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Promoting Inter-Religious Harmony through University-Community Engagement Project: A Case Study of the Educational Visit to Places of Worship (Edvist)

Nur Suriya Mohd Nor*

Abstract

In promoting the unity among multi-religious society Malaysia, the Department of Uṣūl al-Dīn and Comparative Religion (RKUD) is conducting a University-Community Engagement (UCE) project known as the Educational Visit to Places of Worship (EDVIST). This project is a platform to promote inter-religious harmony among Malaysians. The aims of this paper are to describe the nature of the Educational Visit to Places of Worship (EDVIST) and highlight EDVIST as a platform to promote interreligious harmony among multi-religious society in Malaysia. The methodology used for this study is through conversation, observation and student journals. The findings show that students gave positive feedback on the visit. The inter-religious harmony happened during the visit, both parties managed to respect, tolerate, and understand each other. This University-Community engagement project developed a mutual understanding and good relationship among the RKUD lecturers, students, and the communities. By having first-hand information through the visit will surely provide better understanding to all students which may lead to better future of Malaysia.

Keyword: Interreligious harmony, Mutual understanding, Integration, EDVIST, UCE.

Introduction: Background of the Study

National integration is one of the Malaysian Core Values i.e. Core Value 3. It can be achieved by multi-religious, multi-ethnics and multi-cultural Malaysia through the bonds that unify all Malaysians. The integration depends on the various communities coming together to live with mutual understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of diversity. The responsibility of establishing harmony and peace in multi-religious society Malaysia lies upon the shoulders of every person. In achieving our aspiration to live a healthy, harmonious, and happy co-existence with one another, the

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Department of Uşūl al-Dīn and Comparative Religion (RKUD), Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Science (KIRKHS), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) conducting a University-Community Engagement (UCE) project known as the Educational Visit to Places of Worship (EDVIST). This project is a platform to promote inter-religious harmony among multi-religious society in Malaysia.

This research aims to describe the nature of the Educational Visit to Places of Worship (EDVIST); and to highlight EDVIST as a platform to promote interreligious harmony among multi-religious society Malaysia. In order to achieve the second objective which is to highlight EDVIST as a platform to promote interreligious harmony among multi religious society in this country, the researcher had a conversation with six students who participated in the visit. She also analysed five student journals which have been submitted by the students at the end of the semester.

The Nature of Educational Visit to Places of Worship (EDVIST)

The Department of Uşūl al-Dīn and Comparative Religion has decided to carry out an educational visit to places of worship (EDVIST) as an effort not to confine education activities merely to the classrooms, but to expand students' understanding of other religions as understood by their adherents. In doing so, it is hoped that the visit will help students to obtain more extended form of knowledge as religious personals. The visit also provides students first-hand information through dialogue with the religious personals. It also will increase their knowledge on the influential ideologies, particularly as practiced in Malaysia.

The visit is planned as part of study tour for undergraduate students attending classes of World Religions I and II in every semester (Semester I and Semester II). The purpose of the visit is to give exposure to the students to religions in Malaysia i.e. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Chinese Religions. The activities during the visit include tour of the house of worship and dialogues.

Brief Introduction on World Religions I and II

World Religions I and World Religions II present a general exposition of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religions (Taoism and Confucianism) and Sikhism, as living religions. Topics covered in these courses include background, founders, scriptures, basic theologies and doctrines, rites and rituals, denominations and sects, contemporary issues and developments.

At the end of the courses, students are expected to be able to analyze religious activities of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, and Taoism; follow the scientific methodology in the writings and presentations and data collection during field research; and demonstrate professionalism and scientific attitudes while dealing with followers of other religions.

Procedure before the visit

Prior to the visit, the instructors will contact selected places of worship to get their permissions for a visit. The Department will issue a letter to selected places of worship to request for the visit. This letter will be attached together with the list of lecturers and students who will be participated in this visit. The visit is only possible after granted the permission from the places. Starting from April 2017 to April 2019, students attending class of World Religion I have visited Christian's churches in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, while students of World Religions II have visited temples in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor which are belong to the Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Taoists. This research will focus specifically to EDVIST which involved students of World Religions II classes.

Educational Visit to Selected Places of Worship

The students of World Religions II classes have visited several places of worship which belong to Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, and Taoists including Shah Alam Buddhist Society, Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor, Sri Subramaniar Temple, Buddhist Missionary Kajang, and Kajang Shen Sze She Yar Temple. The activities during the visit are tour and dialogue. There will be representatives from the places of worship who will facilitate the participants during the tour and dialogue.

Figure 1: Dialogue session with the representatives from Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor



Figure 2: Dialogue session with the representatives from Shah Alam Buddhist Society, Selangor



Shah Alam Buddhist Society

Shah Alam Buddhist Society (SABS) is a Malaysian Buddhist organization. It is non-political and non-profit oriented. It is also espousing a non-sectarian and ecumenical approach towards all Buddhists traditions, and strongly believes in inter-religious dialogue and discussions.¹ Its philosophy is to champion mutual respect, harmonious relationships, and co-operation among the various ethnic groups that make up our multi-racial and multi-religious harmony.² SABS was officially registered on 15th December, 1990 in Sri Muda, Shah Alam³ acquired a one-acre land in Bukit Rimau, Shah Alam from the Selangor State Government in April 2003.⁴ The educational visit to Shah Alam Buddhist Society was organized on 9th April 2017. 80 students and 3 lecturers have participated in this visit.

¹ Nur Suriya Mohd Nor, “The Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Community in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor” *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies*, 2018, pp. 57-82, <https://doi.org/10.31436/al-itqan.v2i1.42>, p. 63.

² Benny, L.W.K, *Stepping into Freedom*, Shah Alam: Shah Alam Buddhist Society, 2010, p. 10.

³ Benny..., p. 9.

⁴ Benny..., p. 10.

Figure 3: Educational Visit to Shah Alam Buddhist Society, Selangor



Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor

Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor (TKDS) was established in 1918 and officially registered in 1919.¹ TKDS was formed by Sikhs belonging to Tatt Khalsa denomination. The main aims of this Gurdwara are to propagate Sikhism; to safeguard the right of the Sikhs and to make representations to the Government when necessary; and to eradicate illiteracy and spread Punjabi education. TKDS open membership to every Sikh living in Selangor. Students of World Religions II classes had visited Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor on 6 April 2019.

¹ Guru Nanak Darbar Tatt Khalsa, <https://www.worldgurudwaras.com/world-gurudwaras/gurudwaras-in-far-east/malaysia/kuala-lumpur/gurudwara-nanak-darbar-tatt-khalsa-kuala-lumpur-malaysia>, Retrieved: April 23, 2020.

Figure 4: Educational Visit to Tatt Khalsa Diwan, Selangor



Figure 5: Educational visit to Sri Subramaniam Temple, Selangor



Sri Subramaniam Temple

Sri Subramaniam Temple is located a Jalan PJS 7/13, Sunway, 46150 Petaling Jaya, Selangor.¹ Students of World Religions II classes had visited the temple on 17 November 2018.

¹ Sri Subramaniam Temple, <https://www.selangorhindus.com/sri-subramaniam-temple-bandar-sunway/>, Retrieved: April 7, 2020.

Buddhist Missionary Kajang

Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia (BMSM), Kajang is a Buddhist organization set-up to propagate the message of the Buddha to the masses. This organization is located at Jalan Reco, Kajang, Selangor. In 1961, the late Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda, the abbot of the Buddhist Maha Vihara foresees the need to establish an organization to propagate the message of the Buddha to the masses. Backed by a group of enthusiastic Buddhists, the Buddhist Missionary Society was consequently registered on 3 April 1962 entrusted to spread the *Dhamma* i.e. the teaching of the Buddha.¹ The objectives of BMSM are to propagate and promote the teaching of the Buddha; to print Buddhist literatures and organize religious lectures; to render spiritual assistance and acquire immovable property for the use of the Society for achieving its aims and objectives. In 1996, following an amendment to its Constitution, the Society adopted its new name of “Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia” (BMSM), thus joining the ranks of national Buddhist organizations. As for now, BMSM has more than 10,000 members throughout the country compared to 27 members when it was first started.² The educational visit to Buddhist Missionary Kajang was held on 11 April 2018.

Figure 6: Educational visit to Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia, Kajang, Selangor



¹ Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia

https://www.facebook.com/pg/bmsmkajang.official/about/?ref=page_internal,

Retrieved: April 6, 2020.

² Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia...

Kajang Shen Sze She Yar Temple

Kajang Shen Sze She Yar Temple is located at Lot 22 and 23, Jalan Mendaling, Bandar Kajang, Kajang, Selangor. The main deity of this temple is Shen Sze She Yar, who was Kapitan Seng Meng Lee who sacrificed himself in 1860 in Sg. Ujong. The temple was established in 1898.¹ The educational visit to Kajang Shen Sze She Yar Temple was held on 11 April 2018.

Figure 7: Educational visit to Kajang Shen Sze She Yar Temple, Selangor



Analysis

The researcher had a conversation with six students who participated in the visit. She also analysed five student journals which have been submitted by the students at the end of the semester.

Student Journals

In the journals, all the students mentioned clearly that Educational Visit to places of worship gave them opportunity to understand more about the other religions through dialogue with the devotees during the visit. They also acknowledged that EDVIST is a platform to promote inter-religious harmony in multi-religious society Malaysia.

¹ Kajang Shen Sze She Yar Temple, <https://www.facebook.com/KjShiYeGong/about/>, Retrieved: March 20, 2020.

First Journal:

The students had visited Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor. According to the students, they were able to identify some similarities between Islam and Sikhism from the visit. The visit gave them a lot of benefits as they were able to ask directly the Sikh's representative, Major Harwan Singh who is the devotee of Sikhism. He was able to explain some similarities between Islam and Sikhism. According to them, the visit gave a new experience to the students as well as promoted harmony and peace between followers of different religions in Malaysia.

Second Journal:

Students of World Religions II had visited Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor. As the students of Comparative Religion, they believed that they should engage with the non-Muslims. According to them, EDVIST is a platform for them to engage with people from different religions. For them, all people should have mutual respect regardless of religious and cultural differences in order to avoid the conflicts. With mutual respect, they can ensure peace and harmony as well as live comfortably in multi-religious society.

Third Journal:

The students had visited Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia (BMSM) and Shen Sze She Yar Temple, Kajang. According to them, the educational visit implemented what Islam thought in its basic social relationship which is *Ta'aruf*,¹ *Tafāhum*,² *Ta'āwun*,³ *al-Ukhuwwah*,⁴ and *Mahabbah*⁵ in the real life. The implementation of these values will lead to harmony and peace among the society. The students believed that the visit was a very good opportunity for them to know people from other religions better. According to them, they must practice the concepts of cooperation and toleration among each other. For that, should they as citizens of Malaysia concern and grant the chance to build a better community in order to create better country which later will contribute to the development of their beloved country and also become a role model to another country in promoting peace and harmony.

¹ Getting to know each other.

² Mutual understanding.

³ Cooperation.

⁴ Brotherhood.

⁵ Love or affection.

Fourth Journal:

Students of World Religions II class had visited Sri Subramaniam Temple. The students suggested that the visit should be continued in the future with the aim to reduce tension among people from different religions in Malaysia. According to them, through the visit, people from different religions are able to learn about other religions and have a mutual understanding with each other. They believed that this visit will be greatly contributed to the inter-religious harmony among multi-religious society in Malaysia.

Fifth Journal:

The students had visited Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor. According to the students, the educational visit was able to promote a peaceful co-existence living in multi-religious society Malaysia.

Analysis of the student journals shows that all students confirmed that EDVIST is a platform to promote inter-religious harmony among people from different religions. According to them, they are able to develop a mutual respect and understand other religions better through the educational visit to places of worship.

Conversation with the Students

In order to gather more data on EDVIST, the researcher had a conversation with six students who participated in the visit. The researcher asked them two questions; 1) Does EDVIST promotes inter-religious harmony among multi-religious society in Malaysia? 2) If yes, how does EDVIST promotes inter-religious harmony among multi-religious society in Malaysia?

The first student, Nurul Fatimah binti Malek (matric no.: 1512184) had joined the educational visit to Sri Subramaniam Temple. She agreed that EDVIST promoted inter-religious harmony in multi-religious society in Malaysia. According to her, EDVIST thought people of different religions that with differences in faith and culture, they can instill and promotes the harmony and peaceful wellbeing believers of different faith. The students will get to witness what they seen in textbook by visiting and experiencing the real and fascinating events through this educational visit. This wonderful and eyes-opening experience will be a stepping stone towards promoting inter-religious harmony especially for newcomers and beginners of this course. They will draw the conclusion that all religions promote harmony for example, act of insulting other religion is an immoral act and should be

avoided at any cost. It is law of universal and it applied to all religions. With this mindset and understanding, Malaysians will be able to tolerate and learn to respect each differences in faith as long as it is not against *Sharī'ah* (for Muslims) and within the boundary.

The second student, Subhihanie binti Sanusi (Matric no.:1612640) had joined the educational visit to Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor. According to her, EDVIST did promoted the inter-religious harmony in multi-religious society in Malaysia. She said that through this visit, the students witness on how the Sikh community welcoming them. They welcomed the students to their Gurdwara, they respected them so much and are open to interact with the students in harmony. It shows that they respect the followers of other religion, even though they belong to different religions.

Thirdly, Khairul Syafiq bin Khairul Munir (matric no.: 1717883) had joined a visit to Sri Subramaniam Temple in Subang Jaya. He agreed that EDVIST promoted inter-religious harmony in multi-religious society in Malaysia as it held in harmony, no provocation, and mutual respect happened between people from different religions.

The fourth student is Nur Maliha binti Mustaffa (matric no.: 1517830). She had joined the visit to Sri Subramaniam Temple in Subang Jaya. She agreed that EDVIST promoted inter-religious harmony in multi-religious society in Malaysia because it gave the students a chance to ask any questions related to their religious beliefs and practices without insulting them. According to her, through the visit, it allowed the followers of both religions to learn about each other.

The fifth student is Safiyani binti Shaari (matric no.:1627272). She visited Tatt Khalsa Diwan Selangor. According to her, EDVIST is a good opportunity for the community especially those who come from different religious background to understand other religions as well as to clear all the misunderstandings which occurred among them.

Lastly, Fatin Nadirah binti Nordin (matric no.: 1511314) had visited Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia and Kajang Shen Sze Yar Temple. She believed that EDVIST was really promoting inter-religious harmony because the students were able to meet their new friends from other religions; engage with them as well as to have a better understanding about their religions.

Analysis of students' feedback shows that all students agreed that EDVIST promotes inter-religious harmony among multi-religious society in Malaysia through harmonious dialogue among people from

multi-religious society Malaysia. Both Muslims and non-Muslims were able to sit together and discussed their religions in peace and harmony.

Conclusion and Suggestion

In conclusion, students of World Religions II classes gave their positive feedback on the visit. The inter-religious harmony happened during the visit, both parties managed to respect, tolerate, and understand each other. This University-Community engagement project developed a mutual understanding and a good relationship among the RKUD lecturers, students, and the communities.

In order to enhance togetherness among multi-religious society in Malaysia, the researcher wishes to promote the **Five Cardinal Principles of Co-Existence (Muhibbah)** as proposed by Prof. Dr. Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman in her book, *Religion and Pluralistic Society: The Muhibbah Perspective*¹ as follows;

The Principle of Non-interference and Intrusion; not to interfere in the intra-religious and intra-communal matters of other religion or community.

The Principle of Deference and Decorum; to understand, to acknowledge, to endorse, and to appreciate differences.

The Principle of Sympathy and Empathy; to be nice to others and to treat others as how they want to be treated.

The Principle of Communal Cooperation; to bind and work upon the common and similar items of ethics of religions for the good and benefit of the nation.

The Principle of Unity in Diversity; to establish loyalty and increase patriotism to the nation through the spirit of unity in diversity among the citizens of Malaysia.

¹ Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, *Religion and Pluralistic Society: the Muhibbah Perspective*, Gombak, Selangor: IIUM Press, 2010, p. 250.

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