Higher Education and Social Cohesion
Experience in Sabah and Sarawak

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Editors

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Preface

This publication documents a research entitled “Higher Education and Social Cohesion in Sabah and Sarawak” which was funded by the Ministry of Higher Education through the National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN). The authors and researchers record their sincere appreciation to the Ministry and Institute for the sponsorship.

Social cohesion is a highly valued and essential societal condition for countries with a diverse ethnic, cultural and religious demography. It is a key concern in view of its significance in fostering political stability and sustaining economic development under such a pluralistic and potentially volatile social milieu. Social cohesion in multicultural societies requires not only continuous effort and effective governmental policies and strategies, but equally strong support, cooperation and participation from their heterogeneous citizenries. In multi-ethnic Malaysia, social cohesion and national unity have always been a primary concern for all parties. Indeed, efforts to promote better understanding across various ethnic groups and a high level of tolerance for ethnic differences have been a national agenda since independence, manifesting in the nation’s economic, political, cultural, educational and other social policies. This includes the “1Malaysia” concept currently advocated by the administration of Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak.
However, most observers share the opinion that national unity among the Malaysian people has yet to reach its ideal state, despite the multitude of state policies and programmes implemented during the last five decades to facilitate greater levels of social cohesion. Malaysia today still faces a compendium of issues and challenges related to ethnic relations, where ‘narrow’ policies of “positive discrimination”, be they real or perceived, have continued to undermine the broader national vision of realising genuine social cohesion and national unity. In fact, some observers tend to perceive the situation as worsening with greater polarisation across societal groups due to the “ politicisation” and “ sensitisation” of ethno-religious issues by certain quarters for narrow domestic political expediencies. The pessimistic view has likewise been reinforced by the lack of effective public policies to promote awareness, skills and ability, especially among the younger generations to appreciate and value the strength of ethnic diversity and tolerance. In recent years, the mobilisation of younger people to participate in street demonstrations and the “ethnicisation” of various issues and events, have created a “tinderbox of irritation” that threatens to unravel the very social fabric that has held the somewhat fragile cohesion and unity of the Malaysian society together, thus far. One possible effect of this is the outcome of the thirteen General Elections.

Given the societal changes, and the issues and events that have transpired in the contemporary Malaysian context, there is a necessity for social cohesion to be measured and monitored constantly. More importantly, there is an urgent need to understand the degree of social cohesion among the younger generation, since the success or failure of the nation building agenda in Malaysia would very much depend on this cohort of citizenry. It was due to such awareness which led to the pursuit of a year-long IPPTN-funded research project in 2009 that looked into the role of higher education in fostering social cohesion and national unity in Malaysia, from which this book is derived.
The role of higher education as a vehicle towards inculcating social cohesion has been generally acknowledged and widely researched. It is, indeed, conventional wisdom that education in general, and higher education, specifically, plays a crucial role in moulding the younger generation for their meaningful participation in society. As such, higher education is an important conduit for the cultivation of norms, values, attitudes and ethics which are requisites for the foundation of social capital necessary for promoting national social cohesion and civic solidarity in multicultural societies.

In the Malaysian context, the importance of higher education in engendering national unity is undeniable. It has been underlined by national leaders, politicians, educators and informed citizens alike, who commonly see tertiary students as "leaders-in-waiting" bound toward becoming the creators of not only a united Malaysia, but also "bangsa Malaysia" (Malaysian nation), whose shared [national] identity transcends the traditional social divides of this country. Such a view is expected since the values associated with the inculcation of national social cohesion are systematically and consciously delivered and infused through three major components of the Malaysian higher education system, namely curriculum, co-curriculum, and extra-curriculum. Given these efforts, it is almost inevitable for students, especially those in public institutions of higher learning (IHL) to be commonly perceived as racially tolerant and more open or adept to inter-racial interactions. Such perceptions may even be more pronounced, when it comes to students at public IHL located in Sabah and Sarawak, since both states are generally believed to enjoy high levels of social cohesion amid their diverse socio-cultural settings.

As an extension of a previous study by Pang, Ho, and Amran Ahmed (2008) on social cohesion in a public IHL in Malaysia, this book aims to see whether similar findings are prevalent in IHL in Sabah and Sarawak. A key objective of this book is therefore to assess the strength of social cohesion among students
of higher education in Sabah and Sarawak. This is carried out by focusing the investigation on students from two public IHL, namely Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). This work also seeks to examine the contribution of the mentioned components of higher education towards promoting social cohesion, and the perceptions of tertiary students in these two public universities on issues related to the much desired societal condition. Based on the findings, it makes a number of suggestions that could contribute to the formulation and implementation of unity programme policies in IHL.

We believe that this volume is both important and timely, as Malaysia strives towards realising its nation building agenda. It should be of interest to scholars, researchers, and practitioners who are seeking to comprehend the correlations between higher education and social cohesion in the Malaysian context. The book should also appeal to informed readers interested in the current state of affairs on ethnic relations in Malaysia.
Introduction

The nature of ethnic relations varies greatly among multi-ethnic societies. Many such societies have made serious efforts to promote social cohesion among their citizens as it is realised that the political stability and economic development of the state depends on, or requires strong support, cooperation and participation from, their various ethnic citizens (Fukuda-Parr; 2004; Kivisto, 2005). While social cohesion across ethnic groups is inevitably needed for the purpose of political stability and economic development, and vice versa, social cohesion is in itself a social condition that depends strongly on the political and economic policies and strategies of a nation. It is an indicator of the progress and the effectiveness of public policies. As a social condition that is highly valued, social cohesion is seen as an essential enhancement of the promotion of the human rights, dignity and welfare of all citizens through minimising disparities and polarisation among them.

Social cohesion is a societal condition that can only be achieved by continuous effort, and a fair and practical approach. Modern approaches towards achieving unity among citizens of
multi-ethnic states indicate a clear shift from conservative, 'traditional' assimilative and 'melting pot' strategies towards integrative approaches that see pluralism and multiculturalism as a more meaningful, practical and democratic way of promoting better social unity among ethnic groups.

The Malaysian Constitution undeniably has given society a strong foundation for promoting the idea of pluralism and multiculturalism and has enabled Malaysia to avoid serious ethnic conflicts compared to many other nations (Horowitz, 1989). Ever since Independence, Malaysia has constantly struggled to promote better understanding among various ethnic groups and to encourage a high level of tolerance for ethnic differences (Zawawi, 2004). The importance of this has been fully appreciated by the government and has remained on the national agenda of the nation’s economic, political, cultural, educational and other social policies.

National unity is defined by the National Unity and Advisory Panel as the state where individuals of all ethnic, religious, and regional groups live peacefully as a united race that commits fully to the national identity based on the Federal Constitution and the Rukun Negara, the national ideology (Anuar Rafie & Saleh Abdull Hak, 2005). However, despite the enormous numbers of unity programmes implemented for more than fifty years since Independence, national unity among the citizens may not have reached its ideal state (Ng & Sonia, 2006). Malaysia still faces many issues and challenges in fostering national unity among the people.

The community which makes up the Malaysian multiracial society consists, in Peninsular Malaysia, of the indigenous Malays or bumiputera (sons of the land), Chinese, and Indians; while additionally in Sabah and Sarawak, there are many other bumiputera groups such as the Kadazandusun, Murut, Iban and Bidayuh. No doubt the efforts of the government in assisting the economy of the bumiputera (Malays in particular) is perceived by
some quarters of the non-bumiputera - or, in East Malaysia, non-Malay - populace as a policy of ethnic discrimination that endangers the vision of national unity (see Maznah Mohamad, 2009; Gomez, 2009). Others may also see the situation as worsening, with greater polarisation across social groups due to the lack of an effective public policy to promote, among new and younger generations, an appreciation of the value of ethnic diversity and of tolerance among people (Gomes, 2009).

In recent years, the mobilisation of younger people to participate in street demonstrations and the ‘ethnicisation’ of various issues and events among these groups has had to be taken seriously. Thus, as society changes and new events take place, social cohesion needs to be measured and monitored constantly. More importantly, we need to understand the strength or level of social cohesion among the younger Malaysian generation. Do they actually demonstrate attitudes of tolerance for ethnic differences in their day-to-day interactions?

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohd. Najib Tun Razak’s drive since September 2010 for a united Malaysia through the “1Malaysia” concept can be seen as a catalyst for the growing interest in identifying the real values shared by the younger generations, especially those in public institutions of higher learning (IHLs). No doubt, the general perception towards students of public IHLs is that they should be racially tolerant and open to interracial interaction in their daily activities throughout their tertiary education. Nevertheless, there are concerns about the emergence of racial-based ‘groups’ within public IHLs, with students ‘fighting’ for equal opportunities against the bumiputeras. Has the continuous implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) jeopardised the efforts made to create a cohesive community, so much so that it affects the younger generation’s perception of a multi-racial Malaysia?
Educational institutions, as organisations, consist of groups of individuals bound together for a common purpose. In a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia, ideally every public and private organisation must contribute to social cohesion and, inadvertently, national unity. The World Bank Group describes the role of IHLs as follows:

"... the norms, values, attitudes and ethics that tertiary institutions impart to students are the foundation of the social capital necessary for constructing healthy civil societies and cohesive cultures... Through the transmission of democratic values and cultural norms, tertiary education contributes to the promotion of civic behaviours, nation building and society."

(World Bank, 2001, pp. 23, 31; quoted in Heuser, 2007)

Our present study considers educational organisations as having a crucial role in moulding the younger generation for their meaningful future participation in society. Accordingly, we propose to investigate the level of social cohesion among young Malaysians in two public IHLs in Sabah and Sarawak. This will also determine the social health of the IHLs involved and, to a large extent, whether they fulfil the government's prescribed objectives in terms of "raising a generation of students with a capacity for knowledge and first class mentality" (9th Malaysia Plan 2006-2010).

The research problem and objectives

The importance of education for national unity in Malaysia has been underlined by national leaders, politicians, educators and other prominent citizens. For example, a former Education director-
general, Abdul Rafie Mahat (2003, p.30) said that “Malaysia sees education as an indispensable asset in its attempt to foster unity, peace and prosperity”. The values needed for national unity are delivered and infused through three major components of higher education: curriculum, co-curriculum, and extra-curriculum. But how effective are they in creating social cohesion among the students? IHL students are, after all, “leaders-in-waiting” who will ultimately face the task of creating a united Malaysia.

The mainspring of this book is the study conducted by Pang, Ho and Amran Ahmed [2008] in a Malaysian public IHL into the role of higher education in the inculcation of national unity. They found that the main contributors to the inculcation of national unity in the campus were university core courses, cultural activities, interaction with other students, and sports activities. Their statistical analysis showed a moderate correlation between university activities and national unity, with small but significant correlations between each of the activities and national unity. The correlation between residential hall activities and sports activities with national unity was significantly moderate. It was also found from linear regression analysis that the predictors of national unity among students were the university core courses, sports activities, faculty core courses, and student union activities.

This book reports a study that extends the study of Pang, Ho, and Amran Ahmed’s (2008) to a wider population. The study aims to see whether similar findings are prevalent in all public IHLs in Sabah and Sarawak. Since the study by the trio only covered a public IHL and because of this study’s presupposition that social cohesion is high in Sabah and Sarawak, our research extends the scope of the 2008 study to cover all public IHLs in both states.

Indeed, as Sabah and Sarawak are commonly perceived to enjoy a relatively high degree of social cohesion in view of its multi-culturally diverse societies, this study aims to firstly, investigate the level of social cohesion among students of higher education in both states. In doing so, the study also positions itself to investigate
how higher education contributes to promoting social cohesion in Sabah and Sarawak. Thirdly, it seeks to investigate the perceptions of students on issues related to social cohesion, which have a bearing on their inclination toward the idea of national unity and the practice of living harmoniously in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural setting. Last but not least, it is hoped that the findings of this study would contribute to the formulation and implementation of unity programme policies in IHLs.

In line with the aims stated above, this book strives to address the following questions:

(1) What is the level of social cohesion among students of higher education in Sabah and Sarawak?

(2) Is there a significant difference in social cohesion between students of different disciplines (Arts, Management, and Social Sciences versus Sciences)?

(3) Is there a significant difference in social cohesion between students of different levels of study (Semester 1-3 versus Semester 4 and above)?

(4) Is there a significant difference in social cohesion between Peninsular and Sabah/Sarawak students who are pursuing higher education programmes in Sabah and Sarawak?

(5) What is the perception of students on issues related to social cohesion?

(6) What is the extent to which curriculum, co-curriculum, extra-curriculum, and residential activities in Sabah and Sarawak contribute to social cohesion?
Operational definitions and scope of research

For the purpose of this book, the inter-subjective concepts of 'social cohesion' and 'higher education are specifically limited to the following meanings and scope:

**Social cohesion** – defined as the strength of commonality among citizens of various ethnic backgrounds. It is a societal condition that needs continuous effort and an informed and practical approach to achieve it. In the Malaysian context, the terms 'social cohesion', 'national unity' and 'national solidarity' are used interchangeably. They cover various forms of commitment to, and perceptions of, issues such as national ideology, constitution, multiculturalism, usage of language, and policies. In this study, social cohesion is measured by the instrument used by Pang, Ho and Amran (2008) which was modified from Mansor and Morshidi (2005).

**Higher education** – defined as formal teaching and learning programmes as well as the informal experiences of students at tertiary level, with the aims of producing knowledgeable, skilful, and committed citizens for the development of the nation. It covers curriculum, co-curriculum and extra-curriculum. Curriculum involves formal and credited academic courses which are usually conducted in lecture halls, tutorial rooms, laboratories, workshops, studios etc. Co-curriculum involves compulsory student activities for character development which are given credit hours. Extra-curriculum involves student activities which are not compulsory and not credited, which are usually taken by students out of interest and talent. Apart from these elements, the study also scrutinises the residential life of the students and other forms of informal and/or private activities in the IHLs which they partake daily. In this study, two major public institutions for higher learning in Sabah and Sarawak are covered. These IHLs are Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), covering Kota Kinabalu main campus as
well as Labuan International Campus, and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Meanwhile, to enhance validity of the data, the subjects of the research are primarily fulltime undergraduates pursuing their second year studies and above.

**The significance of the study**

The relationship between social cohesion and higher education has always been an area of interest for many stakeholders in Malaysia. Its importance can be seen in the case of the Ethnic Relations Module for IHLs, which attracted so much attention and controversy that it had to be scrutinised and approved by the Malaysian Cabinet prior to its implementation (see Syed Husin Ali, 2009).

In view of the significance of the subject matter involved, the findings of this scholarly investigation are expected to address crucial enquiries pertaining to the propensity of higher education in promoting (or constraining) social cohesion, especially in the case of Sabah and Sarawak. More importantly, the results would provide the necessary information to facilitate policy planning and formulation pertaining to the relationship between higher education and social cohesion for major Malaysian stakeholders in the likes of the Ministry of Education (MoE), public Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs), and future researchers in the area of higher education and social cohesion.

To be more specific, three major benefits could derive from this study. Firstly, the identification of the difference in the strength of social cohesion according to demographic factors would enable the MoE to plan policies to address the imbalance in social cohesion among students in IHLs. Secondly, the identification of the extent to which curriculum, co-curriculum, extra-curriculum, and residential activities influence social cohesion would allow higher education policy planners and implementers in the MoE and universities...
to prioritise, or focus on, areas of higher education that require further enhancement. Last but not least, the identification of the perceptions of IHL students on issues related to social cohesion would enable higher education administrators to align higher education activities to optimise the enculturation of social cohesion.

**Research design and method**

This is essentially a quantitative study in the related fields of education, sociology and political science. Specifically, this book employs a quantitative methodology to measure social cohesion among the students of public IHLs within Sabah and Sarawak. Quantitative data was collected using fixed-response items in a questionnaire.

**The instrument**

The instrument was modified from the questionnaire used by Pang, Ho and Amran Ahmed (2008), which was adopted from Mansor Mohd. Noor and Morshidi Sirat (2005). The instrument of Pang, Ho and Amran Ahmed (2008) consists of 28 statements measuring the degree of social cohesion of the subjects. In this study, the original version for all items was reviewed and modified so as to increase the breadth and the depth of the variables measured. These statements reflect the norms and values needed in the specific political and social context of the multicultural society of Malaysia to promote the sense of national community, identity and unity.

The revised questionnaire consists of three parts. Part I comprises nine items on demographic characteristics of the subjects. They are Name of Programme, Stream, Faculty/School, Age, Gender, Place of Origin, Ethnicity, Religion, and Number of
Semesters attended. The ethnic status of the subjects was based on their perception of this inter-subjective identity marker. Part II consists of 39 statements on social cohesion. Five of the items (Items 2, 5, 14, 15, and 25) were used to measure the respondents' perception of issues related to social cohesion, while the other 33 items were used for the measurement of the magnitude of social cohesion. Meanwhile, Part III is made up of eight sets of items to capture data on academic courses, and co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that facilitate the inculcation of social cohesion. These items were also utilised to gauge the extent of involvement of the respondents in the stipulated activities.

For academic courses, the respondents were asked to indicate their level of participation in taught courses, such as Ethnic Relations, Islamic and Asian Civilisation, languages, and Basic Entrepreneurship. Conversely, co-curriculum activities range from sports to culture-based activities, for which students are required to participate in accordance to their own preference. All co-curricular activities are given credit hours. Meanwhile, extra-curricular activities are those in which students involve themselves according to their own interest, such as recreational, sports, cultural and student body activities. These activities do not carry credit hours. The items in Parts II and III were given responses based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 being 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 being 'Strongly Agree.'

**Samples and data collection**

The samples for this study were taken from two public IHLs in Sabah and Sarawak: a simple random sampling method was employed to select undergraduate student subjects from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) (Kota Kinabalu and Labuan campuses) and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). A self-completing questionnaire survey was administered to a total of 1,508 subjects.
(999 from UMS and 509 from UNIMAS) out of the estimated 22,000 student population in 2009 enrolled in the two universities. Based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the minimum sample required for a population of 22,000 should be between 377 and 379. The number of 1,508 samples collected in this study reflects a better representation of the student population from these universities. The questionnaire survey was carried out simultaneously in the three campuses over a period of three months.

Since the purpose of the study is to understand the contribution of higher education learning and experiences of students to social cohesion, the subjects were selected from among fulltime undergraduate students in their second year and above to ensure that they had sufficient experience and exposure to campus life, particularly in the academic curriculum, co-curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

The actual data collection was carried out following a pilot study involving 79 students at the UMS Kota Kinabalu campus. Reliability of items was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, which indicated a high index of internal consistency of 0.859. The items were also analysed by using QUEST (Adams & Khoo, 1996), an interactive item analysis programme based on Item-Response Theory (Hambleton & Swaminathan, 1985). Items with infit mean square of more than 1.7 were reworded to improve clarity for the use in the final instrument.

The final social cohesion instrument was again tested for reliability. The overall Cronbach's index of internal consistency for the instrument was 0.927, which is considered very high. The items were also given factor analysis, which resulted in four factors:

1. Acceptance of government and appreciation of political stability.
2. Commitment towards nation building and patriotism.
3. Appreciation of law and civility.


These factors are consistent with the theories discussed in Chapter 2. The factors with the respective items and indices of consistency of the factors are shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Items and Indices of Consistency for the Social Cohesion Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptance of government and appreciation of political stability (α = 0.844)</th>
<th>Acceptance of law and civility (α = 0.699)</th>
<th>Appreciation of multi-culturalism and harmony (α = 0.735)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Government policies benefit everyone at every level of society.</td>
<td>1. I agree that Islam is the national religion in this country.</td>
<td>1. I agree that the incident of May 13, 1969 must not be repeated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Government policies benefit everyone regardless of race and religion.</td>
<td>2. I agree that Bahasa Malaysia is the national language of this country.</td>
<td>2. Malaysia belongs to every one of its multi-racial citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel secure with the judiciary system of this country.</td>
<td>3. The national culture should consist of all the many cultures in Malaysia.</td>
<td>3. I am proud that this country is made up of different races, cultures and religions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The racial harmony enjoyed by Malaysians today will ensure racial tensions in the past will not be repeated.</td>
<td>4. It is the responsibility of every citizen to provide constructive feedback on government policies.</td>
<td>4. I am proud that this country is made up of different races, cultures and religions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The political stability in this country is due to equal power sharing between races.</td>
<td>5. It is the responsibility of every citizen to provide constructive feedback on government policies.</td>
<td>5. I agree that Islam is the national religion in this country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I accept the democratic system of this country.</td>
<td>6. Dialogues between different faiths should be encouraged to promote understanding.</td>
<td>6. Malaysia belongs to every one of its multi-racial citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am confident that this country will always ensure the well being of my family and I.</td>
<td>7. I will remain a citizen no matter what happens in my country.</td>
<td>7. I feel hurt when my country is ridiculed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel proud to be in the presence of the King and Heads of States.</td>
<td>8. I will remain a citizen no matter what happens in my country.</td>
<td>9. I feel proud when Malaysia achieves international recognition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel proud to be in the presence of the King and Heads of States.</td>
<td>9. I feel proud when Malaysia achieves international recognition.</td>
<td>10. Schools should display the national flag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I accept the concept of 1Malaysia entirely.</td>
<td>10. Schools should display the national flag.</td>
<td>11. Malaysians ought to be proud of this country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Malaysians should be law abiding.</td>
<td>11. Malaysians ought to be proud of this country.</td>
<td>12.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Description of Subjects

Table 1.2 below describes the demographic characteristics of subjects involved in this study. Some of the figures indicated in the table may not total up to the whole population of the sample due to instances of no information being given. The majority of the subjects fall under these categories – female, arts-based, East Malaysian, and students studying in second year.

Table 1.2: Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Programme Stream</td>
<td>Science-based courses</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1032</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Place of Origin (in Malaysia)</td>
<td>Peninsular Malaysia</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Ethnicity</td>
<td>Peninsular bumiputera 3</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Duration of Studies</td>
<td>1-4 semesters</td>
<td>970</td>
<td>64.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method of data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences Programme (SPSS) Version 16 was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics involving frequencies, means and standard deviations was used. The level of social cohesion of the subjects was assessed based on the division of the possible mean value of 1.00 to 5.00 to three equal parts as illustrated in Table 1.3. Based on these ranges, the means of social cohesion of the subjects were re-coded into one of the three levels.