

SPECIAL ISSUE

Away from home: A reflection of my research journey and accomplishment

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The plan of studying a master program abroad has always been there. This is because there is no master program for physiotherapy in my country. Therefore, my parents and I had been mentally prepared for me going abroad someday. However, things went way differently when COVID-19 hits.

I left for Malaysia in the beginning when COVID-19 strikes, during phase 1, when the infection had not spread to either Indonesia or Malaysia. Some people had already worn mask in the airport, including me, but there were many who still did not bother to wear one. That was the day when I finally got to fly abroad by myself for the first time. And so, my journey as a postgraduate student in a whole new and foreign country began.



Figure 1: Leaving Indonesia for the first time

Upon reaching Malaysia, my first thought on my way from the airport to my new apartment, was "Wow, I'm all alone now." I remember feeling a bit sad and nervous, but very excited for the new stories that soon to be unfold. Alhamdulillah, my new housemates were very kind and always took the intentions to approach me first. This is very helpful since I was very introverted that time.

I spent the first few days going back and forth between Kuala Lumpur and Bangi to settled my VISA issue. I started my classes during this time and I finally met fellow Indonesian students in the class. I started to get close with my housemates and classmates as well. But, as everything started to settled down for me, COVID-19 outbreak went really bad worldwide that WHO declared it as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. In the light of this, the Malaysia's government then enforced the Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020. Many of my fellow international students were planning to go back to their countries, including a few of my close friends.

However, after discussing with my family, they agreed that it was best for me to stay in Malaysia until the situations in Indonesia and Malaysia were getting better. My parents thought that it'll be safer for me to finish my study in Malaysia, because we never know when this COVID situations will end.

I'm forever grateful that my parents never told me to go home during that period because the Malaysia's government closed the international border not long after the MCO was enforced. I couldn't imagine being stuck in Indonesia and not being able to get anything done for my research since Indonesia also faced bad COVID-19 outbreak. I'm glad I had decided to stay in Malaysia instead, because at least, despite having a really hard time coping with everything alone, I was able to finish my research for my master study.

The first year in Malaysia was filled with various feeling. I had a lot at my plate that time. Really, it was a lot. I had multiple class assignments, exams, proposals writing, proposal presentations, and articles writing. Not to mention the constant feeling of not being smart enough to understand everything that was thrown at me at once. Everything felt so new,

foreign, and difficult for me. No matter how much I tried, it was never good enough. Also, I started to receive many bad news from home. A lot of people I knew passed due to COVID-19. I worried more and more each day. Worried for my study, worried for myself not being able to do it well, and worried for my families. What made it worse was I felt that I can't do anything about it. I felt so useless. I started to cry a lot and questioning my decision of pursuing my master study, "Is this a right thing to do?". But my parents and my sisters helped me went through this stressful time. My supervisors also said a lot of encouraging and kind words that helped me out of the dark and bring myself together one more time.

The design of my research was observational study that aimed to examined the validity and reliability of a questionnaire. Given the design, my study needs at least a hundredth participants, which sounds almost impossible with the MCO enforcement that time. However, to raise the possibility to get more patients, me and my supervisors agreed to include three big hospitals that might representing the patients in Klang Valley. The three hospitals were Hospital Kuala Lumpur (HKL), Hospital Canselor Tuanku Muhriz (HCTM), and National Cancer Institute (NCI). Since I had to recruit the patients from these hospitals, I need to get ethical approval from the Medical Research Ethical Committee Ministry of Health Malaysia (MREC-MOH). It sounds scary at first, because I am no one, I am just an ordinary student trying to get a master degree in another country, but then suddenly I have to apply a national-level ethical approval? Scary. Thank goodness, the ethical application was not as scary as I thought. Although there were a lot of documents to be completed, the process was quite smooth. Also, the process was faster than I thought. The overall process of getting the clearance was 2-3 months.

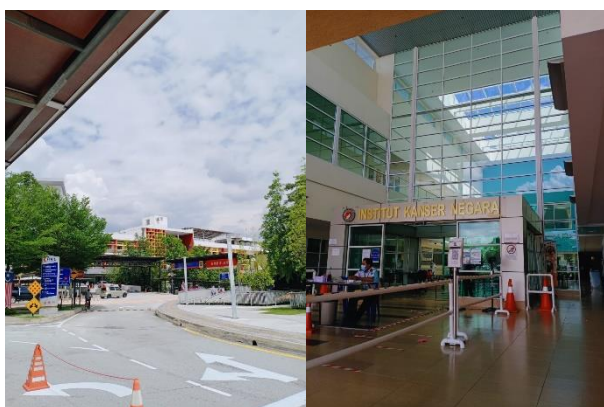


Figure 2: The study sites for my study (Hospital Kuala Lumpur and National Cancer Institute)

The MCO regulation was loosen up in the mid-2021. I got the clearance from MOH to conduct my research, things went smoothly, and I found great research sites with wonderful clinicians. They were really helpful and kind in assisting my data collection. Still, where is the fun without a few hurdles, right? Yeah, right, another challenge of

doing research during this period of time, was less patients were coming to the outpatient clinic. This was due to arising COVID-19 infection rate, the government was still limiting the inter-state crossing. Therefore, patients from other states who usually come for appointment, cannot make it to the hospital. In addition, since the virus infection was still infectious, patients from within Kuala Lumpur did not want to take a risk to come to the hospital. Well, I completely understand them, because it was not something any of us can control. I racked my brain on how to get more patients. After discussing with my supervisors and the clinicians, Alhamdulillah, I managed to get suitable number of patients for my study.



Figure 3: A farewell gift from one of the clinicians

Data collection challenges was not the end of the road. Since the data collection took longer than expected, I did the data analysis and results report as soon as I can. I told myself, the sooner I submit my thesis, the sooner I can go home. I received a great help from my supervisors and other lecturers. I got one article published in 2022, following my first one that published in 2020. I also managed to present my research results in two scientific events and a journal club in my university. I'm glad and grateful for not giving up to those negative feelings that struck me in my first year. I'm happy to finally taste the fruit of my works. Now I can feel that these achievements worth the silent cries and tears.



Figure 4: Finally going home after more than 2 years

More than everything, I'm glad that I can go home with knowledge and skills I have learned during my study in Malaysia. I'm glad I have something to be shared

to everyone in my home country. I can't wait to implement it all to my community. Despite the great hurdles I faced while studying for my master's degree, it won't stop me from furthering my study. On contrary, it gives me more reason and strength to study physiotherapy from great people in another part of the globe.

To those fighting lonely battles, trust the process. Your late nights and early mornings will definitely be paid off. Here's to the new beginnings!

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