

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 instil 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 (ITIASI), 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 Malaya (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 (ICitral) 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.

Students of various ethnic backgrounds wearing the Jalur Gemilang at the Universiti Putra Malaysia 63rd 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



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