

PERSPECTIVE

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Training in Interfaith Dialogue Needed among Educated Youths in Brunei

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Bruneian youth at a cafe in Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei Darussalam on 13 January 2024. Photo by Mohd RASFAN/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Focusing on educated Muslim youths in Brunei Darussalam, this article examines their readiness for interfaith dialogue in the higher education setting.
- Based on a survey conducted in 2016 and 2017, Bruneians on campus realised the importance of interfaith dialogue but are not forthcoming in engaging with those who do not share the same faith. Brunei's political culture and demography contribute to this lack of student-led initiatives.
- While interfaith dialogue within an educational setting is limited due to the absence of dedicated platforms and the almost religiously homogeneous student population in Bruneian universities, the young can take a leaf from recent developments made in interfaith initiatives at the grassroots and state levels.
- This article argues that Brunei youth should expand their intercultural learning to include religious issues and to leverage their familiarity with the latest online mediums.

INTRODUCTION

In many campuses around the globe, youths actively spearhead interfaith initiatives. The campus is a fertile ground for cross-cultural and religious engagements, offering intellectual space for educated youths to critically engage with peers within and beyond their classroom environment. The campus also allows for intercultural and interreligious engagements for young people of different backgrounds and localities. Notable examples from overseas institutions across the world include the collaboration between the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and Interfaith America to advance interfaith cooperation as a learning goal and practice on American campuses,¹ and the European Interfaith Youth Network, which serves as a platform to bring together youth organisations and communities from all religions in Europe.²

The same cannot be said about Brunei campuses.³ Past surveys have indicated youth interest in doing more inter-cultural learning but not in religious issues. By virtue of the demographics in Brunei universities which are predominantly Malay/Muslim, opportunities for meaningful interfaith work remain wanting.

This article draws heavily from a survey conducted almost a decade ago, on youths within the university environment. It examines the nation's premier university, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD). Of note, several academics teaching at UBD specialise in interfaith dialogue and comparative religion, and they have been proactively engaging students on interfaith matters. Between 2016 and 2017, several researchers and I conducted a study entitled "Interfaith Dialogue and Diversity in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Brunei Darussalam". While the data may be dated, anecdotally, not much has changed over the years, and one can still draw inferences from the survey. The survey garnered over 300 responses from Muslim and non-Muslim final-year students at the UBD. Of the 346 respondents, 89.9 percent are Muslims, 4.9 percent are Buddhist, 3.2 percent are Christians, and a small percentage identifying as Free Thinkers or Agnostics. The sample is predominantly Bruneian Malays and Muslims, with only a small fraction of Muslim respondents being from other Asian countries, and some non-Muslims. Consequently, the youth interfaith dialogue and engagement analysis will focus primarily on Muslim youth. These respondents were selected due to their four-year stint at the university, which might have provided them with more opportunities to engage in interfaith dialogue.

FINDINGS ON MUSLIM YOUTHS' INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

The questionnaire survey on Interfaith Dialogue and Diversity covered five key areas which are interconnected: personal religious identity, social networks, interfaith dialogue, personal religious education, and university environment. Each key area elicits different but interconnected information about interfaith dialogues and responses to religious diversity. The analysis of the survey demonstrates several key patterns, including how regularly they discuss religion with those within and outside their faith community, and their readiness to discuss sensitive issues such as gender and sexuality.

One significant finding indicates that many respondents are inclined to discuss their religion with students from other faiths. The survey finds that many respondents demonstrated their dispositions and willingness to seek differences when engaging with other religious groups and being open on matters deemed sensitive to the Muslim-majority society. On questions about

personal religious identity, religious education, religious practices, and knowledge-seeking behaviour, 87.2 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that learning more about their religion is essential. Most Muslim respondents often seek to learn about Islam and improve themselves so that they can be confident enough to have a dialogue with anyone. The data further suggest that young people know the importance of hearing about different religious perspectives, with 27.1 percent choosing Strongly Agree and 41.8 percent choosing Agree. Ironically, only 47.8 percent of the respondents want to learn more about other religions.

However, the data can be interpreted as students eagerly wanting to defend their standpoint rather than engaging in meaningful diverse viewpoints. Moreover, the survey also suggests that there is not much interfaith dialogue happening in the university setting. While the university offers faith-based extra-curricular activities (ECAs), most, if not all, are Muslim-based ECAs, such as the Muslim Youth Club. Even then, only a small percentage of respondents joined it. The demography of the students being predominantly Bruneian Muslims means the space for them to mingle with those outside their ethnic and religious community is lacking. This also limits the interaction between students from diverse backgrounds and consequently limits the opportunity for interfaith engagements within the university setting. Furthermore, the majority feel that their own religion is more important than that of others (57.2 percent for Strongly Agree and Agree combined), which could be a stumbling block for meaningful dialogue.

Respondents also felt that the “other party” was disinterested in discussing religious matters. Most felt knowledgeable enough to answer religious-related questions from people of the same faith (Strongly Agree, 34.6 percent and Agree, 33.7 percent) and those of different faiths (Strongly Agree, 30.8 percent and Agree, 37.1 percent), but they contended that their friends were not interested in finding out about their religion. Over 61 percent of the respondents indicate that they “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” that they feel closer to those who share their views on religion, which could be friends from within their religious group and those who respect their religion. Being friends with those from the same faith improves their religious knowledge and practices more than others. Their preference for those within their group is natural (easy to communicate with and not much needs to be explicitly said between them). Yet, most students are comfortable with having lecturers from different religious perspectives, and the majority indicate their willingness to seek out friends from other religious practices.

Consistent with the low levels of interfaith dialogue, students avoid talking about sensitive topics such as LGBT and gender issues in their daily conversations. Bruneians consider these topics taboo. The survey agrees with this: 35 percent agree or strongly agree to the statement “*I tend to avoid topics I know are controversial in religion (e.g LGBT, gender, etc) except with very good friends*”, while 19.9 percent disagree or strongly disagree. This avoidance of contested topics raises the question of how significant the existing low practice of interfaith engagement and interfaith dialogue is among the respondents. Interfaith dialogue, after all, requires different parties to be ready to engage in discussion of uncomfortable topics. It also requires knowledge of one’s religion and other religions. Furthermore, for interfaith dialogue to take place, it is important to have a diverse social network from outside one’s social and religious group and to engage with contested topics and differences. However, 44.9 percent of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed, while 47.21 percent were neutral when asked if they would argue their case when their friends disagreed with them on something essential to their faith.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS BEYOND CAMPUSES

In recent years, Brunei has seen an increase in interfaith engagements at the grassroots and state levels. In 2018, the *As-Syahadah Muallaf Youth*, a local non-profit organisation, organised an iftar (the breaking of fast) for non-Muslims at the *Jame' Asr Hassanil Bolkihah* Mosque. It was the first event of its kind in Brunei to bring together Muslims and non-Muslims aimed at fostering understanding between the two.⁴ On 30 March 2023, the US Embassy in Brunei Darussalam hosted an interfaith iftar for religious leaders of different faiths in the country.⁵ More recently, on 25 June 2024, several Bruneian academics (including the author), the Ministry of Religious Affairs representatives, different faith organisations, several Ambassadors and High Commissioners, attended an event on Muslim Contributions to Peace through Dialogue, organised by the Canadian Embassy.⁶

At the international level, Bruneians have also actively participated in the Doha Interfaith Dialogue Conferences since 2013 and other interfaith meetings run by the UN Alliance of Civilisations, the Asia-Europe Meeting, and the Non-Aligned Movement.⁷ In 2016, Brunei also sent a delegation comprising both Muslim and Christian officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, a religious education institution, the State Mufti's Office, and two churches to the 12th Doha Interfaith Dialogue Conference.⁸ Local academics also participated in several events organised by the KAICIID Dialogue Centre, which promote and employ interreligious dialogue (IRD) to support conflict prevention and resolution, sustainable peace, and social cohesion, as well as promote mutual respect and understanding among different religious and cultural groups; and counteract the use of religion to justify oppression, violence, and conflict.⁹ Additionally, Bruneian academics and youths have joined the Australia-ASEAN Muslim Exchange Program (AAMEP), which provides the opportunity for emerging Muslim leaders from Australia and ASEAN to participate in a community-based dialogue and intellectual and cultural exchange programme.¹⁰

Mobility programmes dedicated to interfaith dialogues such as those listed above, and social events are growing in numbers, which young Bruneians can participate in. The growing number of interfaith-related events indicates the state and local organisations' commitment to initiating, establishing, and sustaining interfaith engagements. Promoting understanding between different religions through interfaith dialogue should help young Bruneians increase their acceptance and tolerance towards others and facilitate further engagements locally and outside of the country. Furthermore, these engagements could contribute to the national and global sustainable development agenda, particularly SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals, where a strong partnership between multiple stakeholders from different religious communities and religious actors is essential.

However, despite the growing number of institutionalised engagements at the international and national level, youth participation, especially the educated ones, in these initiatives needs to be improved. Youth interfaith dialogue at the local level could expand in size and intensify in its focus, but it depends on whether these young people see the importance of engaging in such dialogue.

Without a doubt, the significance of youth involvement in interfaith engagement within and beyond the university extends beyond the local level to regional and global relationships, where interfaith engagement is significant for dealing with emerging global issues such as conflicts of racial and religious nature. This requires specific skills in dialogue and negotiation, which interfaith engagement can help to develop. What is important beyond youth involvement is the

actual practice of interfaith dialogues; how they interact and engage with religious “others” in the everyday setting. We should not only be interested in whether people engage with different faith groups but also in the kind of topics and issues they discuss as well as how they effectively communicate with others. It is critical to look beyond such institutionalised initiatives to other forms of interfaith dialogue such as those through digital engagements.

ADVANCING CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES TO RELIGIOUS ONES

Faced with a near monolithic and homogeneous society, Brunei’s youths must find meaning in interfaith work, cultivate them, and advance them beyond their current campus settings. Interfaith dialogues and other forms of cross-cultural engagements are important.¹¹ Exposure to identity politics in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia, where race and religious issues remain sensitive and politicised, means Bruneians have to realise the role of meaningful engagement in avoiding similar situations from happening in their country. More than that, interfaith dialogues must lead to harmonious co-existence within and outside one’s locality, and foster cross-cultural and inter-religious understanding. This understanding can be achieved by creating dialogue spaces and short mobilities programmes for students to learn communication and mediation skills for interfaith dialogue.

Scholars and policymakers need to continue building on grassroots practices and responses to religious diversity that could help advance interfaith dialogue among youths in Brunei. Brunei has more transcultural engagements that foster cross-cultural understanding and harmonious co-existence between different ethnic communities than it has interfaith engagements. These transcultural engagements have been effectively fostered through various means, including popular cultural production that Bruneian youths consume. Future interfaith or inter-religious engagements could similarly be fostered through non-institutionalised or informal means apart from providing spaces for interfaith dialogues at universities.

As more young people express their religiosity on social media and consume information on various religions through online interactions, interfaith engagements could develop more effectively online.¹² Social engagements, such as via popular culture production, have the potential to reduce misrepresentation, increase social justice, and combat prejudice. Digital practices could spark new conversations about religion and its practices and expand the understanding of others in an entertaining and non-obtrusive way. For instance, TikTok videos (re)produced and consumed by young people are evidence of a fusion of cultures. The diversities in how Islam is practised in different countries or cultures as produced and circulated on various digital platforms could raise curiosity and initiate conversations about religion and its diverse practices.

Allowing young people to engage with cultural and religious others in could open possibilities for other forms of non-religious intended interactions and engagements that stakeholders such as scholars, policymakers, and organisers of interfaith dialogue events could tap into to deepen interfaith dialogue. It is understandable that Brunei having a Malay Muslim majority makes interfaith dialogue within the country less imperative as compared to other countries with a more diverse and heterogeneous society. Nevertheless, we must think beyond our physical spaces to today’s transcultural, transreligious and transboundary digital spaces. These digital spaces are diverse in both socio-cultural and religious aspects.

CONCLUSION

It is thus imperative to continue studying undergraduate interfaith engagements to create relevant pathways and programmes to develop interfaith leadership among Bruneian youths. A follow up survey to the one we conducted in 2016 and 2017 would shed light into the progress, if any, made by youths on campus. As future leaders, these educated Bruneian youths can play a pivotal role in shaping the nation's values and policies. Interfaith engagements at universities will prepare them for domestic leadership and equip them to advocate for global peace and understanding. Moreover, with Brunei's exposure to global developments, they will have the opportunity to serve as voices of conscience on the international stage.

Observing current trends, at least based on anecdotal observations, younger generations in Brunei are more likely to take peace and religious tolerance for granted. This complacency poses a risk to societal cohesion. By prioritising interfaith education and engagements, Brunei can instill a deeper appreciation for these values.

With intense digital communication and vast information shared in digital spaces, how young people respond to differences, hate speeches, and misinformation about their religion becomes all the more important. How they respond to religious diversity may not be through in-person direct interactions and engagements but via different modes of engagement such as digital practices. Youth interfaith dialogue rests on the 'person (and not his or her religion), friendships, and collective participation'.¹³ This would involve their engagements with others beyond their physical localities. What we need to do at this stage is to continue studying youth practices, including religious practices, in both the physical (campuses) and alternative spaces, to provide a real representation of their lived religiosities.

ENDNOTES

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