

**Student council reps say 'No' to BTN
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Student council representatives from several public universities are opposed to the controversial Biro Tatanegara (BTN) courses which is a requirement at campuses.

Universiti Malaya Students Council president, Mohd Ridzuan Mohammad, said only four out of 41 council members who have been asked to attend the course chose to do so.

"I made it optional for members as I felt the course was unsuitable. It incites racial sentiments and does not help provide better representation to the student body," he said.

The council received an official letter from the Ministry of Higher Education, via UM's student affairs department, saying it was compulsory for council members.

Ridzuan, who had attended a BTN course in his first year, said his decision to make it optional had "angered" assistant vice chancellor of student affairs, Azarae Idris, who threatened disciplinary action.

However, he said, Azarae withdrew his threat after Ridzuan made his case in a meeting with the vice chancellor after the BTN course in April earlier in the year.

Ridzuan's defense was that pro-opposition student leaders were depicted negatively at a BTN course held in Kuala Terengganu.

He said the incident where a pig's head was thrown into a surau in UM was used to tarnish the image of pro-opposition student leaders.

"The course is run over three days, which I think can be better spent on looking after the welfare of the students on campus," he said.

When contacted, neither Azarae nor senior officers at the student affairs department were available for comment.

Compulsory for Islamic studies students

At University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), student council member Hisyamuddin Che Ali said most chose not to attend despite warnings from the student affairs department.

"We received calls from the student affairs department almost everyday to pressure us to go," he said.

Thus far no action has been taken on those who did not attend, as it is not compulsory for most UKM students.

The course, however, is a must for Faculty of Islamic Studies students. Unhappy at being singled out, the faculty's mostly Muslim students protested to the vice chancellor.

"They too, complained that racial sentiments were fanned at BTN courses...for example, they were told that the Chinese are lording over the country," said Hisyamuddin.

Other complaints included the inciting of political sentiments and the fact that male and female participants were not segregated during the activities.

Hisyamuddin said the student affairs department responded by saying that they were merely acting on the instructions of the Ministry of Higher Education.

'It all depends on the facilitators'

On the other end of the spectrum, a former UUM student council president said that he had encouraged council members to attend BTN course.

Nur Mohd Saifuddin Salahuddin said that 25 of the 36-member student council members attended the course.

"It's good for team-building," he said, adding that the courses were optional for UUM students despite rumours that those who did not go would not be allowed to graduate.

Saifuddin, who has attended several BTN courses, said the benefits outweighed negative perceptions, and that the modules mostly concentrated on historical facts.

"Whether or not BTN is an indoctrination camp depends on the facilitator, as some facilitators choose to focus on politics," said the member of the Pro-Aspirasi faction.

Pro-Aspirasi is commonly known to be a pro-Barisan Nasional government group in campus politics.

Saifuddin said that out of the 20 to 30 facilitators present at the BTN courses which he attended, only one or two made their political leanings obvious.

"I had even provoked a facilitator, calling him an 'Umno man', but he told me that it was a requirement for BTN facilitators to not be members of any political party," he said.

'Steer clear of politics'

Despite supporting the ISO-certified BTN, Saifuddin felt BTN courses should be clear of political influences, and use history instead of current events, as a teaching reference,

"I do not agree with some facilitators who try to convince those with different political leanings by stating 'fact' after 'fact'.

"If they must relate the modules to current events, at the very least they should stay neutral and not be so partial to the ruling government," he said.

He also said that the BTN courses should be more transparent, to ensure that the public understands what takes place.

Currently, all participants are asked to surrender cameras, mobile phones and all other recording devices.

This is not the case in Selangor's BTN equivalent SPIES where students taking part are allowed to bring along recording devices and best of all, the course is not compulsory.

"It popular because the facilitators are qualified and the activities are fun and beneficial,"

said Universiti Selangor student council president Wan Azraei Wan Husin.

Wan Azraei said the course includes the history of political parties, motivational speeches, spiritual lessons and outdoor activities like white water rafting, something also included in BTN course modules.

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