

GRIT

# DELIVERING FOOD NOT ABOVE MAN WITH PHD

Akmal would write dissertation at night after 8 hours on the road

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THEY say clothes make the man. And it would be easy to make out from his pink and grey uniform that Mohd Akmal Azhar is a Food Panda rider.

But ask him about developing probiotic tablets from yeast for stomach acid tolerance, and you will literally get a dissertation.

Akmal, 36, has the stomach for hard work, and he has a PhD in pharmaceutical technology to prove it.

He previously lectured at Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) on

contract for six years, before the university gave him a three-year scholarship in 2017 to pursue a PhD there.

But Akmal, who is married to a teacher and has five children aged between two and 10, had to support himself during his fourth and final year, which saw him taking the job as a delivery rider.

Akmal, who used to ride between six and eight hours daily while completing his PhD, now works 12 hours a day from 10am to 10pm, as his wife is due to give birth to their sixth child next month.

Juggling his studies and a full-time job was a major challenge for Akmal, who completed

his bachelor's and master's degrees at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in Skudai, Johor.

"I was halfway through my PhD when I found myself without financial support. It was tough. I have a young family and I cannot be picky about work.

"The Movement Control Order gave flexibility to my timetable. I used to work during the day and stayed up late at night to complete my dissertation. It was tiring as I was out all day. When I was home, I had to divide my time between my family and studies," he said.

Since most of the lab work had been completed before the pandemic, he spent long hours



Mohd Akmal Azhar showing his doctoral dissertation yesterday. PIC BY FARIZUL HAFIZ AWANG

analysing the data and writing up the results.

Despite his academic qualifications, Akmal said it was tough to get a job during the pandemic last year.

"I am grateful for this job because it puts food on the table and keeps our heads above water. I later found out that there are a number of degree holders who work as delivery riders.

"I have no regrets. The job also gave me the opportunity to improve my communication skills. I learnt a lot from meeting and speaking to customers," said Akmal.

Akmal, who commutes 50km daily from his house near Gambang to the state capital, said he planned to apply for a teaching position at UMP but would con-

tinue working as a delivery rider for now.

He said he shared his story on social media to inspire others, especially delivery riders, to pursue their education.

"They can make plans to continue their diploma, degree or master's. By experiencing this journey, they can be challenged on how they think and solve problems."

Akmal's post on Facebook about his achievement garnered great feedback.

In the post, he was clad in his rider uniform and holding the doctoral dissertation titled "Product Development and Evaluation of Probiotic Tablet from Locally Isolated Yeast *Saccharomyces Boulardii* for Stomach Acid Tolerance".