



Putting a New Twist on the MPU Subjects

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In today's column, I wish to propose some interesting and important twist to a group of subjects that have been ignored as 'unimportant' by both public and private universities alike – the Matapelajaran Pengajian Umum or MPU subjects at universities. The whole purpose of the MPU subjects was supposed to produce graduates who could appreciate, understand, and work towards building the nation in a harmonious and peaceful way. I have not done any research on this issue but judging by the subject matter discussed with my five children who went through the courses as well as looking at the statements of some graduates and their silence on many issues plaguing this country, I would hypothesise that these courses are a failure at their objectives. Now, with the coronavirus pandemic, an opportunity has arisen with respect to the implementation of this subject that could just turn things around for this country...if there is anyone listening out there.

Recently, the Ministry of Education has made an official announcement that universities can admit students based on a projected grade if their SPM results were to be released at a later date due to the Movement Control Order (MCO). It also said that these students could start learning the MPU subjects and a few electives just in case they fail to make the grade upon the release of the SPM results. Now, most students do not consider the MPU subjects as very important. Firstly, many universities do not grade students' performance in the subject and one just needs to attend classes and complete some group work and be done with it. Because all students must sit for the courses, the number of students to be taught is staggering where one group would normally consist of 10 students as a way to reduce the workload of the lecturers having to grade hundreds of individual students. Now, most of the time, students would struggle even to complete these courses because they take them together with their major courses and they try to spend the least time at these subjects.

It was a sudden move when the MOE announced that students should start with these MPU subjects and some common electives and hold off of the Calculus or Advanced Geometry subjects. Now, I call it heaven-sent as the students have all the time to spend on these subjects because we can now experiment with making these MPU subjects actually work at nation-building instead of just treating them as an afterthought.

I would like to put forth four important 'twists' to the management of the MPU subjects and make it the most important nation-building tool that we have in our midst.

Firstly, I would like to suggest that all 222 Members of Parliament be made responsible to deliver a 2-hour talk at any public or private university once a year, which should be part of their non-negotiable KPI. One 2-hour lecture at their chosen time. Each university must allow one MP from the ruling party and one MP from an opposing one to deliver their nation-building ideas at different times. These talks must be moderated by senior professors of these universities and attended by the whole strong student population of thousands as one lecture module of the course. Similarly, the Member of the State Representatives of each state must also deliver a 2-hour session with the students moderated by a senior academic of a university as part of their KPI. In this way, the young students who will be voting in two years can decide on issues and even their leaders in the next election. We passed the law to let youngsters of 18 to vote, now we must give them the guides to do so.

Secondly, I wish to also suggest that all professors must deliver at least one 2-hour lecture, relating their fields to the issue on how it contributes to the idea of sharing responsibilities among all people. For instance, the issue of the deteriorating environment may be the result of apathy by all races and its health must come back to all those who play a role. We have 3,000 professors who spend their time only in their own cocoon of areas of studies with no regard to building the conscience of future societies.

Thirdly, I would like to suggest that forums be held with NGOs of both divides on issues of race, religion, and political ideas so that universities can be the true battle ground of ideas and constructs rather instead of just the media. NGOs such as the extremist ISMA can be in the same forum as the more moderate IKRAM as well as the non-Islamic group such as the Gabungan Bertindak Malaysia. This can provide universities the space to finally become the true forum of education in Malaysia rather than just a place for students to wrestle a piece of degree certificate or a factory of papers to polish the CVs of academics.

My fourth and last suggestion is that to have a clear selection and retraining process for the young lecturers of the MPU subjects, I have met a few of these lecturers and upon conversations, I found them not having much attendance at important public forums or presented any papers on the subject on how to forge better relations among the citizens. These lecturers must be made to mentor great Malaysians who show no preference to their own race, religion or political leanings but accept all citizens as one brotherhood of the nation.

As I have said in a previous article, the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed the pause button and it is up to us to push the reboot one rather than the resume key. We can make the MPU subjects better and more meaningful if we can think outside of the box of 'just a subject to pass' and see them as a real key to a great and exciting journey of mature nationhood.