

Promoting National Unity Through Academic and Student Activities: The Universiti Malaysia Sabah Experience

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Introduction

Malaysia is a melting pot of people of multi-ethnicity, multi-culture, and multi-religion. As such national unity is a very important agenda in the development of the nation. This paper discusses the role of higher education in the inculcation of national unity in Malaysia. It also presents a quantitative case study of the implementation of efforts in the promotion of national unity in Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The study focuses on the contribution of curricular, co-curricular, extra-curricular activities as well as information interactions towards the promotion of national unity among the students.

National Unity and Higher Education in Malaysia

The importance of education for national unity in Malaysia has been underlined by national leaders, politicians, educationists and other prominent citizens. For example, Abdul Rafie Mahat (2003: 30) says that "Malaysia sees education as an indispensable asset in its attempt to foster unity, peace and prosperity". The values needed for national unity are delivered and infused through three major functions of higher education: curriculum, co-curriculum, and extra-curriculum. In a related study, Sheets (1996) found that interpersonal conflicts were more prevalent among different ethnic groups. She also found that the attitudes, beliefs, and values of students and teachers differed and were associated with ethnicity, gender, and level of academic achievement.

Curriculum involves formal participation of teaching and learning activities. In the case of UMS, the curriculum involves the teaching and learning of university core courses offered by the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning such as History of the Development of Malaysia; Islamic and Asian Civilisation; Comparative Religion; the Constitution of Malaysia; the Society and the Self; Intercultural Communication; Media, Culture and Society; and Gender, Race and Class. The values for national unity are also infused by some lecturers in the teaching and learning of faculty core courses and programme courses.

To enhance the internalisation of *Rukun Negara* among students, the Department of National Unity and Integration has introduced *Rukun Negara* Club as co-curriculum in institutions of higher education in Malaysia (Ministry of Information Malaysia, 2005). The clubs aim to introduce the principles of *Rukun Negara*; to provide meaning and understanding on the five

principles: to enhance the awareness on the importance of *Rukun Negara* as the basis of daily practices; and to make the principles as daily practices for the inculcation of loyal, visionary, dignified, open and ethical members of the community. Other co-curriculum programmes related to the inculcation of national unity include Interaction of Institution with Community (INTERIM), Leadership and Motivation (*Bakti Siswa*), Folk Dance, Choir, Theatre, as well as Traditional Music (*Muzik Asli*). Sports activities such as soccer, hockey, swimming, basketball and volleyball can also contribute to the inculcation of national unity among students.

Extra-curriculum related to national unity takes the form of student outreach programmes such as student union activities, activities at residential colleges, student activities at faculty level, campaigns, and competitions. National unity is also inculcated through the interaction between students and students, students and lecturers, as well as students and other members of the university community.

Methodology

This study surveyed the level of national unity among the students of UMS. It gauged the extent to which national unity is inculcated through curriculum, co-curriculum and extra-curriculum activities in UMS.

The main instrument consists of three divisions. The first division consists of six items on demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second division, which is adopted from Mansor and Morshidi (2005), consists of 28 positively-worded statements measuring the degree of national unity of the respondents. The third division consists of ten items measuring the degree of agreement of the respondents on university activities in which national unity is taught or infused. These activities were university core courses, faculty core courses, programme core courses, cultural activities, co-curricular activities, sports activities, activities at residential halls, student union activities, interaction with other students, and interaction with academic staff. The items in the second and third divisions were given responses based on a five-point scale.

The questionnaires were distributed to and collected from the samples by staff members of the Student Affairs Department. The samples consist of 502 randomly-sampled undergraduate students in the

university. Out of this number a total of 487 cases with complete data were used in the data analysis.

The Statistical Package for Social Science Programme was used for the data analysis. Descriptive statistics involving frequencies, means and standard deviations were used. Inferential statistics involved comparison of means using independent sample t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and linear regression.

Findings

Higher Education Activities

The descriptive statistics of the responses for higher education activities which contributed towards the inculcation of national unity shows that according to the perception of the students, the most contributing activities for national unity, in descending order, are: university core courses, cultural activities, interaction with other students, and sports activities. On the contrary the least contributing activities, in ascending order, are: interaction with academic staff, programme core courses, faculty core courses, and student union activities.

Relationship between Higher Education and National Unity

To study the relationship between university activities and national unity, the correlation between activities and national unity was computed. The Pearson's r of 0.464 (sig.=0.001) shows that there is a significant moderate relationship between university activities and national unity.

A regression analysis was executed to identify university activities which are predictors for national unity among students. The result shows that the best model (Model 4) consists of four significant predictors of national unity among students. These predictors are, in descending order of strength, the contributions of university core courses, sports activities, faculty core courses, and student union activities. The coefficients of these predictors are given in Table 1.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study shows that university core courses, cultural activities, interaction with other students, and sports activities are the main contributors for the inculcation of national unity in the campus, whereas the less contributing activities are interaction with academic staff, programme core courses, faculty core courses, and student union activities. There is a moderate correlation between university activities and national unity. Linear regression analysis shows that the predictors of national unity among students are the university core courses, sports activities, faculty core courses, and student union activities.

It can be implied from the study that efforts in inculcating national unity through university core courses, cultural activities and sports activities, as well as interaction among students should be continued.

From the finding on the predictors for national unity among students, it is recommended that the Academic Department should build on the strengths of the teaching and learning of university and faculty core courses. On the other hand, the Student Affair Department can complement them with sports and student union activities.

References

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Table 1: Coefficients* of predictors for national unity

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.391	.082			
	University core courses	.185	.019	.400		
2	(Constant)	3.022	.097			
	University core courses	.155	.019	.334		
3	Sports activities	.122	.019	.265		
	(Constant)	2.933	.101			
	University core courses	.140	.020	.303		
4	Sports activities	.110	.019	.238		
	Faculty core courses	.054	.018	.129		
	(Constant)	2.875	.103			
	University core courses	.135	.020	.292		
	Sports activities	.087	.021	.190		
	Faculty core courses	.046	.018	.112		
	Student union activities	.049	.020	.114		

* Dependent Variable: National Unity