

National Youth Roundtable 2022

Preliminary Report

Malaysian Youth Diplomacy

10th June 2022



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About Malaysian Youth Diplomacy

Malaysian Youth Diplomacy (MyDiplomacy) is a focal point movement in the Malaysian diplomatic scene that aims to bridge Malaysian youths to diplomatic opportunities within four main focus areas – community, career, conversation and consultation. MyDiplomacy aims to be a platform that empowers youth diplomacy via diplomatic opportunities such as fellowships, scholarships, conferences, and exchange programs with stakeholders encompassing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, Embassies, Chambers of Commerce, United Nations, multinational corporations and government bodies. To know more about us, kindly refer to our website and deck.



About National Youth Roundtable (NYR)

National Youth Roundtable is an annual roundtable session bringing together youth representatives from IR societies in Malaysia in order to facilitate discussion about the international relations and diplomatic scene in Malaysia involving youths. Post-consultation, a report of the National Youth Roundtable will be produced to summarize sharings and recommendations that can contribute to action plans to initiate change in the current situation of IR and diplomacy in Malaysia.

Executive Summary

As of late, global affairs have gained more interest amongst youths in Malaysia. This is mainly due to the fact that youths today are being more exposed to issues beyond their local communities. The accessibility and interconnectedness of the Internet has encouraged youths to not just explore and understand global issues, but to also take action upon them. This has led to an increase in critical discussions within youths' spheres, encouraging them to reflect on the importance of International Relations in solving global issues of interest. An increase in awareness amongst youths have led to an increased interest in the study of International Relations. Youths find that the study of International Relations is growing steadily relevant in accordance with current issues and global trends, which heavily focuses on the relations between countries in a digital economy and during times of crisis.

Despite the fact that the interest to study International Relations has been gaining momentum within the country, many youths are hesitant to pursue this field as a student. This is partially due to the fact that not much information is readily available for students to understand what studying International Relations would entail. The pursuit of this field of study is further inhibited because there is little-to-no research exploring the interests, effectiveness, structure and methods of International Relations studies in relation to youths in Malaysia. Exposure to students at an early age is also sorely lacking, as most students claim to only encounter elements of International Relations-related content during their pre-university and tertiary studies, with minimal exposure during secondary school and almost no exposure during primary school.

In accordance with the growing interest in the studies of International Relations, the domains of discussion during the National Youth Roundtable 2022 heavily centered around International Relations degrees, International Relation students and International Relation schools in Malaysia. There were three domains that were focused upon; the prevalence of an International Relations Bachelor's Degree, gaps in creating discourse among International Relations students, and solutions to increase involvement among students.

The first domain of discussion touched upon the prevalence of an International Relations Bachelor's Degree in Malaysia. Participants exploited the topic by comparing the perception, marketability and exposure of an International Relations Bachelor's Degree to the 'traditionally preferred' courses among Malaysians such as Law, Medicine and Engineering. They expanded on the topic further by sharing their insights as to how students would be less inclined to pursue the study of International Relations because of these differences between the fields of study.

The second domain of discussion required participants to identify the gaps in creating discourse among International Relations students. Among many issues raised, participants focused more on areas within the academic environment that hinders discussion about International Relations in students' circles. Accessibility, exposure, funding and emphasis on related topics are found to be lacking within our current education system, be it at secondary or tertiary level. Participants are of the opinion that these issues prevent students from talking about global affairs as they do not feel inclined to have conversations in fields that are not only less accommodating, but also intimidating to beginners.

After a rigorous discussion about the problems that currently exist in the study of International Relations, participants have suggested certain solutions to increase the involvement of students in this field. Suggestions were primarily directed towards the International Relations schools in Malaysia as well as relevant ministries within the government. Based on previous discussions, participants focused on how these suggestions would be able to make information about global affairs more accessible to students and how interest among youths can be increased to pursue the field of International Relations as not only a study pathway, but as a career choice.

The National Youth Roundtable 2022 Preliminary Report will explain the contents of discussion among the participants. As the event was participated by a small group of participants, this report is not reflective of the opinions of the entire student population of Malaysia as a whole. However, it aims to give a direction and base for conducting more studies and generating more discussions about this topic.

Prevalence of International Relations (IR) Degree

1

Minimal exposure towards IR courses

Even within the realms of liberal arts, less attention is paid towards IR courses as it is **not regarded as a serious field of study** compared to law, sociology and the likes. **Lack of accessibility to IR since secondary school** is one of the factors that cause the public to have minimal knowledge regarding the functions of IR. Students report that they only come into direct contact with IR-related content in the General Studies subject (Pengajian Am) during the third semester of STPM, which is only Form 6 students undertake. To put into context, the number of students who registered for STPM in 2020 was 44 704 people, but the number of SPM candidates that year was 401 105 people. Only about 11.15% of SPM graduates actually go on to receive exposure for IR in the public education system. This lack of exposure results in diminishing interest and courage for students to pursue an IR degree compared to more conventional streams such as STEM fields.



2

Dilemma of IR in the Malaysian context

For prospective or current students of IR, the lived realities of IR in Malaysia are different from the IR studies. Recent political instability and uncertainties in the midst of a pandemic has caused declining confidence in Malaysia's democratic system, creating a **draining situation for IR students** to apply what they learn in the Malaysian context. Without everyday application, IR theories will only remain as surface theoretical knowledge.



Prevalence of International Relations (IR) Degree

3

Need of empowerment within the IR community



Following the previous point on reduced interest and understanding towards IR as a degree, the lack of empowerment of IR students is also noteworthy. **Scholarships for students considering an IR degree are concerningly few.** The scholarships that are available to IR students on the other hand are usually scholarships that do not specify or emphasize on the type of field of studies, causing them to be very competitive. Due to this factor, IR degrees tend to be less accessible to everyone in terms of financial funding. **Rigid curriculums** provided by the university also results in a less than satisfactory experience for students in pursuing IR, hence there is a call to let higher institutions curate courses based on student wants in the IR field and **increase flexibility.**

4

Students opt for "easier" courses compared to IR

When choosing their study pathways at tertiary education level, students usually tend to be concerned about studying STEM related fields as these particular subjects have been taught during secondary schools which then would be easier for them to excel in. Even students who are inclined towards the liberal arts have little-to-no exposure through their electives which usually consist of economics, business studies, accounts, literature, music, visual arts, home economics and languages in public day schools. Thus, it can be said that the IR field is not very common for them to pursue due to its lack of exposure when compared to "traditionally popular" careers such as accounts, law, medicine and engineering. The understanding and public perception of the study of IR is too generalized compared to other fields.

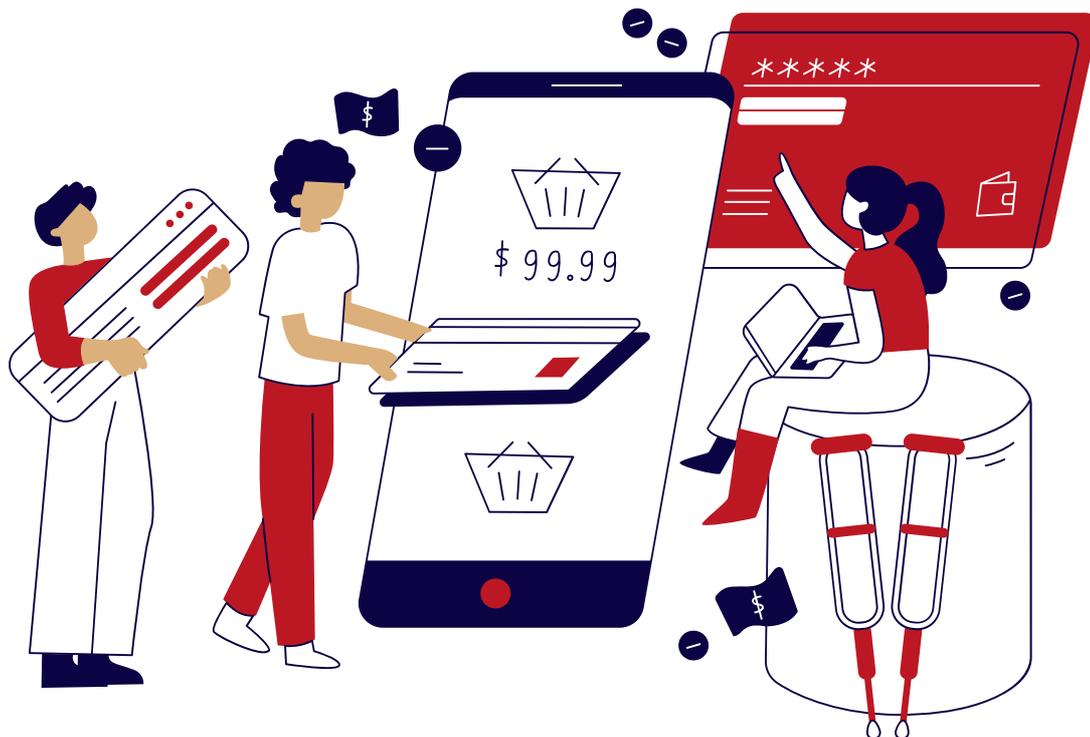


Prevalence of International Relations (IR) Degree

5

Decrement in the marketability of IR

In terms of marketing purposes, it may be deduced that the public is unaware of careers associated with the IR field, which accounts for the degree's lower popularity. With that being said, due to the lack of response from the public, this tends to decrease its popularity which then makes it hard for students to pursue their careers, as they are afraid of the future career's marketability. All in all, we are not only drifting behind compared to other countries, this problem in promoting IR as a marketable degree will tend to reduce its commerciality among students to pursue as their future career. This is a vicious cycle as the decreasing participation hinders progress in this field, which makes it irrelevant to current trends as time passes, even further decreasing its value as a degree.

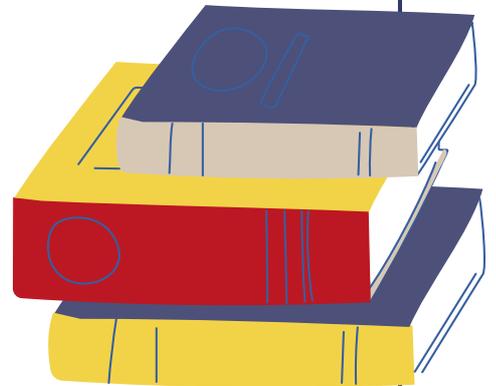


Gaps in Creating Discourse among IR Students

1

Minimal emphasis on IR by the Ministry of Education(MOE)

As the leading government body in laying down education directions and career prospects for the country, MOE's emphasis on careers in popular fields such as law and medicine has trade-offs where IR is stereotyped as just a minor study field. For example, the government planned to churn out at least 60 000 accountants in Malaysia by 2020, and took necessary efforts to ensure that the goal was achieved by revamping the syllabus and promoting the subject to students in secondary schools. Yet similar efforts have not been done for the study of IR. To enhance the understanding of IR among students, it is crucial for IR to be integrated into the national education curriculum so that students are equipped with the knowledge to consider IR as prospective interest fields.



2

Lack of exposure since primary and secondary education level

With this regard, students are required to conduct their own research when studying IR instead of it being provided for them as compared to other areas of studies. Moreover, IR has also not been promoted in schools considering it is stereotyped as a minor field, hence students rarely think to explore the field, and when they do, they need to dig in deep to find out more about this field due to the lack of accessibility. As they are not exposed to IR earlier on, IR jargon can be intimidating and cause them to lose interest or simply not understand their findings. Students are curious about the practical applications of IR and how they can actually access this course, yet there are limited resources available to them, preventing them from pursuing their interests.

Gaps in Creating Discourse among IR Students

3

IR being a second option when applying for tertiary studies

This problem actually evolved through public stereotypes towards this course. Others normally view and think that IR is merely a simple study field but in fact, in reality, it does require the need to study other combinations of study fields such as geography, economics and politics. It is crystal clear that people's ignorance is one of the main reasons stopping IR from growing, hence it should stop being promoted as an undervalued subject. With that being said, students would just opt for further studies in IR when there left no options for them to enter public universities considering their thoughts on IR as a simple study field and its low requirements compared to other courses. In a nutshell, this will then create students with no interest in promoting IR courses in public.

4

Complexity of discussion on IR topics



When entering this realm of discussion, it is vital to note that IR is viewed as a general field to be learned. Bearing this in mind, the complexity of this field requires a higher degree of reading and research. As IR is correlated with other fields too such as economics and law, it requires extraneous sources and readings to be done. On top of that, since IR is more inclined to a general field, there is no fixed answer on certain issues which then leads to many perspectives given. According to a study by Esmé ÖZDAŞLI, the absence of adequate textbooks and lack of quality within some textbooks is another factor making education in the field difficult (Science Direct, 2014). All in all, best believe that IR is a more comprehensive field compared to other social science courses.

Gaps in Creating Discourse among IR Students

5

Lack of accessibility and investment by relevant authorities

When it comes to emphasizing on authorities, policymakers have been focused on policy instead of catalyzing platforms such as MOFA and MOHE that create a very minimal platform in promoting IR to the public compared to NGOs which actively advocate and provide bigger platforms which then shift students to raise issues on this matter. On top of that, discourses have been very theoretical rather than practical. This situation causes the increase of the courses including topics for regional analysis and the reduction of the practical courses. Due to the limitation in freedom of speech, it hinders the voiceless students from pointing out their ideas in combating racial disparity such as a sense of prejudice and biases in IR. Students are also of the opinion that relevant authorities should increase efforts for virtual learning with regards to the IR field rather than spending monetary resources on ineffective materials. The reason being all this time the mindset of discourse has been physically inclined indicating towards a more conservative approach. Thus, this requires a need for an up-to-date program due the lack of mediums and platforms in creating virtual discourses on IR.



Suggestions and Solutions to Increase Involvement

In order to combat the addressed issues, there are several suggested solutions to increase involvement in International Relations (IR) as an academic en route & programme.

1

First off, we suggest an institutional reform by IR schools



This idea can be implemented by **empowering IR students' voices** through more **discourses** among among institutions and students as well as increased efforts in revamping curricula. For instance, there is a need to provide hands-on continuous training rather than just one-off training opportunities for IR students. Thus, institutions should be urged to provide access to IR resources and opportunities by supporting students and enhancing networks among the IR community to **enhance their hard skills and soft skills** alike.

2

We suggest to normalize conversing and creating IR-centric platforms



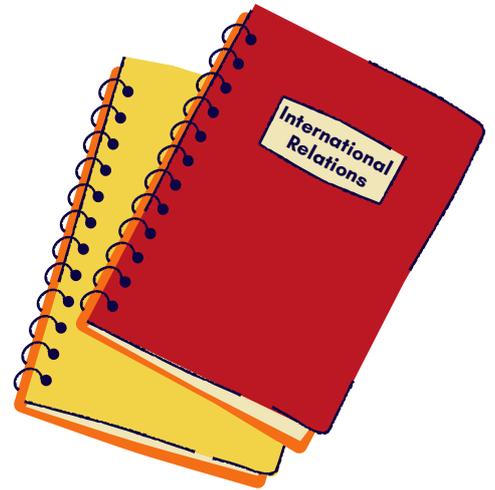
This will definitely **create more exposure and opportunities for the public to learn** and be engaged with IR related activities and programs. Destigmatizing IR through the usage of these platforms is a great effort to make it more familiar in the eye of the public which then will create a greater impact that can transition IR from

being stereotyped as a simple study course to a more complex and valuable one. This would in turn **increase the marketability of an IR degree**, benefitting and **encouraging IR students to further their interests in this field**.

Suggestions and Solutions to Increase Involvement

3

We suggest that MOFA and MOE should collaborate to include IR and politics as a component in existing secondary schools' syllabus



Students will not only be **exposed** to the basic concepts and theories of IR studies, but they are also able to **familiarize themselves** with this field from an earlier age. Familiarity will **decrease intimidation** surrounding the study of IR and help facilitate more discussions centering around the field of IR in local communities. When more conversations are held regarding this field, more students' interests would be piqued and they would see IR as a **more viable option of study and work**.

4

We suggest a shift to a more practical approach when implementing IR studies at tertiary level

As most IR modules and courses are largely theory-based, students call for more effort to include practical and hand-on approaches during their study. While it may not be feasible for students to continuously intern and volunteer in organizations to gain experience and see their lessons in action, IR courses should consider **implementing more mock scenarios** in lessons as part of the curriculum. For example, law students are able to practice in mooting sessions to apply what they have learned in classes. Similarly, IR courses could use mock ministerial meetings (For example at ASEAN level), Model United Nations (MUN) and reenact intergovernmental summits to give IR students a more hands-on approach to learning. This would allow them space to **apply what they have learned in real-life situations** and give them **exposure to the various contexts related to their studies**.

Conclusion

This report was written to give voice to the IR students of Malaysia who are of the opinion that the field of IR in Malaysia's education system can be improved. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Higher Education has already invested resources into the study of IR and have implemented some notable initiatives to complement the existing curriculum. However, gaps remain in the system as a whole which hinder further progress in the field as well as prevent youths from venturing into this field. The field of IR is crucial to the development and progress of the nation, and as the youths are at the forefront of nation-building, it is only right that efforts are revamped to ensure that our youths are sufficiently equipped with knowledge regarding this field.



Credits

This document merely serves as a preliminary report which is to be extended later this year. The contents of this report was a collaborative effort by multiple parties and stakeholders in the Malaysian diplomatic scene. Malaysian Youth Diplomacy (MyDiplomacy) extends our thanks to:

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