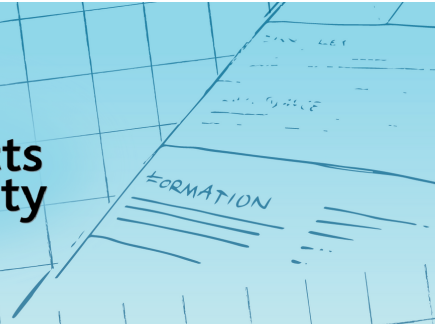Rebuilding Social Bridges:

Review and Recommendations for PLKN 3.0

Architects of Diversity (Persatuan Pendidikan Diversiti) is a youth-led non-profit organisation that bridges communities and identity groups among youth in Malaysia for justice, peace and a sustainable future. Since 2018, AOD has worked towards the promotion of diversity and inclusion in Malaysia by empowering young leaders as champions of inclusivity, pioneering ideas and processes for social cohesion, and building an enabling environment for legislative change towards equity and inclusion.

Executive Summary

- Program Latihan Khidmat Negara, or PLKN, was first implemented in 2004 in response to a need to increase patriotism among youth. In 2016, the programme was rebranded as PLKN 2.0 and made optional, focusing on vocational training. In 2018, PLKN was fully abolished.

- Prior research demonstrated that while PLKN had some successes in improving interracial relations among participants, sub-optimal features of the programme limited its capacity to create significant reductions in prejudice and improve social cohesion.

- In nations such as the United Kingdom, Singapore and France, versions of National Service are implemented in various ways to incorporate elements of national unity, youth development and community service.

- In present day, there is a great need for a social bridging programme due to increasing segregation among youth, the hollowing of opportunities for interracial friendships and increasing threats of extremism.

- We present a case study of Sekolah Diversiti that successfully implemented a bilingual residential programme focusing on building social cohesion and peace among Malaysian youth. The programme leveraged on deliberate diversity among participants, small group implementation and participant-led learning.

- We recommend the **reintroduction** of a revised and rebranded PLKN, beginning with a 1-year pilot stage with the intentional goal of bridge building and promoting interracial understanding.

- Administratively, we recommend the appointment of a non-partisan PLKN Council and youth representation on the Council. A robust procurement process and independent ombudsman are needed to prevent leakages, corrupt practices and protect participants from abuse such as bullying, sexual harassment and negligence.

- Programmatically, we recommend major revisions to the initial PLKN model such as Gen-Z adapted peace pedagogy and smaller ratios between ethnic groups. The emulation of the Peace Corps recruitment system can increase both the quality and diversity of trainers. Independent monitoring and evaluation must be implemented and facilitated for robust assessment.

- To minimise cost, we recommend leveraging on targeted selection of youth who have large influence on social norms in their own communities to amplify the effects of a revised PLKN.

PLKN 1.0 and 2.0

Photo: Berita Harian

Program Latihan Khidmat Negara (PLKN) in Malaysia was implemented on 16 February 2004. The idea to establish PLKN was conceived during the National Patriotism Congress on 24 October 2002, attended by various stakeholders. One of the resolutions from the congress was to raise patriotism among youth and to understand the principles behind National Integration and Unity in Malaysia.

On 30 October 2002, a Cabinet Committee was formed to study the need of its implementation. This committee was led by the Minister of Defence along with various ministers and deputy ministers. The committee reached a consensus to substitute "conscription" with "National Service."

In 2003, the Cabinet approved the implementation of Program Latihan Khidmat Negara. On 25 June 2003, Parliament collectively passed the National Service Act Bill to implement administrative and legal arrangements, particularly in appointing a **National Service Council** and the various terms of national service.

Physical	Nation Building	Character Building	Community Service
Army-based regiment to build self-discipline through physical activity, including obstacle courses, combat, first-aid and team-based activities.	Group-based learning on nation building concepts such as the nation state, national sovereignty, citizen responsibilities and history of ethnic relations.	Self-exploration of leadership qualities and skills, self-confidence and methods in leading others through lectures and experiential-based activities.	Five-part module to instil volunteerism including service time towards neighbourhoods, social services, public amenities, the environment & civil service.

Main modules of PLKN

In 2016, PLKN was reformulated as PLKN 2.0 that made participation fully optional. PLKN 2.0 focused on upskilling participants in various vocations oriented towards supporting youth employment, deviating from its initial conception as a social bridging initiative. In 2018, former Youth and Sports Minister, YB Syed Saddiq Abdul Rahman announced the abolishment of PLKN.

Review

Photo: Air Times

'Rallying around the flag': Can an intergroup contact intervention promote national unity?

In a 2007 study conducted by Oxford psychologists, Al Ramiah and Hewstone compared PLKN participants and a control group consistent of non-participants using a pre-/post-test study using quality of contact, outgroup evaluations, ethnic identity and national identity as outcomes.

A number of small to medium effect sizes were observed for PLKN participants, particularly among Malay participants who demonstrated the strongest improvements of their perception towards other races. PLKN participants also experienced an increase in both national identification and ethnic identification, supporting the dual identity model (e.g. feeling both Malaysian and Indian simultaneously).

However, such effects largely disappeared when comparing PLKN participants to the control group. The authors suggest that the non-significant differences demonstrated the programme produced only negligible changes for its participants compared to Malaysians going about their everyday life.

Al Ramiah and Hewstone do not conclude that such an intervention was ineffective; instead, there may have been a ceiling effect for PLKN participants possibly due to sub-optimal conditions of the programme.

Fresh out of Sekolah Menengah and wondering what the future had in store for me, PLKN was quite a turning point in my life. I had deep conversations with people of different races, religions, cultural backgrounds, and everything in between.

I enjoyed my time there and it really rooted in me a sense of belonging to Malaysia. However, I do wish that the formal class programme would explore social issues in depth more, it felt like it came out of a textbook, the discussions coming out of it also felt flat and forced.

Lim Ee Yeng, 26 (Selangor)
2014 PLKN Participant

National Service Globally

National Citizen Service's (NCS) primary goals are to advance engagement, unity and to empower youths aged 15-17 in the UK. The programmes are structured to tackle a variety of areas from social cohesion, skills development, boosting employability, to cultivating social action and promoting community wellbeing.

The programmes are optional and are conducted in different modes:
- 5-day residential programmes
- Community services
- 6-12 months of paid work placements.

Photo: Third Sector

United Kingdom
National Citizen's Service

The key pillars of the National Service (NS) are to protect the country's sovereignty and to strengthen its defence and security preparedness.

A two-year service that enlists young men aged 16 and above. During registration one has the choice to indicate their vocation of interest to serve in a stipulated uniformed service, namely Singapore Armed Forces, Singapore Civil Defence Force and Singapore Police Force.

Photo: The Straits Times

Singapore
National Service

Service National Universel (SNU) is a voluntary civic training with the intent of fostering national cohesion through French youths aged 15-17 from all backgrounds.

SNU is built into 3 phases:
- Encourages cohesive engagements between trainees and experts through activities in diverse fields (sports, culture, defence, civic education etc.). [2 weeks]
- Initiates a voluntary community service on areas of interest, with support from experts and tutors in SNU. [84 hours]
- Optional volunteer engagements or compensated civic services. The prior two phases are prerequisites to embark on this phase and it can be conducted till the trainees are 25 years old. [3 months to 1 year]

Photo: BBC

France
Service National Universel

Core Tenets
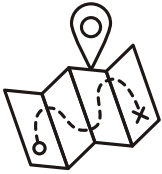
Residential Programme

Residential programmes such as PLKN tend to provide independence, broaden one's horizon, foster deeper connections and encourage social interactions. Separation from home environments and full immersion into a diverse community creates a powerful experience that would difficult to replicate through other methods.

Diverse Trainees

Due to the diversity of participants from conscription recruitment, Malaysia's PLKN provides a perfect ground for trainees with multiple layers of distinct identities to interact, bond, foster understanding and empathy. Unlike other programmes that suffer from self-selection bias of recruitment participants possessing prior interest in intergroup interactions, the unique value of conscription lies in its participant pool.

Social Cohesion in tandem with National Identity

The value add of PLKN lies in its ability to develop both social cohesion and national identity synchronously. As PLKN is a point of contact for multiple layers of Malaysian society, it provides a solid path to pave social cohesion through bonding, building trust and fostering mutual respect. Such a level of informal and formal community building cannot be found in other programmes.

Present Need

🤝 Prime opportunity for social ties

The youth landscape has shifted significantly since the initial establishment of PLKN. Most prominently, segregation is at an all-time high with the intense fragmentation of education streams. Since 2015, only around four percent of Chinese students attend national primary schools. Since the removal of quota of Malaysians in international schools, private and international institutions have proliferated and further divided Malaysian students across socioeconomic and religious lines. The dissolution of shared second spaces has created significant vulnerabilities in our social fabric.

🏛️🏛️ Rebuild social bridges

Outside of segregated education spaces, Malaysian youth have fewer opportunities to meet and befriend other races in a meaningful, intentional manner. A major programme, Rancangan Integrasi Murid untuk Perpaduan that connected students of various streams, has been largely disempowered since its introduction in 1986 and is now mainly limited to cultural exposure through celebrations. At the tertiary level, education spaces are not intentionally built around social cohesion and may have limited effects on its more matured populations. In essence, few bridges exist between isolated communities today.

☮️ Counter extremism and foster peace

The rise of social media algorithms that amplify hate and concentrate echo-chambers has made youth particularly susceptible to extremist narratives. The threat of violence was made most apparent in the GE15 aftermath with teenagers producing TikToks advocating for the repeat of the 13 May tragedy. The gap in empathy and understanding needed for peace can be reduced through an effective social bridging programme.

Case Study:
UWC Short Course | Sekolah Diversiti
by Architects of Diversity

Our flagship programme that has been implemented for 6 iterations since 2018 has experimented with innovations in peace and social education for youth in Malaysia. We gather participants ages 15-16 across all states in Malaysia for a 5-8 day residential programme in Janda Baik, Pahang, providing transportation and accommodation free-of-charge to lower barriers of participation.

In our assessments of previous iterations, 44% of our participants decreased stereotypes about other races, moving the average from neutral to disagreeing with stereotype contents. 27% of participants demonstrated greater positive emotions towards other racial groups, decreasing its difference with feelings towards one's own group.

I've learnt so much about the different lives that a "Malaysian teenager" can have. Discussing serious topics like racism, sexism, and discrimination as a whole, has shown me how different people get treated even though we as humans had never chosen these certain things to happen to us in the first place. This safe space has genuinely let all of us express all our deepest emotions and thoughts without being judged as well allowed us to have access to a group of people who would actually listen to said emotions and thoughts.

- Shaun Amir Renoo, 16 (2021 Alumni)

Programme Features:

Deliberate Diversity
Participants are selected based on their unique perspectives they bring to building a diverse community together. As a result, participants are unable to form groups with people "like them", consequentially pushed to exit their comfort zones and befriend others of different backgrounds.

Small Group
Cohorts are usually sized at 30-35 participants, allowing for close knit relationships and a sense of community as each individual would be able to "know everyone". The reduced cohort size supports vulnerability among participants by reducing sense of threat in a new environment.

Participant-Led Sessions
Rather than lecture-based sessions that use one-way communication, sessions are largely discussion-based to encourage organic participation and story sharing. Through participant-led sessions, ownership and sense of community are increased.

Recommendations

1. Relaunch rebranded PLKN at a pilot stage

To ensure programme efficacy and strengthen public faith in PLKN, we recommend a one-year pilot stage for stringent testing prior to scaled implementation. Additionally, a rebranded PLKN focused on addressing social divisions and supporting interracial understanding could overcome existing negative sentiments of the programme.

2. Non-partisan PLKN Council and Department

An effective PLKN for social bridging must both be free from political partisan interest while allowing for discussion of political realities among participants. Its direct administration should ensure appointees are able to maintain programmatic distance from partisan capture and balance competing views of programmatic design.

3. Youth representation on PLKN Council

While diverse representation of ethnic groups on the PLKN Council should be maintained, youth representation is greatly needed in the governance of youth programmes. Youth representation can ensure programmatic design is contemporary and relevant, as well as voice youth concerns for equitable decision-making.

4. Robust procurement process

Potential for leakage and corrupt practices can reduce the quality of PLKN facilities, hamper public trust in the programme and inflate cost to government. Procurement of material goods, camp rentals, food vendors and trainers must be subject to strict supervision with bipartisan and transparent review processes.

5. Flexible drafting period

PLKN draft dates must consider the needs of SPM leavers to meet college and scholarship application deadlines while reducing attrition of participation. Its implementation should be coordinated with relevant tertiary education institutions and scholarship providers, as well as allow draftees greater choice to select participating dates.

6. Ombudsman to prevent abuse

Instances of bullying, sexual harassment, racism, physical abuse and negligence in PLKN are well-remembered in public memory. An independent ombudsman with investigative and corrective powers must be established to protect the welfare of participants and continued public support for the programme.

1. Leverage social science for higher impact with smaller scale

To create large macro-effects for social cohesion while minimising cost, we recommend leveraging on social science findings to increase programme efficacy. For instance, selecting youth who have larger influence on social norms as PLKN participants can amplify its impact on non-participants through spillover effects.

2. Revision of modules and Gen-Z adapted

The significant generational shift in learning methods and social experiences in the advent of social media requires PLKN modules to keep up with pedagogical trends. We recommend moving away from lecture-based, information-dense modules and revise modules with expert education partners in peace and social cohesion pedagogy.

3. Diversity in trainers

Ethnic diversity among trainers is a necessary condition to model positive interracial relations, create optimal settings for intergroup contact and promote multicultural power dynamics. Prior studies of PLKN have recommended greater diversity in camp facilitators to ensure a "safe, non-threatening environment" for minorities.

4. Smaller ratios between ethnic groups

Various intergroup psychologists have highlighted the necessity of equal ratios of participants across ethnic groups to strengthen equal status norms optimal for prejudice reduction. We recommend balancing ethnic representation as much as possible in the conscription process that no group constitutes a majority race.

5. Corp system for top talent trainer recruitment

In order to recruit diverse, crème de la crème talent for the best delivery of PLKN, we recommend emulating the Peace Corps method of recruiting top university graduates as trainers for 1-2 years. For instance, Teach For Malaysia has successfully emulated the Corp system to recruit top graduates to serve as national school teachers.

6. Independent monitoring and evaluation

To strengthen the evaluation process, we recommend opening partnerships with researchers from public and private universities to carry out appropriate quantitative and qualitative assessments on the efficacy of PLKN in achieving various goals.

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