

Come Back is Real

By Dr. Mohd Hanafiah bin Ahmad

31/7/2013 – Is this the end?

"I do not know how to deal with your case. If there is no solution, then you will have to face the termination process by your university".

That was the words that came out of from the Vice Chancellor during his meeting with the staff who have not completed their PhD studies in 2013. I know that the university has helped me all this time, and I do not see how the university can help me in this situation. I know, the implications were huge, and I must face all the possibilities after this.

Here is my story ...

Flashback – The First Step

In 2002, I joined UMP as an Assistant Registrar (Human Resource). Specifically, I was in charge of the Training Department including processing the staff study leave application. Among my main tasks was to develop a study leave agreement document. It includes the action to be taken in the event of a breach of contract.

In 2006, UMP plans to establish a new faculty specializing in technology management. I see this is the best opportunity for me to apply to be a lecturer. My application to become a lecturer was finally accepted. I was also appointed as the head of the technology management program and was responsible for faculty development.

Finally in 2008, the Faculty of Manufacturing Engineering and Technology Management was established. Once the task of establishing the faculty has been implemented, now is the time for me to think about pursuing a PhD.

Choosing your supervisor

“Don’t choose your university but choose your supervisor”.

That was the advice I often received. Some also suggested choosing a supervisor who has a research grant. Although it is also an important, I did not make it as the main criterion because I

will get sponsorship from the Malaysian government. So, my focus was finding the most suitable supervisor.

Throughout 2008, I have been in touch with various universities and potential supervisors. Finally at the end of 2008 (yes, it took me almost one year), Prof Tony from M University, agreed to take me as his student. Based on his background, I believed that he is one of the best to be my supervisor to guide my PhD. He is an expert in manufacturing management and organizational development. He is also the former dean of the faculty. Even more interesting, his first PhD student was from Malaysia, and he was excited to take another student from Malaysia before retiring from the university.

Finally, I received the official offer letter. I was very excited, however, when I read the letter, I was very surprised when I read the statement

“You will be under the supervision of Dr. Jack”

What should I do now? Everything was not as planned. I checked his background. My god... he is younger than me, an excellent student, he did his PhD without a master degree. He is in the field of industrial psychology, different than the field I want to do. What is even more surprising... he also has a music band and is quite popular in Auckland.

I emailed Prof Tony for an explanation. He explained that it was the decision of the management of the faculty, and he could not do anything. At the same time, he also supports Dr. Jack to be my supervisor.

That was when I started to realize, doing a PhD is not a straightforward process. There are lots of things that beyond our control or even our supervisor control that we need to face.

Family first

February 2009, my family, and I started our life in Albany, Auckland. As a PhD student who has a family, I need to make sure my family settle down as soon as possible.

“Money is everything”.

Before I went to NZ, I was in touch with some Malaysian students. They informed that the cost of living is quite high but still reasonable. However, when I got there, I found that the cost of living was higher than expected. I just realized, Albany is apparently the area of choice for

people like from Japan, Korea, and China to settle down after retirement. Due to high demand especially from them, the pricing house increase, and therefore, rental house also increase. The house rent is on a weekly basis and the house will only be rented according to the family capacity. So, for me and my family we had to rent a house with at least 3 rooms. They believed that a house that is small and does not fit the capacity of the family will cause stress to the occupants. The cost for houses with 3 rooms starts at around 350NZD per week but my housing allowance was 300NZD per month!!!

Looking at this situation, was the advice given wrong? Then I realized, their situation was not the same as mine. They only have one or two children and do not go to school. While I had three children and two of them go to school. There were too many other variables that I miss during my analysis about cost of living.

Like it or not, beside of my study, I had to do a lot of part time work. Tutoring, working in the restaurant, worked as a cleaner and others. My wife also works as a babysitter to get extra money for our survival.

My life as a PhD student

A week after settling down my family, I started to focus on my PhD studies. The registration process went well, and the next thing was my first meeting with the supervisor. We started to talk about the initial proposal. Based on the discussion, I knew that he is not the expert in the field that I want to do. I need to decide, either to stick with my initial proposal or to do a research on his area of expertise.

Finally, I decided to do a research related to his expertise. At least I can refer to him for advice. However, this also means, I need to start over from zero. All the initial preparations I made were no longer usable.

The first semester went smoothly, my study progress was also quite encouraging. Almost every day I came to the university at 8.30 am after sending the children to school and went back home at around 4:00 pm. At 5.30 pm I will go to my part time work until 10 pm. Normally at 4:30 am I woke up and started doing my PhD work. My relationship with the main and co-supervisor was also good. They really help me a lot.

However, in the second semester I noticed that the behavior of the main supervisor began to change. He no longer responds or comments on the progress of the work I submitted to him. Until one day he called me. We discussed about my research, and he gave recommendations for improvement. At the end of the discussion, he gave a statement that was quite shocking to me.

“Hanafiah, you are a good student, you have learnt a lot in a short time. Your work is very systematic.”

I am happy with the compliments given. Then he continued...

“Do you know Garry, my other PhD student?”

“Yes, sure I know him” I replied.

“In one semester, he just met me once or twice, but you, almost two weeks you want to see me. After this, if you want to see me, please make sure it is important. You must be able to solve any problem related to your research by yourself.”

I really shocked with his comment. I know, it is not him. Maybe there was something bother him. Since that day, my productivity and confidence started to drop. Finally, I met Dr. Rick, my supervisor's best friend. He informed me that my supervisor was dealing with personal problems (his girlfriend) and thinking about leaving the university.

The situation reminded me on the advice that it is also important to find a supervisor who has stable personal life like family and for sure information like this is difficult for us as student to get. Finally, in the tenth month under his supervision, he called me. He mentioned that he will resign from the university because he had been offered in of the Korea's university. I was expecting this to happen and not really focused on what he said. I was more worried about myself and what should I do next.

Life must go on

After discussed with the school, I decided to swap my supervisor. Dr. Jack will be the co-supervisor and will supervise me from Korea, and the co-supervisor, Dr. Smith will be the main supervisor. In my discussion with Dr. Jack, he mentioned that he would do his best to help me from Korea. In the circumstances I needed his expertise, I agreed.

A week later, Dr. Rick and another lecturer, Dr. Nick met me. They advised me to change the supervisor. I still remember Dr. Rick's advice...

“Hanafiah, I work for 5 years in Singapore, I know Malay culture very well. To change your supervisor might show that you do not respect your supervisor. But in western culture, it is ok. No need to worry.”

Dr. Nick gives me a simple advice...

“Supervising from distance won't work. Believe me.”

I was in pomegranate, finally I stick with my decision and not follow their advice.

After a few months, I found what they said very true. Distance supervision was not working well. I really regret ignoring their advice. However, I kept trying my best. Finally at the end of the first year I did my proposal defense. Despite the obstacles, my proposal defense ran smoothly. Everything was over in 15 minutes. Only one question was asked, and I was able to answer it well. It really increased my confidence level. At that point, I start to believe that a PhD candidate will become an expert in the field he does, and supervisors only provide guidance so

that the PhD runs smoothly. I feel my challenge is over and my PhD journey will be smoother after this.

Data collection – the real challenge

Entering the second year of study, my focus was on data collection. My PhD research was related to how culture influence the implementation of assessment center in Malaysia and NZ. Assessment center is one of the methods used in staff recruitment. In the early stage of my studies, I mentioned to Dr. Jack, although the comparison between the countries is interesting, but it's not an easy thing to do. Furthermore, I will use the mixed-method method, and surely it will take longer time. But he insisted me to do comparative study and finally I had to agree.

I started to approach NZ organizations for my data collection. The response received was too slow and all of them refused to be my respondent. Finally, after six months of trying, with all the evidence to obtain respondents, I discussed with Dr. Smith, he agreed with my suggestion to focus on research in Malaysia only. I did not involve Dr. Jack in the discussion because I knew what would eventually happen. Interesting point during my discussion with Dr. Smith, he mentioned that...

“We don’t have warrant to force them to be our respondents.”

After the meeting, I sent an email to Dr. Jack in Korea informing him of the decision, and he finally agreed with my decision.

After that, I focused on getting respondents from Malaysia. After two months of trying, I returned to Malaysia to conduct the interview.

The first five respondents were from the same department in Putrajaya. The department has the responsibility to manage staff recruitment using the assessment center method. Although it looks like everything ran smoothly, I could feel something was not correct. I found the answers given were very simple and superficial.

Finally, at the end of my interview with the fifth respondent, he gave me an important advice...

"If you want to get a rich information, don't interview respondents from this department. We have been instructed not to provide in-depth information.”

It explains everything. This situation also caused all my efforts to set appointments became wasted. I need to identify new respondents and get their consent.

This situation teaches me that, even the respondents were identified according to the characteristics set, it is not a guarantee that they will respond as expected. What makes me even more worried was that I am getting behind the time schedule.

Through the fifth respondent, I asked him to suggest few names from other departments. I finally got new respondents, and the feedback given turned out to be deeper than the previous

respondents. After three months, I managed to interview 30 respondents and very satisfied with the results of my study.

After that, I went back to NZ and did qualitative analysis. From the result, I developed questionnaire questions and conducted a pilot study. At the same time, I contacted officers from several agencies in Malaysia for the purpose of distributing the questionnaire. Again, I faced the same problem. All agencies did not allow me to distribute the questionnaire by myself. They said I need to go through them, they will distribute the questionnaire. In this situation, I did not have control or access to my respondents. Respond rate was too low, only 20 people answered the questionnaire and there was nothing I could do.

Game over

Finally, after three and a half years in NZ, I decided to go back to Malaysia. At that point, I only finished half of my research. However, when I return to Malaysia, it means that I will no longer be granted full-time study leave status. I need to come back with my daily duties as a lecturer and at the same time must complete my PhD.

The situation finally became more difficult when in May 2013 I got an email from graduate research school (GRS). I was informed that to continue to earn domestic fee rates, I was only allowed to be outside NZ for a period of one year. That was the regulation set by the immigration of NZ. This means, I need to return to NZ or be charged an international fee and will be backdated starting from 2009.

It is something I cannot possibly do. To return to NZ at my own expenses or remain in Malaysia but need to pay international fees. It teaches me that, to study abroad, you not only must understand rules and regulation by your university, but also by immigration of that country.

Finally, in a meeting with Vice Chancellor on 31/7/2013, I explained everything. I knew he wanted to help but did not know how. At the same time, I contacted GRS to get information on whether I can use the data if I want to continue my studies at any other university. They responded that I need to withdraw from my PhD studies at M University to enable me to use the data if I wish to continue my PhD study at any university.

Finally, with heavy hearts, I decided to withdraw from my PhD studies at M University. I was very sad especially when I looked back on all the challenges I had faced over the years.

I also understand that it means I breach my study leave contract and I know the implication. As mentioned previously, I was the one who develop the contract when I worked as the assistance registrar.

Come back is real

After I withdraw from M University, it took me three months to figure out what to do next. If I want to do my PhD for the second time, I need to strategize everything properly.

I talked to a few fellow lecturers, I also discussed with some officers at various agencies about possibility to get data. Things are much better this time. After building a convincing network with some officers, I re-enrolled as a PhD student at UMP.

It took me a few months to rewrite chapters 1, 2 and 3. In addition, I am also very grateful to my previous main supervisor, Dr. Smith who helped a lot in terms of my qualitative analysis. I am also no longer in contact with Dr. Jack, the last thing I know was he resigned from university in Korea. If there are any questions about the assessment center I asked directly to the Society of Industrial Psychology. This time I need to be an expert in this field and not rely too much on Dr. Jack.

This time too, I need to make sure I have the necessary access to the respondent. With the permission of Allah, I met with an officer who responsible for training for newly appointed officers with the assessment center method. Based on the discussions, he gave me ample space to distribute my questionnaires. If before this I only had 20 responds, this time I got more than 800 responses. With the guidance of my new supervisor, Dr. R, who is an expert in quantitative analysis, I managed to do my quantitative analysis.

At the same time, I was given the position of Deputy Dean of Academic and Student Affairs. Although it was a tough task, the life experiences and challenges I went through during my time in NZ made me more mature in dividing the task between being a PhD student and a lecturer as well as Deputy Dean.

Alhamdulillah, in the end, I not only succeeded in completing my studies, but also helped establish the Faculty of Industrial Management as well as the offering of new programs. I also appealed to terminate the action imposed due to breach of contract. Considering the contributions to the faculty and university I have made and the efforts I took to finish my PhD study, the university has terminated the action imposed on me.

What I would like to say, based on my experience, doing PhD is not a straightforward process. Challenges might come from so many angles. It can be from your family, your supervisor, your university, your respondents, and in my case even from immigration. Failure once is not a failure forever. In fact, it will make us stronger and more successful because of our efforts to overcome these failures.