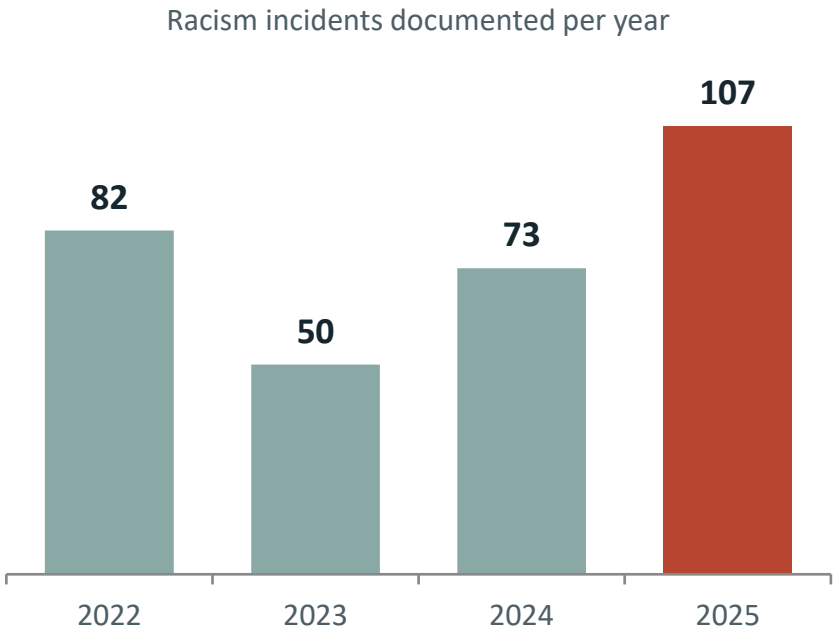
The Science and Practice of Reducing Bias

How Pusat KOMAS uses dialogue and learning workshops to combat racism in Malaysia

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(National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia)

Inclusion That Works · IPS Online Forum · 30 October 2026

Bias is learned, and amplified from the top



107 incidents in 2025, an 11-year high, up from 73 in 2024

82% came from Parliament (43) and public discourse and policy (45)

19 from social settings: everyday racism is the least reported

Source: Pusat KOMAS, Malaysia Racism Report (2023–2025 editions)

Dialogue at the centre

Bangsa Malaysia workshops

Facilitated dialogue and learning; 1,820 students reached in 2026

Public statements

Naming racist remarks by politicians and conservative groups, with evidence

Social media

Call-outs, explainers and positive Malaysian stories that reach beyond the room

National Harmony Commission

Pushing for an independent body that gives victims redress

Learn in the room → **Speak out** in public → **Reform** the institutions

Why dialogue, and why it fits Malaysia

Our context

Separate lives
Many young Malaysians grow up in largely separate schools, neighbourhoods and online bubbles

Race is “sensitive”
Talking openly is treated as taboo, so prejudice is never examined

Rhetoric from the top
82% of documented incidents come from politicians and public discourse, absorbed through social media

Why dialogue works

Contact reduces prejudice when people meet as equals, with a shared goal and support from institutions (the contact hypothesis)

People change through their own discovery, not lectures (popular education)

A real story builds empathy that statistics alone cannot

If you **feel the pain** of one minority community suffering, it should be for all

Six principles behind every KOMAS dialogue

1

Start from lived experience

Participants' own words and stories, not our slides

2

A safe space, not a debate

No winners, no shaming personally; every view can be voiced and questioned

3

Facilitate, don't preach

Trained facilitators ask, listen and reflect back

4

Common ground first

The Rukun Negara and the Constitution as shared reference points

5

Name the system, name the act

Link personal prejudice to policy, media and politics

6

End with action

Each person picks one easy and one hard step to take

Workshop: Awareness on The One Malaysian Nation

NAME IT

Malaysia Kita

Students post what they are proud and not proud of on a ‘Malaysia Tree’; racism surfaces in their own words

SHARE IT

Discrimination: impact

Racist comments they have seen online, then patterns worldwide, from the Rohingya to caste

UNPACK IT

Rukun Negara and the law

What the national principles really mean; equality under Article 8 and ICERD

ACT ON IT

Tokoh demi Malaysia

Fact, fake or propaganda; a mock election; each student picks an easy and a hard anti-racism action

2026 with ADTEC-JTM: **35** workshops, 2,300 technical students, 4 regions, with JTM, Ministry of Human Resources

Making bias visible, and empathy across causes

What makes bias visible



Mirror: The Malaysia Tree puts our own assumptions on the wall



Decode: Unpack the coded words students scroll past every day



Fact-check: Trace fake news and propaganda to its source and motive

Test choices: A mock election shows how one-race appeals work

Empathy, not competition

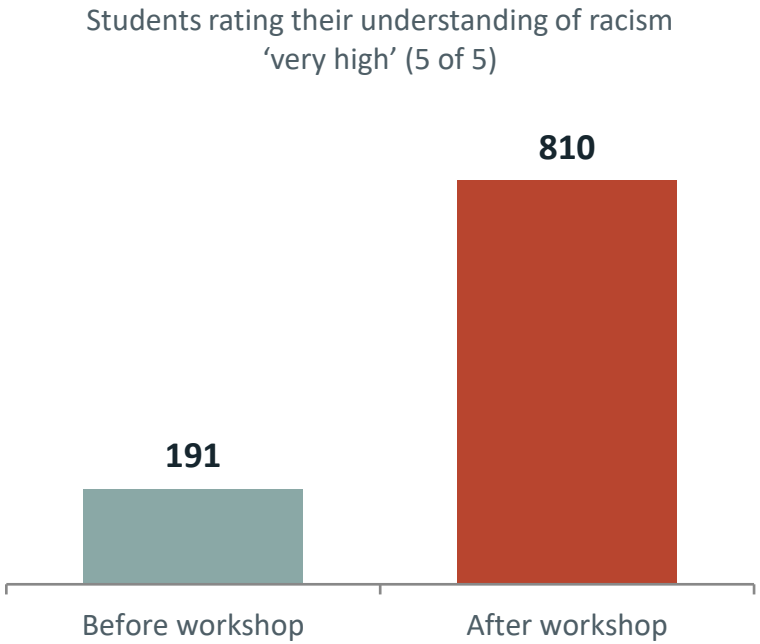
Switch the lens: a majority in the Peninsula can be a minority in Sabah or Sarawak

Global, then local: Rohingya, Uyghurs, Palestinians, African-Americans, then “who is the other here?”

Shared needs: poverty and exclusion cut across races, so we argue for needs-based policy

No hierarchy of suffering: one community's pain does not cancel another's.

Outcomes from 1,605 student evaluations



4× more students rated their understanding of racism and discrimination ‘very high’

72.8% now more comfortable discussing race to build unity (score 4 or 5)

75.1% will actively join discussions on racism in future (score 4 or 5)

~95% feel confident to start with family and friends, and keep their online spaces free of discrimination

Source: Pusat KOMAS, Bengkel Bangsa Malaysia with ADTEC-JTM report, 2026. Self-reported; 1,605 of 1,820 students responded.

What the workshops revealed about bias



Racism goes into code online

New words slip past moderation: “roro” and “puak hanyut” for Rohingya, “Type M/C/I”, “India mabuk”, “Melayu malas”



Xenophobia has no name yet

Most had never heard the word; many could not tell migrants, refugees and undocumented workers apart



Rights literacy is low

Most knew little of the Constitution like Article 8 or Article 153 but can understand how it can be used to win votes. International Law standards like ICERD are unknown.



Propaganda shapes meaning

“Liberal” and “progressive” in the Rukunegara were understood better as positive words (while in present media these words are negative”

In their own words: from insight to action

> *We all have preconceptions about a race or group. This workshop helped us identify those biases so they don't influence our actions.*

> *Learn to listen carefully without judging. When we understand other people's perspectives, it is easier to be tolerant.*

ADTEC-JTM students, post-workshop evaluation (translated from Malay)

Actions students committed to

Family	Gently correct relatives who use slurs like ‘keling’ or ‘sakai’
Family	Tell parents not to trust racist forwarded messages
Online	Report and block posts like “push the Rohingya into the sea”
Campus	As student council president, never decide promotions by race

The long push for a National Harmony Commission



What the commission must be

- ✓ Independent, with real powers
- ✓ Redress for victims, not just the police
- ✓ Mediation and early intervention
- ✓ Backed by dialogue in every community

Sources: Pusat KOMAS; New Straits Times, 7 April 2026

Let us be brave enough to rewrite a new chapter for Malaysia,
one that moves beyond racial anxieties and political calculations.



Thank you

Jerald Joseph · Pusat KOMAS · komas.org