Youth Civic Development in the Higher Education Context: Some Preliminary Results

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Abstract: This study investigates youth civic development in the Malaysian higher education context. The findings described in this study represent the preliminary data obtained through the pre-test procedure. This pre-test study used a sample of 40 undergraduate students in Kualalumpur, Selangor State. Civic disposition recorded the highest mean score; nevertheless, the intensity invested in civic disposition can not support students in reinforcing their civic engagement as this construct showed the lowest mean score. The results discussed only prove the preliminary findings, although the results are expected to represent a possible prediction of what the actual data will be.

Key words: Educational environment, higher education, student characteristics, youth civic development, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

According to some scholars, the job of higher education is to increase knowledge of the common good which could address the challenge of creating a civil society (Maxwell, 2007; McHenry, 2007). Education is an intentional attempt and an effective way to undertake this task by encouraging young people to participate in taking action like adult citizens and embrace their values (Giroux, 2009; Harkavy, 2006; Khader, 2012) and it is one of the most important predictors of civic participation (Putnam, 2000). According to Palmer *et al.* (2010), higher education has the opportunity to develop student's emotional, interpersonal and ethical skills and makes them good citizens as part of its fundamental role in the future of democracy (Jacoby and Hollander, 2009).

Higher education in Malaysia, like in other countries, plays a significant role in the development of nation building (Ramachandran *et al.*, 2009) and tries to achieve peaceful coexistence between its diverse people (Al-Anbouri, 2009). The Malaysian Government views higher education as a tool that the country needs to integrate its multiethnic population (Ismail and Hassan, 2009). The kind of society that the government wants to create and in which the Malaysian people, particularly youth from different races want to live is depending on their future generation's competency for citizenship beyond any technocratic sense (Tor, 2010).

However, the majority of Malaysian higher educational institutions have introduced thinking skills

and ethnic relations, as subjects for nurturing a reading culture and the identification of civic literacy which contributes to citizenship education in some direct and indirect ways (Bajunid, 2008). Another method that is used by higher education to develop a sense of citizenship is to emphasize the education of active citizens within the campus mission statement (Billings and Terkla, 2011). Thus, Malaysian higher education should not be only about discipline-specific knowledge; instead, it should encompass dispositions and intellectual skills that enable graduates to be effective citizens (Chan *et al.*, 2014).

Previous studies mention the influence of higher education on youth's civic outcome (Dee, 2004; Gesthuizen *et al.*, 2008; Huang *et al.*, 2009) but there is also a lack of understanding of the surplus value of higher education in civic outcome (Campbell, 2009) as a result of the marginalization of the role of higher education in civil society (McArthur, 2011; Watty, 2006). Smith *et al.* (2010) use the term civic to describe a range of student outcomes. Civic-mindedness is defined, as information, attitudes and behaviors that are beneficial to society (Smart *et al.*, 2000). A civic-minded person has civic knowledge and the disposition and ability to engage in social issues, as an agent of social change (Hatcher, 2008; Sullivan, 2004; Yusop, 2010). To date little is known with regard to civic-mindedness among young graduates of the Malaysian higher education system, particularly with respect to the purpose of citizenship education which can be translated into how many

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students are civic-minded when they enter real life. Thus, the purpose of this study is to measure civic development among Malaysian higher education students.

Literature review

Youth civic development and higher education: Higher education institutions form the link between citizens and government in a civil society. The idea that higher education leads to the development of democratic values has received support from numerous researchers Glaeser *et al.* (2004) and Papaioannou and Siourounis (2005). Civic development for the younger generation means the way in which they develop their civic abilities (i.e., knowledge, disposition and engagement) through their involvement in the educational process (Amna, 2012).

Civic knowledge: Civic knowledge includes a series of subjects comprising understanding of the fundamental thinking about citizenship along with conventional citizenship education for example, knowledge of civil organizations and concepts or current issues like diversity, the environment and globalization (Schulz *et al.*, 2008). According to Sirat (2010), higher education institutions are the main foundation of knowledge regarding societal issues in the mega and macro contexts.

Civic disposition: Civic dispositionis defined as a willingness to work and act together for the common good to be answerable for one sactions and to think about other's well-being (Fakhrutdinova *et al.*, 2013) as well as those attributes of communal and personal qualities that support both the civil efficacy of youth and the common good of the community (Vontz *et al.*, 2000). The development of this construct will happen when students experience intellectual uncertainty in a new environment with the opportunity to reflect on existing ideas as well as experiment with new ideas and roles (Cole and Zhou, 2014).

Civic engagement: Civic engagement is understood as those activities that reflect civic skills, motivate engaged citizenship and result in personal and shared actions (Battistoni, 2002; Ehrlich, 2000). It comprises not just civic behaviours but also responsibility to society, honesty and mutual understanding (Bowman, 2011). It is a major part of nourishing democracy as students learn the pragmatics of citizenship, through involvement and participation (Youniss and Levine, 2009).

Overall, engagement in civic activities develops student's civic knowledge such as knowing their social responsibility which also leads to atendency and disposition towards upholding communal concerns (Metz and Youniss, 2003; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing, 2005). This cycle of reproduction is continued as shown in Fig. 1.

IEO Model; youth civic development in a higher education context: Many studies wrongly focus only on student's outcomes based on their pre-college characteristics (Bitzer, 2003). Students enter the educational setting with certain characteristics which will have changed to some degree by the time they graduate. These changes can be to internal, perceptual, cognitive and affective characteristics (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). According to Astin (1993) IEO (Input, Environment, Output) Model, outcomes or student characteristics after exposure to college are thought to be influenced by both inputs or student characteristics before and at the time of entry to college and environments or various programs, policies, faculty, peers and educational experiences that students interact with while in college (Inkelas *et al.*, 2006). The fundamental basis underlying Astin's modelis that true learning excellence lies in an institution's ability to affect its learners and to enhance their development (Fig. 2). Pascarella (2001) is convinced that the IEO Model proves to have huge potential if alumni are also included in outcome studies.
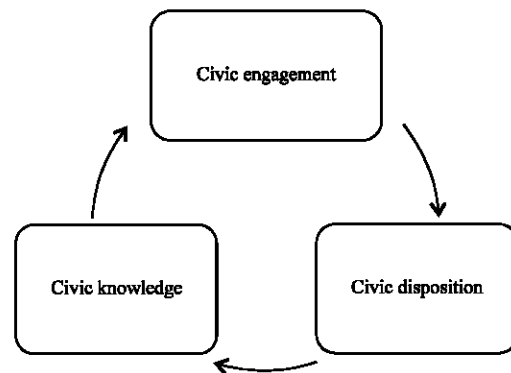

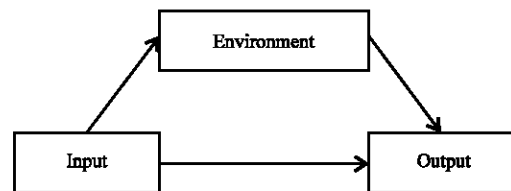Fig. 1: The reproduction of civic development constructs

Fig. 2: The IEO Model

Student characteristics and civic development:
Students enter higher education institutions with certain pre-college characteristics. These pre-college features are crucial to education researchers, particularly when they want to assess student's change and development before and after their graduation (Mondak *et al.*, 2010). University students who hold particular attitudes and values are likely to engage in experiences that align with and further bolster those attitudes and values. In other words, students who are civically minded on college entry are likely to participate in civic activities in college and accordingly become more civically minded. Controlling for pre-college civic-mindedness, thus captures the effects of college experiences on the growth of student's civic-mindedness during their college years (Herzog and Bowman, 2011). The present study chose five pre-college characteristics, namely: Openness to change, self-interest in political participation, prior commitment to civic participation, academic confidence and critical thinking ability. According to Alivernini and Manganelli (2011), openness to change as a higher-order trait is a predictor of civic engagement. Secondly, self-interest in politcal and civic participation is highly influential on attitudes to participation (Campbell, 2002). In Ozymy (2012) words, self-interest motivates civic participation. In addition, prior commitment and experience affect interpretation and new learning (Marlowe and Page, 2005). For instance, a student's voting experience in high school develops their understanding of civic issues in university period (Wolfowitz, 2007). In addition, academic confidence is conceptualised, as how students differ in the extent to which they have a strong belief of trust in what university has to offer (Sander and Sanders, 2003). Finally, critical thinking competency includes, such acts as framing hypotheses, alternative ways of viewing a problem, questions, possible solutions and plans for investigating something (Ten Dam and Volman, 2004). Critical thinking is a particularly crucial trait for good citizenship (Nussbaum, 2006) because it leads to democracy and open debates (Giroux, 2004).

Educational environment and civic development: The educational environment is one of the most important factors in determining the success of a curriculum and subsequently student's outcomes (Tripathy and Dudani, 2013) and their effectiveness in society (Nahar *et al.*, 2010). During interaction with the environment, students as similate complementary components of the external world into their existing cognitive structures (Campbell, 2009). If their experiences do not fit their existing knowledge structures they will change or alter those structures to accommodate the new information (Rogers, 2009). It has been proved that student's insights are related positively to the educational environment

(Mayya and Roff, 2004). Higher education institutions that equip their students with learning experience from the educational environment will have well-informed and civically minded citizens (Cole and Zhou, 2014). The present study chose four important educational environmental factors, namely: peer interaction, faculty interaction, residence hall environment and satisfaction with design. First, evidence shows that peer interaction in the higher education setting does exist, like in schools (Winston and Zimmerman, 2004). Peer interaction has been given a great deal of attention by sociocultural researchers who have focused on its collaborative nature (Foster and Ohta, 2005; Galaczi, 2008; Lapkin *et al.*, 2002) because of its contribution to the development of civic skills and other intellectual outcomes (Antonio, 2001; Astin *et al.*, 2011). Secondly, faculty and staff play an important role in determining student learning as well as the development of curricula (Da, 2007). Interaction with faculty staff has an indirect effect on student's activity inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 2000). Third, according to Kezar (2006), the residential hall environment is associated with student interaction and hence, more engagement. Residential halls and campus living have a positive, although often indirect, effect on student growth and development (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Finally, student satisfaction with and their perception of the course can influence their learning, their decision to continue with the course, their job skills preparedness and later their citizenship competencies (Carr, 2000; Speelmon, 2004).

Malaysian higher education and its civic development mission: Malaysia is a multicultural and multiethnic country in Southeast Asia with three major races: Malays (53.3%), Chinese (26.0%) and Indians (7.7%) (Khader, 2012). Recent research in Malaysia has shown that the level of tolerance between its citizens from different races was less than normal. Indeed, the Malaysian government has envisaged in its Vision 2020 becoming a mature democratic society and also solving its ethnic and social problems (Tor, 2010). Malaysian governments view higher education as the tool that the country needs to integrate its multiethnic population (Ismail and Hassan, 2009), especially after the 1969 ethnic riots which brought special attention to the stability of ethnic relations (Baharuddin, 2007). According to Khoo and Loh (2002), Malaysian youth seem to be well informed but they remain disconnected to civic issues. Conversely, Malaysia may drift into some new market-oriented format with serious consequences for quality in that the society will be losing some of the attributes of higher education that are essential to an effective society (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004). Because Malaysian youth constitute half of its population

(D'Silva *et al.*, 2010), government focuses on its human resources through citizenship education (Bajunid, 2012). Therefore, the goal of the Malaysian education system is to in still civic issues and national unity (Barone, 2002).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data outlined in this study are the pre-test results of a study on youth civic development. It is a quantitative type of study and in four main parts with a set of questionnaires having been developed, as the main data-gathering tool. For measuring Youth Civic Development (YCD), respondents were given a choice of a 5-level Likert scale for each question asked where 1 represents strongly disagree, 2 represents disagree, 3 represents moderately agree, 4 represents agree and 5 represents strongly agree. The questions on the three civic development components were based on the review of literature and past studies. The questionnaire was then justified via a series of instrument development consultations. For the pre-test process, it was conducted at Universiti Malaya (UM) as a public university and Kollege Bandar Utama (KBU) as a private institute in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor where a total of 40 undergraduate students aged between 18 and 25 years were chosen as the respondents. To attain the aim of the study, analyses such as frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation and reliability test for instruments were carried out. To analyze the data, SPSS (version 21) was employed where by analyses such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were performed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic data: Table 1 provides the demographic data on the respondents. The average age of respondents is 24.51 with the majority (60%) senior students. The reason in this study for dividing students into junior and senior groups is due to the importance of studying 1st year students (juniors) in relation to implementing policies for maximum educational improvement (Speelmon, 2004) which will be used for the actual data analysis. Senior students at 60% are those in the 3rd semester or above. The majority of the respondents studied are female (65%) and the majority Malay (47.5%) followed by Chinese race (37.5%). The >47% of the respondents have parents with a monthly income of >RM2000 (Malaysian currency) and most of the respondents are above the poverty rate (RM720≅230 USD) announced by the Malaysian Planning Unit (Economic Planning Unit, 2010). The 42.5% of students are involved in student's associations as extra-curricular activities. Most of the students (70%) live off campus.

Table 1: Demographic data

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Age	-	-	24.51	12.71
Junior	16	40.0	-	-
Senior	24	60.0	-	-
Gender				
Male	14	35.0	-	-
Female	26	65.0	-	-
Parent's monthly income (RM)				
<500 RM	4	10.0	-	-
500-1000 RM	4	10.0	-	-
1000-1500 RM	5	12.5	-	-
1500-2000 RM	8	20.0	-	-
>2000 RM	19	47.5	-	-
Race				
Malay	19	47.5	-	-
Chinese	15	37.5	-	-
Indian	6	15.0	-	-
School background				
Boarding school	2	5.0	-	-
Religious school	2	5.0	-	-
Private school	3	7.5	-	-
Normal day school	33	82.5	-	-
Institute type				
Public	17	42.5	-	-
Private	23	57.5	-	-
Extra-curricular activity				
Student association	17	42.5	-	-
Activities in the social sector	5	12.5	-	-
Citizenship activities	3	7.5	-	-
Sport activities	14	-	-	-
Residence	-	35.0	-	-
Oncampus	12	30.0	-	-
Offcampus	28	70.0	-	-

Table 2: Original references of student characteristics and educational environment instruments of present study

Instrument name	References for instrument
Openness to change	Husfeldt *et al.* (2005)
Self-interest in political participation	Kahne and Sporte (2008)
Prior commitment to civic participation	Kahne and Sporte (2008)
Academic confidence	Sander and Sanders (2006)
Critical thinking scale	Mincemoyer and Perkins (2005)
Peer interaction scale	Franke *et al.* (2010) and Inkelas *et al.* (2006)
Faculty interaction scale	Inkelas *et al.* (2006)
Residence hall environment	Inkelas *et al.* (2006)
Satisfaction with design	Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005)

Reliabilities of composite measures: A measure is said to be valid if it measures what it is intended or supposed to measure which shows the degree to which the numbers obtained by a measurement procedure represent the magnitudes of the attribute to be measured (Kane, 2001). Table 2 shows the original references for student characteristics and educational environment variables from which the scales were obtained for researcher who want to use for their studies.

For measuring civic development among students, researchers used CMGS (Civic Mindedness Graduate Scale) invented by Steinberg *et al.* (2011) and adapted to the Malaysian context based on the literature and other validated scales (Tor, 2010). Table 3 shows that all the measures based on the assumption that primary constructs met the reliability criteria with excellent internal

Table 3: The reliability test of the YCD scale

Scales	No. of items	Cronbach alpha (α)
Civic knowledge	9	0.946
Civic disposition	10	0.952
Civic engagement	13	0.914

Table 4: Student's pre-college characteristics

Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach alpha (α)
Openness to change	6	0.806
Self-interest in political participation	6	0.787
Prior commitment to civic participation	5	0.724
Academic confidence	24	0.864
Critical thinking	20	0.854
Peer interaction	6	0.947
Faculty interaction	6	0.841
Residence hall environment	20	0.899
Satisfaction with design	8	0.835

Table 5: Malaysian undergraduate civic development with overall mean scores

YCD	Mean	SD
Civic knowledge	3.611	0.713
Knowing occasions for public involvement	3.620	
Knowing about civic organization/volunteer opportunities	3.550	
Familiar with organization to inspire public involvement	3.700	
Get specialized information for solving civic issues	3.700	
Ability to solve social problems by learning	3.770	
Employed incommunity development	3.600	
Writing a letter to government	3.420	
Aware of a number of community issues to be solved	3.600	
Uptodate on current political issues	3.520	
Civic engagement	3.355	0.723
Work together casually	3.610	
Spend time joining in community service/volunteer activities	3.480	
Actively participate in associations	3.560	
Personally work for charity	3.740	
Help raise money for charity	3.510	
Vote in GE13	3.430	
Display signs for a political party	3.050	
Contact public officials to express an opinion	3.230	
Take part in demonstrations	3.100	
Sign social and political petitions	3.150	
Do not buy something from a certain company, as a social/political sanction	3.070	
Buy a certain product in support of a company	3.120	
Attend speeches/seminars about political/national issues	3.250	
Civic disposition	3.558	0.768
Like to be involved in addressing civic issues	3.480	
Develop my sense of who I am	3.640	
Improve society through career	3.530	
Realize the importance of political involvement (e.g., voting)	3.530	
Dedicate career to improving society	3.640	
Have conviction of need to achieve planned career goals beyond self-interest	3.510	
Responsibility of using knowledge to serve others	3.640	
Confidence that contributing to improve life in the community	3.610	
Convinced that social problems are not too complex to help solve	3.510	
Belief that having an impact on community problems is within reach	3.710	

consistency (Kline, 2000). Table 4 shows that except for the self-interest in political participation scale, all of them attained satisfactory levels in reliability tests.

Youth civic development: Represented in Table 5, the respondents revealed a great level of civic knowledge.

This result is consistent with Schulz *et al.* (2008) assertion that the development of civic knowledge is influenced by activities and experiences that take place within the contexts of the classroom and the wider community. However, they showed a slight lack of civic engagement. This was followed by a relatively stronger level of civic disposition which aligns with Komalasari (2009) comment that it is similar to a civic tendency which is developed gradually due to the result of learning by youth in university, environment and organization. This means that having civic knowledge alone is not enough to lead to greater engagement in citizenship activities and could contribute more tocivic disposition.

CONCLUSION

The development of citizenship in higher education is a global aim of all higher education institutes, especially in nations faced with complex social and civic issues. The present study has tried to find the common issues that are fostering student's civic development in Malaysian higher education. The main limitation of this study is that these are just the preliminary findings which involved a total of 40 undergraduate students as the respondents and that the results might, therefore, be different if a bigger sample size were to be used. The number of respondents is far too small to claim universal validity and is not suitable to be considered as generally valid. However, even with this small number this study can at least portray an early indication ofthe level of civic development of undergraduate students. Thus, knowing why students develop civically can extend theories in the education field. In conclusion, the findings of this pilot study are consistent with Khoo and Loh (2002) about well-informed Malaysian youth but lacking in civic engagement.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings this study recommends the following:

- Consideration needs to be given to the relationship between civic disposition, civic knowledge and civic engagement before producing policy
- Malaysian higher education institutions need to institutionalize citizenship education with their faculty, staff and students
- Paying more attention to teaching civic information alone is not enough to develop civic engagement and disposition
- To solve the lack of civic engagement (like in this study), universities could use learning about service sin their programs for better involvement in and increasing the level of civic engagement

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