

HL: Bond Voyage

SL: Bond-breakers continue to generate debate, but is there really a problem to begin with?

The release of the A-level results often sees the local dailies inundated with information of prestigious scholarships to leading universities places. These glittering thrones that lead to rarefied academic halls usually entail several years of working under the sponsoring institution in the form of a bond.

While the President's Scholarship maintains the pride of place, students now have plenty more opportunities to complete their education under the aegis of government bodies like MOH, WDA, MAS, SAF or SPF etc. Private intuitions have long jumped on the bandwagon bringing into their ranks some of the best academic performers. The central premise of these scholarships is an excellent academic opportunity but also the fulfilling of a bond that follows it – the reneging of which remains a contentious issue which has gotten its fair share of media coverage in these past years - churning-up heated debates, controversy and forming deeply divided camps.

When EDB and NCB decided to divulge the names of their bond-breakers, in a bid to deter future renege agreements – it raised the ire of many. But years from then, it's difficult to say whether it has prevented similar cases. All we know for certain - browsing over the forums on the internet - is that it still captures the public's imagination while stirring up a cauldron of heated debate.

So is it acceptable to break a bond? Are there extenuating circumstances that make it tolerable? Shouldn't it be understandable that a small proportion of the students will eventually fail to fulfill their contractual obligations?

At the heart of the matter is perhaps the issue of personal moral conviction, or what many would consider a social obligation to serve-out a bond when a student's education is complete. This is especially true when it is a government granted scholarship and it's public money that goes into a student's education. In such a scenario, students can expect to raise the ire of many when they choose to snub their bond after all the resources, money and time an institution has dedicated to them. More disturbing is perhaps the callousness and nonchalance of the nation's brightest in doing so, and a deeper worry that it is really a reflection of the prevailing apathy of the nation's youth to serve and fulfill their obligations

University education is a right of every student, but these students are given an excellent opportunity to study in world's most prestigious academic institutions – outstanding students who have no doubt mugged late nights in McCafe and excelled in all their endeavors. Yet these scholarships were given in mind for a student to contribute to the organization, and OVER other students who never get that opportunity.

Just as it takes two hands to clap, it's the responsibility for both parties to work together and ensure the contractual agreements are eventually met. If companies expect to have the students come back and serve out their bonds, they need to design and create conducive environment for these fledglings to express their talents, to lead and grow. Even if serving out bonds were incredibly lucrative, there needs to be a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment. Circumscribing them to taking minutes at meetings will only nudge them towards breaking their binds. Institutions can develop a more stringent selection process that doesn't merely focus on academic achievement but also character evaluation, and make a greater effort in understanding if a student's ambition dovetails with the company's goals. Yet, even taking all these matters in consideration can hardly guarantee zero bond-breakers – personal circumstances can often take precedence over such commitments, and institutions should understand that.

Can students understand the implications when a majority of them are just about eighteen years of age when they put pen on paper? Many will only join the workforce for the first time after completing their studies – it would be cynical to expect them not to experience a change of heart, especially after being molly-coddled for 12 years in our relatively sheltered education system. Exposed to vast new possibilities in universities, or the promise better growth in other industries or organizations, some may naturally opt out of serving out their bonds. It is by no means ethical to stifle or coerce a student who wants to leave and as the financial means to do so – resorting to shaming them should hardly be permissible.

Students, on their part, prior to taking-up any scholarship offers should have a better understanding of what it could entail. Seeking the advice of peers and doing the appropriate research is vital. The bond period may not necessarily be all that they imagined, and it can prove mentally strenuous when you don't have that freedom to make a career switch at the drop of a hat. More than just a contractual agreement where they are provided financial assistance, it is also a covenant. A government provided scholarship is nothing less than a moral obligation where the nation's people are placing faith in one of their own to serve them. It would be unfortunate if it's negated simply as something that looks good on your resume.

Bond-breakers are still a small minority to generate as much contention and worry as it has. It's the instances of callousness conveyed by either side that has largely been the root cause of much of the debate and it takes is simply some genuine flexibility to deflect much of it.