

NORHASNI ZAINAL ABIDDIN
SHAMSUDDIN AHMAD

The Journey to Success in PhD: A Case of a Malaysian Social Science Student

ABSTRAK

Pelajar Ph.D. perlu memikul tanggungjawab dalam menguruskan pembelajaran mereka untuk memperolehi Ph.D.. Mereka juga bertanggungjawab untuk menentukan apa yang diperlukan, di samping melaksanakannya, dan perlu sentiasa berhubung rapat dengan penyelia mereka. Para pelajar merupakan individu yang terpenting untuk kajian Ph.D. mereka. Pengajian peringkat Ph.D. menyatakan dengan jelas bahawa segala kerja penyelidikan adalah dilakukan oleh pelajar. Kajian asal telah dilakukan ke atas tiga pelajar Ph.D. dari Malaysia yang terdiri daripada tiga disiplin pengajian yang berbeza, iaitu sastera, sains dan sains sosial. Walau bagaimanapun, hanya satu kajian kes dengan menumpukan kepada pelajar sains sosial di dalam pengajian ini. Ini adalah kerana terlalu banyak petikan kata-kata yang perlu dibentangkan bagi membolehkan pemahaman yang lebih baik dicapai. Ianya juga akan menyebabkan perkara ini terlalu luas dan panjang jika tiga kajian kes dibentangkan di dalam artikel ini. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menyediakan panduan yang lebih baik dari segi peranan yang efektif untuk menjadi pelajar Ph.D. dalam bidang sains sosial, terutama sekali bagi pelajar dari luar negara. Hasilnya, kajian ini berjaya membentuk peranan yang lebih efektif untuk pelajar mencapai kejayaan dalam pengajian mereka.

Kata-kata kunci: pengajian di luar negara, program Ph.D., serta penyelidikan dan penyeliaan.



Norhasni Zainal Abiddin, Ph.D. is a Lecturer at the Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, UPM (*Universiti Putra Malaysia*). She was born in Taiping, Perak, Malaysia on July 5th, 1974. She earned her Ph.D. (Education) from the University of Manchester, United Kingdom in 2004. Her Ph.D. thesis was "Effective Supervision of Research Students: A Study of United Kingdom University Practices and Overseas Students' Experiences". For academic purposes, she can be reached at: nonie@ace.upm.edu.my



Shamsuddin Ahmad, Ph.D. is also a Lecturer at the Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, UPM (*Universiti Putra Malaysia*). He was born in Kuala Krai, Kelantan, Malaysia on February 7th, 1954. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Georgia USA (United States of America) in 1995. His Ph.D. thesis was "Contextual Factors Associated with Evaluation Practices of Selected Continuing Education Providers in Malaysia". For academic purposes, he can be contacted at: Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, UPM, 43400 Serdang, Selangor D.E., Malaysia. E-mail: sham@ace.upm.edu.my

INTRODUCTION

One factor driving the decision to do a Ph.D. is the consideration that this qualification is needed in order to become an academic. As the doctorate is the highest grade, completing a Ph.D. is seen as a substantial investment in human capital (Mangematin, 2000). Often, starting a research degree marks a transition in the lives of students (Phillips & Pugh, 2000). For some, it is a transition from recent undergraduate work where learning was structured and directed to a situation where the learning is more self-directed. For others, starting a research degree may be a return to study after a lengthy break. Some students may already be employed in a university and be switching back from the role of teacher to that of a student. Whatever the situation, the student will need time and help to adjust to the new role (Smith, 1989; and Spear, 2000).

All foreign students have a lot of challenges to overcome, such as cultural differences, language, families, money etc. which may lead to lower achievements by them (Graves & Varma, 1999). These challenges are much greater if the student is doing postgraduate education, which really consumes time, effort, patience and enthusiasm. Furthermore, those mature students coming from overseas together with their families and with limited sources of income, may face many more challenges than those who are younger and single.

Most Malaysian students who have been sent to the UK (United Kingdom) for postgraduate studies are civil servants in the Malaysian government, and they are contracted to serve the government again after they have completed their programme. It is their duty to ensure that they fulfil the government's aspirations to contribute their acquired knowledge for the benefits of the country. While the amount of allowance that they have received to live on overseas is very minimal, the government of Malaysia spends a lot of money in order to develop the knowledge of its people. This is seen as a crucial factor in the development of a better educated work force, particularly in science, technology and related professions. Therefore, the students are expected to complete their programme as soon as possible, and certainly within the contracted time frame.

Many factors can contribute to foreign students being unable to successfully complete their programme within the given time frame. All other aspects need to be taken into account in studying the foreign student's experience of supervision. These include the support of the

department or school, as well as the fact that the students should properly know their own responsibilities (Moses, 1992; Holdaway *et al.*, 1995; and Hockey, 1996). This research project studies the three Malaysian Ph.D. students' experience in relation to their roles as a research student.

In general, the objective of this research is to identify the experiences in supervision of Ph.D. student studying in the University of Manchester, United Kingdom. This includes of what he/she had obtained, what were the problems he/she went through and what he/she expects from the parties who had involved in his/her research such as supervisor, school and sponsor. Such experience will be good as general guidelines in order to identify the main problems and helping the involved parties to improvise their services and conducting the necessary research when the issue aroused. The implication of this research will be the students especially the foreign students would be able to apply the experiences and guidelines discovered from the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature search has provided evidence that the student/supervisor relationship is vital to the Ph.D. process. The literature includes statements about the single most important problem, in the eyes of many respondents, being the quality of supervision (Buckley & Hooley, 1988). Various books have approached the acquisition of Ph.D.s, including the management of the supervisor/student relationship (Phillips & Pugh, 2000); and many departments carry out their own surveys in an attempt to assess their performance in the supervision of their students (Haksever & Manisali, 2000).

E.M. Phillips & D.S. Pugh (2000) point out that the acquisition of skills by postgraduate students should be effected as professional learning conducted under their own management. In other words, research students have to take responsibility for managing their own learning and getting a Ph.D. They are also responsible for determining what is required as well as for carrying it out, and must always keep in touch in regular meetings with the supervisor (Moses, 1992; and Powles, 1989 and 1993). I. Moses (1985) argues that supervisors expect students to be diligent, hardworking, energetic, keen, tenacious and conscientious and to have a sense of urgency. They also expect students to be enthusiastic and motivated towards research work, to be pleasant at work and to contribute to a good working environment.

Also, students should give continual feedback, so that the supervisor can give informed instruction.

The student is the main person responsible for his/her Ph.D. research. Doing a Ph.D. clearly indicates that this is a student's own research and work. E.M. Phillips & D.S. Pugh (2000) emphasise that it is the student's responsibility to determine what is required as well as carrying it out, and that students have to come through with the clear aim of becoming a competent professional researcher. In other words, it is agreed that the student is responsible for an original contribution to the subject and for developing a mature, critical knowledge of the subject area and its context. It is also a good idea for them to talk to other postgraduates about their experience of the role as well as their work. A. Russell (1996) found that one of the highly rated constraints on research students' are personal problems. In fact, sharing apprehensions helps to resolve problems through the knowledge that the problem is not an individual one (Arksey *et al.*, 1994). Once students are able to share feelings and talk about them and their effect on their work, they will all start to feel better (Russell, 1996).

Students should identify the topic and preliminary reading (Brown & Krager, 1985). This can be linked with other parts of the Ph.D. task, like the development of a relevant body of knowledge, placing the research in the context of the literature and originality (Salmon, 1992; Russell, 1996; and Haksever & Manisali, 2000). Meanwhile I. Moses (1992) and E.M. Phillips & D.S. Pugh (2000) elaborate this statement mentioning that the process of defining the research topic varies across disciplines. The supervisor in a science discipline has to take the lead in obtaining the physical resources and the research personnel required. The student's research topic will be clearly defined to fit in with the innovative thrust of the supervisor's research programme. In contrast, in the humanities and social sciences, students often come with their own topics within the field in which the supervisor is expert. Additionally, after surveying aspects of graduate education in Canadian universities, E. Holdaway *et al.* (1995) report that in education, social sciences and humanities, graduate students choose their thesis topics themselves more frequently than those in other disciplines do.

The thesis is usually the most substantial piece of writing yet undertaken by students, and it provides an opportunity for them to develop their skills in writing and in marshalling arguments (Haksever & Manisali, 2000). On the other hand, they should submit written

work in some form as early as possible in their studies so that writing problems can be recognised and corrected (Spear, 2000). J.G. Donald *et al.* (1995) propose that the responsibilities of the student should include understanding the scope of doctoral work, such as the number of years to be devoted to full time study, knowledge of research methods necessary to carry out studies, the regulations on thesis submission and the expectations of the supervisor regarding every aspect of the research.

A good student should have a broader view of academic training in the discipline in which he/she is undertaking the research, seeing it as professional development (Phillips & Pugh, 2000). In this sense, professional development include attending conferences, writing papers for publication, attending seminars and workshops, making presentations, networking with other researchers, working as a research assistant and teaching (Brown & Krager, 1985; Holdaway *et al.*, 1995; and Phillips & Pugh, 2000). Students are expected to gain expertise in the research process so that their talents can be observed in as many different settings as possible (Brown & Krager, 1985).

Most overseas students are sponsored by appropriate bodies during their study. They have been given a specific period, namely three years, to complete their study and return to their own country. Therefore, time is one of the enemies of the overseas student. This is relevant to the study conducted by A. Russell (1996), who found that students are concerned about time and time management. Lack of funding seriously affects some students' research, or requires them to partly self-fund it and this result in serious concerns and deep frustration (Holdaway *et al.*, 1995). This view is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which reported that less than 20 percent of students receiving a grant complete their study within four years while 27 percent complete within five years and that completion rates trailed off markedly after five years (Elton & Pope, 1987). So, students should expect to work within deadlines (Salmon, 1992; Yeatman, 1995; and Phillips & Pugh, 2000) and to have a planned timetable (Rudd, 1985; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; and Frischer & Larsson, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This article will be focusing on one case study of Malaysian Ph.D. student studying in the University of Manchester, United Kingdom. The participant represented the Social Science discipline. The

researchers also decided to choose participant who was already in at least her second year of study, such student have much more information than first year students, due to the greater experience she had gained. Initially, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with twelve participants and decided to pick three of them to participate in the case studies to represent Science, Social Science and Arts discipline. The students were then interviewed again to obtain more information about recent developments in their current year of study. However, due to the case study best to be presented in narrative order, the article will be way too long. Therefore, for this article only one case study will be presented which focusing on Social Science student. The researchers will not reveal the real name of the participant, as it is part of the ethics of doing research where the background of participant should be kept confidential. Therefore, "Izzah" will represent Social Science student for this case study.

The case study was conducted over a one year period with the subjects. The interviews, which were semi-structured, were taped and transcribed and then the transcripts were checked with the subjects before the data was used. The purpose of the case study is to gain as much information as possible about the participants' experiences in supervision and university practices. The case study generated large amounts of written data from the students concerning their views and experiences of supervision.

The case study was used as part of the data collection method for the actual research project. Other methods that been used by the researchers were survey on 110 respondents and in-depth interviews on 12 informants. However, this article will only focusing on the results related to the roles and experiences of Ph.D. student. The results were obtained through one case study which emphasising on Social Science discipline. The researchers decided to report the case study as a narrative. Many quotations are presented in reporting the case study in order to give a better understanding of the story.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. PARTICIPANT'S BACKGROUNDS: IZZAH

Izzah is single and 34 years old and has very good communication skills, as well as excellent in spoken and written English, as she has done all her tertiary education abroad. She did her Bachelor's degree in accounting in a United Kingdom university and completed her

Master's degree in the United States of America, specialising in international business. She registered to study for a Ph.D. in organisational psychology and currently she is in her final year, having already applied for a six months extension from her sponsor. She is a very independent student and likes her supervisor to give her as much freedom as possible in doing Ph.D. research. Before she came to study in Manchester, she worked as an assistant lecturer in a Malaysian university. She insisted that she did not gain much experience of supervising students while working, because she decided to do her Ph.D. not long after she had been appointed as an assistant lecturer. In the researchers' view, she seems very serious in her study and a workaholic.

She chose the subject area for her Ph.D. because of her interest in that particular field and she has discovered that the subject is not well established in Malaysia. Therefore she can make her contribution to knowledge in a new area, specifically in the Malaysian context. The reason for her choosing to pursue her study in her current university is that the supervisor that she selected is a very well known professor in her subject area. Initially, Izzah applied to three universities in the United Kingdom to do the Ph.D. All the universities she selected are among the best universities in that subject area. She was looking for a university that had a well-known professor to supervise her. In the end, she decided to choose the first university that offered her a place. Another strong reason for her still wanting to be supervised by her current supervisor is that she is one of the pioneers in her field of study. After spending two years sharing a house with other students, she decided to stay in a student accommodation hall towards the end of her Ph.D. As a fourth year student, she has spent most of her time in her room writing up her thesis. If she has problems, she prefers to consult her friends in Malaysia by e-mail or telephone. She can be seen as a careful and disciplined student. One example of this is that she mentioned that every time she sends her written work to her supervisor she double checks everything in order to ensure that it is her best and well organised. Izzah represents social science students in this case study.

B. IZZAH ON THE STUDENT'S RESPONSIBILITIES

Firstly, Izzah mentioned the connection between the Ph.D. and her current research. She said that, by doing the Ph.D., she was forcing herself to do the research. As she told the researchers that, she did

not have much knowledge about the subject of her current research, because she had done her Bachelors degree in accounting and her Masters degree in business. Her current research is into organisation psychology. She made the decision to study for a Ph.D. on her supervisor's prompting. After that, she started thinking and decided to do something about managerial attitudes, which was for her something very new in the Malaysian environment. As she put it:

It started off the intention to do the Ph.D. Now I see a bigger role for it. If I don't do a Ph.D., I don't think I can do this research. This is a very good learning experience that forces me to do it, because I'm registered and I'm forced to do it. So I'm doing it. If I was not doing the Ph.D. I don't think I could do research because I don't have the exposure [...]. My sponsor sent me to do a Ph.D. I chose the title of my research.

As previously mentioned, Izzah had to force herself to do the research. However, she still feels happy as she likes her current research very much because she chose the research topic. Starting from this, she has made an effort to work hard to ensure that she achieves her objectives. Therefore, she always bears in mind that she has a very big responsibility to meet in completing her Ph.D. programme. Initially, at the beginning of her first year, she admitted that she was responsible for getting a basic understanding of the area, which she has done by, for example, finding the related literature, identifying the methodology and refining her research area. When telling the researchers how she works, she said that she has to do things on her own first, without asking her supervisor how to do it and how to get this and that. For her, it is not the supervisor's responsibility to tell the student which literature is related to her research for, it is up to the student to find it. She claimed that it was her responsibility to do all the work in her first year. Normally, she tells her supervisor about her progress and her problems. However, she mentioned that she tries to resolve them by herself as far as possible. She spoke about this in the following terms:

My responsibility is to do everything because it's my work. To make the best effort I can, like in finding the literature, refining the area, refining the research problem, identifying the methodology, getting the data, it's my work. It's not her (the supervisor's) work. Most of the literature, I decide upon. She did tell me where to start. So there is a starting point. From there, I moved on by myself. But giving the literature is not her responsibility. That is my role. How I want to do things, I decide. I honestly believe one

thing about the Ph.D. It's not the responsibility of the supervisor but that of the student. All I know is that it's very difficult to go through and one of the most frustrating things that I've ever done. I think a lot of that is because you need to like it because you go up and down, like a roller coaster.

Izzah also claimed that she has a responsibility to prepare written work for submission to her supervisor. However, she makes sure she submits the best work she can. She is willing to rewrite her work before submitting it in order to keep her supervisor satisfied and, as far as she can, she does not like her to make a lot of comments on her work. As she mentioned, she believes that the Ph.D. is student's work, so she has to be independent and try to not rely too much on her supervisor. She made the following comment:

I have my own standard. The thing is that one of my friends said that perhaps what I'm doing is a bit too much because I'm rewriting a chapter which I haven't submitted. So my friend told me that it's better to submit the chapter first before rewriting it. I think personally that before I submit, it must be the best work that I've done. So I won't submit until I'm happy with the work.

Izzah knows that most Ph.D. students like to get a great deal of direction, especially in the first year of study, to make their work faster and to make them confident that they are on the right track. However, she likes to take up the challenge of trying to do it on her own unless she is really stuck on something, when she needs her supervisor's assistance. She likes the freedom that she gets from her supervisor as she can explore new things on her own. She also claims that the freedom that she had started from the day she first met her supervisor. Therefore, she does not know what her work would look like if she were not given that kind of freedom. As she put it:

I like the freedom that I'm given, a lot of freedom. But the best thing I like about this thing is that I'm given the freedom to explore on my own. Some people might say that it's like I get too much freedom. I don't know how I would work if she did not give me as much freedom as I have. I don't know whether it would be better or not because this is the way it happened with me.

Izzah is happy to be supervised by her current supervisor because she would rather work independently. Besides, her supervisor told her about her responsibilities on the first day they met. Hence, starting

from the very beginning of the first meeting with her supervisor, Izzah knew what role she should play and she started thinking that she must do everything on her own because, as her supervisor told her, the research is hers. She made the following comment about it:

All I know is that, like from day one, I was told and I had the impression that I had to work hard to achieve and to complete my Ph.D. So, from day one, I was told that the toughest examiner that I was going to face for my research work was my supervisor. She told me from day one and she repeated it about two weeks ago, the same thing. "You get to me and you get to do it". So she is the toughest sort of obstacle.

Another reason why Izzah seems to be prepared to carry this responsibility and not depending too much on her supervisor is that she has made it her priority to select a well-known supervisor. She did not choose her supervisor for her attitude, but because she is really famous and has a very good knowledge of her research area. When Izzah's supervisor told her that the research was all hers, she had to take that as a challenge to work independently, although there were many obstacles that she might encounter. Besides, Izzah believes that, although she begin with limited knowledge in her current research area, she will ensure that she explores and get as much knowledge as she can, as she is supervised by a person who is very famous in her area. Her supervisor has also given her the impression that she could do it, even though the area is very new to her. This encouragement motivates her to do her work. As she put it:

I chose to study here because I chose my supervisor. She is the best-qualified person in the area that I'm working in. At first, I just walked in because when I applied to do research in this area, I was very aware of the fact that I didn't have the necessary background. So I wrote in to a few schools, I submitted my proposal and I got three offers. But the best offer in terms of the person qualified to supervise me was my supervisor here [...]. First, she is a professor and she knows her area very well. I came into the area with the wrong background. She seems to think that, if I work hard enough or I put in the effort in, I can actually grasp the background, so that is already like a motivating factor, because I have somebody who is expert in this area giving me the impression or to telling me that, if I work hard enough, I can actually get hold of this area.

Izzah also mentioned her responsibility to get to know many people around her especially in her school. By doing this, she will know who is expert in one kind of area, and who to get help from.

She also mentioned that it is her responsibility to maintain a good relationship with other staff in the same school. Initially, Izzah started her study by taking an M.Phil. for one year and continued with her Ph.D. the following year. She was on the probation for one year because she claimed that she did not have the relevant background in her research area. Therefore she had to take two courses in the first year. She mentioned that, when taking the courses, she had a responsibility to complete them successfully. She said:

In my first year, I gave myself one year to catch up with everybody. The relationship with the other staff was very good. I was from a different area totally. I had attended just a very few courses. Just one course, I took it because I thought it was interesting. The second course, I took it because it was recommended by my school. The first semester was research methodology and the second semester was more related to my area. I've completed them successfully.

Izzah also claimed that her first year was the toughest in her life, for she had to sacrifice a lot of her rest time, especially when she wanted to meet her supervisor the next day. As she put it:

Sometimes, I didn't sleep at night because I thought I needed to prepare something to present to her (the supervisor) the next day. I needed to work hard, and if I hadn't done what I needed to do? I just burnt the midnight oil, because I was seeing her the next day.

Izzah prefers to discuss her work with her friends. In her view, by having a lot of friends who are familiar with her area, at least she has somebody that she can talk to every time she gets stuck. She will try to solve her problem by discussing it with a friend first. If she still cannot find the answer, then she will bring it to her supervisor's attention. Most of her close friends are Malaysian and they are also doing Ph.Ds. She contacts them by e-mail or telephone. If the problem can be solved by discussion with a friend, she prefers not to see her supervisor. As she put it:

Yeah, I have a few discussions with friends about my research. They are not students with the same supervisor or from the same school. All of them are doing Ph.D.'s, a few here and a few in Malaysia. I'll discuss things with my friends who are in Malaysia by e-mail or phone them up. So far I have bounced and discussed it with my friends if I have got stuck with something. There are certain things that I think I need to consult them about because I think that those things are such new things for me. Then if the problem still

can't be solved, I'll go to the supervisor. Like yesterday or the day before, I was stuck and then I got advice from them. It's happened that I could solve the problem with my friend so, then, there is no need to go and see my supervisor.

Normally each student is allocated an adviser who is responsible for him/her throughout his/her academic life. However, Izzah said that she preferred to have just a single relationship only with her supervisor. Therefore, she has informed her adviser and her supervisor of this and both of them have agreed to what she wants. The reason is that she believes that it will be easier and faster to work with one person rather than two. She said:

My supervisor is my mentor. I was supposed to have an adviser, but, as I said, from the first time I met my supervisor, I know that I perceived that she was the only one. Keep it simple. Enough to have one relationship. I don't think I could handle anybody else [...] They give advice in cases where your relationship with your supervisor isn't working. Basically, I told her (the adviser) I sort of agreed with her that I wasn't going to see her. We met once and that is why we sort of agreed that I would go to my supervisor for everything.

Besides, Izzah claimed that there is a weekly meeting in her school. She goes to the meetings, and so at least she knows who is around her working environment. In her view, a good student has to take this opportunity to go to the meetings because it is like training in doing research. Basically, the objective of the meeting is more to allow students get to know each other. Izzah made the following comment about this:

We had that meeting for Ph.D. students. I think the purpose of that meeting was basically to get to know each other [...]. We meet on a weekly basis in the doctoral training programme to discuss the literature and methodology, stuff like that. It's not actually a seminar but a doctoral training programme. The whole class has to attend basically, I guess, so they can remind us about those sorts of things.

Izzah has planned her work on a weekly basis from her first year of study. However, when she reached her fourth year, she said that it was better to have a long-term timetable as she could clearly see what she should do next and when she should submit her work and finish her Ph.D. However, the timetable is just a plan on paper and is subject to change. She has to change it when she has something urgent or

important to do on a particular day. She will make sure that she can replace the missing events on the following day. She said that her current year is a very challenging time in her life, since she is working to meet a deadline. As she put it:

Yeah, I planned weekly. I did my timetable. I tended to do weekly planning. Normally, I did it on a weekly basis. As far as I can, I'll make sure that I'm working according to what I've planned to do. I think, at this stage, I have to have two timetables or planning, one long term and one short term, because I'm setting a target or deadline for when I need to finish it. So far, I have submitted Chapter 2, which needs to be corrected. I sent her Chapter 3, and it needs to be corrected, and Chapter 4 I sent it, and it also needs to be corrected. I plan to have a viva maybe in June or somewhere after that. Currently, my study is considered to have been going on for three and a half years.

Although she has a timetable or planning, she has not been able to follow all the plans on it. Being human, sometimes she faces problems and when the problems arise, it takes her time to develop the spirit to overcome them. Moreover, she is staying here alone and she has to solve her problems on her own, which sometimes takes a very long time. At one stage, she lost her enthusiasm and she decided not to continue her study and wanted to go back to Malaysia. She said:

I've been down so many times. Like at the end of my first year. I had a period in my time when I was going to give up. I wanted to pack my bag and go home. I actually had that aim in my first year. In March, I bought a plane ticket to go back to Malaysia, and I told myself either I go back for good because I didn't make it or I go back for a holiday. It is because I found it difficult getting into that area [...] very difficult. Yeah, I chose the topic, but when I was writing the proposal, obviously it was just a very minor thing, just like one, two, three, four pages, just an application. But there are a lot of things in this area to get the whole of it, to understand the research methodology, sort of thing [...].

When Izzah reached her second year, she spent most of her time in Malaysia collecting data. She had to go there several times because she encountered many obstacles in collecting it. She also claimed that the people that she was dealing with in getting the data were not very helpful. When she was in Malaysia, she contacted her supervisor by e-mail if she needed her advice. Izzah mentioned that it is her own responsibility to get in touch with her supervisor wherever she

is. She has to tell her supervisor about her current progress and when she would be back in school to continue her study. In her second year, she also did a lot of theory review. This is an ongoing process, which needs to be returned to now and then. She said:

I went to Malaysia to collect my data for about nine months total, on and off because I still didn't have enough data. I went back to Malaysia about three times. A lot of the time, I was in Malaysia, so we did a lot of corresponding by e-mail. So, I told her what was going on and what I was not doing. To be honest with you, there were so many obstacles to finding the data in Malaysia. The people there were not so helpful and so I had many difficulties over there while collecting my data. That is why I went there several times.

In her third year, Izzah is concentrating on analysing and writing up her thesis. She admitted that she has learnt many things since her first year. In her view, it is her responsibility to learn about and explore new things when doing her Ph.D. For instance, she has learnt a great deal about herself. She claimed that she had met many people and been to many countries before and she thought that she had a lot of basic knowledge as well about the area to which her research related. However, when she met her current supervisor, she realised that she had very limited knowledge about many things. In her view, when people try to explore beyond the surface like when they do a Ph.D., they can find out that they actually do not know much. In other words, the more people study, the more they find that they just know a few things and that there are many things out there that they do not know. On the other hand, in her final year of study, Izzah said she has learnt to force herself to do whatever she needs to. Therefore, she has been able to improve her skills, like her writing skills, and also her communication is much better. As she mentioned:

I think the biggest thing I've learnt is about me. You know it's because I thought I'd been in the UK, I'd been in the US. I thought I knew a lot of things, but I don't know much. I think that is the biggest lesson that anybody can learn. One, I don't know anything at all. Two, I'm not good at statistics. The most important lesson is that this Ph.D. is a humbling experience. I thought I knew something, but I don't. My knowledge is very limited. One thing I have learnt from this final stage, it's no longer an issue of motivation. It's an issue of forcing yourself to do it. You have to sit down and do it and do it and do it. As time goes on, I have found out that I can improve my writing skills. That is very important.

Communication skills obviously, I think the most important thing that I have learnt is picking up skills.

Izzah said that she spent a lot of her time in school in her first year. Most of her time in the second year she spent in Malaysia and in her third year she has done a lot of writing in her room. She said:

[...] It depends on my mood to do my work. In the first year, I did most of my work in my school. I arrived early in the morning and did work over there because I had to find the journals and go to the library. The second year was about data collection, so most of the time or a significant amount of the time I spent in Malaysia, collecting my data. In my third year, I'm in my room most of the time because I'm writing up there. I'm doing both a qualitative and quantitative study. I have to interview about fifty-eight managers in Malaysia. And I've got about three hundred responses to my questionnaire. That is a lot work to do.

One week before the interview, the researchers asked her to jot down her activities starting from Monday until Sunday. The following day, a Monday, the researchers met her for the interview. Table 1 next page shows Izzah's weekly activities.

Izzah also mentioned her responsibility towards her sponsor. She will make sure that she finishes her Ph.D. and will go back to Malaysia only when she has completed it successfully. She also told the researchers about her problems in getting her research grant from her sponsor. This happened when she went back to Malaysia for a while. She asked about her research grant. However they said that she would not get it because she had not followed the procedure. She was really frustrated about it and she claimed that there are too many protocols and strict procedures in dealing with many things in Malaysia, which are never found in the UK. As she put it:

If my sponsor asks me to go back, but I still cannot finish my study, I don't care. I'll make sure I finish it within four years. I'll try my best to finish in June. I'll stay for convocation in July and I have some other things going on after that, like publication. One thing that I am not satisfied with about my sponsor, I wasn't sure whether I was entitled to get a research grant or something, so, I applied but I applied late, that is when I was in Malaysia. They told me that my procedures were all wrong and that I was not following the correct procedure. I said to them it's like I try to be as nice as I can but I guess I'm nobody they will listen to or consider. If I were somebody, I wouldn't have to follow step-by-step procedures.

Table 1
An Example of Izzah's Weekly Activities in Final Year Ph.D.

Day	Activities
Monday 7 th	It was a bad day, I just stayed in my room, I tried to do my work. It started when I met a guy, who advises me on statistics on Friday and he told me that I had to rewrite everything. OK fine. I do both qualitative and quantitative research actually. So, I'm not good with numbers. One of my main problems is numbers. I'd prefer to talk about or describe things. So this is the SPSS. Obviously you play with numbers, you play with percentages, means, values, standard deviation. So, I met this guy on Friday and he basically told me to do everything again. This guy is recommended by my supervisor. He is a very good statistician. He has twenty years experience in that field. Yeah, he is a lecturer in my school. So, because, on Friday, I was told that bad news, it has affected other days, like Monday.
Tuesday 8 th	Tuesday, I just try to do it in front of the computer in my room, as long as it takes until I can't stand it anymore. Until I feel I have to get out and do other things. Like last week, when I started writing Chapter 6, I sat for three hours. There were only two words on the computer, "Chapter 6", nothing else...three hours. So after that I went to the library to check on other Ph.D. students work just to see their layout. So, I started to play with the layout. On Tuesday, I didn't write anything.
Wednesday 9 th	Wednesday, I'm supposed to rewrite the whole thing, which didn't happen because I sat too long and I felt pain in my back and a headache. Then, Wednesday went down the toilet basically.
Thursday 10 th Friday 11 th	Doing nothing. Got a headache. I know that my work was going very slow. What I did was like a micro plan. The target for the next few hours was to write at least a page. So that is what I did. I went to school early in the morning, wrote a page about my plan and then I went back.
Saturday 12 th	I went to the library to check other students' theses and went back to my room and continued writing until midnight.
Sunday 13 th	Writing-up. The whole day I stayed in my room.

Generally, Izzah is ready to take up the challenge of working independently at her Ph.D. because she believes that it is a student's work, so, a student cannot rely too much on a supervisor. She seems to accept that kind of supervision because she has to admit that she has chosen her supervisor because of her position and expertise. Another thing is that she planned her work on a weekly basis. She said that she did have a long-term timetable. Izzah also likes to refer to her friends to get help when she gets stuck with something while doing her research.

CONCLUSION

The actual research which was done by the researchers had involved the foreign Ph.D. students studying in the United Kingdom. Survey on 110 respondents and in-depth interviews on 12 informants were used as part of the actual data collection method. However, as for the case studies method, the researchers aimed to focusing on Malaysian Ph.D. students only. For this article, only the results from one case study were discussed.

Izzah was seen as having to face challenges. As for Izzah, who is still single but is growing older, she does not have anyone special to share her problems with. For her, not everything can be shared with friends and sometimes she has to keep things secret and this affects her work. Nevertheless, all the problems need to be attended to with a good spirit and commitment. Another example was when Izzah felt so depressed with her research and there was no opportunity for her to talk about her problems and she decided to return to Malaysia for good in the middle of her study. In her case, with the spirit that she has, which came from the support of her family and friends, she came back with new strength.

Ph.D. student is experienced in his/her study and work and he/she realise that he/she must be independent throughout his/her study. Izzah, she likes to be given complete freedom. With freedom, she is able to gain as much experience as possible. Having said that, the work and study experience, like doing a Masters in the same field, are not very significant in terms of supervision needs. Izzah also refers to her friends when she has any problems. She is of the opinion that it is good to discuss things with friends in the same field before seeing their supervisor. She only seek her supervisor's help when the problems cannot be solved in her circle.

The researchers have found that Izzah is a very independent student because, by chance, she started her Ph.D. with someone who has the perspective that the student should be given as much freedom as possible in doing it. If her supervisor gave her structured supervision with agreement on the number of meetings per month or gave her directions about what to do next, she would definitely accept it. However, as she pointed out, she would not get as much benefit as she gets now if she had not been given such freedom from the beginning of her Ph.D. study. On the other hand, the researchers thought that if she had been given direct help in her first year, she

might have finished her study by now, because Izzah is a very hardworking student.

Izzah seems to be ready to receive that kind of supervision because her supervisor had told her from the beginning of her first year that she would not give her direct help because the research is hers, so, she has to do it all herself. From the time when she just began to plan to continue her study of her selected topic, she started to train herself to be an independent person because she admitted that, whatever it is, she deserves it because it was her decision to choose the university as well as the supervisor. This is supported by the fact that she said she chose to study here because she wanted a supervisor who was very well known in her research area. Although Izzah is single, there are some disadvantages when she is faces a problem and wants to make a decision. She needs very good support from somebody. Sometimes, she feels that she has a very dull life and that it is not appropriate to tell her friends what is going on because it is too personal. Therefore, she cannot find a good way to solve the problem and, at one stage, she nearly decided to return for good to Malaysia.

It is hoped that this research could provide general views of the experiences faced by the Ph.D. Social Science student while doing Ph.D. in overseas. It is true that each individual had different experiences, challenges and problems during their studies and it will be very interesting to study those things. It is also true that we cannot make generalisation and conclusion towards the findings of this case study since this article had only focusing on one Malaysian Ph.D. student in the United Kingdom. As mentioned earlier, the researchers had used various methods and more than one case study for the actual research. However, this case study could at least provide useful knowledge to the readers who need such information for their reference.

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