

## Shared Values of Students' Political Freedom: The Perspective of Public University Students in Peninsular Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

Each university in Malaysia has its shared values to guide its organizational staff and students despite being highlighted as political values. However, only a little research highlights or relates shared political values at the university level, particularly among university students in Malaysia. Therefore, the study was conducted with the purpose of finding a common ground of shared values that relate to political values emphasized by universities and embraced by students. This paper highlights the shared values of student political freedom held by public university students in Peninsular Malaysia. This study analyzed some of the perspectives of the students to provide some of their views towards the values of political freedom by conducting in-depth interviews with 60 participants. The study found three primary themes representing the core values guiding these students' political engagement.

Firstly, the importance of knowledge and *adab* in every aspect of students' political actions and decisions. Secondly, leadership and integrity values take centre stage, as participants stress the need for ethical leadership that prioritizes the nation's interests over personal gain. Thirdly, the value of patriotism and national identity becomes apparent, with students expressing a profound sense of loyalty and pride towards their nation. The study concludes that fostering these political values among university students is vital for a mature and responsible political culture. It suggests disseminating these values

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through formal, non-formal, and informal education, promoting civic responsibility and active citizenship. Collaborative efforts across all levels of society are deemed essential for achieving a humane and prosperous nation, where political freedom and engagement are guided by knowledge, *adab*, leadership, integrity, and patriotism. Embracing these values enables Malaysian students to contribute significantly to the nation's progress and democratic development.

*Keywords:* Democracy, shared values, student political freedom

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 2019, the amendment of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) has shown the improvement of supportive mechanisms for political freedom for university students. However, the provision and legal framework may not be sufficient to support the positive environment of students' political activism. A few incidents involving university students in public demonstrations, such as black flag demonstrations and protests related to Undi18 (Weiss, 2005), incite a concern about the values that guide the students in expressing their political freedom. Having more political freedom does not make the students sufficiently capable of driving themselves to be mature and ethical in their actions and decisions. Past studies (Altbach, 2006; Sigel, 1965) have shown the significance of political values and norms in driving the orientation of students' political activity. So, what are the political values embraced by Malaysia's university students in guiding their actions in expressing their political freedoms?

Reisinger (1995) highlighted the complex and dynamic nature of political value formation, influenced by factors like family, education, peer groups, and media.

Cultural factors, shaped by historical, social, and economic conditions, also play a significant role in shaping societal norms and values, which in turn influence individual political perspectives. Economic factors, such as wealth distribution and financial levels, can further impact how individuals perceive and engage with political issues. For instance, historical events like the May 13 Incident in Malaysia have had a lasting impact on the nation's political landscape, shaping the political values of subsequent generations, including university students (Othman & Ali, 2018). Educational institutions, through their curricula and extracurricular activities, can foster critical thinking and expose students to diverse perspectives, thereby influencing their political beliefs (O'Neill, 2022). Media, particularly social media, has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and mobilizing political action, especially among young people.

It is important to consider the intersectionality of various factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, in shaping political values (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, female students may prioritize gender equality and women's rights, while students from marginalized communities

may be more concerned with issues of social justice and equity. Additionally, students from rural areas may have different political perspectives compared to those from urban areas, influenced by factors like access to education, employment opportunities, and exposure to diverse cultures.

By critically analyzing the dominant political discourse, we can uncover how it shapes the political values of university students. Dominant narratives, often perpetuated by mainstream media and political elites, can influence public opinion and limit the range of acceptable political viewpoints (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Tran, 2022). However, critical thinking and exposure to alternative perspectives can challenge these dominant narratives and foster more nuanced and independent political values.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the common ground of shared values that influence students' engagement in political activities. It is likely that students' political values are primarily shaped by their social upbringing, political socialization, and involvement in university activities, which are embedded within a broader political culture. The specific activities they engage in, their level of involvement, and their social circles can significantly influence their understanding and aspirations for political freedom.

Furthermore, the rise of social media has revolutionized political discourse, particularly among young people (Leong, 2019). Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok can shape public opinion, mobilize

activism, and expose students to diverse political perspectives (Grigoryan, 2024). Student organizations also play a crucial role in fostering political awareness and activism, providing a platform for students to discuss political issues, organize events, and engage in social justice campaigns.

While this study does not get into the specific factors that influence students' perspectives, it posits that their expressed opinions reflect their conceptual understanding and aspirations for political freedom within the university context. Although they may not fully practise these ideals in their daily lives, their understanding of political freedom shapes their engagement with political issues and their potential to become active citizens.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of political values and political freedom is part of political culture theory. This theory was popularised by Almond and Verba (1963) in their seminal work *A Civic Culture*, which laid the foundation for understanding how cultural factors influence political systems and citizen participation. This political theory has been successful as a theoretical foundation in political science because it provides a convincing explanation of the role of culture as a mediator between citizens and the dynamics of the structure, organization, and operation of the state (Voinea & Neumann, 2020). Almond and Powell define political culture as compiled by Giang, (2024) as a set of personal beliefs and inclinations of members of subjective systems that form political action and make

the political action meaningful. In other words, political culture refers to a collective attitude, values, and beliefs about politics and government that are prevalent within a society. Meanwhile, as a theory, political culture is a framework used to understand the deeply rooted norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape political behaviour and institutions within a society. It provides insights into how these cultural elements influence political systems and the actions of individuals and groups within them.

Political values may be understood as political relationships, institutions, organizations, views, and ideas resulting from the transforming, creative socio-political practice of the social forces that meet the requirements of social progress and the development of human personality on a social scale (Kallos & Trasnea, 1982). In essence, political values serve as a mediator in creating and assimilating other values, which shape and influence other values in society. It is important to note that no specific list of political values is embedded in any society. Therefore, in distinguishing the values, one may employ different approaches to values and the intrinsic characteristics of political values. Furthermore, political values are generally based on historical experiences, social institutions, ideas, or ideals that meet the requirements for the free and equitable development of the human personality, collectiveness, and, ultimately, humanity.

Halman (2007) groups political values into traditional and new political values. Traditional political values are those values

that have been established for a long time and have been passed down from generation to generation. Those traditional values are deeply ingrained in a society's culture and traditions, including respect for authority, loyalty to the nation's state, and adherence to traditional social norms and customs. Meanwhile, new political values are prevailing in the current contemporary society. The new political values centre around conflicts emerging from post-industrial societies and issues revolving around citizenship, democracy, and social justice. As seen everywhere, politicians and activists fight for environmentalism, feminism, multiculturalism, human rights, and individual freedom. Considering that we are in postmodernism, new political values do not entirely eradicate the traditional ones. Instead, these two coexist within the political realms.

Across all societies within the political sphere, political values play a significant role as the foundations of people's political behaviours, especially in voting and showing orientation towards political objects. In this matter, Karwat (1982) explains that people are inclined to use political values as their abstract ideas to reflect the beliefs and attitudes of different social groups towards their own needs and those of society. Social needs here could be implied as objectified ideas of social phenomena that bring lasting significance and importance to the satisfaction of the needs of large groups and society. Social needs may include equality, freedom, solidarity, and justice. As mentioned previously, political

needs are bound to complex dynamics. Hence, conservatives and liberals may have different ideas of social needs.

Malaysia's youth have emerged as a powerful force in shaping the country's political landscape. Their increasing engagement in social and political issues reflects a growing desire for change and a commitment to democratic values. This study examines the evolving political culture of Malaysian youth, focusing on how shared values influence their political participation. By drawing on Almond and Verba (1963) framework, we analyze the transition from a subject to a participant political culture among young Malaysians.

Almond and Verba (1963, p.16) identify three ideal types of political culture: parochial, subject, and participant. In a parochial culture, individuals have limited awareness of political processes and focus primarily on local issues. For instance, in traditional societies, people may be more concerned with family, clan, or village affairs than national politics. A subject culture, on the other hand, involves citizens who are aware of the political system but have limited influence over it. They may passively follow political developments but rarely engage in political activities. In contrast, a participant culture is characterized by active citizen engagement, where individuals actively participate in political processes, such as voting, protesting, and lobbying. Democratic societies often strive to cultivate a participant culture, as it is essential for a healthy and responsive democracy. In Malaysia, the political culture among youth

is increasingly shifting towards a participant culture, as evidenced by the rise of youth-led movements like Undi18.

Shared values, such as democracy, equality, justice, and freedom of expression, are the foundation of a vibrant and engaged citizenry. These values foster social cohesion and political legitimacy by providing a common ground for diverse individuals to come together. Past research suggests that Malaysian youth often prioritize values like democracy, justice, and freedom of expression (Zain & Din, 2022). These values are cultivated through a variety of socialization processes, including family, education, and media (Mia et al., 2021). Universities play a crucial role in shaping young people's political beliefs and attitudes. Through curricular activities, extracurricular organizations, and social interactions, universities can foster critical thinking, civic engagement, and a sense of social responsibility. Additionally, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for young people to connect with like-minded individuals, share ideas, and mobilize for social and political change (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). However, it is important to note that social media can also be a source of misinformation and polarisation, which may challenge the cultivation of shared values.

This study posits that shared democratic values significantly influence political participation. As Almond and Verba emphasize, a civic culture characterized by shared democratic values motivates citizens to engage in political activities such

as voting, protesting, and participating in civic organizations. This active participation is crucial for a healthy democracy, as it ensures that governments remain responsive to the needs and desires of their citizens. When individuals share common values, they are more likely to support political freedoms and participate actively in the political process, fostering the trust essential for democratic institutions to function effectively. Moreover, societies with strong democratic values tend to prioritize policies that protect political freedom and encourage civic engagement, further enhancing democratic health.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of political freedom in Malaysian public universities has not gained significant attention as an empirical study despite recent legislative changes and the evolving political landscape. Politics in Malaysian public universities can be a complex and significant aspect of campus life. As institutions of higher learning, public universities serve as platforms for academic excellence, critical thinking, and the development of future leaders. However, they are not immune to political influences and challenges. Politics in Malaysian public universities are characterized by several key aspects, including students' politics, freedom of speech, campus activism, and government influence (Zuan, 2021).

In essence, Malaysian public universities often have active student political bodies and organizations. Student elections are held to elect student representatives who

advocate for the interests and welfare of students. These student bodies can engage in various activities, including organizing events, voicing concerns, and participating in national issues (Ismail et al., 2016). While public universities are spaces for intellectual discourse, there have been occasional concerns about the limitations on freedom of speech and expression. Authorities may place restrictions on certain political activities or discussions that are deemed sensitive or against university policies. In the recent work Zain et al. (2023), student political freedom in public universities in Southern Malaysia is strictly regulated by university rules and regulations that contradict the 2018 Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) amendment. Public universities in Malaysia have a history of campus activism. Student groups may organize protests, demonstrations, and campaigns to address various social, political, and environmental issues (Weiss, 2020). These activities reflect the spirit of civic engagement and social responsibility among students. Malaysian public universities are funded and regulated by the government as public institutions. This factor may contribute to some level of government interference in university affairs, including the appointment of university leadership and funding decisions.

Like the broader Malaysian society, ethno-political considerations can influence public universities. Some student organizations and activities may align with specific ethnic or political groups, leading to diverse perspectives and debates on campus (Zuan, 2021). Maintaining academic freedom



and university autonomy can sometimes be challenging in the context of balancing the interests of various stakeholders, including the government, university administration, faculty, and students. This balance is essential for upholding the integrity of academic pursuits. University policies, guidelines, and governance structures, particularly those that encourage student involvement in decision-making and foster transparent communication, play significant roles in shaping the political climate on campuses. Examples include initiatives like student representation in university councils, co-curricular leadership programs, and debate forums that provide platforms for students to express opinions on social and political issues. These mechanisms allow students to actively engage with political concepts and foster political awareness, contributing to a practical foundation in political values through lived experience on campus. Such engagement, in turn, builds trust among stakeholders and promotes a supportive environment for student political activities.

Much like broader civil society, political values among university students vary widely due to the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and ideologies present on campus. In Malaysian public universities, this diversity mirrors the multicultural nature of the country, where students value unity, social justice, and inclusivity, which are reinforced through campus activities, inter-university events, and community service projects. Malaysian students often advocate for issues such as equal rights, fair

treatment, and environmental sustainability (Ting & Ahmad, 2022; Zuan, 2021). These values are not developed in isolation but are shaped through a continuous socialization process involving interactions with peers, faculty, and university policies that support these values.

Furthermore, concern for the environment and sustainability is a prevalent political value among Malaysian students. They actively engage in environmental initiatives and call for action on climate change. Human rights advocacy is also one of the common political values in which university students in Malaysia often advocate for human rights and speak out against discrimination, social injustices, and human rights abuses both within the country and globally. Indeed, Malaysian students highly value education and often advocate for accessible, quality education that prepares individuals for future challenges (Weiss, 2012). Political values also encompass the preservation and recognition of cultural identity and rights. Students may advocate for preserving indigenous cultures, language rights, and cultural heritage.

The Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) is the primary legal framework that governs the political freedom and activism of university students in Malaysia. Enacted in 1971 and came into force on September 15, 1971, the UUCA has undergone several amendments over the years, with the most recent update being in 2023. It was originally enacted to regulate the establishment and administration of universities and university colleges

in Malaysia. Nevertheless, it has been criticized for restricting student political activities and freedom of expression on campus. The 2023 amendment has marked a rather significant shift in supporting political freedom and activism among university students. The recent update grants student bodies increased autonomy, allowing them to manage finances and organize activities independently. However, the UUCA remains a controversial piece of legislation as it has not yet addressed the fundamental issues of student freedom of expression and political participation.

As highlighted earlier, the recent amendments to the UUCA have undoubtedly opened new avenues for student freedom and activism. However, the broader political climate within Malaysian public universities remains complex and nuanced. While the legal framework has loosened up, societal and institutional pressures can still stifle student voices. Undeniably, university students across the country are anticipating more open policies on political freedom, both on and off campus—particularly under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, a former prominent student activist.

The November 2022 Malaysian general election (GE15) was a historic event that expanded voting rights to include 1.2 million new voters aged 18 to 20. This demographic, nearly 38% of whom were students in higher education, played a crucial role in influencing the outcome of the election (Morshidi et al., 2023). As a significant voting bloc, students in higher education hold significant influence over election results. To appeal to this demographic,

political parties have strategically included issues related to higher education and student welfare in their manifestos.

University students perceive this reform as a step towards greater political participation. Reflecting this sentiment, student groups have increasingly called for the abolition of the UUCA in recent years. During the parliamentary debate on March 28, 2023, Higher Education Minister Khaled Nordin pledged that the government would not allow any political parties to set up branches in tertiary education institutions, deeming it inappropriate. On top of that, Khaled firmly stated that the issuance of permits for politicians to enter universities or colleges falls under the jurisdiction of each institution's vice chancellor rather than his ministry's authority. While the ministry acknowledges that the current Act has been seen as repressive to students, it is committed to reforming it to enhance students' freedom to engage in political activities. The UUCA will be amended to allow university students to openly participate in politics, including joining political parties and running as candidates, among other rights (Parliament of Malaysia, 2023). Amending the UUCA would be a more practical approach to accommodate the evolving needs of university students rather than abolishing it entirely. The latter would require the development of a new university constitution for all public universities, a time-consuming process that could disrupt higher education operations.

Comparing the ideals of the National Education Philosophy (NEP) with the current restrictions on student political



freedom reveals a significant disconnect. The NEP, established in 1988, guides Malaysia's national education system. Aligned with the National Principles (Rukun Negara), NEP aims to cultivate a united and progressive society by fostering holistic development in students (Al-Hudawi et al., 2014). One of the principles highlighted in NEP is democratic principles, aiming to cultivate citizens who are active and responsible participants in society. Therefore, student political freedom is a critical aspect of accomplishing this goal. By engaging in political discourse, students can develop critical thinking skills, tolerance and respect for the rule of law, which are essential for democratic citizenship (DeLue & Dale, 2021). Additionally, students who participate in political activities instil a sense of civic responsibility that further empowers them to become catalysts for positive change (Chia et al., 2024). Along these lines, promoting student political freedom is not only consistent with the NEP but also essential for developing future leaders who can contribute to a just and progressive society.

While the UUCA continues to be a subject of debate, it is imperative to ensure that university students have the freedom to engage in political discourse. This aligns with the goals of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), which seeks to produce well-rounded individuals capable of contributing to society. Through this blueprint, the Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education aspires to create holistic, entrepreneurial

and balanced graduates. In the spirit of this, fostering political freedom for students not only enriches their personal development but also invigorates society (Ganapathy, 2016). These experiences mould students into individuals who embody values-driven principles, foster political freedom and complement the blueprint's broader aspiration of developing values-driven Malaysians who are both globally aware and deeply rooted in Malaysian identity (MOE, 2015).

## METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative approach, adopting in-depth interviews as the main method of data collection. The study covered 12 public universities in Peninsular Malaysia (Table 1).

A total of 60 informants (N=60) were purposively sampled based on the following inclusion criteria:

- i. Informants should be currently enrolled as students in the selected public universities. This would guarantee that the study focused on individuals who were actively experiencing the university environment and its policies regarding political freedom.
- ii. Informants should be individuals actively participating in campus politics. This meant that they could be representatives of student councils, student associations, and/or politics-related clubs. Informants with exposure and experience in campus politics would voice diverse perspectives and

develop comprehensive solutions to current challenges on campus.

- iii. Informants should voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Hence, informed consent was sought from each informant, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study, potential risks, and their rights as informants.
- iv. Another criterion for the informants is their language proficiency. To facilitate communication during the online interview sessions, informants should have at least a professional working level in Malay and/or English.
- v. In addition to student informants, this study also involved student affairs officers providing insights, particularly into the institutional policies, regulations, and practices that influenced students' political freedom.

The 60 participants included 48 students and 12 student affairs administrators, selected to represent a diverse range of perspectives from 12 universities in Peninsular Malaysia. By involving students and student affairs officers from each university, the study captures variations in political freedom experiences across different institutions. The sample size of 60 participants was determined based on available time, resources, and practical constraints, as conducting in-depth interviews and data analysis with a larger group would have been challenging within the study's timeframe.

A case study of this nature often prioritizes depth over breadth, allowing for a thorough examination of each participant's experiences to yield more prosperous and more detailed insights. Additionally, data saturation was reached, as recurring codes and themes indicated that no new

Table 1  
*Universities included in the study*

| Zone       | University                                        | State           |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Northern   | Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)                   | Penang          |
|            | Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)                   | Kedah           |
|            | Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP)               | Perlis          |
| Southern   | Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)        | Johor           |
|            | Universiti Teknologi Malaysia                     | Johor           |
|            | Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)            | Negeri Sembilan |
| West Coast | Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)                   | Selangor        |
|            | Universiti Malaya (UM)                            | Kuala Lumpur    |
|            | Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam campus | Selangor        |
| East Coast | Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK)                | Kelantan        |
|            | Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)              | Terengganu      |
|            | Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP)                  | Pahang          |

Table 2  
*Demographic characteristics of research informants*

| Demographic characteristics |                         | Frequency |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| Gender                      | Male                    | 45        |
|                             | Female                  | 15        |
| Age                         | 21-30                   | 48        |
|                             | 31-40                   | 7         |
|                             | 41-50                   | 5         |
| Ethnic group                | Malay                   | 48        |
|                             | Indian                  | 2         |
|                             | Chinese                 | 4         |
|                             | Bumiputera Sabah        | 3         |
|                             | Bumiputera Sarawak      | 3         |
| Religion                    | Islam                   | 51        |
|                             | Christianity            | 3         |
|                             | Hinduism                | 2         |
|                             | Buddhism                | 4         |
| Position                    | Students                | 48        |
|                             | Student Affairs Officer | 12        |

Source: Fieldwork 2021-2022

information emerged from additional interviews and collecting any further data won't produce value-added insights. Table 2 summarizes the demographic profiles of the informants is included to provide further detail on the participant distribution.

In this study, a gatekeeper approach was employed to access participants. A gatekeeper, or key informant, is crucial for entering research fields, especially during periods of restricted movement. This strategy is commonly used in qualitative research. Data collection for 12 universities in Peninsular Malaysia took place between August 2021 and September 2022, coinciding with a severe COVID-19 outbreak. Due to the challenges posed by travel restrictions, most data collection was conducted through online interviews using

the Zoom Meeting platform, except for three universities in the northern region where in-person interviews were feasible.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure ethical conduct. The privacy and confidentiality of participants were protected throughout the research process. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis facilitated by Nvivo software. Interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' perspectives on the values of political freedom they hold and how they apply these values in their on-campus political activities.

- a. What values of political freedom do you believe are most important in shaping your involvement in campus politics?

- b. What challenges have you faced in upholding the values of political freedom during your involvement in student politics?
- c. How do you personally apply these values of political freedom in your interactions with peers and university management?

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the use of gatekeepers to connect researchers with suitable participants. Student affairs officers at each university served as gatekeepers. They were informed about the research objectives and tasked with identifying potential participants within a specific timeframe. Once potential participants were identified, gatekeepers coordinated with both the research team and the students to arrange online interviews.

While online interviews offer flexibility and accessibility, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations compared to face-to-face interviews. To mitigate these limitations, the validation process adopted including open-ended questions, follow-up probes, and member checking were employed to enhance data quality and reliability. Additionally, efforts were made to minimize gatekeeper bias by requesting a diverse range of participants from different faculties and backgrounds.

**DISCUSSION**

This section presents the analysis of the patterns that emerged from the informants' responses to the interview questions. The questions were constructed to explore the

shared values of political freedom among university students in Peninsular Malaysia. The analysis of recurring themes across the interviews uncovers common points of view, concerns, and aspirations related to political engagement and freedom on campus. The findings are categorized based on the three major themes identified: the value of knowledge and *adab*, the value of leadership and integrity, and the value of patriotism and national identity. Each theme will be discussed in relation to the corresponding interview questions and the informants' responses, offering insights into the broader context of political freedom as experienced by university students.

**The Value of Knowledge and *Adab***

The analysis shows that a strong and consistent pattern emerged from the interviews, where the informants stressed the need for knowledge to be paired with *adab* in their political engagement. Although freedom is the cardinal principle in political engagement, informants viewed that one should exercise it with a sense of responsibility, respect, and discipline, particularly in the context of Islamic ethics. The connection between knowledge and *adab* was seen as a guiding principle for making sound political judgements, aligning with the broader cultural values in Malaysia.

Knowledge and *adab* are inseparable, at least in the context of Islamic ethics. In discussing the conception of education, al-Attas (1980) emphasizes that *adab* is crucial. In the view of al-Attas, education should produce both good

citizens and good individuals all around. In this instance, *adab* is defined as “the discipline of body, mind and soul; the discipline that assures the recognition and acknowledgement of one’s proper place in relation to one’s physical, intellectual, spiritual capacities and potentials; the recognition and acknowledgement of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various levels” (al-Attas, p. 42). Regarding the political sphere, *adab* cultivates citizens who are politically responsible and ensures a political order (Ryle-Hodges, 2021).

Knowledge equips students with the necessary information about political systems, ideologies, and current issues. It enables them to critically analyze and evaluate different perspectives, policies, and candidates (Ryle-Hodges, 2021). By making informed decisions based on reliable information, students can actively participate in the political process and exercise their freedom effectively. Such critical analysis is described as *tabayyun* by respondent USM5, who emphasizes the importance of informed decision-making. They explained:

“There needs to be clarification (*tabayyun*). These students should value clarification. They are intelligent individuals, capable of critical thinking. They will not unthinkingly follow anyone, not even political fanatics. Regardless of what is said, true or false, they should evaluate it. As students, we should maintain that level of discernment.” (USM 5)

Maybe it is about self-confidence. There are still many UMP students who lack confidence in their strengths and abilities. They are also unaware that by speaking up, they can bring about change at UMP. So perhaps they need to be more confident in voicing their ideas for the betterment of UMP itself. (UMP 2)

Furthermore, *adab* guides students in expressing their political views responsibly and respectfully. It emphasizes the importance of thoughtful and constructive communication, avoiding personal attacks or inflammatory language (Gräf et al., 2018). *Adab* encourages students to engage in meaningful discussions, listen to other people’s perspectives, and seek common ground to promote dialogue and understanding. An informant raised a concern about the lack of *adab* among students as below.

So, one of the things I can mention is the value of civility. This is because sometimes students are too fanatical about the ideology of free speech, which can negatively affect harmony within the university and among different ethnic groups, especially in a multicultural country like ours. This is something we can observe as an important value that should exist in students actively participating in the student movement. As I mentioned earlier, there are student movements that claim to represent all students at Universiti Malaya. However, they only

use their mother tongue, which means not all ethnic groups can understand it. Therefore, we can see that these student movements also need to be more accommodating and communicative so that all students can understand them. In my opinion, they should have civility and an understanding of the students' situation if they want to represent them effectively. (UITM 1)

*Adab* fosters an appreciation for diverse viewpoints and encourages students to respect and consider differing opinions. It teaches students to engage in respectful debates and discussions, even when disagreeing with others (Yusuf, 2012). This helps create an inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives and promotes open-mindedness, which is essential for a healthy democratic society. The statement below shows an informant's concern about some students' attitudes regarding their lack of appreciation for the diversity of views.

Show respect. Just as the opposition should respect the government, the opposition and the student management should all be based on the same principle. Even though we are still students, sometimes they say we are not mature, not good enough, or not knowledgeable. When we give suggestions, they say they have more experience. That is not right for us to practice because when we say a terrible thing's word to someone, it will be kept in the loop, and when we become officials, we might speak the same way

to our subordinates, and the loop will continue. Showing respect, in other words, means respecting everyone's opinions. Disagreements can happen, but they should be handled with grace and a better approach. (UITM 2)

Knowledge about digital literacy and *adab* can help students navigate social media platforms responsibly and critically. They can learn to distinguish between reliable and misleading information, engage in respectful online discussions, and use social media as a tool for constructive political activism (Jaafar & Sham, 2022). *Adab* encourages students to use social media to promote positive change while respecting the rights and dignity of others. An informant from UiTM highlights the impact that could be due to a low sense of responsibility.

Sense of responsibility. This ensures that we use the platform correctly. For example, we do not use the platform to incite, we do not use it to fight or argue, and we do not use public gatherings for personal interests. Instead, we use it as an entity to fight for our common agenda. That is the most important thing. Because I feel that without responsibility, whatever we do will become worse. For instance, the issue of freedom of speech to talk loudly about student deaths caused by universities, caused by stress, and so on. Then, inciting students to break down university doors and burn the VC's house, no, it is not allowed! A sense of responsibility is essential. For example,



we show solidarity, and in the end, we will deliver that resolution. And we demonstrate or speak up to ensure this issue reaches everyone with the same sympathy or empathy, with the same agenda and spirit. So, its use must be done responsibly. (UITM 2)

Looking at the value of knowledge and *adab* from the perspective of political culture theory essentially highlights the holistic development of students as informed, ethical citizens. As (political) knowledge is acquired alongside *adab*, students are not only informed about their political rights and responsibilities but conscious of engaging with the political process in respectful and ethical manners. The duality in this approach further encourages responsible political participation, ensuring that students, as citizens, contribute to societal change with integrity and respect for diverse perspectives. In a civic culture, Almond and Verba (1963) emphasize the political cognition of people to be an informed citizen. They highlight that people in the participation culture have an awareness toward all four classes of political objects, towards the government, the processes of political input, the outputs of government, and adopting an activist view of their role as citizens. A sense of awareness of political objects would be more beneficial to a citizen who participates in a political system ethically.

### **The Value of Leadership and Integrity**

The interviews portrayed a clear consensus among informants on the importance of

leadership and integrity in upholding political freedom. Informants emphasized that leadership involves not merely inspiring others but also setting a standard for political conduct. Integrity was viewed as pivotal for maintaining respect and civility in political discourse. Informants connect these values directly to their political engagement on campus.

The values of leadership and integrity are essential in preserving and enhancing political freedom among university students. This value is vital in shaping the campus environment, representing the students, and contributing to the university students' overall growth, particularly in political freedom. Leadership involves inspiring others to work towards a common goal (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009; Storr, 2004). Students with leadership qualities can inspire their peers to become more politically engaged, encouraging them to exercise their freedom, express their opinions, and participate in the political process. Student leaders can inspire others to follow suit by setting an example and demonstrating their commitment to political freedom. One of the informants supports this point as follows:

Indeed, practising these values will encourage them not to act inappropriately. Another value, as I mentioned earlier, is to be polite and refrain from using disrespectful and uncivilized language. If they possess such values, they will understand the importance of etiquette. The significance of etiquette is crucial in all

aspects of their activities and politics. (UTHM 4)

Integrity is essential in political engagement. Students with integrity uphold strong moral and ethical principles, ensuring that their actions align with their values and the greater good. They make decisions based on honesty, transparency, and fairness, even in challenging situations (Colby & Sullivan, 2009; Jensen, 2009; Putman, 1996). By embodying integrity, students demonstrate a commitment to ethical, political practices, fostering a culture of trust and respect. The essential of this value is shown in a statement by the following informant,

The most important value is honesty. This means being truthful in every administration or management we engage in. It requires us to be transparent in our actions. To me, it signifies having high ethical and moral standards in all our dealings. It means combining knowledge with proper conduct and etiquette when interacting with others. It implies that when we encounter someone, we should demonstrate the appropriate manners and ethics, showing respect to that person. Honesty is vital in all our activities and political engagements. (UPM 3)

Effective leaders understand the importance of building trust and credibility among their peers (Simons, 1999; Williams et al., 2023). Students who demonstrate integrity in their words and actions can establish themselves as trusted figures within the student community. This trust is

crucial for fostering an environment where students feel comfortable expressing their political views and engaging in open and honest discussions. The following statement made by one of the informants indicates the importance of the university's trust being integral in providing a healthy political surrounding of student leadership potential to grow effectively.

The value of trust is crucial. We must start believing in each other. This means that the university, through Student Affairs, needs to trust the students in their abilities and talents. Conversely, the students also need to trust the university, understanding that everything the university does is solely for their benefit and well-being. So, I see trust as an integral part of this whole service. Student Affairs starts to demonstrate trust when they begin giving students opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes, for example, managing their own affairs, being part of the Senate, and being invited to participate in management meetings concerning student affairs. Before this, they had no such opportunities, and their voices were not heard. Thus, building trust between all parties is extremely important. (UM 5)

Furthermore, students with leadership qualities can facilitate discussions, encourage diverse perspectives, and seek common ground on political issues (Nauman et al., 2022). By fostering an inclusive and

collaborative approach, student leaders can create an environment that respects and values different opinions, which will contribute to the promotion of political freedom. This approach also shows the value of integrity. An informant shared the experience of how their student council compromised their group after the campus election to reduce conflict within the council and focus on collaborating with others in the student council to value the trust to lead given to them as student leaders.

The shared values that should be in student leaders are “Amanah”, which means trustworthiness and integrity. This involves speaking truth to power and acknowledging both right and wrong. For example, after the election, the Student Council disbanded the X group it formed before the election. This demonstrates our commitment to collaboration with other parties and student councils. We prioritize truth and transparency, ensuring our members are trustworthy in their knowledge and actions. (UTHM 2)

A university lecturer we interviewed also agrees that integrity is integral to effective leadership. This kind of leadership can nurture a high respect for political freedom among students.

Integrity is the cornerstone of effective leadership. As university lecturers, we strive to instil this value in our students. We encourage them to respect themselves and to approach their

work with honesty. Our assessments focus not only on correct answers but also on how they present their arguments and engage in discussions. Integrity is a powerful shield that protects individuals. If we fail to cultivate integrity, we risk producing individuals who lack character. Such individuals can have a detrimental impact on society. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of integrity, which encompasses honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, and other related qualities. (UITM 5)

Leadership involves working collaboratively with others and building consensus (Slater, 2005). By incorporating leadership and integrity into their political engagement, students can become effective advocates for political freedom, fostering a culture of ethical and responsible participation. These qualities can empower students to contribute positively to their communities and make a lasting impact on the political landscape. In the context of political culture theory, particularly the concept of subject culture, student engagement infused with leadership and integrity represents a significant departure from passive participation. While subject culture often characterizes students as aware of political structures but limited in their agency, the cultivation of leadership and integrity empowers students to engage in a more informed and morally conscious manner, even within the constraints of a passive political environment. This approach not only enhances their understanding of

political systems but also positions them as advocates for responsible political freedom. By embodying these values, students contribute positively to the political culture of their communities, fostering a foundation of ethical engagement that could influence the broader political landscape over time.

Furthermore, higher education institutions play a crucial role in cultivating critical thinking, ethical engagement, and social responsibility among students. By providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful political discourse, participate in student organizations, and undertake community service, universities can empower students to become active and informed citizens. As future leaders, these students have the potential to shape the political landscape by advocating for policies that promote social justice, environmental sustainability, and human rights. By fostering a culture of ethical leadership and responsible citizenship, higher education institutions can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to address the challenges of the 21st century.

### **The Value of Patriotism and National Identity**

The interviews revealed that patriotism and the national identity of the students were of great importance in influencing them politically. Most informants felt that patriotism went beyond academic study and encompassed a sense of responsibility, compassion and attachment towards the nation, which, for instance, called on the

students to carry as opposed to avert. The informants also mentioned that the promotion of patriotic concepts and a strong sense of nationality will enhance political participation among the students as they are likely to care about the health of the nation and democracy. The discussions also highlighted that the students' concept of nationhood, which encompasses a collective history and nationalistic feeling, reinforces the sense of purposeful democracy and political activity free from abuse by the myriads of ethnic diversities.

Patriotism is an ideology that concerns individuals' attachment and loyalty to their nation and country (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997). Thurairaj et al. (2018) deliberate that there are five categories of patriotism, each owning its own complexity. Constructive patriotism is referred to as genuine, constructive, critical, civic and reasonable in a democratic society. Constitutional patriotism deals with the idea of political attachment to the universal norms and values of a democratic constitution. Meanwhile, patriotic education is the education towards inspiring the spirit of patriotism, either carried out through formal or informal means. Next, symbolic patriotism defines the emotional attachment of belongingness and 'weeness'. Another category is blind patriotism, which is defined as total obedience toward authoritarian government activities and policy formation. In a democratic country like Malaysia, these types of patriotism are portrayed by different groups of societies. Eventually, patriotism, in essence, is the basis of national identity that leads to good governance and fosters trust among citizens.

Patriotism and national identity can instil a sense of civic responsibility in students (Straughn & Andriot, 2011). By nurturing love and pride for their country, students are more likely to feel a personal stake in its well-being (Westheimer, 2006). This can motivate them to participate in political processes actively, engage in community service, and contribute to the betterment of their nation. An informant shows his concern over the political apathy among students, which may jeopardize their values as citizens.

Today's youth must understand that regardless of our country's current challenges, this nation is ours. Instead of passively complaining about issues like budget allocations and police engagement, we should actively contribute to positive change. We should not be overly distracted by entertainment and superficial trends. In this rapidly changing world, political apathy can lead to a sense of detachment, making young people believe that their vote does not matter. We must encourage young people to be informed and engaged citizens. (UITM 1)

Patriotism can help foster national unity among students with diverse backgrounds. It can provide a common ground that transcends differences and brings people together (Othman et al., 2021). When students share a sense of national identity, it promotes understanding, empathy, and cooperation, enabling them to work collaboratively towards shared goals,

including preserving and advancing political freedom (Westheimer, 2014). Patriotism and national identity can reinforce students' commitment to democratic principles. Students who feel strongly connected to their nation are more likely to value and protect democratic ideals, such as freedom of speech, equality, and the rule of law (Wang & Jia, 2015). This can drive them to actively engage in defending and advocating for political freedom, ensuring that these values are upheld and preserved. As in the Malaysian case, this political engagement is closely related to the respect of values instilled in the Federal Constitution and Rukun Negara, as mentioned by the following informant.

The values that we can adopt are the positive values that can be embraced by themselves. If we look at several parties like UMNO, PKR, PAS, Pribumi Bersatu, and others, I believe the most important aspect is their fundamental struggles. The fundamental struggles of these Malay parties, as reflected in their constitutions, are as follows: firstly, safeguarding the sovereignty of the nation. Secondly, preserving Islam as the official religion. Thirdly, defending the special rights of the Bumiputera and the Malays themselves. So, in my opinion, this is related to what was mentioned earlier, the values from the Federal Constitution and the principles of Rukun Negara that should be embraced, especially in terms of the interests or love for the country. (UITM 4)

National identity can help build a sense of collective identity among students (López, 2014; Safran & Liu, 2012). This shared identity can create a sense of solidarity, common purpose, and a collective vision for the nation's future. Students can leverage this collective identity to mobilize and organize around political causes, fostering a sense of unity and empowerment. An informant from UMP believes that university students should be patriotic to their university and country as part of their motivation for political engagement.

Students must have a strong sense of identity and patriotic spirit that genuinely loves their university. I, too, honestly joined the Student Council with the intention of promoting UMP's name because I noticed that many students from other universities were proudly representing their respective institutions. So, if possible, I personally want UMP's name to be recognized, and people should know that there are student leaders or even top management figures from UMP. Hence, student leaders need to have a high sense of self and patriotism that genuinely cares for the university. Therefore, everything they do should be aimed at promoting the university's name. If they participate in competitions, their spirit to win should be for the sake of their university. (UMP 2)

The above statement shows how patriotism can inspire students to actively participate in political processes, such as

voting, running for office, or joining political organizations (Richey, 2011). However, this is not limited to the national level; it also includes the spirit of the university community itself. By recognizing the importance of their individual contributions to their university community, students can take an active role in shaping the political landscape and exercising their political freedom. According to an informant, one of the important qualities of any candidate for the student representative council should be more concerned about students' problems to show their belongingness to the core of the university community.

The candidate must be sensitive and empathetic to the issues faced by students. Resilience is essential to have strong leadership capabilities. Also, considering the students' perspectives is crucial in making informed decisions. (UMP 4)

In a context characterized by subject political culture, where individuals are aware of political structures but may not actively participate, instilling patriotism and citizenship can foster a sense of belonging among students. Universities, as significant socializing institutions, shape students' political perspectives through interactions with peers, faculty, and the broader university culture. By exposing students to democratic values such as equality, freedom, and justice, universities can cultivate a sense of civic responsibility and a commitment to the nation's progress.



While subject culture often limits active political participation, it can still foster a thoughtful appreciation for democratic principles. This form of engagement aligns with broader nation-building goals, enabling students to contribute to political freedom and progress in a meaningful, albeit passive, way.

## THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes significant contributions to the understanding and enrichment of political culture theory by presenting a perspective on how shared values among university students shape their political engagement. By analyzing the themes of knowledge and *adab*, leadership and integrity, and patriotism and national identity, the findings enhance the contextualization of the theory in the following ways.

First is the integration of knowledge and *adab*. The study highlights the interplay between knowledge and *adab* as a guiding principle for ethical-political engagement. This duality enriches the civic culture dimension of political culture theory, as proposed by Almond and Verba (1963), by emphasizing the importance of ethical awareness alongside political cognition. The findings suggest that informed citizenship when paired with respect and discipline rooted in cultural and religious values, can foster responsible political participation. This perspective broadens the civic culture concept by integrating ethical considerations into the framework of political awareness and activism.

Second, the leadership and integrity in the subject culture. The study challenges the traditional notion of subject culture, which often portrays individuals as passive participants. By demonstrating how leadership and integrity empower students to engage in morally conscious political activities, even within constrained environments, the findings redefine the understanding of subject culture. This contribution positions students not merely as passive observers but as active contributors to a more ethical and informed political discourse, thereby advancing the discussion of agency within the subject culture.

Third, patriotism and national identity as catalysts for engagement. The study underscores the role of patriotism and national identity in fostering a sense of belonging and civic responsibility among students. This aligns with the broader goals of nation-building and democratic participation, even within the context of the subject culture. By illustrating how universities act as socializing agents that instill democratic values, the findings expand political culture theory to include the institutional role in shaping political perspectives and fostering purposeful, though limited, democratic engagement.

Overall, this study emphasizes how political culture and political freedom interact within the context of a democratic environment. Political culture, as demonstrated through shared values of ethical engagement, leadership, and patriotism, provides the foundation for understanding and exercising political

freedom responsibly. By fostering informed citizens who engage with respect, integrity, and a commitment to democratic principles, political culture shapes the way individuals perceive and practice their political rights. Within a democratic framework, this relationship ensures that political freedom contributes to societal progress rather than conflict, reinforcing the role of universities as vital institutions in cultivating civic responsibility and a thriving democracy.

## CONCLUSION

By exploring the essence of political values, our case study illuminates three distinctive political values espoused by public university students in Peninsula Malaysia. The value of knowledge and *adab* plays a crucial role in creating a mature political culture for university students. In the complex world of politics, university students ought to be conscious that knowledge and *adab* are two interlinked values that become the guiding principles that essentially shape their political behaviour, interactions, and contributions to society, as supported by Gräf et al. (2018). Furthermore, the value of knowledge and *adab* reflects that political engagement or participation is not based on sentiments but heavily relies on knowledge and understanding (Ryle-Hodges, 2021). They can practise this value through informed political engagement, respectful and civic discourse, as well as ethical-political participation

The value of leadership and integrity as a political virtue is instrumental in creating a responsible political landscape among

university students (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009; Storr, 2004). Student leaders who embody this value foster an environment of trust, accountability, and responsible governance, which is a condition that must not be jeopardized in the political sphere (Simons, 1999). This effort can be achieved by building trust and credibility, collaboration, consensus building, advocacy, and activism (Smith et al., 2024).

Further, the value of patriotism and national identity guides university students to prioritize the importance of their nation before personal or political interests (Bartal & Staub, 1997). Essentially, this value instils a profound sense of loyalty and attachment to the country, which becomes their moral compass to contribute to the well-being and progress of their nation (López, 2014; Safran & Liu, 2012). This value fosters a collective spirit of unity, resilience, and shared responsibility, driving university students to work together towards a common goal: the country's prosperity (Westheimer, 2014).

The three major political values highlighted in the findings are fundamental in shaping an encouraging, mature, and responsible political sphere for university students. These values foster democratic principles, responsible citizenship, and ethical leadership (Wang & Jia, 2015). By upholding these shared values, universities can be an environment where political freedom is protected, and students are empowered to actively participate in shaping the country's direction (Chamhuri et al., 2019). Furthermore, embracing these

political values is key to nurturing a vibrant, inclusive, and democratic political culture, which aligns with the tenets of participatory political culture (Warren & Mark, 2001).

In the political culture framework, these shared values contribute to the development of a more participatory political culture, where students are actively engaged in shaping political discourse. By promoting knowledge, leadership, integrity, and patriotism, universities can foster a sense of civic duty and empower students to become active agents of change. This aligns with the goals of civic culture, which emphasizes the importance of active citizenship and political participation (Almond & Verba, 1963).

By integrating these principles into student political engagement, universities help to cultivate individuals who are prepared to lead with integrity, critical thinking, and a commitment to social justice. These values are essential for building a strong and resilient democracy, where citizens are empowered to hold their leaders accountable and work towards a better future.

### **Limitation**

While this study provides valuable insights into the political values of university students in Peninsula Malaysia, it is not without limitations. The qualitative design, sample size and geographical scope may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or student populations. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases that

affect the accuracy of the reported values and behaviours. Future research should consider a broader sample and incorporate mixed method approaches to enhance the robustness of the findings.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations can be made further to enhance the political engagement and education of university students. While many universities in Malaysia have implemented efforts to promote civic engagement and political awareness, such as through student clubs and societies, there is still room for improvement. To further strengthen these initiatives, universities should foster environments that integrate knowledge, *adab*, leadership, and patriotism into their curricula and extracurricular activities (Ting & Ahmad, 2022). Additionally, policies and programs should be developed to support ethical, political participation and civic responsibility among students (Weiss, 2012), in parallel with the latest amendment of UUCA in 2022 that essentially has increased student autonomy and removed some restrictions. Engaging students in activities that encourage critical thinking, and active citizenship will not only contribute to their personal development but also the overall democratic health of the nation (Zainon et al., 2017).

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