

Stories for Inspiration



Insights into Successful Postgraduate Study



SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES, UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA
Ensuring quality in postgraduate education

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Foreword

As a research university, postgraduate study is the heart and soul of UPM. With every successful graduate, the university gains strength and stature as a reputable research institution. Thus, every successful graduate not only marks a personal achievement, but the achievement of the university.

The idea behind this collection of stories was inspired by a similar effort made by our learning support partner, the University of Otago, New Zealand. We felt that positive success stories of our past graduates would encourage our existing students, to know of others who have journeyed the same path and made it to the end of their research degrees and find themselves at the beginning of their academic careers.

This collection is the outcome of email interviews with nine of our graduates from different fields of specialisation. The graduates featured in this collection were nominated by their faculties for having done exceptional research work, and for their outstanding professional and leadership positions held since graduation.

We would like to thank the graduates for their enthusiasm in sharing stories of their postgraduate journeys, and for their willingness to update us on their current experiences.

This is the inaugural issue of our series of success stories, which we plan to publish once a year. We hope that you will enjoy reading these stories and are inspired by them. The stories give glimpses and insights into different postgraduate experiences and some answers to the 'what happens next?' question. We hope the stories will give you strength and fortitude as you undergo your own personal postgraduate story.

Professor Dr Bujang B. K. Huat

Dean

Assoc Professor Dr Noritah Omar

Deputy Dean

School of Graduate Studies

Universiti Putra Malaysia

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Although it has been more than a decade since I first came to Malaysia, I remember how I felt upon my arrival: UPM made me feel at home, despite the cultural and climate differences.

Dr Adel Al-Raziqi

MSc Structure and Construction Engineering | Completed 2002

PhD Geotechnical Engineering | Completed 2006

Assistant Professor, Civil Engineering
Dhamar University, Yemen

Born in a farming community in Buat Al-Raziqi, Yemen, Adel Al-Raziqi worked hard to find his way into Sana'a University in Yemen to study civil engineering, before joining the Yemen Economic Corporation for Construction Sectors as a consultant, and then Dhamar University as an assistant lecturer. It was only in the year 2000 that Adel's life was changed forever, when he received a scholarship to complete a Master's degree in Structure and Construction Engineering, and thereafter a PhD in Geotechnical Engineering in UPM.

Although now serving as an Assistant Professor in the Civil Engineering Department of Dhamar University, Adel still draws on the variety of skills he acquired at UPM in his research, encompassing skills related to presentation, thesis writing, computing and programming. Adel has also been appointed as the Dean of Engineering, a title which makes him responsible for coordinating and integrating different departments and service units within the faculty, allocating available funds for

instruction and research, as well as recruiting and supervising staff.

Despite these administrative tasks, Adel still manages to publish extensively, and chairs a number of committees associated to space science in Yemen, including the Geotechnical Engineering Committee. Adel believes that for Yemen's profile in the world to be elevated, all universities and organisations within the country need to be run by strong, competent and most importantly, educated leaders. He hopes not only to see this dream come true in his lifetime, but wishes to contribute personally to Yemen's advancement.



I believe that the notion of excellence being only within the grasp of a few is a fallacy; as long as students put in the hard work, success is well within reach. Nothing is impossible for those with a willing heart.

Dr Yahya Hassan Al-Wadhaf

PhD English Literature | Completed 2008

Assistant Professor, English Literature
Abss Community College, Yemen

Yahya Hassan Al-Wadhaf believes that his experience as a postgraduate student in UPM was incredible. “UPM built the foundation for my academic career. UPM’s influence is still in my blood and will do so forever. Besides the actual PhD in English Literature from UPM, the most significant lesson that I learned there was how to get myself published.” UPM also provided Yahya with the opportunity to expand his research interests. He has transcended the field of postcolonial literature which he explored in his doctoral thesis, to explore and invade the fields of Islamic literature, contemporary Arabic literature, and minority literatures.

Yahya also recalls that aside from the crowded computer and engineering labs where his fellow Yemeni students used to spend their time, he was equally drawn to the UPM library. The iconic Sultan Abdul Samad library building was a safe haven for someone, he recalls, who had crossed thousands of miles to search for knowledge. “My quest was more than just to get a PhD; I wanted to shape and develop my research abilities, to better serve my religion and nation in every possible way.”

Aside from the library, Yahya also recollects with fondness the facilities available at UPM, not least the comprehensive research database on offer—which helped him overcome every deadlock he faced when writing his thesis. He also notes that his supervisory committee, especially his main supervisor, played an integral part in his success. “Her mastery of the scholarship in the field, intelligent ideas, and constructive criticism really defined the path of my research journey.”

Yahya is now the Dean of Abss Community College in his home country of Yemen, and despite being responsible for many administrative tasks—such as promoting and teaching professional achievement, maintaining effective communication between students and lecturers, coordinating the assessment and development of academic programmes within the college, and overseeing the budgetary needs of the college—Yahya’s desire to conduct research has not abated in the slightest.



The multicultural atmosphere of UPM had a massive impact on my learning experiences. Malaysia helped me learn about other cultures and gave me a unique opportunity to look back into my culture and obtain new perspectives.

Dr Afshin Asadi

PhD Geotechnical and Geological Engineering | Completed 2010

Research Fellow, Geotechnical and Geological Engineering
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

After graduating with a PhD in Geotechnical and Geological Engineering in June 2010, Afshin Asadi was appointed as an academic research fellow in UPM. “Sometimes I act as an independent investigator. The courses on soil mechanics and environmental engineering during my studies assisted greatly in my investigation of soil behaviour from an environmental perspective. I always had a dream to conduct environment research from multidisciplinary dimensions. UPM helped me to do just that and do it properly.”

Afshin believes the way he was supervised during his PhD helped him enhance his leadership ability, independent thinking skills, critical thinking, and self-management to deal with a whole range of academic functions. “My supervisor, who knew very well what he was doing, involved me in a variety of academic tasks including being a demonstrator at the geotechnical lab, lecturing University courses, and supervising undergraduate students.”

Afshin draws upon these experiences in his current duties as an academic

research fellow, which include conducting research, supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students, writing research proposals, writing and publishing journal articles, participating in scientific workshops and exhibitions, and refereeing academic journals.

Soon after finishing his PhD, Afshin received the Australia Endeavour Award Fellowship 2011, and undertook his postdoctoral studies at the University of Wollongong, Australia. In addition, he was appointed to be on the Editorial Board of Environmental Geotechnics, a journal published by ICE Publishing. Afshin hopes to one day be a world class professor in his field, and believes that UPM will help considerably in this regard.



Living in a foreign country and studying a foreign language are very daunting tasks, but I was able to gain self-confidence by attending different conferences and presentations that provided me with new learning platforms.

Dr Sina Kazemian

PhD Geotechnical & Geological Engineering | Completed 2011

Assistant Professor, Civil Engineering
Payame Noor University, Iran

After being awarded a doctoral degree with distinction in Geotechnical Engineering in 2011, Sina Kazemian joined Payame Noor University of Iran (Mashhad) soon after. Sina works as an assistant professor and heads the department of civil engineering, where he lectures, conducts research and supervises undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Sina believes that his current position can largely be attributed to his experiences in UPM. As he notes, “I was not only given the opportunity to expand my horizons, but also how to use my initiative to solve a problem. In addition, the different responsibilities I was assigned by my supervisor, Prof Dr Bujang Kim Huat, taught me how to multitask.” Sina adds in turn, he now imparts these lessons to his students.

Sina’s enthusiasm, perseverance and diligence paid off in UPM, when he won a gold medal at the PRPi10 UPM (Exhibition of Innovations and Patents) which saw the participation of more than 550 students and researchers. Sina

regarded his being awarded a PhD with distinction as one of his proudest achievements, which put him in UPM’s Hall of Fame. In 2012, he won the North East Universities of Iran’s Best Researcher Award, for his numerous publications in journals and conference proceedings. And together with his PhD supervisor, Prof Dr Bujang Kim Huat, Sina is about to publish a book on geotechnical engineering, which is due for publication later in 2013.

To Sina, the pursuit of a postgraduate degree can be, like any long journey, fraught with peril. What Sina tells his students is that these perils can be overcome if they are “hardworking, eager to learn, and able to think creatively.” He adds that choosing a supervisory committee is of tremendous importance as well, as it can make or break a student’s journey towards getting a PhD. Despite his successes, Sina’s journey is not over; he hopes to progress even further in his career by applying the same skills he acquired during his study at UPM.



I believe that doing a postgraduate degree should not have to be a lonely journey, if students can learn to seek help from the right people. Everyone has a dream, but what really makes a difference is whether you dream with your eyes open.

Dr Vijay Kumar Mallan

MA Applied Linguistics | Completed 2000

PhD Applied Linguistics (Otago) | Completed 2005

Deputy Head, Higher Education Development Centre
University of Otago, New Zealand

Vijay served as an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Modern Languages in UPM before taking up his current position. At the University of Otago, he is responsible for researching into postgraduate support, postgraduate supervision, doctoral examination and doctoral feedback practices.

Vijay asserts that his position would not have materialised were it not for his ability to network with the right people. “In networking, it is not important who you know but who knows you that matters.”

Vijay remembers how his years at UPM propelled his progress in his academic career. As a student, the diligence and resourcefulness of his supervisors enabled him to obtain his MA in Applied Linguistics; and as a member of the teaching staff, he found the “collegiality” of the other staff members to be the university’s most attractive feature. UPM also provided Vijay with a platform to work with students from all corners of the globe and learn lessons which he imparts to his students in turn. “The experiences at UPM enabled me to

understand negotiation, communication and leadership skills.”

On his return to UPM in 2005, after completing his PhD, Vijay worked very closely with Prof Datin Paduka Dr Aini Ideris, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and International) of UPM, to hold workshops for postgraduate students under the Putra Sarjana programme, which was then replicated in other Malaysian universities. Additionally, Vijay was the first early-career academic in Malaysia to be invited to become a member of the International Doctoral Education Research Network, and was also invited by the Malaysian Council of Deans of Graduate Studies to write a guidebook on postgraduate supervision for the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.

Still, Vijay lists his proudest achievement as “being regularly welcomed with earnest hospitality to conduct Putra Sarjana workshops for UPM and other Malaysian universities,” and feels elated when he receives calls from students sharing their success stories. “I feel proud because I have been able to make a difference in their lives.”



I found the simple life in UPM to be beneficial to my pursuit of knowledge. It was my treasure and source of satisfaction, for it is a kind of happiness to be able to be totally devoted to something you like.

Dr Qiao Meng

PhD English Literature | Completed 2012

Associate Professor, English Literature
Ningxia University, China

Qiao Meng obtained her PhD in English Literature from UPM in 2012. She found her three years of study there to be unique; the hardships she came across were tempered by “the joy of being accompanied by great minds and being able to progress slowly towards the unknown.”

As Qiao recalls, life in UPM was simple. Although there were many amenities provided by the on-campus residences, Qiao maintains that “all I needed was a bed, a table and an internet connection.” Her contentedness with the simple life brought her peace of mind, and enabled her to concentrate more on her research. Her total devotion to her subject matter grew into an obsession, to the point that ideas started popping up in her dreams.

But aside from her own dedication, Qiao found the guidance of her supervisor to be invaluable. “As a learned and earnest scholar, she has a great command of knowledge in her research area. She could detect fallacies in my reasoning from a mile away, and challenge the

significance of my analysis, which then forced me to explore my subject area further.” Qiao also enjoyed talking with her supervisor, for she was a fount of new research ideas. “Even when she was talking about her own research rather than mine, I learnt a lot from the way she approaches a subject.”

Qiao looks back fondly on her simple life in UPM, given that she is now responsible to her students and supervisees as an associate professor in Ningxia University, China. Besides teaching English Literature courses, Qiao also teaches translation, which was her research field before entering UPM. Qiao hopes to meld these two interests together in future research.



Everything I have become today is owed to the opportunities and guidance given by my supervisors, from whom I learned humility, a willingness to share, and determination.

Dr Show Pau Loke

BSc Process and Food Engineering | Completed 2010

PhD Process and Food Engineering | Completed 2012

Assistant Professor, Industrial Education Management
University of Nottingham, Malaysia

Rising from humble beginnings, Show Pau Loke is now an assistant professor at the Malaysian campus of the University of Nottingham. “When I was only 6 years old, I started helping my father in his tiling work. Because I was working and studying simultaneously, I quickly realised that education would be the only way to help improve my family’s condition.”

Throughout his life, Pau Loke has taken every difficulty as a challenge that can be overcome with positive thinking. With this principle in mind, he managed to get himself enrolled in UPM as an undergraduate student in Process and Food Engineering at the Faculty of Engineering in 2007.

Upon obtaining his Bachelor’s degree in October 2010, Pau Loke was fast-tracked into the PhD programme almost immediately after, and successfully graduated just two years later, despite being heavily involved with student activities. “My experience at UPM was great and meaningful because I managed to complete my PhD degree in less than

two years, and even managed to be elected as the UPM Students’ Representative for two terms, during both my period of undergraduate and postgraduate study.”

After leaving UPM, Pau Loke was able to achieve the top five best score in student evaluations across the three University of Nottingham campuses worldwide, and even headed a major research project commissioned by the Malaysian government. Pau Loke hopes to become a world class researcher and make significant contributions to his homeland. His advice for prospective UPM students is to “never give up, and one day you will be proud of your hard work.”



My experience in UPM was memorable, given that the excellent teaching and administrative staff helped me face every challenge I encountered. I still consider them family until now.

Prof Dr Indah Susilowati

MSc Resource Economics | Completed 1991

PhD Resource Economics | Completed 1998

Professor, Natural Resource and Environmental Economics
Diponegoro University, Indonesia

“When I joined UPM I was juggling many things at the same time. I started studying without a scholarship, was married with two kids and my husband was also a university student,” Indah Susilowati recalls. “But at UPM, I learned the necessary skills to deal with pressure.” With the assistance of her supervisors, Indah realised that all she needed to succeed was hard work.

Indah is now a professor in Natural Resource and Environmental Economics at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Diponegoro University, in Semarang, Indonesia, since 2005, where she also headed the Research Institute until 2010. Currently, she also reviews competitive research schemes, assesses programme accreditation and the establishment of new programmes, evaluates professorship grants, and serves on the steering committee for both domestic and overseas scholarships programmes under the Directorate General of Higher Education in Indonesia.

Indah made special use of the training courses and seminars provided by UPM.

“I am now harvesting the positive impacts of the hectic training sessions.” But it was the teaching staff in UPM who made a real difference. “My supervisor always inspired me to push the frontiers or research, and more importantly, taught me many things about humanity.”

Indah realised early on that successful students are those who do not confine themselves to the limits of the classroom. This is why Indah continues to complement her research and teaching with service to the greater community outside of academia.

Indah is the youngest professor at Diponegoro University, the youngest female professor in the Central Java province, and is considered one of the top five social-economic researchers in Indonesia, and the first Indonesian in UNDIP. How has Indah managed to get here? “I have a belief that working hard is the key to success. Hardworking people will always grow, and will always be rewarded.”



Completing a PhD in UPM made me realise the importance of actively improving the community I live in and contributing to its progress. Doing research and community service are also part of my function as a lecturer and researcher at my home institution.

Prof Dr Waridin

PhD Agriculture & Community Resource Development | Completed 1999

Professor, Economics and Business
Diponegoro University, Indonesia

“There are no shortcuts for success,” Waridin’s supervisor advised him when he was completing his PhD at UPM. As true as these words were, the challenges Waridin faced were tempered by the excellent academic atmosphere and facilities provided by the university, as well as the experiences he gained there.

“Courses like Statistics and Research Methodology were impressive. The institution and lecturers provided an excellent academic atmosphere for the students. I was always engaged in dialogue, and made to feel part of the course.” These reasons, among others, guaranteed Waridin a smooth transition from a PhD candidate to a lecturer in a university back home in Indonesia.

Waridin is currently a professor at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Diponegoro University, Indonesia, where he also heads the Economics Master’s Programme, a position he has held since 2007. Waridin is also a member of the review committee for competitive research schemes at the Directorate General of Higher Education, and an assessor at the National Board of Accreditation for Higher Education, both

under the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture. Additionally, Waridin lectures both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and has numerous supervisees from the latter group.

Waridin believes that it was the training he received at UPM as well as the commitment and dedication of its staff, which largely laid the foundation for his present professional and personal success. Waridin’s desire to conduct high quality and community-based research—values inculcated at the university—has not been satiated fully; he hopes to continue publishing papers and books to benefit as many people as possible.

