

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND CIVIC DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA

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### Abstract

After 57 years of independence, Malaysia's process of nation-building its multi-cultural society is now geared towards national solidarity to ensure long term political stability and sustainability. Nation-building refers to the process of constructing a national identity using the power of the state in relation to policies, institutions, and campaigns to facilitate efforts toward social harmony and political stability as a pre-requisite to development and economic growth. Higher education is also entrusted to facilitate civic development through its institutions which aim to produce good citizens, knowledgeable workforce for long term socio-economic development of the country. A research was done to identify and measure the attributes of Malaysian citizenship among university undergraduates in relation to civic identity and global citizenship. Through a presentation of its findings, this paper will discuss the complexities of a nation-building, especially ethnic relations, in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, Nation-building, Malaysia, Civic Development, Ethnic Relations and Higher Education

### 1. A Process of Nation-building: Higher Education and Civic Development

#### 1.1 Introduction

In the process of nation-building for over 50 years, the politics of Malaysia's multicultural society is sensitive to the issue of national unity/solidarity. The 1Malaysia campaign launched by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak in 2008 that emphasises on ethnic harmony, national unity and government agency was the latest concerted effort to consolidate national solidarity and nation-building and galvanise the spirit of patriotism and civic nationalism in a citizenry whose politics since its creation is defined by ethnic interests and cultural identities. National solidarity here is understood as fellowship and union of interests among compatriots.

Nation-building refers to the process of constructing a national identity using the power of the state. The process of nation-building is towards national solidarity which ensures long term political stability and viability. It involves the use of policies, institutions, and campaigns to facilitate efforts toward social harmony and political stability as a pre-requisite to development and economic growth.

Among others, higher education is also entrusted to facilitate civic development. The aim of higher learning institutions is to produce good citizens, knowledgeable workforce for long term socio-economic development of the country. The graduateness of graduates thus refer to the quality of a degree holder on whether he or she reflects the possession of certain level of attributes, as stipulated by the mission, vision, goals, and objective of education in a country.

Literature on civic development and graduate attributes in the recent years has increasingly included global citizenship as a crucial component. This term refers to graduates "attitude or stance towards the world". In this study, global citizenship refers to a variety of related concepts including intercultural awareness, inclusivity, diversity, globalisation, leadership, internationalisation and community engagement (Bosanquet 2011).

## **1.2 Internationalisation, Higher Education and Civic Development**

Internationalisation represents a new and sustainable educational vision to provide global society with an education that responds to present demands, challenges and change. The globalisation of higher education is understood “as the flow of technology, economy, people, values, ideas across borders. Globalisation affects each country in a different way due to a nation’s individual history, traditions, cultures and priority. Internationalisation of higher education is one of the ways a country responds to globalisation, yet, respects the individuality of the nation (Knight in Gacel-Avila, 2005: 124).

Internationalisation of higher education as a paradigm is seen as “an educational process, continuous and ongoing, comprehensive and counter-hegemonic” with critical pedagogy preparing students to work and gain citizenship in a global community while promoting the representation of different cultural or identity traditions in the teaching and educational process”. It has been suggested that the goals of educational process in developing global citizenry i.e. pragmatic; (2) liberal; and (3) civic (Schoorman in Gacel-Avila, 2005: 124-125). Among the factors to consider for the future of internationalization are:

- (a) It’s centrality as educational policy and implementation to transform educational systems to meet the needs and demands of a global society
- (b) The strategic role of international academic cooperation in globalising solidarity among nations and establishing a global citizenship
- (c) Focusing on internationalisation in higher education research

## **1.3 MOE (The Ministry of Education), Internationalisation and Civic Development**

In fact, this paradigm shift in higher education with “soft revolution” where knowledge replaces natural resources as engine of growth is strategically incorporated by the MOE to propel Malaysia’s higher education at the global stage i.e. (1) Strengthen relations with preferred partner nations through higher education cooperation; (2) Long terms strategy for higher education exchange in its NHESP (National Higher Education Strategic Plan (phase 2) “Malaysia’s Global Reach: A New Dimension” (MOHE 2011).

Malaysian higher learning institutions are expected to undertake new roles and strategically explore new areas that would bring positive impact to students and communities. This new dimension of citizenship still retains conventional concerns in MOE’s existing efforts in the development of national identity, solidarity and patriotism in the curricula and co-curricular activities among undergraduates. A content analysis of MOE’s policies and governance of her civic development courses, program and activities and various focus group discussions was conducted together with the civic development survey among undergraduates.

## **1.4 Research Objectives and Methodology**

The research objectives are:

- (a) To identify the attributes of citizenship among HEI undergraduates in relation to patriotism, civic identity and global citizenship.
- (b) To measure undergraduates’ perception of patriotism, civic identity and global citizenship.
- (c) To assess the effectiveness of on-going government led policies, campaigns, programs of national solidarity/unity in instilling patriotism, civic development and global citizenship among undergraduates.
- (d) To recommend initiatives and changes that can be undertaken especially by MOE in relation to citizenship education to facilitate patriotism, civic development and global citizenship.

The findings are thus to help MOE in strategizing its efforts in the areas of:

- (a) Feedback on civic development courses, programs and activities.
- (b) Help MOE to make informed decisions about the initiatives and changes that can be undertaken in relation to citizenship education to facilitate patriotism, civic development and global citizenship.

(c) New input for courses, programs and activities i.e. improved structure and content for MOE's civic education

The primary data collection method in this research was a field survey. This survey was conducted via administration of a composite higher education and civic development, patriotism and global citizenship questionnaire that takes approximately 30 minutes to complete. A four point Likert scale was utilized. For each statement in the questionnaire, the respondents are required to state the extent to which they strongly agreed by giving a score of '4' or strongly disagreed by giving a score of '1'. The design is made to gather information pertaining to the research questions. The main objectives of the questionnaire are:

(a) To identify perceptions of citizenship among undergraduates in relation to patriotism, civic identity and global citizenship.

(b) To measure the perception of undergraduates towards patriotism, civic identity and global citizenship in specific social, political and economic spheres, and also perspectives on values and activities.

(c) To examine the effectiveness of on-going government led policies, campaigns and programs of national unity/solidarity among undergraduates in fostering the spirit of patriotism, civic development and global citizenship.

(d) To measure the perception of undergraduates of policies/activities that is being undertaken by MOE to facilitate patriotism, civic development, and global citizenship among undergraduates (See Section 5 and 6 in Table 1)

Table 1: Content areas covered by questionnaire

Section	Description
(1) Demographic information	Respondents' details such as gender, age, ethnic group, religion, parents' level of education, respondent's program of study and level
(2) Patriotism and Pride	To know about respondents' feelings and understanding of patriotism and pride on being a Malaysian citizen e.g. what respondents take pride about Malaysia, her institutions and cultural icons, identity and constructive patriotism
(3) Civic Identity	To assess perceptions, attitude and participation of being a Malaysian citizen e.g. being a Malaysian citizen, value orientation, social tolerance, voting, and confidence in socio-political institutions
(4) Global Citizenship	The items aim to gather information on respondents perceptions, attitude and participation of being a global citizen e.g. global personality, participation in global citizenship activities, and global skills
(5) Higher Education and Civic Development	The items are meant to assess respondents' level of civic knowledge, participation and attitudes towards nation-building programs, courses and activities as undergraduates, and campus life

(6) Open-ended Questions	An open-ended section that allows respondents to freely write on how civic development can best be facilitated among undergraduates (in terms of policies, curricula, programs, or activities).
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The questionnaire was administered individually to a cross-section of undergraduates from public and private higher education institutions using a pre-determined sampling method. 3703 respondents were selected nationwide among undergraduates from all public higher education institutions and selected private ones. Issues from sections 5 and 6 are addressed by this paper. Apart from the survey, focus group discussions were also conducted with stakeholders involving MOE committees, general subjects' providers of selected public and private universities, and undergraduate students.

### 1.5 Demographic Information

The demographic data of respondents is described in details below:

The first part of the questionnaire contained items that assessed respondents' background information. Among the items included in the questionnaire are age, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Academic background of the respondents which include the institutions that they are enrolled in; year of study; and current programme were assessed. They were also asked to indicate their family background such as home location, both parents' highest academic qualification as well as family income.

Of the 3703 participants who responded to the questionnaire, 35.3% (n=1305) were male and 64.7% (N=2391) were female. The age were ranging from 17-20 years old (42.2%, N=1532), 21-24 years old (53.9%, N=1958), 25-28 years old (2.6%, N=93), 29 years old and above (1.4%, N=51).

At the time of the survey, 65.2% (n=2412) of respondents were Malay; 22.9% (n=845) were Chinese; 4.7% (N=173) were Indian. The remaining respondents; 7.2% (N=267) were in other ethnicities. Based on these ethnic groups, mostly 68.9% (N=2547) were Muslims; 18.3% (N=676) were Buddhists; followed by 8.0% (N=295) were the Christians and the rest; 4.8% (N=177) were in other religions. Comparatively, Malaysia's 28.3 million population breakdown based on ethnicity is Malay and Bumiputera (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%) and Others (0.7%).

Of those, 80.6% (N=2983) were undergraduates in public universities and 19.4% (N=720) were undergraduates in private universities. Most of the respondents were from Year 1 of study, 36.8% (N=1345), followed by Year 2 30.7% (N=1121); 24.9% (N=909) were Year 3; 7.0% (N=257) were Year 4 and the rest of .5% (N=20) were above Year 4. There were four categories according to the field of study amongst the respondents. Most of the respondents 62.6% (N=2186) were in Arts based field of study. Science, 21.2% (N=741); Professional Degree 8.1% (N=282) and 8.1% (N=282).

## 2. Citizenship and Citizenship Education in National and Post-national Society

### 2.1 Defining Citizenship and Citizenship Education

The conceptual discussion of patriotism from John Stuart Mill, Alexis De Tocqueville, Niccolo Machiavelli to Cicero have emphasised on love for country as a civic virtue and this is also normally extended to the sentiment and values of family, loyalty, commitment and sacrifice. This commonality and solidarity among members of a political community is usually seen to be based upon language, history, culture and ethnicity..

However, the post-colonial context of multi-cultural Malaysia, partly based upon British policies of migrant workers removed from their familiar elements of commonality and solidarity mentioned above entails a more cosmopolitan and constitutional founded commitment to the narrative of the Malaysian nation. The conceptualisation of patriotism in this survey is typically distinguished from nationalism as a more intrinsic and introverted sentiment and sense of solidarity with regards to the citizenry. A citizen may be defined as a "native or naturalised member of a state or nation who owes allegiance to its government and is entitled to its protection"; and "state of being vested with the rights, privileges and duties of a citizen" (Banks 2004:3-4, 8).

The goal of citizenship education in democratic multi-cultural society is to "help students acquire the

knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to make reflective decisions and to take actions to make their nation-states more democratic and just” and “similarly effective citizens in a global context”. Citizenship has national, cultural and global identifications. Cultural, national, and global identifications and attachments are complex, interactive and contextual. Globalization and nationalism are contradictory but co-existing trends and forces in the world and require management to harness their positives to facilitate the country’s development and stability.

Here, the *national* and *post-national* perspectives of society and education need to be reconciled to facilitate sustainable nation-building.

Table 2: National and Post-national models of society

	National Model of Society	Post-National Model of Society
General Orientation of the Education System	-Internal focus on national interests -Concerned with strengthening or maintaining national identity	-External focus -Global interdependence of countries or regions
Approaches to Social Education	<u>Emphasis on:</u> -Patriotism -National history and societal structures -National membership of the individual <u>Rights and responsibilities:</u> -Rights and obligations that come with legal status of country	<u>Emphasis on:</u> -Extra national perspectives -Inclusion of historically excluded groups -Notion of citizenship tied to trans-national personhood -Regional and global level political structures <u>Rights and responsibilities:</u> -Universal human rights (political, social, economic)

### 3. Selected Findings: Civic Knowledge and Attitude towards Nation Building

#### 3.1 Civic Knowledge and Ethnicity

This section presents the views of the Malaysian undergraduates on higher education and civic development. It analyses this issue from various dimensions which include civic knowledge and attitude towards nation-building. For civic knowledge, respondents were required to answer yes or no in relation to statements concerning Malaysia and racial discrimination, Malaysia’s formation, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, work sector the Chinese are associated with, government policy on race relations, Malaysia’s parliament, and the head of state.

Overall, the majority of the respondents predictably answered the factual questions correctly and they also answered similarly on the subjective or value oriented items i.e. 67% affirm that Malaysia does not tolerate racial discrimination; 75% think that the Prime Minister must be a Malay. At the same time, respondents were also uncertain about the year of the creation of the Malaysian Federation i.e. 49% thought wrongly that it was created in 1957.

However, when we look at the responses according to public or private institutions; and by ethnicity – disparities and disagreements begin to show in the level of civic knowledge of multicultural Malaysia, especially between the Malays and the Chinese.

For civic knowledge by public or private institutions, more than sixty percent of the respondents are in agreement with the statement “Malaysia does not tolerate racial discrimination”. The public institution respondents, however, recorded slightly higher than the private with the percentage of 68.5% and 62.8% respectively. Thus, the majority of the respondents both from public and private institutions agreed on the issue stated that Malaysia does not tolerate racial discrimination. For the statement that “government policy

promotes good racial relations” received considerable amount of diversity between both public and private institution respondents. *While almost nine out of ten (87.9%) public institution respondents reported higher degree of agreement with the statement, the private counterparts recorded lower (60.6%) with six out of ten respondents agreed with it. This implies that the private institutions’ respondents in this respect are less receptive to the effort made by the government in promoting good racial relations.* Incidentally, private institutions of higher learning students are mainly comprised of non-Malays.

There also appears to be a lack of constitutional knowledge of private institution students as only 59% of them think that a state governor cannot be the Yang DiPertuan Agong when compared to 71% of public institution respondents. Moreover, for the contentious statement of “the Prime Minister of Malaysia must be Malay”, the difference of responses between the public and private institution respondents is also obvious. While the public institution respondents reported higher level of agreement with almost eight out of ten respondents are in favor of the statement (78%), only less than six out of ten IPTS respondents are in favor of it (59%). Both public (48%) and private institution (54%) respondents were uncertain about the creation of the Malaysian federation.

The different level of agreement among the respondents by race concerning the civic knowledge items is further highlighted here. Generally for the statement “Malaysia does not tolerate racial discrimination”, Malay respondents reported the highest percentage (70.1%) followed by Others (68%) and Indian (65.7%). *The Chinese respondents, however, reported the least with 60.2%. It is, nonetheless, concluded that the majority of the respondents in relation to the race agreed on the issue stated that Malaysia does not tolerate racial discrimination.* Moreover, the statement “government policy promotes good racial relations” received mostly higher level of agreement as well. Both Malay and Others groups reported (89%) and (86%) respectively. While the Indian respondents scored a moderate of 77%, *their Chinese counterparts scored the least with only 65%. The finding asserts that there are differences in terms of level of agreement on this statement in relation to the race classification.* As for the statement that “the Prime Minister of Malaysia must be Malay”, most of the respondents reported higher level of agreement with Malay 81%, Others 73%, and Indian 71%. *However, the Chinese respondents scored least with 57% only.* This concludes that majority of the respondents except their Chinese counterparts agreed with this statement.

### **3.2 Attitude towards Nation-building and Ethnicity**

Based on the findings, a majority of the undergraduates strongly agreed in all of the 15 statements on nation-building experience i.e. foster(s) a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect amongst multi-ethnic students; proud of Malaysia; making a better citizen; appreciation of people of different race, culture and religion; improving relations with other ethnic groups; being more competitive; aware of current global events; feel responsible to alleviate human suffering; have a responsibility to the environment; acceptance of Islam and Malay language as the country’s official religion and language; feeling accepted in the company of other ethnic groups; strengthen feeling of being Malaysian; acceptance of the practice of other cultures and religions on campus; and acceptance of inter-racial marriage.

Encouragingly, the highest level of agreements are for the items on inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic relations, i.e., not feeling threatened when other ethnic groups practice their religion and culture on campus (86%), appreciate the existence of different religion, culture and races in the country (83.4%), and appreciate people of different races and cultures (82.8%). All other items apart from having no problems if someone from my ethnic group marries someone from another (79.2%) were highly rated above 80%. Items on higher education contributing positively to attitudes towards nation-building pertaining to feelings for Malaysia and as its citizen, global citizenship, competitiveness, accommodation and respect, and acceptance of Islam and Malay as official religion and language of the country are all rated highly from 81% - 82.7%. In light of attitude towards nation-building, their experience of nation-building up to higher education has contributed positively to the civic development of Malaysian undergraduates.

Again, when we look at the responses according to public or private institutions; and by ethnicity – disparities and disagreements begin to show in the attitudes towards nation-building experiences, especially between the Malays and the Chinese.

Based on the findings, there is significant relationship between institution type and level of agreement on all items ( $p=.000$ ). *Across all items, % of public institutions that agree with all items is also consistently higher*

than private institutions. The highlight of the findings here is that the highest rated item for public institutions is acceptance of Islam and Malay as official religion and national language (86%) is interestingly also the lowest rated item for private institutions (68%). Another joint highest rated item for public institutions is strengthening feelings of being Malaysian (86%) but it is also the second lowest rated item for private institutions (70%). A joint second lowest rated item for private institutions is making me a better citizen (70%). Overall construct mean of attitude towards nation-building by institution type is: public higher education institutions =3.38; private higher education institutions =2.86.

Based on the findings, there is also significant relationship between ethnic group and level of agreement on all items ( $p=.000$ ). Across all items, % of Chinese undergraduates that disagree with the items is higher than the other ethnic groups. % of Malays that agree with all items are also consistently higher than other ethnic groups with the exception of three (3) items: fostering spirit of tolerance and mutual respect among multi-ethnic students, making me feel accepted in the company of other ethnic groups, and that I have no problems if someone from my ethnic group marries someone from another ethnic group. In these three (3) items, others (not Malays, Chinese or Indian) have rated them highest or joint highest with the Malays. Indians and Chinese are consistently third and last respectively across all ethnic groups in their level of agreement to statements on attitudes towards nation-building. The strongest agreed items for the Malays are acceptance of Islam and Malay as official religion and national language (88%), strengthened feelings of being Malaysian, and being proud of Malaysia, and acceptance of the existence of different religion, culture and race – all three (3) items at 87%. Interestingly, the strongest agreed item for the Malays on Islam and language is also the least agreed item among the Chinese, Indians and others at 68%, 78% and 82% respectively out of all the other items. The highest rated items by the Chinese are on awareness of responsibility towards the environment (75%), and appreciate the existence and people of other religion, culture and race (both at 74%). Highest rated items by the Indians are on appreciating the existence of other religion, culture and race, and feeling accepted in the company of other ethnic groups (both at 83%). Others have rated fostering spirit of tolerance and mutual respect among multi-ethnic students (86%), responsibility towards the environment, appreciate the existence and people of other religion, culture and race, improve relations with other ethnic groups, proud of Malaysia, making better citizens – all six (6) items at 85%. Overall construct mean of attitude towards nation-building by ethnic groups are: Malay (3.42), others (3.38), Indian (3.25) and Chinese (2.87).

### 3.3 Policy Recommendations and Actions

Apart from the selected survey findings presented in this paper, focus group discussions were also conducted with stakeholders involving MOE committees, general subjects' providers of selected public and private universities, and undergraduate students to gather qualitative material relevant for policy recommendations and actions. Below are a list of issues, policy implications, implementation and action on the part of policy makers and general subjects' providers in the MOE and public and private higher education institutions in relation to civic development.

#### 1 (a) Issue:

Lack of financial resources, avenue and leverage for developing and sharing best practices among teachers of general studies courses or modules

#### (b) Policy implications:

It is recommended that the MOE TITAS (Islamic and Asian Civilizations Course) and Ethnic Relations committees to be provided annual budgets to hold periodic workshops and other activities to facilitate training of teachers and best practices in both public and private institutions.

#### (c) Implementation:

- Periodic workshops and conferences by MOE TITAS and Ethnic Relations committees to train and facilitate effective delivery of courses/modules
- Identify and facilitate leadership capacity for TITAS and Ethnic Relations
- Identify and facilitate research and publication capacity for TITAS and Ethnic Relations

#### (d) Action:

MOE; MOE TITAS and Ethnic Relations committees

#### 2 (a) Issue:

Content revision; and importance of student centered learning through activities and community engagement for civic development.

#### (b) Policy implications:

- It is recommended that there be a content revision of university general studies' courses for a more constructive and critical engagement to Malaysian history
- University general studies' courses to be implemented as modules to encourage more activities, community engagement and reflection among students
- Reconsider pass/fail marking

## (c) Implementation:

- Periodic curriculum revision by MOE i.e. TITAS and Ethnic Relations committees; and also revision of student development activities

## (d) Action:

MOE office in charge of student development; MOE TITAS and Ethnic Relations committees; Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) – student development offices; and units in charge of university required courses; MQA subject matter assessors (Malaysian Qualifications Agency) as the body that gives accreditation to university programs and courses.

## 3 (a) Issue:

There is significant relationship between ethnic group and level of agreement and understanding on attitudes towards nation- building and civic knowledge. Malays are generally most agreeable and informed and the Chinese were the least agreeable and informed.

## (b) Policy Implications:

While it is expected that the Malays would be more agreeable due to the nature of multi-cultural nationalism and consociational politics in the country, measures should be taken to strategize effective engagement with minorities to facilitate their increased sense of belonging and national ideals.

## (c) Implementation

- It is recommended that there be a content revision of university required courses for a more constructively critical engagement with Malaysian history especially pertaining to inter-ethnic relations.
- University general studies' courses to be implemented as modules to encourage more activities, community engagement and reflection among students that emphasizes on the importance of ethnic minorities in the country.

## (d) Action

MOE office in charge of student development; MOE TITAS and Ethnic Relations committees; HEIs – student development offices; and units in charge of university required courses; MQA subject matter assessors (Malaysian Qualifications Agency) as the body that gives accreditation to university programs and courses.

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