THE BUMIPUTERA POLICY AND MALAYSIAN BRAIN DRAIN: POLITICS AND BELONGING AS KEY PUSH FACTORS

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of Malaysian professionals are migrating overseas, resulting in a persistent brain drain with profound implications for the nation's economic development and social cohesion. This paper examines the key push factors driving professional Malaysians to leave their home country, focusing on political inequities, a sense of not belonging, and economic constraints. Using qualitative data from focus group interviews, this study identifies the race-based affirmative action "Bumiputera policy" as a critical factor influencing both Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera professionals. While initially designed to address socioeconomic disparities, these policies have fostered perceptions of inequity, limiting the attachment of skilled Malaysians to their homeland. Despite initiatives like TalentCorp aimed at reversing brain drain, these efforts remain inadequate without systemic reforms. The study contextualises these findings within broader migration theories, offering insights into the interplay between systemic barriers, cultural alienation, and economic dissatisfaction. Policy recommendations include promoting inclusivity, strengthening meritocratic systems, and fostering a unified sense of belonging to curb migration trends.

Keywords: Brain Drain, Push Factors, Political Economy, Sense of Belonging, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Brain drain—the emigration of highly skilled individuals in search of better opportunities—is a critical challenge for Malaysia, which relies heavily on human capital for economic growth. This phenomenon has been exacerbated by systemic push factors rooted in Malaysia's sociopolitical and economic frameworks. Unlike global trends driven by pull factors, Malaysia's brain drain stems primarily from internal systemic issues—political inequities and a diminished sense of belonging—which compel professionals to seek fairer, more rewarding environments (Supramani & Ali, 2022). These dynamics deplete the nation's intellectual capital and hinder long-term development.

In Malaysia, the interplay between political factors and social belonging is significant. Push factors often outweigh pull factors in driving professional emigration (Supramani & Ali, 2022). Central to this is the Bumiputera policy, which aims to advance the socioeconomic status of Indigenous peoples. While initially designed to

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address inequalities, it has fostered dissatisfaction among Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera professionals, amplifying political inequities and a weakened sense of belonging. These dynamics drive skilled individuals to seek more inclusive and meritocratic environments.

Over the past two decades, Malaysia has experienced a significant outflow of skilled individuals, with many tertiary-educated Malaysians migrating to countries such as Australia, the UK, Singapore, the US, and Canada. These destinations have attracted Malaysian professionals with promises of higher wages, enhanced career prospects, advanced infrastructure, and better living conditions. These migration trends underscore the urgency of understanding brain drain not only as an economic issue but also as one deeply intertwined with political and social factors.

The conceptualisation of brain drain has been explored extensively in migration research. Docquier and Lodigiani (2006) define it as the emigration of individuals with tertiary education across various fields of expertise. However, professionals' unique experiences and motivations remain underexamined despite a substantial body of literature. This paper addresses this gap by focusing specifically on Malaysian professionals, exploring how the Bumiputera policy, political inequities, and a diminished sense of belonging shape their decisions to migrate.

To uncover these dynamics, this study employs a qualitative approach, using mini focus groups to facilitate in-depth discussions and capture diverse perspectives. The focus group interviews were conducted between May and June 2017, comprising two sessions: four Malaysian expatriates, three Malaysian business professionals, and five Malaysian students. Most expatriate participants were members of the Malaysian Association in the Republic of Korea (MARK), ensuring a sample with shared migration experiences.

A semi-structured format was employed, allowing for guided discussions while encouraging open-ended responses. The discussions explored key push-and-pull factors, including economic constraints, career opportunities, the Bumiputera policy, systemic inequities, and a sense of belonging. The consistency of responses across different participant groups was analysed to refine the model outlined in Figures 1 and 2. Given the study's time constraints, focus groups were chosen because they enabled cost-effective, efficient data collection and captured collective insights that might be less apparent in individual interviews.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns related to migration decisions. These qualitative findings are supplemented by document analysis and interpretation of secondary data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the push factors driving brain drain in the Malaysian context. By examining these interconnected factors, this paper aims to offer policymakers actionable insights to mitigate Malaysia's ongoing talent loss.

BACKGROUND

Bumiputera Policy and Malay Dilemma

The sense of belonging among Malaysians is intricately linked to the nation's political landscape and historical context. Prior to the 1969 inter-ethnic riots, Malaysia functioned as a consociational democracy, where ethnic minorities retained significant group autonomy. However, the riots marked a turning point, leading to the transition toward an ethnic democracy, as conceptualised by Smooha (1997), which institutionalised Malay political dominance. Within this context, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in the 1970s as a framework to address socioeconomic disparities among Malaysia's ethnic groups. The NEP's Bumiputera policy promoted the advancement of the Indigenous Malay majority through preferential treatment in education, employment, business ownership, housing, and government programs (Mahathir, 1970; Gomez & Saravanamuttu, 2013).

The Bumiputera policy, conceived to address historical inequalities and promote national unity, has significantly impacted Malaysia's multicultural society. It has heightened tensions between the Malay majority and non-Bumiputera communities, particularly Chinese and Indian Malaysians, who perceive it as exclusionary (Faaland, Parkinson, & Saniman, 2003). For the Chinese, the policy acts as a structural barrier to education and public employment opportunities. Meanwhile, the Indian community faces challenges in upward mobility due to limited access to resources and opportunities (World Bank, 2011).

Interestingly, the impact of the Bumiputera policy extends beyond ethnic divides to include marginalised segments within the Malay community. While the policy is designed to uplift the Malay majority, its benefits are often concentrated among politically connected elites, leaving underprivileged Malays with limited access to its advantages (Jesudason, 1989). This dynamic has led to perceptions of inequity within the Bumiputera group itself, further complicating the social fabric and raising questions about the policy's effectiveness in fostering inclusivity (TalentCorp & PwC, 2013).

The sense of belonging—or lack thereof—arising from these systemic disparities has far-reaching implications for migration. When individuals perceive structural barriers to advancement or experience exclusion from economic and social opportunities, their attachment to their homeland diminishes. This is particularly evident in Malaysia, where skilled professionals from all ethnic backgrounds—Chinese, Indian, and Malay—view migration as a means to achieve fairness and meritocracy (Supramani & Ali, 2022). Research has shown that migration decisions are deeply influenced by an individual's perception of inclusiveness and equity within their home country (Antonsich, 2010).

The historical and political underpinnings of the Bumiputera policy have also shaped broader perceptions of fairness in Malaysia. For the Chinese and Indian communities, the policy poses a systemic challenge that limits their access to higher education and lucrative career opportunities (World Bank, 2004). For underprivileged Malays, it highlights the stratification within their ethnic group, where advancement often hinges on political affiliations (Jesudason, 1989). These narratives of exclusion

collectively contribute to Malaysia's ongoing brain drain as skilled professionals seek opportunities abroad that prioritise meritocracy over ethnicity.

Addressing the challenges associated with the Bumiputera policy is critical to fostering a stronger sense of belonging among Malaysians. Scholars argue that affirmative action frameworks must evolve to emphasise equity and socioeconomic needs over ethnic identity to mitigate their unintended consequences (Gomez & Saravanamuttu, 2013). Policies promoting shared national identity and inclusive opportunities could help bridge the gaps among Malaysia's ethnic and socioeconomic groups, reducing the push factors that drive migration.

In conclusion, the Bumiputera policy and the broader sociopolitical context of Malaysia play pivotal roles in shaping citizens' sense of belonging. Perceptions of exclusion and inequity are not confined to non-Bumiputera groups but extend to marginalised Malays as well, creating a complex dynamic that drives skilled individuals to seek opportunities abroad. Recognising these intricacies is essential for designing policies that retain talent, foster inclusivity, and mitigate the impacts of brain drain on Malaysia's development trajectory.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Brain drain among skilled Malaysians is well explained by Everett S. Lee's (1966) push-pull migration model. This framework highlights how migration results from the interplay between push factors, which compel individuals to leave their home country, and pull factors, which attract them to a destination country. Push factors typically include negative conditions such as political instability, systemic inequities, and lack of opportunities. In contrast, pull factors are positive attributes of the destination, such as higher wages, meritocratic systems, and better living conditions. This model has been foundational in migration studies, providing a framework to analyse how internal and external forces shape population movements.

Figure 1: Junaimah and Mohd Yusoff's Modified Research Model for Malaysia Brain Drain
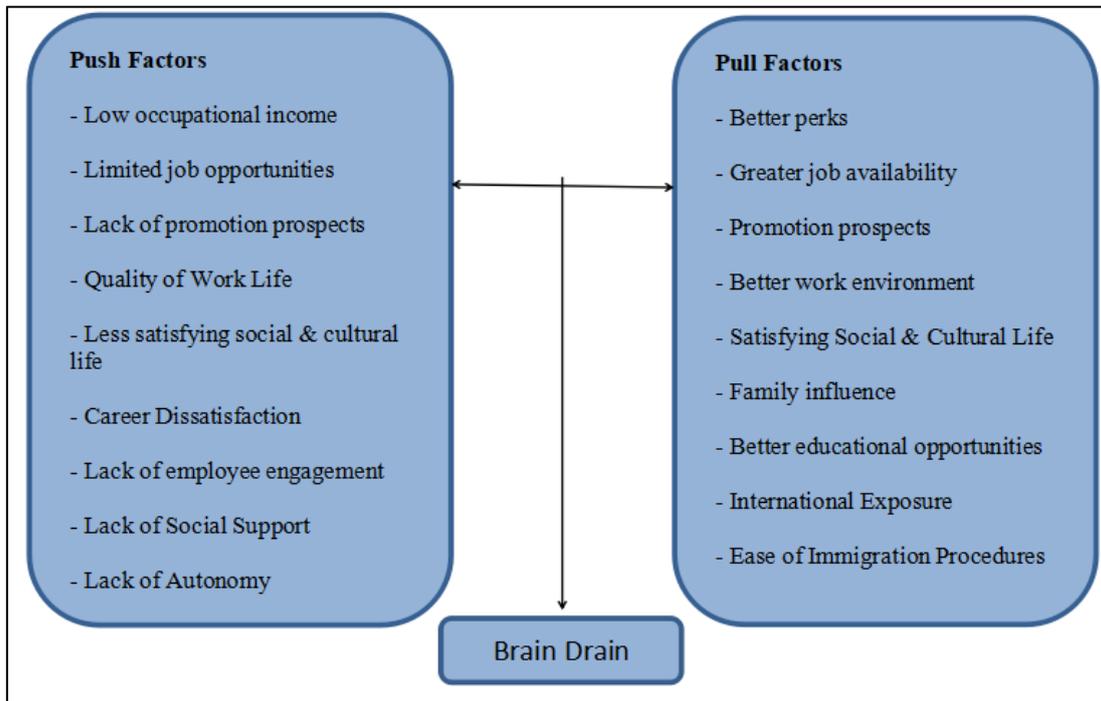
Source: Author's own

In the Malaysian context, researchers have adapted the push-pull model to examine the specific dynamics driving skilled migration. Junaimah Jauhar and Yusliza Mohd Yusoff's adaptation of the push-pull framework (Figure 1) is particularly relevant. Her research focuses on the unique factors in Malaysia that influence professionals' migration decisions, including political dynamics, economic disparities, and limited career prospects (Jauhar & Yusoff, 2011). Her model emphasises the role of systemic push factors, such as the exclusionary effects of the Bumiputera policy, over pull factors, such as opportunities abroad. This study builds on Junaimah's work, narrowing the focus to two critical push factors: political-economic conditions and the sense of belonging.
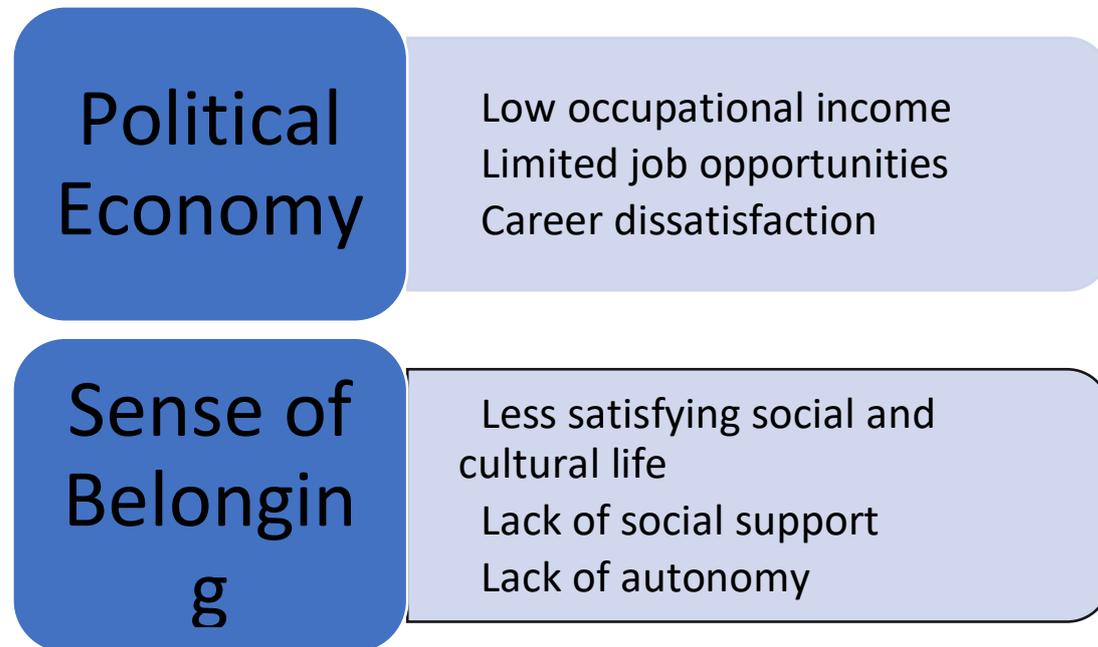
The Push-Pull Model and Its Relevance to Migration Studies

The push-pull model has been utilised to explain migration patterns worldwide, emphasising how individuals consider the drawbacks of remaining in their home country against the benefits of relocating elsewhere. In Malaysia, push factors such as political inequities and systemic exclusion are evident. Research has demonstrated that migration choices often stem from dissatisfaction with governance frameworks, unequal policies, and a lack of socioeconomic mobility (World Bank, 2011). These dynamics align with Lee's (1966) focus on the significance of origin-country conditions in influencing migration.

While pull factors such as higher wages, educational opportunities, and inclusive environments attract Malaysian migrants, this study argues that the root causes of brain drain stem from systemic barriers within Malaysia. The Bumiputera policy, for instance, creates perceived and actual barriers to professional advancement for non-Bumiputera groups while also alienating underprivileged Bumiputera

individuals who feel excluded from its benefits. Such systemic issues underscore the importance of focusing on push factors to understand Malaysia's brain drain crisis.

Figure 2: Author's Remodelled Push Factors into Political Economy and Sense of Belonging

Political Economy	Low occupational income Limited job opportunities Career dissatisfaction
Sense of Belonging	Less satisfying social and cultural life Lack of social support Lack of autonomy

Source: Author's own

Political-Economic Factors

Politics greatly influences migration decisions in Malaysia, with political inequities, especially the Bumiputera policy, shaping perceptions of fairness, inclusion, and opportunity. For non-Bumiputera professionals, the policy is often seen as a structural obstacle to accessing vital resources and opportunities in education, employment, and business, as documented in studies on Chinese and Indian communities (Faaland, Parkinson, & Saniman, 2003; Jesudason, 1989). Even within the Bumiputera group, the concentration of benefits among politically connected elites fosters perceptions of unfairness, further eroding trust in governance (TalentCorp & PwC, 2013).

The political-economic dimension of push factors is outlined in Figure 2. Specific push factors include low occupational income, limited job opportunities, and career dissatisfaction, all of which are influenced by systemic inequities and perceptions of favouritism. These conditions align with global findings on brain drain, where political instability and exclusionary policies erode trust in governance and compel skilled professionals to seek fairer environments abroad (Chaichian, 2011; Benedict & Ukpere, 2012).

Sense of Belonging and Migration

The sense of belonging, a key psychological and cultural factor, is deeply intertwined with migration decisions. Antonsich's (2010) framework on belonging emphasises how institutional and societal inclusion shape individuals' emotional and social attachment to their home country. In Malaysia, systemic exclusion—exacerbated by the

Bumiputera policy—undermines this sense of belonging, particularly among non-Bumiputera groups. These communities often perceive themselves as second-class citizens, excluded from full participation in Malaysia's socioeconomic and cultural landscape (Gomez & Saravanamuttu, 2013).

Even within the Bumiputera group, marginalised individuals who lack political connections often feel excluded, as the policy privileges a select few. A lack of social support, unsatisfying social and cultural conditions, and limited autonomy further weaken their sense of belonging, as outlined in Figure 2. Research has shown that a weakened sense of belonging often drives skilled individuals to seek environments where they feel valued and included. Studies in other countries, such as South Africa and African nations with exclusionary policies, demonstrate how a diminished sense of belonging contributes to migration trends (Chaichian, 2011; Antonsich, 2010).

Framework Application

This research adopts a modified version of Junaimah's push-pull model, grouping push factors into two primary categories: political-economic conditions and a sense of belonging (see Figures 1 and 2). The model outlines specific push factors, including low occupational income, limited job opportunities, career dissatisfaction, lack of social support, and diminished autonomy. These factors are contextualised within Malaysia's sociopolitical landscape, providing a nuanced understanding of the systemic challenges driving brain drain.

To further refine the analysis, this study integrates Lewin's (1951) field theory, which conceptualises migration as the result of conflicting forces. Push factors, such as dissatisfaction with political and economic conditions, create a sense of tension that compels individuals to seek pull factors abroad, such as better governance and career opportunities. This duality is particularly evident in Malaysia, where the interplay between push factors and a diminished sense of belonging creates strong incentives for migration.

While the push-pull model examines both push and pull factors, this study focuses exclusively on push dynamics to explore the root causes of brain drain in Malaysia. This research aims to uncover the internal challenges by emphasising push factors, such as political inequities and systemic exclusion. This approach not only aligns with the theoretical foundations of migration studies but also addresses the unique context of Malaysia, where internal systemic barriers are more significant drivers of emigration than external opportunities.

By situating politics and belonging within the push-pull model, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding Malaysia's brain drain. The findings emphasise the importance of addressing internal systemic challenges, such as inequitable policies and diminished social belonging, to mitigate the loss of skilled professionals. This framework offers policymakers valuable insights for addressing the root causes of brain drain and fostering an environment where all Malaysians feel valued and included.

ANALYSIS

Politics as the Push Factor of Malaysia's Brain Drain

Political dissatisfaction remains a major push factor for Malaysian professionals, aligning with Junaimah and Yusliza's (2011) model, which identifies political-economic barriers as key migration drivers. However, this study refines the framework by restructuring the push factors into two dominant themes: Political Economy and Sense of Belonging (Figure 2). The findings demonstrate that while income disparities, limited job opportunities, and career stagnation are fundamental push factors in the political economy, professionals also leave due to social dissatisfaction, a lack of autonomy, and weak institutional support, reinforcing the sense of belonging category.

At the heart of these dynamics lies the Bumiputera policy, which has influenced Malaysia's political and socioeconomic structure since its inception in the 1970s. Aimed at redressing historical inequalities, the policy has grown increasingly controversial owing to its perceived unfairness. While it has created opportunities for some, it has also led to exclusion, especially among disadvantaged Bumiputera who lack access to political networks. One participant in the focus group observed:

> I understand the historical reasons for the policy, but it feels like it's now being used to benefit a select group rather than helping everyone equally (Focus Group 2, Participant 2).

This dual-layered exclusion is a recurring theme. For some Bumiputera professionals, the policy reinforces stratification within their community, while for non-Bumiputera professionals, it acts as a structural barrier to accessing key resources and opportunities. A Non Bumiputera participant noted:

> Growing up, I always knew that certain opportunities were closed to me, no matter how well I performed (Focus Group 1, Participant 3).

These perspectives align with findings by Faaland, Parkinson, and Saniman (2003), who documented the institutionalisation of inequality through the Bumiputera policy. These systemic barriers diminish trust in governance and drive dissatisfaction among professionals, who often view migration as a means to achieve fairness and meritocracy. From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics reflect Lewin's (1951) field theory, where push factors—political inequities and systemic favouritism—create tension that drives individuals toward environments with more inclusive policies.

Low Occupational Income

Income disparities between Malaysia and developed countries are a critical push factor for skilled professionals. Salaries for roles such as doctors, engineers, and lecturers are significantly higher in Singapore, the UK, and Australia, reflecting global demand for expertise (Chandar et al., 2015). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) highlights economic security as a personal motivation, and for many professionals, higher salaries abroad provide the means to fulfil this need. This situation explains why Malaysian professionals seek better financial rewards abroad. Participants in the focus groups frequently cited dissatisfaction with their income as a driving force behind their decision to leave. One professional shared:

In Malaysia, I felt undervalued. In Korea, I was promoted for my hard work—something I never thought would happen back home (Focus Group 2, Participant 1).

This sentiment highlights the dual role of income in shaping migration decisions. While financial stability is a motivator, the perception of being undervalued in one's home country further amplifies the desire to leave. These findings align with global research, such as Oosthuizen and Ehlers' (2007) study in South Africa, which found that 95.5 per cent of surveyed nurses reported leaving their country due to inadequate pay and living standards. For Malaysian professionals, particularly those with familial commitments, the economic benefits of migrating often outweigh the relocation challenges.

Figure 3: Number of graduates and high-skilled vacancies, 2018-2023

Source: Malaysia Economic Monitor 2024 Report from World Bank

As shown in Figure 3, Malaysia consistently produces more graduates than there are high-skilled job vacancies, creating a persistent employment mismatch. Many graduates are unable to secure jobs aligned with their qualifications, leading to underemployment in lower-paying or unrelated fields. This imbalance limits career progression and fuels dissatisfaction, pushing professionals to seek better job alignment and growth opportunities abroad.

The wage gap between Malaysia and overseas destinations, on the other hand, is particularly stark. Recent studies reveal that salaries abroad are nearly quadruple those offered in Malaysia for equivalent roles. For example, engineers and IT professionals reported that salaries in countries like Australia and Singapore far exceeded what they could expect domestically. Hussin (2024) highlights how these disparities make migration attractive, particularly for professionals who feel their expertise is undervalued in the Malaysian job market.

The Bumiputera policy adds to the complexity of occupational income disparities. While intended to support Malay and Indigenous Bumiputera communities

through preferential treatment in sectors such as government employment and public procurement, it has inadvertently created challenges for non-Bumiputera communities. These communities, particularly Chinese and Indian, often feel excluded from high-paying roles in the public sector and government-linked corporations (GLCs). This exclusion limits their earning potential and contributes to perceptions of systemic inequity.

However, the policy's effects are not limited to non-Bumiputera individuals. Even among Bumiputera professionals, access to lucrative positions is often influenced by political connections rather than merit. A focus group participant observed:

> Although I benefited from the Bumiputera policy in some ways, it feels like the real advantages go to those with political ties. The rest of us are left struggling with the same challenges as everyone else (Focus Group 2, Participant 2).

This dual-layered exclusion underscores the systemic barriers that impact income dynamics for both Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera professionals. While the policy may open doors for some, it creates a stratified labour market where opportunities are not equitably distributed, further exacerbating income dissatisfaction.

Income disparities also play a significant role in shaping the aspirations of younger Malaysians. Research indicates that students often view studying abroad as a pathway to securing higher-paying roles in their host country or globally (Chaichian, 2011; Chandar et al., 2015; Tansel & Gungor, 2005). The financial expectations associated with international education make migration attractive for graduates, particularly in fields with limited domestic opportunities.

In conclusion, low-income and structural barriers tied to the Bumiputera policy are significant push factors for Malaysian professionals. The combination of limited earning potential, career stagnation, and perceptions of being undervalued drives talent abroad. Addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms that prioritise equitable access to high-paying roles and foster competitive wage structures across sectors. Without such changes, income disparities will continue to fuel brain drain, undermining Malaysia's efforts to retain its skilled talent pool.

Limited job opportunities

A significant factor driving migration among Malaysian professionals is the limited availability of job opportunities in specialised fields. As a developing country, Malaysia's labour market has struggled to match the growing output of tertiary-educated graduates with the creation of high-skill jobs. This mismatch creates a situation in which many professionals cannot secure roles aligned with their qualifications, leading to dissatisfaction and migration.

Figure 3 highlights the challenges Malaysian graduates face in securing jobs aligned with their fields of study, where a notable mismatch exists between graduate output and job availability in high-skill sectors. This reflects systemic inefficiencies in Malaysia's labour market, where the growth of high-skilled jobs lags behind the expansion of higher education. While tertiary education rose significantly, graduate output remained above 250,000 per year from 2018 to 2023, yet employment in high-

skill roles remained significantly lower, with vacancies staying below 50,000 annually. (World Bank, 2024). Participants in the focus groups expressed frustration with these structural inefficiencies. One participant remarked:

> It's not just about finding a job—it's about finding the right job that matches what I studied. When that isn't possible, going abroad becomes the logical choice (Focus Group 3, Participant 2).

Theoretically, this mismatch aligns with Lewin's (1951) field theory, which explains how opposing forces drive decision-making. In this context, the push factor of limited opportunities at home creates tension, prompting individuals to seek pull factors abroad, such as better-aligned job markets and career growth opportunities.

Systemic discrimination further exacerbates job limitations in Malaysia. While the Bumiputera policy aims to provide preferential access to education and employment for Malays and Indigenous communities, it has created disparities affecting all ethnic groups. Non-Bumiputera professionals, particularly Chinese and Indian individuals, often face barriers to accessing high-paying roles in the public sector and government-linked corporations (GLCs). Conversely, Bumiputera individuals experience similar discrimination in the private sector, where opportunities are often limited by systemic preferences for Chinese professionals (TalentCorp & PwC, 2013). This dual-layered exclusion reinforces perceptions of inequity and drives dissatisfaction among professionals across ethnic groups.

This systemic discrimination is compounded by unequal access to educational opportunities, which further shapes job prospects. Historically, the Bumiputera policy has provided preferential access to scholarships and public educational institutions for Bumiputera students (Selvaratnam, 1988). While these initiatives aim to address historical disadvantages, they have inadvertently restricted opportunities for non-Bumiputera students, limiting their ability to access higher education and professional development. This uneven distribution of resources perpetuates economic disparities and constrains career prospects for non-Bumiputera groups.

For financially able families, studying abroad becomes a strategic choice to circumvent these barriers. Many focus group participants noted that their educational experiences shaped their migration decisions. One participant shared:

> I went abroad for my degree because I knew the chances of advancing my career in Malaysia were slim. Staying abroad after graduating just made sense (Focus Group 1, Participant 3).

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs explains this phenomenon, as individuals prioritise esteem and self-actualisation in their careers. When domestic opportunities fail to meet these needs, migration becomes a viable path to achieving personal and professional fulfilment.

From a push-pull perspective, Malaysia's inability to create sufficient high-skill job opportunities is a strong push factor. The pull factors abroad, such as better alignment between qualifications and job roles, stronger meritocratic systems, and higher salaries, become increasingly attractive to professionals facing limited domestic options. This dynamic is particularly evident in fields such as engineering and

healthcare, where developed countries actively recruit Malaysian professionals to address their labour shortages.

In conclusion, limited job opportunities, exacerbated by systemic labour-market inefficiencies and discriminatory practices, create a decisive push factor for professional migration. The inability to secure roles that reflect their qualifications, along with barriers imposed by systemic inequities, drives dissatisfaction and compels individuals to seek better prospects abroad. Comprehensive reforms to align job creation with education and ensure equitable opportunities across ethnic groups are essential to breaking the cycle of brain drain and supporting socio-economic development in Malaysia.

Career dissatisfaction

Career dissatisfaction is a key push factor driving brain drain among Malaysian professionals. While professional challenges often motivate individuals to pursue skill development, dissatisfaction arises when these challenges are associated with systemic barriers rather than growth opportunities. Research by Imm (Anna Ong Cheng, 2001) indicates that many Malaysian expatriates do not return to their homeland because they find jobs abroad more fulfilling and development-oriented. In contrast, work in Malaysia is often characterised by quantity rather than quality, leaving professionals unmotivated and dissatisfied.

Professional development, indirectly linked to career satisfaction, plays a significant role in migration decisions. This includes opportunities for skill enhancement, higher education, diverse job scopes, and enriching work environments (Chappell et al., 2009). However, career advancement is often hindered by ethnic preferences in job allocation and promotions. For example, legal provisions in Malaysia's Federal and State constitutions allow the government to implement affirmative action policies in favour of Bumiputera individuals. Reports suggest that up to 80 per cent of specific ranks in public and authority services are reserved for Malays, with non-codified ethnic preferences practised in professional and technical services (Lim, 2013).

These preferences, while aimed at addressing historical inequalities, have created significant perceptions of inequity. The GLC Transformation Graduation Report (PCG, 2015) reveals that Bumiputera individuals constitute 79 per cent of the workforce in G20 government-linked corporations (GLCs), compared to 10 per cent Chinese, 8 per cent Indian, and 3 per cent others. However, even within the Bumiputera group, frustrations are evident. A focus group participant commented:

> It feels like opportunities are given based on ethnicity or connections, not on what you can actually contribute. It's disheartening for everyone—Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera alike (Focus Group 2, Participant 2).

This sentiment underscores the dual-layered dissatisfaction experienced by professionals in Malaysia. While non-Bumiputera individuals feel excluded from opportunities due to systemic ethnic preferences, some Bumiputera professionals perceive their ethnicity as a limitation rather than an advantage. This dynamic can

create decreased motivation, lower productivity, and dissatisfaction within the workforce.

From a theoretical perspective, career dissatisfaction connects to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, where esteem and self-actualisation are crucial motivators. In Malaysia, the inability to achieve recognition and career growth due to systemic barriers leads professionals to seek environments abroad where promotions and job allocations are based on merit. The lack of meritocracy is particularly evident in promotions, often influenced by factors unrelated to qualifications or performance. This issue affects career satisfaction and contributes to broader economic disparities, as unmotivated and underutilised professionals cannot contribute to the economy at their full potential.

Critics of the Bumiputera policy argue that these practices may inadvertently exacerbate economic disparities rather than alleviate them. For instance, while the policy has provided many Bumiputera individuals with opportunities, it has also created a stratified job market where meritocracy is often overlooked. This lack of equity affects both non-Bumiputera and Bumiputera professionals, with the latter sometimes feeling that their ethnicity hinders their progress. These perceptions can lead to widespread dissatisfaction, as professionals across demographics feel undervalued and constrained by systemic limitations.

Career dissatisfaction is also closely tied to the broader issue of brain drain. For professionals, the decision to migrate is often motivated by the desire for better job satisfaction, professional development, and recognition. Opportunities abroad are perceived as more meritocratic and rewarding, aligning with professionals' aspirations for self-fulfilment and growth. This aligns with Lewin's (1951) field theory, which highlights how push factors, such as systemic inequities and a lack of growth opportunities, create tension that drives individuals toward pull factors abroad, such as meritocratic systems and inclusive environments.

In conclusion, career dissatisfaction, driven by systemic barriers and ethnic preferences in job allocation, is a significant push factor for migration among Malaysian professionals. Addressing this issue requires fostering a more meritocratic job market where promotions and opportunities are based on qualifications and capabilities rather than ethnicity or connections. Without such reforms, career dissatisfaction will continue to drive skilled professionals away, exacerbating Malaysia's brain drain and undermining its economic development.

Sense of Belonging as the Push Factor of Malaysia's Brain Drain

The sense of belonging—or lack thereof—is pivotal in shaping migration decisions among Malaysian professionals. This concept extends beyond economic considerations, encompassing emotional, social, and cultural attachments to one's homeland. Many professionals' decision to migrate stems from a perceived disconnect with their environment, driven by systemic exclusion and the pursuit of inclusivity and stability abroad.

In lifestyle migration, belonging involves individuals seeking environments that offer financial opportunities and improve their overall quality of life. Benson and O'Reilly describe lifestyle migration as the pursuit of better personal and professional

circumstances. Quality of life, including satisfaction with work, personal relationships, and overall living conditions, is shaped by individual perceptions and needs. While higher income abroad is often a key factor, many professionals migrate due to dissatisfaction with their work environments, limited personal and professional balance, and inadequate living conditions in Malaysia, highlighting the emotional and social aspects of migration motivations.

Malaysia's complex sociopolitical history offers a compelling case to examine the relationship between belonging and migration. The Bumiputera policy, introduced to address historical disparities, has inadvertently fostered divisions within the population by tying access to education, employment and resources to ethnic identity and creating perceptions of systemic exclusion among non-Bumiputera communities. For Chinese and Indian communities, the policy represents a structural barrier that diminishes their sense of inclusion and equity. Research by Choong et al. (2013) and Quah et al. (2014) highlights how these perceptions foster feelings of alienation, prompting individuals to seek opportunities in environments that value inclusivity and meritocracy.

Even among Bumiputera individuals, dissatisfaction with the policy is evident. Marginalised Bumiputera, who lack political connections, often feel excluded from its benefits, perceiving the system as favouring elites rather than uplifting the broader Malay community. This dual-layered exclusion contributes to a fragmented sense of national identity, where individuals feel disconnected from government policies and a shared national narrative. These fractures in identity and belonging undermine attachment to Malaysia and serve as a decisive push factor for migration.

This study supports Junaimah and Yusliza's (2011) brain drain model (Figure 1) while refining its framework by emphasising that sense of belonging is as critical as economic factors in professional migration. The findings validate the remodelled framework (Figure 2), which groups push factors into political economy and sense of belonging, showing that systemic exclusion, lack of autonomy, and social dissatisfaction are just as influential in migration decisions as low income and career limitations. This aligns with Lewin's field theory, which posits that migration is a response to conflicting forces, and with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which explains how unmet psychological and social needs drive individuals to seek fulfilment elsewhere.

For Malaysian professionals who choose to migrate, the contrast between belonging at home and abroad is stark. Many migrants report experiencing a stronger sense of community and inclusivity in their host countries, where their professional contributions are valued irrespective of ethnicity or nationality. Nedumchira (2009) observes that "sharing a sense of sameness with a large group provides a sense of belonging and protection" (p. 27). This sentiment resonates with Malaysian migrants, who often find that their skills and identities are embraced more fully abroad than at home.

The decision to migrate is not merely about escaping systemic barriers but also about seeking environments that foster emotional stability, professional growth, and collective belonging. For many Malaysian professionals, a sense of not belonging at home creates a powerful push factor that compels them to seek opportunities in societies that align with their values and aspirations. These dynamic underscores the

importance of addressing issues of inclusion, equity, and identity to mitigate brain drain and foster a sense of belonging among all Malaysians.

Lack of Autonomy

A sense of autonomy—the freedom to make independent decisions about one's career and personal life—is central to fostering a sense of belonging. When systemic barriers restrict autonomy, professionals often feel disconnected from their environment, which diminishes their attachment to their homeland and compels them to migrate. For many Malaysian professionals, constrained autonomy arises from sociopolitical structures, systemic inequities, and limited opportunities for career advancement, all of which weaken their sense of belonging.

Economic and political factors significantly impact perceptions of autonomy in Malaysia. Lam (2002) highlights how migration decisions are shaped by the interplay of these forces, emphasising that constrained autonomy is often linked to structural barriers. In Malaysia, the Bumiputera policy aligns access to education, employment, and career growth with ethnic identity and creates a stratified system where autonomy is limited, particularly for non-Bumiputera communities. For marginalised Bumiputera professionals, opportunities are often distributed based on political affiliations rather than merit, further restricting their ability to navigate their careers independently. Participants in the focus groups frequently linked their migration decisions to their experiences of constrained autonomy. One participant shared:

> In Malaysia, it felt like my choices were always limited by external factors, whether it was policies or systemic barriers. Moving abroad gave me the freedom to make decisions based on my skills and goals (Focus Group 2, Participant 1).

The World Bank's (2011) report on Malaysia's brain drain underscores how systemic inefficiencies and ethnic divisions limit professionals' career and lifestyle choices, reinforcing perceptions of constrained autonomy. This inability to exercise personal agency weakens professionals' attachment to the nation. The lack of autonomy in Malaysia is not merely an administrative issue but a deeply ingrained sociopolitical challenge that breeds dissatisfaction and drives migration as a means to regain control over one's future.

The connection between autonomy and migration is evident in global trends. Mishra's (2017) concept of the "age of anger" aptly describes the frustration and disconnection many Malaysians experience. Events such as the 2018 General Election revealed the public's dissatisfaction with systemic inequities, corruption, and governance failures. For professionals, these constraints often translate into a loss of autonomy and a diminished sense of belonging, solidifying their decision to migrate.

From a theoretical perspective, the lack of autonomy aligns with Lewin's (1951) field theory, which conceptualises migration as a response to conflicting forces. In Malaysia, push factors—systemic barriers and constrained autonomy — create tension, driving professionals to seek pull factors abroad, such as meritocratic systems and equitable opportunities. Migration thus becomes a pathway to reclaim autonomy, allowing individuals to thrive in environments where their contributions are valued and their decisions are respected.

In conclusion, the lack of autonomy in Malaysia erodes professionals' sense of belonging and attachment to their homeland. Focus group findings highlight how constrained autonomy fosters dissatisfaction, prompting individuals to seek environments that support personal agency and career growth. Addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms to foster inclusivity, equity, and empowerment, mitigating the push factors driving the brain drain.

Less Satisfying Social and Cultural Life

The quality of life is a critical factor for professionals deciding whether to stay in Malaysia or migrate. Beyond economic reasons, dissatisfaction with living conditions, public services, and work-life balance is a major push factor. Research shows that professionals migrate not just for career opportunities but to escape environments they perceive as failing to support well-being (Baruch et al., 2007). Focus group participants echoed this sentiment, citing concerns over safety, social welfare, and financial security. One participant remarked: One participant remarked:

> Moving abroad wasn't just about earning more—it was about feeling safe and having a better life for my family and myself (Focus Group 3, Participant 1).

Malaysia's social support systems remain inadequate, failing to provide sufficient safety nets for professionals and middle-income earners. OECD (2024) highlights that Malaysia's social assistance programs are fragmented and poorly targeted, often benefiting higher-income groups more than lower-income households. Additionally, pension coverage remains limited, with over 60 per cent of the population lacking access to any pension scheme, creating long-term financial insecurity (OECD, 2024). Weak social protections and limited public investment force individuals to rely heavily on personal savings, increasing stress and dissatisfaction. One participant shared:

> It's hard to focus on building a life in Malaysia when public systems don't provide the support you need. Moving abroad gave me the freedom to focus on what matters most (Focus Group 2, Participant 2).

As illustrated in Figure 4, Malaysia's taxation and social spending contribute minimally to reducing inequality, unlike peer economies, where public transfers and in-kind benefits play a more significant role (World Bank, 2023). The OECD (2024) argues that without structural reforms in taxation, social spending, and labour policies, Malaysia will struggle to close its social protection gaps. The combination of low social spending and weak redistributive mechanisms reinforces the perception that professionals receive little institutional support, fuelling migration to countries with stronger welfare systems.

Figure 4: Impact of Public Policies on Income Inequality in Malaysia vs. Other Countries, 2023
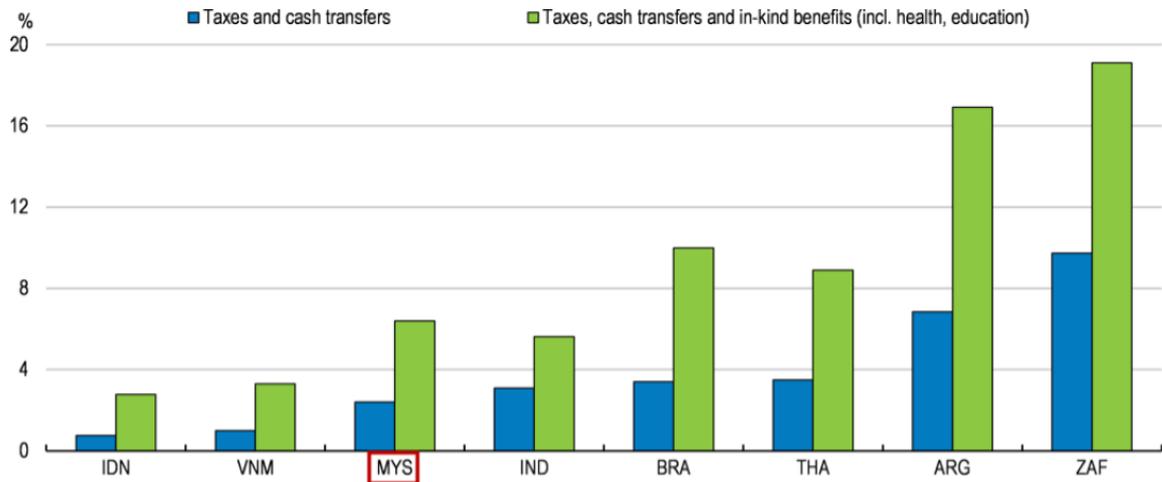
Source: World Bank (2023); Commitment to Equity Institute (2023)

Labour market misalignment further compounds dissatisfaction. The OECD (2024) emphasises that many tertiary graduates work in jobs that do not match their skills, resulting in underemployment and stagnant wages. Weak links between higher education and labour market needs, coupled with insufficient vocational training and adult education programs, exacerbate career frustration. Additionally, limited access to affordable childcare restricts workforce participation, particularly for women (OECD, 2024). These systemic issues push professionals to seek employment abroad, where their skills and qualifications are better valued.

From a theoretical perspective, dissatisfaction with social and cultural life aligns with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, where safety, financial stability, and institutional trust are fundamental motivators. Lewin's (1951) field theory explains how push factors, such as ineffective social protection and weak institutional trust, drive migration, as professionals seek greater well-being and career stability in countries with stronger welfare systems.

In conclusion, a less satisfying social and cultural life in Malaysia remains a significant push factor. As shown in Figure 4, weak public safety measures, inadequate social support, and ineffective redistributive policies reduce professionals' attachment to the country. Addressing these issues requires increased investment in public services, stronger redistribution mechanisms, and comprehensive welfare reforms to improve the quality of life and retain skilled professionals. Without such changes, brain drain will continue to persist.

Lack of Social Support

The availability and quality of social support systems significantly influence individuals' sense of belonging and their migration decisions. In Malaysia, deficiencies in social welfare, education, and public services create additional stress for professionals, weakening their attachment to the nation. While Malaysia performs well in areas such as healthcare access, basic services, and home ownership, it

underperforms in key domains such as education outcomes, labour force inclusion, and social welfare (World Economic Forum, 2015). These gaps not only create additional stress for working individuals but also undermine their sense of stability and attachment to the nation.

Malaysia's tax-and-transfer system does little to reduce inequality, reflecting weak public welfare investment. As shown in Figure 4, Malaysia's spending on social assistance and in-kind benefits, such as education and healthcare, remains significantly lower than in peer economies (World Bank, 2023). Despite economic growth, social expenditure has stagnated, leaving gaps in social protection. Instead of expanding targeted assistance, subsidies for fuel and transport disproportionately benefit higher-income groups (OECD, 2024). This misallocation places financial strain on professionals balancing career and family. One participant in the focus groups commented:

> In Malaysia, it feels like you're always trying to fill the gaps left by public systems. Moving abroad was about finding stability for my family and me (Focus Group 2, Participant 2).

The connection between social support and education further underscores the disparities in Malaysia's social infrastructure. Selvaratnam (1988) observed that while preferential treatment for Bumiputera students increased their representation in tertiary institutions, it deepened ethnic polarisation and contributed to dissatisfaction among non-Bumiputera communities. These inequities often drive migration, as individuals seek opportunities in societies perceived to be more inclusive and meritocratic. As Goh, who left Malaysia more than six years ago, expressed:

> I was never very comfortable, and I never agreed, and I don't agree, with the affirmative action policy (AFP, 2018).

This sentiment reflects the broader dissatisfaction among professionals who feel constrained by systemic barriers. Such discontent fosters alienation, prompting many to leave in search of environments that value their contributions irrespective of ethnicity or background.

The dissatisfaction with Malaysia's social support systems is further exacerbated by systemic inequities that disproportionately affect certain communities. Non-Bumiputera individuals often experience exclusion from key resources, such as education and welfare programs, due to policies favouring Bumiputera groups. This creates a sense of alienation and reduces their attachment to the nation. Rashidah Mamat (2014), in her study on patriotism and national allegiance among Malaysian students abroad, found that non-Bumiputera students frequently expressed feelings of being "threatened" by Malaysia's political climate. This perceived lack of acceptance within society drives many to explore opportunities abroad where they feel their contributions and identity will be valued.

Figure 5: Sense of Identity Among Youth Based on Ethnicity
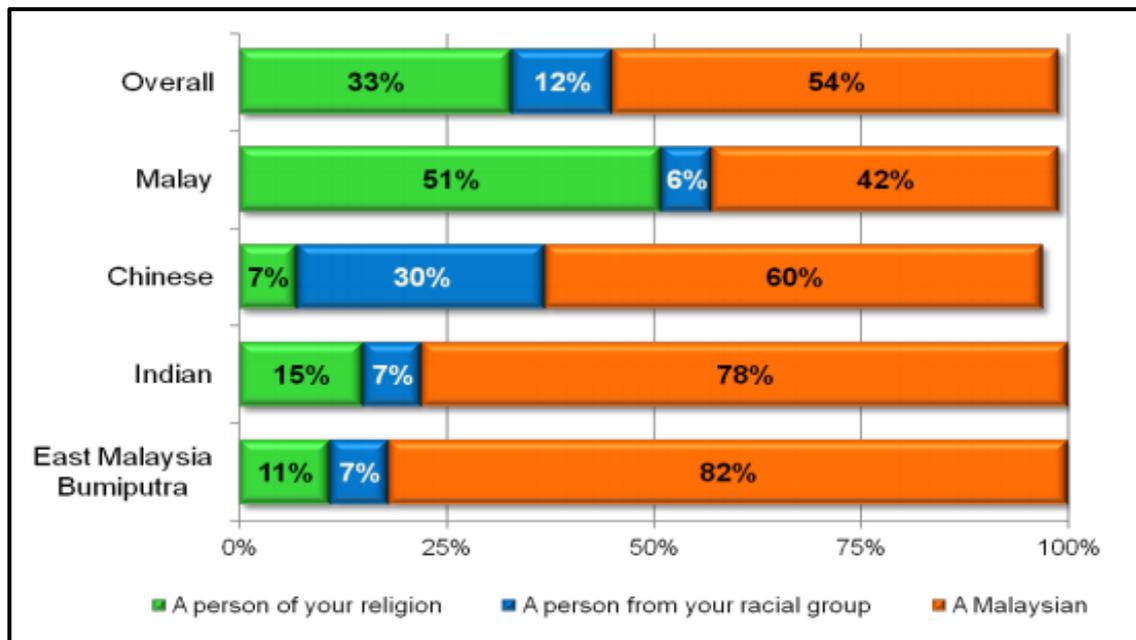
Source: The National Youth Survey (Leong et al, 2012)

The National Youth Survey conducted by Leong et al. (2012) further highlights this disconnection. While more than half of non-Bumiputera respondents identified as Malaysian first, 12 per cent identified more strongly with their ethnic group, with Chinese youths comprising the largest proportion of this group. These findings, illustrated in Figure 5, demonstrate how systemic inequities fragment national identity and weaken collective belonging. This fragmentation fosters a sense of alienation, prompting professionals to migrate in search of environments where they feel integrated and supported.

The intersection of social support and systemic inequities is evident in the education system as well. Preferential treatment for Bumiputera students, while aimed at addressing historical inequalities, has created disparities in access to higher education for non-Bumiputera communities. Selvaratnam (1988) observed that these policies deepened ethnic and cultural polarisation, further reinforcing divisions within Malaysian society. For non-Bumiputera professionals, these disparities are a source of frustration and dissatisfaction, as they perceive the system as prioritising ethnicity over merit. Focus group participants frequently cite such discontent as a reason for seeking education and employment opportunities abroad.

From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics align with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, where safety, stability, and social acceptance are foundational motivators. When individuals perceive that these needs are unmet in their home country, they are more likely to seek environments that provide better support and fulfilment. Lewin's (1951) field theory further contextualises migration as a response to opposing forces, in which push factors —such as inadequate social support and systemic inequities — drive individuals to seek pull factors abroad, such as equitable opportunities and stronger welfare systems.

In conclusion, the lack of robust social support systems in Malaysia creates significant challenges for professionals, eroding their sense of belonging and attachment to the nation. Systemic inequities in education and welfare programs further exacerbate these issues, prompting individuals to migrate in search of environments where they feel valued and supported. Addressing these deficiencies requires systemic reforms to foster inclusivity and equity, as well as increased investment in public welfare to strengthen the nation's social infrastructure.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the push factors driving Malaysian professionals to migrate, focusing on the interplay among the Bumiputera policy, political dynamics, and a sense of belonging. The analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how systemic barriers and sociopolitical conditions diminish professionals' attachment to their homeland, compelling them to seek opportunities abroad. The findings underscore that professional migration is predominantly influenced by push factors rather than pull factors, with systemic inequities, constrained autonomy, inadequate social support, and a diminished sense of belonging as critical drivers.

The Bumiputera policy emerged as a crucial factor shaping migration decisions. While initially designed to address historical inequalities, the policy has inadvertently reinforced systemic exclusion, creating divisions both across and within ethnic groups. For non-Bumiputera professionals, the policy often represents a structural barrier that limits access to education, employment, and professional growth. Similarly, marginalised Bumiputera individuals perceive the policy as disproportionately benefiting elites, further weakening their sense of belonging. These dynamics collectively intensify dissatisfaction and fuel migration trends.

This research reinforces Junaimah and Yusliza's push-pull model, demonstrating that political-economic factors and a weakened sense of belonging are the primary push factors for Malaysian professionals (Figure 1). The findings refine this model by emphasising its interconnection, necessitating a remodelled framework (Figure 2). While economic constraints like low income and limited job opportunities contribute to migration, systemic inequities, inadequate social support, and constrained autonomy play an equally decisive role.

Professionals, as a distinct group, are particularly affected by these barriers, compelling them to seek opportunities in more inclusive and meritocratic environments. The loss of highly skilled individuals depletes Malaysia's talent pool, hindering innovation and economic growth. Without meaningful reforms, the Bumiputera policy will likely continue to fuel brain drain, as professionals are influenced not only by financial factors but also by structural exclusion. These findings align with Junaimah and Yusliza's framework (Figure 1) and its refinement in this study (Figure 2), supporting the theory of reasoned action and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which posit that unmet aspirations drive migration. Addressing these root causes is essential to retaining talent and ensuring Malaysia's long-term competitiveness.

To address these challenges, policymakers must prioritise systemic reforms to foster equity, inclusivity, and a shared sense of belonging. The following recommendations provide actionable steps to mitigate brain drain:

1. Reform the Bumiputera Policy: Reevaluate and balance the policy to ensure equitable opportunities for all Malaysians, fostering inclusivity while addressing historical disparities.

2. Strengthen Meritocracy: Create transparent systems for education, hiring, and promotions that prioritise merit over identity, rebuilding trust among professionals.

3. Enhance Social Support Systems: Increase investment in public welfare — including healthcare, education, and social infrastructure —to reduce stress and foster stability for professionals and their families.

4. Promote National Cohesion: Implement initiatives that bridge ethnic divides and cultivate a shared national identity, strengthening individuals' sense of belonging.

5. Address Career and Autonomy Needs: Ensure professionals have access to opportunities for career growth, autonomy, and self-fulfilment to reduce the appeal of migrating abroad.

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the push factors driving Malaysian professionals to migrate, providing policymakers with valuable insights. Retaining professionals requires more than offering incentives; it demands systemic changes that address inequities and foster an environment where individuals feel valued and empowered. By implementing these recommendations, Malaysia can mitigate brain drain, retain its skilled talent, and create a cohesive, competitive society poised for sustainable development.

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