



Are you prepared for a research postgraduate study (Masters or PhD) in Malaysian universities?

Update (15 May 2013): I was interviewed by Samantha Joseph from the New Straits Times newspaper on my views on postgraduate studies in Malaysia. ["The realities of postgraduate education" was published today in NST Postgraduate Supplement issue \(pg. 2\).](#)

Some students go through a self-inflicted torrid time during their Masters or PhD programme in local Malaysian universities. There are many reasons for this, but they can be grouped into two issues. These students often have: 1) a wrong evaluation of their interests and capabilities, and 2) a wrong expectation of the amount of self-reliant work required from them in their postgraduate studies.



Yes, yes, you are interested in a research postgraduate degree in a Malaysian university, but are you really prepared for it? (photo from www.wtsinternational.org)

So, before you fill in the postgraduate study forms, you need to ask yourself the following questions.

1. Why do you want to do a research postgraduate study?

This is the most important question students should to ask themselves, but yet, students often neglect to do so. Doing a postgraduate study is not a customary progression after completing your first degree. And you should not do a Masters or PhD simply because some of your friends are doing it, or because you cannot find a job, or because you feel aimless after graduation.



Research work often involves plenty of work in labs (photo from www.upm.edu.my)

Unbelievably, one of my former (and failed) students once disclosed that she wanted a PhD simply because she like the title “Dr.” to precede

her name! Some students also do a PhD with the belief that their employers would increase their salaries or their social status would rise.

A research postgraduate study should only be pursued if (and only if) you are interested in research or academic work. What you might be unaware is doing a research postgraduate study would limit your career options to only those in research and teaching. And even if you do find a job that is unrelated to research, do not expect your employer to pay you according to your highest training level. In other words, you would be paid according to your first-degree level. But in most cases, your job application would likely be rejected because you would be deemed over-qualified.

2. Do you have sufficient money?

Another often neglected question is to ask is if you have sufficient funds to support your

postgraduate study. A Masters study would take two years, and a PhD four years. Shockingly, some foreign students have little qualms coming to Malaysia with insufficient money. *God willing, they might say, part-time work or additional money would come later.*



**Shockingly,
some students**

**pursue their
postgraduate
studies with
insufficient
financial
means.**

**Although
plenty of
scholarships
are available
to local
Malaysian
students,
these
scholarships
are typically**

**unappreciated.
These
scholarships
actually act to
cause students
to be lazy and
slow down
their work
progress
(photo from
[www.themalay
siantimes.com](http://www.themalay
siantimes.com).
my).**

**When you are stressed out
thinking of money, is there any**

room left in your concern for your research?

To put it simply, you must have sufficient funds to pay the tuition fees, accommodation, food, and other expenses.

And, no, part-time work is never a good option for additional income. The job, even though part-time, steals your precious time from research work. You must be fully focused on your research work. My students who have part time jobs have never been able to give their best

effort in their research or to complete their studies in time - never.

But what about scholarships?

3. Can you get a scholarship? And would you even appreciate the scholarship if you get it?

Supervisors in

Malaysian universities are blessed with ample research projects and with ample financial support for student scholarships.

However, these scholarships are competitive. There is

**no guarantee you
would get it because
supervisors often
have more than one
student under their
wings. Do not be
surprised that a
supervisor can have
as many as five to
twelve students at**

any one time.

**My university, UPM,
along with five other
universities, is
recognized as a
Research University.
This means, UPM
gets additional funds
to offer scholarships
to postgraduate**

**students. Local
Malaysian students
find it relatively easy
to obtain one form of
scholarship or
another. Now,
ironically, comes the
problem with
abundant
scholarships. With**

**plentiful of
scholarships available
to Malaysian
students, you might
think this would
make these students
work even harder and
more appreciative,
right? Wrong. Easy
access to**

**scholarships only
makes some
Malaysian students
lazier and slower in
their research work.**

**Foreign students
have it harder. The
only scholarship
available to you in
Malaysia is through**

your supervisor's research funds. You need to ask your prospective supervisor even before you apply for a postgraduate study if he or she has sufficient funds to support you.

4. Is your family or partner supportive of your studies?

What most students fail

**to realize is
doing a
Masters and
particularly a
PhD can
disrupt your
family life and**

**social
relationships.
I have seen
more than one
case where
parents
threaten to**

disown their

children

because their

children

wanted to

pursue a

postgraduate

**study. This is
because some
parents fail to
appreciate or
are naïve
about
postgraduate**

**studies. These
parents think
a
postgraduate
study is an
unnecessary
and additional**

**financial
burden to
continue to
support the
children's
seemingly
never-ending**

studies.



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**I have seen
one of my
former
students
receiving
ridicule from
relatives and**

**even from
family
members
when they
compare her
to her ex-
course mates**

**who have
already
graduated
(from
Bachelor) and
who are
earning good**

**money while
she still slogs
through a
Masters
programme.**

I have seen a

**marriage end
up as a
divorce
because the
wife cannot
stand being
alone for long**

**periods whilst
the husband
was busy at
the field or
lab. I have
seen a long-
term**

**relationship
break up due
to one partner
(girlfriend)
pursuing a
PhD, while the
other partner**

(boyfriend)

was not.

Intellectually,

it appeared,

they grew

apart. On a

personal note,

**my own ten-
year-old
relationship
with my
former
girlfriend
broke down**

**because of my
long absence
while I
pursued my
PhD in the UK
while she
remained at**

**home in
Malaysia (no,
long distance
relationship
do not work).**

I have seen

**one student
who was so
completely
stressed out
from his PhD
that he was
admitted to a**

hospital

mental health

ward ... twice.

And I have

seen both

husband and

wife (both

**PhD students
at the same
time) stressed
out of having
to take care of
their newborn
baby, their**

**financial
difficulties,
and their
respective
research; so
stressed the
husband was**

**that he was
close to tears
as he
disclosed his
troubles to me
in my office.**

**Doing a
research
postgraduate
study is
stressful
because it
competes with**

**your family or
your partner
for your time,
energy,
devotion, and
concentration.
So, you may**

**be ready to do
a PhD, but is
your family or
partner ready?**

**5. How is
your
English?
English is**

the

lingua

franca in

academia

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**Unfortunately, the
level of**

English

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students

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• **Yes,**

English

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**what can
be taught
in these
English**

**language
centers.**

**It is one
thing in**

being

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read and

speak

**conversat
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English

such as:

*“I would like
to see my
supervisor.*

*May I know
when he is
free to see*

me?”

and

wholly

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in being

able to

read

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**the whole
text is
saying,
such as:**

*“...factors of
aggregate
stability can
interact with
one another;
meaning*

*that a factor
may not, by
itself, have a
unique
contribution
to aggregate*

stability.

*Instead, it
jointly
contributes
with another
factor or*

*factors to
affect
aggregate
stability.*

*Such jointly
contribution*

*s cannot be
measured by
simple linear
regression
or by
correlations*

...”.

**So, if
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English is

less than

desired,

how far

are you

willing to

work to

improve

it? You

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**level of
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**6. Are
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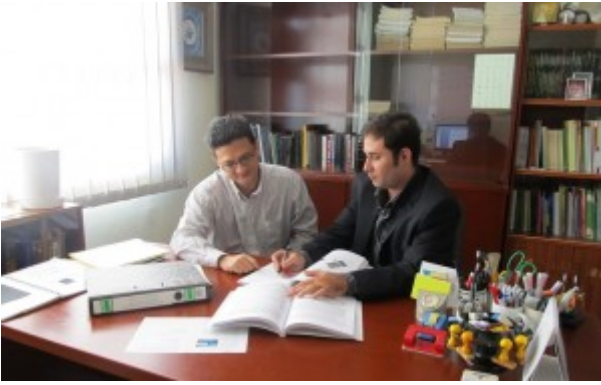
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