SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE COUNTRY: ASSESSING PATRIOTISM, LOYALTY AND NATIONAL ALLEGIANCE OF MALAYSIAN STUDENTS ABROAD

Rashidah Mamat
Centre of General Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia
shidah@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Malaysia is trying to move from a developing state to a fully developed country by the year 2020 as outlined in Vision 2020. In order to realise the goals of Vision 2020, it requires Malaysians to have a higher level of unity, loyalty and sense of belonging to their own country as well as having more skilled and talented human capital. However, a recent report from the World Bank which was published in April 2011 offered a very disturbing picture of the brain drain in Malaysia. For instance, the number of skilled Malaysians living abroad has tripled in the past two decades. Accordingly, the Malaysian government strives to invoke Malaysian students studying abroad to have a strong sense of patriotism and nationalism to return home and serve the people after completing their studies. This paper aims to explore the impact of studying abroad on Malaysian student attitudes with regard to their sense of belonging to their home country. Qualitative approach was undertaken in order to explore, interpret, and compare perceptions and attitudes of Malaysian students abroad on how they position themselves in terms of attachment, patriotism, and national allegiance to Malaysia. The study revealed that the degree of attachment, patriotism and sense of belonging amongst Malaysian students abroad towards their home country are distinctive between one individual to another and this is particularly obvious between the Malays and non-Malays ethnic groups of students.

Field of Research: Sense of belonging, Patriotism, national allegiance, brain drain, study abroad

I.0 Introduction

Vision 2020, which was outlined by the former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad in 1991 to turn Malaysia into an industrialised country by 2020 identified that the most fundamental challenge for the country was creating a ‘united Malaysian nation’, or a Bangsa Malaysia with political loyalty and dedication to the nation. However, a recent report from the World Bank which was published in April 2011 offered a very disturbing picture of the brain drain in Malaysia. The report titled “Malaysia Economic Monitor: Brain Drain” stated that the Malaysia brain drain is not only growing rapidly but is likely to intensify (World Bank, 2011). The ‘brain drain’ refers to the outflow of entrepreneurial skills and talent, which hinders productivity and prospects for economic growth (Tyson, 2011:85). For instance, the number of skilled Malaysians living abroad has tripled in the past two decades. The migration of highly skilled individuals to other countries is seen as something that incurs severe loss to the country, and has implications for the success of Vision 2020. In examining this phenomenon, many have argued that Malaysia’s brain drain would be much lower if skilled and educated Malaysians were more patriotic and had a higher degree of allegiance and sense of belonging to the country. Accordingly, the Malaysian government strives to invoke Malaysian students studying abroad to have a strong sense of patriotism and nationalism to return home and serve the people after completing their studies.
This paper aims to explore the impact of studying abroad on Malaysian student attitudes with regard to their sense of belonging to their home country. Specifically, this paper can be described as an account of how these young people position themselves in relation to aspects of attachment, loyalty, allegiance and belonging to their country of origin during their overseas study. To what extent does being in another country influence feelings of attachment and a sense of belonging to Malaysia? Does patriotism and nationalism really matter to Malaysians studying abroad?

2.0 Method

A study has been conducted by using qualitative interviews and observation to explore the perceptions and experiences of two different categories of students; Malays and non-Malays, at two universities in the UK. The sample of respondents in this study consists of thirty-two Malaysian undergraduate students (sixteen respondents from each university and ethnicity respectively). These samples represented four main student groups with equal numbers of each category which is comprised of Malay first year undergraduate students, Malay final year undergraduate students, non-Malay first year undergraduate students and non-Malay final year undergraduate students. The length of time or period of study in the UK is the main reason why the first and final year undergraduate students have been chosen to participate in this study. While maintaining a gender balance was a primary concern in this sampling method. Research was undertaken on Malaysian undergraduate students since statistically these groups are the largest Malaysian student category in the UK. These students basically represent an elite student group who excelled academically and who can be considered to be ‘future leaders’ in the country.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Students Attitudes towards a Sense of Belonging

The nature of belonging involves a concept of ‘human relatedness’ (Hagerty and Patusky, 2003) in which all people in a particular country or community have a sense of attachment and share particular characteristics. Sense of belonging also has a strong relationship with the concept of patriotism. Patriotism as based on Lee and Hebert’s (2006:500) definition refers to “emotional and symbolic attachment to the national symbols, to the government and its structures, to a sense of civic responsibility, and to the traditions and customs of a political community”. While Merry (2009:380) defines ‘patriotism’ as a special affinity one has toward the homeland (or adopted homeland) which fosters a deep psychological attachment and pride. Therefore, the degree to which individual participants feel a sense of belonging may reflects their loyalty and attachment to home country.

The study revealed that the degree of attachment, patriotism and sense of belonging amongst Malaysian students abroad towards their home country are distinctive between one individual to another and this is particularly obvious between the two different ethnics groups of students (Malays and non-Malays). The research found that there were mixed feelings between having Malaysian citizenship and proud to be Malaysian. On one hand, they felt happy, lucky and grateful to be born in this country have Malaysian citizenship; on the other hand a feeling of ambivalence and indifference towards national pride was noticeable. These dilemmas were termed by the students as ‘love but not proud’. On being asked whether she feels stronger or weaker towards her homeland after 3 years in the UK, Fatin (Malay female final year student) gave this answer.

I’m…not…maybe it is just my homeland. Being here I feel stronger but at the same time I feel less proud of it. Personally I love it because it’s my homeland. It means a lot to me but I don’t feel proud of it. Love but not proud.
She justified her views by emphasising her increasing age and length of being in the UK, as she claimed that she has become more mature and able to engage with social issues in Malaysia. From this perspective, both age and the period of study serve as underlying elements that create new patterns of emotional attachment. On the other hand, the interviews also revealed that the age, gender or period of study of some respondents, particularly non-Malays did not significantly alter their feelings towards their home country. Accordingly, they just gave short answers and generally cited “it’s about the same”, “hasn’t really changed” or “not much feeling” but added some phrases like “miss home more”. These phrases suggest that there is less emotional relatedness to Malaysia as a country amongst these students. However, strong attachment with ‘home’ may signify that ‘family and relatives’ in Malaysia are more valued.

Sense of pride in being Malaysian sometimes grounded in aspects of Malaysia such as a multicultural society, peacefulness and the variety of food. Above all, the variety of food was seen as a primary criterion that the majority of the respondents in this study identified about Malaysia. - none said that they disliked it. Eleven respondents (mainly non-Malay students) strongly regarded food as the first thing that came to mind when depicting Malaysia. The key point here is that Malaysians abroad identified ‘Malaysian food’ as something that makes them feel attached to their home country.

3.2 Attachment to the National symbols

National pride was generally measured by the level of attachment to the country, knowledge of history and love for its national symbols (Keillor et al. 1996; Eriksen, 2002, Smith, 1991). The findings revealed that twenty five of the participants perceived of a deep and reverent sense of loyalty to and identification with Malaysian national symbols, particularly the Malaysia flag and the national anthem. A number of students linked these national symbols to national unity and identity. For instance, Ellen (non-Malay female first year student) stressed that “national symbols are also one of the elements that tie us together. Things that people feel in common will bring them together”. Azie (Malay female first year student) reflected:

Malaysia’s flag and Negaraku (national anthem) are our national identity as well. It symbolises us. I feel proud when we are singing the national anthems in the sports ceremony. You can feel the sense of unity.

These basic values that most of the research participants maintain towards national symbols are broadly similar. As a sign of identity and forging unity, they talked about the fact that these symbols are important, whether as ‘symbols that represent Malaysia’, ‘to be recognised’, and ‘historical reminders’ that could ‘develop a sense of patriotism and belonging for the country’. The ways in which they expressed these kinds of views towards national symbols indicates an awareness of the possibility that they might have connections to the home country based on shared meanings, familiarity and consequently, identity.

From the other angle, two respondents seemed to suggest that national symbols are less significant than individual attributes in forging a sense of belonging and building a strong nation. But the most dramatic evidence could be traced from Erma’s (Malay female final year student) quotation who admitted that pride in the Malaysia flag was slowly dissipating as she spent more time in the UK.

In my first year of study, I hung the flag on my window and I was so proud of it. But after my second and third year, that flag was no longer there, I just put it under my bed. I guess the feeling of pride towards
my home country became less and less. Maybe in the first year I felt really attached and missed Malaysia so much. After been here quite long, when we mixed around with others we felt comfortable with them, it made me feel.. I don’t feel any security with Malaysia flag anymore. There’s no feeling when I see that flag.

Erma openly expressed her uneasy feelings about her sense of belonging and confessed that her initial feelings of pride about being Malaysian had changed since she has been in the UK. What made her ‘proud’ of Malaysia was her family living there as she said “I don’t think that I will have sense of belonging to Malaysia if my family is living here”. Clearly, the experience of living abroad, observing other cultures and mixing with different people gave her a greater opportunity to evaluate and make comparisons with her home country. Unfortunately, in this case, spending time abroad and collecting new experiences decreased her sense of belonging and attachment to national symbols. This reflects how feelings towards one’s own country or nation depend on the amount of time spent outside of it (Koening, 2006:22).

3.3 Engaging as Ambassadors

In terms of the research participants’ perceptions of obligation, patriotism, and national allegiance, it appears that the experiences of living abroad and observing different cultures has encouraged the majority of the Malay and non-Malay respondents to remain aware of their own values and identity. Some of them seemed quite conscious that the people they were meeting knew little about their home country and this led them to see themselves as ‘representatives’ of their country (Osler, 1998). Accordingly, this motivated them to act sensibly while presenting what is deemed appropriate Malaysian behaviour. The significance of Malaysians abroad operating as an ambassador was emphasised by Ellen (non-Malay female first year student) who said; “I think we make a very important part of how people think about Malaysia. So how you behave and how you perform in class is the first impression people will have about Malaysians”. Haziq (Malay male first year student), a somewhat patriotic student, provides further evidence of how he acts as an ambassador of his home country as illustrated below;

We are all ambassadors. I always intend to promote Malaysia to other people here, you know (smiling). When they get to know me they will learn more about Malaysia. I guess I have a responsibility to keep a good image of Malaysia while I’m here. I will try to portray myself as a good student.

Even though most of Hong’s (non-Malay male final year student) views seemed to resist the national identification and patriotism of his home country, in this case he spoke fervently about the importance of being a Malaysian abroad. He asked:

If you don’t present yourself as a Malaysian, who will? The more you being minority, the more you feel a sense of belonging to the country. We should take responsibility to present our own roots in the foreign country. Otherwise, nobody else will.

Another feature that suggested stronger feelings towards Malaysia was that respondents felt more appreciative of their home country. The most typical phrases that supported this were ‘used to take for granted’ and ‘now realised’. Among the respondents who spoke about this was Ismawati (Malay female first year student), who told me that living in a comfort zone in Malaysia made her take
everything she had for granted. However, being abroad and having undergone new experiences made her realise how good her own country was and how proud she was to be Malaysian.

Representing non-Malays who manifested stronger feeling towards Malaysia, Daawei (non-Malay male final year student) responded:

I feel obliged to go back to Malaysia. Back home we are in the problem itself, so it is harder to gauge the extent of the problem; how severe it is. I guess seeing things from an outsider’s point of view you can see everything in the bigger picture. You actually have more ideas to help this problem because you are exposed to other cultures so you can learn about how they deal their problems. Being here, it has helped me see how we are lacking in something and it makes you feel like you should go home and do something.

What is noteworthy in the responses of those who articulated strong feelings towards Malaysia was that they saw opportunities to put Malaysia in a better position. They could make comparisons about how the host and home countries manage their systems. From these perspectives, it seemed clear that the respondents were enthusiastic about their responsibility towards their home country and patriotism manifested strongly after being abroad. In parallel, Osler (1998) observed that studying abroad provides significant opportunities for students to reflect upon their home culture and look critically at their own values and ways of thought.

Others shared this view yet several students were indifferent towards the idea of being an ‘ambassador’ as a Malaysian abroad. On this point, it appeared that non-Malay respondents were less positive and passionate than their Malay counterparts. For instance, James (non-Malay male first year student) gave this answer:

Yes... more or less. I think every international student represents their own country. For me, most of the time I don’t really think about it but there are times when I realise that I should be careful what I do because I’m Malaysian.

For Malay group, apparently there were many Malay students who interested in understanding how to portray a good image as an ‘ambassador of Islam’, reflecting that Islamic identity is a priority. A rather overt statement towards an ‘ambassador of Islam’ preference was made by Zaiton (Malay female final year student) who said: “I think I prefer to be an ambassador for Islam because the best Muslim image that we promote could indirectly give a strong impact on the Malaysian image as well”. Looking at Malay students as a whole, most felt that religion i.e. Islam and its image was the most important aspect as opposed to other identities. Yet protecting and promoting a good image of Islam serve as manifestations of strong attachment to their home country as they believe a good Muslim reflects a good Malaysian. This view could be linked with al-Attas (1979 cited in Halstead, 1995:29) who argues that “it is more fundamental in Islam to produce a good man than a good citizen, for the good man will also no doubt be a good citizen, but the good citizen will not necessarily be a good man”.

3.4 Engagement in Malaysia: Recent News and Political Consciousness

It is also clear that politics and current issues in Malaysia continue to influence a large part of Malay respondents’ attitudes. Having been abroad, several students mentioned that they had a clearer picture about the situation in Malaysia than when they were at home. For example, Zaiton (Malay
female final year student) indicated that after coming to the UK she could make comparisons between Malaysia and the host country from a wider perspective.

It was when I came here then I could see Malaysia from the outside. I think the economy is quite poor, there some kind of corruption which is not really free from been control by certain political parties. Compared to here, there is more freedom to raise their voice and dissatisfaction.

While Asrul (Malay male first year student) appeared well-informed about political issues in the UK when he kept comparing the political system in Malaysia and this country. He admitted that he was really interested in politics after observing the British political system. He noted:

Of course [I am interested in politics]. Before I came here, I thought politics is very dirty but now I have realised that it’s not the politics that is dirty, but the people involved in it that makes it dirty.

In contrast to Asmida (Malay female final year student), she stressed that politics were not of interest, but she recognised the importance of engaging in the current political situation since it could contribute to the improvement of the country. All of the above participants linked politics with significant roles in the country’s development, thereby promoting feelings of allegiance to the home country. The narratives also illustrate how studying abroad appears to be significant in influencing perceptions towards the country of origin. As Learman (2008) observes, students who study abroad were able to analyse their native country more critically. Apparently, these students assign real value to their host country. In examining these quotations, this research highlights a sense of belonging and patriotism amongst Malay respondents and this is negotiated within values, responsibility and hostile feelings towards the home country and its politics. Rather than overlooking Malaysian politics, they were instead concerned about the future of the country since they deemed the Malaysian political system to be inherently ‘meaningful’ as they took the ‘transparent’ British political system as a point of reference.

In analyzing the non-Malay students perceptions towards their engagement in Malaysia recent news and political consciousness, Janet (non-Malay female final year student) gave her opinion by trying to balance her subjective attachment and her belonging to her homeland. She noted in these two quotations:

I feel I have drifted away from my country, especially because of the political issues rising...when people talk about Malaysia is it always about the corruption. I feel it’s very dark, I don’t want to be exposed to it. I sometimes even wonder whether I still want to go back to Malaysia because of the current situation, not because of culture or heritage...it’s the political side.

I sometime have a feeling that I would like to stay here longer if I can. But, back home, Malaysia is my home, so I know one day I need to go back but because of the issues, I’m feeling that I’m escaping. I will see how things go.

From a similar perspective, James (non-Malay male first year student) even though he recognised and appreciated his home country a lot more when in the UK, seemed slightly dissatisfied. He said:

I’m proud to be Malaysian but....(pause). I mean, I still feel Malaysian, but deep inside I feel quite disappointed. It is not because Malaysia is a bad place to live, but it is because of the people themselves who still have a negative mentality towards each other. But I feel more sense of being Malaysian when I’m in the UK.
Both Janet and James seemed to ‘expose’ their discontentment at being a minority in Malaysia and felt ‘threatened’ by Malaysian politics. Each felt that they were not being accepted as truly Malaysian citizens. Parekh (2000:342) argues that feelings of alienation can seriously damage the quality of citizenship and commitment to their country.

The findings also reveal that the degree of exposure to information and news has a strong relationship with political orientation and attitudes towards home country issues amongst the respondents. In this respect, a key factor that emerges from the analysis of results in this section is that the level of attachment to the home country amongst research participants is grounded in knowledge and information that the participants obtained during their study in the UK. Apparently, the UK’s fast internet access plays a crucial role in helping students gather the latest news and information about Malaysia.

Fahmi (Malay male first year student) reflected over how studying in the UK allows more access to choice in terms of news from Malaysia. He stressed that:

Being in the UK, I think I have a clearer picture about Malaysia based on the variety of mediums that we can get here. I prefer to go for websites and blogs or other social networks rather than NST online or Beritaharian online. We can compare and evaluate by ourselves. At least we can see balanced information rather than bias to only one side.

Like their Malay respondent counterparts, non-Malay respondents prefer to search for information and news about Malaysia from the most of these alternative media, however they were more inclined to read blogs. Charlie (non-Malay male final year student) reflected this by saying; “I am really curious to know what happened in Malaysia. I normally read blogs. One thing that I learned is sometimes the news doesn’t tell everything so those blogs are deeper”.

From both Malay and non-Malay students’ perspectives as presented above, the use of information and communication technology with a global reach is seen to construct the students’ views that could serve to challenge the authority and understanding of patriotism and sense of belonging. The Malaysian government usually promotes patriotism and a sense of belonging for Malaysians that involve “political loyalty and dedication to the nation” (Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia official portal), as well as “respect, loyalty and obedience to the present authority” (Brown, 2005:15). The participants however, define the notions differently as presented in Hakim’s (Malay male final year student) quotation:

I’m really interested in Malaysian news but I prefer to review alternative media like website and blogs but not pro-government media, I’m sick of it! These kinds of media are more towards the government agenda that is trying to fool people. This situation is unhealthy and could limit the space for the grassroots to reach the broaden issues.

This type of response tends to suggest that it is not easy to ignore dissatisfaction just to fulfil the country’s allegiance and patriotism demands. The participants who demonstrated this kind of views have a sense of belonging to their country but not simply on the grounds of ‘blind patriotism’, rather because of ‘constructive patriotism’. Blind patriotism is defined as an attachment to a country characterised by unquestioning positive evaluation, firm allegiance and intolerance of criticism. Constructive patriotism is defined as an attachment to a country characterised by support for questioning and criticism of current group practices that are intended to result in positive change (Schatz, Staub, and Lavine, 1999:151). Indeed, Morse and Nel (1977) found, in their study of Brazilian
students, that they tend to be critical of the government as they strongly identify with the nation’s state. This attitude has led to a positive relationship of political involvement and attachment to their homeland.

In this respect, it seems that the UK education setting which encourages critical thinking and openness has influenced these Malaysian students to become more outspoken and critical towards issues and more ready to criticise authority back home. To compare this system with the Malaysian education system, Brown (2005: 15) observes that students in the Malaysian education system are not taught to have a critical view of authority but learn about the importance of respect, loyalty and obedience to protect a “national unity that is constantly under threat”. It could be argued that any attempt to restrict students’ freedom of expression is in fact a ‘threat’ to the nation as this superficial national unity is only achieved negatively through fear of the consequences.

3.5 Plans after Graduation

It has been noted in earlier discussion that this paper was derived from a disturbing problem of brain drain in Malaysia that could severely impact economic development over the long term. Many talented Malaysian, in particular those who have graduated overseas, chose to stay in their host countries after graduating due to the advantages that these countries could offer. The Malaysian government, however, is on high alert about this issue and ‘the Talent Corporation’ was set up in 2010 to prevent the loss of capable individuals and to attract foreign talent to fill professional gaps in critical economic sectors. Nevertheless, this attempt has produced unsatisfactory results (Ho and Tyson, 2011). This section seeks to investigate the extent to which these respondents are preparing to return to Malaysia and serve their nation. Alternatively, do they plan to stay or work in the UK after graduation?

Based on the interviews carried out, only twelve out of thirty-two respondents reported that they would be prepared to go back to Malaysia and contribute to the country after graduation. Unfortunately, not many of the respondents intended to return on account of the responsibility and duties as Malaysian citizens. Most of them argued that they leaned more towards missing the culture, food and general social environment in Malaysia. Above all, they wanted to be close to their family, friends and relatives as well as feeling somewhat alienated in the UK. Nazri (Malay male final year student) stated that the different culture and environment of the UK had pushed him to return and be with his family. Another student, Fatin (Malay female final year student), apart from the fact that she was bonded with the government scholarship, seemed to place a much greater emphasis on language ability and weather and decided to leave the UK for her home country.

Although some respondents who chose to return had given little attention towards contributing to their country as compared to their own family, several other respondents appeared to showed willingness to serve the nation. Without doubt, these respondents have to negotiate between some ‘opportunities and benefits’ that they might gain in the UK if they wish to stay, with the duty and responsibility to their home country. In response to this issue, Ismawati (Malay female first year student) gave her justification: “Maybe I will stay here to gain more experiences or to earn pounds but I think to go back home is much better because there where I belong and it’s my responsibility to serve the country”. While Ellen and Shalini were both government sponsorship holders and non-Malay first year students, they also articulated their intention to serve their country.
Clearly, from the above observations the locational advantage or disadvantage influences the student’s motivation to return home. However, the study also found that thirteen out of sixteen non-Malay respondents have considered working or migrating to the UK. This situation is due to the majority of these students were self-funded; hence they have more freedom and autonomy. For many, although they have inclination to migrate, Malaysia remains a ‘home’ that they deeply wish to return to. Most of them talked about their plan to go back to live in Malaysia for good and making a contribution after obtaining useful experience or achieving financial stability in the UK. Alice (non-Malay female first year student) for instance, gave her views:

If I do have a chance I really want to stay here first. So I think that by working here to a certain extent you have more experience, superior as compared to Malaysians in Malaysia. We can learn how they operate and I think it’s good enough that we can actually bring the way of operating back to Malaysia to improve ourselves in Malaysia.

Nevertheless, a substantial number of non-Malay respondents (seven out of sixteen) were prepared to migrate to another country if their standard of living would be significantly improved by moving abroad (Sin, 2009, Tyson, 2011). As noted earlier, the opportunities and benefits that one country could offer can impact on whether the person wishes to return or remain in the host country for some time, or even choose to migrate. Interestingly, even though none of the Malay respondents in this research were self-funded: six of them expressed strongly that they wanted to work and stay in the UK for the same extent of time as their non-Malay counterparts; to gain experience and go back home to contribute to their home country. An example of this was voiced by Ruzman (Malay male final year student), who said:

I used to consider it seriously once but not to work and live here permanently. I just want to stay for a while merely for career development. Whatever it is, I will go back home to serve the country.

Overall, Malay and non-Malays who gave their views in the above discussion were confronted with the reality that for many, the UK is not a place to live in or to become a citizen, but it is instead a place to obtain useful experience and strengthen their position, particularly in the economic sphere. This value was not just in the UK but other places where they could earn more money, gain considerable skills and experiences and bring them back to their home country.

4.0 Conclusion

Opportunities to study abroad are multifaceted, multidimensional and provide students with perspectives and world views that cannot be replicated at home. At the same time, attachment and identification with the homeland are also considerably important to enrich the call for undivided loyalty and a sense of belonging towards the home country. The study has confirmed that the degrees of attachment, sense of belonging and patriotism are distinctive between one individual to another. The findings of this study indicates that there were mixed feelings between having Malaysian citizenship and being proud to be Malaysian. The majority of both Malay and non-Malay students were variously happy, lucky and grateful as Malaysians despite frequently being ambivalent about the notion of ‘love’ and ‘pride’ of their own country. In this respect, it is clear that the respondents maintain a strong interest in the physical qualities of Malaysia, yet demonstrate a kind of indifference towards national pride. They implicitly indicated that having Malaysian citizenship does not automatically bring about a sense of real belonging to their home country.
Given this situation, the research finds that an individual's judgments about social issues, the education system or the politics of the government itself are related to the students' sense of belonging towards Malaysia. However, perhaps surprisingly, many of the respondents demonstrated similar attitudes as largely inactive allegiance to the home country; indeed they still regarded 'national consciousness' (Hroch, 2000; Fenton, 2007) as of considerable importance in improving their country. The study found that a significant number of respondents are keen to discuss key issues, such as national unity and national development. Thus, it is argued that the research participants do not simply abandon or detach themselves from Malaysian affairs or political issues rather they do have a sense of attachment as Malaysians who are well informed with public knowledge and political consciousness.

In this context, the majority of the participants, in particular final year students, appeared to demonstrate an inclination towards 'constructive patriotism'. This suggests that this group conveys a notion of patriotism and attachment to the country based on critical understanding, in which they criticise and argue the authority actions for positive changes and are thus hesitant to express a strong attachment to the country. While in most cases, the heightened sense of significant feelings of pride and strong attachment to Malaysia that have tendency to be 'blind patriotism' were expressed by the first year respondents from both ethnic groups. Part of the reasons in which pride and strong attachment to their home country is strengthened is because of fewer opportunities to learn a new culture due to the short duration of study, as well as a lack of interest towards engaging with political or current issues in Malaysia.

It is also argued that wider internet coverage in the UK plays a powerful tool that intensifies political consciousness and public interest, in particular amongst the final year students. Equally significant is the fact that since the UK education approach encourages critical thinking and giving more space to students; this has stimulated the students to be more critical and pro-active in society as well as engaging with current issues in their home country.

In comparing the figures of those respondents (Malays and non-Malays) who indicated strong patriotism, it is noticeable that among the latter the numbers are far smaller. For the non-Malays, feelings of exclusion from being ‘Malaysian’ that arguably deserves equal treatment from the authorities has reduced the sense of pride in their own country. Another feature that is noteworthy is religious affiliation; in this case, Islam. The Malay respondents were more interested in understanding how to portray a good image of Islam, thus they prefer to identify themselves as 'ambassador of Islam' over 'Malaysian ambassadors'. Therefore, it is suggested that a sense of belonging and patriotism in the Malaysian context should be articulated differently from its general understanding. Patriotism is not merely unquestioning political loyalty and allegiance to the country but it embraces other forms of allegiance and loyalty practised, including 'critical loyalty' and religious affiliation.

References


