologist Prof Dr Sivamurugan Pandian said Covid-19 has shown the true value of freedom and humanity that are often taken for granted.

It serves as a timely reminder, he said, on the importance of unity in facing a disaster.

"The virus does not discriminate between religion, ethnicity, class, gender or political ideology.

"Aug 31 should be a date that will go down in history as a celebration of freedom and humanity for all Malaysians amidst the ongoing battle against Covid-19.

"Malaysians from all walks of life can ride out this pandemic and emerge as a stronger nation," said

the Political Scientist who was awarded Malaysia's Patriotism Icon 2016.

### Fostering patriotism through activities

In charge of planning and coordinating National Day celebrations, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Corporate Strategy and Communications Office director Prof Dr Azmawani Abd Rahman shared that UPM has been conducting activities such as quizzes, public speaking sessions, storytelling and essay writing competitions on Rukun Negara to remind students and staff on the importance of Aug 31.

"National Day is a great opportunity to encourage and remind younger generations to show their pride for Malaysia and to love and respect each other regardless of race and religion.

"Amid the challenges due to the global pandemic, HEIs must do their best to celebrate National Day to show our solidarity towards the nation. It also displays the respect we have towards 'freedom fighters' who gave their lives for Malaya (then) to achieve independence," she said.

Prof Azmawani added that independence day celebrations can inspire youths, who should be directly involved in nation building activities - to serve the country.

### E-Merdeka celebrations

Meanwhile private higher educational institutions (IPTs) have

veered towards "digital National Day celebrations" which they described as more convenient.

Sunway University and Taylor's University produced customised videos depicting Independence Day.

Encouraging students to spread as much cheer and positivity to surrounding people and take time to reflect and appreciate the sacrifices of unsung heroes, Sunway Education Group chief executive officer Dr Elizabeth Lee said the university collaborated with the Malaysian Army Culture Troupe on a trilogy of songs to celebrate Merdeka and the nation's heroes.

"One of the songs is entitled 'Living in Malaysia' that celebrates all things Malaysian. I hope it will put a smile on the faces of anyone listening to it and connect our diverse communities more.

"In an increasing polarised world, let's shed our prejudices and come together as Malaysians."

National Day, she said, commemorates our independence as a nation and we celebrate our ability to stand proud and united in the global community as equals.

It provides us with hope and opportunity, she added.

"By remembering our Malaysian legacy, we can take comfort in recognising our inherent "Malaysia Boleh" resilience and resolve to overcome any challenge life throws at us.

"It reminds us to embrace our unique position in the world as a multiracial, multicultural, and multi-religion country that thrives on diversity. We developed largely because of it."