

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



EXPLORING ETHNIC RELATIONS AMONG UNDERGRADUATES AT A MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT-LINKED UNIVERSITY: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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Abstract

This study provides a preliminary look at the level of ethnic interactions among undergraduates at Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia (National Energy University of Malaysia or UNITEN), one of the Private Higher Education Institutions with a Government-linked University status. This study aimed to determine whether UNITEN successfully fostered harmonious ethnic relations among its students through national education aspirations that emphasise the elements of unity and quality education, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025: Higher Education. Questionnaires were given to a select group of students who satisfied the sampling criteria. The most fundamental level of ethnic relations explored was accommodation, followed by acculturation, assimilation, and amalgamation as the highest level of ties. Each level of association was assessed using a four-point Likert scale. According to the results of the research, the level of ethnic ties among students at UNITEN scored a total mean score of 3.20, which is associated with high levels of assimilation. These data point to a shift in ethnic relations from “Low/Moderate” to “High” in previous research. The findings show that students, especially those at private higher education institutions, can accept and adapt to relationships with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds if instructional strategies and unity initiatives are vigorously implemented inside and outside the educational institution. Student responses to questionnaire statements suggest many concerns, including their sensitivity and acceptance of different ethnic groups.

Keywords: Ethnic, Government-Linked university, Level, Private higher education institutions, Relation, Undergraduate students.

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Introduction

The primary focus of national education, spanning from primary schools to higher education institutions, is on promoting unity among diverse ethnic groups (Mohd. Zaini, 2014). This emphasis on cohesion has been a cornerstone of education policies since the country's independence, especially following the racial unrest of the 13 May 1969 riots (Mohd. Zaini, 2014). Initiatives that foster unity have been particularly prominent in primary education, as evidenced by the directives outlined in significant documents such as the Razak Report (Abdul Rahman, 2009), the Rahman Talib Report (Abdul Rahman, 2009), and the National Education Policy. Furthermore, the Ministry of Higher Education has introduced a comprehensive strategy named the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (hereafter referred to as the Education Strategic Plan) for 2007-2020, comprising three integral components.

Additionally, efforts to promote harmony among students from diverse ethnic backgrounds have been extended to Higher Learning Institutions, such as the introduction of the General Studies Subjects in 2013, which are divided into U1 (Appreciation of philosophy, values, and history), U2 (Mastery of soft skills), U3 (Expansion of knowledge about Malaysia), and U4 (Practical community management skills such as community service and co-curriculum) (MOHE, 2013). The justification for the introduction of the General Studies subjects is to align the previously implemented Compulsory Subjects at all higher learning institutions, to aid in nation-building, to enable students to master and expand their soft skills, to help strengthen and expand knowledge in Malaysia, and to encourage students to apply their soft skills.

As a continuation of the Education Strategic Plan review, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) (hereafter referred to as Education Blueprint) was introduced. The Education Blueprint places great importance on unity by focusing on ambitious goals and efforts to revolutionise the education system and enhance both the availability and standard of higher education in Malaysia (MOE, 2015). The Education Blueprint has two goals that are directly related to unity: (a) assessing current performance and challenges to improve access to education, raising standards (quality), closing achievement gaps (equity), promoting student unity, and maximizing student efficiency, and (b) establishing clear aspirations for the system and students, and aligning them with the national agenda, Malaysian priorities, and main programs (MOE, 2015).

Research contribution

This research contributes significantly to monitoring UNITEN's implementation of the higher education policies created by Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education to fortify the unity of undergraduate students from diverse ethnic backgrounds while staying current with educational advancements.

Research questions

This research intends to answer the following questions (i) What are the degree of ethnic relations of undergraduate students at the National Energy University Malaysia (UNITEN)? and (ii) Does

the degree of ethnic relations for UNITEN undergraduate students differ from earlier study conducted by the academics listed in the literature review?

Problem Statement

The multicultural society of Malaysia emerged due to British colonization. The British implemented a divide-and-rule program that effectively created a division between the indigenous Malays and the Chinese and Indians who were brought to Malaya for economic reasons. Multiple events have contributed to the development of a phenomenon known as “distant and distrust” (Shamsul, 2012), exacerbating the preexisting barrier. After the British withdrawal following independence, the Malays had little option but to cohabit with the Chinese and Indians. Despite achieving independence and the founding of Malaysia, the feeling of distance and distrust was not completely resolved.

The problem that contends Malaysians until now is (i) the Malays, as the majority wanted their “rights” to be safeguarded, maintained, and unchallenged while at the same time seeing the Chinese as rivals or the causes of their economic disproportion and (ii) the Chinese and Indian sees themselves lacking several opportunities because of their status as non-bumiputra (sons of the soils), such limited prospects for them to pursue higher education because of meritocracy, government policies that favours the Malays, (iii) racism, stereotyping, prejudices, discrimination that triggers ethnic and religious conflicts, and (iv) all these had successfully created “polarisation”. The Malaysian government took serious measures to foster unity through education upon independence. Education was made to unite people from different ethnicities through structured syllabuses and the use of the Malay language as the national and unifying language.

With the government’s goals and educational policies, it is anticipated that ethnic relations in Malaysia will be free of anything that could cause social unrest and division. At the tertiary education level, students of other ethnicities should have the opportunity to come together via education, building upon the unity they have already experienced throughout their primary schooling. Contrary to expectations, inter-ethnic conflicts continue to be a prevalent concern. Past studies by Ramlee et al. (2009), Rusimah et al. (2004), Hamidah et al. (2001), and Nazri and Mansor (2014) have contended that the interaction between students from diverse ethnic backgrounds in public higher education institutions remains moderately satisfactory. The presence of polarisation, quota issues, lack of understanding and acceptance of other ethnic groups, biased curriculum, non-Malay ethnic groups’ weakness in mastering the Malay language (Nurul Farhanah et al., 2019; Rohaidah et al., 2019), and political issues in the country all contribute to the challenges surrounding ethnic relations in higher education institutions.

According to Sanusi’s (1989) research, polarisation in public universities is caused by several factors. These include limited interaction between students from different ethnic backgrounds, a preference for befriending individuals from the same ethnic group, prejudice, stereotypes, and ethnocentrism, as well as student activities that reinforce ethnic divisions rather than promoting integration. Strong biases, preconceived notions, and a significant degree of cultural superiority contribute to the limited comprehension and embrace of different ethnicities (Sanusi, 1989). This scenario aligns with Gordon Allport’s Intergroup Contact theory, which posits that intergroup interactions arise when four specific conditions are fulfilled: equal status in each situation, shared common goals, cooperative intergroup relations, and endorsement from authorities, laws, or customs (Pettigrew, 1998). Some courses, particularly history, are perceived

as ethnocentric, leading to marginalization among other ethnic groups regarding their contributions and roles in national development (Ahamad et al., n.d.). According to Sanusi's research conducted in 1989, students from different ethnic backgrounds have a deficiency in engaging in open and profound conversations regarding the political, economic, and social matters of their country.

Mortazavi et al. (2015) and Tamam (2009) contend that higher education institutions in Malaysia are unsuccessful in fostering unity among students from different ethnic backgrounds. This failure leads to the presence of intolerance, ethnocentrism, and isolation on campus. Additionally, the issue of isolation persists among students of diverse ethnicities on campus. Furthermore, there is limited knowledge regarding the effects of ethnic diversity experiences on university campuses in Malaysia. Interactions between different ethnic groups are crucial for attaining educational aspirations and goals, including enhancing dedication to democratic values, enhancing leadership abilities and cultural comprehension, promoting civic awareness, and diminishing prejudice (Mortazavi et al., 2015).

Research Background

The introduction of privatisation in Malaysia facilitated the establishment of private higher education institutions in the late 1980s. Due to this inclusive approach, there are no occurrences of quotas or meritocracy for admission to private universities, unlike at public higher education institutions. The establishment of private universities serves as an alternative and remedy for non-Bumiputera students who have difficulties obtaining admission to public universities due to the influence of merit-based selection criteria. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for Malay and Bumiputera students who cannot meet public university admission requirements to pursue their studies. Consequently, the open admission policy implemented by private higher learning institutions contributes to enhancing ethnic relations by eliminating quotas and meritocracy.

This government policy explicitly promotes the construction of separate independent private higher education institutions by Government-linked Companies. For example, it facilitated the creation of Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN) as a subsidiary of Tenaga Nasional Berhad, Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP) by Petroliaam Nasional Berhad (Petronas), Multimedia University (MMU) by Telekom Malaysia Berhad (TM), and Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) by MARA Corporation Sdn.Bhd (MARA Corp). The four universities that are wholly owned by GLC are commonly referred to as Government-linked Universities.

Like public universities, Malaysia's private universities are bound by the National Education Philosophy while providing high-quality education, even if they operate profit oriented. For instance, this is seen in the vision and objective of UNITEN's establishment, aspired by Tenaga Nasional Berhad. Furthermore, Article 89 of Act 555, known as the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act, governs the prohibitions or limitations pertaining to race and belief. According to Article 89, individuals can become members of the staff, teachers, and students, regardless of gender, race, religion, nationality, or social class. Moreover, no religious examination or conviction can be conducted in private universities.

The second stage of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan is in accordance with the Fourth Thrust of the Tenth Malaysia Plan, which focuses on developing and maintaining a globally competitive human resource pool (MOE, 2011). As part of the Critical Agenda Project (CAP), the second phase of Education Strategic Plan involves the establishment of Private Higher Education

Institutions. The Education Strategic Plan anticipates that the inclusion of diverse disciplines in private universities would facilitate the implementation of the idea of democratizing education in Malaysia. This will result in a greater number of Malaysian citizens being able to pursue higher education in the programs of their preference (MOE, 2011).

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) endeavours to elevate the education system through the implementation of the Aspirations System and the new academia education system. The Aspirations System focuses on providing access to higher education for all students who meet the entry requirements. The new academia education system emphasizes the importance of quality education, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to receive an excellent education equivalent to the world's top institutions. Additionally, the blueprint aims to establish an equitable higher education system that supports social mobility, regardless of factors such as race, geographical location, and economic background. Lastly, the blueprint promotes unity by fostering understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of diversity.

The second phase of the Education Strategic Plan strongly focuses on engaging the business sector in education, particularly as Higher Education Providers. Since 1996, the Ministry of Higher Education has introduced Compulsory General Subjects such as Malaysian Studies, Moral Education 1, 2, and 3, and Islamic Studies 1, 2, and 3 to private universities as part of the initial phase of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan. Public universities in Malaysia introduced the subject of Ethnic Relations in 2005, and Islamic and Asian Civilisations in 2006. The Ministry has started implementing Compulsory General studies courses during the second phase of the Education Strategic Plan, requiring all students to enrol in four categories of courses (U1: Appreciation of philosophy, values and history, U2: Mastery of soft-skills, U3: Expansion of knowledge about Malaysia, and U4: Practical community management skills such as community service and co-curriculum) in both public and private universities.

The Ministry of Higher Education in 2013 held that the implementation of the Compulsory General Courses aims to cultivate well-rounded graduates who possess a deep understanding of patriotism and the Malaysian identity, as well as the ability to develop soft skills that enhance employability and career prospects effectively. The initial implementation of the Compulsory General Courses in 2013 prioritised the integration of students in private universities based on the rationale that the sense of patriotism among its students had declined. This decline was partly attributed to the disparity in mandatory course areas offered between both public and private universities (MOE, 2013). The compulsory general courses underwent additional enhancements in 2015, coinciding with the implementation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint-Higher Education.

The enhancement of these subjects was known as the second stage of Compulsory General Courses, serving as a response to several concerns that emerged during the previous introduction, particularly in the category of “Appreciation of philosophy, values, and history”. An incident that sparked anger among Hindu worshippers in Malaysia was the controversy surrounding the discussion of the subject of Islamic and Asian Civilisation at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. In this incident, a faculty member insensitively devalued the teachings of the Hindu religion. The second implementation of compulsory general courses focused on cultivating pupils with a deep understanding and appreciation of Malaysian history and virtuous principles. As per the Ministry of Education’s statement in 2015, the inclusion of subjects in the U1 category aims to nurture students who not only grasp their nation's legacy and history profoundly but also demonstrate

virtuous qualities in their interactions within society. This component is additionally reinforced in course assessments, which need group collaboration and engagement with the external community via social experiments.

During the second phase of the Education Strategic Plan, a suggested approach is to incentivise private universities to enhance the availability of educational facilities, raise their capacity to admit students, and widen the criteria for admission to solve the concern of non-Bumiputera students' admission quotas in public universities. This can also mitigate the issue of disproportionate student demographics in private universities in Malaysia. Furthermore, there is a concerted endeavour to synchronize the compulsory general courses curriculum between public and private universities to tackle the challenges related to ethnic tolerance and student polarisation. Within the framework of Malaysia, the Malay language functions as a cohesive language in the field of education. The Ministry of Higher Education mandates that all compulsory general courses in the U1 category must be conducted exclusively in the Malay language (Rohaidah et al., 2019). Moreover, the evaluations for these courses would compel communication among many ethnic groups. This initiative improves Malay language proficiency among non-Malay students, fosters social interaction, and addresses concerns regarding student polarization (Nurul Farhanah et al., 2019; Rohaidah et al., 2019).

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to conduct a preliminary investigation into the extent of ethnic relations among UNITEN undergraduate students and to ascertain whether there has been a notable shift in the levels of ethnic relations between students at private and public universities, as noted by Ramlee et al. (2009), Nazri and Mansor (2014), Hamidah et al. (2011), and Rusimah et al. (2004).

Research Methodology

The researcher built a research instrument by combining questionnaires from previous studies conducted by Ramlee et al. (2009), Nazri and Mansor (2014), Hamidah et al. (2011), and Rusimah et al. (2004). In addition, the researcher modified important questionnaires from past studies and developed new ones based on pertinent literature.

The purposive sampling strategy was used in this study, which entails choosing a specified group of individuals with defined traits to function as responders (Chua Yan Piaw, 2006). The Islamic Studies Association represented the Malay ethnic group, the Chinese Cultural Bureau represented the Chinese ethnic group, and the Indian Cultural Society represented the Indian ethnic group. The study participants were selected from the members of these three student associations at Universiti Tenaga Nasional, each representing one of the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia.

This research requires participants to complete their compulsory General Studies course covering Islamic and Asian civilization, Ethnic Relations, and the U2, U3, and U4 components. These include Comparative Religion, Moral Education 1, 2, and 3 for students who are not Malay, and Islamic Studies 1, 2, and 3 for Malay-Muslim students. All respondents from the three student associations must also participate in an inter-ethnic programme beforehand.

Table 1
Respondents' Demographics

Respondents	Total Population of Respondents	Total findings of the Sample	Percentage of Sample Findings
Islamic Studies Association	100	80	38.4%
Chinese Cultural Bureau	100	58	27.8%
Indian Cultural Society	100	70	33.6%
TOTAL	300	208	69.3%

Table 2
Gender Fraction

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
<i>Valid</i>	Male	72	34.6	34.6	34.6
	Female	136	65.4	65.4	100.0
	<i>Total</i>	208	100.0	100.0	

This study outlines four dimensions of ethnic relations: Accommodation, Acculturation, Assimilation, and Amalgamation. According to Shamsul (2012), accommodation refers to the process in which each ethnic group becomes aware of and respects the norms and values of other ethnic groups in society. On the other hand, acculturation is the process of accepting cultural elements among individuals or groups from different cultures (Shamsul, 2012). Acculturation refers to the assimilation of cultural components from one culture into another or the merging of cultures due to prolonged contact (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Hughes and Kroehler (2008) define assimilation as the phenomenon in which groups with separate identities undergo cultural and social fusion. According to Shamsul (2012), assimilation is the act of a minority or new ethnic group adopting the culture and identity of the majority to lessen their ethnic distinctions. Ting (1975) (as cited in Shamsul, 2012) posits that assimilation is the process by which distinct groups with differing thoughts, emotions, and behaviours merge into a single social and cultural entity.

Shamsul (2012) outlines that amalgamation, the process by which cultures or races unite to form new cultures and races, is the highest form of assimilation. Hughes and Kroehler (2008) define amalgamation as a process in which social involvement, cultural sharing, and intermarriage become so prevalent that it becomes difficult to differentiate between the ethnic groups previously separated within a society. Only when the minority group is willing or forced to combine and the dominant group both approves and actively promotes the merger, can these two groups come together (Zaid, 2010). This study suggests that amalgamation is the most advanced type of integration. It implies that the gap between ethnic groups in society is closing and that the significance of a sense of belonging is decreasing.

Open-ended questions were utilised in this study to gauge the levels of ethnic relations within UNITEN. The final three statements on the questionnaire correspond to the amalgamation level, whereas the remaining nine statements correspond to the accommodation, acculturation, and

assimilation levels. The questions require respondents to choose between Strongly Agree (Scale 4) and Strongly Disagree (Scale 1) as their response options. A four-point Likert scale, Mean Score (M), and Standard Deviation (SD) were used to measure the Mean Levels of ethnic relations.

Table 3

Likert Scale, Mean Score, and Mean Level

	Likert Scale	Mean Score	Mean Level
4	Strongly Agree (SA)	3.26 – 4.00	Very High
3	Agree (A)	2.51 – 3.25	High
2	Disagree (D)	1.76 – 2.50	Moderate
1	Strongly Disagree (SD)	1.00 - 1.75	Low

Source: Ramlee et al. (2009). *A Survey of Social Interaction among Diverse Students in Malaysia's Higher Learning Institutions. International Journal of Learner Diversity*,

Findings and Discussions

1) Accommodation

Table 4

Accommodation

	1	2	3	4	M	SD	ML
The spirit of unity thrives throughout UNITEN	1.9 (4)	11.5(24)	65.4(136)	21.2(44)	3.06	.634	Very High
I demonstrate reverence for the convictions and customs of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds	0.5(1)	1(2)	32.7(68)	65.9(137)	3.64	.529	Very High
I am open to the idea of cohabitating with a friend from a different ethnic background	8.2(17)	1(2)	36.5(76)	27.4(57)	2.83	.925	High
I quickly established friendships with students from diverse cultural backgrounds	1.9(4)	8.2(17)	50.5(105)	39.4(82)	3.27	.693	Very High
The spirit of ethnicity has become stronger since studying at UNITEN	0.5(1)	13.5(28)	61.5(128)	24.5(51)	3.10	.625	Very High

I take the initiative to learn new aspects about other ethnicities	0	10.1(21)	60.6(126)	29.3(61)	3.19	.599	Very High
I hold high regard for university lecturers from various ethnicities	0.5(1)	1.4(3)	26.9(56)	71.2(148)	3.69	.523	Very High
I hold an optimistic viewpoint of other ethnic groups	0.5(1)	3.4(7)	44.2(92)	51.9(108)	3.48	.589	Very High
I am embraced by other ethnic communities at UNITEN	1.0(2)	3.4(7)	50.0(104)	45.7(95)	3.40	.606	Very High
<i>Overall score</i>				3.30			

1(Strongly Disagree), 2(Disagree), 3(Agree), 4(Strongly Agree), M(Mean), SD (Standard Deviation), ML (Mean Level)

Table 4 enlists five items from the questionnaire with mean levels that are consistently high, ranging from M=3.27 to M=3.69. The statements corresponding to the mean level are numbered 2, 4, 7, 8, and 9. Statements 1, 3, 5, and 6 were the four that showed a high mean level, with M=2.83–3.19. In terms of accommodation - which is defined as adjusting to the campus/university setting to reduce or eliminate conflict - UNITEN scores a 3.30 overall, making it a "Very High" degree of accommodation.

Adapting to the campus environment can be discerned through expressions such as “I demonstrate reverence for the convictions and customs of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds”, “I am open to the idea of cohabitating with a friend from a different ethnic background”, “I hold high regard for university lecturers from various ethnicities”, and “I am embraced by other ethnic communities at UNITEN”. However, upon aggregating the findings, it becomes evident that most of the response likelihoods favour Scale 3 and Scale 4, not Scale 1 and Scale 2.

Acculturation

Table 5

Acculturation

	1	2	3	4	M	SD	ML
I am at ease seeking assistance from acquaintances of diverse ethnic backgrounds	0.5(1)	8.2(17)	49.0(102)	42.3(88)	3.33	.645	Very High
I feel at ease participating in social activities with friends from diverse ethnicities	0.5(1)	8.2(17)	49.0(102)	42.3(88)	3.35	.626	Very High

I enjoy eating delicacies from many cultural backgrounds	3.8(8)	20.2(42)	38.0(79)	38.0(79)	3.10	.854	High
I am comfortable eating at restaurants owned by people of different ethnicities	6.7(14)	36.1(75)	33.7(70)	23.6(49)	2.74	.895	High
I am capable of dining together with friends from different ethnicities	0.5(1)	5.3(11)	47.2(98)	47.1(98)	3.41	.615	Very High
I am at ease wearing traditional attire from many ethnic backgrounds	1.9(4)	15.9(33)	51.0(106)	31.3(65)	3.12	.733	High
I regularly visit friends belonging to various ethnic groups	1.4(3)	6.3(13)	62(129)	30.3(63)	3.21	.617	High
I maintain a strong degree of social consciousness toward individuals from different ethnic backgrounds.	0.5(1)	4.3(9)	63.5(132)	31.7(66)	3.26	.558	Very High
I support the adoption of a meritocracy system.	1.4(3)	14.4(30)	59.1(123)	25.0(52)	3.08	.669	High
Overall score		3.18					

1(Strongly Disagree), 2(Disagree), 3(Agree), 4(Strongly Agree), M(Mean), SD (Standard Deviation), ML (Mean Level)

The degree of acculturation among UNITEN students was measured using a set of nine questionnaire statements. A mean level classification of “Very High” was found from four statements, with values falling between M=3.26-4.41, and a mean level classification of “High” for the other five statements, with values falling between M=2.74 and 3.21. The two statements with the highest average scores are “I can dine with friends from various ethnic backgrounds” (M=3.41) and “I feel at ease participating in social activities with friends from diverse ethnicities” (M=3.35). The statement “I am comfortable eating at restaurants owned by people of different ethnicities” has the lowest mean of 2.74.

Acculturation, as defined by Ramlee et al. (2009), refers to the process of adapting to a new culture following accommodation. Upon enrolling in UNITEN, students experience a period of adaptation to a novel environment, including a transition from secondary to tertiary education. They have the chance to engage with people from all walks of life and states in Malaysia during this period, including lecturers and fellow students. After a few weeks, students gradually become used to these unfamiliar situations and surroundings. Several statements, including “I feel at ease participating in social activities with friends from diverse ethnicities”, “I am capable of dining together with friends from different ethnicities”, and “I regularly visit friends belonging to various ethnic groups” support this. Table 5 shows that UNITEN's “Acculturation” level is classified as “High” overall, with a score of 3.18.

Assimilation**Table 6***Assimilation*

	1	2	3	4	M	SD	ML
I actively participate in the cultural and social activities of many ethnic groups	2.4(5)	30.3(63)	48.1(100)	19.2(40)	2.84	.754	High
I am thrilled to participate in activities with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds at UNITEN	0	4.8(10)	59.1(123)	36.1(75)	3.31	.559	Very High
I am comfortable discussing academic topics with acquaintances from other ethnic groups	0	3.4(7)	53.4(111)	43.3(90)	3.40	.556	Very High
I'm fine with having a roommate of diverse ethnicity	8.2(17)	39.9(83)	34.6(72)	17.3(36)	2.61	.867	High
I take great pride in the accomplishments of peers of different ethnic backgrounds	0.5(1)	4.3(9)	49.0(102)	46.2(96)	3.41	.599	Very High
I can engage in dialogue with friends from other ethnicities if there is a conflict or problem	1.4(3)	10.1(21)	59.6(124)	28.8(60)	3.16	.651	High
I have confidence in university lecturers of many ethnic backgrounds	0.5(1)	5.3(11)	51.4(107)	42.8(89)	3.37	.607	Very High
I am not intimidated by the presence of other ethnic groups expressing their ideas and cultural practices on campus	0.5(1)	8.2(17)	50.5(105)	40.9(85)	3.32	.641	Very High
I encourage my peers of diverse ethnic backgrounds to participate in all campus activities	0.5(1)	4.3(9)	49.0(102)	46.2(96)	3.41	.599	Very High
Overall score	3.20						

1(Strongly Disagree), 2(Disagree), 3(Agree), 4(Strongly Agree), M(Mean), SD (Standard Deviation), ML (Mean Level)

Six questionnaire items in this dimension had mean values between 3.31 and 3.41, indicating a “Very High” classification. Three statements also had means categorised as “High” scoring 2.61, 2.84, and 3.16, respectively. The average score of 3.41 for the two statements was found to be similar. In terms of average score ($M=3.41$), the statements that came out on top were “I take great pride in the accomplishments of peers of different ethnic backgrounds” and “I encourage my peers of diverse ethnic backgrounds to participate in all campus activities”.

The three statements that indicate a high level are as follows, “I can engage in dialogue with friends from other ethnicities if there is a conflict or problem” ($M=3.16$), “I’m fine with having a roommate of diverse ethnicity” ($M=2.61$), and “I actively participate in the cultural and social activities of many ethnic groups” ($M=2.84$). Consistent with the observations about student on-campus accommodations, UNITEN students exhibit unease and were seen struggling to embrace housemates from different ethnic backgrounds. In Malaysia, different ethnic groups are associated with different religions, thus religious issues are delicate and often lead to disputes. Conflicts like these have historically arisen over matters like *hudud*, apostasy, non-Muslims using the name Allah, temple demolitions, and other topics. With an overall mean score of 3.20, UNITEN demonstrates a high degree of assimilation, which is consistent with the definition of “assimilation” itself- the lowering of ethnic boundaries.

Amalgamation

Table 7
Amalgamation

	1	2	3	4	M	SD	ML
I am willing to accept a non-Malay Prime Minister	25.5(53)	29.3(61)	23.6(49)	21.6(45)	2.41	1.091	Moderate
I take great pride in being a citizen of Malaysia	1.0(2)	2.9(6)	30.3(63)	65.9(137)	3.61	.596	Very High
I am very accepting of my friend's decision to marry someone from a different ethnic background	4.8(10)	11.2(23)	45.7(95)	38.5(80)	3.18	.812	High
Overall score	3.07						

1(Strongly Disagree), 2(Disagree), 3(Agree), 4(Strongly Agree), M(Mean), SD (Standard Deviation), ML (Mean Level)

For the level of Amalgamation, only three statements are provided. The term “amalgamation” describes a higher degree of social or ethnic interaction. The process of lessening the social differences between various groups, and consequently the importance of ethnicity, is known as amalgamation.

With a mean score of 2.41, one statement is categorised as “moderate” and indicates the acceptability of a prime minister who is not a Malay. The respondents strongly preferred Scales 1

and 2. These results show that one of the biggest challenges facing UNITEN students is still the status quo of Malays and Bumiputera. The statement “I take great pride in being a citizen of Malaysia” received a mean score of 3.61, indicating a “Very High” level of pride. On the other hand, the statement “I am very accepting of my friend's decision to marry someone from a different ethnic background” acquired a mean score of 3.18, indicating a “High” level of acceptance. **Table 7** shows that, with an average score of 3.07, UNITEN's “Amalgamation” level is categorised as “High”.

Conclusion

With a cumulative mean score of 3.20, the data above show that UNITEN undergraduate student-ethnic relations are at a “High” level. The characteristics of assimilation, amalgamation, acculturation, assimilation, and ethnic relations are shown in **Table 8**, along with the overall mean, standard deviation, and total score.

Table 8

Overall Mean, Standard Deviation & Total Score of Social Relation

	Overall Mean	SD
Accommodation	3.30	.267
Acculturation	3.18	.190
Assimilation	3.20	.271
Amalgamation	3.07	.607
Total Score	3.20 (High)	

Source: *Own analysis*

It is evident that three dimensions of ethnic interactions were at a high level, but only one dimension received a very high level. This demonstrates that a significant amount of work must be accomplished before we can ultimately attain a “Very High” standard of ethnic relations. Nevertheless, the average rating of “High” remains encouraging.

Implications

The fact that there is room for improvement is encouraging. Additionally, the previously cited studies by Nazri and Mansor (2014) and Ramlee et al. (2009) show a significant improvement in ethnic relations, moving from a “Moderate” level to a “High” level. Even yet, several issues need to be taken into account, including how respondents answered several items on the questionnaire. Significantly, those who chose “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” in response to assertions such as “I hold high regard for university lecturers from various ethnicities”, “I maintain a strong degree of social consciousness toward individuals from different ethnic backgrounds”, “I have confidence in university lecturers of many ethnic backgrounds”, and “I take pride in being a citizen of Malaysia”.

Recommendations

Despite the infrequency of the manner, it is crucial to address this issue to foster harmonious relationships among students from different ethnic backgrounds at the institution and increase students' awareness of the current state of ethnic relations in Malaysia. Some would be in the

seriousness with which policies or goals outlined in the Education Blueprint for Higher Education and the Education Strategic Plan are to be implemented.

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