MULTICULTURALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: IDEALISM, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN MALAYSIAN REGION CONTEXT

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Abstract

Malaysia's unique cultural kaleidoscope is the result of many centuries of contact and influence of many and varied civilisations, which have gone into making each ethnic group especially distinct, yet interactive. The 1957 independence is indeed a vital proclamation for Malaysia as the pluralism and multiculturalism are accepted and recognised wholly and officially. Multiculturalism and education are inextricably intertwined, especially at the tertiary level. At this crucial juncture, the understanding and awareness of multiculturalism are prioritised to maintain the stability of higher education. In this paper, we will discuss the idea of multiculturalism in Malaysia by focusing on the development of higher education in illustrating the opportunities provided by higher education. Nonetheless, no matter how many initiatives or efforts have been put forward to tackle the issue of multiculturalism in the Malaysian context, even in any plural countries in this world, there has been considerable debate about the 'dimness of multiculturalism' and its importance in higher education. This paper will highlight the various efforts and initiative approaches which have been implemented in recent years by the Ministry of Education to embrace multiculturalism at higher learning institutes. Specific challenges on the students' side have been given particular attention to addressing the multicultural issues in higher education.

Keywords--- multiculturalism; diversity; higher education; opportunities; Malaysia region.

INTRODUCTION

Multiracial is absolutely a unique feature in Malaysian's society. Malaysia's unique cultural kaleidoscope is the result of many centuries of contact and influence of many and varied civilisations, which have gone into making each ethnic group especially distinct, yet interactive. It becomes more interesting with the existence of diverse characters which called as a plural society (Mohd Anuar & Mohammad Aizat, 2012). This braided relationship of ethnic diversity in Malaysia requires a high degree of national unity among multiracial and religious communities as it is a very complex relationship and takes a long time to see the worth (Samsudin, 2011).

The existence of different cultural backgrounds in the context of Malaysian society has been made possible through the colonial system of government, especially during British imperialism. Consequently, the British colonist had formed a new added value in societies' polarisation and way of life of the population in Malaya before the independence itself (Rozita, Nazri & Ahmad Hidayat, 2011). Being a plural society, Malaysians have experienced an intricate and multifaceted path in their historical trajectory. The 1957 independence is indeed a vital proclamation for Malaysian as the pluralism and multiculturalism are accepted and recognised wholly and officially. In a not-so-long experience of being together in the post-independent political set-up, i.e. the adopted political system of parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy, the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians, the Bumiputras (son of the soil), the Indigenous and other races and ethnic groups have shown their ability and willingness to tolerate each other on matters of difference and at the same time instil a sense of commonness, reciprocity and mutual respect within the pluralistic nature of the society (Zaid, 2007). From this point of the path, various proactive measures undertaken by the Government of Malaya after independence in 1957.

By all means, this does not denote Malaysia as a country free from any racial or ethnic problems or religious tensions. Nonetheless, after the traumatic experience of May 13, 1969, for Malaysia, it is our national 'code' for a violent racial meltdown and a greater determination to preserve the peace, especially among the older generation. Throughout the six decades of the post-colonial era, the government has worked tirelessly to unite the nation from fragmented, to heal the divide, and to endure the multiculturalism that has been a landmark for our country.

Diversity of society began to change with the presence of many other ethnic groups and became more prominent as this described a salad bowl, with a people of different cultures living in harmony. Of course, it is often to hear that Malaysia is well known for ethnically-diverse-cuisine paradise such as *Nasi lemak* (Malay), *Char Kuey Tiaw* (Chinese), *Thosai* (Indian). Sometimes, you can taste delicious ethnic fusion food like *sambal* with *roti canai* (Malay's spicy chilli-based relish with Indian-influenced flatbread dish). On the other hand, another multicultural portrayal was shown through the richness and diversity of traditional outfits where we can also see Chinese and Indian girls wearing baju kurung. Recently, a Malaysian newspaper The Star (Zazali, 2017) has penned that a Malay woman has helped thousands of students, mainly Malays, Indians and people from Sabah and Sarawak, converse in Mandarin.

These gastronomical images could give an inkling of how Malaysians accept and celebrate plurality together in the society regardless of religious and cultural festivities, attires, language and identity. As aforementioned, this unity has gone a long way to understand, to accept and to be a part of the multicultural society. Whether this scenario is deciphered as a true incidents in everyday life or just a superficial, one must understand how Malaysia as a nation-state has evolved and undergone from time to time concerning diversity, multiculturalism and pluralism, as well as how this idealism of unity has garnered Malaysians to live harmoniously when some countries are still struggling to adjust with a plurality. If this question is might seem impossible in the future, then one must able to uncover the present and future challenges of multiculturalism in Malaysia that withholds fellow Malaysian to be united. Hence, this paper intends to explore

these questions in the context of multiculturalism in Malaysia. The discussion will be focusing on the pattern of multiculturalism as I see it and particular attention will be given how Malaysian Higher Education regarded as a key-role in fostering national integration.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF MALAYSIAN MULTICULTURALISM

The concept of multiculturalism embodies a new perspective toward the future. Although multiculturalism is distinguished as a new paradigm in the 21st century predominantly in education, yet there is no definitive term nor has a clear definition of the concept emerged. Since for many it is also a value-ladened concept, it is where and how you perceive the world differently in most of the real situation, and it is exceptionally true for the concept of multiculturalism.

As in most cases, multiculturalism is generally described as a manner in which a given society deals with cultural diversity. It is assumed that by often very different cultures can coexist harmoniously. It is also sometimes used to describe the condition of a diversified society. Many countries in this world are culturally diverse. To prove this, African countries dominate the list due to their tribal culture. Canada is another example since they have opened their door to immigrants, it is reported by 2016, over 250 ethnic origins and ancestries in the Canadian population (Census of Population Canada, 2016). The same applies to different parts of the world like China, USA, Australia, France, India and not to forget Malaysia. However, all of them are multicultural in their way. Some describe it as a melting pot and some refer as a salad bowl.

In this regard, the explanation by Rusado (1996) can be a help to furnish the definition. Rusado state that the term multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviour that recognises and respects the presence of diversified groups in a society or a community that acknowledges and values their socio-cultural beliefs and differences and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organisation or society. Rusado has made this operational definition to clarify human interaction and to understand the substance lies within this concept.

In this paper, the term multiculturalism is converted into a smaller range that focuses on ethnic, culture, gender, class, physical, mental ability and religion (Banks, 2004). Multiculturalism, on the other hand, Locke (1998) and other advocates of multiculturalism see one nation in which differences and unique qualities are sources of strength, rather than of division. I strongly believe that multiculturalism from the viewpoint of Banks (2004) outlined 6 main components that determine the effectiveness of multiculturalism. These include ethnicity, language, socioeconomic, religious and beliefs, gender, differences in mental intelligence and physical ability. The existence of various racial identities has created a cultural diversity in this country which can be defined through six components of multi-cultural.

I found this portrayal is similar to Malaysia's current state of multiculturalism which has an estimated population of 32.6 million people of various ethnicities and religions in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). The largest group of Malaysians consist of three main races, namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Orang Asli is the natives in peninsular Malaysia and is generally divided into three major groups, namely the Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay. Sabah's population consists of 32 ethnic groups and the major ethnic is Kadazandusun while Sarawak population consists of 27 ethnic groups and Iban is a major ethnic group.

In Malaysian ethnicity structure, Malay and Non-Malay indigenous people (Orang Asli, Sabah and Sarawak Indigenous people) together make up as the Bumiputra or sons of the soil group (Promod Singh, 2017). The Bumiputras especially Malay are the largest community and large dominant in country's politics. Linguistic diversity is also widespread. Thus, as a multi-ethnic multicultural country, the principal languages spoken by those in Peninsular Malaya are Malay as a national language followed by other languages like English, Mandarin, and Tamil. In the case of Sarawak, Malay is the most commonly spoken dialect but Malay and English are generally used by those in Sabah (generally by the higher social and economic class). In this respect, religion, cultural and ethnicity diversity in Malaysia has gone a long way from tolerance to adjustment, to acceptance and as of now, embracing the diversity as part of Malaysian spirit, as our brethren.

MALAYSIA HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE NEED OF MULTICULTURALISM

Since the beginning of the 21st century, multiculturalism and education are inextricably intertwined (Guo & Jamal, 2007). According to Clark (2018), Higher education is at a crucial juncture. With the advent of a social climate that questions the validity of facts, scientific evidence and critical thinking, higher education has come under attack from a myriad of stakeholders.

As a result, national identity has been shaken to its focal point, prompting the transformation of many into multicultural states (Aydin, 2014). While there is no universal consensus on a specific description of multiculturalism in education, it remains a very broad concept with numerous models and different dimensions (Veronica, 2017). Understandably, there is also a thoughtful need to foster social cohesion and tolerance of cultural differences through education. According to Gollnick and Chinn (2013), multicultural education supports and extends the concepts of culture, diversity, equality, social justice, and democracy into the higher education settings. Multiculturalism and pluralism are one of the high-end challenges in higher education which is regarded as complex and complicated (Rohaty, Salasiah & Elis, 2001).

At this point, the understanding and awareness of multiculturalism are prioritised to maintain the stability of higher education. Apart from that, reducing bias and creating multicultural understanding among students from different national, racial, and religious groups is one of the fundamental goals of multicultural in education. Moreover, the goal of multicultural in education according to Aydin (2014) is to get ready the students for the world with an ever-growing diversity and to build up the students' capability for interactive with others by making them adapt and adopt the pluralism around them.

Currently, higher education around the world is undergoing a highly commercial and corporatisation process to encourage diversified students to accommodate new dimensions of thinking, learning and researching while preparing students for highly technological and knowledge-based occupations of the 21st century diverse workforce. In this process, Hans de Wit, Karen and Stephen (2014) pointed out that social cohesion is an important aspect as well as the role of public institutions of higher learning, is an alternative to the increasing emphasis on competition, market and internationalisation in higher education. To centralise all these, Morey and Kitano (1997) suggested that multicultural curriculum emphasis in higher education will provide a clear, accurate and holistic perspective to enable all students to function in a multicultural society and fulfils the learning needs for all students regardless their background.

Globally, student enrolment at tertiary institutions has increased since the year 2000 to 2008, reaching 52 million students

worldwide (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). These figures indicate clearly that students' access to higher education is gaining attention and that the need for strategies for adapting students of various identities should also be in line with these figures (Morgan, 2013). According to Morgan, today's students are very complex and often bring different characteristics from different groups. They usually have to adapt to the lifestyle or environment of the place. Morgan (2013) described the role of higher learning institutions should be to identify the cultural diversity inherent in their universities and to create, develop and implement strategies to support their needs and adaptation to higher education. Next discussion will be specifically on the efforts and initiatives of the Malaysian government and Education Ministry in intensifying and embracing multiculturalism at the higher education level.

HIGHER EDUCATION INITIATIVES IN MULTICULTURALISM
The higher education institutions in our global world are fast-changing and consequently and this emergence is the same applies to the current Malaysian higher education system. It is now fully driven with the need of industrial revolution 4.0 which productivity relies on science, technology and management (Md Abdul Haseeb, Jan 10, 2018). To understand the impact of diversity and multiculturalism in Malaysian educational setting, it seems necessary to some key terms, including Malaysian higher education revolution and it's setting in embracing multiculturalism.

In Malaysia, admission to tertiary education studies is increasing every year. According to local newspaper The Star, a total of 182,409 Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) school-leavers were offered a place in 20 public universities which called as a *Universiti Awam (UA)* in Malay for the 2018/2019 June academic session intake (Lee & Rebecca, 2018). Former Education Minister Dr. Maszlee Malik stated that this number includes 17,338 candidates from the B40 group (median household income of at least RM3,000.00 and below), 299 special needs students, 384 Orang Asli students and 1,225 sports athletes. This includes students from all ethnicities and backgrounds and even from international as well since higher education in Malaysia is no longer designed to fulfil the needs of Malaysians only.

In this era of globalisation, the Education Ministry has made a recent transformation by intensifying internationalisation and since 2018, a total of 170,000 students from over 135 countries have been achieved by Malaysia. They are from Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa (The Star, May 6, 2018). Former Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh has mentioned that Malaysia has positioned itself as an ideal higher education destination as it offers world-recognised learning programmes, reasonable tuition fees, as well as an affordable cost of living (The Star, Dec 17, 2017). Promotions and campaigns were carried out in foreign countries to attract students to enrol in local universities. All these new development will certainly bring about a new phase of multicultural encounter to the various ethnicities in Malaysia (Rozita, Nazri & Ahmad Hidayat, 2011).

This directly indicates that the importance of prioritising cultural diversity among students is an important aspect and the higher education should be a key pillar in ensuring that students can meet their needs (Awang-Hashim, Kaur & Valdez, 2019). According to Banks (2004), in pursuing higher education, students cannot escape the confines of multiculturalism in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, gender, socioeconomic status and differences in mental and physical ability. These multicultural concerns, if not addressed thoroughly, can have detrimental consequences including inhibiting students' development in terms of personality, social skills and even management competencies and academic achievement while at university (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2012).

Therefore, towards achieving a developed nation status, higher education is one of the most important sectors to propel Malaysia's talent development in spearheading Malaysia's socio-economic growth in line with the 11th Malaysia Plan as well as Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025). The Blueprint envisaged 10 shifts in the higher education sector to make Malaysia as the best higher education hub in the world. Some of the initiatives aimed at producing holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates provide a clear framework for promoting elements of multicultural values. These include the iCGPA. The Integrated Cumulative Grade Point Average initiative is a comprehensive assessment system that adds value to the traditional CGPA. The iCGPA assesses students across eight domains of learning outcomes including knowledge, social responsibility, communications, leadership and teamwork, problem-solving skills, entrepreneurial skills, as well as values and ethics.

The interesting fact about this initiative is no one left behind and it is compulsory to have diversified students in higher learning classrooms and (The Star, May 6, 2018). In related to this, Aydin (2014) argued that higher education learning comprises of any aforementioned learning domains requires cultural compassion approaches and the creation of equal chances for academic success and individual development for every student. Hence, the direction of higher education in Malaysia under the Ministry of Education has seen vast changes in embracing diversity and pluralism in higher education level.

It was also observed that the Malaysian higher education system has experienced various key reforms in the previous 10 years, which have a robust bearing on the nation's values. One of the issues which has been given attention recently is the shortage of facilities for people with disabilities (OKU) is one of the main reasons why many public and private institutions of higher learning are reluctant to accept disabled students. Their fear has unwittingly denied disabled students of the right to pursue tertiary education and it does seem as if universities are not giving equal opportunities to OKU students (Erda Khursyiah, Oct. 10, 2019).

To counter this problem, the Education Ministry has come up with OKU Inclusion Policy with an aim all public higher education institutions (IPTAs) must become completely disabled-friendly within the next decade. Study materials that specifically cater to those who are visually-impaired, deaf or have different learning abilities provided (Rebecca & Sandhya, 2019). These upgrades and changes have taken into a count of Banks's (2004) one of the multicultural component which is differences in mental intelligence and physical ability. This vital component has been a tool to measure the effectiveness of multicultural and diversity acceptance in a higher education context. Fundamentally, it is the utmost responsibility of higher learning institution that opportunities are not based on any disability but committed to equality and diversity.

REVIEW OF MULTICULTURALISM CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Given its pluralistic landscape, the contested space of the Malaysian nation is an important concern for many higher learning institutes. No matter how many initiatives or efforts have been put forward to tackle the issue of multiculturalism in Malaysian context even in any plural countries in this world, there has been considerable debate about the 'dimness of multiculturalism' and its importance in current generations. Multiculturalism is a process, and such processes are always contextual to particular places and cultural experiences. Thus, as already noted, we have to recognise that the experiences of multiculturalism in Malaysia are unique to that country, and are different from multiculturalism in other countries, such as

Canada, Australia, India or the UAE. This means that our analysis and understanding of multiculturalism in each of these contexts must also be contextual, and we should not try to understand one within the framework of the other (Nye, 2007).

If we all look at it from a Malaysian context, In the context of Malaysia, the growth of institutions of higher learning is accelerating, notably private, which encourages large numbers of students. The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), especially on issues of ethnicity and cultural diversity, outlines the actions the government will take to transform education in Malaysia into one of the best education in the world. The current scenario in Malaysia is one of the challenges and opportunities in addressing the increasing issues of cultural diversity in educational institutions.

To look through on some general issues, as multiculturalism is processual, it is very important to recognise that relations between groups and people within any multicultural context are subject to change and development. Studies conducted by Abdullah Taib (1984) at three universities, namely Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Malaya (UM), are about the degree of interaction among students of various races. He found that the degree of interaction was high only among intra-ethnic groups as compared to inter-ethnic interaction rates. This statement is supported by the recent research done by Khairul Azam, Samsudin, Norliza, Kalsum and Zulkarnin (2019) that the level of acceptance of minority ethnics (Sabah and Sarawak) into higher education is still not balanced and it is suspected that there is some bias in involving minor ethnic students in university program. Based on this research, it is found that polarisation still exists when a particular ethnic student prefers to meet and discuss with his own ethnic friends or students rather than other ethnics. Such differences are not only cultural or religious differences, but there are also many other factors of social diversity and cohesion which may equally impact and contribute to the problem. Also cultural and religious diversity very often overlaps with other social differences. As I have argued, these differences need to be managed effectively at higher education, and in particular, the respect for diversity needs to be combined with the creation and development of a sense of common ground across the differences.

Sanusi Osman (1984) in his study of racial polarisation in higher education institutions outlined several polarisation problems among students of higher education institutions. Among them, the degree of interaction between students of various ethnic groups is low although there are many opportunities to interact with them on campus. There is a tendency to choose friends or friends of the same ethnic group. Lack of open and serious discussion among students of various ethnicities on political, economic and social issues. It is also agreed that there some strong prejudices, stereotypes and ethnocentrism. Many student activities are conducted along ethnic lines rather than across ethnic lines. Some of the factors that led to the polarization problem were due to the problems of students and university institutions that eventually led to social sanction. Second, the structural and developmental problems of the community that bring about issues of particular interest to the people. Third, the problems of the political and economic systems of students in higher education are largely influenced by external political elements that ultimately neglect their responsibility as students and rarely think of strategies towards fostering closer racial relations among students of various races.

The above discussion shows how the development of human capital and the promotion of unity among multicultural groups in Malaysia have always been fundamental to the goals and role of public universities. However, the question of whether this is pure intent in the social realities of everyday life among university students remains unanswered (Shamsul, 2010). Rozita Ibrahim, Nazri Muslim and Ahmad Hidayat Buang (2011) have argued that the issue of ethnic polarization at the university is partly due to the lack of a clear policy on nation-building in higher education. Most policies focus on education at the primary and secondary levels. However, there is a view that although ethnic polarisation seems to exist, it is due to shared norms related to contemporary life that focus on the individual's need for material gain, social status and connection, he argues, has succeeded in overcoming the importance of political and ethnic differences.

Another study by Zaharah Hassan et al. (2010) shows that university activities have successfully helped to create awareness and enhance students' motivation to interact with other ethnic groups. One of the most important contributions was the introduction of the Ethnic Relations Module as a mandatory course for all public universities beginning in 2005/2006. For private institutions of higher learning, this course is compulsory with the same objective called Malaysian Studies. This is seen as a positive step towards fostering awareness and knowledge of the Malaysian multicultural community. In addition to having a compulsory course in the university curriculum, co-curriculum activities in faculty and college colleges are identified as potential sites where understanding between ethnicity and relationships can be nurtured. The development of a policy of effective multiculturalism also must always be pursued within the context of national identity, it is part of the development of national identity and not a challenge to it. It is certain that the issues of multiculturalism will become more urgent and more challenging as the twenty-first century progresses. Nye (2007) mentioned that for effective governance of these nations and the people contained within them - to ensure that the benefits of diversity are felt rather than the tensions and conflicts - there needs to be greater engagement with and understanding of the issues behind these changes. What we are seeing at present is not the 'death of multiculturalism', but rather the birth of the academic discipline of 'multicultural studies', as a response to the central role that the processes of multiculturalism will have in the coming century.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, perhaps the most important points to stress are that multiculturalism is both a process and it is unavoidable in the contemporary world. Multiculturalism is not an optional extra, it is not something that a society can choose to have or avoid. Nye (2007) urges that the management and governance of multiculturalism are necessary at higher education to manage diverse students. This is to ensure that there is widespread and effective respect for diversity, whilst at the same time, there is an element of cohesion and shared identity - a common ground upon which the society and nation work as more than a collection of diversities.

Global developments in higher education have led to an increase in international government's commitment and expansion of access to improve global competitiveness in the industry and their position in the global higher education market (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Higher education is a platform for students to develop their professional maturity in order to face future challenges. This is due to their involvement in activities based on the cultural diversity that exists in their tertiary institutions. Recruiting and supporting a student body that engages students of cultural diversity at the tertiary level brings many benefits to the individual, society and economy as the diversity of students is crucial to creating a constructive intellectual question and resilient knowledge economy. This promotes higher social and cultural offers of higher education and more representation from the local community. Diversity in

higher education is also important in creating a more just society, fostering social mobility and supporting economic growth. Education is also said to promote multi-cultural values such as employment, adaptability, personal competence, better health, social inclusion, democracy and peace.

This paper discussed multicultural acceptance and its effectiveness by taking the case of higher education in a plural country like Malaysia. The brief discussion shows how multiculturalism and education are well intertwined and indeed, these issues can be tackled through proper education. As we all know, as for multiculturalism is a never-ending solution but it can be managed at all levels of society especially in higher education as the graduates are the future leaders of Malaysia. Higher education has an extremely significant role to play in which understanding of toleration for and engagement with diversity in Malaysia and embrace the pluralism. But recent initiatives from the Malaysian government through the Ministry of Education has seen vast changes in tackling multicultural challenges in higher education and moving forward gradually to support the needs of multiculturalism in all levels.

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