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# Teacher, will this come out in the exam?

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The Election Commission's proposal to teach about elections in school to encourage the young to vote has received mixed response.

BECOMING a prefect was a big deal when she was in school, Kartini A. recalls.

“After suitable candidates were nominated, we would have a short campaign' period where their details and pictures were put up on the notice board.

“Finally we would have a voting day. It was conducted like a real election, complete with secret ballot papers and ballot boxes,” Kartini, a former teacher, tells of the practice at her old school in Pahang.

“I learnt more about elections and responsibility to vote from that school tradition than from History or Civics Education.”

Hence, Kartini who strongly believes that one is never too young to learn about elections, welcomes the recent proposal by the Election Commission (EC) to introduce Malaysia's election system as a chapter in one of the subjects in our secondary school curriculum.

However, it cannot be treated as a dry topic with facts to remember for students, she stresses.

“No one will pay attention to it in class, what more remember any of it when they leave school. I feel that experiencing school polls like we did was more effective,” she says.

As reported recently, the EC has been mulling various ways to encourage youths to register to vote after records showed that some eligible 3.7 million Malaysians are still not on the election roll.

It was revealed that this is due to lack of interest in politics among the young, compared with study and work.

There were also many who did not know how to register as voters. Then there are many who simply don't care.

The EC found this lackadaisical attitude towards voting the most vexing many of those who have not registered gave the excuse that they were too busy.

The EC hopes that by introducing poll studies at an early age, it would instil awareness as well as a sense of responsibility in voting among young Malaysians.

As some students told Sunday Star in a Facebook interview, they would welcome “Elections” as a topic in school. Their only reservation is how it will be implemented.

Testy subject

The ministry has to think hard on how to introduce the election studies in the syllabus, says 18-year-old Syaza Nazura from Kolej Tuanku Ja'afar, Negri Sembilan.

“They have to come up with a way that would not bore students to death, like what the History lessons are doing now. The syllabus should be interactive and informative so that students can learn more about elections,” she says.

She believes it will be a good idea but only when the students are mature enough to think on their own.

“Without the basic knowledge of the election processes, I feel that students and youths around Malaysia would not be interested to vote. I, for one, am not sure if I'd vote when I turn 21 because at the moment, I have zero knowledge. The curiosity is there, but since there's too much information available on the net, it's hard to know which is the truth, and which is nonsense,” she says.

Learning about elections is something that 18-year old Penangite Chow Qing would also have appreciated when she was younger.

It is a good way to give students “an early view into how the voting system goes before we become voters in the future”, she says.

Chow Qing, who cannot wait to turn 21 to vote, adds, “I'm interested to learn more about elections because there are still some questions in my head that have yet to be answered.”

But like older peers who have yet to register to vote, time and other commitments are also the main concern for most secondary school students.

“With our tight timetable, do we really have time for this? Even now, some students try to skip Moral and PJK (physical education) so that they can catch up with their revision and homework,” says Alia Aziz, 17.

Fourth former CK Lim is worried about how it will fit with the other “new” things the Education Ministry has been talking about introducing.

“Last time, they said they wanted to introduce sex education and patriotism. This year, they said they might teach Jawi. Before that, road safety. We will die if we have to do all! And will we be tested on it?”

Priscilla Lim, 15, from Kuala Lumpur agrees that the effectiveness of the topic would really depend on how it is fitted into the curriculum.

“I'm not that interested in politics now, but I suppose it would be good to learn

more. I love Malaysia and one way to show my love would be carrying out my duty to vote later on,” she says with pride.

Aifa Muhammad Radzi's criterion is that it is introduced in an unbiased way. “Not like our history syllabus! I feel that Malaysian youths need to be exposed more to politics because people tend to be ignorant of the matter.”

For Kaveeta Nair, 17, the worry is whether students would be able to handle differing viewpoints.

“It has to be put forth very carefully because there may be arguments and some passionate' students may come up with negative comments. However, it is good for students to get early exposure.”

Practice makes perfect

Like Kartini, Celine Wu, 17, thinks that elections has to be made a “living” topic.

“There doesn't seem to be much that can be studied on this subject. You can teach us about how our election system works but what use is it when you have no idea who those up for elections are? The curriculum for this subject will have to be changed continuously and a textbook will not easily be written,” she opines, pointing out that the basics of our government system is already taught in Civics Studies.

Celine also feels strongly that students should not have the topic forced on them. As she puts it, she knows that it is her duty to vote and she will when the time comes.

“I will arm myself with the necessary information then but for now, honestly, I don't want to know,” she says.

Former student leader Woon King Chai, 23, who knows too well about getting into trouble for being interested in elections, has the same question.

Infamously known as one of the UKM4, a group of students involved in a legal tussle to declare s.15(5) of AUKU (a provision which restricts students from expressing support of, or opposing, any political party) as unconstitutional, Woon and his friends were hauled up before a disciplinary tribunal for observing the Hulu Selangor parliamentary by-election campaign in 2010 and threatened with expulsion.

They were subsequently cleared by the tribunal and even won their case at the Court of Appeal which declared that Section 15 (5) was indeed unconstitutional. Consequently, the Government has pledged to review the Act and amend the act to give students their constitutional right of participation.

(However, the Federal Court last week gave the Government, along with UKM and the Higher Education Minister leave to challenge the earlier Court of Appeal decision)

Commending the EC's proposal to introduce election studies in school, Woon nevertheless feels that it would be pointless if the AUKU is allowed to restrict students' participation in politics.

“To quote (Constitutional Law expert) Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi on the issue, it is like telling students learn how to swim, but don't get wet’,”

he says.

For long, students have been barred from politics by AUKU on the basis that they are “not mature enough” or should just focus on their studies, Woon points out.

“But students (aged 21 and above) are allowed to vote. They are just not allowed to gain knowledge about the political system (and how it works) in the real world,” he laments, questioning if the young will then be equipped to make the right decision at the polls if they do not have “a holistic view of the world or gain an understanding of society outside”.

Final year psychology student Azmil (not his real name) is another who blames AUKU for young people's apathy to voting.

“My friends who are studying in public universities in Malaysia get really uncomfortable when I talk about politics and the political parties,” says Azmil, who is studying in Britain.

He strongly believes that learning about the election system in school is not enough to instil the responsibility to vote in young people.

“How can you be encouraged to vote if you know nothing about the political parties and their leaders? You also need to understand issues in society as well as things like citizenship rights and human rights. Anyway, how many of us remember what we learnt in school after leaving school?”

A lecturer from a local university who wants to remain unnamed agrees that it may not be effective to teach the young about voting in school and then bar them from



politics when they enter university.

She strongly believes it is crucial to give students the opportunity to get first-hand exposure to “real” politics if we want them to understand the importance of voting.

“The majority of students will not want to get involved in political activities anyway, but it is good for them to at least learn about how the political system works outside. At the very least, they should attend ceramah and other rallies during elections,” she says.

“I honestly don't see how you can just learn about voting without learning about the different political parties and their ideologies.”

All Women's Action Society programme officer Smita Elena Sharma, 26, concurs.

“Some young people do not bother to register to vote because we have not been persuaded that politics is worth our time. I think this reflects the failure of our teachers, parents, and society to instil civic values and consciousness in us. So much focus is on striving for status and material goods instead of on building our society together. Voting is a basic starting point for that.”

More than apathy

Tan Meng Yoe, a graduate student from Monash University Malaysia, finds it unfair to label a person who does not vote as irresponsible or ignorant.

“Taking part in everyday things like helping others, teaching, cleaning up and not bribing, for instance, is more significant in the long run and harder to do than just'

vote and not do anything else,” he argues.

Most are simply too burdened by their day-to-day concerns specifically to cari makan to think about voting, says lawyer Joachim Leong.

“Many find it difficult to see how one vote may matter, even among those in urban areas when they should realise that if you want to see change, you need to be the change you want to see,” he says.

“If they want better housing, better public transportation, a better future which will improve their daily lives, choose the government which will offer them the choice and go a few steps further, participate further in the democratic process by campaigning and even being an election observer for civil society to help the democratic process.”

Final year Law student Karl Rafiq Nadzarin highlights that there are some young people who exercise their right not to vote by choice.

“It would not be fair to generalise that young people do not care about politics or are ignorant about voting. To say that is to ignore the diverse nature of the younger generation,” he says.

“There are of course those who do not want to have anything to do with politics but there is also a significant number who believe in a more participatory democracy (for example the Occupy Movement worldwide).”

Distrust in the system is one main reason young people are not voting, conservationist Sharyn Lisa Shufiyan, 26, points out.

“It is not that they do not care, it is more like they are defeatists. They acknowledge that there are wrongs in the current government yet the opposition is no less the same, so why bother?”

Many are armchair critics, she adds.

“They feel that the same issues keep creeping up without any real reforms taking place and they see no improvement. Yet, when posed with the question on why they don't do anything about it, they often ask back what's the point?”

This is something that Woon has noticed too.

“I think it's untrue to generalise that youths today are not interested in politics, especially judging from their postings on Facebook and Twitter. Many show concern in political issues but are unable to discern the truth and don't know how to contribute to the cause,” he says.

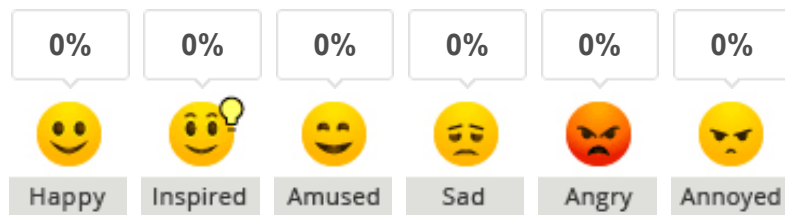
He, nonetheless, is confident that political participation is on the rise among young people.

“Many now recognise how much we stand to lose from poor governance and vice versa, how much we stand to gain from electing officials and a government that we can trust. Many of the youths today also realise that they hold in their hands bargaining chips to demand political parties to be an interest aggregator for their generation,” he says.

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