

NATIONAL UNITY AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL: IMPORTANCE OF CIVILISATIONAL DIALOGUE AND WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Malaysia is often described as a prime example of societies that are severely divided along ethnic lines. The country is also among the few pluralistic societies that have achieved some measure of success in managing ethnic conflict and enjoying relative political stability. Efforts toward integrating the diverse groups in the interest of national unity have been, and remain, at the heart of all Malaysian endeavours for peace (Suhana Saad 2012). Many changes have been introduced. There has been much discussion pointing to the education system as a key place where national unity may be nurtured. This paper however aims at examining the role played by the university in promoting national unity. Mixed mode method has been used to study the various stakeholders' perspectives in order to identify the current efforts and challenges of promoting national unity at the local universities in Malaysia. Results from the 420 surveys given to university students showed that effort of promoting national unity at the university level is very important and dialogue is said to have play the equal role in promoting national unity as well as to world peace. Results from interview also indicated that focusing on teaching and learning for example via the TITAS/Ethnic Relations Courses to promote national unity may just not suffice. A more interactive and proactive way of teaching and learning should be encouraged in all the university courses so that the good policies/concepts/ideology introduced towards promoting national unity could be fully reflected via practices.

Keywords: National Unity, Dialogue, National Integration, Nation Building

Introduction

National unity has been one of the fundamental themes for nation building since the independence of Malaya followed by the formation of Malaysia on September 16, 1963 (Denison Jayasuria 2010)¹⁴⁴. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Mohd. Najib Razak in his delegation speech in conjunction with the Malaysia 52nd Independence Day in year 2009 stated that, to strengthen the linkages and relations while demolishing walls of segregation amongst the people of different races was the biggest challenge faced by Malaysians. What Malaysia has achieved today may not be necessarily last forever but instead, there might be risk of losing the peace and harmonious life if precautions and attentions to all races were not taken. This basic idea has been passed on from one and

¹⁴⁴ Denison Jayasuria, National Unity Advisory Panel: Opportunities and challenge in a multi-ethnic society, In Ho Khok Hua, Sivamurugan Pandian, Hilal Hj. Othman and Ivanpal Singh Grewel (Eds.), Managing success in unity (pg.168-193), Putrajaya: Department of National Unity and Integration 2010.

another country's leaders whom believed that the sustainability of the country's development and peace is directly affected by the strength of unity amongst the Malaysians (Sivamurugan Pandian 2010)¹⁴⁵.

In response to the ethnic disturbances in year 1969, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced with its primary objectives were to reduce poverty irrespective of race, reduce inequalities in income distribution between races, and to reduce the identification of race with economic activities. Since then, ethnic dimensions has always remained as an important focus in most of the public policies in Malaysia. For instance, education has been identified as the most important medium to promote national unity. In order to foster national unity and to promote a common sense of identity, policies like National Language Policy (NLP) and National Education Policy (NEP) were enacted so that common curriculums could be promoted across the different types of schools in Malaysia (Maya Khemlani David & Wendy Yee Mei Tien 2009)¹⁴⁶. Moreover, of late, there has been much discussion pointing to the school as important places where national unity may be nurtured. When a student attends school, it is not disputed that he/she gets to interact with others of different ethnic origins. This indeed provides ample opportunity for integration, particularly if the schools and their teachers are prepared to guide integrative activities proactively.

However, to focus on schools only, it would only be tinkering at the edges of the issue of national unity. When students left school, the surface 'unity training' received during school time is set to evaporate into oblivion when they confronted head-on with concrete realities on the ground. For example, as some news reports indicate, certain students may score straight A's in their examinations, yet, they are denied scholarships whereas others with lesser qualifications are successful. Public always relates it with racial and ethnic disparities in Malaysia. As a result, many Chinese youths felt alienated and are obliged to look and study abroad, or to private institutions for their professional training. At home, the parents may indulge in bitter banter with visitors about the inequalities in life for them and their kids as a non-favoured ethnic group in the country. In the face of these and other difficult realities, whatever values of unity minority students have imbibed at school are often rapidly undone. Thus, national unity activities at the school level could be greatly consolidated through a genuine revisiting of current policies, in which not just students at the school level, but students at institutions of higher learning should also been given the opportunity to better exposure and participate openly as Malaysians of all backgrounds in the activities aimed to strive together to create a more unified and a more equitable Malaysia.

What Is National Unity/National Integration?

In Malaysia, the term nation unity is often used interchangeably with national integration, united nationality, loyalty, united community, nation building and building national identity. Although their evolution is intertwined, each of the concepts is different. The concept of national unity is used commonly in Malaysia, to describe the process of uniting people of various races with different culture under one form of national identity (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail 2003)¹⁴⁷. In order to foster social harmony and national unity, the use of propaganda or major policy changes that suit the current scenario of the nation became a very important step to be taken cautiously. However, the term nation unity is a normative

¹⁴⁵ Sivamurugan Pandian, Managing diversity: From independence to 1 Malaysia, In Ho Khok Hua, Sivamurugan Pandian, Hilal Hj. Othman and Ivanpal Singh Grewel (Eds.), Managing success in unity (pp. 210-244), Putrajaya: Department of National Unity and Integration 2010

¹⁴⁶ Maya Khemlani David & Wendy Yee Mei Tien, 'Conceptualization of Nationalism through Language - An Analysis of Malaysian Situation', *Language in India*, Vol. 9: 1 January 2009 pg. 303 – 316

¹⁴⁷ Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, 'Pendahuluan: Perpaduan Negara dan Pembentukan Bangsa Malaysia', *Membina Bangsa Malaysia*, Jilid 1. Jabatan Perpaduan Negara 2003.

concept that may carry different meanings to different people. The latest meaning of national unity could fundamentally conceptualised as "a state in which all citizens from various groups (ethnic, religion, regions) live in peace as one united nation, giving full commitment to national identity based upon the Federal Constitution and the National Ideology (*Rukun Negara*)".

“National unity is a social situation wherein the citizens consisting of diverse ethnic groups, religious beliefs and regions co-exist peacefully as one united Malaysian Nation in accordance with our National Ideology (*Rukun Negara*) and Federal Constitution.”

(Source: National Unity Advisory Panel 1992)

There are so far many different definitions for national unity, yet most of its basic concepts are more or less inter-related. Shamsul Amri (2007)¹⁴⁸ stated that integration is a process that creates a national identity among a separate group in terms of cultural, social and political position. While unity can be defined as processes that unite the whole community and country to create a sharing value and identity of oneness in order to love and be proud of the country. Mohd. Ridhuan Tee Abdullah (2010)¹⁴⁹ combined the word – integration & unity and defining it as a process to unite a community under one national identity. Co-operation and unity can be promoted via the integration of the federal, economic, culture, social, education and politic. In the Malaysian context, integration and unity in Malaysia do not show much on assimilation elements, but they are more to multiculturalism – integration, accommodation and acculturation.

Mohamed Yusoff Ismail (2003)¹⁵⁰ stated that in order for Malaysia to move towards becoming a united nation, besides looking at the similarities on the cultural elements that can be shared together, efforts to reduce the gap of socio-cultural among the different ethnic groups is also important. The process moving towards promoting national unity is a very tough matter to achieve due to the socio-cultural differences among the various ethnic groups as in generally, conflicts will still occur directly or indirectly. Ideally, it is said that the best way to promote national unity is to find a national symbol or ideology as the basis for the national identity that is accepted by all the ethnic groups.

The national unity concept is often used simultaneously with the term national integration which covers a vast extent of human relationships as well as attitudes ranging from the development of the sense of national identity to the integration of diverse and discrete cultural traditions which include beliefs, values, religion, culture, language, race, gender and etc.. Since national unity touches much on the root of people's attitudes and beliefs in regard to sustain peace and harmonious life in the nation, then it is said that the character of a society's culture is directly affecting the process of promoting national unity significantly by which education is said to be the most important and suitable medium to influence the mind-set of the people on the character of others culture.

The approach to lead Malaysia to become a united nation practiced so far is more about the minimum value of consensus shared among the multiracial community in order to maintain the continuity of the social order. This approach is not assimilation and does not require dramatic elimination of certain ethnic or race as practiced by some other nations. As compared to the approach practiced in Malaysia, it is said to be more accommodating.

In this context, a nation is said to have achieved a minimum level of unity only when it has an effective administrative and governance system that allow its citizens to live in

¹⁴⁸ Shamsul Amri Baharuddi, Modul Hubungan Etnik. Putrajaya: Ministry of Higher Education 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Mohd. Ridhuan Tee Abdullah, ‘*Cabaran Integrasi Antara Kaum Di Malaysia: Perspektif Sejarah, Keluarga dan Pendidikan*’, *Jurnal Hadhari*, Vol. 3, 2010, pg. 61–84. Bangi: Institute of Islam Hadhari, UKM

¹⁵⁰ Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, ‘*Pendahuluan: Perpaduan Negara dan Pembentukan Bangsa Malaysia*’, *Membina Bangsa Malaysia*. Jilid 1, 2003. Jabatan Perpaduan Negara.

peace and harmony, though the citizens' ethnicity or racial identity remain unchanged or forgotten (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail 2003)¹⁵¹.

National Unity and Integration Department Malaysia

The Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN) under the Prime Minister's Department is the foremost agency responsible for the challenging task of managing unity and integration in Malaysia. JPNIN is established in year 1970 following the racial riot on May 13, 1969. The race riot May 13, 1969 has raised many concerns on the importance of dealing with issues related to race, culture and religion. Under The National Operations Council (NOC) ruled in year 1969, a specific body known as National Goodwill Council, was established as a secretariat for the coordination of activities related to national unity and goodwill among the different races. On July 1, 1969, the National Unity Department was established under the governance of NOC to manage and strengthen the unity among races at that time (Annual Report JPNIN pg IX 2006)¹⁵².

On February 22, 1971, the National Unity Council was formed and gazetted under the Essential Regulations 1971. The council was later transformed to National Unity Advisory Council, chaired by the Prime Minister and made up of fifty one (51) representatives of various ethnic groups and those experienced in matters of nationhood. On January 1, 1972, the National Unity Advisory Council merged with the National Goodwill Office and transformed to the Ministry of National Unity. The Ministry is responsible for coordinating the duties of National Unity Advisory Council and National Goodwill Council at the national level as well as the duties of all other National Goodwill Council's Committees.

Following the General Elections 1974, the status of the Ministry of National Unity was shifted to that of the National Unity Board under the Prime Minister's Department. Subsequently, the National Unity Board merged with *Rukun Tetangga* Secretariat to form the *Rukun Tetangga* and National Unity Secretariat in February 1980. The Secretariat was then renamed as the National Unity Department under the Prime Minister's Department in January 1983.

The department was then placed under the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development on October 27, 1990 and later on once again placed under the Prime Minister's Department on March 27, 2004 after it renamed as Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN).

The Vision of the JPNIN is to be an excellent government agency in the efforts to develop a united, farsighted and competent *Bangsa Malaysia*. Its Mission is to nurture tolerance and goodwill through social network and social interaction towards the formation of a united *Bangsa Malaysia* with national identity. In the year 2011, the objectives for JPNIN are: 1) to nurture, strengthen and enhance social unity and national integration; 2) to instil, nurture and strengthen the spirit of patriotism and noble values amongst the community; 3) to implement unity programmes and activities and national integrity in line with the objectives of Concept 1Malaysia; and 4) to monitor and coordinate the implementation of programmes and activities under the Ministry's policies which spur unity and national integrity.

With more than four (4) decades in managing issues related to social and ethnic diversity in Malaysia, the experience gained and the creation of peaceful and harmonious Malaysian society are now recognized as a successful model amongst the international communities or Asian countries nearby. The model of managing social and ethnic diversity is presented according to the phases of development covering from the year 1970 till year 2012 consisting of Confidence Building (1970 – 2007), strengthening Community Cohesion (1982

¹⁵¹ Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, '*Pendahuluan: Perpaduan Negara dan Pembentukan Bangsa Malaysia*', *Membina Bangsa Malaysia*. Jilid 1, 2003. Jabatan Perpaduan Negara.

¹⁵² Annual Report, Department of National Unity and Integration, 2006.

– 2004) and Conflict Management (2005 onwards) as well as outline of the issues and challenges of conflict management (Azman Amin Hassan 2009)¹⁵³.

National Policies towards Nurturing National Unity

Besides JPNIN as the foremost agency responsible for managing unity and integration in Malaysia, in the efforts to create positive attitude towards promoting the importance of national unity and national identity, other government policies were introduced. Among them were the New Economic Policy (NEP) which was first announced in year 1970, National Culture Policy (NCP) which was introduced in August 1971, and National Ideology (*Rukun Negara*).

Malaysians have been striving hard to integrate the multi-ethnic society through various visions, ideologies, concepts and activities, yet, it is not easy to achieve the ideal state as ethnocentrism occurs at everywhere and everyday. Ethnocentrism divides the different ethnicities, races, and religious groups in society and this practice always caused racism and prejudice. History, vision, ideologies, concepts and efforts proposed and introduced by the country's leaders is said to have simply rhetorical in nature due to the favour to preserve one's traditions. The forth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was once commented that the major challenges for Malaysia to move towards Vision 2020 is to create a united nation that has similar aspirations and united ethnic groups based on justice, rights and equality.

The Vision 2020 not only focuses on development on economics, social, politics, psychology, science and technology but it is also a comprehensive and rounded agenda for the nation. One of the challenges set out by Vision 2020 is the challenge of building a united Malaysian nation (*Bangsa Malaysia*) with sense of common and shared values, aspirations and destiny. A united Malaysian nation is a nation with its citizens that able to live in peace and harmony, territorially and ethnically integrated in full and fair partnership.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad is confidence that this ambition can be achieved not by following or copying the ways done by any of the developed country, but instead to form our own mould as a developed country. In his words:

“Malaysia should not be developed only in the economic sense. It must be a nation that is fully developed along all the dimensions: economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically and culturally. We must be fully developed in terms of national unity and social cohesion, in terms of our economy, in terms of social justice, political stability and the system of government, quality of life, social and spiritual values, national pride and confidence.

(Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, “Working Paper – The Way Forward” presented to the Malaysian Business Council, 28 February 1991)”¹⁵⁴.

Despite leadership change, activities that help in promoting and nurturing national unity in Malaysia are still on-going. After Vision 2020, in order to nurture national unity, The current Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak had introduced the concept of 1Malaysia (Najib Tun Abdul Razak 2008)¹⁵⁵. It is an idea that aspires to promote

¹⁵³ Azman Amin Hassan, Three Decades of Managing Social and Ethnic Diversity in Malaysia: The Experience of the Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister's Department. Membina Bangsa Malaysia. Jil. 4, 2009: Integrasi Nasional (pg. 500–511). Putrajaya: Department of National Unity and Integration.

¹⁵⁴ Mahathir Mohamad, Working Paper – The Way Forward. Presented to the Malaysian Business Council, 28 February 1991, Retrieved Nov 26, 2011, from

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan003223.pdf>

¹⁵⁵ Najib Tun Abdul Razak, 1 Malaysia. Bahagian Penerbitan Dasar Negara 2008.

the integration of the multi-ethnic society as one functioning nation without assimilate or eliminating their background of diverse cultures and traditions.

In the education policies, the important of common cultural value in the education system of Malaysia should be stressed on to promote national identity and nationhood. (Sandra Khor Manickam 2004)¹⁵⁶. When the education challenges become ethnic or political issues, the efforts to promote national unity in education become harder. For example, the project on Vision Schools mooted on February 19, 1997 which aimed to produce generations that are highly tolerant thus to realize the dream to build a united nation. However, in general, Malaysians are not supporting the idea of Vision Schools due to the perpetuation of vernacular schools based on mother tongue education (Shakila Yacob 2006)¹⁵⁷. The education and language issues become very sensitive in Malaysia because public worry that they might lose their ethnic identity and culture.

The Role of Higher Education Institution in Promoting National Unity

According to Chandra Muzaffar (2010)¹⁵⁸, Chandra has identified the training in the higher education is a ready passport for entry into the elite society and the stupendous increase in opportunities for the community has meant a greater influx into the upper echelons of the professions, commerce and industry apart from , of course, the civil service.

Julian Betts et. al. (2007)¹⁵⁹ explained that to prepare their students for success and be compatible in the labour market after they graduate is always been set as the major role of universities around the world. However, most of people know very little about how universities' educational policies influence the success of their students. From a policy perspective, the role of field of study and university characteristics in determining labour market success of graduates is a compelling issue. Education feeds indirectly into both public and private budgets through productivity gains, earnings power and the tax base.

Universities have always been regarded highly by society as knowledge generators. John Henry Newman (1909)¹⁶⁰ refers university as the 'School of Universal Learning' in which the university is a Knowledge Centre that drives scholars of all disciplines from all over the world to meet. It is a place where scholars and students exchange ideas and thoughts. Newman's definition of a university is not only limited to the institution itself, it also includes the learning process covering all areas of life and stresses on real situations and people as the basis to acquire knowledge.

Today, the idea of a university stretches far beyond knowledge acquisition or generator. The role of university has entailed many questions on the purpose of a university and its contribution to society and nation. Newman sees different institutions as some sort of universities or ideal places for learning and today's university plays the role of engaging these institutions to improve knowledge production which in turn serves to enhance social and national development.

¹⁵⁶ Sandra Khor Manickam, Textbooks and nation construction in Malaysia, 2004. Retrieved November 1, 2011, from http://www.rchss.sinica.edu.tw/capas/publication/newsletter/N28/28_01_04.pdf

¹⁵⁷ Shakila Yacob, 'Political culture and nation building: whither Bangsa Malaysia?', *Malaysian Journal of Social Policy and Society*, 3, 2006, 22-42.

¹⁵⁸ Chandra Muzaffar, Widening income inequality: A challenge to 1 Malaysia, 2010. Retrieved October 3, 2011, from <http://www.Malaysianinsider.com>

¹⁵⁹ Julian Betts, Christopher Ferrall & Ross Finnie, The Role of University Characteristics in Determining Post-graduation Outcomes: Panel Evidence from Three Recent Canadian Cohorts. Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series. Statistics Canada – Catalogue No. 11F0019MIE, No. 292, 2007. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2007292-eng.pdf

¹⁶⁰ John Henry Newman, Essays: English and American. The Harvard Classics, 1909. Retrieved March 26, 2010, from <http://www.bartleby.com/28/1002.html>

However, emphasis on the role of universities over the period of time has changed especially in the case of a multiracial country like Malaysia. As stressed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the Humboldtian ideal of a university, the social role of a university has been slowly losing its importance as the question of a university's contribution in other domains picks up attention (Ooi Poh Ling, et. al. 2010)¹⁶¹.

Robin Cowan (2005)¹⁶² describes the social role of university as in the German case as being that of strengthening national identity. This was done by teaching the same tradition to all students to create unity with the objective of producing good citizens who could function well, be ambitious and lastly, contribute to the nation as a whole. According to the author, such traditions were based on literature in the respective language that speaks about a nation's culture. By that, a university's role was to instil such culture in each student to build a cohesive society.

On the July 18, 2004, Sunday Star reported the former Education Minister, Datuk Dr. Shafie Mohd. Salleh's proposal to introduce a subject tentatively called "Ethnic Relations in Malaysia" as part of the curriculum in public as well as private universities in Malaysia. This move is in line with the Malaysia government's effort to explore the polarization among undergraduates in campuses. Datuk Dr. Shafie surmised that although there are co-curricular activities and the sharing of rooms among different races on campus, inter-ethnic interaction is superficial. Hence, the effort to produce quality graduates must not neglect or leave out the issue of polarization.

However, the burning question is "After the introduction of such a course at the university level, does it really help in strengthening the inter-ethnic relationship and thus achieving national unity?" and "If so, how far does it help in promoting mutual understanding among the different ethnic groups in university?" Ethnic relations involve learning values like mutual understanding, sharing, empathy and kindness, and to have these values instilled in an individual's character from a very young age. *Melentur aur biarlah dari rebungnya*, as the Malay idiom goes and as Socrates had emphasized,

"The beginning is the most important of any work, especially in the case of a young and tender thing, for that is the time at which the character is being formed and the desired impression is more readily taken... Anything that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable"

(as quoted by Plato in *The Republic*, ca. 375 B.C.E)

National Ideology (*Rukun Negara*) was introduced to guide the Malaysian. It presented in five principles; Belief in God, Loyalty to King and Country, Upholding the Constitution, Rule of Law and Good Behavior and Morality. In order to embrace the National Ideology, most of the public schools require all students to state their pledge by reading the National Ideology in the morning assembly. However, the importance of implementing these principles is no longer felt important by the young generations. Although most of the university has established *Rukun Negara* Secretariat or Club as an active voluntary body that is capable of strengthening relationships between students in their university, most of the *Rukun Negara* Secretariats are inactive.

University undergraduates are semi-adults who already have their own predispositions and set ways of thinking and doing things. To change their ways is a formidable task, albeit not impossible. Since the idea of promoting ethnic awareness and consciousness towards

¹⁶¹ Ooi Poh Ling, Sarjit Kaur & Morshidi Sirat, Revisiting the Role of University. No. 75 – 31 March 2010, National Higher Education Research Institute. Retrieved September 26, 2012, from http://www.ipptn.usm.my/v2/index.php/publication/doc_download/32-no75-revisiting-the-role-of-university.html

¹⁶² Robin Cowan, Universities and the knowledge economy, 2005. Retrieved March 27, 2010, from <http://edocs.ub.unimaas.nl/loader/file.asp?id=1097>

developing positive ethnic relations and achieving national unity are uncertain at young age among the Malaysians, hence if university is to promote healthy inter-ethnic interactions among the undergraduates, their understanding and acceptance of these values will be fortified.

In a micro study undertaken by Ong (2004)¹⁶³ to look into perceptual patterns of 265 undergraduates from a local private university, it was found that:

- Interactions and choice of friends were generally based along ethnic lines. When asked to name 10 best friends, 84% of the respondents gave mono-ethnic names. When asked to name 10 friends who were of different ethnic groups from them, 40% could not complete the list.

It is therefore not a fallacy to say that prevailing patterns of social interaction in workplaces, universities or schools are strong manifestations of the value system of the people. Hence, present efforts in addressing these issues at the early childhood or school level is just not enough. To make such efforts effective, policy makers must not under-estimate the influence at the university level. Continuity and synchronization must start from early childhood level and followed through primary and secondary school level and to university level. Effort at fostering national integration must not be done on an ad-hoc manner but rather, they have to be long-term, gradual and pain-staking at times.

Methodology

Data collection for the present study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data in order to better understand the research problem (Greswell & Plano Clark, 2007)¹⁶⁴. This mixed method consists of merging, integrating, linking or embedding the two different methods. Simply said, the data are mixed in this research since it is believed that one type of method (quantitative or qualitative) is not sufficient to develop a complex picture of the current national unity scenario at the university level in Malaysia. Qualitative data was collected from the Ministry of Integration and National Unity to gain an understanding of what has been done by the government to promote unity among university students, and to identify challenges/factors that have led to the current neglecting of national unity activities in the university milieu. In the second phase, researchers utilize quantitative and qualitative approaches, collecting surveys from students and engaging in an open-ended interview with Dr. Farid Al-Attas, who is an expert on ethnic relations in the country. For incoming students, a total of 420 sets of surveys were distributed to at the University of Malaya intake session of 2012/2013, while the interview with Dr. Al-Attas was conducted concurrently. The purpose of the surveys was to understand perceptions on national unity held by students upon entering the University. The researchers divided the population of the undergraduate students of University of Malaya based on 12 faculties and 2 academies in the university. Snowball sampling was then used to collect a total of 420 samples from each sub-group of the population. The total number of the new student population for 2012/2013 is 3165, with students being asked to identify others who could become members of the sample. Meanwhile, the interview with the expert on ethnic relations explored his perceptions on national unity issues, paying particular attention to the challenges of promoting national unity at the university level. We further enquired about what he viewed as recommendations for increasing national unity.

¹⁶³ Ong Puay Tee, 'A Comparative Study of Malaya-operated and Chinese-operated Childcare Centres in the State of Melaka, Malaysia', *Child Care in Practice*, 11(1), 2004, p. 23-38.

¹⁶⁴ Creswell, J. W. & Plano Clark, V. L., *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 2007.

Data and Findings

In this research, mixed mode method was used to collect the different perspectives on issues related to national unity. In the interview session with the Director for the Department of National Integration, Mdm. Suraya bt. Wen, it was clarified that there have been many activities or efforts being done by various parties aiming at promoting national unity at the different levels. The activities/programmes organized by JPNIN & MoHE aimed at promoting national unity are mostly referring to the basic principles to strengthen, understand & practice the National Ideology (*Rukun Negara*). The efforts of promoting the philosophy of the National Ideology are usually done at the university level via the Secretariat of *Rukun Negara* (SRN).

To date (December 2011), there are a total of 129 Higher Education Institutions (122 Public Higher Education Institutions and 7 Private Higher Education Institutions) have established the SRN. Various programmes have been planned and organized to instil the spirit of loyalty to the country and to foster the understanding of the National Ideology. In each of the programmes, various approaches have been taken to explain the principles/philosophy of the National Ideology in order to provide a clearer and better understanding to the participants involved. Since the establishment of the Public Higher Education Institutions' SRN, a total of 35 activities have been carried out aiming at strengthening national unity and integration among the university students of different races.

Based on the feedback/evaluation of the implemented programmes by the students, results showed that 80% of the organized activities/programmes achieved their objective, which is to promote and strengthen unity among the participated members. However, one of the most critical challenges in implementing the programmes is to get the involvement of various ethnic groups, especially students from the non-Malay group. In order to ensure the participation of students of various races, JPNIN will always has to set a condition in which there must be multi-ethnic participants such as in the Unity Debate Competition among the Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

A total of 420 surveys were collected from the undergraduate students of University of Malaya Kuala Lumpur with the respondents' age range of 18 and 24 years old. Most of the respondents (65.7%) are Malays, followed by Chinese (25.7%), Indians (1.9%) and others (6.7%). The data showed that there are more than 95% of respondents are comfortable when having their meals with other ethnic groups. However, they would be more comfortable if they live in the same room with the same ethnic group instead of with other ethnic groups. This have indicated that the students of the University of Malaya are able to mixed up with friends from other ethnics via activities like games, classes, having meals together and etc., however due to lack of empathy and understanding towards other ethnic groups besides them, they are more likely keen to worry that their living culture will be influenced/disturbed by other ethnic groups. There are more than 99% of the students are aware of the importance of national unity, however, there are still 17.1% of the students do not understand or do not even care the meaning and importance of national unity. This showed that the efforts of promoting the awareness on national unity are still not suffice.

The data from the survey also showed that more than 86% of the university students learned about national unity during their primary and secondary education. This is then followed by the voices/publicities by Malaysia mass media, efforts done at the university level and the teachings by their own parents. However, due to the culture of education system in university and the interest/attention of both the university students and lecturers are not on national unity but keen to focus more on academics performance, this resulted the university to be the least important medium to promote national unity. Individual/Self-awareness, Government and Childhood Education have been rated as the main key players/focus areas to promote national unity. This showed that in order to promote national unity, the awareness on

the importance of national unity need to be promoted to all the students/citizens. Government sectors which consist of government/political leaders and government servants whom have always been the role model or the main attention to the public should play an important role in promoting national unity. Last but not least, childhood education which is rated to be the third most important key focus area to promote national unity. This is due to pre-school students are at the fast learning period, thus, they could easily learn about the importance of national unity as quoted by Jerome Bruner, “young children can learn almost anything faster than adults do if it can be given to them in terms they can understand” (Jerome S. Bruner 1960)¹⁶⁵.

There are more than 55% of students are not involved or even care about the activities/programmes organized aimed at strengthening the relationship amongst the multi-ethnics students or to promote national unity at the university level. This is attributable to the university’s main focus to strive for higher international ranking and to produce marketable students, thus most of the students would rather spend more times on improving their academic performances and most of the lecturers would focus more on to prepare the students to be compatible in the labour market rather than strengthening the relationship amongst the students or to promote national unity. Students were also required to rate the impact of activities/programme/teaching & learning that aimed to nurture national unity at the university level. According to the results, the respondents feel that activities/programmes bring more impacts on students compared to teaching and learning. This also indicated that focusing on teaching and learning for example via the TITAS/Ethnic Relations Courses may just not suffice. Programmes/activities like charity works, seminar/forum/dialogue, competition and etc. involving various ethnic groups should be organized more often so that the chances/opportunities for university students of various ethnic groups to mix around would be higher.

Although most of the respondents are aware of the importance of national unity, more than 80% of students feel that there are still issues/students are not favour towards national unity at the university level. Most of the respondents claimed that it is mostly due to the lack of interest amongst the university students. This followed by the missions of university that do not cover or putting more attention in promoting the importance of national unity. The lack of interest in lectures and the lack of publicity on activities/programmes that promote national unity are also been identified as one of the issues that caused the importance of national unity been neglected. When respondents were being asked about the important and role of civilizational dialogue, most of the respondents (81%) claimed that civilizational dialogue is very important especially in the efforts of promoting national unity and promoting world peace. This followed by the role to avoid conflict and to promote the understanding on differences and sameness among one and other. Thus, it is showed that civilizational dialogue is very important and good mechanisms/tools for strengthening national unity that is more educational, systematic and suitable for a multi-cultural nation like Malaysia.

The interview with Dr. Syed Farid Al-Attas, expert on ethnic relations in the country mentioned that Malaysia government is trying to achieve a state with certain level of tolerance and mutual respect where people could retain their own culture perspective and practices and at the same time achieving harmonious. Although many good policies were introduced towards promoting national unity, the policies introduced were not reflected via the practices. For example, some of the universities in Malaysia restrict the entry of other races. Malaysia could have university that promotes Malay studies but restricting the entry of students from other races will only cause the negative impacts – polarization. Aside from

¹⁶⁵ Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960. Retrieved December 26, 2012, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/999799.pdf?acceptTC=true>

that, some curriculums in the university are not a good exposure for students too especially when it relates to civilization and ethnic relations. Some curriculums tend to be more towards Islam. The education in university should emphasize on the perspectives of all the ethnic groups. Teaching in all courses should acknowledge all civilizations, for example, Malay, Chinese and Indian civilizations, so that students graduated from the Malaysia universities will at least understand the culture of all civilizations.

According to Dr. Al-Attas, the role of university is more than just to produce marketable students or to strive for higher international ranking, lecturers play an important role in strengthening the relationship among the different ethnic groups of student. More dialogue could be done between students and lecturers only if lecturers are proactive to discuss with their students in a neutral way. For example, lecturers should not only cover certain group of ideas/perspective, ideas/perspectives/contributions/values of all the different ethnic groups should also be stressed. These efforts encourage students to dialogue and give their opinions based on their own perspectives which align with their own cultural identity. University should organize and encourage students to participate in activities/programmes such as seminar, public lecture, dialogue, conference that are aimed at promoting the important of national unity. Dialogue plays an important role to promote the understanding of the different background/culture/value of the multi-ethnic society in Malaysia.

Civilizational Dialogue as a Way Forward

The world has witnessed several incidents caused by misunderstandings or lack of communication, it is even more to be said as the conflict and tension between civilizations, for example the invasion of Babri Mosque in year 1992 in Delhi as the action of hatred and extremism against the minority Muslim community by Hindu extremists who allegedly killed thousands of human lives. Besides, it is also stated in the history of India that the Muslim army commander and destroying Hindu temples although of course these are prohibited by Islamic law itself. The same situation also occurred when Hindu kings kill people who believe in Islam. Before the advent of Islam in India, the Buddhists destroy Hindu temples and the Hindus revenge by doing the same, destroying Buddhist temples. These are all the examples of lessons that can be taken as a result of lack of understanding of other civilizations and positive interaction.

Nowadays, issue concerning the adoption and implementation of dialogue is an important topic in sustaining peace and harmony within the society and nation. Even the United Nations General Assembly in year 1998 announced year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. This declaration signalled that any tension and conflict in the world should and could be reduced through dialogue. In general, the disunity and conflict around the world happened perhaps not just because of self-integrity but also the integrity of the leaders in civil society involving all sectors including economic, politic, social, religion and science and technology.

Indeed, the people of the world could not avoid themselves from the differences in biological, demographic, geographic and diversity of individuals in the society, but this kind of situation should be well-handled and managed. Serious attentions on various differences and diversity are also needed even in smaller community to prevent different cultural values and human civilizational from becoming the obstacles in strengthening the ethnic relations and to promote national unity. Therefore, the way to reduce the gap of misunderstanding and mutual understanding is through dialogue as it is to be said and highlighted as the most effective way compared to others.

By using dialogue, opinions are formed; questions are examined and the implications of discussion are concluded. Within the framework of national unity, dialogue can be used as a tool of correction, construction and self-evaluation. It is a tool of consultation, mutual

advice and cooperation in righteousness and piety. Errors can be corrected and deficiencies can be successfully addressed when the government welcomes dialogue and trains society to accept criticism and revision. When this happens, dialogues will be educational and systematic; deeply enriching unity within the nation. Until then, common consensus can, at best, be achieved only indirectly between the different ethnic groups.

Commitment and input from all the citizens, especially those who deem themselves as living in the civilized world are needed to support the efforts towards promoting national unity and sustaining the nation's peace and harmonious life. In order to nurture a common base/value for human existence, fruitful dialogue should be rooted deep in the hearts and minds of all the citizens. Importance of shared values, which not just giving meaning to life, but also to provide form and substance to identities should be focused in all the dialogue. Understanding, respect and tolerance for others are the core values that transcend civilisational differences. The heart of a true dialogue is to promote awareness and observance of universal values, ethical principles and moderate attitudes towards differences. Last but not least, respect for human rights and the important of inclusiveness and unity in diversity become particularly relevant in the context of globalization and rapid social transformations.

Free, independent and pluralistic universities should be more aware of its influence in promoting national unity using dialogue as its performance can either enhance or diminish the real meaning/use of dialogue. Discussions on such issues especially among the representatives from JPNIN, Ministry of Higher Education and local universities should be encouraged on how real dialogue could play its role as one of the important way to promote unity at the university level. The use of real dialogue in promoting national university will greatly influence the perception of the increasing numbers of people, especially among the growing – and often aware of the important of national unity – young generation in the university.

Dialogue at all levels – either through formal or informal approaches – has an inherent ability to nurture national unity. Both national unity for dialogue and dialogue for national unity are needed. Thus, the University of Malaya Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (UMCCD) – the first Centre of its kind in Malaysia – is tasked with conducting various dialogue sessions and act as a platform for reaching consensus and thus promoting peaceful and harmonious environment not just in the University of Malaya, but in the nation as well.

The University of Malaya Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (UMCCD) was established in 1996, just before Samuel P. Huntington published his thesis of the 'Clash of Civilisation'. The setting up of the centre was because of the fact that dialogue of civilisation was fast becoming a much needed mechanism for discoursing issues that arise from the inevitable encounter between nations, ethnic groups, faith systems, ideologies, worldviews and cultures. The expansion of globalisation spurred by the rapid developments of science and technology is one of the main forces behind this reality. Looking at civilisation not merely in the context of the past, the centre's main focus is on the articulation of values that may be the basis of a common platform for the solving of issues and problems universally encountered across and within cultures and civilisations. The centre has successfully organised a great number of workshops and conferences locally and internationally as well as run resident and visiting research fellowship programmes for scholars locally and internationally. The centre also acts as a reference point as well as serves on consultative basis in many government and non-government organisations locally and abroad. To date it has published widely on many topics pertaining to the dialogue of civilizations as well as provided supervision for scores of local and international postgraduates.

Conclusion

Unity is the heart of political stability, economic development and social harmonious. The current peace and harmony life inspire the Malaysians to strengthen the relationships among the different ethnic groups and to ensure Malaysians understand the important of unity as enshrined in the National Ideology. The implementation of project especially via civilizational dialogue at the university level would definitely play an important major role in promoting national unity and unifying the different background of university students, thus, shaping the one of its kind culture in Malaysia conducive for nation building. The 1Malaysia Concept is also to remind us the importance of achieving national unity. Although the leadership in Malaysia change from time to time, the vision to achieve a peace and harmonious social cohesion is remain unchanged. Therefore, the role of university in Malaysia is no longer just to produce marketable graduates but also to produce graduates with the skill to conduct ‘real’ dialogue which assist in promoting national unity and sustaining peace among the different races in the country. Civilizational dialogue is also very important and good mechanisms/tools for strengthening national unity that is more educational, systematic and suitable for a multi-cultural nation like Malaysia.

Acknowledgments

Financial support for this study was provided by a grant from the University of Malaya under the project number RP004/2012A. The authors wish to thank Assoc. Prof. Dr. Raihanah Hj. Abdullah for her suggestions on preparing the manuscript.

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