

Focus on Constitution, history

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KUALA LUMPUR: A deeper understanding of Malaysian history, the Constitution and national policies will form the basis of the new Ethnic Relations course to be introduced in public universities in December.

Higher Education Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed said the course guideline was forward-looking and would highlight the positive aspects of multiracial Malaysia.

The module will touch on the rationale for Article 152, which relates to the national language, Article 153 (position of Bumiputeras), Article 3 (religion) of the Constitution and the background for the implementation of national economic policies.

He said the idea was to remind the younger generation of the major provisions of the Constitution where founding fathers such as Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun V.T. Sambanthan had given their inputs in the spirit of goodwill and compromise.

"Not many of the younger generation have a sound understanding of the route we took to independence and nationhood and there are some who have chosen to forget historical facts and events, so the module would act as a reminder," he said in an interview with the *New Straits Times*.

"This is because the younger generation was not part of the history and did not

fully understand the compromise achieved by the major races in the drafting of Article 152 on language, Article 153 on Bumiputeras and Article 3 on religion.

"Our founding fathers had a lot of wisdom and they came to many compromises and that in the end every citizen has a stake in Malaysia.

"For example Article 3 on religion says that Islam is the official religion, but other religions are also allowed to be practised."

Mustapa said although the course had come under fire recently for stirring racial sentiments, resulting in the course module being withdrawn, he felt that something must be done to address the racial divide in public universities.

"We are not in a state of denial. We acknowledge that there is a problem and the government is trying to address it for the sake of peace, prosperity and harmony," he said.

Mustapa believes that instant results to get students of different ethnic groups to mix freely in universities cannot be achieved through the course introduction alone.

"This is a problem that has been around for many years and we would need a few years before we can see any results from the course."

Mustapa said the new course guideline which would place more emphasis on unity and tolerance would be introduced at all public universities.

"It would be more forward

looking than the earlier draft as we want to highlight the positive aspects and on cultural diversity. We have removed the sensitive aspects and paragraphs which were considered objectionable by some parties."

He said one of the aims was to reduce the segregation of the races in universities.

"This is evident in the university cafeterias, the lecture halls and even the sports fields. Students mix with their respective racial groups and the racial divide is visible."

Mustapa said this was an unhealthy practice and the government believed that the subject was vital for Malaysia's continued survival as a multiracial nation.

"This means we have to ensure that football and netball, for example, are played by a multiracial group. So the challenge is not the module as such, but how far we can change the mindset and attitudes of our undergraduates."

He said from his observation, community outreach programmes in universities were often monopolised by one race: Malays.

"If there are non-Malays among them, they are only a handful, five or six," he said, adding this was disappointing.

He hoped the goal of the programme which was to get students to understand the importance of preserving racial unity would be achieved.

The best way to do it was to implement programmes that would bring students of different racial origins together.