

Education, Aspiration, and Everyday Diplomacy: An Ethnographic Study of Female Malaysian Muslim Students in the UK

Ireena Nasiha Ibnu

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia

Corresponding author: ireena@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the aspects related to education and aspiration through the on-going experiences of Female Malay Muslim students in UK higher institutions. Building on an ethnographic approach, an in-depth interview with 30 female Malay students, I focus on the various aspects of the students' lives as scholarship holders, addressing in particular how they handle diplomatic practices in their everyday lives as Malaysian mini ambassadors overseas. The notions of aspiration, well-balanced citizenship and 'everyday diplomacy' are deployed in this research to understand the everyday experiences of these students. Hence, it is argued that the privileges in education policy for Bumiputera Malays have shaped the notion of achievement they hold and their attitude towards overseas education as well as their experiences abroad. My research suggests that being a mini diplomat means not only promoting the relationship between different cultures but also contributing to nations abroad through their volunteering work.

Keywords: aspiration, Bumiputera Malays, diplomacy, education policy, ethnography, Malaysian students

INTRODUCTION

Like migrants, international students experience the process of leaving their home country and making their way to a new country through their many aspirations and with a great deal of hope. According to Quaglia and Cobb (1996), a student with aspirations is someone who is involved in various activities for both their inherent value and enjoyment and their connection to future goals. In a recent article by Scheibelhofer (2018) on aspirations among European migrants, aspiration is perceived as hopes, plans, ambitions or goals which are produced or not clearly expressed (due to biographical changes). She also argues that, in the context of migration, aspirations endure throughout the life course and influence the ways in which people act and react over an extended period of time. Thus, aspirations can shift and be unstable over time due to changes in social contexts and transformations in a person's biography, such as migration, marriage and retirement (Scheibelhofer, 2003). In my research, I analyse how the aspirations of female Malay students shift with the context of biographical change such as their status as a scholarship student and mini diplomat after succeeding in going to the UK.

Since 2015, more than 50,000 Malaysian students have arrived in the UK to pursue their studies (Higher Education Statistics Department, 2019). Due to its multicultural atmosphere and the number of prestigious universities, the UK is seen as a preferred destination for Malaysian students to study abroad. Scholarships from both the government and private agencies, such as the MOHE, the Public Services Department or *Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam (JPA)*, People's Trust Council or *Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA)*, PETRONAS, and other private and government-linked agencies are awarded to qualified citizens and government officers to enable them to study abroad. Although the UK has been a top higher-education (HE) destination for Malaysian students, there is very little information or studies pertaining to these students' transnational lives and experiences as scholarship holders. Since most of the Malaysian students appear to be scholarship recipients, my study investigates how these students handled their position as scholarship recipients and the impact on their daily lives in the UK.

Three different aspects of the production and experience of aspiration will be discussed in this paper. The first section deals with the key literature and previous works related to aspirations, achievement and everyday diplomacy. The second section demonstrates the students' aspirations to study abroad in relation to the historical context in which they do so. In this section, I analyse the notion of aspiration and achievement in relation to the experiences of Malay students' desire to study abroad through a consideration of the effort they made in Malaysia to win the scholarships that allow them to pursue their dream. The third section provides a connected discussion of the notion of aspiration and the pressures of student life in the UK in terms of everyday and mini diplomacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Aspirations and Achievements in Life

Several studies have explored the aspiration of students from ethnic minorities and refugees for education in the field of international student migration and mobility (Chee 2017, Schneider 2018, Hallberg Adu, 2019, Newman, 2019, Shakya et al., 2012). In this case, parents' ethnic minorities play an important role in articulating the aspirations of international students in education. In Hong Kong, the transformation in socio-political could create better opportunities in education to Pakistani-migrant youth and their families in designing their future careers. However, in Singapore, study by Senin & Ng (2012) reveals that there is a lower educational aspiration among Malay youths compared to other ethnicities in education although the Malays belong to the lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. While in Philippines, the aspirations of Filipino returnees from European universities at postgraduate level have reflected their overseas experiences to create a better career contribution in their respective occupational fields (Liao & Asis, 2020).

Focusing on youth living through the upheaval of Egypt's Arab Spring in 2011, Schielke (2015) critically documents the nature of his informants aspiring efforts in terms of achieving a balance between their hopes and the frustrating conditions of their everyday lives. Schielke builds on the 'grand schemes' approach, which he defines as 'persons, ideas and powers that are understood to be greater than one's

ordinary life, located on a higher plane, distinct from everyday life, and yet relevant as models for a living (Schielke, 2015, p.13). Doing so helps him to explore the moral dilemmas facing his male interlocutors; ethnographically, he focuses in particular on the ‘pressure points’ that occur in the young people’s daily lives. In his work, I am interested in the ways in which he invests the term ‘hope’ experienced by these youths with specific meanings and attributes, such as the hope to live a God-fearing life, avoid boredom, and with aspirations for freedom and money, love and marriage. This approach helps me to discover the ways in which aspiration is specifically perceived through their everyday life in the UK. Besides, participation in piety movements and commensality among students Malay students community abroad is said to help relieve stress and overcome loneliness in these sponsored students’ life adjustments (Ibnu, 2022; Ibnu & Azman, 2021).

Long and Moore (2013), in their book, *The Social Life of Achievement*, provide critical ways in which to explore the notion of achievement within the context of its social life, such as the ways in which achievement is attained and experienced, as well as how its meanings shift in specific contexts. One example that I found relevant is Susan Bayly’s (2007) book, *Asian Voices in a Postcolonial Age*. Bayly highlights the complex relationship between a generation of liminal Asian intellectuals in India and in Vietnam. In her fieldwork in Vietnam, Bayly (2007) explored the French-educated Hanoian intellectuals who signified themselves as active participants in the process of making and mapping the revolution and liberation in urban and rural areas in the period from 1946 to 1954. In her analysis, she also includes the experiences of those who were left behind, such as the French-educated Hanoian families, their emotions of return and separation, nurturing, education, services and sacrifice. From this analysis, we can see how the colonial education and language of socialism was able to structure the experiences and aspirations of students for their nation and family in the context of both colonialism and the post-colonial landscape.

In another work, Bayly (2014) engages with the vision of Vietnam as one of the ‘tiger states’, analysing how this has shaped the ways in which Hanoians understand citizenship, especially with regards to students’ notions of aspirations and achievement. The term ‘tiger states’ refers to when in 2010, Vietnam was ranked as the world’s top CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa) economy, which means the country that was renowned as the world’s strongest emerging, fast-growth, on-commodity-dependent power after BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) in terms of its globalised development potential. To sustain their status as global achievers and to make Vietnam one of 101 marketized South-East Asia’s top producers by 2025, the students and parents generate a real effective charge around notions of achievement (Bayly 2007). This, however, has affected the state’s education sector and produced a condition widely referred to in the country as the ‘achievement disease’, the excessiveness of doing something that is perceived as good and moral regarding attainment marking that can cause harm. For example, the parents would bribe the school to make sure that their child became an excellent student or reached a top attainment status. Bayly’s works demonstrate the dynamics of aspiration and practices of actors in this context of both colonialism and post-colonialism. In my study, the parents of Malay students from lower income backgrounds gave their full support and motivation by encouraging their children to study hard to win an educational scholarship, as I demonstrate in the next section.

Besides aspirations and achievement, the paper also explores diplomacy practices in the everyday lives of the students after going to the UK. Many studies on diplomacy, especially in International Relations, deal with diplomats, states, foreign policies, embassies, consulates, ministries and international organisations, as both actors and instruments (Cohen, 1998; Constantinou et al. 2016 ; Sharp 2009). However, scholars from various disciplines find that the practice of diplomacy is not limited to the formal actors outlined above; it can also be observed or imitated by a multiplicity of actors and instruments beyond states –such as traders, intellectuals, religious organisations or minority groups (Cooper, 2008; Marsden et al., 2016). According to Constantinou (2016), actors need to diplomatically identify and learn knowledge about the facilities they can deploy in order to deal with conflicts. By this he means that actors who practice diplomacy should recognise their role, who they represent and in relationship to what particular cause. Besides, the practice of diplomacy can be translated to the understanding of intercultural responsibility of international students. By using this concept, Tran & Vu (2017) argue that intercultural responsibility can reflect international students’ self- determined responsibility to respect, accommodate or incorporate into

the host culture. The study focuses on the role and self-positioning played by international students in a transnational space. The findings show that there are four forms of intercultural responsibility perceived by international students such as their responsibility to represent the home country, responsibility to respect the host culture, responsibility to assimilate into the host culture, and responsibility to integrate into the host culture (Tran & Vu, 2017). These forms of intercultural responsibility are important in shaping the diplomatic practices especially for the students in my study, who came to the UK under educational scholarship.

Marsden et al. (2016) demonstrates through ethnography the diplomatic practices, skills and capacities that are deployed by Afghan traders. These transregional traders identify themselves as diplomats and emphasise how the skills of the trade are also those of diplomacy. The notion of being diplomatic here is the ability to speak multiple languages, the capacity to be flexible when representing themselves to others and also the convenience of living in multicultural surroundings. Drawing on the everyday diplomacy framework by Marsden et al. (2016), this paper seeks to make a case for exploring the everyday diplomacy of student migrants. It aims to extend the focus to the diplomatic practices and activities of these state sponsored students. It also seeks to understand these practices and activities as part of the effort they must invest into fulfilling the aspirations of Malay education policy and becoming both outstanding citizens of a good nation and the global ummah or community of Muslim believers. I now explore Malaysian students' aspirations to study in the UK.

The Aspiration to Study Abroad in Historical Context

In her book on race, education and citizenship, Koh (2017) argues that the culture of migration among Malaysian students abroad is the result of the legacy of British colonial-era racialisation, something that has been inherited and exacerbated by the postcolonial Malaysian state. In her findings, she concludes that the migration for education of the Malaysian-Chinese is seen as an exit strategy (Cartier, 2003; Fong, 2011). The desire of Malaysian-Chinese students to study abroad is due to the failure to the home country's failure to provide satisfactory education opportunities in prestigious universities or colleges in Malaysia, a situation arising from the National Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP is an affirmative-action policy which was aimed to eradicate poverty amongst all Malaysians and to restructure Malaysian society so that the identification of race with economic function and geographical location was reduced and eventually eliminated—especially the Malays, who were the *Bumiputera* ethnic group, made few advances in the modern economic sector, as their business class was very small and weak economically. Thus, building on this policy, this section would like to extend and contribute to the study of the effects of the NEP on Malaysian student migration. It will do so, however, from the vantage point of *Bumiputera* Malay students' aspirations to study abroad. This entails exploring not the experiences of an excluded minority but those of a privileged and dominant race that has received the highest proportion of scholarships from the Malaysian government through the NEP. In this latter, priority has been given to Malays in terms of access to education, government scholarships, property ownership, civil service jobs, subsidised housing and business licences (Lee, 2012). As a result, a sizeable Malay from the lower and middle class has evolved that has had the opportunity to study in both local universities and overseas institutions. Financial aid and scholarships in education have been offered to help Malays' aspirations for educational attainment.

Like Malaysian Chinese students' migration, above, transnational Chinese students in China also explained that study abroad was seen as an alternative route for students after their access to a prestigious education in China was denied (Fong, 2011). Hence, to achieve this aspiration, many parents invest an unprecedented amount of money, sell their homes and borrow money from their friends and relatives to pay for their children's tuition and living expenses. In China, this aspiration became more convincing with the one-child policy in 1970, whereby many urban middle-class parents encouraged their children to study abroad (Fong, 2011). However, the situation is different in the case of Malay students. The privileges which have been given to Malays in education have shaped the nature of their aspirations to study abroad. Though they are categorised as *Bumiputera* Malays by birth and have an advantage as a favoured race since British colonisation and the NEP, these students' aspiration to migrate overseas for their education nevertheless involves a great effort on their part, usually over the years in which they studied in primary or secondary school. Despite investing an unprecedented amount of money on their children's education, Malay parents

encourage their offspring to study hard by giving them full moral support in applying for places at boarding school and then government scholarships which facilitate their studying abroad. In this context, high achievement in education for many Malays is when their children succeed in winning scholarships for a university education abroad (Ibnu, 2019).

Investing money on education since their children were small (in a manner comparable to the Chinese and Malaysian Chinese students discussed by Fong (2011) and Koh (2017) is not an affordable practice for Malays largely because of their relatively low-income levels. In an exclusive interview on Channel NewsAsia in June 2018 with the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Muhamad, explained why these privileges in education and economy should continue to be given to the Malays. According to Mahathir, 'The reason why Malay students need scholarships to study overseas is because he finds that many Malay parents cannot afford to have a university education for their children'. He also explained that it is because Malay parents are primarily civil servants and wage earners, unlike the Malaysian Chinese who are primarily in business (Naidu 2018). Indeed, during my fieldwork, it was rare to meet Malay students who were self-funded or sponsored by wealthy parents.

Thus, education is perceived as one of the essential ways to render the Malays proud as a majority race that has a significant gap in poverty compared to the country's Chinese community. As Zerrin Salikutluk(2013) said, 'The salience of hoping for socioeconomic improvement can induce a strong belief in education as the key to upward mobility'(Zerrin Salikutluk,2013, p.7). For these sponsored Malay students, the opportunity to study abroad gives them the hope that they can improve their social status and economic condition, secure a job and also gain cultural exposure. The only affordable way for them to study aboard is by attaining excellent academic results in national examinations – a crucial step which qualifies them to apply for government scholarship. It means that they, too, have to compete and gain excellent results in order to get the scholarship, just as Chinese and Indian students have to do. Besides achieving good results, these students also need to involve themselves in a range of extra co-curricular activities and leadership skills, which furthers their chances of being awarded a scholarship over and above their outstanding academic achievements (Ibnu, 2019). The findings section demonstrates the efforts undertaken by these students in order to be awarded educational scholarships.

RESEARCH METHOD

The ethnographic fieldwork for this paper was based in two locations in the UK: Manchester and Cardiff, from January 2016 to January 2017. In my research, thirty Malay students became my informants. From thirty informants, only four students were self-sponsored. As the starting point for one year of intensive ethnographic research with Malay students in the UK, I spent an extended period of time in the northern English city of Manchester. The consideration of statistical data related to the presence of Malaysian students indicated that the city was indeed one of the favoured destinations for Malay students. In this ethnographic study, the data were collected in several ways. Methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, conversations and fieldnotes were deployed throughout the fieldwork. Participant observation is commonly associated with ethnographic research. It is a process of learning and comprehension in which the researcher is exposed to or involved in the daily activities of his or her study participants or groups (Schensul et al. 1999). Apart from observing the way they lived as an international student or a scholarship holder, I also had many conversations with them about their personal lives, family backgrounds, and interests or hobbies. These conversations have provided me with a wide range of perspectives in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds, their hometowns, and most importantly as a way to unpacking their aspiration in education (Trainor, 2018). Besides, in my fieldwork, I used a lot of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to determine the current events that were going on in the community that I was researching. Using Facebook was crucial for my research because I gained much real-time information, especially about the Malaysian community – much of which was displayed on their organisation page.

During the participant observation, I used visual data such as photographs, field notes and recordings to support my observations during the data collection. According to Bernard (2006), there are four types of field note – jottings, a diary, a log and field notes proper. The field notes are descriptions of

the events and the people whom I met during the fieldwork. They are the most important data in my research. I also took several photographs of the events and places that I visited. The data in my fieldnotes were developed through interactions with the informants or any interesting events that occurred which I found invaluable for my research. The scratch notes help me to produce my informants' viewpoint while observing or talking with them (Sanjek, 1996). Therefore, most of the keywords gathered in my scratch notes enabled me to explain something in more detail later. During the coding process, field notes and participant observation data have been integrated into the data analysis process for the extraction of meaning (Creswell & Creswell 2017, Patton 2002). All of the interviews and memos were transcribed and analysed manually based on the emerging themes from the interviews. To ensure that the obtained data were accurate, I summarized the findings from the semi-structured interviews and share with my informants to get their confirmation

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Aspirations to Study Abroad: The Route to UK Higher Education Institutions

Many Malay students in my research regarded an education scholarship as a passport for them to study abroad. One example is the case of Aty, 23, an optometry student from Cardiff University. Both her parents were police officers in the suburban city of Penang and she was the youngest daughter of three siblings. One thing I found interesting about Aty's background was that all her siblings had graduated in optometry. The main reason why they chose this course was because the oldest sister had managed to improve their family's finances by setting up an optometry business. Her motivation to study abroad started when she saw her older brother – who studied in the UK on government scholarships – return from the work and achieve a stable source of employment and social respect. This shows that personal networks such as family or friends are essential in shaping students' decisions to study abroad (Azmat et al. 2013; Collins 2008; King et al. 2011). Since her brother's return home she told her mother about her desire to study abroad. According to Aty,

When I told my mum that I wanted to study abroad like my brother, the first thing she told me was that I must study hard. If I did well in the SPM (Malaysian national examination) I could get a scholarship and have the opportunity to study overseas like him.

From then on, she was motivated to study hard, attend tuition classes and be active in sports and co-curricular activities. The ultimate aim at that time was to get an excellent result in order to be in a competitive position to apply for a scholarship. She hoped that she could make her parents proud and improve their family economic situation and legacy in optometry.

Unlike Aty, Ameera came from a rural area in Kelantan. She was the eldest daughter of six siblings. Her father worked as a taxi driver and her mother as a housewife. As the eldest child in her family, Ameera felt responsible for improving her family's economic status. Her ambition to be a doctor made her study hard so that she could help her father to support her siblings. However, the route to success was more difficult because she lived in a rural area where there was a lack of educational facilities and support. According to Ameera,

It is not easy for a village girl like me to be where I am today (studying in the UK). In my village, I can see that there is a lot of potential among the children; they are not lazy or not smart in their studies, but the problem is that they need motivation, support and exposure to academics. Thus, we have to study harder than those who live in urban areas...

In Ameera's case, she pointed out how geographical factors and the characteristics of life in the rural areas where most Malays live is an obstacle to Malays' developments and achievements in the field of education. Although similar facilities have been provided in rural areas by the government, the best schools always have good assistants, good teachers and excellent facilities (Mahathir 1970). Another scholar (Roslan 2001) also argues that the reason why many Malays in rural areas have fewer opportunities to enter the upper classes is because of the different mediums of instruction in schools under colonial rule – i.e. most of the English-medium schools were located in urban areas and were attended by Chinese and Indian immigrant children. Many Malays in rural areas were educated in government schools that used the Malay language

and this held them back from entering business and professional fields, which prefer people educated in English.

The above quotations show that Malays invest their individual and familial effort into achieving places in high-ranking universities with the long-term aim of winning a scholarship to study abroad. Although Malays are given priority in terms of access to scholarships in education, these students still have to compete amongst themselves and prove that they are the best candidates and the deserving recipients of a scholarship. However, compared to Bayly's (2007) research, as shown earlier in this paper, there is no evidence to show that the parents or students would use immoral ways such as bribery and corruption to attain scholarships. Instead, the students told me that the teachers and parents would encourage them to apply for as many scholarships as possible to increase their chances of studying abroad.

The Government's Aspiration Towards Malay Sponsored Students and the Challenges

The second theme demonstrates my ethnographic findings based on my participants observation and fieldnotes during the fieldwork in Manchester. The Malay students with whom I conducted my research felt that being a sponsored student – whether privately or state-funded – was a huge responsibility to carry. In comparison to the Chinese students' migration in Fong's (2011) studies, the floating life for my Malay students is their struggle to meet the government and family expectations of sponsored students. The first thing these students realised when coming to the UK was, they had to ensure that they demonstrated excellent moral behaviour of the type advocated by their sponsors and also maintain an excellent academic track record every term. Second, while living abroad, they were not only representing their family, but also their religion and nation. Thus, they were expected to be responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal wellbeing and to demonstrate excellent behaviour (*akhlaq*) in everyday life such as wearing modest clothes and being trustworthy, respectful and tolerant – and most importantly, being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large.

On 15 October 2016, my informants invited me to attend the Education Malaysia Engagement Session in the student union hall of the University of Manchester. Three Malaysian students' organisations organised the event: the Malaysia Community of Old Trafford (MCOT), the Kelab UMNO Salford and Manchester (KUSMA) and the Malaysian Student's Society of Manchester (MSSM) in conjunction with the Manchester Students' Carnival. The event aimed to introduce the newly arrived Malaysian students in Manchester to the educational attaché and to explain to them the roles that are played by the education officers in helping to shape the students' experience of studying abroad. It also aimed to promote the Malaysian student organisations in Manchester. My appearance at this event was not only as a research student but also as a teacher at Malaysia Community School of Manchester or *Sekolah Komuniti Malaysia Manchester* (SKMM), who attended the event in order to promote teaching as a volunteering experience to the new students. I attended the event with two of my informants, Afiqa and Ainaa, both of whom were students at the University of Manchester and also worked as teaching assistants at SKMM. Afiqa and Ainaa shared their work experience and explained to those gathered what they had learned from SKMM. They did so in order to encourage new students to volunteer their participation.

The event started at around 2.00 pm, and the audience mostly comprised first-year Malaysian students. The students and committee members wore formal clothes such as a blazer with black shoes. The ways these students presented themselves during this ceremony showed how they wanted to be seen by the Malaysian educational attaché – as a future leader or someone properly qualified to study abroad; this underscores the performative aspect of achievement in Malay students' lives as discussed above. This was obvious when Afiqa and Ainaa looked very conscious of their formal appearance, as they had to talk in front of the officers that day. The ceremony started with the national anthem, Lagu Negaraku and a doa or Quranic recitation. Besides the educational attaché, other chief guests for the day were officers from scholarship bodies, including the JPA and MARA. These people were in charge of the affairs of Malaysian sponsored students in the UK.

The event became more serious when the Malaysian Embassy contacted the attaché to get further details or confirmation about the Malaysian students studying in the UK who were involved in accidents while travelling outside the UK. However, what I found interesting in the speeches that evening by Mr Hazim and other officers was when they raised their concerns about the numbers of Malay overseas

graduates who still have a low proficiency in English when they returned home. He said that he hoped students would make friends with different groups of people in order to improve their English language skills.

Listening to Mr Hazim' and others' concerns about and aspirations for the English proficiency of Malay students led me to see the importance of the ethnographic approach to my research. It would be easy for us to say that these students had low English proficiency because they lived with Malays and did not speak English often. Yet we know little about the broader challenges they faced and efforts they invested in improving their English proficiency during the course of their everyday lives in the UK. It is quite striking to know that many of my Malay informants stated that they felt disappointed because of the slim opportunities available to them to make friends with local and European international students on their courses. This was the case for most of my informants, especially those studying Finance and Accounting in Manchester. In my interviews with them, the students stated that most of the international students on their course were Asian and mainly from China. Afia, 22, from Selangor, told me that she felt disappointed because she never thought this would be the case during her studies abroad,

I thought that I could speak more English when I studied here (Manchester). But it seems that it won't happen because most of my course mates are Malays and Chinese from China. And we only mingle among ourselves.

Due to the substantial numbers of Asian students on her course, Afia and her friends rarely had the chance to interact with local and other international students in English. When I asked her why she did not want to sit with other Asian students during the lecture she told me that most of them feel comfortable sitting together in their own groups (for example, the Chinese students from China would all sit together, as would Malays) and the substantial number of them on the course made it seem unimportant for them to extend their friendship networks. Thus, to improve her English proficiency and to have non-Malays friends, these Malay students took the initiative of registering in different tutorial classes, participating in voluntary activities and attending foreign-language classes at the university. This strategy provided them with a greater opportunity to engage with other international students from different countries. Hence, it is important for the Malaysian Higher Education to understand the struggles and experiences of these students in their overseas environment campus. Besides, this finding also demonstrates these sponsored students were trying their best to integrate with the host and international students' community in order to learn different cultures, make friendships and improve their confidence in English. Next sections unpack the experiences of students as mini diplomats in achieving the aspirations above.

Students as Mini Diplomats

Duit Rakyat and Expectations. A further essential aspect of Malay students' behaviour that I heard a great deal about during my fieldwork concerned their relationship to the financial allowance they received as a *'duit rakyat'* (the Malay term for the tax paid by Malaysian citizens to the government that is used to sponsor excellent students to study abroad). Interestingly, *'duit rakyat'* is used among my Malay student informants to remind each other of their responsibility and the hopes that their family and other Malaysians had in them.

For Afia, a 23-year-old from Selangor, living as a sponsorship student in the UK meant that she had a huge responsibility which was quite a burden. She told me that she had to study hard for three years because she knew that the allowance she received was coming from the taxpayer, including her parents, in Malaysia. According to Afia,

It is not only a responsibility to a country, but also as the first daughter in my family to go abroad to study. I find it very difficult because they have high expectations of me [and because] I feel like I'm an ambassador.

The high expectations of her family and her responsibility to the country made her feel as though she was not just a student but also an ambassador. The situation became dangerous when the government and sponsorship officials in the UK raised several issues that addressed how students should utilise their education experience abroad.

Diplomatic and Religious Reputation. Previous ethnographic studies of international students have dealt with the ‘floating life’, temporality and intercultural adjustments, and it is quite striking that religion was absent in most students’ lives (Fong 2011; Hansen 2015). In my study, religion had become the central part of the everyday lives of most Malay students. Besides getting a degree, these students ensured that they learned as much as they could about culture, language and, most importantly, how to handle their religion in diplomatic ways. When the female Malay students first went to the UK, one of the particular things they were able to experience primarily in the Western landscape was the stigma towards Muslims following the various terrorist issues. For many Malay students, the route to getting a degree in life had a lot to do with their juggling the balance between education and religion. Despite their roles as sponsored students and mini ambassadors, the undesirable Muslim stigma and being a student migrant influenced the ways in which they behaved in everyday life. During my interviews, many students presented themselves as mini ambassadors for both nation and religion when they were going to class or taking part in various social activities. Many students also shared with me their challenges in integrating with non-Muslim friends.

This, however, did not stop them from trying to learn and prepare themselves through several strategies regarding Islamic knowledge, Malaysian general information and current international issues. In term of the religious aspect, Aida, 24, a final year accounting student in Manchester, found that being the only Muslim in her class made her feel like a Muslim ambassador. Since she wore the hijab, she was easily recognisable by her classmates:

In my class, I am the only one who wears the hijab; otherwise they are mostly Chinese so my classmates can soon see if I don't go to class..... I should make an impact. I feel like an ambassador. Because everything I do they will think ‘Oh Muslims are like this’.

Since she was the only Muslim in her class, many students asked her about Islam. Feeling responsible as a Muslim, Aida took the initiative to learn more about Islam by reading books and going to usrah to explain to her international friends about Islam. She also tried to find the simplest method to explain to them so that they could understand the concepts she was talking about. For example, Aida watched YouTube clips of Muslim scholars talking on simple dakwah skills for non-Muslims. For these students, besides carrying the heavy ‘burden’ as sponsored students, they also have to deal with the idea of well-balanced citizenship in the context of a challenging and highly diverse Western educational environment. To achieve all these aspirations, state and socially sanctioned forms of good moral behaviour, faith and reputation needed to be constantly upheld and enacted in their daily lives. They also had to deal with many hurdles, especially cultural differences, in the new environment. This challenge was unavoidable as they needed to face every day, which required them to act diplomatically as international and sponsored students abroad.

Community Engagements and Transnational Contribution. This section explores the aspirations of the female Malay Muslim students in community engagements and transnational contribution. It documents these in terms of improving the Malaysia education system and becoming well-balanced citizens, thereby building on earlier sections of this paper in which I emphasised the ways in which aspiration among Malay students reflected both their personal desires as well as the collectivist goal of the Malaysian nation-state. Besides promoting good *akhlaq* (behaviour) and diplomatic practices in everyday lives, it showed how female students also seek to cultivate a ‘patriotic spirit’ by engaging in a range of volunteering activities. Volunteering in the field of education was one of the major activities in which the students in this study were active. Most of the informants became volunteers because they were curious to know how school education in the UK operated, were keen to engage with the local community or meet new people as well as acquiring skills and work experience. As Badri (2015) argues, participating in volunteering activities also provided these students with useful skills, personal development and confidence in helping the community. From her research on the perceptions of and aspirations to social responsibility of Saudi youth, the results show that personal desire, loyalty to the acquisition of community spirit and of new skills and knowledge is the highest factor influencing for young people’s participation in volunteer work (Badri, 2015, p. 244). Thus, the volunteering by the female Malay informants in my own research shows that they were students with aspirations and not passive actors, because they enjoyed participating

in activities which related to their future goal of contributing to God, nation and community (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996).

During my fieldwork in Manchester, I was repeatedly struck by the efforts made by these Malay students, who invested their weekends in teaching the Malay child migrants at supplementary school. One example in my research was the Malay students' participation in the Malaysia Community School of Manchester (SKMM). Unlike those in Cardiff, the Malay students in Manchester had the opportunity to contribute to the life skills of Malaysian children who lived abroad by teaching them the subjects that were not taught in the UK state-school syllabus – such as the Malay language, Islamic education and *Jawi* (the Arabic alphabet for writing Malay), Malaysian history and traditional cultures. An exchange of knowledge, culture and self-development occurred among them. Holdsworth (2010) argues that volunteering can develop students' sense of civic duty and responsibility. This was the case of Hafiza, 23, a student at the University of Manchester, who told me that her interest in being a volunteer at SKMM provided her with a platform from which to serve the Malay community abroad,

'You know what?... I feel happy that I could teach the kids about Malaysia as some of them have never been there'.

What is more, these students not only helped in the academic sense but also played an essential role in assisting the migrant children's religious life such as teaching the basic Quran and praying. I remember that there was also a Malay mother who drove five hours from Scotland every Saturday to send her children to this school. While I was having a conversation with her at the school one morning, she shared with me that the reason why she was willing to travel to this school every week was because she needed help to teach her children about Islam, and especially about praying. There were not many cities that had supplementary schools and she did not know anyone who could help her to do it.

A similar response was also provided by Aini, a biology student in Manchester who took the Leadership of Learning subject as an option on her course. As a task for the subject, she shared her experiences when doing a placement in a local primary school,

These children were inquisitive when they did not understand something... This is so unlike the ways we were taught in school, you know. I mean like...sometimes we were not brave enough and could not really ask more questions in class...and they (the teachers) always expected us to understand it as was.

From this description, we can see that the students also learned from the Malaysian and local children during the lessons, especially in terms of ideas about critical-thinking skills and the courage required to ask a question in the class. Huda, who hoped to work as a lecturer in a suburban area in Penang after her PhD, wanted to contribute to society by setting up a community learning centre for marginalised children, providing them with free tuition. For her, it was essential for the oldest child in a low-class family to have proper guidance on and motivation for his or her direction in life. Speaking about motivation and support, Aini told me her desire to engage more with non-governmental organisations to help school pupils in education by giving them motivation and guidance to apply for university and scholarships. As an example, she would also share her personal experiences as an overseas student. Thus, these transnational contribution through volunteering work by these students have demonstrated their diplomatic responsibility towards the Malaysian children's migrants in the UK.

Career Aspirations

At the end of my fieldwork, I spent my winter break with my informants in Scotland. The five-day trip was to visit their close friend, Hannah (24), who was doing pre-optometry preparation at an opticians in Edinburgh. Hannah was a cheerful lady who had graduated from Cardiff University. During our trip, we had a conversation and she told me about her course and the reason why she decided to return to the UK. After graduating, she spent a year working in Malaysia. However, it was quite a frustrating experience because she could not practice a great deal of what she had learnt in the UK. She found that the full eye-care routine was only available in hospitals but not in optometrists' practices in Malaysia. According to Hannah:

In optometry, I learned much about health care for the eyes. It is more than just checking the strength of the eyes and selling spectacles. When there is a patient, we do the full eye routine...and

this was not happening in Malaysia. I did not learn much. The patient was a customer and we were selling spectacles rather than an eye-care service.

There are many elements lacking in eye-care in Malaysia. Most of the optometrists' practices in Malaysia do not focus on the full eye check as they do in the UK. She explained that:

In the UK, a customer needs to make an appointment for a full eye check-up to be prescribed spectacles or contact lenses. There are many procedures to be carried out before the customers are able to buy the spectacles or contact lenses. However, in Malaysia, an optometrist would either do an eye test, or recommend or take an order for the spectacles or contact lenses for the customer.

She also added that contact lenses in Malaysia are also available only in one standard size. While on her course, she learnt that customers need to have their eyes properly measured for contact lenses as there are many different sizes. The full eye check-up will determine which size is suitable for the patient. From her training in the UK, she also discovered that those who went to the opticians for a full eye check-up were treated as patients while, in Malaysia, the patient was a customer. For her, it was essential to do the whole eye routine because it could prevent someone from another illness that could be identified by doing the full eye test. As a UK optometry graduate, she and her Malaysian optometry friends hoped that they would be able to practice the full eye routine and educate customers about optical healthcare rather than just sell products in the opticians. Thus, she told me that her aspiration was to gain as much work experience in the UK as she could in the hope that she would be able to help others and implement British eye-care practice when she returned to Malaysia one day. Hannah's case tells us of the aspirations and concerns experienced by undergraduate students in Cardiff who were mainly there as MARA scholarship recipients.

In addition, the students also hope that the Malaysian government will pay greater attention to the value of professionalism in a career. In this case, the optometry students were sponsored to become professional optometrists but, when they returned home, they found that the job scope and environment had devalued. As in the case above, an optometrist was only perceived as an optician – i.e. seller of spectacles – rather than an expert in eye-care itself. This also explains the importance of overseas students building careers and not just those activities which turn out to be market-driven. Thus, this paper suggests that a blueprint or policy for career development by the Malaysian government towards sponsored students is needed to support build a professionalism career as professional optometrists.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper has documented and analysed the educational aspirations of female Malaysian Muslim students by focusing on the multidimensional aspect of their lives as scholarship holders, addressing in particular how they handle diplomatic practices in their everyday lives as Malaysian mini ambassadors overseas. This focus is essential because there is a lack of discussion on international students' experiences which focuses on the pressure placed upon scholarship holders by families and by the awarding bodies. The culture of educational migration and aspirations of Malay students today are heavily influenced by the legacy of British colonial-era racialisation. My findings show that the privileges in education for *Bumiputera* Malays has shaped the notion of achievement they hold and their attitude towards overseas education as well as their experiences abroad. As a result, many Malay parents encourage their children to perform well in school in order to win a scholarship, which they perceive as a way to improve their social and economic status. Besides, for the many Malays in my research, achieving an excellent result in national examinations also indicated that the student was hard-working and intelligent; this is important because it reinforces Malay collective self-pride in the face of colonially derived stereotypes of Malays as 'the lazy native'. With all the expectations and uplifting aspirations of being educated abroad, they also come to recognise themselves as mini diplomats.

For policy recommendation, this paper suggests that there should be a blueprint or a professional association for overseas sponsored students to share their ideas and knowledge in their respective field of studies to help them pursue their professional careers which could benefit the country. Besides, this paper also recommends an intercultural responsibility handbook for sponsored Malaysian students who are going to pursue their education at overseas institutions which includes the aspiration and expectations of the Malaysian Higher Education government towards them.

The findings of this study can be developed by doing more ethnographic research on returnee sponsored students on their career development when they return to their home country. Further study can explore what are the challenges or opportunities they have in pursuing their professional careers in Malaysia as a Malay overseas educated. Besides, it is important to know their future direction and socio-economic status after obtaining the scholarship and overseas degree.

REFERENCES

- Badri, A.Y. (2015). The perceptions and aspirations of Saudi youth to social responsibility: A social survey among students of King Abdul Aziz University. *Asian Academic Research Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 2(5), 235–252. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1133112.pdf>
- Bayly, S. (2007). *Asian voices in a postcolonial age. Vietnam, India and beyond*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bayly, S. (2014). How to forge a creative student-citizen: achieving the positive in today's Vietnam. *Modern Asian Studies*, 48(3), 493–523. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X13000504>
- Bernard, H. R. (2006). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (4th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cartier, C. L. (2003). Diaspora and social restructuring in postcolonial Malaysia. In L. J. C. Ma & C. L. Cartier (Eds.), *The Chinese diaspora: Space, place, mobility, and identity* (pp. 69–96). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Chee, W. (2017). Opportunities, challenges, and transitions: educational aspirations of Pakistani migrant youth in Hong Kong. *Children's Geographies*, 16(1), 92–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2017.1380782>
- Cohen, R. (1998). Putting diplomatic studies on the map. *Diplomatic Studies Program Newsletter*. Centre for the Study of Diplomacy.
- Constantinou, C. (2016). Everyday diplomacy: Mission, spectacle and the remaking of diplomatic culture. In J. Dittmer & F. McConnell (Eds.), *Diplomatic cultures and international politics: Translations, spaces and alternatives* (pp. 23–40). Routledge.
- Constantinou, C., Kerr, P., & Sharp, P. (2016). *The SAGE handbook of diplomacy* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Cooper, A. F. (2008). *Diplomacy*. Paradigm Publishers
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Fong, V. (2011). *Paradise redefined: Transnational Chinese students and the quest for flexible citizenship in the developed world*. Stanford University Press.
- Hallberg Adu, K. (2019). Student migration aspirations and mobility in the global knowledge society: The case of Ghana. *Journal of International Mobility*, 7(1), 23–43. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-journal-of-international-mobility-2019-1-page-23.htm>
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). (2019). Higher education student statistics: UK 2018/19. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/16-01-2020/sb255-higher-education-student-statistics>
- Holdsworth, C. (2010). Why volunteer? Understanding motivations for student volunteering. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 58(4), 421–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2010.527666>
- Ibnu, I. N. (2022). The taste of home: The construction of social relationships through commensality amongst female Malay students in the United Kingdom. *Journal Of Nusantara Studies (Jonus)*, 7(1), 316–334. <https://Doi.Org/10.24200/Jonus.Vol7iss1pp316-334>
- Ibnu, I., & Azman, N. (2021). The role of Islamic Piety Movements in the lives of Malaysian female Muslim students in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153211027011>
- Ibnu, I. N. (2019). *Female Malaysian Muslim students' experiences in the United Kingdom: Piety and everyday life in Manchester and Cardiff*. Doctoral thesis (PhD), University of Sussex.
- Koh, S. Y. (2017). *Race, education and citizenship: Mobile Malaysians, British colonial legacies, and a culture of migration*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lee, H.-A. (2012) Affirmative action in Malaysia: Education and employment outcomes since the 1990s. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 42(2), 230–254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2012.668350>

- Liao, K., & Asis, M. (2020). Back to the Philippines: Connecting aspirations, return and social remittances in international student migration. *Asian And Pacific Migration Journal*, 29(3), 402–421. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0117196820964999>
- Long, N. & Moore, H. (eds) (2013). *The social life of achievement*. Berghahn.
- Marsden, Magnus, Ibañez-Tirado, Diana & Henig, David (2016). Everyday diplomacy: Introduction to special issue. *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 34(2), 2–22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/ca.2016.340202>
- Naidu, S. (2018). Affirmative action still needed to bridge the gap and avoid conflict between Malays, Chinese. CNA. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/affirmative-action-malays-mahathir-malaysia-819546?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter
- Newman, A. (2019). The influence of migration on the educational aspirations of young men in northern Senegal: Implications for policy. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 65, 216–226. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2018.08.005>
- Patton. M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Quaglia, R. J. & Cobb, C. D. (1996). Toward a theory of student aspirations. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 12(3), 127–132. <https://quagliainstitute.org/uploads/legacy/TowardsTheoryofSA.pdf>
- Roslan, A. H. (2001). Income inequality, poverty and development policy in Malaysia. Paper presented at a conference on ‘Poverty and Sustainable Development’, Université Montésquieu-Bourdeaux IV, 22–23 November.
- Sanjek, R. (1990). *Fieldnotes: The makings of anthropology*. Cornell University Press.
- Scheibelhofer, E. (2003). *Migration und individualisierung: Grundlegende handlungsorientierungen bei auswanderungen aus Westeuropa in die Vereinigten Staaten*. Peter Lang.
- Scheibelhofer, E. (2018). Shifting migration aspirations in second modernity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), 999–1014. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384151>
- Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews, and questionnaires*. Altamira Press.
- Schielke, S. (2009). Being good in Ramadan: ambivalence, fragmentation and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15(s1), 24–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01540.x>
- Schneider, L. (2018). Access and aspirations: Syrian refugees’ experiences of entering higher education in Germany. *Research in Comparative And International Education*, 13(3), 457–478. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499918784764>
- Senin, N., & Ng, I. (2012). Educational aspirations of Malay youths from low-income families in Singapore. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, 22(4), 253–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185385.2012.739473>
- Shakya, Y. B., Guruge, S., Hynie, M., Akbari, A., Malik, M., Htoo, S., Khogali, A., Mona, S. A., Murtaza, R., & Alley, S. (2012). Aspirations for higher education among newcomer refugee youth in Toronto: Expectations, challenges, and strategies. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 27(2), 65–78. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.34723>
- Sharp, P. (2009). *Diplomatic theory of international relations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Trainor, A. (2018). Community conversation as a method of gathering and analyzing qualitative data. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 29(1), 2–6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207317739403>
- Zerrin, S. (2013). *Immigrants’ aspiration paradox: Theoretical explanations and determinants of the aspiration gap between native and immigrant students*. Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung.
- Kang, J-J & Metcalfe, A. S. (2019). Living and learning between Canada and Korea: The academic experiences and cultural challenges of undergraduate international exchange students. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, 11(2), 28–36. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v11iFall.1074>

IREENA NASIHA IBNU, senior lecturer at Faculty of Communication and Media Studies at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia. She obtained her PhD in Migration Studies, University of Sussex, UK. Her major research interests lie in the area of intercultural communication, gender, transnational migration, and international student mobility.

ORCID

Ireena Nasiha <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6966-0088>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: This research was supported by Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA). I also thank to my supervisors, Prof Magnus Marsden and Dr. Anne-Meike Fechter who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted the research.