

Students' Perceptions of the Malaysian Nationhood Course in Strengthening Patriotism among Younger Generation

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Abstract

Patriotism-based courses at the tertiary level, such as Malaysian Nationhood or similar are very important to strengthen the patriotism among the younger generation. However, the course is not fully offered to local students in all institutions of higher learning, especially in private universities. On the other hand, there are compulsory courses offered in institutions of higher learning, namely Internalization of Ethics and Civilization and Philosophy and Current Issues, which are expected to absorb the content of the Malaysian Nationhood course or similar. However, the course content does not reflect the important aspects of Malaysia. Therefore, the perception of students who have taken the Malaysian Nationhood course or similar on its ability to strengthen patriotism among the younger generation is very important because they have experienced studying the course. Thus, this quantitative study will examine their perceptions in that context. The study sample consisted of 800 respondents who had attended the Malaysian Nationhood course from Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Based on the descriptive analysis, the study found that students' perception is very positive towards the Malaysian Nationhood Course in strengthening the patriotism among the younger generation. In this regard, it is appropriate that such courses be made compulsory in all institutions of higher learning to ensure the integrity of the patriotism of the country's next generation.

Keywords: Patriotism Education, Compulsory University Courses, Malaysian Nationhood, Nation-Building, Political Sociology

Introduction

The basis of national defence from all forms of threats, whether physical or virtual, actually lies in each of its citizens, known as the spirit of love for the country or patriotism. In this case, the condition of the spirit must be pure, born from the hearts of the people who are sincere,

willing to sacrifice and loyal to the country. If these conditions are met, then the level of patriotism of a citizen is high and strong. Of course, when the people possess such a level of patriotism, national security will be more assured. Even the elements of virtual colonialism that are increasingly contagious in this era of information technology boom can be repelled accordingly. The spirit of patriotism is usually not a natural gift to every citizen. But, it should be cultivated and nurtured since childhood through certain socialization agents such as parents, family, peers and educational institutions.

In institutions of higher learning, formal education based on patriotism is implemented through university core courses and co-curricular activities selected by students, such as the Student Police Volunteer Corps (SUKSIS) and Reserve Officer Training Team (PALAPES). The university's core courses are compulsory for all students, such as Malaysian Nationhood or similar, Internalization of Ethics and Civilization, and Philosophy and Current Issues. In this context, patriotism-based courses only involve Malaysian Nationhood and the like such as Malaysian Studies, Malaysian Nationhood and Development, and Malaysian Nationhood and Recent Development. However, based on the General Studies Subject Guidelines, Second Edition (2016), the patriotism-based course placed in the U1¹ group is only compulsory for Malaysian students at the certificate and diploma level. Meanwhile, at the Bachelor's Degree level, the Malaysian Studies course is only compulsory for non-Malaysian students. Such a situation illustrates if Malaysian students pursuing their studies at the Bachelor's Degree level no longer need patriotism education through this course. While patriotism education needs to be carried out continuously, the students who will receive the degree will later serve the country, race and religion. Therefore, education based on the spirit of love for the country is expected to guide the graduates to carry out their responsibilities to the country with full integrity for the country's sake.

Prior to the 2019/2020 academic session, Ethnic Relations courses were made compulsory by the Ministry of Higher Education in all public and private universities at the undergraduate level. At that time, the Ethnic Relations course was seen to be able to absorb the content of the Malaysian Nationhood course or similar. In reality, the content in the course did not reflect the whole of the important aspects of nationhood, such as the origin of the country, history of the struggle for independence, the system of government, government policy and patriotism. In fact, the main focus of the discussion in the Ethnic Relations course is more on racial unity in the Malaysian context. When the Internalization of Ethics and Civilization course was introduced in the 2019/2020 academic session, the course content still did not cover the elements of patriotism as a whole. Therefore, as an effort to strengthen the spirit of patriotism of the people, especially the younger generation, which is an important asset of the country, it is appropriate that the course on Malaysian Nationhood, Malaysian Studies and the like is compulsory in all institutions of higher learning. In fact, the institution's teaching and learning activities need to be closely monitored so that the methods used can attract students and achieve learning objectives. Therefore, as a measure to examine the

¹ The scope of the U1 Group course offering aims to form/nurture students to know about appreciating Malaysian history and pure values. The objective of offering courses in the U1 group is to produce students who know of the heritage and history of the country as well as demonstrate noble values in interaction with society; provide basic Malay language skills for non-citizen students.

appropriateness of making the Malaysian Nationhood course and the like compulsory, the perception of students who have gone through the experience of taking the course in institutions of higher learning needs to be explored. In this regard, this study will examine students' perceptions of the Malaysian Nationhood course or similar in strengthening patriotism among the younger generation.

The Reality of Patriotism Education in Malaysia

Certainly, the main goal of patriotism education is to instil, cultivate and strengthen the spirit of patriotism among the people. This is due to the patriotism spirit usually not born naturally in people. In this context, patriotism education is not a subject studied only once in a lifetime. Still, its learning is continuously aided by socializing agents, either formally or informally.

Informal patriotism education is actually more indirectly between children with parents, family and peers who act as socializing agents. When in childhood, the most dominant agents are the mother, father, and family. As adolescence and adulthood age increase, peers will usually be more influential in their thoughts and actions. Because such education occurs indirectly and unplanned, no specific format or structure needs to be followed. The process happens by chance, even sometimes without the agents knowing they are imparting patriotism education to children. For example, when a family was on their way to town, they saw a group of police forces setting up roadblocks. When the children ask about the situation, the father or mother will tell the task of the police force in keeping the country safe in a simple language that the children could easily understand. Similarly, when they see the national flag waving on a building or on the side of the road, children as young as two years old will show their excitement and demand an explanation from their parents or anyone close to them on the object they see. Of course, they will be explained according to the appropriateness of their age level.

In fact, such information also requires repetition because children's minds take a relatively long time to analyze and process information. This is due to the nature and practice of brain development of those still young and lacking exposure (Ahmad et al., 2007). Indeed, cultivating such a doctrine of nationhood among children is necessary to ensure that every citizen knows their homeland from an early age. Peers also play an important role in enriching information on national affairs. This process occurs indirectly when they spend time together surfing social media, reading newspapers or watching television. These mediums act as a catalyst to the discussion topic geared towards nationhood. For example, maybe at that time, the issues that went viral through social media such as Facebook were about insulting the monarchy, national language, Malay privileges, etc. Then they will discuss the matter and at the same time, make them aware of issues that can threaten the sovereignty of the country.

In school, the process of patriotism education will be formal, more organized and structured. At the preschool education level, for example, the process of recognizing the country is done at the most basic level, such as recognizing the national symbols, the national anthem and so on. Furthermore, at the primary and secondary school level, they need to study subjects related to the country to cultivate patriotism and form an identity, such as History and General Studies. The Internalization of Ethics and Civilization and Philosophy and Current Issues courses are compulsory at the tertiary institution level. Meanwhile, certain public universities such as UPM, UPSI, UUM and UTHM have made Malaysian Nationhood,

Malaysian Studies and the like compulsory. In addition, patriotism education is also implemented through co-curricular activities such as Scouts, Police Cadets, Palapes, Suksis, Student Devotion, Volunteerism Program, etc.

This situation shows that Malaysian youths have gone through the process of inculcating and strengthening the spirit of patriotism up to the tertiary level. However, not all institutions of higher learning offer and make compulsory courses based on comprehensive patriotism, such as Malaysian Nationhood, Malaysian Studies or the like. In fact, the National Service Training Program (PLKN), which aims to strengthen patriotism among the younger generation has also been changed from compulsory to voluntary through the PLKN Transformation Program 2.0 launched on March 26, 2016. The program focuses on the younger generation interested in venturing into skills only (National Service Training Department, 2017). However, PLKN did not last long. It was terminated in 2018 (Rizanizam, 2018). In fact, PLKN should not be terminated because the program is very important in nurturing and strengthening the spirit of love for the country continuously for all groups. In this context, the education of patriotism does not only stop at the level of educational institutions only. Still, it must be done continuously throughout the life of every citizen as long as they are Malaysian citizens. However, after graduation, either at the school level or in institutions of higher learning, the opportunities to follow educational programs and strengthen patriotism formally are quite limited. This can be seen when such courses or programs are not made a mandatory status for public or private servants. It is up to the employer whether they want to oblige their employees with such a program or vice versa. For employers interested in holding the program either from the private sector or the government, applications will be made through the Civics Bureau, which offers patriotism excellence programs through education, training, awareness and strategic partnerships (Civics Bureau, Prime Minister's Department, 2016). This situation illustrates that the program to strengthen the spirit of patriotism formally through the employment sector is no longer actively carried out after the era of studying in schools or institutions of higher learning. However, the process of patriotism education will take place continuously if a citizen tries to participate in the process voluntarily. For example, attending seminars, briefings, dialogues or interviews regarding the importance of the spirit of patriotism, nation-building and the like.

Literature Review

There are various studies on strengthening patriotism among the younger generation through teaching and learning activities in educational institutions, either at the school or university level. For example, in the United States, the subject of Civics is seen as very important in cultivating the spirit of patriotism, especially after the tragedy of the attacks on New York on September 11, 2001 (Manzo, 2001). Through the subject, students are educated about the rights and responsibilities of the people as well as matters related to society and the country and then analyze the events that take place in their homeland. Thus, it will indirectly create a sense of responsibility in their minds to work with the authorities to maintain national security.

Thus, it is clear that the subject of Civics, which is indeed based on patriotism, can motivate students to love the place of their bloodshed. This is supported by Chu and Couper (2003), who found that the teaching and learning process of patriotism-based subjects in schools can strengthen the patriotic spirit of students. Further details can be traced through (Hasnita and

Haizam, 2011). They found that education based on patriotism can positively impact Malaysian students through three main aspects: a tool for understanding and unification, a driver of national progress, and a strategic investment in national security. Suppose the teaching and learning process can be carried out successfully either through courses with elements of patriotism itself or across other subjects. In that case, the spirit of love for the country of the younger generation, especially students, will be nurtured and strengthened from time to time.

If examined on patriotic-based subjects, it consists of History, which guides students to know their origins, thus strengthening their identity through topics related to the origins of the country, the glorious era, the colonial era, the establishment of Malaysia, the national constitution and so on. In this context, Ishak et al (2016) stressed that the subject of History is important in instilling the values of loyalty to the country, love of homeland and can trigger concern for issues occur in the country. Therefore, the subject of History has a role as an important medium in nurturing and strengthening the patriotism of the young generation to become loyal citizens and proud of the culture and heritage of the country. In fact, part of the content of this History subject is also absorbed in the subject of Malaysian Nationhood, Malaysian Studies and the like, which is compulsory at the level of certain institutions of higher learning. The learning objectives of these subjects are definitely geared towards strengthening the spirit of patriotism of students.

However, students' achievement in the subject's learning outcomes is closely related to how the instructor implements the teaching and learning methods. This is supported by Nor et al (2016), who explained innovative and interesting teaching and learning methods could attract students to the Malaysian Nationhood course, thereby strengthening the patriotism. Although the subject of Malaysian Nationhood is seen as very significant in strengthening students' patriotism, this course is not compulsory in all institutions of higher learning. To date, a study on students' perceptions of this course has not been found. Therefore, this study will examine these aspects to strengthen patriotism among the younger generation. This is important to explore because the respondents' perception is based on their experiences which have been through the process of teaching and learning the Malaysian Nationhood course.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted quantitatively involving 400 Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) students and 400 students of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) as respondents. The number of respondents was based on the average of the sample size determination standards as proposed by (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970). The total number of respondents involved was 800 people. A stratified sampling technique was used to determine the study sample. Respondents were categorized into ethnic strata based on the population ratio of Malaysia, which is 50% Malay and Bumiputera Sabah and Sarawak, 30 per cent Chinese, 15 per cent Indian, and other ethnic groups 5 per cent.

All respondents are students who have taken a course-based patriotism, namely Malaysian Nationhood. Although several other public universities offer Malaysian Nationhood courses, such as Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) and Universiti Tun Hussein Onn (UTHM), which use the course name Introduction to Nationhood and Malaysian Development, UPM was chosen

as the study location. This is because the course offered at UPM has exceeded 30 years, from the early 1980s until now (Zaid et al., 2010). The element of seniority needs to be taken into account in determining the study sample because that aspect reflects the experience of educating patriotic children poured by the lecturers to the students. Meanwhile, the selection of UPSI is due to the institution directly playing a role in educating prospective teachers who will devote their services to educating the nation's children. Therefore, when they are equipped with a solid knowledge of patriotism through the Malaysian Nationhood course, it is hoped that the knowledge will be spread and sown into the souls of their students later with full appreciation. Data were analyzed descriptively to achieve and describe the objectives of the study.

Findings and Discussion

The study results clearly show that students have a positive perception of the ability of the Malaysian Nationhood course to strengthen the spirit of patriotism of the younger generation. This can be proven through the following findings:

	Item	Perception (%)	
		Positive	Negative
1.	The implementation of the Malaysian Nationhood course needs to be improved to strengthen the spirit of patriotism among students.	95.3	4.7
2.	Students need to be motivated to pay attention and deepen their knowledge of nationhood.	96.0	4.0
3.	Malaysian Nationhood courses should be made compulsory in all higher learning institutions.	93.6	6.4
4.	At the tertiary institution level, students must obtain grade A or B only for the Malaysian Nationhood course as a condition for graduation.	81.1	18.9
5.	Malaysian Nationhood courses must be taught in the Malay language only.	91.0	9.0
6.	Malaysian Nationhood courses should also be taught at primary and secondary schools.	90.8	9.2

Of course, the positive perception is formed from feedback based on the experiences and learning they had gone through when they took the course. In this context, 95.3 per cent of respondents showed a positive perception of the item "The implementation of the Malaysian Nationhood course needs to be improved to strengthen the spirit of patriotism of students". This means that improving the course's implementation is necessary to attract students. The element of 'interest' is very important in the teaching and learning process because it will become a barrier to negative feelings such as boredom. Thus, the subject studied will be able to be mastered and embodied with full appreciation. As a result, the spirit of patriotism will be successfully nurtured and strengthened. Among the suggestions put forward by the respondents to attract students to the course often assessed as dull are; using interactive

online teaching and learning techniques such as e-learning that apply gamification methods such as world peace games, recycle bank, superbetter and so on. Indeed, this interactive method is very popular with students because it is fun and relaxing. This is supported by Pappas (2014), who stated that about 80 per cent of the students surveyed believed that they would be more productive if educational institutions or workplaces used game-shaped teaching methods; educators need to relate current issues to the subject of nationhood.

Therefore, students will be able to feel the importance of the subject-centred on nation-building on the latest issues in the country. This can make class discussions very fun and meaningful. Lecturers could show videos to students especially those related to the country's history, and then provide discussion questions. If the students have fun with the activities implemented, then the goal of strengthening the spirit of patriotism will be easily achieved. It is natural for human beings to do something fun with more diligence and earnestness. In fact, to overcome the problem of boredom and lack of interest in nation-building courses, 96 per cent of respondents suggested that students be given special motivation by emphasizing the importance of national knowledge for the development of the country and the nation. Therefore, awareness will exist and produce positive attitudes and actions towards learning the Malaysian Nationhood course.

In addition, the majority of respondents, namely 93.6 per cent, perceive that "Malaysian Nationhood courses should be compulsory in all institutions of higher learning". This is important to strengthen the spirit of patriotism of the students. This perception is made based on the experience of those who have taken the course before. If viewed in terms of the course content, which includes aspects of history, system of government and nation-building, such courses are believed to strengthen the spirit of love for their country. Through this course, the value of students' identity can be further strengthened when they know and understand their origins in this country. For example, by understanding the social contract signed at the initial stage between UMNO representatives led by Tunku Abdul Rahman and MCA representatives led by Tan Cheng Lock on 3 February 1953 and subsequently certified by MIC in December 1954 (Abd. Manaf, 2009), the people will be able to understand and appreciate how the process of formation of this multi-racial nation takes place. Therefore, issues related to sensitive matters that can lead to issues of racial unity will be overcome and avoided. However, not all public universities make such courses compulsory for their students. While nation-building courses like this should be compulsory for all institutions of higher learning, whether public or private, to strengthen the spirit of patriotism of the younger generation, thus avoiding negative action in the country.

In addition, to ensure that students master the Malaysian Nationhood course, 81.1 per cent of respondents perceive that students should be required to obtain grades A or B as a condition for graduation. Such perceptions reflect the high awareness of the respondents about the importance of the subject in nation-building. Such awareness will exist if students feel that whatever program they follow in institutions of higher learning is significant for the country's development. Thus, the determination of grade A or B for the Malaysian Nationhood course as a condition for graduation should be accepted with an open heart without raising any negative issues. In fact, to further strengthen the identity of students, a total of 91 per cent of respondents showed a positive perception of the item "Malaysian Nationhood course must be taught in Malay only". In this context, every Malaysian student

must know the rationale for using the Malay language in the teaching and learning of the course. Of course, it is closely related to Article 152 of the Federal Constitution, which stipulates Malay as the national language. This will be studied in detail in the chapter of the Federal Constitution, which covers aspects of history to the latest issues. Meanwhile, the ability of every citizen to master the national language well is also categorized as patriotic (Hasnita et al., 2020).

To ensure that every Malaysian has a strong patriotism, they need to be educated with these values consistently from the school level. In this case, 90.8 per cent of students positively perceived the item "Malaysian Nationhood course should also be taught at the primary and secondary school level". Of course, their positive perception is based on the relevance of the course in nurturing and strengthening the spirit of love for the country. In reality, patriotism-based subjects at the primary and secondary school levels have already been established, such as History, Civic Education and Citizenship, and General Studies. However, at the primary school level, the History subject is not categorized as important as it is not compulsory in the Primary School Assessment Test (UPSR). Its existence only fulfils the requirements because students will study more diligently and earnestly for the required subjects in the UPSR. This is evidenced through the Professional Circular Letter of the Ministry of Education Malaysia No. 8 (2016), which only allocates 32 hours per year for History subjects compared to the compulsory subjects in the UPSR up to 160 hours per year. The very significant difference in the number of hours shows that primary school history subjects' teaching and learning process is less significant and relevant.

More sadly, patriotism-based subjects rich in national values such as History are only taught from level two of primary school (years four to six). In contrast, the process of patriotism education needs to be started at an earlier stage, as early as year one (age seven), with content and approach appropriate to their age. For example, they get to know their country through exposure to national symbols such as the National Coat of Arms, Jalur Gemilang, national flowers, and the authorities who look after national security. This is supported by (Easton and Hess, 1962). They asserted that education about national politics capable of triggering the spirit of patriotism begins as early as the age of three and becomes more established when reaching the age of seven. Thus, it is clear that early exposure to values and knowledge of nationhood in early childhood will positively impact the increase in their patriotism. However, the positive impact results are closely related to the teaching and learning process that takes place in the classroom.

Conclusion

The positive perception shown by the students on the ability of the Malaysian Nationhood course to strengthen the spirit of patriotism of the younger generation clearly shows the relevance of the subject in nation-building. This is because, compulsory courses with elements of nation-building such as Internalization of Ethics and Civilization and Philosophy and Current Issues do not have all the values and knowledge of nationhood in them. Meanwhile, in the situation of the people's spirit of patriotism, which is increasingly fragile today, the value of nationhood is very important to continue to be cultivated, nurtured, and empowered in every citizen, especially students, so that the country's dignity continues to be maintained and defended. In this context, the students are an important asset of the country that will generally serve the beloved homeland one day, thus helping towards the progress of the

nation and country. Therefore, the Malaysian Government through the Ministry of Higher Education should consider making the Malaysian Nationhood course compulsory in all higher learning institutions for the beloved country's survival.

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