



IMAGINED
MALAYSIA



A HISTORY OF
**Student
Activism**
IN MALAYSIA

CHAPTER 5:

**Findings, Summary
and Recommendations**

Acknowledgements

A History of Student Activism in Malaysia is a research project run by Imagined Malaysia, supported by Malaysia Reform Initiative (MARI), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and U.S. Embassy Kuala Lumpur. The research project lasted for approximately four months, starting from late August until December 2020. This research project was conducted with two goals in mind: to probe the development of student activism in Malaysia from pre-Independence period, including the issues activists championed and how these changed or remained the same. We also aimed to probe and highlight the various narratives within student movements, and to propose a series of recommendations for various parties to further empower youth- and student-led initiatives in Malaysia. We conducted our research through literature reviews, surveys, and a series of focus group discussions and interviews. The research project is also Imagined Malaysia's attempt to create opportunities for analytical historical research outside academia and institutions.

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“With ongoing research re-orientated towards policy recommendations, our research finding is therefore pertinent in providing practical dimensions to contextualise the emerging forms of student activism and its diversifying roles in the socio-political development in Malaysia.”

As earlier chapters of this report have highlighted, the purpose of this research is to investigate the ways that various student activist groups of diverse racial, cultural, religious, and political stance in Malaysia can unite and serve as a conduit for nation-building and the promotion of good citizenship within a heterogenous country such as Malaysia; and how student activism can be fostered constructively while balancing the need for freedom of expression, national security, and the nation’s progress. The points contained in this research will serve as a guide in formulating and contextualising future policy recommendations. With ongoing research re-orientated towards policy recommendations, our research finding is therefore pertinent in providing practical dimensions to contextualise the emerging forms of student activism and its diversifying roles in the socio-political development in Malaysia. Furthermore, by tracing the historical dimension of student activism in Malaysia, we can observe the phenomena of student organisations and structures, leading us to questions of sustainability in the evolving process of student movements. Having said that, from this research, there are several key findings worth mentioning divided into sections below:

Student Activist’s Character and Changes

The character and forms of student activists were among the key findings of this research. Recognising the development and factors related to character changes is important as student activist groups is among the main actors responsible for shaping the dynamics of society. It has been proven not only in Malaysia but also globally that this group plays a significant role in driving the future of the nation. Student attributes can influence the ideology of student activism which simultaneously affects the approach of nation-building. In relation to that, our findings show that there is heterogeneity in the relationship between input i.e. students’ background and the outcome i.e. student activism. Family background and upbringing appear as a strong factor according to our focus group discussion (FGD) participants. Personal upbringing and family background influence a student’s exposure level towards current issues¹. Interviews with former student activists stressed the importance of having familial support in their involvement with student activism². Some of the FGD participants even suggested that a student’s approach to problem-solving, which is influenced by their upbringing, may indirectly affect their outlook on activism.³

¹ According to one FGD participant: “Bagi saya bukan pendidikan. Bukan latar belakang pendidikan dan sebagainya tetapi family background. Latarbelakang keluarga saya. Sebab ayah saya dan mungkin pernah dengar nama Dr Nasir as well – sama PSM Chairman. Kan dua orang ni, ayah saya terlibat dalam PSM. So the family background dari awal lagi sudah exposed dengan isu-isu berkaitan dengan masyarakat. Bukan sahaja isu-isu mahasiswa. The exposure sudah dari beginning, at the very early stage sudah ada exposure. So masa tu the transformation to university sudah ada pengetahuan untuk terlibat dalam isu-isu masyarakat dan sebagainya.”

² According to our interview with Adam Adli, where he said: “..Especially my late father, of course. Because he’s political himself so I think they understand me pretty well. Very supportive. So, I guess if people were to ask me, “What kind of privilege did you have that allowed you to actually be in student activism, in students’ movement quite actively?” Because I have a very supportive family. That’s why. That would be my kind of privilege. Yeah, I may not have the money. We may not have much to start with but at least I have a very supportive family. So, they allowed me to actually be there. If wasn’t because of that, I don’t think I would be able to be there.”

³ According to one FGD participant: “...I came from a very patriarchal background of learning, dari kecil sampai besar, kita duduk dengan lelaki alpha. We went to an all-boys school. It was a cultural reset when I came into campus because those things that you did back then were not in line with the correct upbringing of your country. Tapi untuk kata kita melihat masyarakat2 marginal dari kecil, I think its yes, of course, to some, we have seen face-to-face about how the marginalised have been raised, the upbringing of the marginalised, is very critical. And when you come to university because like I said, as I mentioned every students are considered as a marginalised community as for now because we were always been belittled and we are not being taken seriously and even so we are being oppressed by authority. So in a way we have been so comfortable with the idea of seeing the marginalised people have been treated so when you come to university and you have a different perspective of what a student is, or whether they are really marginalised, and then you have been proved that we are marginalised. That’s why you join these kind of things. That’s why you have been involved in idealism and advocacy.”

To further explore participation based on student characteristic such as socioeconomic level, our survey participants have been categorised as either “self-funded” or “non-self-funded”, where their higher education is concerned. The results suggest that students’ funding methods do not affect their willingness to “speak up” or become active in student activism. This is further reiterated by a participant from our focus group discussion who has been both self-funded and non-self-funded during her years at university. She noted that funding did not influence her decision to participate in student activism⁴. The FGD participants said that while sponsored students in the past may have been restricted by fear of getting their scholarships rebuked, that is not the case nowadays.⁵ This suggests that the level of awareness among the students has overcome the cultural fear this group had for so long. Meanwhile, in terms of age, our survey found that younger students within the age range of 18 to 25 years old tend to remain committed, or plan to be involved, in activism in the future. Such tendency decreases drastically amongst participants of older age groups. This pattern is consistent with the perspectives of our FGD participants in all sessions and can be explained by the increase in commitments – such as career or family – following graduation. However, there are possibilities for them to continue participating in activism although it is may not particularly be related to the student movement. Besides that, our interview with former student activists suggests that those who hold to the student activism ideology will continue to contribute to student movements in long term, nation-building work.

In terms of environment, the FGD participants generally agree that campus surroundings do have an impact on influencing their participation in student activism. The factors include the location of the university and the attitude of the university administration. Location matters a lot, says one participant, as it enables (or disables) mobilisation of students, which tend to happen more easily in urban settings.⁶ Students from rural areas may face logistical difficulties as well as social discouragement.

⁴ According to one FGD participant: “My case is quite unique. I was self-funded during my first year, and received a scholarship in the subsequent year. So, personally, I think that regardless of whether or not I’m funded, the status does not affect me much. It’s true that when we receive a scholarship, there will be contracts to be signed and everything. But for me, just because you signed a contract, it does not mean that you cannot do certain things or that we should remain apathetic. For me, you can still participate, care and set an example like for example, the UKM Democrats have become a pressure group to the university administrators on issues such as student placement and facilities. To me, if you feel that you don’t need to speak up and that someone else has to do it after you receive a scholarship, you need to realise that we all go to the same university. Whether you’re funded by external parties or you fund your own higher education, the thing will affect us all. SO, for me, my scholarship does not influence my participation. I will still participate. I will still actively criticise or join anything that will benefit the students. That’s just my personal opinion.”

⁵ According to one FGD participant: “Pendekatan pembiaya-pembiaya sekarang ini, saya fikir tidaklah terlalu rigid seperti di zaman 80-an, 70-an, yang mana kalau menentang sedikit, teruslah dihentikan, dipotong di-cut dan sebagainya.”

⁶ According to one FGD participant: “...in terms of mobilising student organisations to advocate some causes, the location matters a lot. Like the locations closer to the city or urban areas are more easily to organise such activities because maybe the right spots, the logistics and the environment is more conducive for activists’ activities but whereas universities located more on the rural area, kawasan luar bandar, they face more challenges in mobilising students. Maybe will face more pressure when it comes to social backlash from the masyarakat tempatan.”

Apart from that, the type of peers, lecturers and social activities that exist in the university may also encourage or discourage activism participation. Former student activists have affirmed in their interviews on the important role that the campus environment plays.

The heterogeneous relationship between the various inputs that affect student activism reflects a pluralistic student group that have immensely diverse experiences, background, and influences. Our policy recommendations below will help supplement this diversity and transform student activism into a unique opportunity where students act as informed citizens and cooperate with the government in advancing the nation and its interests. Policies aimed at both higher learning institutions and government will foster a better relationship between students.

Student Activism Trends

Student activism trends are both complex and cyclical. This is because they are tied in varying degrees to external political and institutional contexts as well as internal dynamics. Thus, in a way, the history of student activism in Malaysia can be viewed as a reflection of the country’s growth and development from its pre-independent days to the present. Students on campus serve as a microcosm of the Malaysian society at large. As law lecturer, UK Menon mentions during one of our interviews that students are an equally important group in society and have an important role to play as citizens. They serve as mirrors to the government, holding elective representatives accountable and signalling their dissatisfaction with the country’s state of affairs at different periods. Student activism is a helpful tool which allows students to navigate their own social and political identities and contribute to the betterment of the nation through innovative ideas and critical thinking. Through less government overreach and more university autonomy, students are better able to explore and exchange ideas through their classes, with their peers and within the campus grounds.



“Within that decade, however, different visions of national identity and orientation gradually exacerbated ethnic cleavages on campus, manifested mainly through contentious disagreements over the issues of the national language and education and the role of students in society.”

The early years of the University of Malaya in Singapore, during which anti-colonial sentiment was not pervasive, student activism was limited to student welfare and campus issues. The students themselves, as outcomes of the prestigious English-education system, were groomed to become professionals and bureaucrats that would fit nicely under the colonial order. There was little incentive for students to disrupt the social order that benefitted them. Contributing to this lack of reactive behaviour is the cognitive and emotional disconnect between the “elite” undergraduates and the masses. Student demographics were heavily non-Malay, as inequality in socioeconomic conditions and education opportunities left the Malay community heavily disadvantaged in pursuing tertiary education. The University of Malaya, as the paragon of English-language education, created a close-knit class of educated and privileged graduates, which would play major roles in the Malayan environment.

As anti-colonial sentiment strengthened after World War II, which also saw the increased appeal to leftist ideologies, student criticism and activism were directed at the colonial regime. Questions of national consciousness and identity emerged as imaginations of self-governance spread among the enlightened students and Malayan society as a whole. While the rise in student activism also bred radicalism, which in several instances, have caused violence and casualties, it proved effective in uniting the English-speaking and Chinese-speaking students in rejecting colonialism. Activism within the Malay community largely circulated among Malay-speaking teaching and journalism fraternity as most of the community members did not enrol in tertiary education. While visions of an independent nation may be shared by each community, their different variants would prove to be contentious later. The dominance of left-wing ideologies among student activists was evident in UM in Singapore, and in Kuala Lumpur in the 1960s, which can be observed through the flourishing of the Socialist Club and similar movements in both campuses. Students involved themselves actively with national politics, international issues and rural poverty.

Within that decade, however, different visions of national identity and orientation gradually exacerbated ethnic cleavages on campus, manifested mainly through contentious disagreements over the issues of the national language and education and the role of students in society. The influx of Malay students beginning in the early 1960s through affirmative action policies slowly altered the student demography and activism discourse. The issue of rural poverty, which many new Malay students related to, gained greater ascendancy. Malay interest organisations also lobbied aggressively for greater prominence, in planning and implementation, of the use of Malay language in the university and national education system. The change of Malaysia’s institutions to be more Malay-centric and authoritarian affected the dynamics on campus. The student Left was weakened, and student activism was becoming fronted more by nationalist, Malay student groups. The introduction of the Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU) in 1971, which restricted student participation in politics and student activities on campus, did not conclusively curb student protests. More restrictive amendments to AUKU in 1974, following large-scale protests were held in solidarity with the rural poor, conclusively curbed student demonstrations. AUKU resembled the government’s embrace of an ambitious social engineering programme alongside the interventionist New Economic Policy (NEP). Tertiary education was rapidly expanded through AUKU and made more accessible to Malays. Students were transformed from *mahasiswa* to *pelajar*, in the sense that they were told to focus on their studies instead of protesting and dissenting.

Although this research did not carry out in-depth analysis on the relationship of religion and student characteristics, this element is deemed crucial in student activism dynamics. Following the successful curbing of student protests in 1975, student activism dampened and took to a less audacious outlet – religion. Across the country, a sense of religious revival swept through the nation inspired by ideas borrowed from Islamic thinkers and movements abroad, which was also highlighted by Dato Shabery Cheek in his interview.⁷ On-campus, a parallel situation emerged

⁷ Please refer to Interview with Dato’ Sri Shabery Cheek, where he quoted; “...tahun 79, tahun 80, awal 80-an dan sebagainya turut mempengaruhi ideologi mahasiswa. Tentang Islamism yang bercakap Islam bukan soal ibadat, bukan soal puasa, sembahyang dan sebagainya, ia membawa dimensi politik yang lebih dinamik pada waktu itu. Dan sedikit sebanyak ia memberi satu dimensi baru dalam perkembangan politik di negara.”

where more religious student organisations emerged and dominated the activism sphere. Islam was promoted as the answer to the problems of modernity, with its decadence and morality, and as a way for individual and collective advancement. The communal gap that marked the conflicts between student groups in the late 1960s and 1970s was redefined through religious denominations.

Relative to the pre-AUKU years, student activism was quiet. This changed with the *Reformasi* movement, following the sack of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, reinvigorated activism amongst students and civil societies alike. Activists channelled their focus on issues of social justice, good governance and civil liberties, demanding greater freedom of expression. Ethnic cleavages became less eminent as cross-ethnic alliances were built between student and NGO groups to protest on specific issues. Compared to the physical protests that dominated student movement in the 1970s, however, student activism after *Reformasi* would eventually be more diplomatic and strategic. Student activism was sustained and normalised since *Reformasi*. Despite possible repercussions in the forms of suspension, dismissal or arrest, student activists consistently braced the streets to challenge the government on critical issues. Since the *Reformasi*, student protests have revolved around topics such as the Internal Security Act, AUKU, the National Higher Education Fund (PTPTN). Most significantly, some activists, such as the “UKM 4” even challenged the state through judicial means to assert their rights to freedom of speech. The “intellectual containment” created by AUKU and other restricting state measures were gradually being challenged and torn down.⁸ AUKU, for instance, has been amended several times since *Reformasi* to allow greater freedom to students.

The FGD sessions with current student activists indicate that student activism will remain a constant feature in the foreseeable future. This perspective was confirmed by former student activist Adam Adli who was pleasantly surprised with the changes on campus after he returned to the university after many years.⁹ It seems that students have accepted that their role in championing the community’s interests and no longer curtailed by fear of state action. While student activists of the past may be branded as “radicals”, or “troublemakers”, nowadays their actions have become normalised and viewed increasingly as legitimate civil actors.

⁸ Weiss, 2011

⁹ Interview with Adam Adli

¹⁰ Interview with Khairul Anuar

¹¹ According to one FGD participant:

“Kalau untuk Malay, saya rasa kawan-kawan saya pun ada juga yang cakap benda-benda macam tu. Tak nak terlibat dengan politik sebab kadang-kadang bila saya pon pergi ke perhimpunan-perhimpunan apa-apa untuk express opinions, kadang-kadang depa tanya kan, “tak takut kene tangkap ke?”, macam tu lah. Rasanya macam benda tu pon ada jugak kat some of my peers sendiri. So maybe bukan Chinese je but also Malay pon ada.”

According to Weiss, intellectual containment was not accomplished simply through the introduction of AUKU, as there were many cases in other countries where students became more aggressive in response to restrictive state measures. Intellectual containment in Malaysia was achieved through the government’s and society’s belittling of the role of students in society, which discouraged the latter from involvement in matters unrelated to their academic qualifications. On the contrary, the normalising of public dissent and increased acceptance, if not celebration, of students’ political involvement either on or off-campus have provided positive reinforcement which would further energise future student activism. As a former student activist and ISA detainee, Khairul Anuar (Jonah) pointed out, the role of activists during the early years of *Reformasi* was to physically fight for democratic space at the risk of bodily injury and police brutality. That democratic space has been achieved and now it is the turn of new activists to keep expanding its frontier to include more issues, be it human rights, the environment or other issues.¹⁰ With greater global connectivity through the Internet, student activism trend is likely to not only concerned on local issues but also international developments.

Student Activism Development

One notable development in student activism was the strategy of involvement in off-campus politics to convey a bigger message. Based on our analysis, the approach taken by previous student activists were radical, but as the era changed, a softer approach was adopted. The change of strategy relates to how the environment or surrounding interacted with the student movement. Previously, aggressive measures were used to react to the abolishment of platforms in universities such as Speaker Corner in University Malaya, and the restrictions against student activism. The most prominent piece of legislation within the higher education realm was the introduction of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (or more colloquially known as AUKU). Based on our survey, the results suggest that even if students decide to participate in the student movement or otherwise, it does not affect their opinion of the enforcement of AUKU. During our focus groups discussions, several participants alluded that many of their peers were neither ignorant nor apathetic, but rather, they were fearful of the consequences tied to AUKU and other regulations.¹¹ Consequently, many students may have formed their own opinions about

AUKU but do not feel as though their participation in student activism was worth the risk. During our interview with Mr U K Menon, he elaborates on AUKU as legislation that was used to provide the legal framework for all public higher education, aids to this culture by instilling fear on campuses through direct government intervention. However, he notes that they provide no guarantees or measures that students fundamentally receives what they deserve when attending tertiary education.¹² Other attempts to reform higher education such as the Malaysian Education Blueprint has not been written in the interests of the development of the student population in the country.¹³ On the other hand, Dr Chang Da highlights that AUKU is neither the sole nor predominant factor in the repression of student rights to expression and political participation. Rather, he speaks to the Malaysian culture where protests and demonstrations were not common practice and therefore not prevalent generally, let alone on campus grounds. AUKU aids to this culture by instilling fear on campuses through direct government intervention.¹⁴ However, as the restriction towards student activism had been slowly reduced, the soft approach like open discussion and introducing student parliament has become the student activism strategy.

Besides that, the medium in disseminating information and approaching both students and society has also evolved. Our survey examined students' reading attitudes based on their interest in issues. The survey analysis demonstrates that higher levels of interest in an issue will lead to a higher reading attitude. The results conclude that majority of the student with interests towards social issues will tend to read more and have a more acute awareness of the current societal issues at large. One participant in the FGD contended that while the survey results reflected that free and quality education was the most popular issues of interest among students, followed by racial

discrimination, both campus and national issues are more often than not closely tied with one another and affect both students and the public at large and almost at equal magnitude. Another participant suggested that while many student activists in the past acted as champions for society at large, it is also important for current student activists to get in touch with issues that are more relatable to students before attempting to address national issues. This result shows the importance of having access to information and the importance of using the right medium to disseminate that information. In earlier eras, traditional media such as the newspaper and *surat layang* had been used to distribute information and reach the target audience. However, we can observe that this process of dissemination has been redeveloped since the advent of new media and technology such as social media and networking sites. Our survey results highlight social media as the most effective platform for disseminating awareness on an issue. Many of the FGD participants and interviewees reiterated that social media, despite a relatively new platform, can disseminate information to a broad audience. However, they also noted social media's inability for in-depth discussions or the rise of "clicktivism," which may lead to ineffective and performative activism.

Furthermore, we can observe the development of student activism in terms of student involvement. As highlighted in the literature review, the participation of other ethnic groups like Chinese has merged since the '80s and early '90s and was mostly concerned with student welfare and politics in campus elections. This shows that their level of awareness about their rights has increased. As time went by, more students became open to the idea of student activism and we could see the increase of ethnic variation in student movements which could manifest the idea of people unity. Although based on our survey, ethnic background does not appear as a significant

¹² Please refer to the interview with U K Menon, where he quoted:

"What is the engagement, or what is an engagement for education? What does AUKU do about that? AUKU does nothing. AUKU provides no guarantees, AUKU provides no measures to ensure that the student gets what he has gone into university for. So everything that AUKU has done so far as to restrict students civil rights, but it has not done anything in order to promote the students interests in any one of these in any one of these areas."

¹³ Please refer to the interview with U K Menon, where he quoted:

"I don't see any alignment of educational policies in this country with the blueprint. The Blueprint goes in one direction, the policies, the government goes in the other direction. I'm not seeing the blueprint principles being formulated in a way which could be brought into the policymaking process of higher education in this country, which is the National Council of Higher Education, this is not happening. The blueprint itself is a incipit document, created by some technocrat in some who has not gone into the heart of education was still the blueprint has not touched on how high education should be developed for the emerging student populations in this country. So I really have to look away have to say about what have they done in so far, the blueprint recommendations for the blueprint was hesitant about autonomy, they said, Oh, we should wait and see what the universities are capable of acquired while being autonomous, and we will give it to them as they prove they are capable of the capably or not this institution is, you know, again, this is it."

¹⁴ Please refer to the interview with Dr. Chang Da, where he quoted:

"Generally, we are a society that has never been... protests has never be no way until the reformasi in the 90s. That, for a very long time, we have not seen people going down to the streets, right. And then the reformasi is one of them versus the other one that mobilise people to go down to the streets. So it was not very much a Malaysian kind of culture, to be involved in protests. And what has changed by AUKU is really creating sort of a fear, a very indirect fear. By saying to the university, now the government thinks you cannot govern yourself anymore. We are going to govern you."

factor, this might not be the case for the development of student activism. Our survey results reflect the country's demographic proportion with Malay students registering the highest participation followed by Chinese, Indian, Mixed race, Orang Asli, Orang Asal and Foreigners. It should be noted that the small sample size of our survey may not be reflective of the actual situation. Statistical analysis of the results further indicates that there is a weak correlation between individual race categories and the identification of a student as an activist. However, the low connection between the ethnicity and student participation in activism could be seen from a different perspective such as the increase of other ethnic participation, ie Indian representative in higher positions within student movements, which was highlighted by our FGD participant.¹⁵ Our FGD participants were also split between attributing ethnic background as a factor in student activism as reported in the Research and Data Analysis chapter of our research.¹⁶

Based on the surveys conducted, it was found that there is a higher number of male respondents who read about current issues at a more frequent rate, as compared to the female respondents.¹⁷ Despite the frequency in keeping up with the current news, more female respondents reported to be well-informed on current issues as compared to the male respondents and even considered themselves as activists. To better understand the correlation between gender and participation in activism, the survey results were presented to FGD participants throughout all FGD sessions. While the responses varied from one participant to another, many of them agree that student activism in Malaysia is largely dominated by male students, where the majority of them hold leadership positions.¹⁸ Anis Syafiqah, a former student activist in Universiti Malaya, related her experience to that of social expectations of women that both encourage and discourage them from taking the lead in activism.¹⁹ From this, it can be deduced that while there is a strong correlation between gender and participation in student activism in Malaysia, it is not because of the lack of interest among female students

or a smaller number of them being well-informed. Rather, as pointed out by many of the participants in the FGD sessions, it is because the Malaysian political area continues to remain male-dominated.

Conclusion

To conclude, our research has demonstrated that each element within student movements is not in competition with one another but rather are complementing factors that influence an individual's behaviour in student activism. Each of these elements contributes significantly towards influencing the creation of a model student, which would in turn shape them into model citizens. These traits that are developed do not necessarily produce homogenous and similar-minded citizens, but rather, mould students into insightful citizens capable of participating in a series of discourses that concern society at large, thus leading into a more progressive nation that is open to new ideas of development. The development of student character is important as this will simultaneously construct the trends and developments of student activism in the coming years. The effectiveness of student activism in carrying out its varying objectives and goals have been proven since the pre-independence era until the present time. We have witnessed an inexorable march of progress through these types of movement. Student activism undeniably affects, influences, intervenes and plays an active role in bringing about many changes in Malaysia, whether in the political sphere, social welfare, or our national legislations. Hence, emphasizing the importance of student activism is crucial for the nation-building process. However, this positive contribution is still heavily debated and often overlooked by our society. Although the important role of student movements and activism has slowly been accepted in the political arena, the restrictions and sentiments towards them are still prevalent, especially in terms of the legislation regulating their movement. Above all, the biggest challenge to overcome with regards to student activism remains shifting the overall perception of society on the important nation-building role they play.

¹⁵ According to one FGD participant:

"Saya timbalan pengerusi MPP UKM pertama dari kaum India. Selepas saya menjadi timbalan pengerusi, ramai yang berminat untuk terlibat. Seakan mereka perlukan ikon untuk terlibat. Kemungkinan kalau dilihat dari luar, kalau tiada penglibatan dari kaum minoriti, mungkin kaum minoriti yang tak mahu tanding kerana tiada visibility."

¹⁶ Please refer to pages 29 to 30 of Focus Group Discussion analysis section in the Research and Data Analysis chapter.

¹⁷ This can be referred to Figure 6 in the Research and Data Analysis chapter.

¹⁸ According to one FGD participant:

"Saya rasa ini satu culture kot sebab kita masih lagi terperangkap dalam idea "oh, kalau nak pengerusi, mesti lelaki, tak boleh perempuan". Ya, sampai sekarang macam ni. Ataupun saya rasa satu hal lagi, sebab kita memandang tinggi lelaki. So, kalau perempuan, aktivis perempuan, selalunya, sekejap je la, nanti mati la nama dia. Macam tu. Kalau lelaki, akan diangkat. Kalau kita tengok sejarah pon, semua nama lelaki. Nama perempuan memang takde kan?"

¹⁹ Please refer to the interview with Anis Syafiqah, where she quoted:

"Waktu tu idea-idea yang diketengahkan kali ni adalah nak ada satu wow-factor untuk protest tersebut. Jadi yang ni turning point lah macam mana saya boleh jadi frontline dalam student activism. Jadi ada orang cadangkan wow-factor tu adalah yang lead protest tu adalah perempuan."

“Whilst our research has brought in a new idea on student activism, the variation of information pool for the analysis is still limited. Hence, for future research, we suggest a wider reach, increased capacity, and to obtain iterative and strategic feedbacks.”

The main concern that revolves around this research is how student activism can be fostered constructively amidst the changes in national and international issues, technological development, as well as the existing and newly-introduced national legislations and by-laws while balancing the need for freedom of expression, national security, and the nation’s progress. Drawing on existing research and our findings, it can be deduced that student participation in campus and national politics is crucial for the country’s progress and for promoting good citizenship, and that student activism can be fostered constructively despite the changes in issues, laws, and technological development provided that there is unity among student groups that come from diverse racial, cultural, religious and political stance. Whilst our research has brought in a new idea on student activism, the variation of information pool for the analysis is still limited. Hence, for future research, we suggest a wider reach, increased capacity, and to obtain iterative and strategic feedbacks. Besides that, multiple perspectives have yet been explored such as social media’s influence in reshaping the student activism dynamic, and the non-political activism developments in the student movement.

Recommendations to the Malaysian Government, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and students of HEIs

In pursuit of the above aims, Imagined Malaysia has come up with the following list of recommended plans and actions:

FOR THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT

1 Revise UUCA and any related laws and regulations and review the proposed Higher Education Act to widen student participation in activism/national decision-making process with greater transparency, and with due consideration given towards passing the proposed Higher Education Act that may serve to standardise all legislation pertaining to all types of higher education institutions such as UUCA, Private Higher Education Act 1996, and others.

Although the latest UUCA amendment was passed in 2018 with the immediate effect of students no longer prohibited from taking part in political activities within the campus following the removal of Section 15(2)(c) and other similar regulations, students are still not allowed

to participate in any political activities that are deemed to contradict the “interest and wellbeing” of the higher learning institution as determined by the University Board. Regulations on student movements, political participation, and freedom of expression should not only be in line with international human rights law to prevent violations of students’ rights and wellbeing, but they should also serve to increase student participation in the national decision-making process. In addition, the government should also consider repealing Section 4(1) (a) of the Peaceful Assembly Act, which prohibits a non-citizen; as well as Section 4(1)(d) of the same Act, which prohibits persons below the age 21 from participating in peaceful assemblies, following the reduction of voting age to 18 in Malaysia, and the fact that foreign students also make up a significant number of students in higher education institutions across Malaysia. Students of higher education institutions including international students should be granted the right to participate in activism or movements so long as it is within the interest of the students themselves and the public at large.

2 Introduce the Autonomous Universities Act or similar legislation that grants greater autonomy to higher education institutions.

University autonomy, according to the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel of UNESCO, is the “necessary precondition to guarantee the proper fulfilment of the functions entrusted to teaching personnel and institutions” (UNESCO, 1992). Greater autonomy is pertinent to the growth and development of higher education institutions, academic integrity, and allows for better protection of student rights with minimal governmental intervention in the decision-making process.

3 Publicly affirm that students of higher learning institutions have the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association under Malaysian law and international law as well as participation in the national decision-making process.

The government, particularly the Ministry of Higher Education should continue taking the initiative to publicly affirm that students have the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assemblies, and associations as well as engaging with them in dialogues and the decision-making processes of national issues as a way of showing support and trust in students as responsible individuals.

4 Ratify key international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in acknowledging and ensuring student rights to freedom of thought, expression, and peaceful assembly.

Ratifying the ICCPR and ICESCR is a sign of a country’s willingness in moving forward, where civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights are concerned. These international laws establish a clear foundation that facilitates cooperation and responses between nations, as well as setting the legislative gold standard that nations should aspire to. Citizens, including students, will be able to share innovative ideas and provoke thoughtful discussions among themselves and with the government without fear of punitive repercussions.

5 View student groups and associations as a valuable stakeholder, capable of driving the country’s progress by forming collaborative partnerships and engaging in dialogues with them.

During our focus group discussions, participants expressed that students needed to be part of the administrative decision-making process. Ultimately, these decisions will impact the environments in which students may thrive, thereby allowing a freer exchange of ideas that can potentially impact the country’s progress. Young academics are fundamental to the development of significant research and discussions that can contribute to the nation-building process.

FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIS)

1 Amend internal regulations to remove all restrictions that violate the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association, and to allow greater participation from students in engaging with higher education institutions and government agencies on a decision-making process at both institutional and national level.

The rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly are rights that are fundamental in a democratic entity as they allow citizens to engage in issues that affect them. For Malaysia to continue developing into a modern democratic nation capable of tolerating its citizens’ points of view and ability to express themselves in any way deemed peaceful, it is therefore imperative for students to be granted these rights and be allowed to engage with institutions and the government on national issues.

2 Recognise student’s freedom of expression by establishing a platform at every university and college that allows rightful assemblies and petitions among students; inculcate programmes that promote and protect students’ rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association as a way to promote critical thinking and leadership skills, in line with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan.

Higher education institutions play an important role in students’ development as independent and insightful citizens. The revival of the Speaker’s Corner at Universiti Malaya – a place where students could congregate and express their thoughts freely without the fear of any consequence, which was first established in 1966²⁰ before its forced closure following the AUKU amendments in 1971 – in 2010²¹ is one good initiative that encourages student engagement with the community and civic society. The inclusion of more diverse platforms similar to the Speakers Corner and programmes that serve to increase student engagement in pressing social issues allows students to speak up and exchange ideas in a safe space while developing themselves as active agents of change.

3 Promote unity, respect, and understanding among all varying student groups by initiating and encouraging collaboration, diversity in leadership positions, conducting more discourses and roundtable discussions.

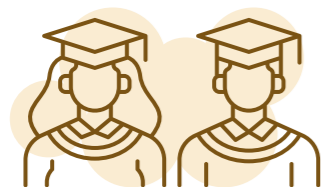
Tolerance is an essential value that should be advocated for in every nation, as it promotes a willingness to accept varying ideas that may not necessarily be in accordance with one’s own belief or value systems but is therefore vital in establishing peace while simultaneously removing the fear of repercussions for speaking out.

4 Create a campus environment that is safe and favourable for students to optimise their student life by inculcating programs and activities that accommodate different points of view and promote student engagement in politics within the campus and outside.

Diversity and multiculturalism have always been an important hallmark in Malaysia – as people from varying ethnicities and backgrounds cooperate to produce solutions that benefit Malaysians, not just specific segments of society. By accommodating different points of views, campus grounds will encourage more students to speak up and encourage debate and discussion for a flourishing and comfortable environment. Further, promoting student

²⁰ Established in 1966, the Speaker’s Corner was an important venue for students to learn about, debate and discuss current issues that are both foreign and local, encompassing all matters political, economic and social. In reference to Silverstein, J. (1970). *Burmese and Malaysian Student Politics: A Preliminary Comparative Inquiry*. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1(1), 3-22. Retrieved December 14, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20069843> and Weiss, M. L. (2005). *Still with the People?: The Chequered Path of Student Activism in Malaysia*. *South East Asia Research*, 13(3), 287-332. <https://doi.org/10.5367/000000005775179694>

²¹ The Star <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2010/01/27/speakers-corner-back-at-um/>



“Students are an important group in society and their higher education years is imperative in shaping their own identity, as well as consolidating their national identity as Malaysian citizens. They should be encouraged to participate in political activities, with their involvement fostered by higher education institutions that serve to encourage them into becoming insightful citizens on campus and prepare them as young adults imperative for the nation-building process.”

engagement in politics will mould students into well-informed citizens capable of critical thinking. In turn, they will have distinct and creative ideas as young adults entering the workforce after graduation, which benefits both the Malaysian economy and political scene.

5 Establish a well-trained team of ombudsmen specialising in human rights within the student affairs department to ensure that students are heard before the higher learning institution decides to take any actions against them.

In order to prevent harsh and unjust penalties on students, a well-trained team of ombudsmen will be able to provide essential services to students and encourage better communication and cooperation between institutions and their students.

FOR STUDENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIS)

1 Proclaim their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and participation and association under Malaysian law and international law by disseminating information through various forms of medium.

It is important for students to know and understand their rights, and to educate the public on that knowledge and understanding for greater awareness.

2 Actively act upon those rights in-line with their duties as responsible students and citizens with the aim of contributing towards nation-building.

Students are an important group in society and their higher education years is imperative in shaping their own identity, as well as consolidating their national identity as Malaysian citizens. They should be encouraged to participate in political activities, with their involvement fostered by higher education institutions that serve to encourage them into becoming insightful citizens on campus and prepare them as young adults imperative for the nation-building process.

3 Continue to exert pressure on government bodies and higher education institutions through awareness campaigns, mobilisation initiatives, and tabling roundtable discussions and proposals to make their demands heard.

Campaigns that provide a bridge between students and governments have proven to be particularly useful in the past, such as that of the Undi18 campaign. Students and youths are the future of the nation, and they provide fresh and innovate perspectives that may be beneficial to those in government. Such an ability to exert pressure on government serves as an important check-in government accountability, as well as fostering better communication between the two bodies in constructing effective legislation together.

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IMAGINED
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